# The Sirens Call

February 2017 issue #31



The Fifth Annual Women in Horror Month Edition



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L Horror Written

Exclusively by Women

in the Horror Genre!

Artwork by
Emerian Rich:
Print, Color & De-Stress!

An Interview with Su Haddrell, Author of 'Bodies'

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# Bent Metal

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### **Bellarmine** | *Em Dehaney*

Nathaniel Bird's hand shook with effort as he bent the final metal pin between finger and thumb, and dropped it onto the pile with the others. Twenty-two bent pins for the twenty-two cursed years his wife had walked God's Earth. He unhitched his breeches and angled his manhood into the cooking pot on the floor. A stream of hot urine shot out onto the curved metal, splashing back over his shins. He gritted his teeth against the pain of a thousand thorns ripping through his cock. When the agonizing flood had dried to a trickle, he gave himself a shake and stared at the flaccid monstrosity in his hand. Reeking and covered in sores, the bitch must have hexed him as punishment for his visits to the local brothel.

But what did she expect? If his wife wouldn't perform her sacred duties, what was a man to do?

If only he had seen the mark of Lucifer on her before they were wed. But she had been so comely, enchanting him with her evil ways, making him think she was sweet and virtuous. It was only when she disrobed on their wedding night that he saw it, under the flickering candle glow. On the skin on the inside of her thigh was a brown crescent moon. The bite of the Devil himself. The things his new wife had done with him, and to him, that night had made him think that maybe living with a succubus might not be too bad. She brewed her own beer too. So Nathaniel Bird put the birthmark far from his mind.

Until she failed to bear him a child. After a year with no sign of any offspring, Nathaniel decided she needed more of his seed, so he started to force himself upon her daily. The more she fought, the more excited he got. But still no baby came. After two years of fruitless endeavors, Nathaniel tried a different course of action. He would beat the evil out of his wife. But still, no baby came.

What kind of woman does not fall pregnant after three years of marriage? Only a truly wicked one, spoiled by her unholy union with Satan.

Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.

But if he killed his wife, that would mean admitting to the village he had been laying with a demon. He could not stand the shame. So he decided he would play that Devil's whore at her own game.

A length of shiny red ribbon and a scrap of rough leather lay on the table next to Nathaniel's gutting knife. He hacked the ribbon into four; one for each of her limbs. Next, he carved the shape of a heart into the leather. Finally, he dragged the edge of the knife along the pad of his thumb, slicing almost down to the white. A fat glob of blood oozed out and dripped into the pot. With his other hand he threw in the leather heart and the ribbons. He had paid a pretty penny for that bright scarlet, and he hoped it would be worth it. When he was happy with the amount of blood mingling in with his foamy urine, he wrapped his thumb tightly with a rag before placing the pot on the fire.

He would teach that witch a lesson.

Let her be the one who burned when she pissed.

Let her flesh be pierced with pins the next time she refused him his right.

Let her heart be seized the next time she tried casting a spell on him.

Let all her wicked ways come back to her ten-fold.

While he was waiting for the foul concoction to cook, Nathaniel opened a bottle of his wife's famous beer and took a swig of the delicious brew. Another reason not to kill the bitch. He quickly finished that bottle, and another, and another. All the while, the stinking brew bubbled away in the iron pot. Just one more bottle, thought Nathaniel Bird, then back to the task at hand.

\*\*\*

Elizabeth's beer sold out early that day, so she pulled her cart back from the market slowly, dragging her feet with every step. If she had somewhere else to go she would, but he would surely come and find her and drag her home anyway. As she walked, she thought back to her wedding day. How happy she had been, to be leaving the chaos of her family home. The eldest of twelve children, Elizabeth couldn't wait to be lady of her own manor, even if it was only a two room shack on the edge of the next village. Her mother and her many aunts had given her lots of advice in the months leading up to her marriage to Nathaniel Bird, the most notable being to make him happy.

"Keep your husband happy, you keep yourself blessed, my girl," one of the oldest aunts had told her.

"But how do I keep a man happy?" Elizabeth remembered asking. She laughed ruefully to herself as she lugged the cart over a fallen tree-trunk. Of course she knew about the union between man and wife. She couldn't escape it sleeping in the same room as her mother and father, separated only by a thin curtain. An older cousin had taken Elizabeth to one side and told her of secrets dark and wet, of hidden places and ways to use her hands and mouth that made her face flush and her insides tingle.

As she rounded the final corner and saw smoke rising from the chimney of their house Elizabeth's insides tingled again, this time with fear. He was home already. She braced herself for whatever indignities lay in store for her as she gingerly pushed the front door open.

Pungent black smoke filled the room, reminding her of the tannery. Through the dense cloud Elizabeth could see Nathaniel slumped in his chair, surrounded by empty bottles. On the table in front of her snoring husband, the hideous pottery face of a bellarmine jar leered at her. Nathaniel called her a witch and a whore of Satan and a demon, and a hundred other frightening things while he beat her, but now Elizabeth knew he meant it. He truly thought her a witch.

Elizabeth had never seen a real bellarmine up close, so she tiptoed to the table to take a closer look. The bulging eyes of the clay face stared at her with spiteful hatred, and the mouth was open to reveal long, curved teeth. Known to some folk as witch-bottles, bellarmines were used to invert curses, sending pain, misfortune or even death to the witch responsible. Peering through the acrid smoke coming from the cooking pot, Elizabeth could see her husband had left the bottle unfilled. Sitting in the tarry residue at the bottom of the pot were a stack of pins, a curled up rag and some thin pieces of brown string.

Moving closer, Elizabeth brushed one of the discarded beer bottles with her foot. Nathaniel's eyes flicked open, bloodshot and full of drunken rage. Without thinking, Elizabeth grabbed the clay jar by its long neck and swung it with all her strength into her husband's face. The bulbous end of the bellarmine smashed into Nathaniel's nose in a spray

of shattered clay and blood. As his hand went up to his busted nose, Elizabeth's hand went for the gutting knife and in one swift arc she sliced through the exposed part of his neck and across his wrist. Hot lifeblood splashed Elizabeth's face. She dropped the knife, staggered backwards and watched as her husband bled slowly to death.

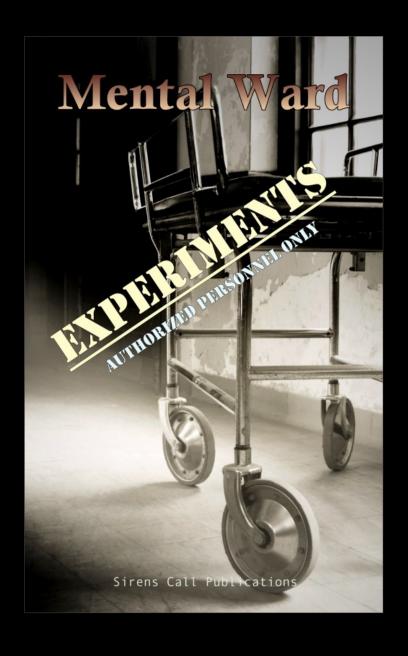
She may have never made her husband happy, but at last she was blessed.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Em Dehaney is a mother of two, a lover of horror, and a writer of fantasy. Born in Gravesend, England, her writing is inspired by the dark and decadent history of her home town. She is made of tea, cake, blood, and magic.

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## Mental Ward: Experiments

Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and iTunes



### Anesthesia | Veronica Smith

Janice was getting more nervous as the procedure time approached. It was just a standard colonoscopy they told her. They do them all the time. It'll only take 30 minutes and then you're awake and done. But the thought of being *put under* scared the hell out of her. She'd never been put under before but the doctor said this procedure needed to be done. Once they put that IV in her arm it became real and there was no turning back.

"You won't feel a thing," a young man in scrubs, her anesthesiologist, told her, patting her arm as he injected something into her feed.

"I'm giving you a little something to help you relax. But don't tell anyone." Then he winked. She knew he probably used that little speech on every single patient to make them feel special and it worked. She did feel relaxed and wondered what he put in her cocktail. She giggled; did she really care? She felt like humming a song until two more people in scrubs came and began wheeling her away; then her fear returned. She stared at the ceiling and counted the tiles until they entered the surgery room. She promptly forgot the count.

"Now turn on your side, your left side dear," her anesthesiologist told her as he helped roll her over; her backside exposed. But she was too nervous to be embarrassed.

"You'll feel a cold rush going up your arm and then you'll be asleep. When you wake up you'll be done and in recovery." She smiled up at him nervously and nodded as she felt the cold creep up her arm and then she was out.

She jolted awake and saw that she was in the recovery area. She smiled and turned when she heard a voice. "Just a few more minutes then it's your turn." The voice belonged to an elderly man sitting to her right. She looked around and saw that it was a different area than she was in before the procedure. But they told her that would happen; they brought patients in and out like a well-oiled machine.

Who are you? she asked, but couldn't hear the words. She could hear them in her head but couldn't get them past her lips. The old man smiled nervously and reached for her hand. She followed it to find it resting on her own, which had become old, wrinkled, and liver spotted.

What? What happened to my hands? She pushed his hand off and held them up. The right one had the IV inserted and taped and the left one had plastic bands wrapped around. But when they put it on her earlier they only put the white one on. This hand had three different ones, a green and orange one in addition to the white. She read the name on it: Shirley Roberts. She saw the birth date of April 6, 1940. 1940? She was only twenty-eight years old. It must be the anesthesia playing with her mind.

"Alright, time for you honey," a nurse told her brightly as she gently placed herself between her and the old man. She watched him as she was wheeled away, tears falling down his face.

"She'll be fine, Mr. Roberts," another nurse gently told him as she led him back out to the waiting room.

"He's always so scared for me," a voice laughed. It was Shirley's voice. Janice seemed to be sharing Shirley's body but couldn't speak. "This is the third time I've been in here," she said again, "he should be used to it by now." They crossed a doorway into a surgical room almost identical to the room Janice had been wheeled into.

Wake up! Wake up! This is just a bad dream! Shirley smiled at everyone in the room in anticipation of the anesthesia, "Good night all. Sweet dreams!" she joked with them. Janice was amazed at how calm Shirley was. Maybe she was used to this but Janice would never get over the fear. She felt the familiar cold in her arm and then she was out.

Janice woke slowly. The only thing in her view was the ceiling. She looked back and forth, almost expecting to see the old man sitting next to her. There was no one. She smiled and closed her eyes, ready to let the anesthesia wear off so she could go home. They were supposed to call her sister to come get her. "Sorry. I'm back!" a woman said cheerfully, plopping herself down in the chair to her right.

I think you have the wrong bed, she said, and then realized that again her voice never reached her mouth. Oh no, not again! She held up her hands to find two masculine ones; turning and clenching in front of her. She looked at the white band to see the name: Kenneth Stephens, birth date August 21, 1979. She looked around frantically, wishing for a mirror.

"Ken, what's wrong?" the woman, presumably his wife, asked him.

"I'm fine," he answered and the movements stopped. So she wasn't in complete control of his body; he took back control with ease.

"How are we feeling?" It was the same anesthesiologist who she had seen as herself.

What's happening to me? She screamed in her mind, unable to make her voice verbal.

"Eager to get this over with," Kenneth replied, slurring a little. He must have gotten the special cocktail as well.

"Well you're next," the anesthesiologist told him, glancing over his shoulder, "in fact, here they come." Kenneth's wife kissed him but didn't look worried. Janice could feel the brush of her lips on his forehead and her breath on his face. Once they were inside the surgical room Janice felt panic again.

I can't do this again. She felt the cold go up her arm and she was out.

Janice woke screaming in silence. Her shoulder hurt terribly. She opened her eyes to see the surgeons and nurses bending over her right shoulder. She turned her head and was able to see Kenneth's shoulder cut open, the bones and tendons being repaired. The pain was unbearable and she screamed silently. Kenneth muttered something.

"He's awake," the doctor said.

"I'll adjust the anesthesia," the anesthesiologist said calmly, "he won't even remember."

The pain began to fade and Janice was out once again.

When Janice awoke she peered out cautiously, so afraid to see the surgical room again, but was relieved to see it was recovery. Her relief was short lived when she noticed something was wrong. It looked very different from the ceiling tiles she remembered from recovery that she was in before. She tried to hold up her hands but they were strapped down. She became aware of all the noise surrounding her and a pain in her stomach that increased with her awareness. She tilted her head to see she was in an emergency room filled with screaming and moaning patients. Nothing like the quiet surgical center she was at previously. There was blood on many of them and some struggled against the medical staff. She was able to see the fingers that were strapped down and saw they were male and a darker shade than her own. The fingernails were cracked and covered with blood.

Oh God that hurts! The voice of the body she shared moaned and cursed in a deep voice in a different language.

"This one is next. He's critical," a nurse called out.

"What do we have?" a doctor asked as he picked up the chart at the end of the bed.

"Gang fight. Multiple gunshot wounds to the abdomen," the nurse replied, "internal bleeding."

"Get him in surgery, now!" the doctor exclaimed as nurses surrounded the man. The things they did were in a flurry and Janice couldn't keep up with it. All she knew was this man was dying and she was feeling it all. He finally passed out but Janice was aware of everything they were doing to him. She was relieved when they passed into the surgery room, much bigger and different from the one at the surgical center. She waited for that cold rush up the arm so she could fall out and be done with this one too. But this time she felt the cold creep up much longer than any time in the past.

She frantically whispered Put me out. Please put me out!

"He's out. Let's begin."

*Nooooo!* she screamed silently, *I'm not out yet! Please give me more time!* 

"Scalpel."

Nooooo!

And the pain began.

"No!" she screamed as she woke up.

"Hush, Janice, you're alright." She turned to see her sister, Marci, in the chair to her right. She whipped her head around and saw she was in a recovery bed in the surgical center. "Janice, calm down," Marci said, "you're still under the effects of the anesthesia. They said you might be a little loopy."

"I'm... here?" Janice asked. "I'm back." Had it all just been a dream?

"Yes!" Marci laughed, "I told you it'd be quick and easy."

"Look who's awake." It was her anesthesiologist. "We'll give you a few minutes then a nurse will help you get dressed while I go over the procedure results with your sister."

Five or ten minutes later a nurse came closer, pulled the curtain shut and pulled out her bag of clothes from under the bed. "Now take it easy, you will be unsteady," the nurse said when she tried to stand too fast. She finished dressing and the curtain was opened back up. When the nurse went to get a wheelchair Marci came to her side, clutching the envelope with all the information.

"You must have had one heck of a dream while you were in there," the anesthesiologist said, "You talked in your sleep almost the whole time. We had to check to make sure you were actually out."

Janice paled, "What did I say?"

"Nothing I could blackmail you with," the anesthesiologist laughed at the worry on her face. "It was more like you were talking to people. You mentioned Shirley and Ken and then cursed in Spanish."

"I don't know a Ken or Shirley," she replied uneasy, "and I don't know Spanish."

The anesthesiologist shrugged, laughing, "I do. But don't worry; I didn't take any offense to it. Here's your ride."

Marci went ahead to get the car pulled up in the pickup driveway. There were two others waiting for their rides, their nurses patiently waiting.

"Kenneth, you have a good recovery," one nurse said as she wheeled a man with his right arm in a sling, bound tight to his body, to the SUV that just pulled to the front. "Make sure to follow all the in-home therapy instructions."

"Thanks so much," he replied. His wife came around to help him get into the front seat. It was the woman from Janice's dream. She glanced over and her eyes froze in puzzlement on Janice for just a moment before getting back in and driving off.

Janice jerked her head to the remaining patient, an elderly woman, waving to the approaching car.

"Shirley?" Janice asked hesitantly.

"Yes?" she replied turning to her, "Do I know you?"

"Ah no," Janice answered, "I just remember you from the inside. Good luck."

"Thank you dear." And she vanished into the car. Janice recognized the elderly man driving the car as the one in her dream. Marci pulled up and came around to help get her out of the wheelchair. Janice looked around for another wheelchair but didn't see one.

"What are you looking for?" Marci asked, looking around herself.

"Nothing." Janice replied, "nothing at all."

As they drove past the main hospital Janice felt a cold creep in her when she saw the van from the City Morgue parked there. A covered body was being loaded inside.

"Keep driving," Janice said, "let's go home."

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Veronica Smith lives in Katy, Texas, a suburb west of Houston. Her first full length novel, *Salvation*, was just published in December 2016. Her first novella, *Chalk Outline*, was originally self-published but is the process of being re-released. She also has several short stories published in anthologies. In addition to writing, she's a co-editor for two anthologies. Follow her to get the latest on her works.

Facebook: <u>Veronica Smith, Author</u> Amazon Author Page: <u>Veronica Smith</u>



### Accomplished | Jennifer Mccullah

Tim's parents walked in and saw the cat he'd skinned and dissected. He played with its organs while Mommy and Daddy argued. Daddy said Tim needed professional help, Mommy said he was just curious. Tim made sure to hide his experiments after that.

As the months passed, his parents constantly argued. Eventually there was a divorce and Daddy left. Tim wasn't sad because he could experiment openly with him gone. Experiments became bigger and more complicated. Tim liked a challenge. He was never satisfied until he cut open Mommy's torso and saw her beautiful insides. She was his greatest accomplishment.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Jennifer Mccullah is a writer from Kentucky. She lives with her girlfriend and the two coolest Chihuahuas on the planet.

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### An Encounter with Old Duir | Jeannie Wycherley

"I wonder why that tree has kept its leaves when all the others haven't." Jane stared out of the window at the copse of trees atop a hill in the middle distance. Since they'd moved into the house in late August, Jane had delighted in the view over the valley below, even more so when presented with evidence of the changing season. The trees had burst into brilliant colors of fire and earth, but now after a couple of stormy nights, most were bereft of foliage, with the notable exception of one huge overreaching specimen in the center of the cluster. "Alex?" Jane prompted her husband. He grunted, barely looking up from his phone.

"It's probably an evergreen. Something Alpine," he said, returning to what he was doing. "Maybe." Jane didn't think this was the case. The tree was tall and round and full. It looked more like a large oak or beech tree but at this distance she couldn't really tell. Curiosity was killing her. "We ought to go and investigate. What do you think? Go for a walk and see if we can get up there?" Jane was feeling stir crazy after being cooped up over the holidays. She wanted to get out into the fresh air.

Alex glanced up again, irritated. "Mmm?" he said and Jane decided not to pursue the conversation any further. She quietly left the room, and a little later she left the house alone, car keys in hand, intent on her mission to locate the tree if she could.

She had a vague idea of how to get to the hill. It involved navigating numerous narrow back lanes that led down to the valley, then fording the river at the bottom, before making her way up the other side. Fortunately, with the exception of an enormous milk lorry and a few tractors, she encountered little traffic. Once she had a good vantage point of the top of the hill, she pulled up in a small muddy layby and took her bearings. Behind her, the coastal town where she lived splayed out, tumbling down the hill to the sea, her housing estate neatly lodged into the hillside.

There were far fewer dwellings this side of the valley; the occasional mansion or palatial bungalow, set well back from the lanes. The area was densely wooded in places, but towering above everything was the crest of the hill with the copse. Jane studied the landscape; she could make out the flash of green. She was in the right vicinity.

She drove until she could progress no further, then abandoned the car, pulling it off road as far as possible, hoping it wouldn't cause inconvenience to anyone else.

The trees here were widely spaced, mainly silver birch and ash, with the occasional large beech. Jane pulled her walking boots on and zipped her jacket up, savoring the smell of damp earth and must. The sky above, the color of spoiled milk, promised that the remainder of the day would only grow colder, and provided a stark relief for the skeletal branches as they danced on a frigid breeze.

Jane tramped through the thick carpet of leaves, relishing kicking them with each step. The leaves were crisp, freshly fallen, in various shades of crimson, orange and yellow. Underneath these, older leaves moldered and decayed, scenting the woodland with a subtle natural putrescence.

The climb to the crest of the hill was steeper than Jane had imagined. About halfway, she rested, noticing how the trees were now packed more thickly than they had been lower down

the hill. The trunks of the beech trees here were covered in thick moss, and the branches above her head entwined, tapping against each other nervously.

Jane started off again, hauling herself up the last 100 yards with some difficulty. The trees congregated thickly and brambles tore at her clothes and hair. The undergrowth was vicious. Tree roots stuck out of the earth at abrupt angles, ensuring the going was slow and treacherous. Several times Jane sucked her breath in as a thorn sliced into her naked hands, and once she slipped and wrenched her ankle. She was considering giving the whole stupid venture up when finally, the vegetation thinned out, and she found herself standing under the canopy of an enormous oak tree.

Jane marveled at the sight before her. The oak's great knotted trunk must have been twenty feet in diameter at least. The lowest branches hung at least 6 feet above her head, the thick foliage a luscious verdant green. Jane inhaled the fresh, healthy scent, feeling it tingle in her nose, and felt suddenly compelled to place her hands on the gnarled surface and run her fingers through the deep grooves. As her hands connected with the rough bark, the tree gave a distinct hum, as though powered by its own vibrant internal electricity.

From the other side of the trunk came a shushing noise as though someone had suddenly kicked up a pile of dry leaves. Startled, Jane pulled away from the tree as a woman walked into view.

"You made me jump!" Jane gasped. Pulling herself together, she smiled.

The woman gawped back at her, her mouth a toothless cavern, dark and hot. She was old. Very old. The creases carved into her face were as deep as the wrinkles in the bark of the tree, and the green of her long dress exactly matched the color of the oak's leaves. Silver hair flowed down her back, rippling in the muted light. It was freezing cold out here, yet she was barefoot.

"Greetings to you, my dear. You've come to meet Old Duir, have you?"

"Dew- ra?"

"Duir. He's mighty pleased to meet you, aren't you, old man?" The woman wheezed out a laugh and patted the tree. Jane was perplexed. The woman had a name for the tree? Jane figured discretion was the better part of valor in this case, as the woman was obviously unsound. She decided to extricate herself from the situation as quickly as she politely could.

"I'm surprised this tree has all its leaves this far into winter," she said, and began to step away.

"Duir never loses his leaves, pet."

That was ridiculous. "How is that possible?" frowned Jane.

The woman looked seriously at Jane. "Well, see, like all trees, Duir keeps his leaves when he is able to draw the energy he needs from the earth. And the earth is good hereabouts, so Duir is blessed."

Jane had always assumed that trees absorbed energy from light, using chlorophyll or something. She racked her memory back to school and her biology classes but couldn't remember quite how it all worked. Perhaps the woman was right and the tree absorbed extra nutrients from the ground, but that didn't account for the fact that the leaves had remained on the tree far longer than would be considered normal.

"I keep the earth well fertilized especially for Duir, and then he sees to the rest of his needs himself."

Jane examined the ground around them. The area had been swept free of fallen leaves, and the soil had been exposed. It had not been turned over, but it was strangely dark, and oddly rich looking.

"How?" asked Jane, unsure whether she wished to continue this conversation. Something touched the back of her neck, and irritated, she swatted it away. A moth, or spider perhaps.

The woman was smiling again but now she said nothing, distracted by something behind Jane, unnerving her completely. The touch came again and Jane lifted her hand to ward off the insect, but recoiled when she connected with something hard and cool. She ducked, but whatever it was had twisted itself around her neck. Jane shouted and squirmed in its grasp, but the more she struggled, the tighter it held her. She only stopped wriggling once her feet left the ground. She was being hoisted into the air in a hangman's grip.

With horror, Jane realized she was being held tightly captive by a branch. The tree swung her effortlessly around to its reverse. In a flash, she took in a man lying crumpled against Duir's enormous roots, splayed out and dead for some time by the look of it, while another female walker, was sprawled against the trunk on her knees, her face devoid of color, her neck at an awkward angle, but still making small movements with her mouth. She was alive. Just.

The branch dropped Jane next to the other woman. She fell heavily and pain flared in her knee, bright and orange. Nonetheless, she tried to scramble to her feet, rending the forest with her terrified screams. The tree was faster though. A branch shot down from above her head, sharp as an arrow, entering her right shoulder, ripping through her lung, before exiting her right buttock, impaling her against the ground.

The shock was intense and Jane was abruptly silenced, shuddering and twitching, knowing that the agony had not yet fully formed, but certainly would. She breathed shallow, praying for release.

The old woman scampered like a child, delightedly clapping her hands. "Clever Duir! Clever, clever Duir!" she sang.

The tree bowed towards the women, branches waving softly, the foliage caressing Jane's cheek. She watched as the veins in the leaves pulled away from the membrane, attracted to her skin—as leeches are drawn towards warmth. With the lightest of touches, as Duir began to draw Jane's life blood from her, she finally understood the source of the nutrients he used to retain his energy and bounteous greenery. And as the light faded from Jane's reality, she focused only on her heartbeat as it pulsed in time with Old Duir's humming energy, and the percussive orchestration of the natural world.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Jeannie Wycherley is a writer, copywriter and gift shop proprietor residing somewhere between the forest and the coast in East Devon, UK. Her work is inspired by the landscape, not least because her desk affords her sweeping views over Sid Valley and the glorious hills beyond. She has resisted the temptation thus far to visit old Duir. Jeannie's debut novel CRONE is due for release in April 2017.

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### Deals | Sarah Craft

It's nearly midnight when Paul walks through the front door. The honeymoon phase of our relationship is long over. Rarely does he rush home; instead, he arrives an hour or two after his shift. His excuse is, he stops at the bar and drinks with the guys—de-stresses before he comes home, you know. But over the past month, it's taken him longer and longer. He's told me not to worry.

Worry is the last thing I'm doing as I rush into the kitchen and warm up his dinner. It and other emotions filled up the past six hours as I waited.

While the microwave is doing its thing, I grab a beer out of the fridge and pop the top with practiced ease. Thirty seconds later, I'm carrying a plate out into the living room where Paul is sitting in his recliner. The TV is blaring sports scores. To the untrained eye everything is normal.

I don't ask where he's been as I lean down to set the plate on the end table beside him. "How was work, baby?" I smile as I ask the question. A scent interrupts the usual dance. Hints of floral surround him in a fresh, clean cloud. Taking just a few more seconds I see his hair is dry, but it's clean, free of the sweat and oil that tends to cling to it.

Inside, a hand reaches for that switch. I push it back, gently, with a promise. The deal's been broken but I want to play this out.

Paul doesn't look at me as he shoves me away with one hand.

Stumbling back, I go limp and fall. It's a part of the game we've both been playing for a while now. He pushes, shoves, hits and I take it. *Appetizers for what's to come*.

Only after I start getting up does his gaze wander my way. I freeze as he examines me, head cocked to the side. Without looking away he reaches over to his dinner. "I don't want this slop." The plate clatters as he flips it over, sending pork chops, roasted potatoes, and carrots all over the carpet. A self-satisfied smile plays at the corners of his mouth.

"I'll fix you something else," I say as I scramble up and begin the dash to the kitchen. I've made my move, next is his.

He reaches out, grabs my arm hard enough that I'll have five new bruises, and yanks me to him.

I knew what he was when I met him. Just handsome enough to draw attention; just smart enough to hide the violent streak that snaked inside his heart. But I could see it. It was in the way he looked at the crowd: dismissing any of the girls who looked him in the eye or stood a little too proudly. They'd take too much work.

He wanted something easy, something already bent, but not quite broken.

Usually, I try to appease him by appearing weak. A few bruises and maybe some sex, and he's back to normal for a few days. But the scent of flowers, where Paul usually smells of cigarettes, beer, and sweat triggers new moves in our little game.

"Where have you been tonight, Paul?"

He snarls and shoves me towards the kitchen. "Go make me something to eat."

I catch myself and turn around. *Time to push*. "Why'd you take a shower before you came home?"

His eyes flicker to the side.

"Who is she?"

"I'm getting tired of your questions, you lazy bitch." His voice is the warning growl of a mad dog. He stands up. There's anticipation in his eyes. Another lesson on what it means to be his woman is what he's expecting.

I stand my ground as he approaches. Watch as his fists ball up and he pulls his right arm back for a punch. And then witness an entirely new emotion as I easily catch his fist.

"We had a deal, Paul," I say calmly.

Anticipation rolls into shock and tumbles into anger. The emotions are easy to read. They always have been. His next move, a left to the gut, is telegraphed in his eyes.

I move just enough to avoid it and shove him back with unexpected force. He stumbles into the recliner.

"I'd be your woman, and you could do what you wanted."

Paul's lip curled up in fury. There's none of his cunning left as he yells and rushes at me.

A slight step to the side and his own momentum carries him into the wall. The plaster caves and cracks where he impacts. Slightly stunned he turns to look at me.

"But I'd be your only one," I remind him. *The hand inside flips the switch*. I smile and watch his anger turn to horror as the little changes in my body begin. "I don't make deals lightly, and when someone breaks them, I take it personally."

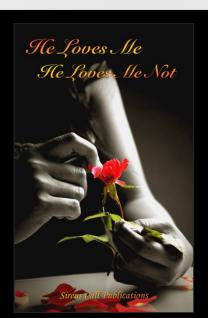
All of his anger is gone, replaced with terror. The scent of urine fills the air. I kneel beside him as he whimpers and tries to crawl away.

"You see, I've made a deal with the monster in me," I whisper near his ear. "It gets to feed, but I get to choose dinner."

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — When it comes to chaos, Sarah wears the crown—although a bit lopsided. She's an all around free-lancer who works as a personal assistant, publicist, author, editor and artist. She shares her crazy life with her husband and 2 boys and tries to keep the cats occupied.

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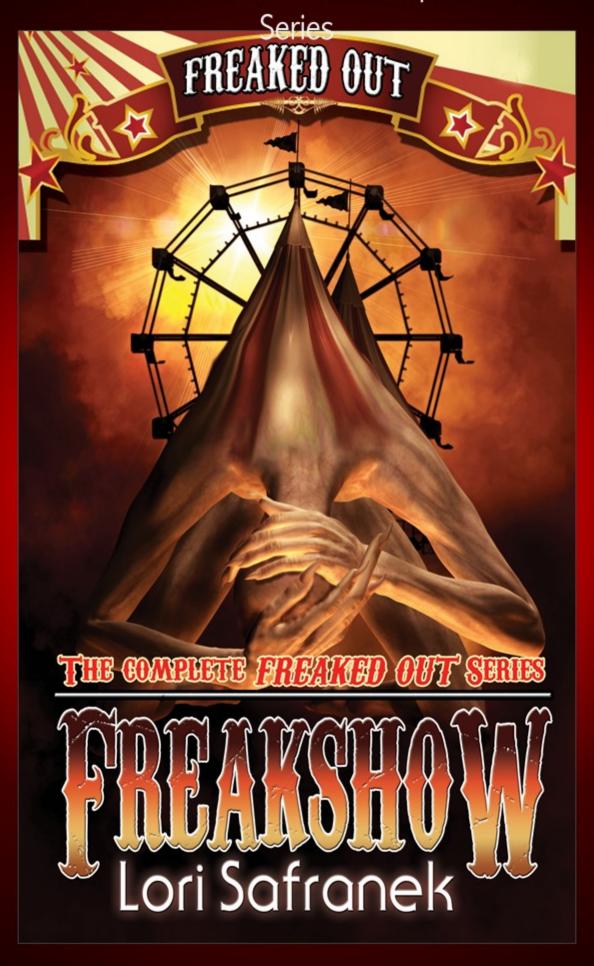
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### The Ballad of Johnny and Lisette | Stacey Turner

"I want to be a serial killer," he whispered in my ear as we turned lazily on the muggy dance floor at Bob's. We'd only met that night, and though I was sweating, pressed cheek to cheek, chest to chest, groin to groin with him, a chill snaked icy tendrils down my spine, and I shuddered slightly. He grinned—I could feel the movement against my face—and pulled me closer. I was sure it was the start of a beautiful romance.

He spoke to me of evil in the night, whispering after I'd turned out the lights, of the people he'd kill to invite the darkness in. I listened as he talked out ways in which he'd complete his plans, how he'd choose his victims, and blueprints for avoiding the police. He thought police were stupid and bumbling. Confident he was far more intelligent than they, he laughed as he talked about how he might even return to the scene of the crime to watch their bogus efforts.

"Isn't that how killers get caught?" I asked.

"Stupid ones, yeah," he replied. "What would you know about it?"

"Nothing. I've just watched a lot of crime shows." I turned away, watching the deepening shadows in the corner, and suppressing the trembling, afraid he might see I was tamping down my emotions. I bit my tongue on the words I wanted to reply, knowing his anger could spike at any moment, making him violent. And after the violence came the tears, the explanations and recriminations, the meaningless apologies. He couldn't control his feelings the way I could. I hoped it was something I could teach him.

I loved him with a fierceness I hadn't felt in a long time. I'm not a passionate person. I don't let myself get carried away. I find comfort in routines, in control. And maybe that's why I loved Johnny, because he was the exact opposite of me, no control, all passion. He scared me, but it was exciting.

I'd let him move in that very first night. We'd had groping, drunken sex on the couch in my living room, barely making it in the door before ripping at each other's clothes. The next morning, I'd made him breakfast and studied him as he drank his coffee and chain smoked. I hated cigarettes.

"Were you serious about what you said last night?" I asked after he'd polished off the pancakes.

"Which part?" He scratched his head endearingly, and shot me a schoolboy's smile. "I mean, I probably could grow to love you, but we've only just met. You can't take anything someone says when they're that drunk seriously, you know. And the tequila was flowing fast and strong—"

"No," I shook my head. "Not that part. The part about becoming a serial killer."

He raised an eyebrow and studied me for a moment. "Absolutely. Does it scare you?"

"No." I found myself unable to suppress a slight shiver.

The action made him grin. I leaned over to kiss him and wipe the smug expression from his face. We ended up knocking the dishes to the floor and fucking right there on the kitchen table. Syrup seeped into my hair and it took three washings to get it all out.

The first time he hit me was the day he lost his job. I found it almost comical the way he came home pissed off, and let's face it, embarrassed. Somehow that measly ten buck an hour

job had been all tied up with his self-esteem. I didn't care about whether he even had a job or not; I had plenty of money for the both of us. But things went badly when I told him so.

"What kind of man do you think I am?" He punctuated the question with a backhand to my face. I fell, clipping the corner of the coffee table with my side. He towered over me, rage contorting his usually charming features into a grimace.

"I just meant you don't need a job."

He kicked me in the side. "That what I look like to you? Some fucking loser who sits around all day, mooching off his woman?" He bent and jerked me up. "I'm. Not. A. Loser." Each word was punctuated by a vicious shake. My teeth clicked together and I saw stars. He threw me back down to the ground. The slamming door announced his departure.

I picked myself up, treated my bruises, and made dinner. I'm not a whiner, and I understood something inside of Johnny was broken. Most people were broken if you looked down deep in their souls. And those were the people I liked best. The broken ones. They needed me.

He came home three hours later, stinking of whiskey, stale cigarettes, and underneath it all—cheap perfume. But I didn't say a word, just reheated dinner and set the table. He caught me wincing as I sat down, the coffee table had left a nasty bruise and I thought I might have cracked a rib.

He hung his head in silence for a moment or two and then set his fork aside. "I'm so sorry, Lisette." Puppy dog eyes peered at me from a face full of remorse. "I don't even know what happened. It was like I was someplace else, watching a stranger hurt you and there was nothing I could do to stop him."

I cocked one side of my mouth up in a rueful grin. "It's okay," I said. "Shit happens."

"Well it won't happen again," he promised. And I wondered if he heard the lie beneath his words as clearly as I did.

Six months of unemployment did nothing for Johnny's self-esteem or his temper. There were more fights, mostly beatings I guess. Him hitting me for something he imagined I thought, some 'look' I'd given him. Afterwards was always the same—he'd go out for a few hours, and then come back apologetic. I never once criticized him, regardless of what he made up in that thick skull of his. Never once blamed him for the violence. I, of all people, understood. We all have our demons.

And Johnny'd had it rough. His mom had been a crack whore who turned tricks to feed her addiction, while little Johnny went hungry and cold. Some of her tricks knocked him around and most knocked his mom around. To him, violence almost equaled love.

I'd been the recipient of the same sort of love so I understood. My father'd been a mean ass drunk who enjoyed hitting me almost as much as he'd liked forcing himself on me. I'd learned early to conceal my emotions. Any sign of weakness on my part just made things worse. And Heaven forbid if I got angry. I'd learned my lesson the hard way, waking up in a corner of the kitchen three days after he'd knocked me there for cussing him. So I learned to keep my mouth shut and my head down and take whatever he doled out. But I didn't let him break me.

"What happened to your mother?" I had asked one night as we lay wrapped in each other's arms.

"I don't know." He rolled to face me. "What happened to your father?"

"I killed him."

Johnny laughed as though I'd said the funniest thing he'd ever heard. "Then why aren't you in jail, my lovely Lissette?"

"Because the official cause of death was internal bleeding. They blamed the Warfarin he was on."

"But you think you killed him?" Johnny asked.

"I know I killed him," I replied. "I was the one who brewed his herbal tea every night before he went to bed. Turns out there are some herbs you shouldn't mix with blood thinners."

"Nice try, girl." Johnny planted a kiss on my head. "But accidents and wishful thinking don't make you a killer." He rolled over and before long his snores filled the room. I stared into the shadows and realized things weren't working.

Johnny's talk of murder grew more frequent and he bought a gun, a lovely Glock with a seventeen round clip. Though it was a nice gun, and I actually grew to enjoy shooting it, guns weren't my thing. He stopped asking me to go to the range when he realized I'd become a better shot, even though I wasn't interested. Johnny was pulling away from me. And instead of learning to control his emotions, he grew more unmanageable every day.

So I started making a plan, a last ditch effort to save us, bind us together. I made my plans carefully; I'm a very thorough planner. I like to imagine every scenario, and accommodate for all contingencies. I've always hated surprises. Two weeks into my planning, things went wrong. So wrong.

I came home from the grocery store to an empty house. I'd thought Johnny would be there, probably angry that dinner was late. I was prepared for his anger and his fists, no big deal. But I wasn't prepared for what happened next.

"Johnny," I called as I walked through the house. "Honey?"

No answer. Shrugging, I went back to unloading the groceries, mentally prepping dinner in my head and trying not to wonder where he'd gone. Ten minutes in, the garage door opened. We never used the garage.

"Lisette!" Johnny came busting through the door linking the garage and kitchen. He was sweaty, excited, his eyes huge. He grabbed my hand.

"Come with me. You're never going to guess what I did."

My heart sank. Please, God, don't let him have done what I think he did.

He dragged me through the door, into the garage, and stopped me by the trunk of his car. "Open it," he demanded.

I moved sluggishly, feeling like a sleepwalker, a sinking dread filling every part of me. I stopped, turning my head to look at him. Pleading with my eyes the whole time: don't make me do this, Johnny. This changes everything. I love you. I don't want to see this. But of course, he picked up on none of my thoughts and pointed at the trunk.

"Open it."

I turned to the trunk, and threw open the lid. A gasp I couldn't stifle flew from my lips, and my eyes welled with tears. Lying inside, wrapped in a plastic sheet, was the body of a blonde woman. I didn't recognize her through the sheet, didn't want to. Hoped I wouldn't. He'd done it. His first kill. I started shaking.

"Oh, Johnny. Why?"

He danced around, adrenaline surging through his veins, making him almost high.

"She was giving me shit at the unemployment office today. Silly, stupid bitch. Telling me I needed to work harder, that jobs were available. Yeah. Right. As though I'm going to go flip fucking burgers at the local Mickey D's. Dumb cunt. Had no idea who she was talking to, no fucking clue." He was bouncing around like a ping pong ball, so pumped by his own words.

"And all I could think about the whole time she was berating me was killing her. Just sticking my Glock in her stuck-up bitch face and pulling the trigger. So I came home and got the gun. And then I waited in the parking garage, waited for her to get off and come down."

"How did you know which car was hers?" My voice was calm, even if I was crying inside.

"What? Oh, that." He shrugged. "I didn't really, I sort of drove around all the levels until I saw her walk out of the doors. Then I made sure she was alone and I snuck up behind her. Grabbed her by the hair and forced her to get into my car. Stupid bitch. She wasn't so high and mighty with tears and snot running down her face."

I slumped back against the car. "Johnny, they have cameras in those garages. When someone reports her missing, they'll play back the footage, and see you with her."

He slapped me. Hard. "Stop trying to steal my fucking moment here. Jesus, you're such a fucking downer. And you haven't even heard the best part yet."

I just stood there. "Go on, then." I cocked an eyebrow. "What happened next?"

"I drove her out to the forest, I mean way out, off the blacktop by Lima. I hiked her into the timber a ways, and then, well..." he paused, looking at me sheepishly.

"You fucked her." My voice came out louder than expected, but I managed to suppress the eye roll. "You left DNA."

He looked like a wounded child. "Well, I didn't plan on that part. It was just, she was begging, and just being there, knowing I was in charge, it made me so horny. I just, look, baby, it didn't mean anything. Don't be mad."

"I'm not mad about you screwing her, Johnny. I get it. You're impulsive." I sighed.

"You love it when I'm impulsive." He came over to me then and pulled me hard up against him. I knew I shouldn't feel anything, shouldn't feel the rush of warmth between my legs, or the excited tingle in my stomach. Shouldn't kiss back when his mouth fell on mine. Shouldn't be frantic to unbuckle his trousers and raise my skirt. And I certainly shouldn't bury my hands in his hair and scream out his name as he picked me up, pressed me against the wall, and shoved himself into me. But I couldn't help it. I loved him. So I enjoyed the ride. Afterward, he sat with his back against the wall and held me on his lap and I breathed in his scent. Licked the salty drops of sweat from his neck and wished things could be different.

"How did it feel when you pulled the trigger?" I asked as he lit another damn cigarette.

"I can't describe it, baby." He exhaled. "It was almost as good as sex. Watching her there on her knees, beat up, still begging for her life, and then squeezing the trigger. Yeah, it was almost as good as pumping a load into you. A release."

I sighed. "What now?"

"Now, we clean up the mess we made. I need to think of somewhere to dump the body. Someplace no one will find it."

"You," I said softly.

"Me what?"

"You made. The mess you made. You said 'we."

"Oh, so I'm alone in this? Is that what you're saying? You're a fucking accessory right now. I go down, you go down. Don't think I wouldn't tell a jury how much you enjoyed me humping you not three feet from the dead body."

"You're a pig, Johnny." I didn't mean to say it, but I was having trouble keeping control. No one had ever threatened my control like Johnny. No one. It was probably why I loved him so much.

He shoved me off of him and rose to a standing position over me. "Fucking cunt." He zipped up his pants and started to pull the belt from them.

"Johnny, stop," I said quietly, my voice barely above a whisper. I don't even know if he heard me. If he did, my words had no effect. He cracked the belt once, and then let it fly. It whistled through the air and I felt the sharp sting of the leather biting into my shoulders. And I realized no matter how much I wanted things to work out, they weren't going to. Tears leaked from behind my closed lids.

He brought the belt down twice more before he realized I was crying. It seemed to sink in and bring him to a halt. "Christ, Lisette! Why you gotta make me do this shit?" Things were always my fault in Johnny's world.

"I love you so much, but damn, you make me so angry." He knelt and reached for me, but I scuttled crab-like across the floor to the far wall.

"Lis," he said. "Don't be like that, baby. Look." He laid the belt down and held his palms up. "I'm not gonna hit you again. I'm sorry. C'mere, baby."

I stood, but didn't walk closer. I could feel myself shaking.

He stared at me with his puppy dog eyes slowly welling up with tears.

"I'm sorry, Lis." He opened up his arms and I inched slowly into them. "Lis, honey, you're trembling. Don't be scared. I'm not going to hurt you."

"I'm not scared."

"Sure you are, baby. I can feel you shaking."

"No." I said. "I'm sad."

"Because I broke my promise not to hit you again?" he asked, shame creeping into his words.

"No. Because it's over." I pulled back slightly to gaze into his eyes. He stiffened and his eyes widened. He hadn't even felt the blade slip like butter between his ribs, puncturing his lung. I grabbed the handle of the filet knife I'd slipped up my sleeve when I heard the noise in the garage and pulled. It whisked out cleanly. I keep my knives surgeon sharp.

I gave him a shove and he fell backward, his hands immediately trying to stem the blood flow.

"Don't bother," I told him. "You won't be surviving. First off, your blood won't clot. I've been adding ground chamomile and angelica root to your food each night. Both have anticoagulation properties. Second, your lung has probably already collapsed and will fill with blood. So if you don't bleed to death, you'll drown in your own blood. Sorry, I know neither of those choices sound good, but well, this is all your fault."

"Wh-why?" Johnny exhaled the words and I watched him struggle to inhale.

"Because you screwed up, Johnny. That's why. You can't control your damn emotions and you went off halfcocked. I was hoping you'd learn from me. Do you ever see me cry

when you hit me? Do you see me yell or retaliate? No. Because, unlike you, I'm in control. Though I will admit, you've tested me sorely." I bent and pulled out a grey plastic tub from its spot under the workbench. Lifting the lid I pulled out a tarp. I stretched it on the floor and rolled Johnny onto it.

"All your talk of being a serial killer was bullshit. You don't know the first thing about being a killer. Bringing me out here and bouncing around like an overeager pup. Look what I did, look what I did. You screwed things up, that's what you did." I sighed and shook my head.

"If you'd just waited. I had a murder planned. A perfect murder. Just like all the others. Every part planned, down to the tiniest detail. Not this, 'oh, I'm pissed, I'm Johnny badass, I think I'll just kill someone' shit. You have no finesse. And you know why? Because you let your emotions override your judgment. Dumb, Johnny. Dumb." I lifted the plastic tarp wrapped corpse out of the trunk and laid it on the floor beside Johnny. He was growing pale and shaking. I knew I didn't have much time left to explain. And I needed him to understand.

Unwrapping the girl, I pulled a hacksaw from the tub and squatted beside the body. I shook my head.

"I loved you, Johnny. From the night we met. I thought we were two peas in a pod, one soul in two bodies. That's why I didn't mind the beatings. I thought I could teach you, teach you to control your emotions, and then we could have killed together. It would have made us so much stronger as a couple. It would have been beautiful. But I guess I've known for a while now it would never work." Tears once again trailed down my cheeks.

I put down the hacksaw, and knelt by Johnny's body. I stroked his cheek and placed soft kisses on his lips. His breathing had grown labored and shallow; he didn't have much time left.

"I tried to keep believing it would work out. That this time I'd found a true partner. Someone who shared my passion for killing, my quest for perfection, my love of the darkness. But, you didn't get it, Johnny. You kept talking about inviting the darkness in. When a true killer knows—the darkness lives inside us. We kill to feed it."

He gurgled and lay still. I knew he was gone. Part of me wanted to weep, to lie down and hold his rapidly cooling body. But the other part took over. The rational part that knew I had to finish cleaning up. Had to hide his mess, as well as him. I didn't know how much time I had before the police would come looking for him after viewing security footage, but figured at least twenty-four hours. Even if the blonde was missed immediately, a missing person complaint can't be filed right away. I'd dispose of both bodies in a place I'd used once before, then drive his car to a cliff not far away in the dead of night. I'd have to scrub the garage of course. I wished I'd had time to take him someplace else for the kill, I hated to dirty my own space; but he hadn't given me much choice. I knew no one would miss him. And I had my story ready. Enough people around town had seen the bruises he inflicted. I'd tell the police I'd finally had enough and made him leave. Act a little scared, until they promised to keep an eye out for me.

And after enough time had passed, I'd go back to Bob's. My soul mate was still out there. Despite my losses, I remained optimistic. Someone shared my darkness.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Stacey Turner lives in West Central Illinois with her husband. Three wonderful, adult children call her "Mom," and three beautiful little grandsons call her "Mimi". She is owned by cats. She is the editor of several anthologies, as well as many novels & novellas for a variety of authors. She has been published in several anthologies and online magazines.

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### **Nephilim** | *Abs Beard*

Judy Watson and her mother stood outside the old house one early autumn day. Neither had been here for many years. It was a solid brick house, rebuilt during Victoria's reign. Yet it seemed older. Darker. Perhaps colder than other homes.

Judy was the first to enter. The heavy door creaked open to reveal a slum of fine chaos inside. Threadbare rugs that sent plumes of dust particles flying into the warm autumn sunlight. Cobwebs crawling with spindle legged spiders clutching their prey. Grand paintings adorned the flaky walls. Portraits of captains and generals. Saints dotted between. No family portraits here in this crusted barren home.

"I'll fetch the broom and you can get started," the mother swallowed.

Judy rolled up her sleeves. She hadn't wanted to come, but as she was living in her mother's house she felt obliged to follow orders. The old man was her only uncle. He had died of pneumonia. It was some weeks before he was found. Slack jawed, rotted and festooned with bluebottle maggots.

Judy braced herself, took the broom from her mother's frail hand and headed to the cellar. This is where the hired help had boxed up all the personal effects. Her mother had said if anything took her fancy, she could keep it. Or sell it.

The war years had been hard on this family and Judy had her unborn child to consider.

The cellar was full of boxes. Small boxes. All sealed. Curiosity got the better of her and she pried one open. Inside was a child's skeleton. The bones were mangled but the skull unmistakably human. It had a long tail, curled round it like a sleeping cat.

She shut the lid quickly. Dare she open any more?

She dropped her broom on an old ornate drain cover. She spied through the grate something green and twinkling. She heaved up the cover and peered inside. Something was definitely in there. She climbed down the ladder pinned sturdily to the drain wall, looking upward like Alice down the rabbit hole.

On the floor was a huge emerald ring. She quickly put it on and peered down the tunnel. There was a room. A secret room down here.

She felt unease. Claustrophobic dread swirled inside her. She tiptoed down the tunnel careful not to touch the filthy walls. Strange. No rats.

It was dark down here. Not pitch black. The chamber ahead had a faint green glow. The

closer she got to it, the more nauseous she became. It was like something was stealing her breath. Halfway she hesitated. Perhaps she should go back. See what else her uncle had stashed away in those boxes. He was well travelled. He'd been to Jerusalem and Egypt. He was a perpetual scholar even after he had left the priesthood. No one in the family ever spoke of it. Judy did not really know anything about her mother's early life with her brother.

Theirs was a distant family. They seemed to stay aloft from each other, writing insincere Christmas cards and nothing more.

The tunnel was dark but the room ahead was not. She headed carefully toward the light. The closer she got, the more the little hairs on her arms and neck stood on end. Her breathing became shallower. A voice inside her head screamed Get Out!

But she had reached the secret room.

There was strange green light there. She could not pinpoint the source. The place seemed almost misty. She prayed it wasn't poisonous gas.

The room was spherical. On the walls were deeply engraved sigils. She hadn't seen them before. They weren't Egyptian. No. It's a language she hasn't seen before. In the middle of the room was an old case. It too had sigils engraved into it. It had large chains wrapped around.

Suddenly she heard a child crying within the case. A muffled sobbing.

Oh dear God, Judy recoiled thinking the worst. Her uncle must be a child snatcher. A depraved maniac. How long has this little one been here?

She scrambled back down the tunnel and up the iron ladder rungs. In the cellar she frantically searched for a key. Her uncle kept his spare keys labelled in a cabinet on the wall. She could not see one that would fit the lock on that awful case.

Think, Think,

She looked around. The hired help had left a tool box there. She remembered she almost tripped on it by the stairs.

She found a claw hammer and dashed back down the drain steps.

She spent all her energy raining down blows on the lock. Inside the sobbing grew more urgent and afraid. It was no good. She collapsed next to the case, her head resting on it, whispering how sorry she was.

Just as she had resolved to fetch the constable, she saw the lock and chains just fall off the case. Impossible, she thought.

The air within the chamber became frigid. She saw her breath and felt her skin shiver.

She backed away from the case. She heard scratching inside it. It sounded like rats gnawing and clawing but the case had no hole in it. There were no rats here just a few intrepid spiders.

The case began to rock at first, then gradually opens a fraction. Out shot tiny claws like a bird's through the slit in the opening. Judy felt vomit rise in her throat and shook her head slowly.

Next, the long lick of a lizard's fork tongue whipped from the gap tasting the air. That tongue was black and snaked around as if looking for someone.

Judy is trembling now. She felt her stomach knot and her sphincter contract. What was this thing?

The claws pried open the case and out slid a creature as if newborn onto the dirt floor of the room.

In some ways it resembled a human being, in shape at least. It had uncountable cat-like eyes all over its face and body, even on the arms. The eyes blinked in unison. The nose was

just two small skull-like holes rather like a carved pumpkin. The skin was shiny and green in color. Looking at it made a person feel feverish and ill. Inside a slit mouth was rows of tiny pointed teeth.

It stared at Judy but stayed quite still. All except for that exploring tongue.

Judy could not take her eyes off it. Dared not.

It felt as if it was waiting for something to happen.

Those many feline eyes exuded intelligence, malignancy and a great power. Power like a god. Power beyond good and evil. Power that fills every atom in the universe. Those eyes. They shone in the darkness. Inhuman lamps always watching.

Judy felt the spell weaken on her and started to slowly back away down that dusty tunnel. The creature moved like a cat stalking its prey. Those eyes blinking and glowing in the dark of the tunnel moving closer and closer.

The thing whispered, but to Judy it sounded like gobbledegook. The voice was surprisingly human.

Finally, it hissed one word she recognized "Child."

Judy held her abdomen. It can't want her baby? No not that.

Its tongue reached her in the darkness. It licked her horrified face. It felt like the flesh of a bloated corpse and the smell! It smelled so rotten. She vomited right down her dress.

She turned and ran as fast as she could to those sturdy steps. The creature slithered after her claw after claw on the rungs but Judy was fast. She hurled the drain cover shut, and rans back upstairs not looking back at those grotesque claws protruding through the grate.

She took the stairs two at a time and found the bathroom. She washed her face and cleaned the vomit from her dress. She shook, her lips trembling in shock.

She looked in the looking glass and where that hideous tongue touched her skin, there was a terrible burn. The skin, blackened and mottled. Even her left eye is turning black.

Judy screamed loudly. Her scream sent her mother running from the bedroom.

Once she saw her daughter's face, a hand went to her mouth in horror.

Judy cried and held her arms out to her mother.

Her mother gasped then turned on her heel and headed downstairs, down to the cellar.

She descended the cellar steps one at a time creeping forwards towards the drain cover.

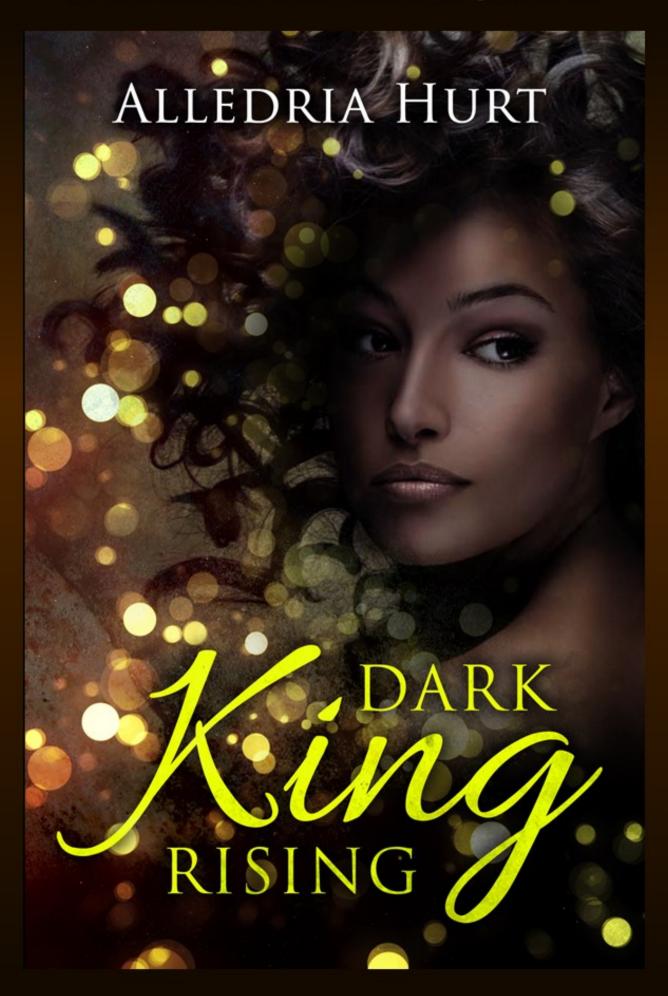
The cover lied there on the floor. The hole exposed in accusation.

Mother sighed. "Oh Albert." Then she said something in that old language the creature had spoken. She turned and calmly went back upstairs, taking out a key from her pocket, locking the cellar door.

Mother climbed the stairs to the ever-hysterical Judy. Her countenance was heavy. Under her long skirts the tip of her tail playfully twisted. She braced herself and went to her disfigured daughter, her green eyes revealing an inner eyelid. Downstairs the door knob to the cellar twisted as a murky shadow lurked beneath the door

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Abs started life interested in theatre and stand up, leading to participation in development of the play Crossfire with the Theatre du Soleil. Abs studied at London Metropolitan University and at Marburg, Germany, study place of the Brothers Grimm, and is also greatly influenced by Poe, fairytales, Wyndham and Wells. Abs is working on a novel and lives with a daughter and pet demon Jazz Hands Munro.

### REMEMBER THE ABANDONED...



AVAILABLE EXCLUSIVELY ON AMAZON

### Be Careful What You Wish For | Suzie Lockhart

Moonlight glistened off the silver frost coating the bare branches of the surrounding trees. Elizabeth could sense him coming for her...

"Jo, get me a beer, would ya?"

Ignoring the sound of my husband's plea, I continued to read. The night was alive with his formidable presence. A cool breeze swirled around her body; the thin, silky gown she wore fluttering against her skin like a caress, making her shiver...

"JoAnne, how 'bout that beer? Game's gonna start."

Bob couldn't see me glaring at him from behind, gritting my teeth.

Trying to keep the annoyance out of my voice, I replied, "Sure."

Creasing the page of my latest romance novel, I set it on the coffee table. I slipped on my old Crocs and trudged reluctantly into the kitchen. I had just gotten to the best part; Mitchell was about to reveal to Elizabeth what he truly was.

Twisting the cap, I set the amber bottle in front of him.

"Thanks," he mumbled absently, aiming the remote towards the television to click through the channels. I could not, for the life of me, understand what compelled men to need to know what was on every single channel.

I flopped back on the sofa, anxious to read what was going to happen next.

...and then his strong arms were wrapped around her waist, his lips dancing across her shoulder and brushing against the soft skin of her neck. Elizabeth moaned from the release of pleasure his mere touch ignited.

"Hey, Jo, how about fixing me a sandwich?"

Frustrated, I tossed my book onto the couch and headed back into the kitchen. If I could ever get a moment's peace, it'd be a miracle. I pulled the loaf of Italian bread from the pantry and made Bob two sandwiches. I knew one was never enough.

I handed Bob his sandwiches. He grabbed one off the plate and began stuffing it into his mouth, never taking his eyes off that flat screen TV.

"I have a confession, my love." Mitchell spun Elizabeth around, and she gasped as her eyes rested on his protruding fangs ...

"Would you get me another beer?"

Lord forbid Bob should actually ever move from that freakin' recliner. Still, I got up again and fetched his beer.

"I would never hurt you." Mitchell held her tightly against him, and he could feel her trembling. Even as he spoke the words, he was not certain he could keep his promise. The scent of her warm blood, rushing just beneath her pale skin, was almost more than he could bear. His fangs protruded in protest.

The pages of the book were getting difficult to read, and I realized it was already getting dark outside.

Time to start supper. Romance and passion would have to be put on hold, once again.

I tossed leftover taco meat in the skillet, deciding to use it for chili. A stack of dishes in the sink beckoned me, so I turned on the hot water. As I ran the sponge over the plates, I wished I could feel like Elizabeth. I imagined a dark, mysterious lover sliding his hands around my waist...

"What's for supper?" Bob's voice spoiled my daydream.

"Chili." I swear, all he thought about these days was his stomach.

I sat at the dining room table, trying to read. Bob stayed on the recliner.

Click. Click. Click.

Finishing the last of my dinner, I thought about the satisfaction it would give me to take that remote and throw it at that television.

Click, Click, Click,

Annoyed, I announced, "I've got a headache. I'm going to lie down." I took my book and headed for the bedroom, looking forward to reading in peace.

Mitchell struggled with his salacious desire to rip Elizabeth's flesh open, so he could satisfy his craving for that sweet red nectar.

My eyelids became heavy, and sleep overcame me.

A loud crash in the living room startled me awake. The book fell off my chest, as I jumped up.

A cold chill hung in the air, and I wrapped my arms around myself and headed down the hallway.

Bob was asleep in the recliner, and the television set was shattered.

Wait. Bob wasn't asleep! He was... I gasped. Crimson liquid dripped from his neck.

A dark stranger stepped out of the shadows, from behind Bob's lifeless form. He licked my husband's blood from his lips.

"Your wish has come true. We can finally be together, my love."

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Suzie Lockhart attended The Art Institute of Pittsburgh after graduating, but the gnawing urge to write always remained. After discovering the innate ability for macabre storytelling, Suzie embraced her inner-creepiness. Her middle son, Bruce began writing chilling tales, and they teamed up. Five years working together have yielded nearly 50 short story publications, in dozens of paperbacks and eZines. The pair have also edited several anthologies, including two top ten *Preditors & Editors* \*\* *Readers' Poll* Awards.

Twitter: <u>@suzienbruce2</u> Facebook: <u>Suzie Lockhart</u>

### Childhood Nightmares: Under the Bed

Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and iTunes



"It's over," he said, "it's... I just can't do this anymore."

Twelve years since they committed to each other. What no man should put asunder, her husband had rendered null and void in a matter of minutes. She knew that he meant what he said; he was not one for jokes, and this would be a joke of the worst kind.

She didn't know what to say. She had lost her voice. This was nothing new. Her voice died little deaths all the time. She was afraid that this time her ability to formulate thought had been murdered permanently.

Finally, she found some meaningless words, just to see if she could still make a sound. "What about your father's birthday next week? Do I still get him a present?"

He didn't answer and it didn't matter.

He left her for the time being. He was generous enough to offer her privacy to pack her belongings so she could go to a place that she hadn't decided upon yet. Twelve years prior, she had decorated this place; she had considered it hers. She had put her imprint on the kitchen and the bathrooms, she had tweaked the bedroom to her liking. For twelve years, she had cleaned and scrubbed and replaced and repaired. She had invested a large part of her life to developing a home. Everything looked and smelled like her; how would he be able to stand it? The only place free of her essence was his man cave. She never went in there. She wasn't allowed.

He trusted her to obey his rules. Even now, even when she no longer owed him anything.

She packed clothing and shoes. She packed trinkets and pictures (even wedding pictures). She packed spices. While she packed, she pushed down tears, layering t-shirts and trousers and thyme on top.

She saw that he no longer kept his hygiene products on his dresser. She no longer cared what he thought, so she opened his drawers. Maybe she would slice holes in his work shirts, or hide his lab ID. Maybe she would do much worse.

The first thing she noticed is that he no longer kept a pack of condoms in his sock drawer. That was a good sign—he was not planning on having sex with anyone else now that he was finished having sex with her. Then again, one condom might have given her hope of reconciliation.

Is that what she wanted? Could she forgive him for his callous dismissal of her and return to him? Wouldn't the shadow of today haunt any possible future relationship with him?

Twelve years was such a short and long time.

She opened the shirt drawer where everything was folded flawlessly. She always joked that he had the perfect work/life balance—he was a scientist in both worlds, with such careful attention to detail that it was almost a war on chaos. He hated chaos and hated surprises more.

He surprised me, she thought bitterly, running her hands over the shirts and forcing them to collide with each other. He would have a terrible time with the wrinkles and that made her happy.

Her hands brushed against a latch in the back of the drawer. She had never known about the latch, because she had never put his clothes away, because she could never learn to fold them properly. The latch concealed a small space that concealed a small book. The first page was an article, an obituary.

Thirteen years ago, he had been unceremoniously dumped, as he was dumping her now.

The obituary was for the woman who had done the original dumping. A woman named Julia, perfect in memory, preserved as a nubile twenty-something. In the obituary, Julia was forty, but she knew that he remembered her as younger. She was convinced that his memories of Julia, and his longing for what once was, infiltrated their happiness. Julia had died three months ago. The cause of death was not discussed but she imagined it might relate to the drugs that he had mumbled about one dark night full of recollections.

She returned to her dresser to grab her perfume and earrings, taking the book and its secrets with her. She didn't know who she hated more: him or the woman who stared out at her from the dresser mirror. She contemplated how different she looked now. There was little to tie her, physically, to the thin, blonde, makeup wearing woman of a dozen years prior.

This was her fault.

Julia had been blonde and makeup wearing. Julia had been her height and the weight she had been twelve years ago. Julia had been a name he mumbled in his sleep.

She left the bedroom, having finished with what she needed and wanting to flee the memories of his stubble scratching her inner thighs, and of his body on top of hers, and of how the muscles on his back felt beneath her fingers, and of how safe his skin smelled after a shower.

Those painful memories were already dated. He had been coming to bed later. He had been spending weekends and evenings in his man cave. He had been purchasing air freshener for his dank hideaway when he had never cared about its ambience before. Her heart began to pound in her ears as she tried to remember the last time they had made love. She no longer interested him in that way.

This was her fault.

She went to the bathroom they had shared to retrieve her Ambien and Prozac. She had begun taking them five years ago. He had refused marital counseling during that dark time; he said it was her issue—her depression. She had gone to see a therapist, working on keeping her voice when things became stressful. She was not allowed to hide inside her own shell but had to confront the issues facing her.

She thought she had seen emails to Julia. She had imagined secret rendezvous. He had been coming to bed later then, as well. Then she took her medicine and everything reverted to normal. They shared a bed, they shared intimacy. The ghost of the living Julia retreated.

Until Julia had to go and die.

He had taken time off work for the funeral and the wake. He had pulled further away from her than ever before. The second and third pages of the hidden book detailed the funeral. She hadn't known that he could be so poetic or so emotional. It was a side he had never shown her.

The few subsequent pages were impossible to decipher. They were full of scientific equations. Following was a drawing of the graveyard where Julia now resided. The drawing was the result of a highly focused mind—the detail was staggering. If it had been a picture of anything else, it might have been beautiful.

She went down the stairs and into the dining room, recovering her mother's dishes from

the china cabinet. She would not be able to take any furniture with her, but she would fill her car with anything of value. She would leave her broken voice behind, along with the ghost of Julia. Therapy and medication would help with that.

She felt nauseous and dizzy at the thought of letting go of the pain. Who would she be without it? What would she do without having to take care of him? He had been her project in addition to being her husband. Did he even know how to cook or how to use the scanner at the grocery store?

That was no longer her problem.

His tidy drawers belied the absent-minded scientist that she had married. Maybe that's what drove Julia away. It is difficult to have a balanced relationship when one is the caregiver of the other. All of these years, all of these twelve years, he had seen her as a mother figure, a secretary and maid, and Julia had nestled into the imprint of long lost love.

It had only been several dozen days since she had diligently cleaned the mud he had so carelessly tracked into their home. She now knew he had defiled their space in more ways than mud. His memories and lingering feelings had scaled the walls of their marriage and pillaged any contentment they might have shared.

Julia was preserved at forty like an icon, like an image of a saint she no longer prayed to. But she would be forced to grow old.

Alone.

She wanted to finish with the house quickly. Later, she would go through all their virtual connections: bank, cell phone account, taxes, and eliminate all traces of their togetherness.

She went to the basement to sort through 5000 days of shared living. The scent of air fresheners was nearly overwhelming. Her side of the basement housed the washer and drier, boxes of mementos, and the gardening tools that had been unable to shake their detritus as of late. Despite the cold days, despite her not being in the yard, her shovels and spades had accumulated fresh dirt, just as her marriage had accumulated fresh dirt.

His side of the basement lived behind a closed door. His man cave. The place where he howled at the moon. The place where he ran with the devil. She knew he spent more time there watching television than anything else, but she had to romanticize the space: it was shameful to lose out to a mistress as benign as historical documentaries.

She decided to break the lock on the door and enter his sanctuary. The only thing she risked was his anger, and she could go someplace where he would never find her. He could choke on that anger for the next twelve years, choke on his rage while he pined for Julia.

She no longer cared about his trust, nor feared the consequences.

She grabbed the garden spade and splintered the door from the jamb. The fragrant smell was stronger behind the door where it was taxed with covering the odor of a lost love.

The room did not look like any man cave she had seen before, and it looked nothing like it had when she moved in. It was full of bottles and tubing and needles and machines. Some machines she recognized, they looked like the monitors that were housed in hospital rooms.

It also contained all of his necessities, so he could live down there permanently.

She moaned, but nothing came out. Her voice was dead again, an appropriate status in this morgue-like dwelling.

The room was organized clutter—no chaos, but plenty of surprises. She found epinephrine, she found atropine, she found handcuffs and shackles and drill bits and chapter

five of *Frankenstein*, and she found herself understanding that she didn't know the man who had woken beside her every day for twelve years.

There was another door on the back wall of the room. She didn't remember that door, but it seems there was a lot that she did not see during her marriage.

Julia was behind the hidden door and she hadn't died from a drug overdose. The bruises around her neck confirmed that. She had been correct: Julia was preserved. She floated in formaldehyde, naked, yet he had placed a curtain around her to protect her privacy.

He was all about privacy.

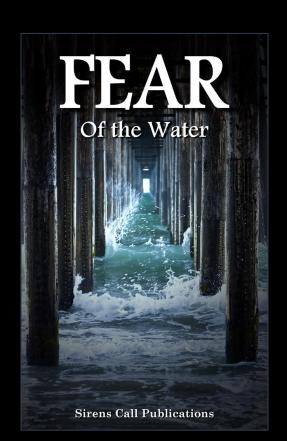
Julia's organs swam in preservatives, drifting in jars and dreaming of their former host. Her lips were horribly swollen and the flesh on her face hung delicately, as if the slightest ripple in the liquid around her would carry her skin away. Julia no longer had blonde hair either, she had no hair at all. Her skull was decorated with a long jagged scar that had allowed him to remove her brain, most likely to reprogram it so that it loved him again.

He had, in fact, been howling at the moon and running with the devil. He had been clearing the way for his new bride.

And, now he stood behind her, knowing his science was strong enough for polygamy, and knowing, after twelve years of cohabitation, that she would be unable to scream.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Elaine Pascale had been writing her entire life. She lives on Cape Cod with her husband, son, and daughter. Her writing has been published in magazines and anthologies. She is the author of the soon to be released Blood Lights, and If Nothing Else, Eve, We've Enjoyed the Fruit. Elaine enjoys a robust full moon, chocolate, and collecting cats.

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Webpage: <u>elainepascale.com</u>



**FEAR: Of the Water** 

Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and iTunes

### A Bargain and an Arrangement | Alledria Hurt

There is always something about the way he behaves toward me that makes me wonder what exactly I'm still doing here. He's a good man, I am certain. Unfortunately, I don't think his goodness is enough.

No matter how wonderful he's been, there's still a head sitting on his mantle staring down at the both of us.

I pretend not to notice the eyes, but they're there, staring, clear green eyes.

I wish it would rot away and disappear.

It never will. No matter what happens, it'll never go away and I can't ask him to remove it. He talks to it. Sometimes, in the dead of night when I can hear him murmuring platitudes to the slacken face, I even think I hear it respond. That can't be true. However, I feel as though I hear it just the same.

Perhaps I am madder than he.

I set the plates on the linen last night as he stood there watching me, his arm propped up on the mantle beside the head. He mouthed something, but I couldn't hear. Then he chuckled, a predatory smile crossing his features that made my heart flutter like a bird's must when faced with the smiling snake. Once the table was set for he and I, he said: "Add another and draw up a chair."

"Are we to have company?"

Even as I asked, I saw the darkness grow in his eyes. He detested being questioned. Then the darkness was gone and his smile returned.

"Add another plate, dearest, and draw up a chair. A visitor comes and he shall dine with us."

I did as I was told, adding another ivy patterned china plate to the table settings, bracketing it with silverware. The chair, one of two unused, I moved from the corner. The visitor, by virtue of his guesthood, would sit at the head of the table while we once more ate facing one another.

I had just set the potatoes beside the mutton when a rap came at the door. It was followed quickly by two more.

My eyes flicked from my husband to the door and back again. He smiled and I... well I felt fear. Concentrating on my plate, I heard him as he crossed the floor and the clicking of the door latch giving way with the finality of a gallows trap door.

"Welcome." My husband's voice was cheerful, even I daresay charming. "Welcome. Come sit with us."

I cautiously raised my eyes as they approached, noting the expense of our guest's wardrobe without meaning to. His dress was finer than our own. A slim gold chain hung in a loop from his waistcoat, undoubtedly attached to a similar watch. The waistcoat itself was a deep verdant green silk that stood out from his white linen shirt. His suit jacket was midnight black, severe. My eyes traveled up to the froth of lace at his throat expecting a well-carved chin and there was *nothing*.

Oh my heavens, he had no head.

My husband helped him to his seat and he sat down. I returned my eyes to my plate,

trembling fingers pressed tight against the tablecloth to hide my fear. I caught my teeth around my lower lip and forced myself to breathe as my husband continued to chatter across the table at our visitor as though he were not holding a conversation alone.

"My dear darling seems at a loss for words." The sudden touch of his hand made me swallow a shriek. "Sweetness, you've not even greeted our guest."

"My apologies, love, I've simply started to feel a touch ill. If I may be excused?"

"No, no, not yet. The evening's entertainment has barely begun." He stroked my skin and it crawled. His voice held a viper's viciousness. "My *friend* has come to complete a bargain."

In the quiet, the guest's gloves moved. He listened. How on Earth could he listen with no ears? I had not gone running from the table, I considered this to my credit. Many a lesser woman would have gone screaming into the night, their petticoats flashing passerbys on the street, but not I. No, I stood my ground despite knowing I sat at a table with monsters.

The headless monster before me and the one that I married.

"Yes, a bargain," my husband continued. "He's come to win back his head and, perhaps, take mine." Beneath his words, a maniacal laughter I did not ignore. "It was a bargain we made, you see, he and I, long before you and I met. A bet between boys who knew no better."

The scraping started again, louder, fingers moving feverishly.

I thought perhaps he was shaking. It might have been fear or maybe anger. Anger was where my mind went. What else could he be when his body sat at a table and his head stared down from the mantle?

"And what, my love, does this bet entail?" I refused a quiver.

"The head to the man who first comes by a kiss." Glee suffused the statement. "You see, the night I kissed Juliana Marsten, he lost his head. Now he hopes to see me lose mine, but I have all the advantages. After all, I am the one possessed of a wife."

Possessed of a wife.

Possessed of: to own or have control over.

A wife: woman who shares life, cooks food for, and cleans up after a husband.

My husband was possessed of a wife, me.

"Yes," I agreed with him. "You are possessed of a wife. However—" I left the word hanging in the air like an autumn leaf dropping from a tree. "It would seem that now I am possessed of a husband."

Understanding dawned in his eyes. Those brown eyes I had once considered so wonderful. Now they were loathsome and disgusting, muddy pools offering nothing but his sudden fear.

I swept up from the table, gaiety I had not felt in years wrapping about me like a velvet shawl. With light steps, I moved across the dining room and into the parlor where the head sat once more watching me, but now I understood its gaze.

I understood so much more now.

"Perhaps you and I can come to an arrangement."

It said nothing, but the eyes moved from me to my husband who stood just behind me.

"Yes, you see," I continued. "I would be rid of him and you need a kiss to take back your head. We might benefit one another." The eyes fluttered and the lips poked out in an offered kiss.

Then I picked up the head and pressed a soft kiss to his lips. He felt surprisingly warm

for someone who should have well been dead and even managed to be a decent kisser. My husband sputtered and choked at the sight. I held the kiss a few moments longer before I took the head and set it on its former neck, square between the shoulders. The body adjusted it slightly and then worked his jaw.

"Well, that was rather unexpected. I would say you've a debt to pay, old man," the once headless gentleman said.

With that, he rushed over and took a hold of my husband's hair, the fool being too flabbergasted at his loss to run like the coward he was, and off came his head with an audible pop like a wine cork.

His jaw worked but no words came out. He glowered at us both, but I suppose chiefly at me. After all, his arrogance toward me had been his undoing.

"No longer will you gloat over me, old friend. Now it is I who have won over you and I will not give you a chance to supplant me." With a slim blade, he stabbed my former husband directly in the chest. He collapsed to his knees, then lay down to expire.

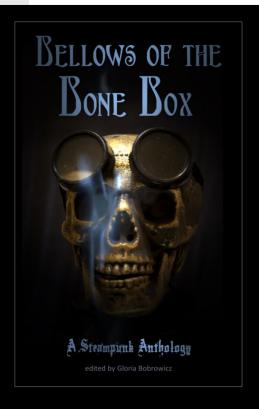
Blood dripping from the blade, he abandoned it to the floor and came to me. "You, beautiful lady, have given me my freedom and I shall give you yours."

"What benefit is my freedom to me? I would rather have your protection."

"Then that I grant you. Forever and always." He took my hand and brought it to his lips. "While I live, you will not want for anything upon my honor and my soul. Such is our arrangement."

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Forever fascinated by horror, Alledria Hurt spends a lot of time making up monsters and then giving them hapless victims to torment. In the end, they get away, but never unscathed. Author of three dark fantasy books with a fourth on the way, she's happily motoring along with her writing career. In her rare free time, she likes Guild Wars 2 and self-help books.

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### **Bellows of the Bone Box**

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#### The Death Box | DM Smith

He rang my doorbell at exactly the time we agreed. Hilary looked like something from the seventies, with glasses so big they were almost fashionable.

"Hello," he said, blinking through the huge lenses. "It's about the apartment you advertised in the university magazine."

"Come in... I know it's tiny," I said, showing him around. "But your room is the biggest." As we gazed through the kitchen window's grime I asked, "What are you studying?"

"Haemopoiesis," he said, like anyone would understand.

Hilary didn't haggle about the rent and we shook hands on the deal. But once he had gone, I realized I knew diddly-squat about him. Hilary, doing a PhD in some sort of poetry. Poets are usually depressed and I hoped he wouldn't move in, hang himself in the stairwell, overdose on his bed or slit his wrists in my rusting bath.

\*\*\*

He turned up the following Saturday about nine thirty. I hadn't said a time and figured no one moved before midday. I staggered out of bed, pulling up my sweat pants and tripping over some old magazines on my way to the door.

"Did I wake you?" Hilary said.

"I was just getting some breakfast," I lied. "Been up a while... Need a hand with anything?"

"No, I'll be fine. I've got some things in the car and I'll bring them up later." He put out his hand. "Do you have a spare key?"

As I gave it to him I remembered my pile of dirty clothes on his bed.

"Make yourself at home, have a coffee, find your way around the kitchen," I said, rushing to his room.

He made for the kitchen while I scooped up the laundry and opened the window for good measure.

Back in the lounge, Hilary was sitting in my favorite TV chair with his coffee. He seemed to take up most of the available air and I wondered if this was such a good idea. Then he opened his wallet.

"A month's rent up front," he said. "...is cash OK?"

My doubts evaporated like morning mist.

"I've left two friends in the car. Can I bring them in?"

"Help yourself. It's partly your place now."

Hilary headed down the stairs while I finished getting dressed and went out for more coffee. Across the road he was chatting with two men by the tailgate of an old Volvo. They were dressed in a similar seventies style and one even wore a sports jacket like my granddad's. They heaved at something heavy and covered in a thin blanket. For a bunch of poets, they looked quite handy. Hilary waved as I walked past.

\*\*\*

Two weeks passed. Washed gym shorts hung over the bath and clean dishes sat on the drainer. Came home one day, no Hilary. Next day, no Hilary. Maybe he'd left, though he was still two weeks in credit.

Feeling like a trespasser, I looked inside his room. It was tidy, but didn't seem as if he'd moved out. Apple computer on the desk, trainers under the bed. The box his friends had carried stood under the window, its blanket cover draped over the lid.

His clothes hung on smart wooden hangers and ties hung from a tiny wooden hanger of their own. No denim. I pulled the drawers open. No tee-shirts, only a small pile of white underwear and folded white handkerchiefs. I didn't even think my granddad had those.

I described my shock discovery in the student union bar that evening.

"Put it all in a museum," my friend said. "But keep the Apple!"

Next morning I went to the admin office to see if they had any details on Hilary. A girl on the desk wore a badge that said 'Joanne.'

"He's probably gone home for a few days," she said.

"Well Joanne," I said, "we didn't talk much, so I'd remember that."

"What name?"

"Hilary," I replied. "Hilary Harkness."

"Department?" She tapped her keyboard.

"English, I think... studying poetry."

She looked up from the screen.

"He's not registered with us this year. But I'll phone around to check." She drew a blank.

\*\*\*

I folded Hilary's clothes into black refuse sacks, before tackling his computer and kicked myself for not switching it on before. The screen was as neat as his room, with no rash of icons, no documents, photos or emails. That shocked me even more than the ties on their special hanger.

Then I remembered his box, about the size of my grandmother's blanket box. Its cover slipped easily over the smooth wood as I pulled it off. I imagined magical inscriptions, probably from reading too much fantasy, but the box was plain apart from carved feet and golden metal corners. The woodgrain was something else though, with an intense darkness that seemed to steal the light.

An ornate clasp on the box front looked as if it would take a padlock, but none was in place. I had to investigate and ran my fingers over the clasp's intricate design. It felt warm to my touch, warmth that got under my skin and ran up my arms. I felt it in my bones as it traveled down my spine and into my legs.

"Whew!" I said and waited while the warmth ran its course.

I kneeled and touched the lid, which opened easily for such heavy-looking wood. I remembered how Hilary's friends had struggled lifting it from the back of his old Volvo.

A brown envelope lay among a froth of tissue paper. It contained several photos, some black and white, some color and a couple of sepia. Most showed Hilary and his two friends in different places, but nowhere I recognized. I turned the photos over to look for clues, but the backs were disappointingly blank.

A pack of translucent bags lay under the tissue paper. Below them, and fitted into the box, was a rack of metal instruments and soft leather roll. The roll held similar instruments and small drill with a flexible tube.

Light-headed, I stood up as if I were in a dream and fetched my backpack. I filled it with one of the translucent bags and the leather instrument roll. In closing the lid I touched the box's ornate clasp again and it came off in my hand, so I added that too.

I was going to replace the photos, but thought I'd flip through them in case I'd missed something. Flip, flip, wait. There was Joanne from the office, a head and shoulders shot with Hilary and his two friends laughing together. It was unmistakably her.

\*\*\*

Back at the office with the photo, Joanne spotted me and came over.

"I've got your photo with the disappearing man. Do you know him?" I said, pointing at Hilary.

"It looks like me," she said. "But I don't know those men. I must have a double." She laughed as she walked away.

Back at the apartment I showered and washed my hair more carefully than usual. I felt the need for a smarter appearance and decided to borrow from Hilary's clothes. His cotton shirt felt cool on my skin and the smooth wool trousers hung perfectly from my hips. A lightweight cardigan completed the look.

I picked up the backpack bag as I left.

\*\*\*

Half waking, half dreaming, I guessed at Joanne's short cut across the park. She never saw me coming. My hand held the box clasp, though I don't remember how it got there. When I touched it to her temple, she crumpled without a struggle.

I took out the translucent bag and instrument roll and untied the soft leather. Working the tube on the drill into her hip bone, the bag soon spattered bright red as I harvested her marrow and her carotid artery stopped pulsing as her body cooled. When I pumped her essence into my veins I felt a more intense spike from that red mush than anything I'd put into my body before. I smiled down at Joanne as her stem cells released their energy.

Soon, I became aware of the strong stink of dog shit in the grass. The odor mixed with the smell of old chewing gum, stale beer and whatever the local kids had been using. A blood whiff lingered on the air and I guessed at last night's needle activities. I left Joanne where she rested and went back to the apartment.

Opening the door, the smell almost bowled me over. Dirty laundry, spilled wine and a filthy carpet. Dishes lay in the sink and the kitchen reeked of stale pizza and old Chinese takeaways. I almost heaved. The only escape was Hilary's room and I sought olfactory sanctuary there, mentally preparing for a deep clean and heavy fumigation.

\*\*\*

Next day passed in a sanitation whirlwind. I didn't have so much as a cleaning cloth or bottle of bleach and Mr. Patel grinned as I piled my purchases on his counter.

"Your parents coming over?" he asked. "Or maybe a young man?"

I smiled back, unwilling to admit the pigsty I'd been living in.

After my bleach and polish whirlwind, I looked through Hilary's photos. Flip, flip, wait. Joanne's photo now only had images of the three men laughing together. Flip, flip, wait. A

full-length image of Kelly Waterhouse, our new lecturer, appeared in another photo with the men. They were clearly having a great time and the photo was so lifelike Kelly almost waved at me.

I picked up the leather tool roll from the box. It jumped into my hand, like a dog leaping for its lead at the word 'walkies.'

\*\*\*

The place Kelly rented was nearby and I came up behind her as she crossed the grass to her front door.

"Oh! You gave me a fright," she said, dropping her keys.

I smiled and said, "Don't worry," as I touched the box's clasp to her temple.

She melted into my arms and I half carried her through the door. It was much nicer to have the time and space to savor the moment. I laid Kelly on her bed and looked around the pretty, feminine room. I liked that. Tidy and very clean. Gym kit hung in the bathroom and a swimsuit draped the mirror; proof that she looked after herself. I warmed to her and looked forward in anticipation.

This time I got her better positioned, supporting her pelvis and making her iliac crests more prominent. The drill did its silent aspiration work and her marrow spike was even sharper than Joanne's. I didn't know Joanne smoked or I wouldn't have bothered. Still, it was good to start somewhere.

Back at the apartment, I hadn't moved into Hilary's room because I didn't want to spoil its intense cleanliness. But it was good to go in and flip through the photos. Kelly's image had vanished. Flip, flip, wait. The new face was Colin's, our neighbor back home, who studied sport science. He'd always been keen on healthy pursuits and played everything that moved. That's why we'd never been friends. I was in the local bar while he was playing football.

\*\*\*

"Hello Mum," I said down the phone. "I'm coming home this weekend now that term's finished."

"That'll be nice," she said. "Colin's home too. Maybe you could have a drink together."

"I don't think he'd let alcohol touch his lips, Mum."

Packing my bag, I carefully placed the clasp, leather tool roll and a translucent bag from Hilary's box between my clothes. I slipped on one of Hilary's softer jackets and it looked good on me.

Mum's eyes bulged as she opened the door. "You're looking well," she said, taking a step backwards. "Smart too. Have you come into money?"

I smiled and brushed past her into the lounge where Granddad looked up from his newspaper.

"Been charity shopping?" he asked. "Or are you in a play?"

"Nothing wrong with smartness, Dad," Mum said. "You of all people should know, having been a tailor."

Granddad came over to rub the cloth of Hilary's jacket between thumb and forefinger.

"Better than charity!" he said. "This is a silk and wool mix tweed." He spun me around to look more closely. "This tailoring is excellent."

He rummaged inside the jacket to find a maker's label. There wasn't one.

"Seen Col?" I asked.

"He's out running," Mum said. "Goes through the woods."

"I've taken up running recently," I said. "I'll see if I can catch him."

"You'll have to get up early," said Granddad with a flick of his newspaper.

Getting up early, and following Col as he ran, was simple. Like most runners, he didn't deviate from his route, so finding a good spot was easy. I'd chosen the place well and could luxuriate in his marrow, which was the best yet. His body certainly had been a temple and I began to contemplate a change of study. How hard could it be to move from table football to the real thing?

"Did you catch Col?" Granddad asked me.

"No. You were right, Granddad. I couldn't get up early enough."

\*\*\*

This term my grades have gone up and my weight has gone down. No one has been arrested yet for the murder of Joanne and Kelly, or the others. The police are baffled and the media is frenzied. I was interviewed among a group of other students, but looked so smart I was let out early. And being a woman helps. They're not usually known as mass murderers.

I was genuinely shocked and sorry about each and every one and told the young policeman so. He was a keen ice hockey player and his marrow gave me a spike a few days later. He had been such a clean living young man.

Afterwards I bounded up the stairs to my apartment, ready for my salad and beetroot juice. I sipped my juice and looked through the photos, but dropped them as if one had bitten me. My face with Hilary and his friends stared back. It threw me for a while so I went for a short run to clear my head.

As I put my key in the lock, I felt an unusual tension in the air; the way people describe a thunder storm in the mountains before it hits.

I knew it was Hilary even before I saw him sitting in my favorite TV chair.

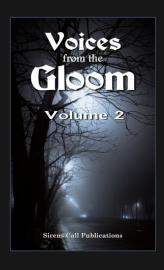
He turned to face me as I came into the lounge.

"Hello young lady," he said. "I see you've found my death box."

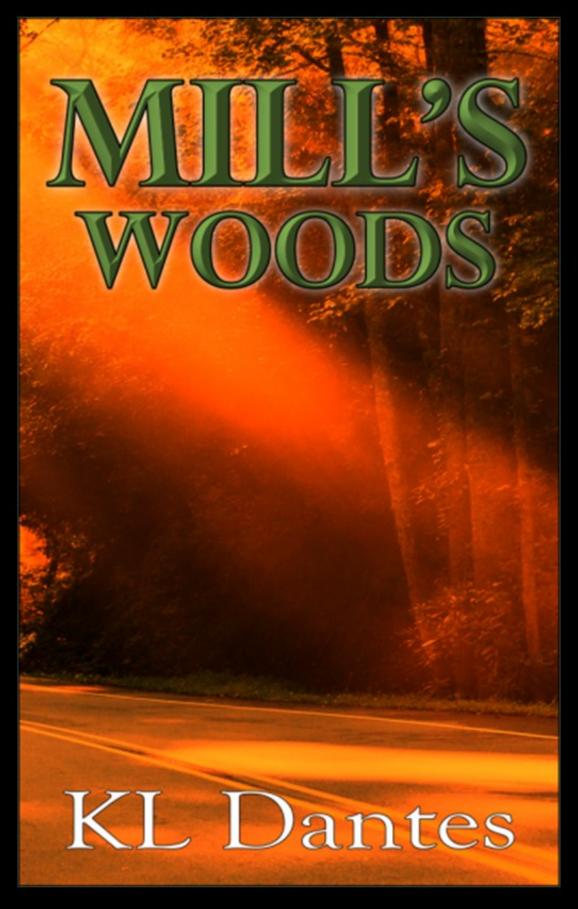
**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — DM Smith's biomedical science career began with the UK Atomic Energy Authority and ended with the National Health Service. She has been a management consultant and now writes for various businesses. She also ghost writes for senior executives. She lives with her husband in a small village and sings in early music ensembles.

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#### Jane | Sarah J. Browne

"Why are you staring at me?" Bridget asked.

I woke up and blinked the remnants of my dreams away. The bedroom was in near total darkness and I could only just make out Bridget next to me. She was staring at something I couldn't see.

"You're dreaming, Bridget. Go back to sleep," I said, nudging her. She ignored me and continued to stare intently. I sat up and shook her. "Bridget?"

"Diana?" Her voice was trembling. "It's moving closer!"

She started coughing uncontrollably. I reached over and turned on the lamp on the nightstand. I looked at Bridget, concerned. Her face was pale and she was taking deep breaths after she finished coughing.

Bridget waved her hand at me. "I'm fine. Sorry for waking you."

"What just happened?" I asked. "What were you talking about before you started coughing?"

She shrugged. "I must have been talking in my sleep or something. Come on, let's go back to bed."

She laid back down and soon was snoring softly. I laid beside her but I couldn't fall asleep. Something felt off.

In the middle of the night, I heard Bridget's breathing quicken and a tiny whimper. I rolled over to look at her and her eyes were wide and frightened. She stared at me and whispered, "It's her! It's Jane!"

Jane was a friend who committed suicide right in front of Bridget. She had stabbed herself in the throat and bled out. Bridget was so traumatized that she had to spend time in a psych ward after the incident.

Bridget bolted into an upright sitting position. "Diana, I can't move my legs! Can you move them?"

I sat up too and placed my hands on her legs. They were ice cold and wouldn't budge at all when I tried to lift them or push them. Bridget starting crying. I looked at her weeping face and was struck by how pale and clammy she looked. She kept repeating in between sobs, "I can't move them! I can't move my legs!"

I pulled again and suddenly whatever force was holding Bridget's legs down disappeared. I lowered the leg I moved to the bed. Her skin wasn't as cold anymore.

She fell against me, nearly knocking me over. I held her for protection and looked around the room but I could see nothing.

"Why the prank, Bridget? You think you can scare me?" I immediately regretted the question. I knew she wasn't faking anything but it was easier for my mind to process. I didn't want to accept that something unexplainable might be going on.

Bridget didn't answer. I gently lifted her off of me and lowered her to the bed. She was passed out.

I couldn't fall asleep from fear and at three in the morning I began to cry quietly. I regretted asking Bridget over. Most kids in our school avoided her after the incident with Jane. Some of them even said that it wasn't really a suicide and Bridget had murdered her. I

didn't believe that and I took pity on Bridget. But I never imagined that inviting her to stay with me would lead to such terror.

Something moved in the darkness. I watched in horror as an inky black blob materialized out of the wall on the far end of the room. It hovered there for a moment and then moved directly over me. I let out a small shriek and fell backwards against the pillow. The mass of black hovered over the bed briefly before shooting away with lightning speed. As it moved, I caught sight of its reflection in the mirror, which wasn't a black mass at all. It was a humanoid figure, moving too quickly for me to make out features.

Then the room was quiet and empty. I lay there motionless, too terrified to dare moving. The blankets rustled and out of the corner of my eye I saw Bridget sit up. Her breathing didn't change at all and when she spoke, her voice was a whisper. "I'm sorry for scaring you."

I couldn't look at her and fixed my eyes to the ceiling. "Please tell Bridget that I'm sorry for doing that in front of her. I needed someone to see so my parents wouldn't think I was murdered. Tell her and my family I love them. Tell them I said goodbye."

With that, Bridget collapsed back onto the bed. I laid there in the dark for a long time, processing what had just happened. When the sun rose, I would tell Bridget what I had seen and heard and I would find Jane's family and tell them too. They'd think I was crazy, but I had to try. I looked over at the mirror again and saw a face that wasn't my own. She was a young woman with sad eyes. Her throat and the front of her shirt were covered in blood. She said something inaudible to me and I read her lips.

"Thank you."

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Sarah Jeanne Browne is a self-help and young adult fiction writer from Pennsylvania. She has been published in numerous magazines and blogs, including Tiny Buddha and Holl And Lane Magazine. The short story "Jane" is her first foray into horror.

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#### Why the Baby Cries | Josie Dorans

For late June the midnight water was breath sucking cold. Wicking up Jewel's ratty jeans into the night air, it drew even more heat out of her already shivering body than the creek itself. Jewel stood in the middle of its 3 foot span, arms crossed tight against her chest, teeth clenched and head cocked trying to tune out the gurgling water and whistle of the night breeze through the bridge supports behind her. She was sure she had heard a baby squalling. Now if it would just let out one of those hungry yowls again they could both get out of this rural hellhole and on their way to somebody who might give a crap about at least one of their predicaments.

The shivery, wrenching cries drifting up from the riverbank in the middle of the night were not something a decent person could ignore. Even on the run from one too many bad choices of her own, Jewel couldn't help but put on the brakes. She might not have much to offer but she was pretty sure that some dumped newborn would eventually appreciate keeping its life and the good karma sure wouldn't hurt Jewel any.

Fifty feet from the shale bank she had slid down to begin the search. A clump of weeds reached into the water from both banks. Jewel figured it looked like a good place for some little idiot to stash her unwanted souvenir from last fall's date with Captain Hottie. The steep slope on either side of the creek would have made most of the area a chute right into the water. That should have silenced any crying right off.

Things don't always go how they should. Jewel knew that first hand. There was a little cooler on the passenger seat of her car filled with the formerly beating evidence of exactly how far off course things could veer given just the right amount of wrong thinking. Jewel supposed she would tuck it into the trunk once she found the baby and got back on the road. It just seemed wrong to keep both of them in the same seat. Jewel toyed with the idea of leaving the cooler behind. She could chuck it into the creek and let it float away. It would be a trade of sorts; a life saved for a life destroyed. Poetic maybe, but Jewel couldn't bring herself to let go of what was gone just yet.

Her careful, near numb, bare feet picked their way up the creek bed as Jewel tried to keep the sounds of her movement to a minimum. The kid couldn't be far. She had heard it over her car engine and Lord knew that ancient heap was anything but quiet. She spread her arms for balance against the current sweeping just above her knees. If she had been crossing Ohio in the dry season the stupid creek would have probably only oozed its way around her ankles.

Three feet from the tangle, sharp shale bits gave way to silty muck. Jewel yelped into the darkness when she sank up to her calf on the first step. The smell of rank, rotting vegetation filled her nose and coated the back of her tongue. She could see the black ooze swirl up under the moon's shaky reflection on the water and had to swallow hard to keep what little she had been able to afford for dinner in her habitually underfed stomach. An equally putrid hope that the girl who caused this whole search and rescue fiasco was downstream rotting in her own muck bubbled up from Jewel's lizard brain. She stomped it back down and tugged her foot out of the mud to take another sinking step. Judge not, after all.

She sank to her knee this time. She had to focus more on staying upright than moving forward. A bullfrog taking a header past her left thigh scared her heart into her throat and almost had her turning around to slog back to the car. Then she heard the whimper mixed into the splash. So much for the nagging thought that her imagination had taken over in the dark on the bridge.

The suck of the mud pulled hard at Jewel's knees making her throw all of her skinny body into the pivot of each step. By the time she could reach the near edge of the weeds, she was hip deep in murky water, soaked to the shoulders from her efforts and afraid to stand still in the fowl smelling ooze pressing firmly on her kneecaps. Her searching hands found nothing but soggy ground as far as she could reach.

A soft, pathetic mewling drifted on the water from the far side of the weeds. Jewel watched the spot she thought it came from and it seemed that she could see movement in the shadows. She kept her eyes locked on the area and made the next sucking lunge, then the next.

How had anyone deposited their burden here in the first place? For that matter, how was she going to manage the retrieval? Jewel wasn't sure who she hated more right then; the failed mother, herself, or Sam who's spectacularly bad organizational skills were ultimately to blame for her being on some backwoods bridge at midnight in the first place. If he hadn't sent her the text addressed to his whore... on their anniversary no less...

The whimper from the weeds ahead drew her forward again. Frustration with the effort of getting her feet loose had Jewel grabbing at the weed clumps for extra leverage. Breaking through the snaggled overhang sliced cuts across her palms and up her forearms, but it sped her progress through the now thigh deep creek bed and made her feel more sure of her eventual retreat.

There was nothing there; nothing. No parting of the long grass offered up a tiny, squirming body. No groping in the muddy bank produced the feel of a little foot or grasping hand. Digging her feet deeper into the muck, reaching toward the bank, gave her nothing but more dirt beneath her fingernails and cuts along her arms.

Jewel beat at the ground, tears gouging trails down her dirty face. Years of tied down, boxed in stress unwound through her system in howls of frustrated rage and gut wrenching grief. She didn't even notice that she was still frantically rummaging through the weeds, dragging muddy handfuls into the creek around her, searching for something that simply wasn't there. The unleashing coursed through her for what felt like a lifetime and left her sprawled, spent and dragging air past her raw throat into her lungs with hiccoughing spasms. Consciously she knew that the keening sound in her ears now was her own, but she couldn't get a good enough grip on herself to make it stop.

She laid there until the world went still and quiet. The moon hanging overhead blurred and cleared in the cycle of tears that forged her resolve. She had done her best here. She had tried her hardest. She had found nothing because she was not meant to find anything. Some things were meant for other hands.

She would go to the police. She would tell them... everything. Even hand over the little cooler in the passenger seat that she just couldn't live with anymore. Maybe they would find the lost child before it was too late. Maybe they wouldn't. Either way, the innocent stood a far better chance if she handed the search over.

Arms shaking with the effort, Jewel pushed herself up. During her battle with the weeds and her inner demons, her feet had dug backward into the silt, toes pointed to gain more leverage in her stretching search. Dragging the first one forward left her panting. Sliding it back into the sticky mud was almost more than she could bear, but she knew she needed to get her balance to drag the other out and begin the eternal fifty foot trek back to the bridge. Putting her weight on the straight leg, Jewel focused on pulling the other free. For each inch her bent knee came forward her opposite hip sank two toward the murky water until she could feel the bottom tightening around her knee. Her foot came free suddenly, as if the creek bed had simply been playing at the threat to not let go. The forward momentum carried her foot completely out of the creek, arcing water off her toes so that it sparkled like shooting stars in the moonlight. Arms windmilling, fingers grasping at air and the other leg firmly encased in the mud, Jewel hit the icy water before she could make a sound.

There was nothing to grab. The overhanging grasses had met their end during the failed search and long since washed downstream. The bank was slick and offered no help for her digging fingers. It broke off in clumps that added to the swirling murk of the stream. Kicking her free leg produced splashes that did nothing but stir the water more. Frantically, Jewel planted her hand against the bottom, hoping that there was something solid to push against.

The surface was so close, and her lungs were so empty. The panic welled up making her strain upward, forcing her fingers down into the mud past her wrist, up her forearm.

No air.

Water rushing in icy currents over her face carried silt into her wide open, panic filled eyes.

Still her arm sank deeper. Past her elbow, taking the surface father from her desperate lungs until finally wrapping her shoulder in a layer of mud that deep down Jewel knew she would never pull away from.

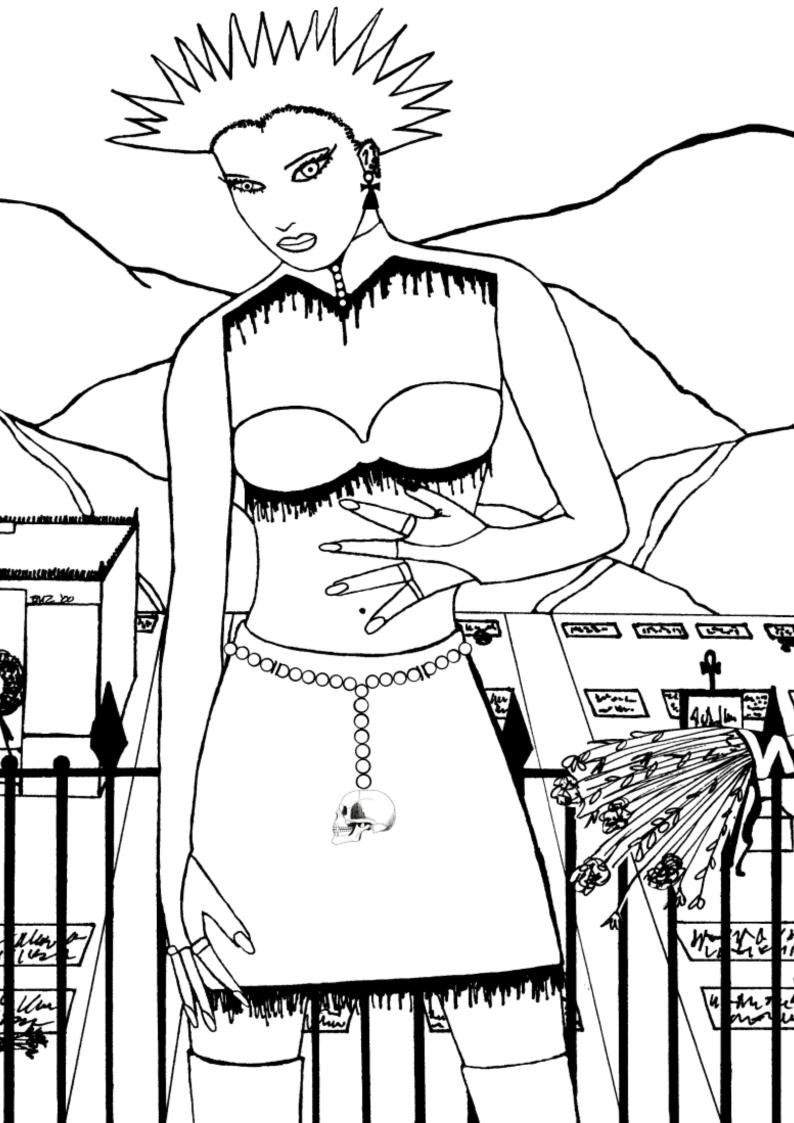
The creek flowed on, carrying the muddy water down under the bridge and off to settle farther away. The moon showed its face again, shining on the little eddies and ripples not even a foot above Jewel's face. She held her breath as long as she could, listening to her heart beat behind her eardrums and thinking about the silent contents of the cooler in her car. Sam really should have been more careful...

Black crept in around the edges of her vision making the moonlight a silvery tunnel in the gathering dark. Bubbles streamed slowly at first, then with the last of her breath they escaped in force, carrying the sounds of a crying baby past her ringing ears and downstream into the night.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Josie Dorans is the pen name responsible for unleashing the feistier side of a rather nice indie author who grew up in the heartland, currently lives surrounded by mountains, but sometimes wishes her toes were still in the ocean of her twenties. Find her work in previous issues of The Sirens Call e-Zine; also Allie Bedeviled - a devilishly fun novella, and an upcoming short story collection.

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#### **Bacteria** | *Julianne Snow*

The perfect killer. Small, invasive, self-replicating; it needs you, it loves you...

\*\*\*

"Mommy, I don't feel very well..." Angie whined as she rubbed a grubby hand across her nose.

Laurie placed the back of her hand on the little girl's forehead, judging the severity of her illness by temperature. "Is it your tummy honey?"

"No Mommy."

"What hurts sweetie?" Laurie looked at the pallid complexion of her daughter, beginning to worry at seeing the dark-rimmed eyes and runny nose.

"I just don't feel we—" Angie barely got the words out before going limp in her mother's lap.

Laurie shook her daughter, gently at first growing more concerned at her inability to rouse her. Placing her fingers on her neck, she felt for a pulse, growing alarmed at how cool her daughter now felt. "Angie? Angie! ANGIE!!"

Panicked, she laid her daughter on the couch as she grabbed for the phone. Dialing 9-1-1 quickly, she cradled the phone in the crook of her shoulder as she waited for the line to connect. Still she searched for a pulse...

"Police, Fire, or Ambulance?"

"Ambulance!"

Laurie waited a few more seconds as the general dispatcher connected her to the correct department, growing agitated at the delay. She stroked her daughter's face with one hand as she pushed deeper into her daughter's neck with the other. Why couldn't she find a pulse?

"Ambulance. What's your emergency?"

"It's my daughter. She just fainted and I'm having trouble finding her pulse, can you send an ambulance please?!?"

"Is your daughter breathing?"

"No!"

"Do you know CPR?"

"No!! Oh my God, she's going to die isn't she??"

"Ma'am, calm down and do as I say. Can you put the phone on speaker and put it down beside your daughter?"

"Yes, hang on a second..." Noises reverberated in the background of the call as Laurie fumbled with the phone. She came back a moment later sounding a little farther away. "Okay what do I do?"

"I need to take your finger and scoop out anything that may be in her mouth first."

"Okay, gimme a second." More noise sounded in the background, then a piercing scream echoed over the line.

"Fucking hell! She bit my finger!"

"Ma'am?"

"Angie! Oh thank God you're awake! I was so worried!"

"Ma'am?"

"Let me get a towel for my finger." Laurie's voice seemed farther away as she addressed the phone again, "Operator if you're still there can send help for me? It seems my daughter's bite reflex was a little stronger than I expected."

"Your daughter bit you? Is she conscious now?"

"Yes, she seems to be alert, though she's still very pale and seems confused. Sweetie, stay on the couch I'll be right back."

\*\*\*

The dispatcher concentrated intently on the other end, listening for anything that would tell her what was going on. The tension started to wear on her already frazzled nerves and the scream of pure panic made her bladder empty unexpectedly. Embarrassed only for a moment, she sat in her own urine until the line went dead. Without a moment to spare, the switchboard lit up, signaling the pandemonium of incoming calls...

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** —Julianne Snow is the author of the *Days with the Undead* series and *Glimpses of the Undead*. She is the founder of Zombieholics Anonymous and the Publicist and Co-Founder of Sirens Call Publications. Writing in the realms of speculative fiction, Julianne has roots that go deep into horror and is a member of the Horror Writers Association. With pieces of short fiction in various publications, Julianne always has a few surprises up her sleeves.

Twitter: <u>@CdnZmbiRytr</u> Blog: <u>Days</u> with the <u>Undead</u>

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#### **Shallow to the Grave** | Ashlei Hawley

Shadow Creek had a reputation as ominous as its name. Though it had a slow current that presented negligible danger and a depth even at its deepest that could not cover a full-grown adult head-to-toe, Shadow Creek had claimed no less than thirty souls since its naming.

As a boy, Clark Henson had played in the bends and shallows of the Creek where it flowed behind his home. Until he was ten years old, he'd never believed the stories of death or warnings from his elders. He'd heard them so often that even late into his twenties, he could repeat them by heart: stay to the rocks, do not try to cross alone, never swim or play except in the shallows, unless you have a death wish, do not go near the Creek at night.

The Creek itself had not scared Clark away from playing in it. When plundering the mud for crawfish or seeking minnows with his mesh net, Clark had never entertained any threat to keep him from the lapping waves. Yet one day, he did see something in the trees.

With eyes like blue ice and fangs a hunting beast would envy, Clark had seen the biggest, shaggiest and most fearsome-looking dog he'd ever encountered. Whenever he thought about it unexpectedly later in life, Clark would often wonder if it had actually been a wolf. Dog or wolf, the creature had scared him so badly he'd pissed himself and run screaming for his mother.

The worst thing about the encounter was what Clark had seen when he looked back while running away. Sliding through the omnipresent shadows along the bank of the Creek, the creature had seemed to shift form. Clark would later claim he'd seen the beast morph into a horror fit to dwell on the alien bottom of the sea instead of a winding creek in a superstitious town. Tentacles sprouted all over from the creature's center mass, a multitude of milky white eyes overtook the face and the orbs of icy blue. Though the beast appeared newly blinded, Clark felt its hateful gaze burning into his back as he ran. When it slid beneath the still waters of the Creek, the thing had been four times the size of the wolf and infinitely more terrifying.

For weeks after the encounter, Clark had awakened from even the deepest sleep with screams clutched within his throat. Though he'd always been a good sleeper, he'd begged his mother to let him sleep with her until the nightmares passed. Whenever he looked out a window at night, he could have sworn the sightless yet seeing eyes stared back at him, stalking him from the banks and beneath the placid surface of Shadow Creek.

The nightmares had eventually subsided, and Clark returned to sleeping on his own. Over time, the experience faded in meaning for him. He believed his mother, who assured him as all caring parents did, that his imagination had been overactive that day. Dogs were common in the area, and Clark had never been a fan of larger canines. Even though he stopped experiencing the nocturnal fear, and though he let his mother convince him the experience had been blown far out of proportion by a ten-year-old mind, he'd never found reason to risk a chance at an encounter like that again.

He'd never returned to the Creek, and after he graduated, he'd taken pains to rarely return to the town.

He didn't want to be there now, but his mother was dying. The woman who'd calmed his fears and supported his dreams deserved more from her only son than for him to just come in

to plan and attend the funeral. She had about a week to live, he'd been told. He could be there for that.

She was confined to a hospital bed that had been positioned in the big, airy front parlor of his childhood home. Bedpans, bandages, and other miscellaneous medical supplies had overtaken the worn shelf that had once held her treasured books. She hadn't needed them lately. Even the bedpans were pristine and unused. She'd been taken off her feeding tube days before.

The lingering was the worst for Clark. He'd asked the nurse who came in to check on his mother if they couldn't just add more than the needed amount of morphine into the drip that kept her sleeping. Enough to end it. Enough for her to slip away with any shred of remaining dignity the disease had stolen from her.

Clark hated to look at her. She'd been a beautiful woman. The slender, healthy body women half her age had envied wasted away to nearly nothing in the span of a few short months. Her sallow skin sank in unnatural pockets, ashen and fragile. Clark often wondered if his finger would go right through her cheek when he stroked it, or if her eyelids would eventually peel away as they dried and stretched over what now seemed to be abnormally large brown eyes. She looked like an emaciated corpse awaiting ritual mummification. Clark just wanted it to end any way it could.

Surprisingly, the nurse had been understanding of his request. She'd gently informed him, though it was something she'd heard often, it wasn't how she or the hospice service she worked for operated. Euthanasia, no matter how humane it might seem, was not supported by her personally or the laws of their state.

She tried to assure him his mother wasn't suffering. She knew nothing except darkness, just like someone who'd gone under anesthesia for a routine operation. She would go on her own time, and that was how it would be. From her empathy, Clark had welcomed a small amount of comfort into his troubled soul.

Clark smoothed his mother's graying hair from her warm temples, wondering when the rich brown had begun to lose its luster. He was the male embodiment of his mother, with the same caramel cream skin, dark eyes and thick, healthy dark hair. He even had her hands, though his looked impossibly large against hers as he cradled them.

Her inherent strength had faded, and it made Clark uncomfortable as he stood his bedside vigil. He loved his mother. Seeing her so small and weak, of as little substance as the thin blanket covering her, brought tightness to his throat and burning to his eyes.

She'd been such a vital, vibrant woman. It wasn't right.

The small brown mutt his mother adopted four years ago nudged Clark's leg, breaking him from the chains of his ruminations.

"Whatcha need, Indy?" he asked. The moroseness in his tone surprised him. He needed a break from the maroon chair at his mother's beside. As soon as he sat down, it seemed all his joy and hope sank into it.

"You need to go out?" Indy wagged his short tail and his tiny ears perked and swiveled forward, showing his interest in the word.

The dog was strange because he never barked. In the three days he'd been the mutt's keeper, Clark had learned to read Indy's nonverbal cues. Chances were the dog would be

going with him when his mother passed, so it was good they would have spent some time together beforehand.

"OK, let's go." Clark pressed a gentle kiss to his mother's forehead. He could smell the weakness wafting up from her leathery skin, and it made him want to cry and gag. Though her eyes were open and she seemed to stare at him, Clark knew she couldn't see him.

He moved away from his mother, shaking his head to clear the fog his misery misted over his thoughts. The dog was a better thing to focus on.

Clark drew the sliding glass door in its track away from the wall, letting in seeking tendrils of cool evening air. It was summer and the scent of life was thick and sweet on the breeze, yet a stubborn chill of winter fought to remain. The nights were still cold even if the days consistently got up to the 80s.

Indy preceded Clark out the door and bounded off the red wooden porch and down onto the lawn. He sniffed a bush, then the young pear tree Clark's mother had planted just two years before. Finding neither of them appealing for his relief, Indy trekked farther over the healthy green grasses, toward the line of trees which indicated the thick stretch of woods and the section of Shadow Creek that was on his mother's property.

Giving his attention to the tree Indy had disregarded as unsuitable, Clark felt a deeper cut of agony slice into him. The tree hadn't even borne its first fruit yet. His mother had been wonderfully happy and healthy when she'd planted the tree. She'd sent Clark a video of the process, promising him she'd send care packages of juicy pears as soon as the tree began producing. How could such a strong and beautiful woman become so wasted and weak in such a short time?

Some inner voice, a voice he'd tried to breed out of himself with city living and a new age attitude, told him the place was cursed. The elders had warned him of the misfortunes that fell upon those who lived or strayed too close to the Creek. It took them, they'd said, in any way it could.

Clark felt an irrepressible chill and frowned darkly in the direction of the Creek. He wasn't a kid anymore. There was no reason for him to continue to harbor any such ridiculous fear.

Regardless, Clark's discomfort mounted as Indy travelled farther away, seeking the perfect foliage on which to relieve himself. The dog didn't need to go so far, Clark thought irritably. There was plenty of space between the house and the Creek for him to do his business in. Clark became frustrated with the mutt, and moved forward one step while raising two fingers to his mouth.

Clark issued a sharp whistle to summon the mutt back. It was a practiced sound his mother had taught him and had never failed to make any dog he directed it at obey his commands. Indy gave him a look, debating the effectiveness of the whistle, and then darted his stubborn doggy ass into the trees.

Swearing loudly, Clark flung himself off the porch in pursuit of the mutt, silently vowing to wring his scrawny neck once he caught him. He didn't want to be running around in the dark chasing a stupid dog that wasn't even his. Yet.

Shadows lashed out at his feet, making every step seem like a treacherous endeavor. The moon, buried behind clouds, did not deign to light his pursuit of the fast-moving little creature.

"Indy!" He called for the dog in a tone of anger and indignation, ignoring the sting of fear that crept into it.

There were predators in the woods, he knew. Foxes, badgers, the occasional coyote, and even cougars once or twice. Indy was a short, stubby little prick; part Chihuahua and part some other breed of tiny canine. The dog wasn't fit to fight a kitten, let alone a coyote.

"Where the hell did you go, you little bastard?" Clark hit the edge of the land right before the trees and saw no sign of Indy.

Shadow Creek loomed before him as a snake of black camouflaged in the deepening darkness. He heard the ripples and the faintest splashes of water on rocks. To his surprise, he also began to hear barking.

Though he didn't know how he'd managed it, the damn dog was on the other side of the Creek, moving farther into the trees, barking the whole time. The longer Clark debated, the more Indy pulled away. He needed to man up and go get the fucking dog, he told himself.

Stay to the rocks...

Clark refused to admit to himself that he was reciting the advice given to him in hushed tones around campfires over a decade ago. He told himself he didn't want to get wet as he found footing on first one boulder of the constructed path, and then another.

Indy barked, barked, barked.

Do not try to cross alone...

Clark's heart began to pound as his mind whispered the second of the wisdoms. He wasn't alone, he urged himself. The damn dog was just across the Creek, barking himself silly. And what did it matter, anyway? He wasn't afraid of the Creek.

On the fifth rock, Clark's foot slipped dangerously. He soaked his leg halfway to the knee, but regained his balance with no small effort. He was panting, and he didn't know when it had started. Beneath his rapid breathing, Clark could hear shuffling noises, conspicuous and threatening.

"Go back," his inner voice suggested. "Fuck you," Clark muttered aloud. He claimed another rock as the next wisdom butted its way into his thoughts.

Never swim or play, except in the shallows...

The Creek wasn't very wide or deep, but Clark was far enough away from the shallows now that if he fell in, he'd be soaked to his chest. The shallows seemed miles away, though they were only three rocks back.

Catching a glimpse of Indy as he darted between two trees, Clark hopped onto another rock, then two others in quick succession. He was nearing the end of the rock path.

Unless you have a death wish, do not go near the Creek at night...

The shape in the darkness hit Clark before he saw it. After a short, surprised shout from Clark, they were both submerged in the water.

Shadow Creek felt as frigid as glacier runoff and when some of the water got in his mouth, it tasted foul, like frozen bile.

Clark didn't know what was on him, but he lashed out against it furiously. He felt the sandy bottom of the Creek beneath him and the cruel weight above him, holding him down. Fumbling for something to free himself, Clark found a rock with a sharpened side. With all his strength, he thrust it at the appendage holding him.

He heard a bellow of rage and pain from above him. Even through the muffling effects of the water, the cry was feral and fearsome and caused Clark such terror that his bladder betrayed him as it had once before.

His attacker's hold loosened and Clark thrust himself up through the arctic waters, coughing it out of his lungs and drawing sweet air as soon as he broke the surface.

Readying himself to call for help, Clark choked on his intentions as soon as he recognized the preternatural aberration which held him. All hope fled from him, drowned in the realization that the creature he'd convinced himself had never existed was as real as the bitter water around him.

Dog or wolf or tentacled-horror no longer, the creature slid an almost humanoid hand around Clark's neck and shoved him back beneath the cold water. Its strength was incredible. No matter how crazily Clark thrashed and struggled, he found it impossible to dislodge himself from the unnatural grasp.

Clark had a chance to think that the last breath of clean air between his two bouts of drowning had been the cruelest of experiences.

Teeth tore into the hand Clark sent seeking toward the distorted face of the beast. A jet of air exploded from Clark's open mouth as he screamed. His thumb and first two fingers had been torn from his hand. Blood swirled around him, warping his view of his supernatural assailant further.

Clark felt himself being raised up. Still drowning, still immobile, and regrettably still aware, he felt the powerful jaws close around his flesh once more. A meaty chunk of forearm came away and was swallowed up. More blood surged into the churning water. There was no more air left in Clark's body to scream again as the pain burned into him. Acid and fire, the tearing of flesh continued down his shoulder and into his neck.

Clark realized he'd been given the chance to breathe again. The creature had lifted him above the water to sink its bloodied teeth into the meat of his neck. Clark's dazed eyes opened as lifeblood pumped from the gaping tear below his jaw. It pattered into the water, sounding like raindrops in the night. The eyes glaring down at him were icy blue again. The newly-transformed creature had scales for skin, and teeth more fitted to the mouth of a shark than any beast Clark would have ever expected to encounter.

His lungs weren't working properly. The creature submerged Clark's upper body again and began tearing into his stomach. The cold of the Creek seemed to be numbing him finally. He felt only a sick weight in his stomach when the creature sank claws and teeth into it and pulled out viscera upon which to feast.

As darkness around him became darkness within him and his eyes eased closed, Clark felt himself floating away. Shadow Creek had claimed him. On its own time, it would eventually claim them all.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Ashlei Hawley is a writer of horror, erotica, and paranormal books. She occasionally dabbles in poetry. She is a mom, hard worker in many jobs, gamer, and lover of all things shiny, apocalyptic, and geeky. Find and friend her on Facebook—she loves meeting new people to be weird with.

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#### Krampustasia | Ruschelle Dillon

Post-anesthesia shivering revived Cammie after surgery. Furiously blinking her eyes in an attempt to regain her bearings and, hopefully, garner some medical attention, what came into focus was two-fold; the black sequined mini dress she had been wearing had been swapped out for a drab hospital gown but more importantly, her airway was choked by a breathing tube.

Panicked, she pounded on the rails of her bed. A nurse in a Santa hat hurried to Cammie's side.

"I know it's scary but this will help," she said and quickly injected medications into her IV.

Cammie could feel the spasms gradually subside.

"Now relax. They'll be moving you soon."

Although the medicine was relaxing, it helped that the nurse's voice was soothing. She patted her arm before checking her vitals on the monitor one last time.

Whatever else she gave Cammie made her eyelids droop, but luckily she no longer cared about the tube stuffed down her throat.

Her sedation was quickly snatched from her as the woman lying in the bed across the room sprang to life. Just like Cammie had been moments before, the woman was trembling uncontrollably. With one difference; this woman was screaming.

Anticipating the nurses to spring to the woman's side as they did hers, Cammie was quickly disillusioned. The nurses were huddled around a computer screen, unfazed by their patient's panicked cries. Why weren't they helping her?

Cammie focused her heavy eyes back to the woman whose screams were now deafening. The woman's arms flailed at something black crawling from the bottom of her bed.

Unable to do anything, Cammie watched helplessly as the woman swatted and punched furiously at the black fuzzy beast that was making its way up her chest. Cammie could see it had something in one of its scythe-like fingers but she couldn't discern what it was.

Like a deranged jack-in-the-box, a second black furred creature popped up from the side rail of the woman's bed. Cammie could hear it laugh as it revealed an equally inky black bag and shoved it over the terrified woman's head.

The first beast chimed in with the sickening laughter and revealed just what was in its hand: a wooden switch. As the second beast stuffed the rest of the woman into his bag, the other beat her unmercifully with the switch.

The tremors returned and took over Cammie's body but this time it was fear, not anesthesia.

The horrible creatures had the woman's body almost completely shoved in their bag when Cammie let out a muffled crack of air from her obstructed throat. Their attention turned to Cammie.

For a horrifying second, both beasts stopped their beating and stuffing and placed a pointy finger to their smiling lips, convincing Cammie to remain silent.

She slammed her eyes shut. She wanted to keep them pressed closed for as long as she could but she knew she couldn't hide. It happened. They saw her. The beasts saw her.

Reluctantly, Cammie cracked open her eyes.

There was nothing. The hideous black beasts were gone.

The nurses were still conversing at the computer. Doctors were scurrying back and forth. The woman in the bed was gone. But how much of what she just saw was real and what was medically induced?

Cammie stared at the blinking red lights on the small desktop Christmas tree at the nurse's station. She had been through a lot of trauma for one evening. The red blinking lights were a blinding reminder.

Unfortunately, her composure was interrupted by the woman snatched from her bed. Only this time, her face and chest were full of glass shards and blood poured from her wounds. The same screams she heard minutes before were now echoing in Cammie's head.

"Where is Tia? What did you do with my little girl? Where is she?"

Once again, Cammie could feel the terror rise in her broken body. But the woman continued screeching, "You took her! You took her from me?"

Tears burned from her eyes but the tube in her throat kept Cammie mute. She thrashed her head side to side, avoiding the woman's bloody finger that dangled in her face.

The assault didn't go unnoticed. One of the doctors padded over and gently placed a hand on the screaming woman's shoulder.

"Now Marion, we've talked about this. Cammie doesn't have Tia."

A nurse sidled up to him and took Marion's arm.

The feral look in Cammie's eyes softened. The doctor continued speaking to Marion.

"Cammie may have taken her from you. But your own Christmas *spirit* lead you here... with us."

His lips twisted into a deranged smile displaying rows of tiny sharp teeth.

Within a single blink, both the doctor and nurse had morphed into the grotesque beasts.

"Now get back in the bag!"

The *doctor* yanked the black bag over Marion, who punched and kicked as the nurse beast struck her with the switch.

Once she was stuffed inside, the nurse creature dragged her down the hallway, the bag undulating and lurching.

Cammie had the creature's sole attention. It hurled itself on top of Cammie and stroked her tear-soaked hair. Its voice was thin, ragged and hideous.

"It's Christmas, Cammie. I have something for you."

Furiously, Cammie shook her head no.

The creature snarled.

"Aww...where is your Christmas *spirit*? You had it when you left your Christmas party. You had it when you ran through the pretty red light."

Cammie's head continued to shake in declination.

But the beast wouldn't take no for an answer. From behind its gnarled back, it retrieved a doll. A blood-stained doll: its dress torn and wet. The beast sat it on Cammie's chest.

Cammie noticed the gift tag on the doll's tattered arm.

"To Tia: Love Mommy."

Choking uncontrollably on the breathing tube, Cammie couldn't help but panic.

The beast cooed, "Let me help you, child," and yanked the tube from her throat.

The other creature appeared next to her bed with the black body bag in its fist.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Ruschelle Dillon is a freelance writer whose efforts focus on the dark humor and the horror genres. Including the novelette "Bone-sai" as well as the video shorts "Don't Punch the Corpse" and "Mothman". Her short stories have appeared in various anthologies and online zines such as *Strangely Funny III*, *Story Shack*, *The Sirens Call* and *Weird Ales—Another Round*.

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#### Dark Ocean | Farah Rose Smith

If there is a discomfort in writing, it is because death is in these waters. Not the death of life entire, but the death of life as is. Coughing up a mist of marrow, I imagine my bones have turned to soup within me. I can bend my toe back like rubber. My ankles ache—ball-jointed rot, I fear. It is as it will be—this predicament.

I am, in the boat, as I am in any other place. Gliding without purpose over the surfaces of life. There could be stillness without pain. I tell myself this, to believe something—that there may be more to experience in sweeter places than the wounds of wartime exile and their repeated torment in my mind.

Clouds, like curtains, shield me from the crimes on high. Broken vessels floating in a fractured haze, blurred by the burden of heavy eyelids. I can see very little, that is the truth of it. In these nights of liquid languor, menace brewing in my bones—wheezing, viperous venom. I soak in it. I soak in the terror of being nothing—surrounded by nothing, seen by nothing.

The sun hardly rises anymore. A green streak will peek out over the steam ridge for an hour, maybe two. Mischief catches fire in my mind. A yelping, gyrating banquet of untoward dreams. I am not opposed to them, any more than the myth of matter splashing over me in this rickety excuse of a ship.

There is a great door to the ocean depths, and above it sits Munjavi. I can see very little of his sand-scathed cloak, or the tiny bristles of fiber cascading down the length of his spine; those that once glistened in the desert sun amidst the pouring sweat of merchant skins and soldiers' coins. I see only dawn-tinted waves, singing songs as omens to the brittle depths, warning whales and deeper flesh of a drifting darkness.

If I were ever to return to the old world, they would ask me to speak of his face. There are no words within worth speaking, though I comfort myself with their design. As sea foam spreads into these veins, seaweed strangles my ribcage, now delicate from the soreness of being lost at sea.

I have never felt discomfort run quite as deep. His eyes have the deep-set anxiety of the oldest, most tired of horses, until they flash towards me with the gruesome hue. I look away, marking the disturbance in the air in this moment. The peculiar frost, as though swimming ghosts—in their immortal absurdity—have marked me with some inconceivable design. He glances at me with eyes harboring the deepest of disease. Or contempt? I doubt that I will ever know which.

Nobody asked me about the offer of poison. A chance to avoid this dismal affair altogether. Apparently I misheard the council, or wandered to a far corner of the room in my despair without ears, or some such nonsense. They didn't ask about my personal brands of torment. Soaking myself in darkling odors. Drawing despair with fists over my own vanity. I was like the beast with no tongue in those old places. Racing to the glory of honest people and failing—falling here.

Ruby red sails. War-tossed oak splintering into midnight waves. I have seen such things, on what ocean I no longer know. One ought not look into the eyes of the withered. There are too many things there to be absorbed. To cross over without consent or consideration. I, myself, have wandered too far into the eyes of mutilated men and found myself a carrier of a wayward pain, here, right above the stomach.

I could drink up the poison of endless cosmic oceans and never be so drawn and derelict as I am on the waves beneath him. I would wait for a brighter dawn to unveil this wreckage, but in this I have no say. We sail to vile shore, beyond the reaches of guiltless foam. I whistle to a passing throng, unaware of my own mindless imaginings. Those ports of splendor are absent in such regions of desertion. They are the resting quarters of sunken souls. What hurricane could bring down greater gales of shame than these—shadows from beneath the waves?

Sailing to the vile shore. It is a way's away, though with squinting eyes, I see the haunt of the rim. A scream gathers in the pit of my throat, but is strangled by the soreness.

Munjavi, the collector. Delighting in tormented notes as we wade through the darkest waters. I can think of no other currency for his great game. There is more to this pleasure of sea and sand than mere vengeance upon me and mine. Or is he merely that merciless, that evil? Perhaps he waits for me to shriek in regret. No doubt these have golden weight in his trade. I will not allow him the luxury, or the collection. My voice will remain confined.

Caution sinks to the realm of folkloric wonderment, but not of warning. I heard such protestations against mythic figures in the old world, each growing more passionate. I likened them to the religious doctrines I had long-since rejected.

If there is glory to be had in this mess, let it be fleeting. I don't want it anymore. Or anything that isn't meant for me. There could be nothing underneath the sheet of black. Or everything. The dark ocean itself could be my own soul, laid out before me as the ultimate punishment. My thoughts are as black as aging gaunts, in laughter, under the shadow of Androvac Munjavi. His soul can be nothing more than a fragmentary snow, blasted from its core and dribbling out towards the sipping haunters of the deep. I reach up into the sky and out falls the pale light of stars, slowly milked by the touch of living flesh. My chest burns, but this is welcome. This is living.

We close in on dawn—tired, but alive. I hear the faint sound of a whisper on wind, let out from the saving place. If I could find it, perhaps I would escape. This cosmic confounder

of which I find myself imprisoned—how did I ever let myself become lost in such a way? There is little hope for me, so detached from the riddles and rhymes of someone so diabolical, so profound. I think no less of him. Rather, I must think less of myself. Of ignorance, I was a guiding light. I so wish I'd harbored protection over deeper things. Deeper thoughts, deeper times. I may have escaped this torment.

By the foul pungency of strange, dark liquid, I fall to my knees—cracking my head on the railing's edge. I drift in the dark pull of dreams. The eerie glide of notes travel up and around every sense I possess in this unknown world. The needle of time has moved into place by itself, spewing out the elemental atrocities that would let me live—and suffer—forever. Here comes the chill of dead water again.

The question now becomes, what will happen after this? When the vile shore is on the horizon and the current locks my course into its grasp? In a daze I imagined a horrible thing. My soul turns dark and rips through my mouth in swirling particles. My body cracks like land under the enormous weight of a volcanic blast. The place is a festering Hades. My melancholy is so profound, that even the orchestra in my mind's eye plays only songs of bitterness and suffering. I wish I had something else to think about. Somewhere else to go. Some dreams of fancy that far outweigh past grievances or current aggressions, but I do not.

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He could summon some sky hell's progeny in one fell swoop! The uneasy pulsing of the ship towards the vile shore meets with an unlikely current. An age passed before I came to understand these as a shifting in this dark and unparalleled universe. The very skies catch fire as haunted moans and bloodied raindrops pour down into this hellscape. I look upward at a stab wound in the bleeding sky.

My hands grasp to the broken boards, sending me—salt-soaked, splintered—into the deep. A shriveled mass. An excuse of a thing. The vile shore is ever-closer, and there can be no hope left to lift my spirits there. The ship itself can't stand the unseen onslaught of malice. My squinting eyes can barely make out the faintest mark of a sheath-like barrier between the vile shore and myself. Reaching up to the heavens, if such a place could even be conceived of in his presence. Every misstep in life was a seedling in this forgotten ocean. If I had known of what occurs beyond the indulgences of mortal travel, I may have never lost myself to such a place.

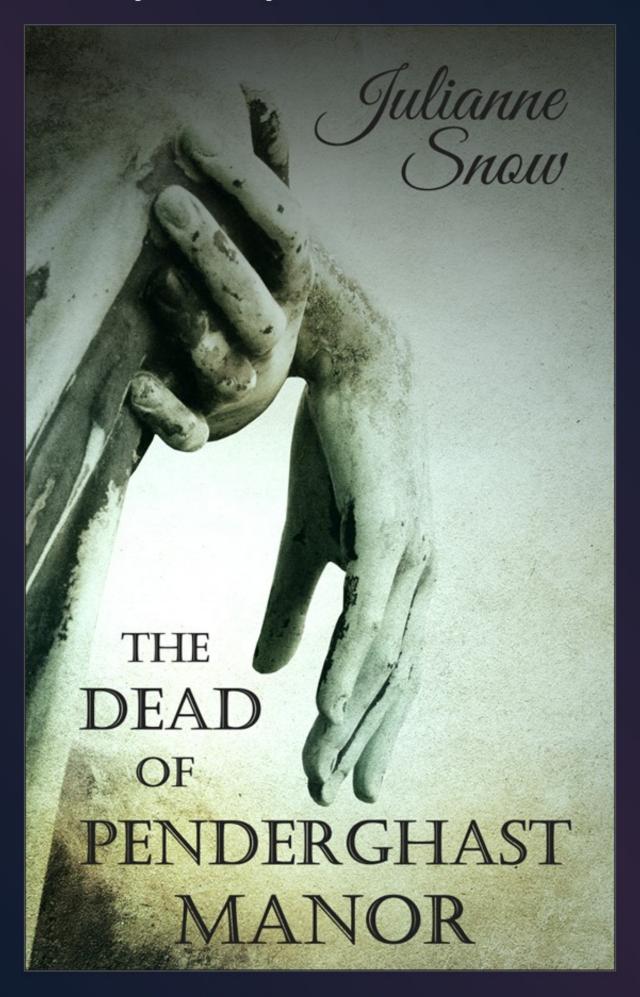
The waves overtake the bow. My grip is lost in the onslaught of foam. I grab onto one last twisting rail as the vessel rips in half, being sucked in by the ominous power of the burnished sands. Only now, after so many ages, I let out that guttural scream reserved for the last of conscious moments. As the power of the body leaves my arms and barrels into my throat, I let go of the rail and fall into dead water—unspeakable, rotten, and wondrous dark.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Farah Rose Smith is a poet, fiction writer, and artist from Providence, Rhode Island. She is the founder and editor of Mantid Magazine and the Creative Director of Grimoire Pictures. Her work, which often focuses on the Surreal and Avant-garde, has been recognized at film festivals, receiving accolades in both experimental film and screenwriting.

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## What would you do if you knew the Dead could talk?



Available on Amazon

#### **Demolition Derby** | *Amber Fallon*

The roar of the crowd mingled with the salty sweet aroma of blood, bandages, beer, and stale popcorn. The clatter of roller skates on the polished and pitted wooden track added to the din as the girls rounded a corner, speeding after one another in a mayhem ballet, a tournament of turbulence and destruction.

Huddled below one of the plastic bench seats in the Bleeder Box at the forefront of the arena, a small boy watched the action from a rat's eye perspective. The tot was separated from the gruesome track only by a section of dirty chain link fence which had bits of something reddish, rust or maybe blood, clinging to it at random intervals.

Headphones that were far too large for the boy clamped his small head like a vice, leaving his pale blonde hair sticking out at odd angles. Smooth, resounding notes of classical music played through the earpieces, echoing above the din and adding to the illusion of some sort of ghastly dance being acted out in front of him—a haunting melody the backdrop as Terrifying Tara ripped Deadly Darlene to shreds.

The lean, long-limbed forms of the combatants whirled and twirled in violent motion so much like a passionate dance. Only inches separated them at times. A crescendo peaked as blood splashed across the shining hardwood, speckled with teeth and bits of bone and gore.

Tara ripped through Darlene's torso with a long blade fastened to her forearm with thick bolts, sending bits of gristle and a ropey length of intestine into the cluster of clamoring fans pressed up against the fence blocking in the tight confines of the Trauma Track.

Darlene arched back, blood spraying in a crimson fountain as an aria contrasted with the brutal scene, everything reflected in the small boy's huge eyes.

Terrifying Tara licked her shining blade and grinned at the crowd. The patchwork of multihued flesh, held together with uneven stitches and gleaming staples, stretched and pulled in slightly different directions across her ghoulish face.

Tara soaked in the cheers and cat calls, pausing for just a moment, a fatal mistake. In that second when Tara swam in her reverie, drinking in the glory of her kill like wine, Gory Goldie dashed forward, laying a burst of savage speed, coming around the corner with a shattering surprise—a bone splintering bludgeon to Tara's head.

Tara went down inches from the Bleeder Box, mismatched fingers twitching as she spasmed; death—and defeat—a dire welcome.

Gory Goldie threw up her arms in triumph, but she would not make the same mistake as her unfortunate victim. She swung around in the same fluid motion, with the beauty and grace of the woodwinds that accompanied her movements over the small boy's headphones, and swung her weapon, acting almost on instinct.

A dark length of battered metal connected solidly just under Violet Viscera's chin, sending her reeling and spinning, crashing against the fence where the rabid spectators tore her to bits, reaching their hungry, grasping hands through the wide links and finishing the job for a grateful Goldie.

Now only two girls remained in the arena; Goldie herself and the spectacle that was the heretofore undefeated Murderous Marcy.

Ancient looking Christmas lights, strung around the arena like stars, glinted off of Marcy's armor like a beetle's carapace. She grinned a humorless grin that was a bit off kilter and slightly too wide on one side. Goldie screamed, roaring a challenge that sounded like an arpeggio to the ears of a small boy as the floor began to tremble, a tumultuous dance to the stomping feet of the fans, bloodthirsty hungry for destruction. The girls danced their deadly dance, careening faster and faster as they closed in on each other, speeding past the voracious viewers, weapons, armor, pale, bruised and bleeding flesh, a blur in the dim and dismal artificial light.

The boy's breath hung still, caught in his throat as his eyes darted over the scene, enrapt and entranced by the obliterating operetta taking place on the track. His fingers played smoothly over a small square control box in front of him, red and black buttons and the slender shaft of a joystick dancing like the girls as they neared each other for the final furious fight. Violins and violence, flutes and fury, pianos and pain, all became one as the boy's agile digits darted over the device in front of him.

A twist! And Goldie parried Marcy's devastating attack, knocking her off balance and nearly ending the fight right there. A flick of the wrist and Goldie was back on her feet, vigilance and violence restored.

The sanguinary sonata played on as once again Marcy sped around a corner, scraping her blade along the arena's one concrete wall, a shower of sparks marking her passing as the crowd called for the kill.

Goldie swept in close but once again Marcy dodged the brutal blow, staving off defeat for one more moment.

A symphony of agonies both real and imagined awaited the loser, the bitter taste of dishonor and defeat, and then respite.

The remaining pieces of the girls would be gathered up and brought to the chop shop below the arena where they would be combined with whatever pilfered parts had been scavenged for the wanton workshop, vile preparations for another scintillating show.

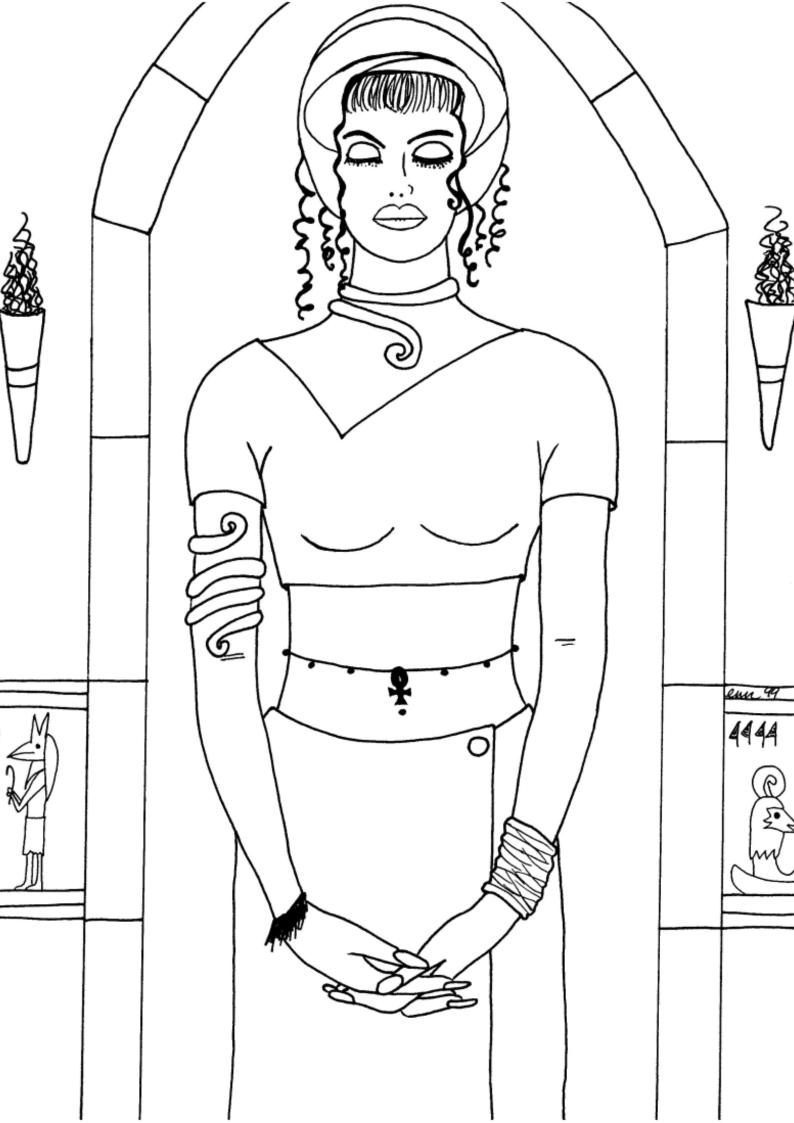
Goldie's blade glinted, glittering in the dim glow of the multicolored lights as Marcy made her move, darting forward on pink skates.

Marcy whipped around the corner, feinting right and delivering a devastating decapitation with a well-timed sweep of her arm.

Elsewhere in the arena, an electric guitar screeched a high-pitched chord into the ears of a small, dark haired girl in a ratty red velvet dress. She giggled as she set down her control box and wiped a stray splatter of blood from her cheek. Her victory tasted as sweet as candy.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Amber Fallon lives in Massachusetts with her husband and two dogs. A techie by day and horror writer by night, Mrs. Fallon has spent time as a bank manager, motivational speaker, produce wrangler, and butcher. Amber's publications include *The Terminal, Daughters of Inanna, So Long and Thanks for All the Brains, Zombies For a Cure, Quick Bites of Flesh, Operation Ice Bat, and more!* 

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#### Lonely Hearts Club | Betty Rocksteady

On our fifth date, I ripped his heart out.

On our first date, we ate Italian. Heads bent over noodles, eyes locked over wine. He picked at his cuticles and I smiled. We traded cleverly selected stories and sweet spiced kisses. I placed my fingers on his lips and he nibbled, tasting me with a grin.

On our second date, I gave him a tattoo. A small one. A heart on his hand, hidden in finger web, where only he could see it. We sat on my dirty carpet, where I laid out fresh clean linen and my supplies. India ink. A brand new needle. Alcohol. I took my time, drew my tiny stencil and leaned in close, smelling Old Spice on his sweater. Like my father used to wear.

He barely flinched. I held his hand steady. I felt his eyes on me as I stabbed the needle in, again and again, pushing in fresh black ink, wiping off blood. Stab. Stab. I took my time and it was perfect, the tiny imprint black as shadow.

When he kissed me, I bit his tongue. Tasted him.

On our third date, we exchanged angry words and found them to our liking.

On our fourth date, the tattoo had grown, creeping its way up the back of his hands, his arms, peppering his back with evidence of our love.

On our fifth date, I ripped his heart out. I laid down the clean linen again and he looked up at me, trusting. With clinical precision, I sliced my way through muscle, fat, tendon. It fluttered like a bird in the cage of his ribs. Trapped. Ready to be set free. Blood stained my carpet, but I didn't care.

I pressed the scalpel into his hands. Sweat on his brow, he mirrored the incision, opening the plate of my breasts to reveal the meaty flesh that lay beneath.

Tender, exposed, we never looked away. I kissed him and he tasted like blood. Right hands entwined, our left hands reached deep into each other's body and pulled the prize. I held his heart in my hand, beating, sputtering its insane heart song. It felt heavy. Used. But now it was mine and I nestled it into my own empty cavity.

We sewed each other up. My stitches were neater than his. He pressed a thumb down the haphazard scrawl of thread on my chest, bumps rising to meet him. He read me in braille.

We lay next to each other for hours, letting the rhythm of our breath and the pounding of our hearts sync. We made love, or something like it, breathlessly, our new hearts rattling unfamiliar in our chests.

When he fell asleep I walked barefoot to the bathroom, sidestepping the carnage that sank into my floors. I stood naked in front of the mirror, looking at the zigzag of scar tissue that made its way down my sternum. I liked it. I pressed my palm against the place where his heart now beat and listened to its whisper.

I lay back down next to him, placed a hand on his chest, where my own waylaid heart burbled. And then I slept.

The time spent apart in the drudgery of day to day life was shallow. Empty. On our fourteenth date, we carved off our hands. Just the left ones. We were both right-handed.

His went first. I always took the lead. With an old nightshirt I tied him off mid arm, the knot as tight as I could make. He barely flinched. The bowl of ice was nearby. The cleaver was heavy in my hand. I swung with all my strength, but it still took a few whacks to make it

through the bone. He chewed on a hunk of leather to keep from screaming. It was the last slice that bothered him the most, separating the last slivers of skin and tendon.

It was worth it. He held the spurting limb above his head to slow down the bleed, but my kitchen was splattered with bright red dots by the end of it, caught up in the fan and sprinkling the ceiling and walls.

I liked it that way.

He did mine next, one handed, always the gentleman, and my thin wrist broke and shattered and came apart with only two strikes. The pain was bearable when I looked into his eyes.

Our sewing was messier this time. More desperate. Passionate. We were clammy and pale as we reattached squirming limbs to each other. Dizzy. But we did it. That's how strong we could be.

I stretched out the hand that was his, and it felt good. Right. I wiggled his fingers. His heavy tan hand looked odd at the end of my thin pale arm, but it *felt* right.

I was more in love with him than ever the next day. It felt like he was beside me, even when he wasn't. He touched things with my hand. The smooth curve of an apple. The hard surface of his desk. The crumbling pages of an old book. There was a new fascination in objects that surrounded me. Things that had once held the weight of boredom and despair were new again as I juggled them in his hand.

Late that night, I slipped my blouse from my shoulders and with his hand I traced the scar down my chest, finally cupping my small breast, nipple popped out hard against the palm.

I felt the weight of his hard cock in my left hand and I sighed.

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We explored the world through each other's limbs but soon that was not enough.

On our thirty-second date, we sewed ourselves together. Siamese twins. I let him take the lead this time, passing the thick needle painfully through my side, pulling it tight and snug up against his body. This was an easier procedure. Not as messy. Our blood still stained my kitchen walls, making it feel like home.

This was the beginning of the end.

Even that night, I knew we had made a mistake.

He slept soundly beside me, but I lay awake hours after he did. His flesh tugged painfully at my side. I was heavy with sleep but it was impossible to get comfortable. I couldn't turn. I couldn't move. Every movement I made pulled against tender skin on my hip, my thigh. The wounds were bleeding and left gentle dots of red against my sheets. My good sheets.

I laid back, his hand pressed against my forehead. It felt too warm and the hairs on his knuckles scratched my delicate skin. I found myself wishing for my own cool, delicate hand.

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We took turns at work now. One day at mine, one at his. His job was boring, tedious. Long hours where I had to sit silent and still. He didn't like the distraction. He was different at work. Not the same gentle man I loved, he was controlling. Conniving. Sneaky. I hated it there. I hated him there.

He didn't like my work either. There wasn't room for him. I sat in the chair, sweetly getting caught on the missed days that were his fault. He knelt next to me, glowering and twitching and moving so much that it irritated my stitches, making them weep a sticky white fluid.

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I noticed it over dinner, Chinese food at home. He stared at his phone. I played with my food, ignoring him and praying he would notice. His left hand sat snugly on my thigh, no longer a novelty, accepted as my own. His right hand moved small and twitching, and I realized the heart was gone, soaked up by his skin, faded lighter each day, neither of us noticing until now, when it was already gone.

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He was a sloppy seamstress. Day by day the stitches became looser, leaving a crusty fluid in their wake.

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I couldn't count the dates anymore. I don't know where we were. It was all one long day, separated only by the shadows of night and not by the ways we changed.

Was it our eighty-third date? A hundred and five? I was ordering coffee and he was staring at his phone again. The boy behind the counter smiled at me, a shy smile. His face was round and sweet. I didn't think about it, I just slid my eye from its socket and handed it to him with an assortment of change. He took it and I took my coffee and I didn't wait to see what he said.

It took my lover days to notice it was gone. He never looked me in the eyes anymore.

But he was furious! He suspected what it meant, and even as I protested his accusations, a tiny part of me stared up at the coffee boy. His face was soft, my lover's was hard. His smile was always hinted at, never obnoxious, just a smirk of a dimple on his face. I liked him. I liked that he kept my eye. Didn't toss it in the register like it was nothing. He cherished it, took it home and I watched, distracted, even as we argued.

We made up, half-heartedly, but that night while he slept I wiggled and moved and rolled over and tore those stitches apart.

We said we would sew ourselves back up. Soon. But days went by and it just didn't happen. Didn't seem urgent. I was enjoying my newfound freedom. Loved the feeling of being able to stretch both arms high above my head. His scars stayed red and ugly, but mine healed up so fine. I babied them, washed them clean and bandaged them up again.

Then there was a night when he just didn't come back. He went to work and didn't come home and I was mad but a part of me was fine, just fine.

I looked at the stump of his hand on my wrist and it was ugly. I felt his heart beat in my chest and the rhythm of it made me sick. It was all wrong. Days passed without even a text. The heart sang in pain but it wasn't mine. I covered the hand in a mitten so I didn't have to look at it, and that helped.

I stared at the scar on my chest. I liked it there still. It was something. It showed that something had happened. It was real. But what beat within was not.

It was the seventh day without him that I finally got up the nerve to see him again. I went to his apartment and the door was unlocked. He wasn't home, but my things were waiting for me. My hand in a melting bowl of ice and my heart in a cage, beating restlessly. Scrawled in the blood, words: *I don't care if I never see you again*.

We had pushed too hard, too far. My remaining eye watered but did not shed a single tear.

I had brought my own tools. I removed the hand. That was easy. I dropped it in the melted ice. Who knew how long he would be gone. Not my problem. Let it melt. I slid my hand back into place and flexed my fingers. I had forgotten how beautiful they were, long and pale and tapered to a point.

A brand new scalpel slid through my chest. I cut carefully at first but watching my heart pounding out its own rhythm made me desperate. With both of my hands, beautiful as doves, I tore his rotten heart out. It had grown black and ugly in my chest.

The emptiness of my chest was huge, a mean thing, gaping wide open, full of sour feelings. He had never been who he said he was, had he? Had I?

No matter. I took my heart back and sewed up my chest and felt warm for the first time in a long time.

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I was whole now. Complete. I went home on my first day in my own body and laid in my bed. My strong heart beat its own rhythm and I laid my left hand over my chest. Somewhere, not so far away, I batted the lashes of my eye.

It would be different this time.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Betty Rocksteady is a weirdo Canadian horror writer and artist. Her debut novella, Arachnophile, is a surreal horror romance wherein the girl next door is a giant spider. It was part of Eraserhead Press' New Bizarro Author Series 2015. You can read her short fiction in Eternal Frankenstein, Lost Signals, and the upcoming DOA III.

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#### It Tastes Better Fresh | D.M. Slate

Dropping the heavy pack onto the ground, Bret sighed with relief. Tiny beads of sweat covered his forehead and he used his arm to wipe them away, panting as he caught his breath. Squinting into the bright afternoon light Bret watched as his older brother Jeremy took off his backpack as well, lowering the bundle into the grass.

Bret reached into the side pocket of his bag and removed his water bottle, drinking deeply to quench his thirst. They'd been hiking for seven miles and this clearing at the top of the mountain was the perfect camping spot. In his opinion, there was nothing more beautiful than the deep woods of the Rocky Mountains. It offered a sense of calmness and solitude that he'd been unable to find anywhere else.

Spinning on his heels, he turned back toward Jeremy, who was already scouting the small clearing for a place to put the tent. Bret grabbed his pack and carried it the short distance over to where his brother stood. Motioning with his head, Bret nodded toward a nearby rocky outcropping.

"I think we deserve a break before we set up camp."

Jeremy sighed, removing his hat and scratching the back of his head. Taking several large strides, he approached one of the boulders and took a seat.

Bret rummaged through the contents of his backpack, reaching deep inside. A smile of triumph spread across his face as he found the brown paper bag, removing it from his pack.

"I believe it's officially time to celebrate." Bret reached into the paper bag and whipped out a bottle of whiskey, in dramatic fashion.

Jeremy chuckled. "Training camp starts in five days. I've got to stay on top of my game."

"Dude, this is our last *hurrah* before you leave to become a famous NFL quarterback. After that, you'll probably forget that you even have a little brother." Bret held the bottle out toward Jeremy. "Come on, this is our weekend to celebrate your success—before everything changes."

Reaching out, Jeremy took the bottle with a sly smirk. "It's not like I'm going to war. I'm going to Cleveland... to play football. Nothing is going to *change*."

Laughing, Bret agreed. "Well the fact that I'm a Broncos fan definitely won't change just because my big bro is the quarterback over in Cleveland..."

Snap.

Both men's heads swung in the direction of the breaking tree limb. Jeremy raised a finger to his mouth, whispering, "Shhhh."

Bret strained his ears, listening for any other noises.

Jeremy set the whiskey down and his hand shot over to his backpack, grabbing for the can of bear spray. Both gazes never left the cluster of trees where the piece of wood had snapped.

After thirty seconds of being on edge Bret let down his guard, exhaling loudly. "Why are you being so paranoid today?"

Jeremy snorted. "Do you think I want to get eaten by a bear, or a mountain lion? Use your brain. I feel like we're being stalked by something."

"You always were the one with an overactive imagination..."

Narrowing his eyes and scrunching his face into a scowl, Jeremy punched with lightning fast speed. Bret's shoulder exploded with hot, throbbing pains.

"What the hell?"

His older brother rose to his feet, smiling wide. "Come on. Let's go check out the perimeter. And I'm warning you, if I find any fresh tracks out there—we're heading back."

Bret rolled his eyes, taking his time to stand. Reaching down he grabbed the liquor, cracking the lid open. He held the glass jar up in Jeremy's direction in a silent *cheers* motion, before tipping the bottle back and taking a huge chugging swallow. Coughing and sputtering, he passed the whiskey to Jeremy.

Following Bret's lead, Jeremy also took a swig before screwing the lid back on and setting the bottle on the ground.

Together the brothers walked slowly around the camp site, looking for any signs of wildlife. Bret was the first to notice the steady flow of white feathers raining down from a nearby tree, and he motioned with his hand to grab Jeremy's attention.

The brothers watched in silence as a massive brown hawk plucked the feathers from a smaller lifeless bird. The hawk stared at them with its dark eyes, but continued to work on its lunch. Using its razor sharp beak, the hawk tore into the flesh of the smaller bird, eating with delight.

Jeremy whispered, "Come on, let's go."

A small game trail led away from the clearing and Jeremy walked along its path, looking warily into the trees for any large predators. Dense brush grew along the barely-visible animal trail and Bret knew that his brother wouldn't find any tracks. Although there had been several strange noises along the hike, he thought it was unlikely that they were being stalked.

As Bret followed behind his brother he felt the effects of the alcohol starting to set in. He smiled blissfully, enjoying his company and the surroundings. His eyes were drawn to a small yellow butterfly that fluttered in the Aspen leaves not far above his head.

Without warning a piercing scream tore through the serenity of the moment.

At first Bret wasn't sure where it came from, but his eyes swung quickly in the direction of his brother. His heart raced as he sprinted the short distance to Jeremy. His older brother continued his high-pitched wail, reaching down toward his leg.

Bret's breath caught in his throat.

The situation was surreal.

A rusty bear trap had closed on Jeremy's lower leg. Bret stood there staring, frozen, unsure what to do.

"Help me—get it off!"

Jeremy's eyes were wide and bulging. His hands gripped his lower leg, just below the knee.

Dropping to the ground, Bret assessed the damage. The large metal teeth of the bear trap had clamped together on Jeremy's mid-calf. Their rusty edges had punctured his skin, shredding muscles and breaking his shin bone. Blood gushed from the multiple lacerations, pouring down his leg onto his shoe.

Reaching out with shaking hands, Bret grabbed ahold of each side of the trap. Pulling with all his might, he attempted to get the jaws to release. Jeremy bellowed in pain, but the device wouldn't open. Panicking, Bret tried again.

"Fuck—it won't budge. What do I do?"

He looked up at his brother with fear stricken eyes. Jeremy made eye contact, but then his gaze moved over Bret and into the trees.

Jeremy screamed, "Watch out!"

Bret had just enough time to swivel and see a man rushing toward him, wielding a large rock. It smashed into his temple with such force that Bret crumpled to the ground, unconscious.

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The incessant buzz of flies brought Bret back to reality. The right side of his skull throbbed and he tried to bring his hand to his temple, but he was restrained. He blinked several times until his eyes came into focus. Confused, Bret tried to process what he saw.

He was inside a shack. Old rotted beams made a rickety framework for the rusty sheet metal to cover. Animal pelts hung from the rafters covered in buzzing flies. The dirt floor was littered with pebbles and pieces of broken bone, and through the empty doorframe Bret could see into the woods.

Turning his gaze back, Bret stared at the ghastly sight before him. An old table made of logs stretched the entire length of the shack and Jeremy was on top it, lying face down. His hands had been tied behind his back and Bret could see a cloth rag wrapped around his head. More rope was used to keep Jeremy from moving—strapping him to the table at the shoulders, lower back, thighs, knees and feet. The pants on his right leg were shredded and saturated with blood from the bear trap wound. Small red droplets dripped through the space between the logs, staining the dirt below.

Bret's heart raced as he struggled against his own bindings. The constant throb of his head was unbearable, making it hard to think.

Bret was seated in a chair. His ankles had been tied to the chair legs, and his hands were bound at his sides. Rope was then wrapped around his chest, keeping him restrained to the back of the chair. He also had a gag in his mouth. The taste of the dirty cloth made him want to vomit.

Wiggling with all of his might Bret tried to loosen the ropes. His ears picked up the sound of approaching footsteps and he ceased his struggling, listening.

A man's figure appeared in the doorway.

Bret stared in terror.

The older man's head was bald and wrinkled. Droopy ears hung from the sides of his skull and his eyebrows were thick and bushy. He was tall and muscular despite his age. He leaned casually against the doorframe, gazing back at Bret with cold, unfeeling eyes. One of his massive hands gripped Bret's whiskey bottle and he tipped it back, taking a large drink.

After swallowing he placed the bottle on the threshold of the entryway and walked into the shack.

Bret's *flight or fight* response kicked in and he began to struggle against his bindings. He tried pleading with his captor but the gag in his mouth muffled any words he tried to form. The commotion caused Jeremy to stir, finally bringing him back to consciousness.

The older man's attention shifted from Bret to Jeremy.

Bret watched in horror as their captor turned to face his brother. Bret's muffled screams did little to deter the man as he unbuckled his belt, pulling it free of the loops on his pants.

He approached Jeremy, who struggled frantically trying to get free.

Sliding the belt underneath Jeremy's right thigh, the man then pulled the device as tight as he could, creating a tourniquet on the upper leg. Jeremy screamed in agony.

Bret's hollering increased in frequency as he watched the maniac reach down to his ankle, withdrawing a long hunting knife from the sheath strapped to his lower leg. Being restrained face down, Jeremy had no way to know that the man now held a weapon.

Struggling did nothing to grab his captor's attention away from his older brother. The man grabbed a hold of Jeremy's shredded pant leg, cutting the material away. Without hesitation he lowered the knife again, slicing into the flesh of Jeremy's calf.

His brother wailed, unable to move.

Bret watched helplessly as the psychopath continued to cut, removing the majority of the calf muscle on Jeremy's right leg.

Jeremy's struggling had finally loosened his gag and it fell away to the side.

"Stop!" he pleaded in a screaming, sobbing cry.

The man held the large piece of flesh and muscle up, inspecting it.

Turning to face Bret his captor smiled, a creepy sadistic sort of look.

Bret's stomach lurched.

Jeremy's wailing continued. Through his broken cries he managed to ask, "Why are you doing this? Why don't you just kill me already?"

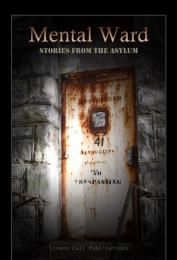
The man chuckled.

Walking back to the entrance of the cabin he paused, retrieving the bottle of whiskey.

Turning back to look at the brothers, he responded. "I don't want to kill you, yet. You see, the meat..." he held out his hand, wiggling Jeremy's calf muscle back and forth, "it tastes better fresh."

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Danyelle (aka D.M. Slate) resides in Colorado, where she's lived for most of her life. D.M. Slate's first sci-fi horror novella was released in 2009, followed by dark fiction novels in 2010 and 2012. In 2013, Slate produced her first audiostory. The following year her second audio-story won the Wicked Woman Writer's Challenge hosted by HorrorAddicts.net, earning her the title of 2014's Most Wicked Woman Writer.

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### The Last Days of Rosalind Kershaw | Madeline Mora-Summonte

The dock sways beneath Rosalind Kershaw's feet even though she's little more than wisps of white hair, withered skin and blood as watery as the soup she heats for herself. She sets her sights on the paper caught between the warped boards, flapping like the wing of a wounded bird. She snatches it then scurries back to land, ignoring the grinding and groaning of old wood, old bones.

A brackish smell wafts from the paper-like perfume off a lover's scented letter. It's damp and crinkled, ragged on one side as if torn from a notebook. Childlike printing spells out "WeRe bAck."

Ros glares around her property—the stagnant lake, the ramshackle house, the encroaching wild woods. Pranksters haven't bothered her for years, but now she feels eyes on her.

"Get out of here, you hooligans! I won't bother with the police. I don't need a jail. I have my own cages." She cackles, remembering those old rumors, the ones she started long ago. She balls the paper in her fist, raises it in the air. "Stay off my land!" She shoves the note into her pocket, hitches up her pants then trudges back to the house, weeds licking her ankles.

The next day, she watches from the porch as the morning unfolds. She's naked beneath her father's old smoking jacket, and the chill in the air makes her wrap it tighter around her. Another accident in the night. Another nightgown in the laundry. Her body is failing, but her mind is as solid as ever. She taps the side of her head twice then settles into her mother's old rocking chair, lifts the big blue mug of coffee with both hands. Her bare feet, long and gnarled, push against the dirty floorboards. A creaking drifts into the air like the call of a tired old bird.

Movement catches the corner of her eye. The tree swing twists and bucks as if someone just jumped off it, the way Ros did as a child. She frowns. No one's about, and there's no wind. She puts down her mug then heads over. She walks around the massive tree, the swing, but sees nothing amiss. She grabs onto the ropes, smiles. When's the last time she took a turn? Her feet barely reach the ground now, but she manages a small push off, setting the swing in motion.

She glances at the memorial plaque near the base of the tree. Her parents never had any qualms about moving into a supposedly haunted house. After all, it wasn't like a murder had taken place. No blood, no bodies, no sign of foul play. Besides, the house was an incredible bargain, perfect for an obscure, unpaid poet and his muse of a wife who valued their privacy and each other above all else. They never considered that their daughter might struggle to make friends, that her classmates would think her weird, creepy. They were afraid of her, and while some just stayed away, others terrorized her.

Ros closes her eyes. Maybe if she swings hard enough, high enough, she can elude that particular memory's grasp. But the past has long, clutching fingers and snags her anyway.

Hide-n-seek in a pitch-black basement. Ros is It, flailing around in the dark. Giggles and taunts erupt all around her. No one is hiding, but she can't find anyone. She can't see anything. Small footsteps pitter-patter. She whirls, lunges, reaches, grabs. Nothing. Hot, wet breath coats the back of her neck. Fat fingers jab her flesh. Rustling. Dragging. She turns

toward the sounds. A rotten, meaty smell rises from the ground, and she gags. Someone shoves her. She lands hard, something squashed and foul beneath her. She scrabbles to get up, get away. Her hand finds a snouted face. A dented skull. An empty eye socket. A furry body split open and slick with oozing innards. She's sprawled on top of a dead animal, dragged in from the side of the road by her classmates. She screams. They scream with laughter. She tries to wipe off the blood, the shit, smeared all over her. She weeps until an adult hears her cries and flicks on the basement light.

Now, Ros shudders and opens her eyes, letting the swing slow to a stop. "Hooligans," she murmurs. After that horrible day, she embraced her isolated and supposedly haunted home, relished the distance it put between her and others. She invented terrible rumors and crafted creepy stories. She did everything she could to keep people away. She made sure she would never be terrorized, be victimized, like that again.

She slides off the swing then kneels near the plaque. It's filthy, weed-choked. As she brushes off the dirt, she remembers choosing names from the list, creating her own playmates, her own friends. Who needed real ones when imaginary ones were so much better? She lingers on their names. The orphans.

It's true no obvious crime was ever committed, no evidence of violence to taint the house's aura. Still, when everyone who lives in a place just disappears one day, something has to be left behind, some trailing sense of unease, of unfinished living. Open doors and windows, the pages of schoolbooks ruffling in the drafts, half-finished chores, vegetables washed and waiting on the cutting board, knife nearby. The ground around the house was disturbed—muddy streaks and patches of mashed earth but no actual tracks. Despite numerous searches, nothing was ever found. The mystery remains unsolved.

Ros sighs. It's a terrible story, yet as a child she sometimes wished she could run off with the orphans wherever they were, that she could disappear, too. She weeds around the plaque until her fingers fumble upon a clump of something soft and silky. Like hair.

Her heart stutters. A dead child buried here after all? It's not possible. Her palms curl around something hard and smooth, like bone...

Ros lifts the old china doll gently from the dirt bed, tree roots surrounding it like a cradle. Ros laughs, pulls the doll onto her lap. She untangles the hair, straightens the dress, wipes the stained face softly with her sleeve.

"Betsy, have you been here this whole time? Shame on you for worrying me so." Ros smiles. "Mother and father blamed me, said I lost you, but I knew that wasn't true. It was old Snoot, wasn't it? He took you off one day and buried you. That damn dog buried everything he got his paws on."

A giggle bursts up near the house. Ros gasps and looks, but doesn't see anyone. Another giggle, from around back. Clutching the doll, Ros hurries to the house.

The landscape is overgrown, wild, but Ros is sure she'd see someone hiding. She circles the house. Once. Twice. No one is around. She squints at the wood's edge. There! The flutter of a figure disappearing between the trees. But a cloud passes overhead, casting shadows everywhere, and suddenly she's not sure.

A chill skitters over her spine. The smoking jacket has come undone, her shriveled flesh on display. Ros shivers, clutches it closed. She hugs Betsy to her, looking all around, seeing nothing but feeling... something.

Ros exhales long and loud. Her ears and eyes might be on their way out, too, but she's still a tough old bird. "Still solid," she mutters, tapping the side of her head. And just in case anyone is watching, she glares defiantly around her then stomps up the porch steps and inside.

That night, Ros stares at the dark ceiling above her bed. Thunder calls, lightning answers. The wind whips around the house, bending branches to scratch against the bedroom window. Rain drills the roof, puncturing it yet again. She imagines rivulets racing down the walls, mildew slinking beneath the sheeted furniture like an unwanted hand under a skirt. She can't remember the last time she went upstairs. She moved down here when her mother got sick, the easier to care for her. Her father died soon after, and Ros just never moved back. Besides, it's easier to stay on one floor. She gave everything a good cleaning, covered all the furniture, closed all the doors. She did the same with some rooms downstairs. But no matter how small she makes her world, she never keeps up with everything, like the landscaping. Earlier, she called the tree trimmer, who would come Monday.

She tosses, turns. Betsy, propped up against the headboard, looks peaceful despite one closed eye, the other stuck open. Ros would've found the doll all those years ago. She's sure of it. But what if Betsy hadn't been buried back then? What if the pranksters who left the note on the dock also buried Betsy? What if it's all a trick?

Ros rolls onto her side. She's being ridiculous. The note was some child's discarded homework tossed around by the wind. And Betsy was there the whole time. Ros just missed her, that's all. Ros stares at the drawn shade over the window. The rain is slowing. The wind, too. Branches scrape the side of the house. Thunder rumbles off. Lightning flashes its goodbye.

Three figures fill up the shade. Their shadows ripple and shimmy like candle flames before winking out the same way.

Ros gasps, sits up. She fumbles for the phone to call the police. The dial tone buzzes like a loud, insistent insect in her ear. But she doesn't dial. Is she absolutely sure people are out there? After all, she heard giggling earlier but didn't see a soul. She blinks, trying to clear her muddled mind. What if it was just the storm? What if she drags the police out here and all they find is a crazy old lady?

She slowly puts the phone down then curls away from the window. She pulls Betsy to her and listens to the night now that the storm has passed. No rain, no wind.

The scratching continues.

"Branches. It's only branches," she whispers to Betsy. But Ros stays awake a long time.

When she finally falls asleep, the sounds of children's laughter and running footsteps, thumps and bumps and creaks come at her from deep inside her house, from deep inside her dreams.

She wakes with a start, anxious and edgy. She gets dressed, makes coffee. The heat and caffeine charge through her, invigorating her. Leaving the mug on the kitchen table, she heads outside and around to her bedroom. The grass is matted, the branches bent. Gouges mar the side of her house. Scratches scar the window glass. Did the storm do this? She pauses. The phone line, cut. Her breath shudders. That wasn't the storm. Was it?

Muddy streaks lead away from her bedroom window. She follows, noting with growing horror that beneath each window, each door, is a large patch of matted grass, as if people recently gathered there.

The trail ends under the porch. A gaping maw yawns at her, the boards once covering it ripped off and scattered. On the ground near her feet are tiny fingernails. Children's fingernails. Ros presses on them with her fingers. They're wet. She brings them closer to her face, Blood, Fresh.

She cries out, wipes her hand in the dirt. Is someone hiding under the porch? Did someone get into the house?

She hurries to the porch steps and collapses, her breath coming hard and heavy. She doesn't understand what's going on. She tries to focus. "Still solid, still solid." She taps the side of her head again. And again. The clouds furrow above her. A damp breeze swishes by. A large raindrop splashes her arm. Then another. Why would anyone bother her? Break into her house? She owns nothing of value, has nothing to steal.

Her eyes go wide. The hooligans! They planted the note, buried Betsy, lurked outside in the storm trying to scare her. It's a horrible prank, just like the one her classmates pulled when she was young. But she's older now, tougher. She swore she'd never be terrorized again, be victimized again. These punks, whoever they are, won't get the best of her.

She stomps inside, grabs her father's old walking stick, then wields it like a baseball bat. She pauses in the hall, looks around, listens. Footprints in the dust on the stairs. A thump and a giggle from above. She races up.

"How dare you come into my house!" She flings open door after door, races into one room then the next. Children's laughter baits her then chases her. Still, she sees no one.

Downstairs, she bursts into another unused room. "You can't hide from me! I'll find you!" The sheeted furniture sits patiently, certain it will be used again one day. Ros yanks open the closet door.

The floorboards are broken, torn up.

Ros drops the walking stick, starts flinging sheets into the air. "You better come out now, wherever you are, whoever you are!" Dust lands in her hair, coats her throat and she coughs, hard enough to ache her ribs.

Giggling from the kitchen. Ros runs into the room, but she's moving too fast and bumps the table. Her mug falls to the floor, shatters. An old newspaper photo floats feather-like into the thick puddle of spilled coffee. Ros lifts it with trembling fingers. It's titled "Happier Times." The orphans play near her tree, laugh on her swing. Her imaginary friends have real faces.

"Who are you? Who's here? What do you want?" She cries.

Thunder shakes the walls. Rain slaps the house. Ros shoves the picture into her pocket then hurries into her bedroom. She grabs the phone only to be greeted by silence. She holds onto Betsy, sobs.

A breath steals across the back of her neck. A child's voice, but with a hollowness, an emptiness that does not belong, whispers, "We missed you." Flecks of ice cold spittle land on her cheek.

Ros screams, whirls around. She flails at the air, but no one is there. Clutching Betsy, Ros runs out into the rain. She slips as she hurries down the stairs, banging every bone in her

body, splattering herself with mud. She doesn't care. She needs to get away. She heads for the woods.

\*\*\*

The next day, the tree trimmer arrives.

"Ms. Kershaw?"

The house is empty. The front door stands wide open. A mug lays broken on the kitchen floor. He hurries through the rest of the house, noting the disarray. Outside, he walks to the tree with the swing.

"Ms. Kershaw?" He cups a hand around his mouth, sending his voice out as far as it will go over the lake, into the woods. When silence is the only response, he hurries back to his truck to call for help.

He doesn't look at the plaque, doesn't see the new name scratched at the bottom—RoSAlinD KeRShaW.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Madeline Mora-Summonte is a writer, a reader, a beach-comber, and a tortoise-owner. She is the author of the flash fiction collections, The People We Used to Be and Garden of Lost Souls.

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## Mental Ward: Echoes of the Past

Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and iTunes



### **Death's Favorite Pet** | *Annie Neugebauer*

He started with a dog, as was only logical. The pup had big watery eyes and a scruffy tail that never stopped wagging, and it wasn't even a full day before Death gave in and petted him, and that was that. Have you ever tried cuddling with a skeleton?

The cat lasted a little longer—all of three days before she hopped onto his robed lap. Three days were enough for Death to grow attached. He cried for her, and the tears dripped down his zygomatic bones and plinked into the gaping hollows of his cheeks. Even then, he had no tongue with which to taste their bitter salt.

He thought perhaps a lesser creature, something smaller and without affection. How was he to know that floppy-eared bunnies are irresistible, that rats are not only smart but sweeter than most humans, that ferrets leave you gifts—the little treasures they find among your own home? Death loved them all, and with that love came touch, and with that touch came death.

When he grew desperate enough he got a tarantula, but he couldn't resist holding it just once to see what its prickly-coated legs felt like. The snake and turtle went the same way. Death knew better than to try a hamster. The hollow in his ribcage ached with emptiness. At night he'd lie awake and pretend he heard a heart beating in the darkness. It seemed things would never change, until he got the fish.

The fish is small and golden, and it swims alone around and around its clear bowl with single-minded contentment. Sometimes Death taps on the glass, but the fish never touches the sides—as if it knows that in a world ruled by the warm and living, the greatest gift a cold-blooded creature like it can give is to never leave its bounds.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Annie Neugebauer is a novelist, short story author, and poet. She has work appearing in over sixty venues, including *Black Static*, *Apex Magazine*, and *Fireside*. She's an active member of the Horror Writers Association, webmaster for the Poetry Society of Texas, and a columnist for two *Writer's Digest* award-winning websites: Writer Unboxed and LitReactor. She's represented by Alec Shane of Writers House.

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Now I Lay Me Down To Reap

Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and iTunes

### **Impossible Silence** | *Jessica Curtis*

Rick sat up and shook his head. Why was he lying on the asphalt? He looked around, startled to see his best friend, Brendon, crying beside him. The boy's shoulders were shaking violently with the force of his sobs. But no sound came from his friend. In fact, the entire street seemed to be abnormally silent. "Brendon?" Rick asked. He frowned in confusion. His voice sounded hollow and muffled to his own ears. "What's wrong?" Brendon didn't respond. "Dude?" He reached out and shoved at him. He let out a scream. His hand passed clean through Brendon's shoulder. Rick yanked his hand back, holding it to his chest as if he had been burned.

Rick blinked rapidly, his body wracked with shivers. He jerked his head around to see more of his surroundings. He could see a set of black skid marks on the street, that he was fairly sure hadn't been there before, and a crowd of people gathering around. They all seemed to be talking, but still, he couldn't hear anything. All of the people looked panicked and worried. An elderly woman pulled Brendon up and away from Rick. As he went, Brendon's eyes were glued to the spot on the pavement where Rick's head had been.

Rick swallowed thickly and turned to look. A low moan of disbelief slipped out of his mouth. Somehow he was still lying on the ground. His right arm was contorted to an unnatural angle, his left sprawled towards the spot Brendon had just vacated. Blood pooled around his head. Or, rather, what was left of it. One of his eyes stared blankly at the sky, but the other, along with the bulk of that side of his skull, was caved in. If he looked closely, he could see a weird pinkish-grey substance through his shattered skull. His stomach turned as he realized that he was looking at his own brain.

He scrambled to his feet. "No," he groaned. "No, no, I'm not dead! I can't be!" He turned to find Brendon, to try to get his friend to see him, but he had been ushered well away from Rick and was sitting on the curb with an officer nearby. Flashing lights now filled the residential street and EMTs were rushing over. Rick couldn't look. He was numb with disbelief. He stumbled away.

What had happened? He wracked his memory as his brow furrowed in confusion. Brendon had swung by that morning so they could go to their usual skate park. It had been packed there, so the boys had decided to return to their neighborhood and skate there instead. He scowled. The moment they had stepped onto their street, his memories stopped in their tracks. He stared at the street. Beyond the skid marks, he saw no indication of what had happened. Had he been hit by a car? Then why was the worst of the damage to his head and not his chest and lower body where the grill of a car would've collided with him? Why would he have been in the street in the first place? His newly silent world didn't seem to hold any answers.

He plopped down beside Brendon. A shock blanket had been placed around his shoulders. Rick watched as he spoke to the cop and tried to read his lips, but couldn't make anything out beyond his own name. "Brendon?" he tried desperately. Again, Brendon did not register his words. Rick ran a shaking hand through his hair and tucked his head between his knees.

Several hours passed, but the world around him remained eerily muted. He was still on the curb, though Brendon had been whisked away by his mother. Rick guessed she had taken him to the hospital for shock since they hadn't gone to their house down the road. He sniffled and wiped at his eyes. He couldn't cry, but it felt like he was.

The area was thoroughly taped off and his grandparents had rushed to the scene less than five minutes after the cops. He knew his parents would still be in Cancun. It was unlikely they would be able to get home before the next morning.

From where he stood, he could just barely see his grandmother, her mouth open in a wail. "Glad I can't hear that," he murmured. "I don't think I could take it." Beside her, his grandfather stood with his arms wrapped around her to offer and take what little comfort he could.

Rick looked away from the sight. Vaguely, almost numbly, he wondered if this was normal. Was this just what happened when people died? Was he in limbo? Purgatory? It certainly wasn't heaven, or he wouldn't be forced to watch his friends and family suffer in silence. He cocked his head to the side and scanned the crowd of neighbors still gathered around the gruesome scene. Surely he couldn't be the only dead person around. He knew a few of his more elderly neighbors had passed away along the row of houses through the years, but he didn't see any faces that didn't belong. Were they all just marooned to view the world they had left, but unable to see any others in their situation?

Early the next morning, his parents returned, their faces already torn with grief. Rick followed them into the house. "Mom, Dad," he said as he watched them sit on the couch. They were curled in on themselves, staring blankly at the officer who was probably explaining the situation. Neither one of them looked in his direction. "It's okay, I'm right here," he tried again. His mother's body jerked with a sob and she doubled over her knees. Immediately his father wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

Rick's lower lip trembled as he slowly stepped forward. He crouched in front of them and waved a hand in front of his father's face. Nothing. Tried to nudge his mother's shoulder. Just like with Brendon, his hand went straight through. It would be easier if he could cry. As it was, there was no way to rid himself of the weight in his chest. "Mommy, please don't cry," he whined. He hadn't called her that since he was ten. He could see tears dripping from her face onto her clenched, shaking fists.

His father buried his face in his mom's shoulder, trembling just as hard as she was. Rick jerked back in shock as the police officer stepped into their space to place a comforting hand on their shoulders. No doubt he was offering his condolences, but in order to do so, he had to step *through* Rick. It caused him no pain, but still Rick clambered to the side to stare up at the man in shock. Apparently ghosts didn't cause the chill that superstition claimed.

Three days passed since Rick's death. Bit by bit, his memories of how he died came back to him. He had been trying to do an ollie, which for some reason he had never been able to do properly. Brendon cheered him on from the sidewalk and threw out advice. His last attempt had gone particularly wrong. His board had gone skidding out from underneath him and into the middle of the road, causing him to land hard on his butt and tear the skin from his hand. He leapt back to his feet, sprinting after it. He hadn't noticed the silver sedan speeding down the street until he was leaning forward to reach his board. There was no time for him to react before the side of his head became very well acquainted with its bumper. Brendon screamed. Everything went black after that, but judging by the skid marks on the asphalt and the lack of a car nearby when he became aware of his surroundings, the car had most likely sped off.

He spent his days in the park across the road, sitting in the mulch. He couldn't stand to be inside and watch his family mourn. Still, he could only hear sounds from his own body.

He took to chattering his teeth or snapping his fingers to fill the silence. Pacing took up most of his time. He was sure that if he had still been alive, he would've made a decent sized hole in the ground from his feet.

Little kids came and went to the park daily and occasionally Brendon would wander over. Mostly he would just sit on the swings in the back of the playground, tracing patterns in the dirt with his foot. Rick kept him company for the first day before deciding that it was just as sad as being around his family. Instead he kept to the edge of the park so that no one would walk through him, watching everything unfold from afar.

Rain poured from the sky, grieving right along with his loved ones, but the water simply passed through him. The trees were nearly bent sideways with the force of the wind. Rick stared up at the clouds with his eyes open wide. If he could feel just a single raindrop, maybe he would feel better. With a sigh, he forced himself to his feet and looked across the street to his house. His heart ached as he walked through the park towards the small beach that bordered their town. His feet dragged on the ground, feeling as though they were filled with lead.

The surf was more violent than usual due to the storm. Rick stood in the sand for a long time, simply watching the small waves crash onto the shore. Unsurprisingly, the beach was abandoned. He let out a sigh and padded through the sand until the water washed over his feet. Shocker. He couldn't feel it. Closing his eyes, he felt an invisible hand close over his heart as he made his way deeper into the water.

He was up to his waist when he paused, staring out at the open sea. Maybe he would be able to explore the bottom of the ocean. After all, ghosts couldn't drown. Or maybe they could. Everything else he knew about ghosts had proven untrue, so how would he know? He kept walking, experiencing none of the typical resistance people do when they get into deeper water. The only thing he could feel was that same heaviness in his heart.

Deeper and deeper he went. Up to his shoulders. His chin. He hesitated for a moment before closing his eyes and taking the next step that would submerge his head. Nothing. No rush of water into his lungs. No burn of salt water in his eyes as he carefully opened them. There was just... nothing.

He moved farther forward, keeping his feet firmly on the bottom. Apparently ghosts didn't float. Curious, he tried to push himself off the bottom, but he stayed where he was. He panicked, pushing up again. It was like someone had tied cinder blocks to his feet. Thrashing his head from side to side, he attempted to turn around and head back towards the shore, but his panic left him disoriented and confused. Every direction he stepped in seemed to only lead deeper. He opened his mouth to let out a wail, only to find that his vocal chords failed him as well. He stumbled forward with his arms outstretched. There was nothing. No light. No sound. Not even the minimal comfort of his own voice. No one to give the sad illusion of company. Just the endless abyss that was the ocean.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Jessica Curtis is an avid writer and short story author. She has work appearing in *The Haunted Traveler* and *The Sirens Call*. When she's not busy writing, she's probably singing along to musicals or scaring herself watching horror movies.

### **Dreadful Dissonance** | *E. A. Black*

I stood in the wings of the club. How was I supposed to make a good impression after that act? Why had the organizers stuck me immediately after the best group of the evening? I felt like the kid all alone on a cold stage playing an accordion right after everyone went wild over a fantastic jazz band.

I couldn't compete with Manic Fury. The crowd loved them! My stomach tied up in knots so tight my gut cramped. I couldn't breathe. Christ, I *must* breathe or I won't be able to play the recorder!

I'm a loser. Who did I think I was kidding? I'm no musician. I'm a hack whose time has passed. Hell, my time never came. If I turn now and leave no one will miss me.

"What are you waiting for, Dyer?" The stage manager shoved me toward the stage. "Get out there, now."

He pushed me into my cart of instruments, forcing me on stage. One wheel wobbled and squeaked an ugly tune as I pushed. If I wasn't careful I'd topple right off the stage and break my neck. Maybe that was exactly what I needed.

It took a few moments for my eyes to adjust to the lights. People chattered and laughed. I hoped they weren't laughing at me. Someone crumbled a bag. The sound pierced my ears, made me squint in pain, but it wasn't nearly as agonizing as when I first heard the squeal of the recorder in the pawn shop.

The bag skittered across the stage, pitched from somewhere in the rows of chairs. If they laughed at me, they would get theirs. With these musical instruments, I'd make sure of it.

I was so small on that stage I felt like a mouse trapped in a box with a roomful of cats ready to devour me. The crowd yowled and hissed, claws out, eager to see me make a fool of myself. A box sailed through the air and hit me on the forehead. Rage welled in my solar plexus.

They wouldn't laugh for long. I'd see to that. I knew that after this concert my gigs would no longer be full of empty chairs and empty promises. Somehow, despite my fears, I knew deep down this gig was different. I briefly flashed on the pawn shop owner's warning, but I shoved the old man's consternation from my mind. I was surprised he didn't call the police when he caught me robbing him. Did he really want me to destroy these instruments? How harmful could they be? Refusing to listen to him, I bagged my cache and fled. I had my infernal music to perform and nothing would stop me.

The air chilled around me. My breath came in spurts, partly from excitement and partly from panic. Actors say stage fright is your friend. The moment you no longer feel it, it's time to hand in your greasepaint. Stage fright didn't feel like a friend to me. I felt it in my girlfriend's gruff demeanor demanding to know why I wasted my time with this nonsense when we couldn't make the rent every month. I remembered the latest eviction notice that was shoved under our door a week earlier. If this concert didn't work out we'd end up homeless.

When I saw my breath burst from my mouth in a cloud of vapor, I wondered why the temperature had dropped. Had someone turned on the air conditioning? I shivered, partly from the cold but mostly from terror. There was no turning back. Once my fingers alighted on those keys I wouldn't be able to stop. I'd have to play until the bitter end, even if I was the total flop I feared I'd be.

I sat on my chair, fingers poised over yellowed calliope keys, and waited. What would

those keys feel like once I touched them? Would they numb my hands again? Would I feel pain jolt each finger through to my wrist, much like the Little Mermaid felt stabbing pain with each furtive footstep? Once I pressed those keys the music would wreak havoc. I knew it would silence the audience in a snap. Heads would turn towards me. People would stop chattering mid-sentence. Chewing food and slurping drink would cease. I craved the power of these instruments and although I knew they would fight me, I wanted to control them.

I pumped the foot pedals until enough steam filled the pipes, and then I lowered my fingers to the keys. They felt warm and moist to my touch, as if I stuck my fingers into a lover's open mouth and reached the swollen tongue. I fingered the keys like a lover, first a D minus chord, then an E diminished just to jar the audience into submission. Steam wheezed from the pipes. The music crawled down the stage into the house, echoing off walls and ceiling, and slammed into the people in the front row.

I looked into the audience. Although the people were blurry due to the haze from the stage lamps and the vapor from the steam, I saw the bodies in the front row jerk backwards, caught in the flow of a shock wave. Distressed faces stared at me, and I feared for a moment that they'd laugh at me.

They didn't.

Dissonant chords carved their music into my skull, bringing on one hell of a massive headache. Bright lights flashed around the edges of my vision, and I realized I wasn't seeing an afterglow from the stage lamps. I was on the verge of a migraine. The sounds rose in a cacophony of agony as I squeezed my eyes shut, fighting off the pain.

My fingers took on a life of their own, running over the keys, slamming chords so hard I could have bruised the keyboard. I pounded out the notes with such force the calliope rolled across the stage. I scooted my chair to keep up with it, but I would not reduce my fevered pitch. Steam from the pipes and wind from the bellows blew into the recorder and a high-pitched scream filled the air around me, reverberating into the audience that sat motionless and, from the expressions I saw on their faces, in awe. My heart jumped in my chest. For the first time, my music stunned people to revered silence. I basked in their admiration, surprised and delighted but wary.

I yearned to taste the sour mash notes of the recorder so I jerked it from its lair and placed it in my mouth. The moment the blackened wood touched my tongue, I saw in my mind's eye a desolate landscape of wizened trees with blistered bark and a sky the color of dried blood. Haze hovered above the fetid ground, oozing around pulpy ferns and thick-bodied snails. Wind blowing through tall hollow reeds mimicked the monstrous sounds coming from the recorder. While the images horrified me, I resisted removing the recorder from my mouth. I wanted more. These visions were meant for me and me alone.

I pressed a knob and gears pulled the front of the shaft inward, making the recorder smaller. The pitch of the infernal music rose even higher. The clockwork turned, clicking in place, each landing in a gear tooth tapping so loudly I heard it over the sound of the calliope. The tapping took on the sound of a ticking clock as it kept time with the music. My instruments provided their own metronome.

As I pulled the recorder from my reluctant lips my eyes adjusted to my surroundings. I searched through the clouds of steam to see the audience. Heat and moisture plastered my hair to my forehead. The sky darkened. Lightning streaked across the heavens from one of the tall stained glass windows. This concert hall was formerly a church. I smiled at the irony of playing such ghastly music in a place that used to be a house of worship. I shoved the

recorder back into its lair and attacked the keyboard. I played, worshiping the grotesque creatures that provided the hard teeth that made the keys. I writhed in honor of the gelatinous beings whose guts made the mandolin's strings that now strummed on their own.

The mandolin sat on its own tripod, looking like a gourd that had been gutted by maggots. A steady breeze blew across the stage as horrid unseen hands groped the strings. I rocked my body as I pumped the calliope's foot pedals, pulling more unclean air into the bellows. Rain poured with such force outside I was afraid no one would hear the music over the din but I needed not worry. Steam flowed uncontrolled around the calliope, forcing air through the recorder that shrieked its rage at the audience. As the notes became higher and of a shrill pitch, I slammed my fingers into the highest octaves the keyboard would allow. I threw my entire being into the music that crashed around me like waves over a churning sea. A press of a button gave me higher octaves to work with. The shrieking stabbed my ears, slammed my head, pulsated with the pain of my headache. Within seconds, the sound of the torrent of rain and the music from the instruments screamed their disgust at the people writhing in the rows, pulling themselves forward and straining their ears so they would not miss one dreadful note.

Two strings on the mandolin snapped, whipping out so fast and hard they struck my face. Blood flowed down my cheek. The warmth drove my madness.

I pressed several buttons and the sounds reached a pitch so high I could barely hear the notes. I strained to hear, not knowing what sounds would come next from these musical appendages. That's exactly what they were—wooden arms and greasy heartstrings, bony yellowed teeth and smaller black teeth that would not break no matter how hard I pounded the keys.

The rain let up and stopped as I hunched over the keyboard, pounding out one chord after another but I heard... nothing.

The instruments worked, keys pressed, water sloshed on the stage, strings strummed, gears turned, and steam blew through the recorder and calliope but I heard no sound.

Dead silence on the stage, but the audience remained quiet and frozen with anticipation and dread, as well as eagerness.

Why couldn't I hear the notes? Had they become so high my ears could no longer register the sounds? I whipped my head towards the audience and saw a man leaning forward, his head bent so far I feared he'd snap at the neck.

Everyone strained, yet I knew no one heard the notes although I and the wind continued to play them. Eerie silence filled the house. All I heard were my fingerpads striking the keys and the tapping of the gears but no music came from the calliope or any of the other instruments.

A man rose.

"I hear it! I can hear it!"

He could hear the notes? Why could he hear them and I could not? Who the hell did he think he was? I controlled the instruments! They were under my power, so what made him so fucking special? I pounded the keys, strummed the strings, blew into the tube of wood, slammed my feet against the foot pedals. Why did I think pounding the instruments harder would force the sound to reach my ears?

Nothing worked. I could not hear the music. Dismay and rage fought for control inside me.

"I hear it, too!" A woman cried. "It's very high but I hear it."

Rage roiling inside me beat dismay into a bloody pulp. I strained to hear those high notes, listening to every sound around me; the pump of the bellows, the whoosh of air through the recorder, my fingers tapping and pounding the keys, gasps of astonishment and fear from the audience. Lightning flashed across the sky but I heard no rain. I heard only the sound of my assault yet no music oozed from the instruments.

The people in the front row stood and shoved each other aside to get to the edge of the stage. Stagehands blocked their way from overflowing the rise to the wooden floor. Men and women growled and hissed as they threw themselves at the stagehands, hoping to reach me. If they did, would they grab the instruments and try to bring forth the abominable sounds themselves? The wildness in their eyes frightened me. Would I be mobbed, crushed beneath a wave of bodies? I grabbed the calliope and pulled it towards the back wall, away from the crowd, but it was so large I moved it only a few inches.

I stood, looking for escape, when I heard the shrieking. At last! I could hear the notes! They bayed and howled in the air, the sound carrying ahead of me, bouncing off walls and seats. A manic smile spread across my face and my heart raced with glee. I heard the music! Most of the crowd struggled to hear so much as a high C but I heard the shrill cacophony, although it barely registered against my eardrums. I swelled with arrogance as I—and I alone—could not only hear but play the accursed chords.

The notes swelled around me, assaulting my ears. High-pitched wailing slammed against my skull, intensifying my headache that pulsated with the beat of the music. Within seconds the sounds no longer matched my finger movements. The mandolin strummed yet the hellish choir surrounding me did not come from the remaining strings. It made no sense. Why did the music not coincide with how I played the instruments?

The music seemed to come from the front of the house. I listened, confused. Did the notes come from my instruments or not? I backed away as I realized with a sickening feeling in my stomach to what I listened. A distraught noise rose from my solar plexus, the staccato laugh of a man dissolving in hideous terror.

Hounds.

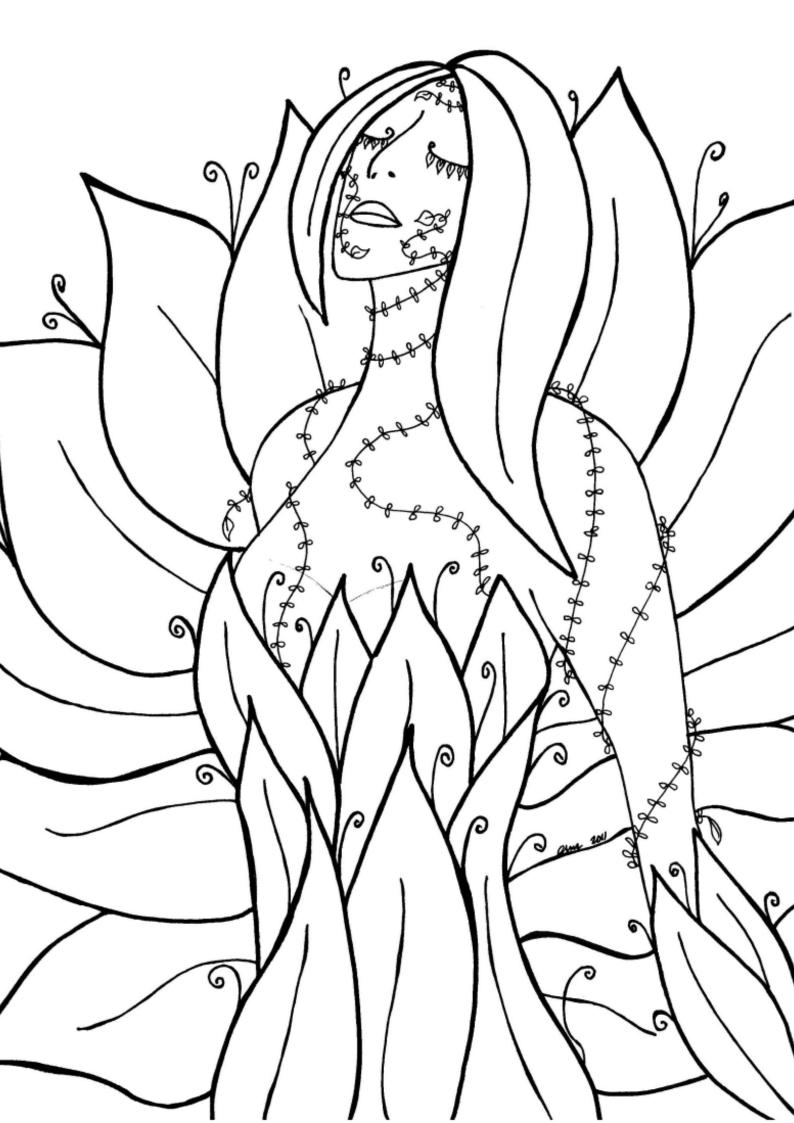
Hundreds of canines descended upon the concert hall. The notes were so high most humans could not hear them but dogs could. The gnashing of teeth and enraged baying terrified me as the dogs rushed to the open doors. Pets rose from their lairs to descend upon the concert hall, attacking their owners as the music drove them mad with rage. I stood, angered since I could not hear the notes that provoked them. Why was I not special enough to hear the diabolical singing?

I saw red pinpoints of light glowing in the distance. Crazed canine eyes sought the source of the hideous intonations that deranged them.

They came for me.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — E. A. Black lives in Lovecraft country on the Massachusetts coast with her husband, son, and three cats. She loves the ocean but has yet to run into Cthulhu.

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### The Red Witch | Alessia Giacomi

The Red Witch fills her cup
With the blood of serpents and men without honor.
The ruthless demon that lives inside her,
Ate her soul long ago.
No one calls her mother but her creatures,
They lay by her feet as she rehearses her spells.
She calls to us when the blood moon rises,
The souls she takes she keeps for her Dark Lord.

She prepares his meals,
Or feels his wrath.
Blood and tears are served in golden goblets.
Carcasses served on silver platters.
The souls scream through each gulp,
Begging to be reborn.
Souls are best served cold and hopeless.
His belly fat with dim lights.
He rubs the sweat from his brow in dark delight.
The Red Witch has served her King well,
And may return to her wicked duties,
Until she is summoned yet again.

When the blood moon rises,
Hide your kin,
For the Dark Lord is merciless.
He cares not about age, stature, or moral.
Souls are souls, they bleed the same.
He'll lick the bones clean and pile them below,
His prized possessions from a battle won.

When the Red Witch comes for you, Say your prayers. For there is no savior, That would dare, Save your soul above their own. Say goodnight, Say farewell.

For in his belly you will remain, Until the fires burn you up, And nothing is left, Not even dust.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — A. Giacomi is a wife, and mother to two small human children. She is a Canadian born writer, educator, and artist, who devours books any chance she gets. She is a zombie enthusiast, lover of all things Tim Burton, Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Marvel, Star Wars and just generally just loves film, essentially she's a fangirl who can't help but geek out about things she loves.

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Website: <u>http://www.poeticzombie.com/</u>

### **Shadows of the Moon** | *A. F. Stewart*

I will sing to your black blood cold we will dance over stone runes old The night will howl, the wind shall squall in shadows of the dark moon's call

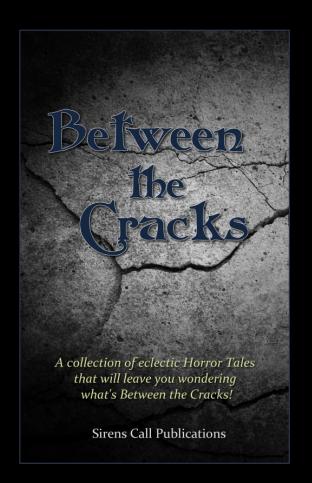
Rise from black fire and the earth Spawn of hell give accursed birth Revel tonight, my damned cabal in shadows of the dark moon's call

Come raven hour, by spell and rite, conjured death under silver light Will take its due, and souls will fall, in shadows of the dark moon's call

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — A. F. Stewart was born and raised in Nova Scotia, Canada and still calls it home. She favours the dark and deadly when writing—her genres of choice being dark fantasy and horror—but she has ventured into the light on occasion. She is fond of good books, action movies, sword collecting, geeky things, comic books, and oil painting as a hobby.

Twitter: @scribe77

Website: <a href="https://afallonblog.wordpress.com/">https://afallonblog.wordpress.com/</a>



### **Between the Cracks**

Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and iTunes

### The Darkness of Snow | Suzie Lockhart

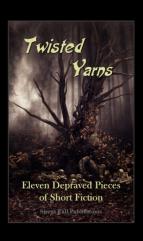
The cold... Though the frigid wind howls outside my window that is not the cold I feel. Inside me cold has penetrated the walls of my heart, burrowing through the warmth until it finds my soul. It is *there* a darkness lingers; a void where no light can exist where warmth can no longer live because the cold blackness devours it... Just as the fresh snow falling absorbs sound until nothing but silence surrounds you. A once beautiful landscape of white. now desolate. Ravaged by darkness until the silence becomes deafening...

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Suzie Lockhart attended The Art Institute of Pittsburgh after graduating, but the gnawing urge to write always remained. After discovering the innate ability for macabre storytelling, Suzie embraced her inner-creepiness. Her middle son, Bruce began writing chilling tales, and they teamed up. Five years working together have yielded nearly 50 short story publications, in dozens of paperbacks and eZines. The pair have also edited several anthologies, including two top ten *Preditors & Editors* \*\* *Readers' Poll* Awards.

Twitter: <u>@suzienbruce2</u> Facebook: <u>Suzie Lockhart</u>

### **Twisted Yarns**

Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and iTunes



### Give me Blood | Preeti Singh

Kissed by a mystic vampire, I have tasted blood I am feeling high and craving for shiny red drops They say, I have to wait for the full moon night It's then, I will meet my master and quaff blood

I can not eat, I can not sleep, all I do is weep I am neither human, nor vampire, but a thirsty damphir I will transmute wholly into one on the full moon night

The sun's rays disturb me, destroy me and torture me Tortured I wait for the night to arrive, it delights my hunger I am waiting for some blood, shall I wreck another human Or wait till I see my raven, the black crow is my messenger

I love black and I love dark, the light screams in my head But the night calms me down, I am falling down I am turning evil with lightning speed Drops of delectable blood are all I need Oh Lord, I feel so trapped, this body is mine But I feel out of my mind, I crave and I wait

Waiting for my master, waiting for the moon Take me fast, take me away I am waiting for the union I am waiting for blood

### **Nocturnal** | Preeti Singh

I am lost; lost my path, lost my zone, lost my home, lost my aim and lost my name, But I am left here, all alone by my own; sun rises, sun sets and birds fly back to their nests

I do not exist at noon, I live by the night, I am not an early bird, but the night owl, Fascinated by the night, glorified by the silence, I feel at peace, I feel nice, I love the night, This place is not meant for me, but I am trapped here to be; I belong to the other world

I have no place to go; I wander aimlessly, if I sit back I become restless, The questions of life and the thought of being alive gives me shivers I am content to be dead, I have no form, I fly in the air, I am free from the world Not bound to the cycle of life and death, being a shadow feels free, I love being bygone

I wander, not to discover but to lose, the high that I get from wandering at night, takes me to another world, it's calm there I enjoy the twilight, I sit back and relax, no questions, no dreams, I am there just to be;

I am a nocturnal, yeah, that's what they call me; I don't have any concerns, I don't have a life, I live for the night and I live to feel the high, I am lost in myself, I live for the dark, I live to die; I enjoy the darkness, I enjoy the gloom, I am a nocturnal, yes, you heard me right.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Preeti Singh, French Interpreter, writer, artist is based in Mumbai, India. Ms. Singh is an under-process contributor at The Huffington Post and a member of Film Writers Association. She is engaged in writing scripts for short films and mainstream films. In her free time, she loves to play sundry characters for television series. Preeti is multi linguist and speaks fluently in English, Hindi, and French.

Twitter: <u>@PreetiWrites</u>
Website: <u>http://languages-consult.com</u>



### **Dreamcatcher** | Lori R. Lopez

The wishes we hold dear, the dreams most precious, occupying space in our gist, at our center, vibrate with a ring audible to the dark's supernal traffic.

Slinking forth, all manner of creatures swarm round the body of a child, whose delicate breaths and fanciful notions feed the awful gullets of these ghastlies.

The most heinous of them, a bandit, the robber of sleep's far-flung journeys, could slither to the bed's foot and crouch, absorbing hopes like gulps of oxygen.

Then hanging on, never releasing a prize; never letting go a dream, for each is as precious—more than gold or silver, diamonds or rubies. They are free.

In them can be found a limitless wealth, an intangible substance akin to the dust of fairies, the beams of the Moon. In them resides security, tranquility.

A sanctuary from day's torments and blows, Inside the bounds of a dream and beyond, longing and regret may dance away night, and troubles subside to a muted roar. Rivers flow and plants flourish; clouds hold beautiful shapes and colors; all creatures can understand. In dreams swirl a balance of wonder and horror.

Architects of fear build castles and towers. Fright is rampant, running streets in droves. Lightning cracks the skies; guns boom; the tempests sob and shriek in pain.

Oh, he loves the taste of each smile and tear, each joy and sorrow, as he looms with his net. The Dreamcatcher has no care of one's age and origins, unlike many of the terrors that abide.

Childhood is rich with their ilk, their type; adults tendering more down-to-earth foe, and the Dreamcatcher never discriminates, for he feeds upon any worry or fear.

You can never outgrow him, nor hide from the reach of his shadowy arms, however many layers of covers you cringe beneath or flickering lights are left on in the gloom.

He will be there, abiding, waiting for your nightmares to unfold, your thoughts to wander astray. He will lap them up, haul off your very last wisp of courage and hope.

### A Clown Lament | Lori R. Lopez

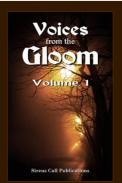
If everyone dressed like a clown There might be less prejudice. Greasepaint and red noses, Baggy clothes would Conceal our differences, At least the physical ones. How we act is another matter entirely And would determine whether We are a nice clown, sarcastic and gruff Like a Stooge, or the scary kind — A Pennywise, wicked and cruel. Some people would always be afraid, No matter what. If each of us wore masks, we could be Someone else, but then nobody Would really know our true identity... Like a superhero, a phantom, alone and cut off from society, unable to be

Real.

It's too bad we can't just Be ourselves and like each other, Appreciate the wonderful diversity Around us; take pride in the natural features we were born with. Though it is fun to play dress-up Or act the fool, the jester, the card. I was once a Class Clown. It's hard to Believe, I know. I like to scare people too! If that sounds kind of creepy, It isn't my fault. Blame Universal Monsters! Blame Mary Shelley! Blame Alfred Hitchcock! Before them, I dreamed of going Where The Wild Things Are. These days I only wear my red nose Now and then. It sits quietly on the shelf Gathering dust most of the time. Otherwise it squeaks Being a clown isn't all it's cracked up To be anyway. There are serious hardships Involved, such as hiding in storm drains Or twisting those frustrating balloon animals That refuse to behave! They squeak and snap and pop, Making a terrible ruckus. They're kind of weird and sinister, Like me when I put on the nose. We're rather sneaky, aren't we? And get blamed for just about everything. Uh-oh, what was that? Did you hear a squeak? Right behind you? Yes, perhaps you should run...

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Lori R. Lopez wears hats. Under the hats lurk secret unsavory furtive things that go bump in the night and slither beneath your toenails as you sleep. Titles include Leery Lane, The Dark Mister Snark, Odds and Ends, The Macabre Mind of Lori R. Lopez, An Ill Wind Blows, Chocolate-Covered Eyes, and Poetic Reflections: The Queen of Hats. She designs her own peculiar covers and illustrations.

Twitter: <u>@LoriRLopez</u>
Amazon: <u>Lori R. Lopez</u>



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# GOTHICFANTASY

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### Interview with Emerian Rich, Artist and Author

Throughout this issue of *The Sirens Call*, we're featuring artwork created by Emerian Rich. But that's not all this talented woman can do so we sat down to ask her about her art and found out a few more things along the way.

# Sirens Call Publications: Welcome Emerian! Why don't you take a moment and introduce yourself?

Emerian Rich: I wanted to be a singer—that was the dream—but after a few real gigs, I realized I had terrible performance fright I could not overcome. The final decision to stop performing plunged me into a depression I don't think I would have survived if I hadn't channeled my creative energy into art. I've been drawing and writing since I was very young. They were hobbies that came naturally to me, but I never took them seriously. I was going to be a singer after all! I never imagined one day my art would be in a coloring book or my stories would be in novel form.

I went to college at FIDM and earned a degree in Visual Presentation and Space Design, which introduced me to graphic arts and display. As I worked in the industry and spent time with artists, I realized I was an artist at heart. The ability to take reality and twist it into something beautiful intrigued me. I've been creating art ever since. You can view my pieces at <a href="mailto:emzbox.com">emzbox.com</a>.

I also have a book about a painter called Artistic License.

Leslie Marietta is the last known heiress of a palatial estate just south of Los Angeles. When she takes possession of her birthright, sudden creative inspiration allows her to paint alive anything she imagines. Enchantment and wonder transform her life into a fairytale, but as with all fairytales, there is a dark presence. Phantom servants sneak through the house, horrifying shadow creatures threaten to destroy her, and a band of Edwardian house guests are trapped in the walls. Lord Ashton Northing is a man of property and situation, with a duty to his people that could tear him from his new love, Leslie. Can Ashton convince Leslie she is worthy of her legacy in time to save them from the evil that dwells in her house?



### SCP: What mediums do you work in?

Emerian: Like most artists, I've dabbled in painting,

sculpting, oils, and acrylics. I settled on pen and ink because it requires just a small amount of supplies. As long as I have some blank paper, pencil, pen and eraser, I can create at the drop of a hat. I also really like the graphic aspect of black and white art. About seven years ago a fan of my art mentioned I should do a coloring book. I loved the idea and started working on transforming my art from black and white block art to pieces people could enjoy coloring. My *Gothic and Fantasy Coloring Book* is available now.

# SCP: Is there a medium that you've always wanted to try but just haven't gotten around to yet?

**Emerian:** I've always wanted to be a great painter. I admire the skill. I paint now and again, but the smaller scale of pen and ink calls me back into my comfort zone.

### SCP: Is there an artist you would love to work with?

**Emerian:** Unfortunately, he is already gone. M.C. Escher is my all-time favorite pen and ink artist. I'd probably spend more time watching him work than working myself, but he'd have a lot to teach me.

# SCP: What do you do when a piece isn't coming together visually the same way it does in your head?

**Emerian:** It's the same as being a writer. When the story—or artwork—isn't going very well, I set it aside and work on something else. Most artists create hundreds of pieces, but display only a fourth of them. Part of being an artist involves knowing a piece isn't fit for public and letting it sit in the discard pile. However, that piece might inspire other works that are better.

# SCP: As writers, we sometimes suffer from 'writer's block'; is there something similar to that in the artist world? If so, do you ever suffer from it? How do you combat it?

**Emerian:** You can get artist's block, but because I create pieces I want to, it's rare. I will just go on to another piece or switch to writing. I've found I don't do well when commissioned pieces. Art is one of my talents that has to flow from a creative place—it can't be pushed. Being told what I have to draw stifles my creativity.

### SCP: Where do you find your inspiration?

**Emerian:** The question might be, what do I not get inspired by? Inspiration can come from something happy or sad happening in my life. It can come from a walk through a cemetery, or a powerful movie. It can come from my stories or a book I've read. I often have more inspiration stored in my head than time to create it.

SCP: What is your favorite piece that you've created, and why is it particularly special? Emerian: My favorite piece is *Thought*. I created it at a time I was struggling to be me. Part goth, part broken human, part beautiful soul, this piece shows a side of me that no one could see at the time. Every time I look at it, it reminds me how far I've come.

#### SCP: What is your favorite piece of artwork created by another artist?

**Emerian:** My all-time favorite painting is *La Mort de Marat* or *The Death of Marat* by Jacques-Louis David. When paintings tell a story, that's the best, and this piece tells such a heart-breaking story. You check it out by visiting it's page on Wikipedia.

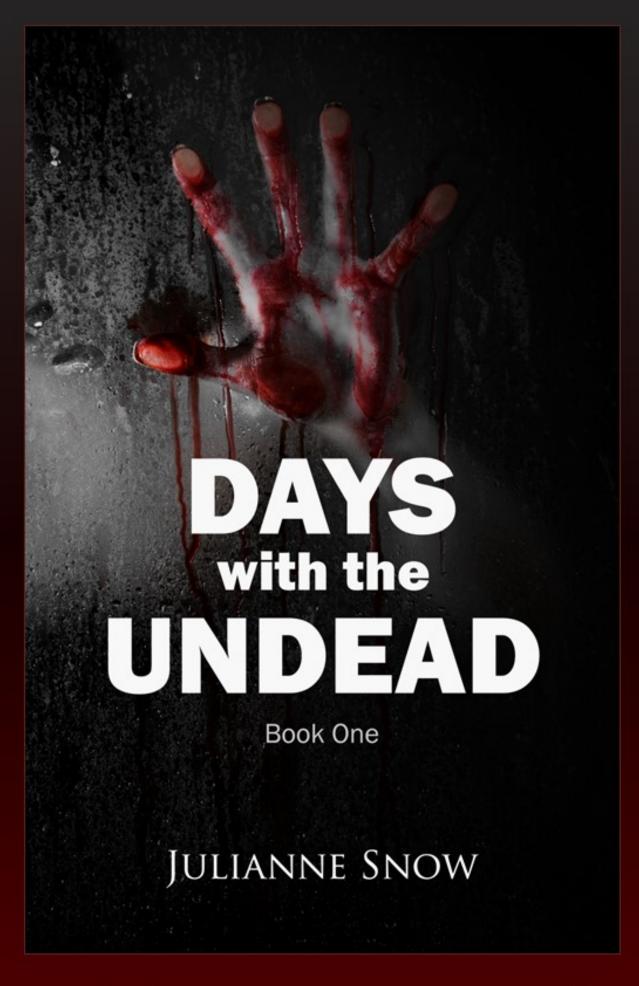
Marat was one of the French Revolutionary leaders who suffered from a skin condition, causing him to spend much of his time in his bathtub. He would often work and conduct business from the tub. An aristocrat snuck into his home and fatally stabbed Marat as retribution for the Revolution. The painter David captured this man and his tragic death so beautifully. It's strange to say death is beautiful, but my favorite artists take tragedy and turn it into beauty.

Thank you Emerian for taking the time to answer our questions!



# Horror: Odd and Bizarre

Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and iTunes



Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and iTunes

### **Grandma Elsie's Typewriter** | Dahlia DeWinters

"Can you fix it?" Katie turned her imploring gaze upon her husband.

John poked at the rusted keys, his forehead furrowed. "It's in pretty bad shape, Katie."

"It's all I have left." Katie squeezed her dusty hands into fists. "They took everything else."

Her grandmother, Elisheba Washington, had passed away six months ago. No will had come to light and there were disputes over taxes owed. After the lawyers were done, despite the value of the rambling house and the twenty acres of grape arbors, gardens, and fruit trees, what was left to Katie was Grandma Elsie's typewriter.

"Couldn't be helped," the town's attorney said. "Water taxes owed. Twenty acres' worth." He gave her an oily smile. "Be glad there was no will. You would have been on the hook."

Shaking her head in disbelief, Katie gripped the arms of the upholstered leather chair. "Water taxes? On land with no pipes?"

Grandma Elsie was thorough. The receipts marked 'taxes paid' seen when she'd gotten old enough to do her grandmother's taxes could attest to that. There had been water taxes on the residence, but never on the land itself. Regardless, the town produced records of non-payment going back twenty years and the only receipts she found were for land taxes.

A twinge of suspicion shot through her gut, but with her parents gone and a teacher's salary between her and John, she had no money to fight. She swallowed her pride and her suspicions and allowed John to lead her back to their car.

At least she had the typewriter, which helped her recall the summers spent playing in the yard while Grandma typed her pulp stories. Whether they were about little girls traveling to Neptune or a hard-boiled detective pursuing a criminal, the keys tapped and the stories supplemented Grandpa's pension payments.

"Katie-dear." Grandma Elsie dragged on her homemade cigarette pinched in a hairpin. Her voice was low and conspiratorial. "Writing stories is the most exquisite escape ever invented. Whenever this world gets weary, I conjure another and shape it to my liking." She sipped from her scotch-laced tea and fixed her hazel eyes on Katie. "Creativity is power."

Katie had listened with widened eyes, fascinated by the romantic life of her grandmother. Days spent in front of a typewriter, building new worlds, like a goddess. It became her dream too.

But now Grandma was dead, killed in a fall from the second floor to the first. The second floor, which she had stopped using after Katie graduated from college.

"I know my limits," Grandma told her. "No more stairs for me."

How had she fallen from up there?

\*\*\*

Now, she looked to John to save the machine. "What do you think?"

John nodded. "It's doable."

The breath whooshed from her lungs. She sagged in the cheap kitchen chair and relaxed her hands. "Thank you."

\*\*\*

A few weeks of John's hard work and a gallon of WD-40 later, Katie placed the refurbished typewriter in the corner of her office. The antique machine gleamed in the

afternoon light, casting a glow on the polished wood table. Katie could almost see Grandma Elsie hunched over the keys, a cigarette burning in the ivory ashtray and a cup of scotch-laced tea at her elbow. Katie depressed the spacebar once; glad to have this part of her Grandma back.

\*\*\*

Late one night, Katie typed in erratic bursts on her laptop, trying to craft the proper ending for a detective story due in three days. Crickets chirped outside the open window, and the warm breeze kept her reaching for her cup of steaming tea, laced with scotch. Despite the weather, the tea calmed her and helped her focus. Grandma Elise swore by it.

She took a break to listen to nature's night music and heard the *tap tap* of the typewriter's keys behind her. Thinking John had crept in to play a trick on her, she turned around with a half smile, prepared to playfully scold him for disturbing her writing time.

No one was there. A slight chill brushed the nape of her neck. Katie wriggled her shoulders to no avail. She'd set up one of those fringed floor lamps, and the typewriter shimmered in the glow of the pink bulb.

Katie blinked and the shimmer disappeared. *Too much scotch?* She shrugged and turned back to her computer and adjusted the brightness so her eyes wouldn't play tricks on her again. Sighing, she read the detective's reveal scene again, and backspaced over her words, deleting them. She placed her fingers on the keyboard and began again.

Tap tap tap.

She whipped her head around. "Grandma?" The word slipped out. Katie stared at the now-quiet typewriter. Her heart pounded and her face heated with excitement. Grandma had always said she'd poured her heart and soul into the machine.

Katie smoothed her hands over her skirt to steady herself. She eased a sheet of paper from the printer tray on her desk and held it between her fingers. Though the office was warm, her arms were dotted with goosebumps. She sucked at her bottom lip, tasting the smoky remnants of scotch.

The chair creaked when she rose and walked over to the typewriter. Katie hesitated for a moment. Was she ready for this? In one determined movement, she fed the paper behind the rubber platen and turned the knob. After ensuring the paper was aligned correctly, she returned to her chair and sat with her back to the machine.

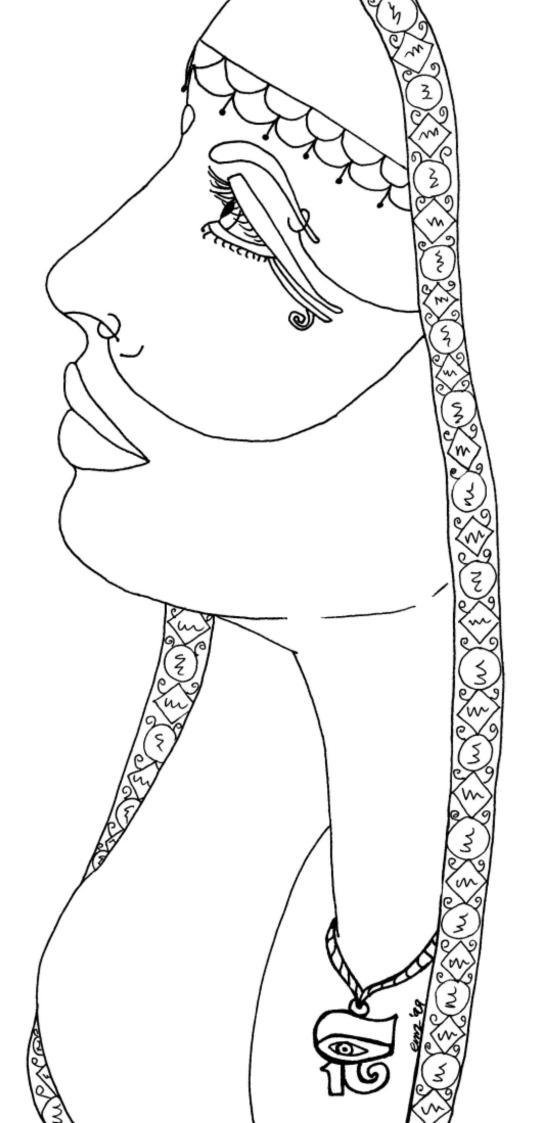
When the tapping began again, she didn't turn around. Instead, she counted her breaths, forcing herself to remain still so as not to startle the typist. Even after the typing ceased, she sat motionless for another few minutes. Finally, she squeezed her hands into fists, released them, and got up to retrieve the paper.

One neat line of text met her gaze.

Six feet under wasn't deep enough...

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Dahlia DeWinters is a lover of all things scary, with an affinity for the undead and found footage horror movies. Drawing, fiber arts, and gardening are a few of the things she does in her spare time, when not dreaming up stories of zombies, mysterious happenings in gothic mansions, or screening horror films.

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Website: <u>http://darkindigohearts.com/</u>



### I See You | KL Dantes

Jasmine Lapeer parked her little sedan back behind the old farmhouse, a sense of excitement bubbling just below the surface. For as long as she could remember the old farmstead stood abandoned out along the two-lane stretch of blacktop, and every time she drove by she swore that one of these days she'd pop inside. Jasmine loved the art of urban exploring, sneaking into decrepit buildings to have a glimpse of the lives that used to be. She also managed to make extra cash by selling photos from her adventures, enough so that she was starting to think it might not hurt to cut back her hours. So, on a whim she opted to take the night and could think of nothing else she would rather do.

Slipping out into the muggy night air, Jasmine was pleased to have been able to conceal her car. The last thing she wanted was a cop to cruise by and get suspicious. She'd been lucky up to this point and saw no reason to ruin her streak. Armed with a flashlight, her cell phone, and her camera, Jasmine waded through the tall grass to the back porch. She always left home prepared, having taken the time to spray herself down with bug spray and trading her usual sneakers for a pair of thick soled work boots. One of these days she might remember gloves.

At the porch, she played the beam of light over the structure in an attempt to judge its quality. The rotten boards appeared to be contained mostly to one side. Still, Jasmine placed one foot squarely on the bottom step and put all her weight behind it, her other foot temporarily hovering an inch or two off the ground. The wood groaned, but held. Carefully she stepped up, knowing that at any moment her foot could fall through.

Jasmine made it into the porch, trying to imagine how it must have looked all those years ago in its prime. It might have been grand; now it was falling apart, covered in dead leaves and shards of glass from a broken window. Someone had taken the time to spray paint a perverted term on the back door, which hung askew on rusted hinges. Jasmine edged her way to the dark opening. The air inside smelled stale and mildewy. Typical. She attempted to budge the door a little more, found it wouldn't move, and that to get inside she had to wiggle through a right fit.

She popped out into what happened to be the kitchen. Right away she began snapping photos, capturing the way mother nature slowly took hold of the house. Jasmine loved the way one vine wrapped itself around the fridge. She only wished it was the flowering sort; that would have made a stunning photo. There were remnants of broken dishes and furniture, more leaves and trash. She kept the light trained on the floor as she left the kitchen for the dining room, the table leaning against the floor, two of its legs broken. A worn and torn painting hung on the wall, now mostly just a frame. Jasmine made sure to capture it all.

She wove her way through the living room, snapping more photos as she moved along, making sure to capture the tufts of stuffing poking out of the couch cushions. Jasmine eyed the stairs to the second story, chewing her bottom lip as she weighed the risk before her. Either she cut her exploration short or she made the venture up, knowing full well the second story might be in worse condition. On her way through the house, however, she'd failed to spy any holes in the ceiling so she decided to give it a go. Jasmine gripped the railing, giving it a violent thrashing and was pleased to find it sturdy.

Up she went.

She peered into the first room, discovering it empty, aside from the usual mix of debris strewn across the floor. The second door led to a linen closet. The bathroom featured a clawfoot tub, rusted with age, and a grimy mirror, both of which she photographed. Oddly, she noticed as she turned to leave that an orange pill bottle lay in the sink. It was too fresh and clean to have been left there a long time. Jasmine shrugged it off. Perhaps it had been left by an explorer before her.

An unexpected rumble of thunder made Jasmine jump. She hadn't realized it was supposed to rain that night. She would have to cut her visit short. Her dog never handled thunderstorms well, especially if left home alone. She turned out of the bathroom with the intent of heading for the stairs when a closed door caught her attention. One more room couldn't hurt, right? Just a quick peek, something to spur a second visit.

Jasmine crossed to the door and yanked it open.

Her jaw dropped.

The room was fully furnished, from two dressers and a full-length mirror to an old-fashioned armchair and a very lumpy four-post bed. Jasmine walked into the room in utter awe, playing the beam of her flashlight over everything. When she noticed the threadbare area rug she toed aside a few leaves to get a better look, capturing another shot. Slowly she edged her way toward the bed and its mess of blankets, curious why this room, unlike all the others, remained intact and mostly untouched. There didn't seem to be any evidence of others having explored the space.

Thunder boomed again.

There was a flash of lightning, drawing Jasmine's eye temporarily to the window.

"I see you!"

Jasmine cried out, jumped, and dropped her flashlight. Her camera would have followed had she not placed the strap around her neck.

"I see you!" the voice came again, shaky but strong.

Without her light, Jasmine could only make out the shape of a person sitting in the bed; which explained the lumps. Her mind raced as it attempted to make sense of what was happening. How could someone be living in such a rundown, decrepit house? There had been no other evidence, at least not that she could recall, with the exception of the pill bottle perhaps. No, it just wasn't... Not possible. She licked her lips. How many times a week did she drive by the property, eyeing the broken windows, the caved-in roof of the front porch? It wasn't right.

"Why are you in my room?"

Jasmine's mouth hung open.

"I see you!"

She turned tail and ran, back through the doorway into the hallway. Her steps faltered. The once dingy, gray and cobwebbed hall was now wallpapered and cast in a soft glow from wall sconces. Lived-in. Jasmine's heart raced, her breath raspy, as she headed straight for the stairs. At the top step, she could hear the telltale strains of music coming from somewhere down below.

"I saw you," the old woman yelled again.

Somehow Jasmine made it to the first floor without falling flat on her face. Another ruckus clap of thunder, another vivid flash of lightning, chased Jasmine back through the

living room and into the dining room. There she tripped and fell, the toe of her sneaker catching on the edge of a throw rug. Jasmine whacked her chin on the floor, biting her tongue. Pain shot through her mouth. She hesitated for only the briefest of moments, then recalled the image of the room.

In a flash, Jasmine was back on her feet.

There were people sitting at the table.

A rag-tag sort of family. Their clothing was torn and stained. The little girl brushed the hair of a nearly bald doll. The older boy shredded a napkin over an empty plate. And at the head of the table was a man, wisps of hair sticking out, a crooked grin on his mouth. However, her eyes were drawn to the rather unfriendly knife clutched in one hand. It was spotted with... Rust. It was rusty. It had to be.

"Lookie what we have us here," he said, the tone of his voice sending a chill to the very marrow of Jasmine's bones. He stood abruptly. "It appears dinner has been arrived."

Tears burned Jasmine's eyes as she raced for the back door and the promising safety of her car. A large pot of water boiled on the stove. The door was locked. Jasmine jiggled the knob, banging on the doorframe as though it might help. When she realized it wasn't going to budge, Jasmine whirled around, retracing her footsteps as she headed for the front. Racing through the dining room revealed the father on the move in her direction.

By now tears were trailing down her cheeks. Her mouth had gone dry, her heart miraculously still beating.

The front door refused to budge.

"Please," Jasmine pleaded, yanking with all her might. She could hear the sound of heavy boots behind her.

\*\*\*

Trey Dodgers was jamming out to a recent top forty hit, the windshield wipers whispering across the glass. He tapped his fingers against the steering wheel. The night had grown late and he couldn't wait to get home, hating the commute that took him down that lone country road. In a flash of lightning he saw the abandoned farmhouse, cruising by without a second look, singing part of the chorus. Had he bothered to glance at the house he might have seen Jasmine standing at the front door, a frantic expression on her face, and the man behind her raising a large knife.

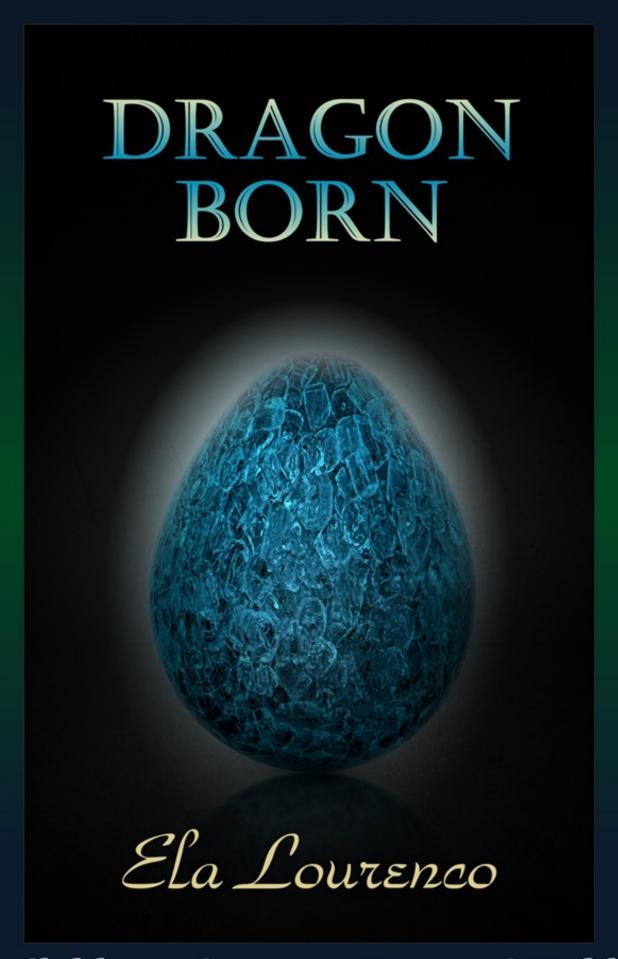
**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — KL Dantes realized she couldn't be Batman so she started writing. She has now published over 30 short stories and novellas in various genres. She resides in southern Wisconsin.

Twitter: <u>@CheddarsGal</u> Facebook: KL Dantes



Legends of Urban Horror: A Friend of a Friend Told Me

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# The Story of Moses | Em Dehaney

Every kid in the Kennington Crew knew the story of Moses. Kicked out of school at ten, left to spend his days robbing tourists at knifepoint in Trafalgar Square. He earned his place in the gang by taking a vicious and prolonged beating that left him deaf in one ear. When he eventually got pulled by the Feds at age fourteen he had been 'going country' for two years, selling Class A to the bedsit dwellers of Margate and Ramsgate. Moses spent more of his fifteenth year inside correctional facilities and young offenders institutes than out. And now, at just seventeen, he was a man before his time. For keeping his mouth shut and staying loyal to the gang on the inside, the Crew Elders made Moses boss of his own country line, with his own weight to shift and his own runners.

The northern coast of Kent was dotted with decaying seaside resorts, ghost towns inhabited by junkies and delinquent care home kids. Easy pickings for an enterprising young businessman like Moses. He avoided leaving the city if he could help it, but a small village on his patch had recently gone quiet. No requests for product, and no money coming back up the line. Three Youngers had been out to collect in two weeks and none had returned. Sometimes they got picked up by the Police, sometimes they went on a four-day crack binge and forgot what they were doing, and sometimes they just stopped playing drug-dealer and went back home to their mums.

The train journey to Dunwich-on-Sea was a mission. As council estates whizzed past the window, punctuated only by tiny pockets of park and woodland, Moses thought back to his first trip as a Younger. How much he had been sweating when he left the flat with twelve hundred quid's worth of heroin and crack secreted up his arse. Every Younger wanted a chance to prove themselves to the crew, and this was the best way. Preparations for the journey began with a bottle of liquid laxative. On his way out to pick up the goods, his guts began to twang. This quickly escalated to a grumbling wobble pushing its way through his intestines, picking up speed until Moses had to squat under the concrete stairwell of his tower block. He'd had barely enough time to pull his trackies down to his ankles before the whole world fell out of his ring.

When he got to the flat, two capsules of diarrhea medicine were waiting for him. And finally came the Vaseline. One of the Elders in the crew had offered to help him as it was his first time, but Moses told them he was no batty-boy and lubed the clingfilm wrapped packages himself, shoving as many up there as he could stand. His sphincter was constantly contracting and cramping on the walk to the station. When he passed the guards at the ticket barrier, he remembered gritting his teeth as he swiped his Oyster card, certain one of them would notice the beads of perspiration leaping from his face. He had stared straight ahead, thinking of the box-fresh Nike Air Force Ones that would be waiting for him when he came back with the money.

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The train hissed into Dunwich station, the sound of the opening doors waking Moses from his memories. The carriage filled with the seaweed tang of salty summer air. A faint aroma of rotten fish drifted in, but it was still better than the diesel fumes, rising damp and crack-smoke he was used to back in London. If he could get to the nest and find out what

had happened to his money, Moses might even get to smoke a blunt on the beach before he had to get back. His crew exploited the disabled, the junkies and the whores, cuckooing their flats to sell their product, until the cops bust in and closed down the nests. The tenants got evicted and slapped with an ASBO, and the dealers moved on to cuckoo some other sucker, too weak or too addicted to argue. Whores were the best. Those skets were always obliging with a toothless blowjob for a few rocks.

It wasn't until the train pulled away that Moses saw he was the only person on the platform. Having only an address, and no knowledge of the town itself, he walked down the ramp to the main road to jump in a cab. The taxi rank was also deserted. Moses had an untraceable burner phone, strictly for incoming calls and texts. The only sound came from a lone seagull crying and whirling in the sky. The calls of the gull echoed like laughter. Laughing at him. Mugging him off.

Muttering under his breath, Moses picked up a stone and launched it high up in the air, missing the seagull.

"I 'aint getting owned by no beach pigeon."

In answer, the bird squirted a glob of chalky-white shit on Moses' hoodie.

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The train station held an elevated position over Dunwich bay. The sea below seemed flat despite the summer sun, a grey façade of an ocean hiding what was beneath. He decided to head towards the beach in the hope that someone would call. Blank-eyed houses stared him down as he walked. A curtain fluttered from one of the open windows. Moses jumped, then cussed himself for being a pussy.

Everyone knew he was a badman. They found out on the day of his arrest, those few short years ago. He had been pulled as he was about board the train back to the city. It took four Transport Police to ground him. Moses relished in the memory of smacking the fat station guard in the face before they took him down. He held out in custody for ten days before finally giving up the two grand in used notes tightly rolled and plugged up as high as his young fingers could reach.

Thinking back to that time, refusing all food and barely drinking any water, made Moses' mouth dry. The rows of terraced cottages near the station had thinned to the odd wooden shed, and the pavement given way to a twisting path that led down to a shingle bay. A squat building with a flat roof stood alone at the top of the path. The angles of the building were off, and it made Moses feel sick to look directly at. Shiny buckets and spades swung on hooks around the door. A rack of postcards spun in the breeze. With any luck, he could buy a Coke and get directions to the nest. Ducking under a sun-bleached inflatable dolphin, Moses entered the shop.

The bright, friendly plastics were at odds with the antiquated goods stacked on the dusty shelves inside. Graying cardboard packets of *Hewson's Medicated Talc* stood next to cloudy bottles of aqueous cream and something called *Dr. William's Pink Pills*. The smell of rotten seaweed was stronger in here. There was no fridge, or even any brand names that he recognized. About leave, Moses heard a cough from behind the glass counter. A round shape sat in the dark. He called out,

"You got any Coke?"

The figure behind the counter remained still.

"Oi, I'm talking to you. Do. You. Have. Any. Coke?"

Silence.

"Blud, I'm getting vex now. Get us a cold drink before I bus' up your shitty little shop."

The figure stood with a snort. A sliver of sunlight illuminated the pale skin of a woman in a lumpy brown cardigan. She went into a back room, lifting a curtain and letting it slip behind her. The damp air in the shop was making Moses claustrophobic. But his tongue was a fat pan scourer that sat in his mouth, and if the weirdo skank had gone to get him a drink, he could wait.

A few minutes later, the woman shuffled back through the curtain holding a swirled glass bottle. She placed the bottle on the counter without saying a word, and sat back down with a fat squelch.

Moses swiped the bottle and saw a hand written label that read 'Root Beer'. It was wet and cold, and he chugged the whole lot down in one. The taste reminded him of the pink cream his mum used to put on his cuts when he fell off his bike.

"You like?" came a croak from the shopkeeper.

"Yeah, I like," Moses laughed, memories of his childhood softening his edges for a brief moment.

"Soda Stream." She smiled proudly, like she was introducing her favorite child.

"I'm looking for Adams Street. Do you know where it is?"

"Soda Stream," she said again.

His eyes now adjusted to the gloom. Moses could see her wide, toad-like face, rubbery lips glistening with spit and bulbous eyes pointing in different directions. Having spent so long numb to the world, he was angry at this woman for making him feel something.

"Adams Street. Tell me where it is before I shank you, you mental bitch."

"You're welcome," came the reply.

"Fuck you, you crazy old derp."

Moses half-heartedly kicked over a display of tinned pilchards. As he yanked open the door, the woman called after him.

"Shank you! Welcome! Shank you! Welcome!"

He slammed it behind him so hard he hoped the glass would break. It didn't.

Knowing he would have to risk using the burner phone, Moses pulled the chunky Nokia from his pocket.

No signal.

Whirling around in different directions, holding the phone in the air hoping to catch a few bars, he spun straight into a solid mass that knocked him to the ground. A massive column of a man, closer to seven feet than six to the tip of his frayed top hat. Moses got to his feet, taking in first the rubber boots, then the ragged, stripy trousers and the ill-fitting suit jacket.

"Mate, watch where you're going, yeah?" Moses voice wavered.

The man remained silent, put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a long, pale fish. The fish gave a spasmodic twitch in his spade-like hand. At the same time, Moses pulled a short knife from his own pocket. A wet grin split the big man's face and he reached forward, plucking the shank from his hand as easily as picking a daisy. He raised the still

jerking fish and jammed the knife into its grey belly. With a quick twist, the fish's guts flopped in a bloody mess of tubes and sacs onto Moses' trainers. Saliva flooded his mouth, but he was spared the final indignity of puking over himself by a solid blow to the back of his head.

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Moses awoke, unable to move. He lifted his neck and a shriek of pain shot through his skull. His hands and feet were bound tight. It was dark, but the shingle shifting under his body as he tried to wriggle free told him he was on the beach. The whisper of the tide pulling over the pebbles was all he heard at first, but he soon detected an undercurrent of repetitive chanting. The voices ebbed and flowed with the sea in a language he didn't understand. Strings of vowels were broken by harsh, guttural growls and alien glottal stops.

"Nnnnnga'aaa. Nnnnnga'aaa. Eeeeeiaaa yog'oth. Eeeeeiaaa nnnnnnga'aaa."

Gaining enough purchase to roll onto his side, he now had a full view of the procession of flames wending its way down the steep beach path. He strained to loosen his hands, the twine cutting into his skin, blood dripping from his wrist.

The train of shadows reached the beach, lead by the grinning circus freak with the fish. His top hat was gone, replaced with a spindly crown. Behind him, each lit by their own flaming torch, were the inhabitants of Dunwich-on-Sea. Elongated heads, bulging eyes, skin glistening with ooze. They had reached the beach, and were staking the flaming torches in a semi-circle around Moses' prone body. As he pushed at the shingle with his feet trying to inch himself away, one split from the group crawling low to the ground in a skittering, lizard motion. It was a child, pale-faced yet green around the edges. She held out her hand to stroke his hair. Webbing stretched between her stubby fingers.

"Get fucked, you mingin' little sprong."

He tried to kick out, but the child gave a swampy gargle and openined her mouth to display rows of tiny, razor sharp teeth before running into the arms of the now naked shopkeeper. Froggy warts covered her ancient shoulders, and two wrinkled breasts dangled limply from her chest. Bulbous eyes glinted at Moses in the fire's glow.

The head man stepped forward, also fully naked. Flipper feet led to thick-set legs covered in silvery scales. Shiny scales also edged his well-defined torso and his phallus stood hard and proud in the dark. He approached slowly, knife in hand, his eyes hungry. But instead of slitting Moses' throat, he snipped the bonds that held his hands and feet and blood rushed into his extremities. The fizz of pins and needles prevented Moses from getting up. He stumbled around in front of the misshapen and slippery bodies of the amphibious abominations. Fish-faced frog boys and toad women surrounded him. On every side were hunchbacked children and wizened old men with angry red gills on their necks. He tried to run but the circle tightened. Their chanting increased in intensity and volume as the group herded him towards the churning sea. The tide frothed like milk, thick with jellyfish and crabs. He wheeled round on the shingle as the chanting reached a crescendo, then dropped to a reverent hush. One of the naked throng behind him emitted an ululating cry. Their leader screamed in a voice so unhuman it rendered Moses paralyzed.

'The Great One no longer dreams! Rise from the deep, O Ancient One and receive your final sacrifice!'

The deafening roar of rusted metal came from the roiling sea, and a horrific mass emerged from the black, framed by the tips of unfurling tentacles. Moses' trainers slid on the wet shingle as he scrambled back from the steaming, sulphurous water. He stretched an arm out to save himself, only to feel the needle-point snap of a mouth around his bloody wrist. Flicking his shoulder round, he flung the child into the path of the huge squid monster now looming before him. Her rag-doll body slammed into the face of the creature. It wiped out two of its devotees with a monstrous whip-crack of one of its massive tentacles. Another suckered limb curled around the broken body of the child, tossed it up in the air and caught her in its ferocious beak with a brittle crunch. The shopkeeper wailed as bloody shards of child bone littered the beach.

Moses ran, spraying shell and pebble in his wake as he dodged the fish-people now swaying on their knees in front of their octopus deity. He ignored the burning in his limbs as he ran the depth of the beach, but was unable to ignore the cries of agony, the sound of breaking bones and cracking cartilage that followed. He didn't look back until he reached the top of the cliff. When he finally turned to survey the scene on the beach below, the tide was lapping gently over the mangled naked bodies strewn at the water's edge. The sea was calm, with no evidence of the boiling, poisonous soup it had been minutes before.

When Moses found his way back to the a station the train was waiting, doors open, lights on, devoid of passengers. He jumped on at the first carriage and walked the length of the train sealing himself in by pressing the door close buttons before the train finally trundled its way back to London.

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Every kid in the Kennington Crew knew the story of Moses.

He swore off ever going country again, mumbling something about inbreds and poisoned Germolene. His dreams were plagued with seas like treacle, thronged with deformed frogs leaping from the waves onto a beach made of crushed bones. He tried to stay awake with uppers, only to find his dreams seeping into his reality. Sticky tentacles reached for him from every cupboard door. He recoiled from smiling children. Walking down a dark stairwell, he would find himself ankle-deep in water teeming with frenzied silver-grey fish, tying themselves in knots and eating their own tails. At age eighteen he took his final train journey to Beachy Head, where he took a free-fall from the cliffs.

The Youngers say he called out to the sea on his way down, but none can agree on what he said.

The Elders all agreed it was a waste. He made good money.

The Old Ones welcomed Moses home, under the deep, to dream for eternity in the cold, black waters of his tomb.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Em Dehaney is a mother of two, a lover of horror, and a writer of fantasy. Born in Gravesend, England, her writing is inspired by the dark and decadent history of her home town. She is made of tea, cake, blood, and magic.

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### **Services Rendered** | *Jennifer Mccullah*

When they finished, the man started to leave.

Crystal said, "You haven't paid."

He looked in his wallet, "Too bad. I don't have anything smaller than a hundred."

It was always men like him, businessmen, who felt entitled to treat her like garbage. These men stiffed her on numerous occasions. Not this time. She pulled the gun from her purse and fired. Blood, bits of bone and brain splattered the hotel wall.

His wallet held exactly five hundred dollars. She looked at his twitching body. Maybe businessmen were the most lucrative clients, now that she knew how to get her money.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Jennifer Mccullah is a writer from Kentucky. She lives with her girlfriend and the two coolest Chihuahuas on the planet.

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### **Bird Song** | Veronica M. Nero

There was a scratching on the glass that roused her from light sleep. At this stage she was so uncomfortable and preoccupied with thoughts of the birth that she rarely got much real sleep at all. It was her first baby.

Again there came a peculiar scratching noise. Sam sighed and slowly rolled herself into a sitting position. Her extended belly, taught and round, nestled between her thighs. She looked around the dim room, disorientated for a moment. It was late at night and she could hear the rumble of the television downstairs, her husband was probably watching a movie. She rubbed her temples, she had a headache.

There was another sound at the window. This time it was a soft tap, tap, tap. She frowned. Pushing herself up carefully, she waddled to the window and pulled the curtain back, peering into the quiet suburban night. At first all seemed perfectly normal but then she noticed it, nestled amongst the bare branches of a nearby tree, a bird. A monstrously huge bird. She stared at it confused, her mind was heavy and foggy. The bird turned to face her, round yellow eyes stared back. It had a long beak and large wings folded around its body. The bird unfurled its wings, stretching them wide. The sound of their flapping was a dense vibration in the night. The creature had the body of a woman, with small pointed breasts and long pale legs, large clawed feet curled the thick branch.

Sam watched the strange bird woman for a while, emotionless, wondering if she was actually dreaming, until a sudden stabbing pain in her lower belly made her groan and clutch herself in fear. When she looked up the bird woman had disappeared but the sharp pangs continued. She began shouting her husband's name.

Nothing was left to chance, they had planned everything to the last detail. The best doctor, the best hospital, but chance was not the only force at play.

Sam squeezed and pushed and panted, her face swollen red.

The nurse patted her arm, her husband talked into her ear.

"You're doing really well!" he said cheerfully.

In between contractions that blinded and winded her, Sam fell back onto the pillows gasping. She heard that sound again, tap tap on glass. Hovering close, outside at the large window, a dark form, wide yellow eyes pinned on her. Sam watched as the creature stretched her black wings and paced, she seemed excited or perhaps anxious. Nobody else seemed to notice. Sam tried to say something about the birdwoman but then she launched into another contraction.

The birth went without complications. After a few days she returned home, her tiny joy bundled in white. It was a little girl, they named her Amy. The memory of the birdwoman and her piercing gaze haunted her, but Sam was relieved the birth was over with and just wanted to get some sleep.

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Her daughter had different ideas. She refused to be put down. The moment she was laid in her plush pink and white crib she began to wail and no amount of rocking or cooing would make her stop until she was picked up again. For a week Sam's husband and mother were around to help and tend to Amy while Sam got some rest. Then they both had to return to work and Sam spent the days alone, jiggling and patting and pacing with her baby attached. She slumped in the armchair in front of the television, with Amy on her chest, still suckling. Sometimes she managed to put Amy down for a brief moment and make a cup of tea or have a shower before the baby began to cry again. She loaded the pram with all the essentials and went for walks around the neighborhood. Amy seemed to like the pram on some days. Other days she didn't like the pram at all and Sam pushed her along as she cried, pausing now and then to plug her mouth with a dummy. Sam avoided stopping for small talk with neighbors who lost all composure at the sight of her newborn baby. They gushed and swooned and giggled. It made her feel guilty. Sam always politely excused herself and hurried off, anxious. Something was wrong. Something was wrong with her. She was not a good mother.

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The birdwoman was always there. And every night, while her husband patiently tried to put Amy to sleep, Sam sat in bed with the covers tucked under her chin, listening for sounds of her. She always came at the same hour, scratching against glass, tap tap tap. It was a little frightening but Sam was certain the birdwoman couldn't enter the house and in the morning she would be gone. Maybe the birdwoman was here to help her, or to give her a message, she wondered, and then she was surprised by such odd thoughts. Sometimes she spied through the lace curtains, trying to stand out of view, and watched the birdwoman perched in the large tree outside. The birdwoman sat silently, her head tucked under one of her wings, her feathers ruffled against the cold night air. But when she turned to stare at Sam, her yellow eyes like mirrors in the night, Sam's heart would begin to pound. She would pull the curtains closed and rush away into bed. She looked over at her husband, snoring lightly beside her, and wondered if she should tell him about the birdwoman. He looked so pale and exhausted

himself, with dark circles around his eyes and rough stubble on his face. Sam felt anger bubble inside her and she glared at the crib, which for a short while remained silent.

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The truth is Sam had known something was wrong on the way home from the hospital. Why wasn't she overjoyed, beaming with happiness and pride over her perfect newborn daughter? Why did she look at her baby and feel only that sinking dread, a dread that seemed to fall deeper and deeper into nothingness as the days passed? Those tiny little curled fists, ten miniature toes, the soft creases of delicate eyelids, the dusty creaminess of newborn skin; these things should make her giddy with wonder and joy but they evoked nothing in her.

She remembered how happy she and husband were when she was first pregnant, but soon after a coldness had settled over her. It was a thick sheet that muted the world, only the vague suggestion of things remained. The coldness had taken root, just like the fetus in her womb, growing day by day. Maybe they were one and the same, she didn't know, she couldn't tell. She carried life and death at the same time. She struggled through the pregnancy. When she mentioned her doubts and fears people nodded sympathetically. It's all very normal they said, with all those hormones going up and down.

After the birth the coldness was not purged as she hoped it would be. Amy was born in gushes of hot blood and mucous but the coldness remained embedded inside. The birdwoman knew, and she understood. Whenever Sam was caught in her gaze she felt ashamed. The birdwoman could read her most private, unspeakable thoughts.

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One night, when Amy was less than a month old, Sam woke to find herself sprawled on the couch. She didn't remember falling asleep. The television was on, with the volume turned down. The house was very quiet, a heavy and peculiar silence. Sam remembered that she was home alone as her husband was working out of town for a few days. She hurried upstairs to check on Amy.

At the bedroom door she froze, startled by what she saw. The birdwoman was standing by the crib, singing softly to Amy. She sang in the language of birds, her voice rising and falling. Amy was awake, both her little hands reached up for the strange woman. Tiny pink fingers curled around old withered skin tipped with long talons.

Sam stepped into the room, more curious than afraid, not frightened anymore but excited to be so close to this creature. She was very tall. Her powerful wings were folded behind her and swept the floor.

Sam tried to speak but when the birdwoman turned, those yellow eyes gleaming, her sharp beak poised open, all words dropped away.

A choir of bird song erupted in the room.

"It is time. I have come for her. She is mine."

Sam walked over to the crib and looked down at her daughter. The baby gazed up at them both, content and peaceful.

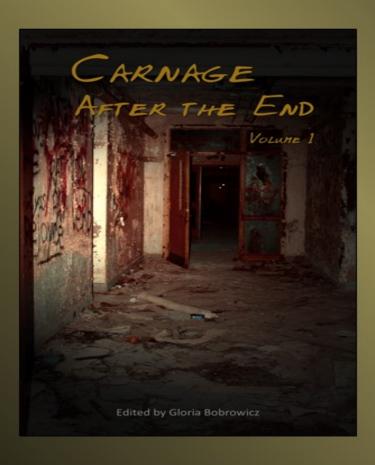
Sam picked up her baby and began rocking her slowly in her arms, for the first time she genuinely smiled at her. At last she realized the intimate and profound bond she shared with her child.

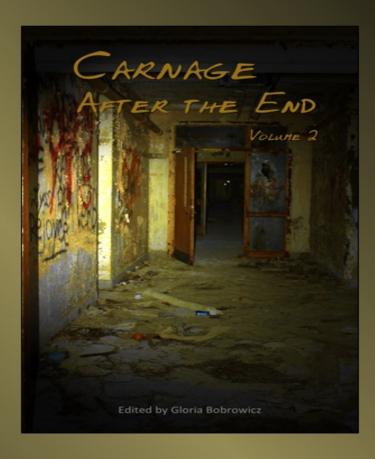
Huge black wings, of coarse and ancient feathers, opened and stretched across her vision, filling the room, wrapping Sam and her daughter in a shroud of darkness. For a moment they were hidden from all the worlds as the pact was made.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Veronica Magenta Nero spins short fiction and poetry with dark threads of horror and fantasy. Her work has been published in Sanitarium Magazine, The Sirens Call Ezine and in many small press anthologies. She hails from Italy and currently resides in the Northern Rivers, Australia.

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In a world where society has collapsed and terror lurks around every corner, no one can be trusted and nothing can be taken for granted...





Available on Amazon,
CreateSpace, Barnes & Noble,
Kobo, Smashwords, and the iStore

# Now I Lay Me Down | Lori Safranek

Dylan sleeps on the couch while I draw cats in an old notebook Mom gave me. Cats are my favorite things in the whole world. Blue cats are my newest favorite to draw, even if I've never seen one in real life. I saw an orange cat once, but Mom laughed at me and said it was really yellow. She laughs at me a lot.

"Tommy? Where are you?"

"I'm here," I say, putting down my crayon and walking over to the couch. He rubs his eyes.

"I was scared."

I don't think he's really scared. It's a habit for him now. He's waked up scared so many times in his life.

"Don't be scared, Dylan, I'm here." I hug him around his neck and tickle his belly. He giggles and snuggles into my side.

"Tom, I'm hungry."

Oh, great, I hope we have some food.

"Let's look in the kitchen, then," I say as I pull him off the couch.

We find a mostly empty jar of peanut butter in the cupboard and two slices of bread still in the wrapper. I make a sandwich, and we split it along with a cherry juice box. We go back to the couch to eat, sitting side by side.

"Where's Mom, Dylan?"

"Don't know."

We sit and chew without talking for a while.

"You want to watch TV?"

Dylan shakes his head, sending his blond hair flying everywhere.

"Okay, want me to read to you?"

Dylan snorts. "No way, man."

Dylan's five years old and has just learned to say 'no way, man,' and he's been saying it so much it's driving me crazy. I'm seven, and I've grown out of saying the same thing over and over. I wish he wanted me to read to him, because I like showing off. The silly baby never wants to be read to until I'm so sleepy I can hardly see.

"Hey, Tom, can we play outside?" he asks, picking his nose. I knock his hand away.

"No, we can't, it's dark out," I say. "Bad guys will get us."

"They won't," he shouts. "You're a liar!"

"Okay, okay," I say. "Be quiet. But we can't go out after dark."

He pouts with his lip out and his chubby baby arms crossed. I feel bad for him, because his favorite thing is to go outside. I'm strict with him, though. Outside there are bad guys, big scary dogs, and bigger kids who could hurt us. We have to stay in the house. I have to keep us safe.

"Where's Sister, Tommy?" Dylan asks, looking at me from the corner of his eye.

I don't answer right away because I can't tell him where Sister is. She ran away from home two weeks ago. She's twelve years old but she and Mom fought so much that Mom

started smacking her around. Sister just disappeared one day. She went to school and never came home.

"Why did she leave us?" Dylan asks. Tears form in his big, blue eyes.

I sigh and hold his hand.

"She didn't mean to leave us, bud," I tell him. "She was mad at Mom, I guess. She'll come back."

Dylan shakes his head. "No, Tom, she ain't coming back. I just know it."

Tears drip down his face. I reach over and wipe them off with my bare hand. I don't have the guts to keep telling him she will, because I don't believe it either. We both know a lot of kids in the trailer park run away and never come back.

Dylan hiccups. "Like our dad. He left, and I don't even remember him."

I start to panic. "Come on, now, let's just watch some TV, Dylan. I don't like talking about him."

Dylan's tears turn into full-out bawling. He puts his face into his hands and cries with all he has. I put my arm around him and feel tears sliding down my own face. Why is life so full of tears? We're just kids. Two kids trapped all night in a smelly trailer while Mom's out having fun. Sister had left us here with Mom. We're so lonely without Sister.

I hear a noise outside, the sound of someone on our front porch. We both shut up and sit as still as we can. Whoever it is knocks on the door, big strong knocks. We know better than to answer the door. That's a rule around here, not to answer the door if Mom isn't home.

"Mary? Mary?" A man's voice booms through the door. "Mary, you in there?"

Dylan puts his hands over his mouth. I hug him hard.

"Okay, bitch," the man yells, and pounds the door one more time before clomping away.

"Can we go to bed now?" Dylan whispers. "I'm scared."

I nod, and we walk toward the small room where we share a bed. We take off our clothes, down to our underpants, and crawl under the blanket. It's warm enough for a summer night, but it will be cold pretty soon, and we'll have to wear our clothes to bed. Dylan always sleeps by the wall, and I sleep on the outside since he fell out of bed a couple times.

We settle in and Dylan reaches for my hand. This usually means he wants me to tell him a bedtime story. Other nights, he rolls over, his back to me, and falls right to sleep.

"Will you tell me a story?"

"Yeah, I will, but you gotta listen this time. Last night all you did was giggle like a girl," I tease.

"Did not!" he says, laughing.

"Listen to you! Already laughing!"

He slugs me in the shoulder and cuddles closer.

"Please will you, Tommy?"

"I will," I say, "but not a long story, because I'm sleepy."

Dylan nods his head and yawns.

"Okay, so one time there was this princess. She lived in a trailer park, just like this. And she was lovely, with long blonde hair and beautiful eyes. She had a cat named Kitty. And Kitty went everywhere with the princess.

"Then one day, Kitty was found wandering around the trailer park, all alone, crying so sad. She tried and tried to get the people in the trailer park to follow her, but no one listened.

Until!" I pause to make it dramatic. "Finally a handsome young man named Dylan realized that Kitty was asking for help. So Dylan told Kitty to lead him to the princess! Kitty ran ahead, and Dylan followed close behind. After a long time, Dylan was getting so tired, but he kept following Kitty, and they found the princess! She had fallen down in some weeds and hit her head. Dylan picked her up and carried her back to the trailer park, where her mother the queen took care of the princess and everyone lived happily ever after."

"Stupid!" Dylan says. "That's a stupid story, Tom."

I'm surprised. I've told Dylan this same story lots of times, and he's always loved it.

"You're stupid if you think that story is true." Dylan's nearly shouting, and he sits up in bed. "I'll never find her. She's gone. And we'll never have no stupid cat."

Mentioning the cat makes me mad.

"We will too have a cat, Dylan!" I shout at him.

"Nuh-uh, Tom," he says, his fists doubled. "Nothing's ever going to be nice for us."

"Stop, Dylan!" I shout. "You're just a baby. Don't talk that way!"

"I'm not a baby!" Dylan climbs over me and runs out of the bedroom.

He is a baby, though, and he shouldn't be thinking this way. I'm sad that my little brother, who I thought I had protected, knows how bad our life is. I thought I had hidden things from him. Mom hid nothing from me. I know Sister isn't coming back. Sister lives with a foster family now. Mom is happy about it. I'm not happy. I'm scared that me and Dylan will end up in foster care, separated from one another.

Now Dylan's catching on to how bad our life is. Would he try to run away? I have to stop him.

I jump out of bed and run to the living room. He's sitting on the couch, hunched up in the corner, crying again.

"Go away, Tom. Leave me alone."

"I can't leave you alone, Dylan. You're my brother."

Dylan shakes his head.

"Yes, I am your brother. Don't be stupid," I shout.

Dylan is on his feet, fists doubled again.

"Don't call me stupid!"

"Okay, okay! I'm sorry!" I say. "I am your brother, though."

Dylan glares at me.

"Please Dyl, say that I'm your brother," I plead.

"Oh, fine, you're my brother," he says.

I smile at him.

Dylan spins around and marches back to bed. I follow him, and we both get back in bed. This time he turns his back to me.

"Hey, Dylan, let's talk. Don't go to sleep yet."

"What do you want to talk about?"

"I'm sorry I made you upset," I say. "I didn't know that story bothered you."

Dylan sighs and turns back toward me.

"I just know it's not true. We'll never find Sister again. You'll never get a cat, no matter how much you want one. We'll both probably run away from Mom one day, because she is a mean mom," he says in his little boy voice. "And then neither one won't have a brother. And it makes me so sad. I'd just rather never grow up."

I can't talk for a minute or two. Dylan said the words that I've had in my head all my life. I never want to grow up. It's not that feeling like on Peter Pan, where you stay a happy little kid and have so much fun. I have a feeling where I just want to stop being a person at all. Not a kid, because kids have it so hard in my trailer park. So do older kids like Sister and so do grownups like Mom.

I don't want to grow up and be a man who walks around pounding on trailer doors, shouting for women to open up. I don't want to be a man who leaves his family with no money and no way to be happy. I'm not really sure what other men there are, but I just see bad men out there and bad women. I don't want to grow up. I don't even want to be older than seven. I don't want to be twelve years old and start fighting with Mom and run away and leave Dylan alone. He would never survive alone. He could die from any of the dangerous things that happen around the trailer park.

I always find our food, have to make him stay inside at night and wear his coat in the cold weather. I make sure he remembers to lock the door when Mom's at the bar. Without me, who knows what would happen to Dylan?

I don't want to grow up. Now Dylan says he doesn't want to grow up. Things were changing fast.

"Dylan, you don't have to grow up," I say, my heart beating fast.

He shrugs. "I guess I don't."

I shove his arm. "Come on, what else can you do?"

Please, Jesus, make him say what I have been thinking.

"I could die and go to heaven, Tommy," he whispers.

I suck air in my lungs. He said exactly what I had hoped. We could both die! We got taught in Sunday School, when Mom let us go, that heaven is a wonderful place.

"How, Dylan?"

He is still for a few minutes, and then he reaches over and takes my hand.

"We can close our eyes and go to heaven, Tom," he whispers. "I've been wanting to for a while. I have been practicing, but I didn't want to leave you alone."

I'm in shock. How had he come up with the same idea as me? I wonder if God made us think of this way to die? Because God knows we're good boys, but the only thing ahead for us is bad things. Or maybe we're both just weird. Maybe all that liquor Mom drank while she was pregnant with her babies might have made us both crazy. I don't care, I'm trying it! I don't want to grow up, and Dylan's ready to try it with me!

Tears slide out the corners of my eyes. I have been practicing death too! Twice I have seen a bright light and felt my heartbeat slow down, so slow. Then I remembered Dylan and forced myself to wake up. I made myself live again, for Dylan.

Now I find out he'd done the same for me.

"Dylan, did you see the bright light?"

He nods.

I wrap my arms around him.

"Baby brother, you came back for me?"

He nods. I squeeze him and kiss the top of his head.

"You're a good brother," I whisper. "The best brother anyone ever had."

"Thanks," he says. "I didn't want to leave you alone."

I lie there with my arms around Dylan for a while and think about things. I think about cold cereal for dinner and sharing a bed and our Sister running away. I think about our Mom gone to the bar again and Dad who left us a long time ago. I remember how Mom told us that our grandparents threw us all out when Dylan was born because they were tired of noisy babies. I think about going to school in dirty clothes. I think of that man and a bunch of other men pounding on the trailer door late at night. I think of my baby brother waking up scared almost every day. And I think of how tired we always are, hungry and tired.

"Dylan, you don't have to leave me," I say. He pulls back from me so he can look in my face. "I think we should both close our eyes and go to heaven, at the same time."

I've never seen my brother smile so wide before this moment.

"You mean it, Tommy? You'd go with me?"

I nod. "I'm ready if you are."

He nods.

"Okay, Dylan, let's get ready. Let's hold hands and close our eyes."

We both roll over to our backs and take one another's hands. I close my eyes and hear Dylan sigh.

"I love you, Tommy."

I have to swallow to get the words out. "I love you, too."

I take a deep breath.

"Okay, buddy, let's just keep our eyes closed, and take slow breaths. Then try to breathe less often. Slowly, until you ain't breathing at all, okay? Then when you see that bright light, keep walking towards it. I'll meet you there or maybe I'll be right beside you, I'm not sure, but I know we'll be together sooner or later."

"Okay, Tom," he says, a few tears in his voice.

"Don't be sad, Dylan, this is what we want, right?"

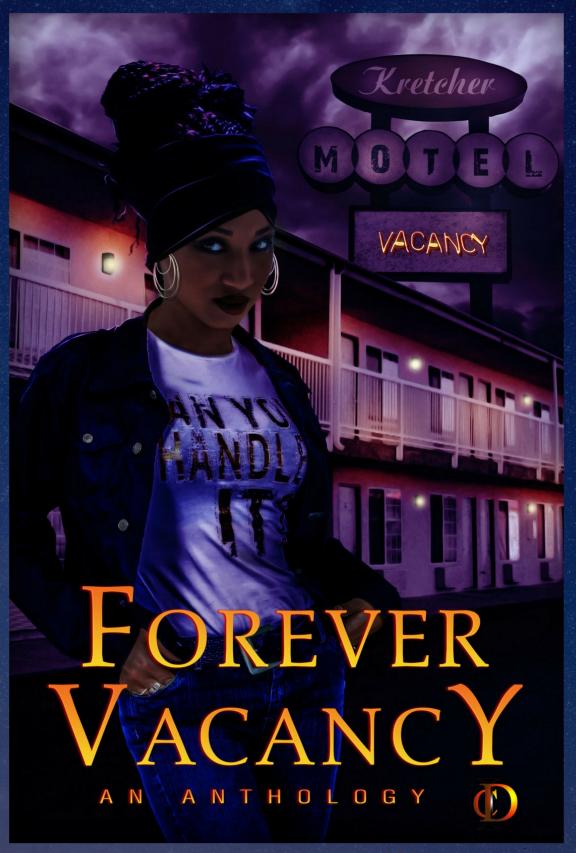
"You know it!" he jokes.

Cool, we are going out of this hard world with smiles on our faces. I start making myself breathe slower and slower. It doesn't take long before I hardly need to breathe at all, like when I hold my breath for swimming. I try to listen to Dylan, but I swear I can't hear him breathe at all. So I start looking behind my eyelids for that bright light.

There! I see it! There's a bright light! It's pretty as anything! Man, you should see it! Well, I guess not, unless you don't want to live either. Oh, I gotta go! There's Dylan waiting for me...

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Lori Safranek has a degree in journalism and was a newspaper reporter in her home state of Nebraska. Now she writes horror stories and has been published in horror anthologies by publishers such as Sirens Call Publications, Angelic Knight Publications, James Ward Kirk Publications, and Scarlett Galleon Publications. She also self-published Freakshow: The Complete Freaked Out Series.

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## The Snake Dancer | B.E.Seidl

She was the last act before the grand finale. Some of the fans came back every night the circus was in town, flocking into the darkened tent, just to see Amanda and Sam. For a little more than a year, she had performed her sultry dance with the giant snake. With every show she felt a tighter connection with the animal. The python, Sam, seemed to respond to her every move. Together, they wiggled on the pole, entangled like lovers.

She liked to caress the tanned pattern on his back, feeling his muscles tense. Sam's warm, smooth skin possessed her. Even in her sleep, Amanda longed for the satiny touch of the creature's body. In a pose she would often revisit in her dreams, the snake wrapped itself around her while she was dangling upside down. Sam entwined her like a vine weaves its way around a tree, becoming one with her.

It was usually at this part of her act that a buzzing sound would arise from the audience. The air in the tent would begin to feel a little bit warmer, almost tropical. Amanda's fans would hiss words of admiration, taking in every move of the python's body. Mesmerized, they would watch the beast's tongue flick, wondering how much of their agitation it might be able to perceive. Some of them envied the dancer. They fantasized being in her place. It was a scenario that gave them a thrill, to imagine the strong body of the exotic creature wrapping itself around them, pinning them to the pole. It was part of the spell that called them to the circus night after night—watching how tightly Sam would embrace her, and wondering whether or not he would eventually let her go.

After a little more than a year, Amanda and Sam's dance was so coordinated that it often seemed hard to distinguish where the creature ended and where the woman's limbs began. Like one body they moved up and down the pole to the rhythm of violins. Amanda was so involved in their dance that she had become unaware of everything else. Even the giant animal, almost twice her size, only seemed to have eyes for her, silvery eyes with a black vertical slit. She was entranced by these eyes; more and more often she could feel herself getting lost in them. It was almost as if they shared a secret.

In their last pose, when the python wrapped its body around her, Amanda seemed to be hypnotized. Craning her neck, she stretched out towards him, almost poking the snake's nose. When it happened, it occurred so suddenly that the audience thought it was part of the act: the dancer reached for the python and let her teeth sink deeply into the animal's neck.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — B.E. Seidl is a bilingual fiction and nonfiction writer. Her work has appeared both in print and in online anthologies and magazines such as Flash Fiction Magazine, Tethered by Letters and Microfiction Monday Magazine Best of 2015. In her writing she seeks to collect kafkaesque moments and transform them into mysterious tales. She lives in Vienna, Austria.

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# **Best Friends** | C.A. Viruet

"Hand me a new scalpel." The Gravedigger held out his hand, waiting.

A shrill laugh filled the air as the Comedian handed the Gravedigger a pair of scissors.

The Gravedigger turned to face the Comedian, "If you can't take this seriously we may as well stop." The man's face dropped. His smile turned down at the corners into a cartoonish yet sincere frown, elongating his entire face.

"No, no! I'm sorry." The Comedian closed his eyes for a second and refocused; he replaced the scissors with the new scalpel.

"Good." The Gravedigger turned back to his work.

He cut a section of muscle and tendons along the sternum, through nearly to the heart itself. He stopped just short of nicking the prize. He peeled back the muscle and flesh as far as it would go.

"Now I am going to continue to peel back the muscle along the ribs, cutting away anything creating resistance."

The Comedian laughed.

"I don't think you can get a nickname like Gravedigger if you face resistance."

He laughed at his own joke, as was his custom, spittle spraying from his giant laughing mouth.

The Gravedigger turned his head slightly and gave the Comedian a disapproving glare. The Comedian looked at his feet.

"How'd you get that moniker anyway? You sure as shit don't dig your own graves."

The Comedian laughed again and slapped his companion on the back jovially. The scalpel slipped and sliced the Gravedigger's thumb. His hand was deep inside the body, resting on the lung, with the fingers wrapped around a rib. Blood had pooled where his hand rested. He couldn't see the cut and didn't particularly care that his open wound was now exposed to the disease and blood of the body. The gesture was unbelievably rude.

"Oh, sorry, I guess that makes it a blood cocktail."

Laughter did not fill the room this time. The silence was too heavy. The Gravedigger stood up, and stared silently into the other man's face. Fear filled the Comedian as he was forced to look into the pale and stoic face of the Gravedigger. The Gravedigger had been leaning over the body for some time. The blood had left his cheeks making him even paler, a shade darker than death. As he stood staring gravely at the Comedian he felt the rush of blood as his anger grew. He walked briskly to the sink to clean the wound. The Comedian watched silently, his smile twisted into a frown, and his eyes frantic. He put a hand to his mouth. He rocked on his heels for a moment and then took a half step towards the sink. Finally the Comedian took a deep breath and let out a sigh, dropping his hand. He smiled briefly as the plan in his head came together. He walked toward a first aid kit hanging on the wall, murmuring directions to himself the whole way.

"Peroxide, then band aid, and maybe tape on top..."

He took the kit down and opened it, presenting it to the Gravedigger as he scrubbed then dried his hands. The Gravedigger saw the Comedian at the ready, and allowed a slight smile to appear on his face. The Comedian responded with his signature toothy grin and handed

him a Band-Aid. The Gravedigger shook his head and wrapped his finger, then took the kit from the other man and replaced it on the wall. He could feel the Comedian's worry shooting from his eyes and into his back. He turned and reached for him, tussling his hair and smiling a bit more.

"You push all my buttons. Let's get back to work."

The anxiety left the Comedian's body, his shoulders, tight with worry, now relaxed as the tension left his muscles.

"I always worry when you go silent as a grave."

The Gravedigger chuckled, picked up the scalpel, and continued peeling muscle back from the rib cage. His eyes grew wider with amazement as the Gravedigger came close to the end of the ribs. Without being asked, the Comedian helped the Gravedigger roll the body onto its side so he could continue to peel the muscle back to the spine. As he came close to the finish, the Comedian began to quietly hop back and forth from one foot to the other, while continuing to stretch and twist the glove in his hand. Sweat had begun to bead on the Gravedigger's forehead as he moved a bit quickly, excited to be near the end of his project. Both men concentrated on the task even more, as if they could will the muscle to peel away faster by staring at it. Their tunnel vision cancelled out the rest of the room and even the world, their eyes fixed on the scalpel as it sliced through the muscle.

"Oh God..." A small voice broke their silent meditation.

The Comedian turned on his heels to see a nurse standing just inside the door, her face white and her mouth hanging open in shock. "What?" she asked, barely able to close her mouth enough to form the word.

"Well, there was a complication with the appendectomy." The Comedian delivered his line with a straight face and professional tone.

The Gravedigger's shoulders began to shake, and a deep, true laugh shattered his stoicism. The nurse's eyes rolled into the back of her head and she collapsed to the floor. "HA! I'd say that was a hit!" The Comedian stomped his feet in excitement as he congratulated himself.

The Gravedigger caught his breath, and collected himself.

"Go take care of that, and don't look over here until I say so."

He had put the scalpel down and was now holding a sheet over the body, keeping the Comedian from seeing the finished product.

"Oh, I love surprises, how exciting!" The Comedian clapped his hands in excitement and spun towards the nurse.

As her eyes began to flutter open, the Comedian pulled a screwdriver from his pocket and shoved it into her ear.

"It's always easier than I think it's going to be..." his voice trailed off.

He grabbed the nurse under the arms and dragged her to a nearby gurney, where he lifted her onto it. He rolled the gurney through the door to the operating room and into the bare hallway. The concrete tunnel was cool and empty. The Comedian did not see another person during his short walk down the hall. The tunnels under the hospital only housed the morgue and an area for a medical examiner to do autopsies if necessary. It had become a secret place for the Comedian and the Gravedigger. A fortress of madness where they could be themselves.

"The nurse should have never come down here, her death was her own fault." Here the Comedian could talk to himself as much as he wanted, and there wasn't a person in the world to interject and tell him it wasn't acceptable behavior. When he arrived back at the steel door with the small glass window, he first tried to look in.

"No, no cheating!" he scolded himself, looking down at the ground.

"I hear you out there, count to ten and then come in." The Comedian bowed his head, closed his eyes and counted aloud, twisting the bottom of his shirt in his hands. "Ten! Surprise!" he shouted as he flung open the door, entering with his arms wide as if he was surprising the Gravedigger at a party.

The Gravedigger stood beside two gurneys pushed together, the body spread across them, the arms and legs were wide open and the flesh of the torso, expertly flayed, spread out between them like blood red butterfly wings. The exposed ribs and sternum created a grotesque likeness to an exoskeleton. The Comedian stood in front of the gurneys, hands cradling his face. The Gravedigger smiled.

"Where is the heart?"

The Gravedigger clapped his hands once, "Ah, you have quite the eye for detail when you slow down for a minute."

The Gravedigger walked to a nearby stainless steel table and retrieved a jar. He handed it to the Comedian, who inspected it as his smile grew wider. The jar held the heart in formaldehyde, but the fresh organ still maintained some color.

"Thank you, it's beautiful. Where am I going to keep it?"

The Gravedigger walked down the long cement hallway to the stairs, the Comedian stayed behind to clean up. He climbed the stairs slowly, checking himself over to ensure he didn't have any evidence of the massacre he left behind. The Gravedigger made one final check before opening the door to the ground floor, he looked good and like nothing out of the ordinary had happened. A large male orderly, with silver hair and silver stubble was waiting for him as soon as he opened the door.

"Dr. Hemlock, we need you for a new patient evaluation in five minutes, don't forget."

The orderly had been standing there for several minutes, waiting for the doctor to come to the top of the stairs. He never made a move to go down them himself. The orderly went back to a large desk in the middle of the entryway and sat down.

"Rob, why didn't you just go down there and get him twenty minutes ago?" Jared, a young new orderly, eager to please, was always ready to jump down his elder's throats.

"Kid, you don't go down there, ever. Unless you like the smell and the sight of death, in that case you'll fit right in with the good doctor." Jared snorted and rolled his eyes.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — C.A. Viruet is a wife, mother and U.S. Army veteran who writes as much as she can, but horror is her favorite genre to write. She has been published in several anthologies.

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## On Any Given Day | Candy Burke

It's too soon. I'm not ready.

The sun beats down from a sky so blue it hurts. The pavement is rough and hard against my back and hips. Vapors of heat are rising from the asphalt, but I'm cold. Cold to the core.

People stand over me, their mouths in motion. I can't understand them, all talking at once. I gaze up at distorted faces, into eyes widened by fear. What are they afraid of?

A man dressed in all blue squats next to me. A cop I think. Have I done something wrong?

"Help is coming. Hold on, stay with me."

His words make my heart stutter. Why can't I respond? I avert my eyes... focus on a woman who's clutching her purse to her chest and crying. I concentrate on her voice and try to comprehend the words.

She says something about a van and a red light... "he ran right through and plowed over her."

Her...

Me.

Oh God.

A glimpse of memory flashes through my mind. Checking my watch as I approached the crosswalk. I'd overslept and was running late. The symbol of a walking man turned green, and I stepped off the curb. A scream from behind. I swiveled my head and then...

God, No! Please ... please ... no!

My mind knows my body is still, but I'm quaking. This is it? All there is for me? Who'll feed my cat? Take care of her? Mom and Dad... this will destroy them. I'm so sorry.

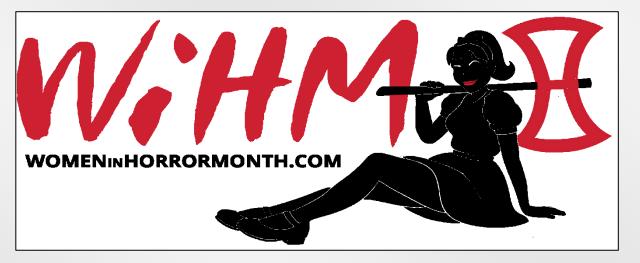
I'm overflowing, not with terror or apprehension, but with sorrow. So many plans and dreams annulated by the absence of a foot on a brake.

There is no physical pain, only devastating coldness. I struggle against heavy lids, a warrior battling death, but I'm losing. I feel it all around me, coming for me.

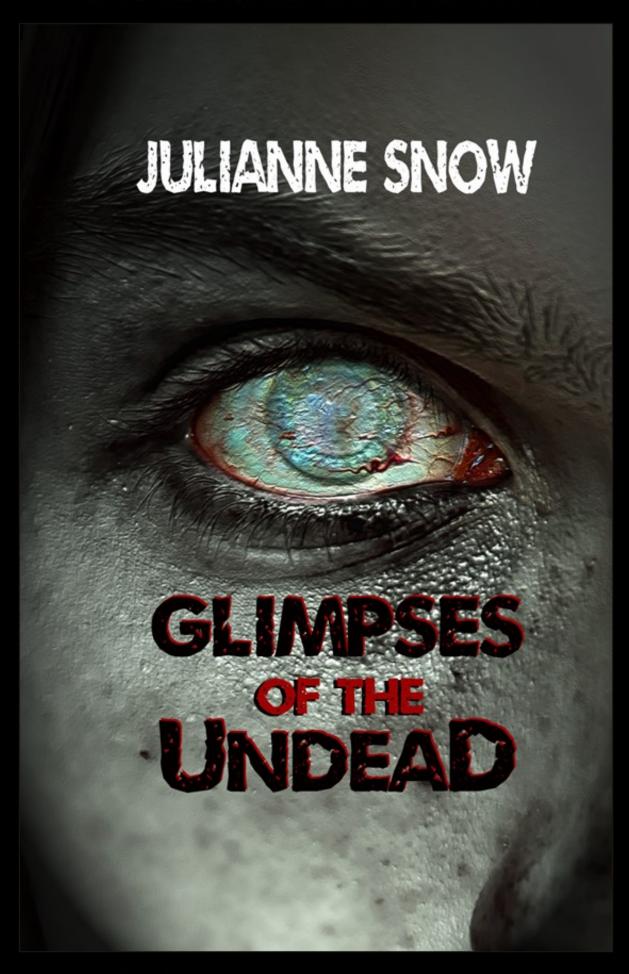
I'm not ready.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Candy Burke is a wife, critter lover and writer. She resides in North Carolina with her husband, three dogs, two cats and a goat.

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# A COLLECTION OF SHORT FICTION...



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# Advice from a Friend | Cat Voleur

7:00pm – *At the Bar* 

"One little drink won't hurt."

Kylie's friend would be showing up soon, but she didn't want to wait. It had been a particularly rough day and she was out to forget that. The music was upbeat, the drink in her glass a bright blue, and the whole situation screamed 'fun.' She needed a little fun.

The liquid smelled of berries as she brought it to her lips and tasted even better. She gulped it down with a smile on her face, unaware of the terrible night she was condemning herself to.

10:00pm – In the Car of a Stranger

"I think you passed my street."

She didn't think—she knew. She was starting to sober up a bit, but even before then she had been looking for her street, watching for it in between the waves of nausea washing over her. Her head had been resting on the cool glass of the window, which had felt so nice against her feverish skin, but now she just wanted to get home.

The man said nothing to her.

With some effort she was able to straighten herself. Her vision swam at first, but when it steadied she thought maybe she'd be okay. She glanced over at the man who had offered her the ride, wondering if he heard her. The state she was in, she couldn't even be a hundred percent sure she actually said anything out loud. She fidgeted for a moment, not sure if she should try again to say something.

The worn fabric of the car's interior rubbed against her bare legs, and for the first time she became uncomfortably aware of just how short her shorts were. They had seemed an appropriate length for the weather and blended in at the bar, but now she wished that more of her legs were covered. Likewise, the man, who had seemed perfectly average at the bar, now seemed very, very large since she was alone with him.

Reality was hitting hard as she realized all the dangers of the situation that her drunken self had stumbled into. She knew she had to get out of the car.

"Uh, hey, sir? If you could just—" Her sentence was cut short by the back of his large hand making swift and brutal contact with her face.

10:26pm – Driving Further into Nowhere

"Quit your sniffling, girl."

Kylie couldn't help it. She'd never been hit in her life. She'd never been in real danger in her life either. She had always been a good girl, a safe girl. She had always been so much smarter than this, and sheltered. She couldn't even conceive what might be about to happen.

"I said, knock it off."

He sounded angry with her, and that just made the tears fall all the harder. She tried to breathe in and get control of herself. She had to stop crying, had to stop making him angry while she thought of a plan. She knew she needed to take action before they got where they were going. The breathing elicited a strange sound from within her, and she realized that her nose had gotten clogged as it always did when she cried.

She sniffled loudly, and his next blow sent her consciousness reeling into the black.

#### 12:57pm – Waking up Chained to a Bed

"Hello?"

Kylie dared only to call out softly. She had only fragmented and surreal memories regarding how she had gotten there. They were so fuzzy in her mind and so surreal that she could have convinced herself that she had dreamt the entire thing were it not for the heavy cuff around her ankle. She couldn't see anything around her in the darkness, but she could feel the weight of the cuff secured around the limb, and hear the chain rattle as she shifted.

"Hello?" She called again, praying that she was not all alone in this nightmare. She wasn't sure if she could stand that.

"Hello," someone responded this time.

That one word of reply gave her more information to process. It was a male voice, but not so deep as the one belonging to the man who had taken her. It told her that she was not alone, and it came from a good ways off, indicating that whoever had spoken was on the other side of a rather large room.

She strained her eyes as she sat up, but could still not see anything. "Who are you?" She tried to steady her voice and to sound braver than she really felt. "Who's there?"

"A friend."

#### 3:30am - Talking to a Friend

"I wish I could see you."

Her friend had taught her a lot in the hours they had been speaking. He'd helped to calm her down, and more importantly he had taught her all she needed to know about their situation.

"Maybe someday you will," he said, though she could tell from his sad tone that he wasn't overly optimistic about the prospect. She couldn't entirely blame him for it.

He had explained that there was one man and one woman. He didn't know what their relationship was. He'd once assumed that they were brother and sister, as they looked somewhat alike, but explained that he had since seem them do things to one another that no sibling should do. Still, he was unsure. From what he had observed, the man hit harder but the woman kept people longer, which was crueler in its own way.

As Kylie listened to him describe what he had seen in even the faintest level of detail, she had felt multiple times like she wanted to be sick. Once or twice, she had been.

She was scared. She had never been strong or tough, and she didn't think she would last long under any type of abuse. She wasn't entirely sure that she'd even want to last once it started. She could hear the pain and exhaustion in her friend's voice. He had been there a

long time, watching people come and suffer and die. She could tell that he was getting weak. She admired him for how long he had made it, but she certainly didn't want to become him.

She was almost grateful not to have the use of her eyes—it meant she couldn't see just what sort of horrors had been inflicted on him. All the same, she really could have used the image of a friendly face.

#### 4:00am – In the Dark

"How long do we have before they come back?" she asked.

"It varies," he replied. "Usually after sunrise though. They sleep in a lot, especially the woman. He might be down sooner though. When someone new comes he likes to make an early start to it."

She shivered.

#### 5:54am – Not Long Before Sunrise

"I have to ask. Is there any way out?"

Kylie had been dreading that question, afraid that she already knew the answer. If there was a way to escape, even the slightest chance, surely he'd have made a run for it a long time ago. She knew she had to ask though. She had no way of knowing what time it was, but she was afraid that she might be running out of time and if there was any hope at all she could spare herself from the upcoming experience, she wanted to know.

Silence greeted her.

"Hello?" she tried.

Her friend's voice sounded more haunted, and there was reluctance in him when he spoke. "You could try to fight."

"But my leg is chained. Even if I could win a fight somehow I'd be stuck here."

"They both keep keys on them at all times. If one of them comes down here, and they're alone, assuming you catch them off guard..." he trailed off.

She waited for him to finish, and when he didn't she got concerned. "You still there?"

"Let me give you a piece of advice." There was another pause. "If you decide to try and fight, do it now. As soon as one of them comes down here. For as weak as you feel right now, you're not likely to get any stronger. Not down here."

#### 6:30am – Waiting

In her hand, Kylie held a key. It was the spare key to her best friend's apartment which she had remembered to grab on her way out to the bar, but neglected to put on her key ring. She was glad she had, or else it would be with the rest of her keys, laying wherever that creep had taken her stuff. Luckily for her, he hadn't checked her pockets before chaining her up.

The key made for a poor weapon, but it had a point at the end and was solid, and Kylie thought it would be better than nothing.

She dreaded taking her friend's advice, but didn't see that she had a choice. If she could somehow pull it off, she'd be free. If she failed, she figured there was a good chance he'd at

least kill her quickly out of rage, and that would at least be merciful compared to whatever fate he had currently planned for her. Either way, she was determined for this to all be over soon.

As light started to trickle in from the windows she lay on her side. She could just see the dark silhouette of her friend laying on a bed at the far side of the room.

#### 6:47 – Hearing Footsteps

The waiting had felt like hell, but as soon as she heard the heavy door to the room begin to open, she wished she'd been given more time. She heard footsteps approaching her prone form and she squeezed her eyes tight.

She tried not to shiver or act out until the footsteps were right behind her. They stopped. When she felt his weight begin to press down on the bed, she knew she was out of time.

She made her move.

#### 7:15am – Lying in Blood

"Kylie," said a voice, but she was too out of it to answer. The voice came back louder and more persistent. "Kylie, you need to get up."

She could hear the words clearly, but couldn't make sense of them. She was consumed by the aching of every part of her body.

"You did it, Kylie. You took the bigger one down. If the woman comes down here to find him dead and you're still chained up here, that's going to be the end. There's going to be hell to pay."

Dead.

At first that was the only word to register. She didn't know who was dead though, she just knew she was covered in blood. She hurt so badly, she figured it had been her blood.

"You're not strong enough to fight again. You need to go now."

Fight.

The pieces were coming back to her. She fought the man who had taken her. She had fought him, and she had won—though only barely. He'd been strong enough to beat her bloody and had continued to do so until his final breath. He'd continued hitting and choking and breaking as she had stabbed away with her sad little key.

"Kylie, you have to get up."

She tried to apologize to the voice, to explain why she couldn't. Every part of her hurt and she just wanted to sleep. She wasn't strong, wasn't a fighter. All she wanted was to drift off and let her pain end. She tried to convey those things, but she barely had the strength to open her mouth up before she was out again.

#### 11:08am – Standing Behind Her New Friend

Coming to, she had been relieved. The last time she'd been awake she'd been convinced it was the end, but after a few hours of rest she had somehow found it in her to keep going. By some miracle she had survived the fight, and had yet to be discovered.

She hadn't known exactly what time it was, but she knew that the woman would likely be coming for her any minute, and she'd prayed she had enough time to unlock her friend and get them both out of that terrible place.

Now that she was standing behind him however, key in hand, something felt off. He hadn't spoken to her in a while, not even as she had been rummaging through the pocket of her captor, or crying at the sight of the apartment key jutting from his eye.

"I'm going to unlock you, okay?" she asked.

No response.

"Hey, everything's going to be okay." She put a hand on his shoulder to turn him around. His head lolled over lifelessly as she shifted the body, a hunk of flesh fell from his face. She was unable to stifle the scream that the sight of the corpse elicited, and without giving it any thought she turned her back and ran, more eager than ever to leave this nightmare.

It wasn't just that her friend had died; it was that he had obviously died long before she'd ever met him.

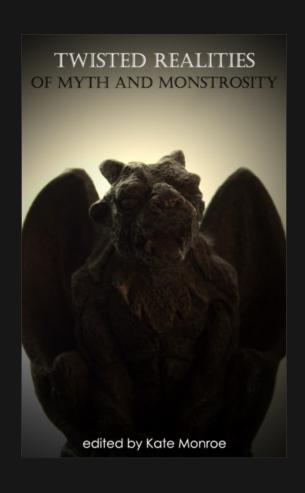
**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Cat Voleur is a freelance writer who currently lives by the beach with her boyfriend and their pet snake, Chronos. When she's not writing speculative fiction she runs a blog dedicated to the horror genre. Her hobbies include gaming, guitar and spreading awareness about zombie survival.

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# Twisted Realities: Of Myth and Monstrosity

Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and iTunes



# The Temptation of Eve | Helen Mihajlovic

As the sun's light grows faint, a crescent moon penetrates the sky; the entirety of nature is concealed by a dark cloak. The dimness brings forth a freedom to all creatures coy of the sun, by veiling their identity. Night's shadowy air bestows expectancy that elating venture will emerge. An eternally varying moon provokes obscurity, with which arises intrigue. Eve favors the night.

Her long ebony hair lies in curls on the verdant grass, her hazel eyes shut in slumber. Her naked bosom gently touches the grass; the moonlight shines on her fair skin while she shifts her buttocks.

An owl flies overhead, lands on an apple tree and grips its claws on a branch. Eve awakens to its foreboding cry; she gently opens her eyes. When she rises, her senses fill with the aroma of the silver wattle in the garden. She hears the enduring call of the owl, forewarning sorrow. Eve saunters to the tree enveloped in large crimson apples where the owl is perched.

The slither of a serpent grows louder as it draws nearer to the tree. Having never seen a creature in this form, her eyes widen, her head draws closer in astonishment. When she looks upon the serpent's red eyes, it writhes to her.

"The forbidden tree," says the serpent looking upon the succulent apples. "It fills one with intrigue."

"Curiosity eradicates the mundane from the day," says Eve.

The serpent's tail lashes from side to side.

"Do you believe that life is not quite what it should be?" asks the serpent.

"I feel there is much about truth I do not know," replies Eve.

"The fruit will grant you knowledge of the truth, it will make you alike God."

"I am told not to eat from this fruit."

"Then it is sad that you do not allow yourself ascendancy," says the serpent.

Eve cocks an eyebrow as she contemplates the serpent.

"The garden bears food, warmth, love, although there remains a void within your heart, a craving for elation and freedom," says the serpent, its eyes filled with red flames.

Eve is momentarily silent. "I am forbidden to leave the garden and I love Adam."

"I believe you do. However, the love for yourself exceeds it," says the serpent ahead of a baleful hiss.

"Paradise is my home," Eve says, her face growing pale.

"Eve, paradise has all that you need, not that which you desire."

Eve lowers her eyes; when she looks up the serpent has vanished.

"Does he deceive me?" she asks the owl.

"His words are true, the apple gives rise to power. Though any creature that consumes it will grow to be dark," replies the owl.

She buries her head in her hands while she gives thought to the serpent's words.

Her breath quickens as the true desires of her heart frighten her; she finds she holds a yearning to be all-powerful like God. It overpowers her love for Adam. Her head violently aches; it is arduous to acknowledge her true self.

As days follow, Eve's mind races, it grows to be a consuming temptation that possesses her. Her blood hastens with guilt; enticements bring enduring torture. She wonders if there is ever a moment of rest when it won't pervade her thoughts.

Eve spends hours gazing upon the fruit of the tree. A crimson orb with a delightful aroma, its facade does not appear malicious. She sidles closer; her covet grows greater than her guilt. While her hand reaches for the apple, her body freezes with hesitation; agonizing shame emerges; the wicked thoughts of indulgence conquer it.

She grasps the apple. She holds it in her hand. Her heart races; the temptation is immense. The desire for infinite power, to be a God is a lure she is unable to resist.

The furtive serpent shelters at the rear of a shrub, its forked tongue thrashes as its red eyes avidly gaze upon Eve.

She consumes the apple, delight imbues her mouth, moistening while filling her with pleasure. A smile crosses her face when she feels euphoria.

Within moments of swallowing the apple Eve grimaces as her lips grow sour.

She begins to frantically choke; a foul taste invades her mouth. She promptly drops the apple; the shroud of misery takes on the guise of innocence and gentle form.

As the malevolent apple falls to the ground it wilts, shrinking, and darkening to its core. Fierce grim clouds rapidly approach overshadowing the starry night sky; a tempest begins. A bitter wind encompasses the trees overhead, hastening their sway. A brightly colored Rainbow Lorikeet soars from thrashing branches into the sky; it cries as it metamorphoses into a black crow. Eve conceals her eyes with her hands in revulsion as the garden's flowers begin to wilt. The pleasant pink heath takes the form of the poisonous Abrus. The pitiless terror of reality—the fantasy was a pleasure, yet an illusion; it spawns solemnity when it bares its true intent.

As the apple courses through her body, transition of her mind transpires, obscurity lifts from her thoughts. She wipes tears from her eyes; confronting the veritable disposition of her state. She longs for change to fulfill the desires for which she aches.

That night Eve leaves paradise and Adam; she follows the serpent to the emancipation of her dark nature.

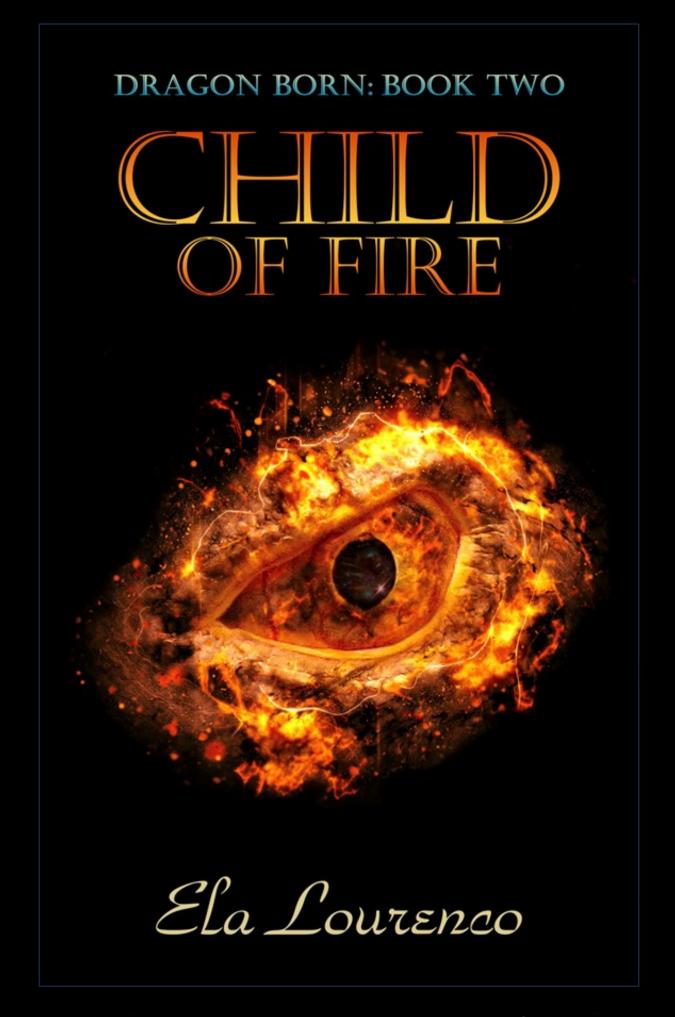
**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Helen Mihajlovic is a published author. Her short story 'The Prince of Devils' can be read online in Blood Moon Rising magazine. Helen also makes films, her film 'Dominica- A Tale of Horror' may be viewed online. She is grateful for her Editor Tanya Dewhurst and Story Advisor James Duncan. All stories are dedicated to her brother Bill and mother.



# Sirens Call Publications

Purveyors of Dark & Edgy Fiction





Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and iTunes

# **Into the Wood** | Rivka Jacobs

Doris waddled to the edge of the passage she'd cut through the vegetation, set down her buckets on the dandelions and unruly grass. The mop and broom dropped from under one of her arms and slipped to the ground. Doris sighed, bent and retrieved them. "Well, that's it," she said to the man who had quietly stopped behind her.

He spat some tobacco juice to the side. He was tall and lanky, dressed in jeans that were green with stains, and a short-sleeved, tan t-shirt specked with bits of debris from his last lawn job. "I don't know, ma'am," he said, avoiding eye contact. He leaned forward, peered into the opening.

"What? Well then why the hell do you call yourselves a landscaping company? Why does your ad in the yellow pages say you'll do any kind of yard work?" Doris was tired and didn't care about being polite. "What's the problem?"

"That's pretty thick growth back there. What's back there?" He straightened, looked up and around at the lofty old oak, ash, and maple trees, the dense thickets of brush and vines on either side.

"Oh for pity sakes! My mother was elderly and her mind wasn't so sharp, so she kind of let the rear of her property go wild. That's good old-fashioned West Virginia jungle—thorn bushes, Virginia creeper, kudzu stuff. Some poison ivy no doubt. See that?" She pointed at the tunnel through the tangle. "I used pruning shears, a weed-whacker, and tree saw to get through. There's a cottage back there that I gotta clean, so I don't have time for this. Can you clear our property, fix it up, or not?"

He looked nervous, his fingers now tucked into his back pockets. "What cottage is that? It looks pretty dark back there."

"The cottage that the real-estate agent assessing the property told me about. She wouldn't go near it either. My mother... she wouldn't let us handle her affairs. We didn't know she even had a tenant."

"I'll talk it over with my boss and get back to you," he said. He turned on a heel and walked briskly back the way they'd come, toward the screened-in porch that could be glimpsed in places through the leaves.

"Oh crap," Doris blurted. She inhaled deeply. It was almost overwhelming, the stifling smell of chlorophyll and sap. She tucked her broom and mop back under an arm, lifted her buckets. "Not to mention all the sorting and cleaning I have to do in the house. Dammit, Momma, you left one hell of a big mess." She ducked into the passageway and soon reached the front door of the overgrown cottage. She paused, bowed her head as she listened to bird calls she didn't recognize. Her own breathing was rushed and raspy.

The door was ajar—she'd previously unlocked it with an old key that once hung perpetually from her dead mother's key-ring that no one else was allowed to touch. Doris shoved the door all the way open with the toe of one athletic shoe.

She winced, sucked air in through her mouth, stepped over the threshold with her eyes screwed shut, her shoulders hunched. After a moment, she raised her head and focused on the room. "What were you expecting, a rotting corpse?" she asked herself. *Well, yes*, the words floated in her mind. The last known tenant was a man named Arlo Ellison; last

contact with him was apparently twenty years ago. After that, neither she nor her brother, nor their lawyers, could find a single mention of another occupant, or any evidence that anyone ever paid a single cent in rent.

She lugged the sloshing buckets to the middle of the floor. The place was moderately cluttered. There were millipede husks curled up along the walls and in the corners, wads of spider webs between pieces of furniture, stuffed into ceiling and window corners. Dust particles gleamed as they swirled in the ambient light. Doris coughed, waved a hand in front of her face. "Goddamn, how long has this place been empty?" She turned, noticed more details—a desk covered with papers under a grimy window to her right, the doorway to the bedroom closed ahead, the kitchenette shrouded in gloom, a pile of dishes and pots in the sink. She sniffed—there was no odor of garbage or rotting food but something else, pungent and pleasant. "I know that smell, it smells lik ... shaved wood," she said aloud. Or, fresh cut wood, or what her ex-husband's workshop exuded when he was attempting to make furniture.

"Well, how should I do this?" Doris asked herself, whisking her hands on the hips of her jeans. She really wanted to march right back to her mother's house, find as many 30-gallon bags as she could carry, and fill them up with all this junk, throw everything out. "I mean, how long did someone live here without anyone knowing they were here?" The thought did cross her mind that a dead body rested in the bedroom, mummified now, the stink of decay long since dissipated. She took a few steps toward the closed door, noticed the shelves for the first time. There were a lot of them. Curio cabinets, too. They lined the far wall behind an old tattered sofa, they stood like sentinels along both sides of a hall that led to the dining room. Behind the dining table, a hutch with glass doors stood in shadows; webs and caterpillar cocoons blotching the panes. Doris couldn't quite make out what they were, but could see rows and rows of objects—similar in height and width—posed on all the shelves and behind the glass. Pricks of greed scratched at her anxiety and exhaustion. "Might be valuable. Might be able to sell some of this stuff online," she said.

"Aunt Doris!" a female voice shrilled from outside.

Doris jumped. Her heart thudded painfully. "You scared me, goddammit!" she yelled. She leaned and squinted through one of the windows beside the front entrance, recognized Christine. "What are you doing here? Go on back to the house," she barked.

But Christine was already sidling through the doorway. She was a large young woman, her elastic-waist jeans bulky, her sleeveless tank swelling with breasts and extruding huge upper arms. Her brown hair was pulled straight back in a ponytail. She smiled as she wiped herself off; one dimple flashed. "What're ya doing? What's going on?" She immediately headed for the bedroom.

"No, no, no, Christine, stop, don't go in ... there." But the door was pushed open anyway. Doris held her breath.

"What a mess in here," Christine called, then reappeared. She whisked her palms together. "Not used as a bedroom," she announced. "Wood working stuff, tools. A table saw. Lots of chunks of wood about ten inches high. Some of them roughed out; looks like the guy was a very busy sculptor. Must have slept on the couch."

"Christine, get on out of here. Now!" Doris felt overheated and extremely annoyed.

Christine moved to one of the bookcases; she ran her fingers over several of the items on display, lined up in a row. "Wow, well, here's what he did with his time," she said, not looking at her aunt. She reached up, gently drew down a figurine. "See?" She half-turned it, held it in Doris' direction. "Needs dusting but this is pretty damn good! Looks just like a woman from the..." She brought it close to her face. "The roaring '20s."

"The what?"

"Yeah, she's a flapper or something. Look at her clothes. She must have been very pretty! Poor thing. I wonder what she did to deserve it?"

"You put that back, and get out of here."

Christine carefully replaced the doll-like wood figure, approached the desk on Doris' left. "It's all dirty with neglect, but pretty much organized," the young woman remarked as she forced her bulk around the end of the furniture. The rolling chair squeaked horribly as she pushed it out of the way. "Wow, Aunt Doris, you should take a look at this!" She leaned over the desktop, reading something with great intensity.

Doris threw up her arms and stalked over. "Christine, I'm not kidding now. You get on out of here. I need to get this ready for the estate sale."

"Alex and I don't think there'll be an estate sale."

Doris stopped across the desk from her niece. "You and your brother are not the executors, I am. And I say what gets thrown out, and what is valuable enough to sell. Now stop touching those papers! Get your hands off that. Suppose the police..."

"The police?" She jumped her gaze up, made eye contact; her dimple gleamed. "Isn't there a statue of limitations on crimes?"

"That's statute of limitations, and it only applies to civil crimes. Leave that alone!" she demanded once more.

"Hmm, this appears to be some kind of letter to himself, or a journal, but not quite a journal. Says here, it's 1925, the modern age... I don't want to go on. I don't want to do this anymore..."

"What? The last tenant rented the place twenty years ago."

"Nope. Appears only one guy lived here, and he stayed for over eighty years."

"What's the name on that page?" She pointed. "Does it say who he was?"

Christine picked up the packet of papers—dirt and insect carcasses scattered. "Let's see," she said as she thumbed through, hacking a few times, "Arlo, Arlo Ellison. Oh look, listen to this. "I done what they asked me. I worked day and night. The folks up at the big house never pay me much mind, unless they want someone done." Christine grunted. "Oh, Arlo, you were not supposed to say that."

Doris' face was stony, her complexion beet-red. "I have no effing idea what you're yammering about, Christy. Your grandmother kept all of this a secret. Your daddy and me knew nothing about this place, we never saw any hint there was a cottage back here when we were coming up."

"She didn't want to tell you and Daddy, said you wouldn't understand. She only told me and Alexander." Both dimples anchored her smile. She carefully put the sheaf of papers back where she found them.

Doris was starting to feel that small, helpless twist in her chest, the knot in her belly. The withering of will and self-confidence that her mother's presence always caused. "Christy, I don't know what you're talking about. I took care of your Mammaw my entire life. And now that she's gone, I'm handling her estate. We're going to get an appraisal. We might also need a police officer to take a look, in case... I mean, we don't want any legal loose ends." She tried to keep her voice from quivering but it seemed to break the harder she tried to keep it even.

"No, no you're not going to do any of those things, Aunt Doris." She tilted her head as she maneuvered her hips back to the front of the desk and stood right beside her aunt. Her face expressed pity. She gripped the older woman's upper arms. "Didn't Mammaw tell you anything?"

Doris stared into her niece's blue eyes, blinked her own blankly.

"How do you think the Whitelaw family got so much land, and this big house, and kept it! Through two world wars, the Great Depression? How do you think they could get away with all the crazy things they did and said, and no one stood in their way?"

"What in the blazes are you talking about? Momma was a heiress, your Pappaw died young and left her a fortune..."

"I know, honey, that's the family legend. But she told me and Alex the truth. I'm not old enough to serve as executor, so she picked you. She figured her son Amos, your brother, my daddy would be a lot more trouble for me to handle."

"What?"

"Oh... I don't know how to explain this." Christine shook her hands as if drying them off. "Okay, listen. Arlo Ellison was very talented. He carved exact likenesses of people. Before him, there'd been other wood carvers who lived nearby, going back centuries. But he was the first to occupy this cottage, and he was the last. My grandmother and your grandmother, and hers, they kind of knew how to bless the wood ... I don't know how else to explain it. I mean, look around you. Just look! Aren't they amazing! Look at them all! I think the earliest one is from the late 1700s." She laughed.

Doris' mouth dropped open. She circled in place then moved closer to a cabriole-legged display case. She raised her chin as she studied the different figurines inside through her bottom bifocal lenses. "They're people, dressed in hoop skirts. Some soldiers too, looks like from the Civil War." She peered more closely at the carvings immediately in front of her, one after the other. Each seemed to have a different grain, different color variations. Some looked to be made of oak or pine, others cherry or possibly hickory. Doris sniffed and drew back her head, thrust it forward once more. "Something's weird about these things." She studied the tiny faces behind the glass on the shelf below. All the little eyes were wide, the mouths set in a grimace or round of surprise and pain. She straightened and stepped back in one motion. "Something's wrong with them."

"Wrong? Totally not! They're fantastic! I mean, it's like we're gods and we have all these little humans that we can move around, control their destiny."

"What?" Doris felt completely confused. She stared at the tall, lumpy girl with the oily hair and bad skin, backed away. "What in the hell are you talking about?"

"It's okay, Auntie Doris. Mammaw told me all about it years ago. She said Alex and I have that way about us. She left me instructions. Anyway," she put a huge arm around Doris' shoulders, "we have to be very careful with all these little people here. Leave them where they are, I think. From how I understand it, they're not quite dead, not quite alive."

"What? But we're going to divide up the land, sell it to developers. We'll all be rich!" She hugged Doris hard. So hard it ached. "That's what you and Daddy want to do. I don't think that's going to happen. Alex and me, we've found a very talented artist. She works in wood! Now you just pick up those buckets. We'll go back to the house and have a talk and you'll see how things stand. If Mammaw had lived another couple of years, I'd be legal age, and you and Daddy wouldn't have been bothered. Now, I hope you-all won't make any trouble for us."

"But, I have to clean... I have to get the house ready..." Doris felt cold.

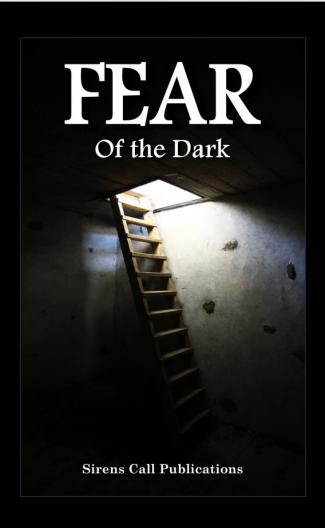
"You just wait," Christine sang as she thrust the mop and broom against her aunt's chest, forcing the woman to grab them, then hauled up the buckets by the handles. She ushered Doris toward the front door. "It's been a struggle for this family since old Arlo disappeared, but everything is going to be fine now!"

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Rivka grew up in South Florida and currently lives in West Virginia. In the 1980s she published stories in The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, the Far Frontiers anthologies, and the Women of Darkness anthology, and more recently has placed stories with The Give Anthology, The Literary Hatchet, Riding Light Review, Fantastic Floridas, and The Sirens Call, including the 2013, 2014, 2015, and 2016 Women in Horror issues. She has a BA in history, MAs in sociology and counseling, and a BSN.

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# FEAR: Of the Dark

Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and iTunes



## The Old Barn Door | L.S. Engler

"That blasted barn door's open again," Elia said as she leaned against the window frame, looking out with a frown. They had tried to fix it; new latches, new hinges, even new wood, but the slow, creeping creak of it had pulled her out of sleep again, despite the lack of wind.

"I'm going to check it out," she decided, reaching for a sweater.

"You always check it out," Kyle murmured, rolling away, pulling the covers closer.

"Aren't you curious?"

"No, I'm sleepy. There's never anything there, love."

Kyle was right, there wasn't, and it drove her crazy. It made no sense, and she kept hoping to catch some intruder in the act or some animal scurrying around. And something felt different this time. There was something in the air, causing her to shiver slightly in the unseasonably chilly morning. She approached the barn with the usual caution, peering into the darkness as she called out to the creatures or trespassers she imagined might be inside.

"Hello?" she asked, stepping forward. "Anyone there? Please come out. I won't hurt you."

But they might hurt her. The thought had not escaped her, though she realized the sense to bring a flashlight had. Still, she walked in further, wondering what might be lurking there in the shadows that gathered in the empty rows of stalls, the ghosts of horses, the specters of the past.

This creepy old barn. Elia rubbed her arms as she peered up into the lofts, wondering why they didn't just tear the thing down years ago when they first moved in. They didn't even use the thing, they were just too lazy and apathetic to bother with it.

"Hello?" she called again, and the wind howled, wind that wasn't there before, wind strong enough to slam the barn door shut behind her. She gasped, plummeted into darkness, and turned to open the door again. But this time, the door had no intention of opening ever again.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — L.S. Engler writes from outside of Chicago, though she grew up chasing dragons in the woods of Michigan. She is the editor of the World Unknown Review and is currently wrapping up a trilogy about zombies called The Slayer Saga. Her work has most recently appeared in The Saturday Evening Post, Potters Field Six, and Dark Fuse Magazine.

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Through Clouded Eyes: A Zombie's Point of View

Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, iTunes, and Kobo

## One Mile Up Goblin Creek | Stacy Fileccia

Go ahead.

Have another glass of wine.

You're gonna to need it.

What I'm about to do is logical. Reasonable. You'll see.

\*\*\*

Five years ago, I was sitting at the kitchen table crunching numbers late into the night when my son marched in, tracking mud.

He lumbered by me like a dead man walking, head hanging low, his beloved LED head lamp he'd won as part of a merit-badge challenge dangling from muddy fingers.

I'd sent him to bed hours before, so I managed, "Where've you been?"

He stopped, head lamp clattering to the floor.

For a long moment, silence sat between us like a giant, invisible toad.

Then he turned and blinked up at me from behind nerdy glasses.

"What happened to you?" I gushed, shaking him by the shoulders. Not only was he muddier than sin, but he had blood spray across his face. Was it animal blood from something he'd hunted?

"Mom, I need your help." His parched words sounded like they'd come from an old, crackly radio.

Emergency-Mom Mode kicked in. "D'ya think? Come on. I'll hose you down in the yard and bring you in for a nice, hot..."

He lifted his head and handed me one of his trademarked, heart-melting looks. "That's *not* what I mean." He sat down. "I'm in *real* trouble."

A thousand questions stormed my mind, but scaring the poor kid into clamming up would be foolish. Dangerous. I had to play it cool. "Do you mean... *ambulance* sort of trouble?" Man-oh-man, I hoped so. I looked at him sideways, shooting for a we're-in-thistogether sort of voice. "It's not the kind of trouble where I need to call the police, is it?" My voice was a little too squeaky.

He looked back down at his feet, which didn't quite reach the floor. "I did something really bad."

I stared hard at the blood spray. "Show me," I said.

\*\*\*

Like wailing ghosts, screech owls hooted as we hurried—shadow to shadow—through the scrub behind our house. Chill desert night air sliced through my hoodie. "So, Zack," I ventured, "want to tell me about the blood?"

His skinny frame shuddered. Then we both stopped. Normally a meandering trickle, Goblin Creek raged before us. Muddy. Deadly. I couldn't recall it raining in the last three months.

Had someone fallen in? His best friend, Tilly, maybe?

As if he'd read my mind, his thin words floated between us. "Tilly and I went exploring tonight. We found a cave a couple of months ago."

My heart caught in my throat. I thought about her big brown eyes and waist-length

pigtails.

I grabbed his hand and squeezed. "Is she trapped?"

He didn't move. Instead he probed my eyes with his, searching for... forgiveness?

The bright moon gave a sense of false day, and something shiny caught my peripheral vision. When I looked full on, I could see only branches moving. Something large had been watching us.

I shuddered, wishing I'd brought a machete. "Come on."

We moved quickly for a quarter mile. Then we stopped.

Here, Goblin Creek had gouged its muddy fingers into the path and formed pools of water. Using a fallen branch, I probed for the bottom of the first pool, but couldn't find it. We had to forge a new trail through the bristly scrub.

A wolf howled in the distance, sending shivers up my spine that stopped when I caught a familiar metallic scent riding the light wind. I opened my mouth to say something, but the scream of some unfortunate animal cut me off. It died a bloody, drawn-out death while the screech owls sang a triumphant dirge.

Visibly shaken, Zack grabbed my hand and ran.

By the time we stopped, my breaths were ripping through my lungs so hard I couldn't say anything.

"The cave's up there," said Zack, pointing up a sizable hill. Not winded at all, he set to climbing.

I had to wait a couple of minutes, but then, I clambered up too. What in the world was he going to show me? Blood spray meant an artery injury, right? Was it Tilly's blood?

I reached a lip midway and paused. My body had no business climbing hills. I was about to move on when a girl's desperate scream shot out of the cave.

It ended abruptly.

Eyes like a dead man's, Zack turned to me. "I took too long."

Heart slamming against my ribs, I climbed up the now frustratingly-muddy hill, desperation egging me on. The sharp, metallic scent I had caught earlier by Goblin Creek had become intense. I knew what it meant. My stomach rose and swelled in my throat as my body whined that it wasn't in shape for this.

My foot slipped.

"Mom!" Zack's face distorted in horror.

I slid as I flung my arms and legs around.

I hit the midway lip and bounced into a free fall. My scream chased me toward my death.

Something thin, long, and brown shot out of the hill. It whipped around my waist and stopped me bungee style. My neck wrenched, but in that instant, I realized it hadn't been paranoia swarming around me about the scent.

Indulf had found me.

After all these years, he'd found me.

And saved me from falling.

Tentacles. Long, strong, mud-covered tentacles—like those of an octopus but much thinner—adjusted my helpless body mid-air, wrapping themselves around me boa-constrictor style.

I fought. I kicked. I bit. I punched.

Instead of fighting back, the tentacles caressed me. Every time I moved, they held me more firmly, head to ankles.

My body stiffened against the firm, slimy nastiness.

Time felt suspended.

"Mom!" Zack was working his way down toward me.

I screamed, "Zack, run away!"

The tentacle caressing my face switched gears and shoved itself into my mouth. Then—to my utter horror—it yanked me into the hillside.

The mud felt hot and wet. It seeped into my ears and pores. My lungs screamed for air. All my existence welled within me, and blackness crept across my thoughts. I was going to die, and I couldn't even warn Zack about the man who'd found me.

\*\*\*

Wait a minute. I see you've finished your second glass. Want another? It gets weird from here on out.

\*\*\*

The tentacles gently set me down when I popped through the cave floor. I lay there trying to regain some semblance of reality. My brain couldn't process it all.

He'd found me.

After all my care.

Indulf's laughter boomed like a cacophony from heavy battle. "There she is. My little queen. The boy spoke true."

Other men's chuckles popped around me.

My throat constricted. I moved a strand of muddy hair from my eyes.

He stood before me. Massive. Wild. Rough in the face. Long, nasty hair. His tentacles coiled against his belly, and one of his henchmen tossed him a shirt. After he put it on, he looked almost human, except for the red-clay mud flowing visibly below his scarred skin.

"Vickie. So good to see you." He ran a finger along my jaw line. "Beautiful as ever."

I jerked away. "I'm covered with mud. Definitely not beautiful." Every reason I'd left him—and our world—flew through my mind. Invasions of peaceful lands. Bleeding innocents. Senseless destruction.

He laughed again. "You'll always be beautiful to me."

"Sweet words from a not-so-sweet guy."

Zack's voice came out in a squeak as he pulled himself into the mouth of the cave. "I'm sorry, Mom. He said he'd kill Tilly if I didn't bring you back."

"Go home, Zack."

Indulf laughed. "Yeah. Sure. Like I'm gonna let that happen."

Blocking Zack's escape, two of Indulf's men moved out of the shadows.

Zack stood in infinite tininess.

I glanced around as sounds bounced around the cave walls. The cave—illuminated by one of our camping lanterns, a fire flickering toward the back, and now Zack's head lamp—was about the size of a fast food restaurant and barely tall enough to give me head room. Then my eyes riveted on what I dreaded most to see.

\*\*\*

No. It's not time you got home to your family.

Actually, no, I'm not crazy, and I don't care who is depending on you to feed them. Play nice with me, and I'll be nice to you. Have another drink.

That's right.

Nice and easy.

\*\*\*

I had hoped Indulf would spare Zack seeing our people's most gruesome practices.

But he hadn't.

The evidence stood before me as I glanced along the cave walls.

If they were made of snow, it would have looked like twenty or more snowmen standing like guards. But with human heads. And no snow. Only hand-crafted mud balls. Blood flowed over them like thin icing on a cake. Being hideously and terribly alive, all the heads stared with rapt attention at the unfolding scene.

In a state of pure pity, Tilly's big brown eyes wept from atop her mud balls.

Zack ran to her.

My eyes roved about until I found the other evidence of Indulf's barbarism. Strips of human flesh—taken while the heads looked on—was being turned into jerky over the fire in the back of the cave. The scent sickened me as much as the sight.

Obviously, Zack knew almost everything.

I still hoped he didn't know about me.

\*\*\*

Yeah, you're going to have to stop that screaming. How does my tentacle taste? I think it's like dark chocolate with almonds. That's why I usually pair it with red wine beforehand. No more wine for you, though. Now for the rest of my story.

\*\*\*

Indulf boomed again. "How'd you do it, Vickie?"

"How'd I do what?"

"That kid has your eyes. He can't be more than ten."

I'd fled my world fifteen years before.

"He's nine."

"Like I was saying. You've got yourself a half-breed son right here. No one's seen you in all this time, and that boy is definitely yours."

Zack spoke to Tilly's decapitated head in low whispers while they nuzzled foreheads.

I looked at Indulf. "Yeah. He's mine. We couldn't have kids. Remember?"

"Of course, I remember. If I'm not mistaken, that kid has human DNA."

"He does." What would Indulf do to Trent, the man I had truly loved for almost fifteen years? What would he do with Zack?

"That creek out there came from your boy."

News to me.

Zack had shown no signs whatsoever of being anything other than human. There are signs, you know? A progression of skills. As babies, our skin and hair change color without rhyme or reason. Random body parts morph when we concentrate too hard. Once that starts happening, we're prone to bringing back a friend or two from other worlds throughout childhood. None of that happened with Zack.

Well, none of it happened that I knew of.

"He has all the raw skills of a young Mudslinger, but none of our marks. Do you know that?"

Looking down at the floor, I shook my head. "No way. He's shown no signs. None at all."

"You've got to make a choice, Honey. Either you practice our ways and teach him, or I kill you both. And whomever he calls 'daddy."

I stared at Indulf's cold face, which pulsed, raw and muddy.

"You bet your sweet tentacles he made every bit of that mud." He tipped his head thoughtfully. "Well, all of it except what I made to save your sorry life. I'm over you. I came here to take revenge, and I found... a son. Not *my* son born of my loins, but *our* son by all the laws, Dear Queen Vickie. All the criteria has been met for him to live. As far as I'm concerned he's mine half the year." He smiled. "Win-win. He can even keep his little girlfriend as a pet."

"Hey, Indulf, look what I found." Another of Indulf's henchmen came out from where the human jerky hung smoking. He half dragged a little guy from Lautus behind him, who stood about waist high, was dressed in a fine suit and a bowler hat, and clip-clopped along on squiddy tentacles—with hooves.

The poor thing vibrated with fear.

"Perfect timing, Butch," Indulf roared. "All right, little man, it's time you showed your mom what you're made of."

Zack couldn't take his eyes off Tilly.

"Zack! Do or die, my friend."

Indulf grabbed the Lautus guy by the neck and threw him bodily at Zack.

Tilly screamed.

The other heads held their breaths.

Zack—my little, sweet, nerdy Zack—flung out slender tentacles of his own. They caught the Lautus guy mid-air. While the unfortunate guy screamed, Zack's scissor tentacle danced in the air around him like an enraged snake. It cut the Lautus guy's head off cleanly with one crisp movement and bathed in his blood, spilling and spraying from the guy's body.

My hopes for Zack leading a quiet life here on this world evaporated.

Zack spun a mud ball worthy of admiration with his Mudslinger glands at his wrists while pumping life mud into the head. As he finished the second mud ball, Tilly grew silent.

Zack attached the head to the mud body.

A mouse looking up at a giant, Zack's voice sounded tiny. "Satisfied?"

"Not quite."

Zack nodded. Not looking at me, he knelt next to the writhing Lautus guy's body. He shoved a tentacle in through the gaping neck wound and pulled out the still-beating heart.

Blood sprayed on Zack's face and dripped down his arms.

Zack smiled with pride.

\*\*\*

Aren't you glad you had those drinks? It'll make the rest go much easier.

You see, on my world, you kill, or you die.

That's where you come in.

My apologies for mud sliding down your throat. I detest the messiness of it all.

I'm sorry about the pain you will feel when I rip out *your* beating heart. That's why I give my prey a drink beforehand.

Indulf wouldn't.

And neither would Zack.

My choice is Zack's life or yours.

It's you who's gonna to die.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Stacy Fileccia, winner of the 2016 Wicked Women Writers contest, is an Atlanta transplant living in Dayton. A technical writer/editor by day, she wordsmiths fantasy and horror stories while listening to profound pop-punk rock music by night. Her stories have appeared in Through Clouded Eyes, The Sirens Call, and Buzzle. She holds a BA and the Professional Writing Certificate from WSU.

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## **Burning Love** | Amy Grech

Shelia Kiernan gets ready to turn in when Robert, her husband of seven years hops in the shower. His iPhone won't stop chirping. He's no doubt rubbing one out, his dastardly deed, obscured by steam and quickly washed away without a trace. She swipes it from the nightstand, easily guesses his passcode, 1965, his birth year, and swipes through his text messages. Her jaw drops when she sees hundreds of salacious sexts from Mellanie Montgomery, his Physician's Assistant. A wildly successful Cosmetic Plastic Surgeon with a Park Avenue office in Manhattan, his day typically starts at 6:00 a.m. and often ends at 10:00 p.m. Grueling hours. Looks like he's found a convenient way to ease all of that pent-up tension.

She comes to bed dressed in her alluring, silky red teddy, brown curls caress her shoulders; her husband reclines in bed busy with his iPhone, tucked in, all warm and toasty. Shelia quickly reaches under the burgundy comforter, between her husband's legs and finds that she can't hold his attention.

"I'm really not feeling it! Can't you see I'm busy?" Robert, a fiery redhead, grabs her arm and clamps down with a vice-like grip.

"Oww! You're hurting me!" She drops the comforter, frozen like a statue.

"You asked for it!" He grits his teeth.

Shelia rolls her eyes.

"Why don't you make yourself useful for a change and bring me a nightcap? Dewar's, rocks. You know how I like it." Robert scowls.

She sighs. "Yeah, just what the doctor ordered."

Shelia storms out of the room, snatching her bottle of Ambien from the bathroom medicine cabinet on her way to the full bar in the living room. She sighs, pulls a frosted highball glass from the shelf, takes some ice from the mini-fridge, and plunks the cubes in. *Clink!* She takes six pink pills from the bottle, slams them down on the bar. Raising the glass, as if making a toast, an overdue farewell. The highball glass collides with the bar, in one fell swoop, pulverizing the pills into a baby pink haze. Shelia gently lifts the glass and sweeps the remnants in.

A Hooters matchbook rests on the remarkably cold, black marble next to Robert's precious bottle of Dewar's. That gives her an idea. She pours Scotch over ice, smiling for the first time in months. A quick stir with an orange swizzle stick, also from Hooters, helps this potent nightcap mask its murkiness. Shelia grabs the matchbook and takes a quick detour to the garage for some lighter fluid, next to the grill in the corner before delivering the drink to the good doctor.

Drink in hand, she saunters back into the bedroom and hands him the glass. "Bottoms up!"

"It's about time. What took you so long? It's not brain surgery for Christ's sake! I'm dying of thirst!" He grabs it without a shred of gratitude.

Shelia chuckles. "You can't rush perfection...I wanted to make your drink extra special..."

"Whatever. I don't see what's so great about it," Robert mutters, then chugs it like a frat boy, wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and slams the empty highball glass down on the nightstand next to his phone.

"Oh, you will." She winks.

He frowns, suddenly concerned. "What's the lighter fluid for?"

Shelia smirks. "I know how much you love barbecue! You're in for a hot time tonight."

"It's too late for a barbecue. I—" His eyelids grow heavy; he collapses in a heap.

She opens the lighter fluid and douses her husband with it before striking the match against the cover; it hisses to life, smells faintly of sulfur. Shelia tosses it in Robert's lap, which ignites with a dramatic *whoosh!* As bright yellow flames hungrily engulf him Robert regains consciousness, shrieks, flailing furiously on the bed; a charbroiled Irish bastard getting his just desserts.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Never trust a man who gives into his lust!

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Amy Grech has sold over 100 short stories to various anthologies and magazines, including Dead Harvest, Expiration Date, Needle Magazine, and Shrieks and Shivers from the Horror Zine. Amy is an Active Member of the Horror Writers Association. New Pulp Press published her book of noir stories, Rage and Redemption in Alphabet City.

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## The Centerpiece | Dee Langone Bonney

Gina and Bob were newlyweds and had just bought their first home on the lake. While rummaging through the attic, Gina came across a beautiful porcelain centerpiece that had a lake painted on one side and was adorned with purple jewels on the other. She brought it downstairs and displayed it on the coffee table.

One evening, the glimmer of moonlight landed on the centerpiece, catching her eye. As it seemed to beckon her, she stood before it. It whispered to her, instructing her to walk to the lake. Allowing curiosity to get the best of her, she obeyed. A creature with purple scales, green eyes and long claws appeared before her. Unprovoked, it bit her, leaving her feeling ill throughout the night.

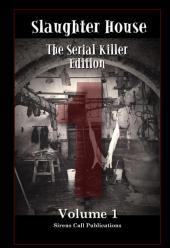
The next evening, Gina was once more beckoned to the lake under the will of the centerpiece, but this time she was told to bring Bob. He followed her willingly. The creature came up from under the water, biting Bob and lulling him into a trance. He, too, fell ill afterward.

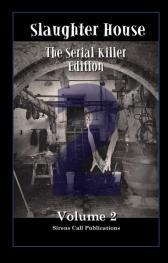
Over the next several months, Gina and Bob's conditions worsened. They suffered through fatigue and fever. Their stomachs began to protrude and they experienced severe bouts of vomiting. Though they wished to see a doctor, the centerpiece would not will them to leave their home. They found that the strange and beautiful decoration held a power over them and the lake house.

In time, the creature summoned them to the lake once more. It lulled them into that very same trance and inserted its claws into their abdomens. While they remained blank, it ripped its offspring from their bodies, then fed on the couple, leaving no trace that they had ever existed. With a snarl, the creature returned to the watery depths with its offspring in its arms, knowing that in just a few more years, the centerpiece would provide them with proper hosts once more.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Dee Langone Bonney was born and raised in Brooklyn, NY, and later moved to Middletown, NY, where she met her husband Richard Bonney. Together, they had one child, named Rory J. Roche. Dee always loved writing poems and short stories.

Twitter: @dee62958







All men are created equal, or so it is said...



Available on Amazon

### Stillborn | Sheri White

Erin put a forkful of cake into her mouth. The sweet pink and blue icing oozed between her teeth, making them ache, but she didn't care. She could barely taste the cake anyway, nor could she hear the happy chatter of moms and moms-to-be around her. This month's pregnancy test wasn't even needed this morning. Her period started while Erin was in the shower, clots dropping from her body and splattering on the tile before being sucked into the drain. Erin had been so sure she'd have her own happy news to share at her best friend's baby shower today. Instead, she was cramping and bleeding and trying not to cry.

They were celebrating the impending birth of Jenna's third child—her first little girl. Erin and her husband Alec had been trying for two years now to have a baby. They had both been tested; they shouldn't have been having so much trouble conceiving. Yet they remained childless.

Erin put her paper plate down on the coffee table. She couldn't finish the dessert. She just wanted to go home and sob. She looked at the women around her, in various stages of pregnancy, and pictured them all miscarrying, bloody and slippery fetuses plopping onto the floor from between their legs, little limbs flailing about as they died.

Jesus, what's wrong with me? That's fucked up.

"Hey, Erin! How's it going?" Abby, Jenna's younger sister, sat down next to her. She sported her own pregnancy bump, her first.

Erin forced a smile. "Everything's fine. So when are you due?"

"In about four months. Bobby and I are so excited. We've even picked out names and furnished the nursery." She rubbed her belly and beamed, glowing as only a pregnant woman can.

Erin's smile faltered. "That's great. I'm really happy for you."

Abby was so wrapped up in her joy that she didn't notice Erin's lack of enthusiasm. "So when will it be your turn? It would be so much fun for us all to raise babies together."

"Oh, I don't know. Soon I hope. Hey, will you excuse me for a minute?" Erin managed to get to the bathroom before she broke down in tears. She clutched her stomach, her uterus convulsing and cramping. She could feel the blood and mucous trickling past her tampon. She grabbed her purse on the way out of the bathroom and discreetly left the party.

\*\*\*

"So how was the shower, babe? Did you have a good time?" Alec stroked Erin's long hair as she sat at the kitchen table with a glass of wine.

"Awful. Just like I knew it would be. I mean, I'm happy for Jenna and everything, but she's on her third baby and I can't even have one! It's just not fair." A sob escaped her throat. Alec leaned down and put his arms around her.

"I'm so sorry, babe. Are you sure you don't want to go for the in vitro option? We have enough in the bank to give it a try."

She turned around to look at him, and shook her head.

"But we shouldn't have to! There's nothing wrong with us. Why can't we have a baby like everybody else? I want one so badly, Alec." A tear rolled down her cheek, breaking Alec's heart.

"I'm crampy. I'm going to go upstairs and take a hot bath." She walked towards the stairs, defeat evident in every step she took. Alec watched her go, his own sadness matching hers.

\*\*\*

Steam rose off the water in the cool bathroom. The hot water relaxed Erin, relieving her cramps a bit. She felt peaceful for the first time all day. Then she coughed, hard, and felt her body expel another clot. It rose to the surface of the water, tendrils of blood snaking towards Erin. In a sudden fit of rage, she picked up the bloody ball and smashed it against the bathtub wall. It popped as it hit the tile, and blood sprayed the bathroom.

\*\*\*

A few weeks later, Erin was holding Jenna's baby girl in the hospital. Jenna lay against her pillows, looking exhausted but happy. Flowers and balloons decorated the room.

"She's beautiful, Jen."

"Isn't she? She has her daddy's eyes, I think."

"You're so lucky. Oh! What's her name?"

"Hannah. I know it's kind of old-fashioned, but we named her after my grandmother."

"It's a sweet name." Hannah started to cry, and Jenna held out her arms. She undid her gown and put the baby to her breast.

"Look, I've got to go, Jenna. Call me when you get home, okay?"

"Sure." Jenna didn't even look up; she was intent on her new baby. The sound of Hannah suckling followed Erin out to the hall. She practically ran to her car.

\*\*\*

Erin sat on the toilet seat, a big grin lighting up her face. She looked at the test stick again, just to make sure. Two lines. Positive.

"Well?" Alec stood in the doorway. He could tell by the look on his wife's face that they finally had good news.

She jumped up and threw her arms around Alec's neck. "We're going to have a baby! Finally!"

\*\*\*

Erin couldn't stop smiling for days. She saw babies everywhere she went, and cooed at them, knowing it wouldn't be long before she had her own child to hold in her arms. She even visited Jenna and her kids, and was able to enjoy them instead of getting wracked with jealousy.

Her OB/GYN gave her a clean bill of health and prenatal vitamins.

Morning sickness hit her at about six weeks, but she didn't even mind that. She'd heard an old wives' tale that said the sicker a pregnant woman got, the healthier the baby was. That was fine with her. Alec held her hair back every morning while she vomited the previous night's dinner into the toilet bowl, then gave her crackers and ginger ale when she got back into bed. She worked from home, so she didn't have to worry about getting to work while feeling so ill. Life was truly good.

\*\*\*

Erin was seven months along when she woke up in the middle of the night, knowing something was very wrong. She ran to the bathroom, and watched, horrified and scared, as blood oozed down her legs and puddled on the floor. A powerful cramp doubled her over in

pain and she called for Alec before passing out.

\*\*\*

"I'm so sorry, Erin," Dr. Matthews said. "We're not going to be able to save the baby. We won't know what happened until we perform an autopsy. But for now, we'll deliver the baby by Caesarean section tomorrow morning."

Erin sobbed, tears streaming down her face. Alec held her, helpless and numb. Dr. Matthews opened his mouth to speak, then shook his head instead. He patted Erin's hand and walked out of the hospital room.

"Alec, I don't think I can go through this. Is she really dead? Maybe they're wrong! I mean, I hadn't felt her kick in a few days, but I thought she was just crowded in there, or sleeping. If I had only known, maybe she could've been saved!"

"Honey, don't. The sonogram showed there was no heartbeat. She's probably been dead a few days."

"Don't say that!" Erin screamed. "That's our baby you're talking about!" She couldn't bear the thought of carrying a dead baby inside her body.

"Okay, okay. I'm sorry. But you have to get strong, babe. Please."

Erin buried her face in her hands and sobbed, her body shaking. "I can't, I can't."

The nurse came in with a syringe. "This will help her sleep. The doctor ordered it for her." She administered the sedative. A few moments later, Erin was asleep.

\*\*\*

The following day Erin was prepped for surgery.

"I want to be awake when they deliver her. Don't put me to sleep."

"I don't think that's a good idea, babe. Just let them put you out, and then this will all be behind us."

"No! I want to see my baby. I have to see her. Please. It won't be real unless I do."

Alec rubbed her back. "Okay, babe. Whatever you need."

\*\*\*

The anesthesiologist walked in the room. "Hi, Erin. I'm going to give you the epidural. It's only going to hurt for a minute, then you'll be numb below the waist."

He had Erin lean over, Alec holding her tightly. He sterilized the area, then inserted a needle into her spinal canal. She bit her lip to keep from crying out. He taped the needle to her back.

"Okay, everything's good. In a few minutes, you won't feel anything from the waist down. I'll see you in the delivery room."

Erin lay back on the pillows, crying softly.

"Did it hurt, babe?"

"Did it hurt? Are you fucking kidding me? What doesn't hurt right now? My heart is breaking, Alec. A needle in my spine doesn't even register."

Alec could do nothing but look at his wife helplessly and hold her hand.

\*\*\*

"Okay, Erin. You're going to feel a little pressure here, but no pain." Erin felt like she was being unzipped as the scalpel traced a red streak across her bikini line. She could feel her flesh being spread apart. Then there was a tugging sensation as Dr. Matthews lifted the baby from her womb.

"Are you sure she's dead, Doctor? Are you sure?"

"I'm sorry, Erin. She's dead. She's obviously been dead for a couple weeks."

"I want to see her."

Dr. Matthews nodded, having been through this before. He cut the umbilical cord and handed the baby to the nurse. She wrapped the baby in a blanket and handed her to Erin.

The baby was gray, her skin mottled and her lips blue. Erin cradled the baby in her arms and kissed her on the cheek. The baby was still warm from being inside her. Tears ran down Alec's face as he watched his wife.

"Isn't she beautiful, Alec?" She snuggled the baby against her breast.

Alec nodded and stroked the baby's face with his finger. He didn't trust himself to speak.

The doctor removed the gray, brackish placenta and stitched Erin up. She could feel the epidural wearing off now that the anesthesiologist had left.

"Erin. I'm sorry, but we need to take her now." Dr. Matthews held his arms out.

"No. Please let me hold her for a while. I need to say goodbye."

Dr. Matthews patted her arm. "Okay, but only for a few minutes." He beckoned to the operating team to clear the room. "I'll be back shortly. I'll prescribe some pain killers for you as well." He turned to Alec. "Can I talk to you out in the hall? We have some arrangements to discuss."

Together they left the room, leaving Erin alone with the baby.

\*\*\*

"Hey, little one. I'm your mommy. Your name is Olivia." She stroked the baby's gray cheek, gently running her finger down Olivia's cooling skin. "Oh, you're chilly. Mommy will fix it." Erin pulled the blanket tighter around the baby, making sure her little feet were covered.

"Oh, God! You can't be dead, you can't! I've waited for you for so long!"

She held the baby close to her chest, rocking back and forth.

Mommy.

Erin stopped rocking. There was no way. She couldn't have heard that.

Mommy.

Erin looked at her baby. Olivia's eyes were still closed, her tiny body stiff and cold. But Erin knew she wasn't dead. She couldn't be.

"Maybe they took you from me too soon. You just weren't ready yet, were you?"

Erin was a mother now. She knew what she had to do. She gently unwrapped her baby and wiped the slippery, cottage-cheese-like coating from her body. Erin lifted her gown, feeling along her stomach until she found the incision. The numbness from the epidural had worn off, and just touching the stitches sent flashes of pain throughout her body.

She used her fingernail to rip at the stitches, clenching her teeth together so she couldn't cry out. She put her feet in the stirrups and braced herself. Blood poured from the wound as she opened it up. The stitches lay in a pile next to her, like dismembered spider legs. Blood and mucous dripped from her hand onto the clean bed. She wiped her hand on the sheets then gently turned her baby so that her feet were facing Erin.

She tried to curl Olivia into the fetal position, but the baby's stiff limbs wouldn't bend. Erin didn't want to break the baby's bones, so she gave up trying. *Olivia will curl up on her own once she's back where she should be*.

She held the incision apart with her right hand, feeling her skin rip as she tugged it open. She cried out in pain, but didn't stop. She thrust Olivia into the opening, feet first, feeling tiny toes pressing against her organs. She gasped in pain and stopped pushing, trying to catch her breath.

Erin wiped sweat away from her face with the back of her free hand. Blood streaked her face. Determined, she grabbed the baby with both hands and forced her up inside the incision.

Something ruptured inside her, but she didn't care, even though the pain was excruciating. She screamed, trying to get the baby to fit back into her womb. Her body could no longer accommodate Olivia. Erin yanked at her skin, widening the incision. Her skin tore, globs of yellow fat mixed with blood oozed from the gaping wet wound, plopping onto the floor beside the bed.

The tiny body, now bent and bruised, lay in the wide gap of her torso. Erin tugged on either side of the gash to close the incision, but the flesh slipped from her gore-covered hands. She fell back against the pillows, consciousness fading as her blood dripped onto the sleek white tiles.

Alec and the doctor burst into the room when they heard Erin scream. Alec vomited at the sight before him. Blood soaked the sheet under his wife. Her hands were bloody too, as well as her face where she rubbed it. He dropped to his knees at the sight of Olivia's little head poking out from the hole in Erin's stomach, lolling with the rise and fall of Erin's last breaths.

Erin smiled through the pain, her face pale and her eyes vacant.

With the last reserve of strength she had left, she whispered to her husband. "It's okay, Alec—it's going to be okay. She wasn't ready to be born yet. She just needs some more time inside me. Just a little more time."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Sheri White lives in Maryland with her family. She's a mom to three girls, ages 28, 21, and 19, and has instilled a love of all things scary in them as well. Her husband Chris is very understanding. In addition to reading and writing horror, she's also the editor of Morpheus Tales magazine. Sheri's fiction has been published in many small press magazines and anthologies.



## Everyone's a Critic | Jennifer Mccullah

Bradley opened Twitter and read the new tweets by Movie Guru Guy.

@Bhartmoviemaker Rising Tide was garbage! Out of all your terrible movies this one's the worst.

@Bhartmoviemaker Horrible acting + predictable plot + unrealistic storyline = another Bradley Hart movie.

Bradley threw his phone, "Damn wannabe Roger Ebert. I'm done with this fucking stalker." Movie\_Guru\_Guy didn't realize that freedom of speech did not mean freedom from consequence. He over-shared on social media, so finding him was easy. Bradley filmed the crying

middle-aged man and said, "I think you'll find my first attempt at horror, *painfully* realistic. I promise you won't predict what happens next."

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Jennifer Mccullah is a writer from Kentucky. She lives with her girlfriend and the two coolest Chihuahuas on the planet.

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## **Highway 54** | *Tabitha Thompson*

Brown teddy bear with standard stitching and right eye removed, soaked from the rain on highway 54. It was then his life had changed. It was only a few miles from where he figured that for once his life would finally come back together, but during that moment it was replaced with fear, something that he never knew until he looked into the eyes of his son. Everything except for the smells that day were a distant memory. The smell of the air thickening in his nostrils as it happened, the smell of the rain kissed with humidity, and the smell of blood. From his lips and nose to his glass covered car seats and his son, the scent was all around him, a constant reminder of that particular moment.

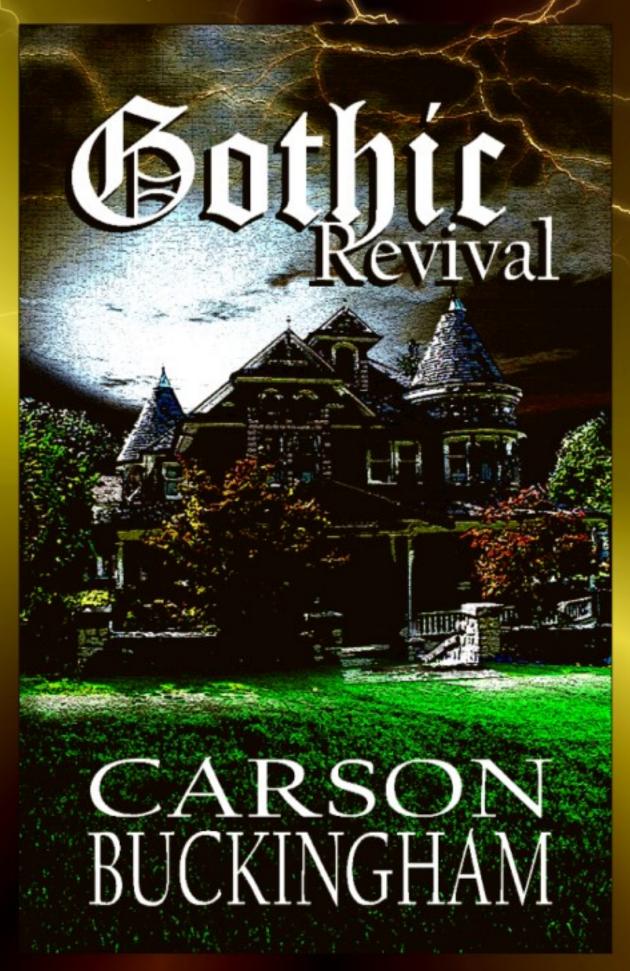
As he clutched the now tattered teddy bear in his arms, he tried to forget, but it was inevitable, the final moments in the car with his son were still there, including the tiny shards of bloody glass hidden in the creases on the road. Blue and red lights were in the distance, and as they were coming closer, it sank in. He wanted nothing more than to have the love of his life back, their lives back that were filled with laughter and love. Improper placement of the car seat is what he would tell the police. He had no choice, it was the only way he could keep his marriage.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Tabitha Thompson writes and lives in Florida. She was born with the desire to tell horror stories and a lover of the written word. Her work has appeared in several issues of Sirens Call Publications with many more to come. Even with a day job, she draws inspiration from emotions and turns them into a story that taps into her readers' dark soul.

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"Excuse me, did I hear you were looking for work?" but with the job come a series of unusual conditions...



Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, & iStore

### The Rose Tattoo | Donna Cuttress

Clara had happily received the envelope in happier times, a besotted lovers gift, when they had been together for only a few weeks. Melanie had presented her with a black envelope with the reddest of roses on its front and a plump tattooed heart across the opening on the reverse. Written in curlicued script was 'To my angel, with love from your devil' ribboned around it. How could she resist? They had vowed to go together, and get a tattoo that meant something to them both, as Clara had done with others, but the fascination had worn thin for her and they had 'the talk' a few days later. The apartment still had some of Melanie's clothes laying dumped in a laundry basket, shared books and favorite records gathering dust. After sporadically cleaning her apartment, Clara had boxed Melanie's things up and decided to drop them at her mother's house, unaware of the news to follow.

"She had fallen asleep, been crying of course, mascara everywhere, perfect half moons of misery on the pillow case... and she never woke up, my girl fell asleep and never woke up."

Melanie's mother still gripped the box; as her hands shook, the contents rattled.

"The coroner said otherwise, but I know she died of a broken heart, no one will tell me anything else!"

She threw Clara a hate filled look, her teeth bared as she almost snarled,

"You've never had your heart broken I'll bet, but it'll happen to you one day and I hope it hurts!"

She stepped back into the house, dropped the box on the floor and slammed the door.

\*\*\*

The next few days passed in a whiskey imbibed fugue. Friends, when they heard, were shocked. Had they wondered about Melanie? When had the funeral been held? Why didn't anyone attend? And then they all agreed that she was a very quiet girl, very private, maybe even a little bit boring. No wonder she wasn't missed. Clara dutifully cried, said Melanie's mother had never liked her and she would never get over Melanie's death, *never*. After a time her friends rolled their kohled eyes. One friend even asked Clara in the dripping stinking bathroom of a nightclub,

"Why are you so upset? You dumped her remember? You said she bored you... you're faking all this, right? The tears? The songs? The bad poetry..."

Those words prickled her hangover as she sipped the too hot coffee the next day.

"How fucking dare they! How fucking dare they think that! I'm grieving, I'm suffering!"

She began searching through drawers and boxes for the black envelope. She ran a finger over the inscription across the heart and read out the address.

"Tattoo Jacs, The Old Ticket Office, Under the Railway Bridge, The High Street. Call first to make an appointment. Drop ins pay extra..."

Clara called and spoke to a man who asked her three times what her name was over the noise of the tattoo gun, then asked her twice how to spell it. He asked who had bought the voucher and the gun fell silent when she told him. He didn't ask how to spell 'Melanie.' They arranged the time and then he abruptly hung up. The monotonous dialing tone surprised her. Clara had never been hung up on. Then she heard it, a cry, a desperate sob.

"Hello?"...Hello?"

She looked at the screen of her phone, Melanie's face flashed across it as the tone continued. Clara disconnected the line, then checked her contacts. She had deleted Melanie's picture when they had split. Maybe she needed a new phone?

\*\*\*

The next afternoon she stood outside what was the old ticket office for the now long closed railway station at the end of a dying high street. An old wooden door had a sign screwed onto it, 'Tattoo Jacs,' she pushed it open and found herself in a small yard facing the door to the Parlor. There was another more elaborately decorated sign on it. The opening times were surrounded by intricate drawings of Japanese koi, ferocious dragons and angry Samurai warriors. In each corner was an old fashioned heart similar to the one on her envelope, but these were speared with a jeweled dagger with blood dripping onto bunches of red roses. She tapped on the door, suddenly feeling nervous.

Why am I nervous? I've had a tattoo before.

Subconsciously she rubbed the Maori pattern that circled her upper right arm through her sweater, and had a flashback of how drunk she was when she got 'long life and good health' in Chinese script on her thigh. Other past loves.

The door opened. He seemed normal, slicked back graying hair, very clean hands, black tee shirt and jeans. The parlor was similar to every other she had seen. Drawings pinned on the wall, inks in boxes and needles in plastic. A pile of yellowing tattoo magazines were stored on a shelf and pinned to the ceiling were fading Polaroid photographs of various customers smiling through the pain. It was small, with space for only two chairs, drop ins would have to wait in the yard.

Clara pointed to the one of the rose pictures in a large book of designs, as he crossed through her name in a battered leather ledger.

"I want this one please. Could you intertwine some leaves around it and on the stem can I have two thorns with some blood on them? They're to signify me and my girlfriend who died... very recently."

She turned away waiting for sympathy, but he closed the ledger and said, "Of course I can do that, sign here."

He handed her a document which she signed without reading, she knew all the dangers of allergies, and the necessary aftercare. She sat in a battered old dentist chair and extended her left arm on a rest. Clara ran a finger over the delicate inner skin of her forearm.

"You don't want her name? Your girlfriend?"

She thought for a moment.

"No."

He stared at her for a split second too long then pressed a switch on the floor with his foot. The buzzing kicked in as he prepared to outline the tattoo into her arm.

"Don't you need to apply a transfer?"

He smiled.

"I've done so many of these. I could do them with my eyes closed... but don't worry, I won't."

\*\*\*

'Trust her to get me a voucher for the shittiest tattoo place.' Clara thought as she daubed at the reddened swelling on her arm with Vaseline. She carefully avoided the angry skin as she slipped on a tee shirt and got into bed.

"If my arm goes septic, I'll fucking sue the bastard," she said as she carefully lay down on her right side.

Clara woke the following morning feeling like she was coming down with flu, there was blood on her pillow, the sheet was covered in thin red sprinkles, pinprick arcs of bright vermillion. She sat up quickly, and her head spun as she examined her arm. The skin was completely healed. The tattoo looked like it had been on her arm for years, yet the color was still vibrant and the edging crisp.

'He's an artist! A genius!' she thought. The rose looked like it had just been picked from a garden, the blood appeared viscously dripping from each thorn.

She tenderly touched the skin, which now felt warm but with no redness, as she admired the tattoo in the mirror.

"Let anyone say I'm not mourning now," she whispered and went to shower.

All day she showed off her new tattoo, pushing her sleeve up for everyone to notice, forcing a tear whenever she explained about the thorns, but as the day progressed she began to feel pain in her arm. Intermittent like the 'sharp scratch' a nurse would always warn you of as she was about to dig a syringe in your arm or the snap of a piercing gun in an unfrozen earlobe. The pain intensified so that she would lose her breath, and have to wait for it to pass. Her boss told her to go home, she looked awful, maybe she was having a reaction to the new tattoo?

The journey home seemed to take forever, as the pain heightened. As she closed her front door Clara felt the crack of her knuckles as her bones popped against newly swollen tendons. She threw off her gloves to examine her hands. The skin was being drawn on, thin black strokes appeared through the pores, spreading like a disease and then almost bubbling within it was a dull bottle green color. The outline and shading twisted its way in between each finger and around her wrist. There was a buzzing, loud and violent in her ears. It sounded like the tattoo inking gun, pulsing as it repetitively gouged ink into her skin. Her breathing stopped as she tried to comprehend what she was seeing. The tattoo reached her fingertips and as each nail lifted from the skin and dropped like a leaf in autumn, she screamed. The ink carried into the bloodied raw skin of the nail bed covering her entire hands. The buzzing continued as the stem of the rose continued to twist and weave around the skin of her arms. Clara shuffled off her coat, and ripped open her shirt causing the bloodied ends of her fingers to weep more. She stood before the hallway mirror, both arms covered in the deep greens and browns of the roses stem and leaves. It was as though it had begun to merge with the muscle beneath the skin, sticking to her bones. As she collapsed in agony she thought she could smell burning, as the light hairs on her arms seemed to curl and disintegrate under an invisible heat.

There was a dull light shining through the window of the door from the outside streetlamp. Her head ached and her tongue felt cracked and swollen. Clara tried to remember why she was on the floor in the hallway. Had she fallen? Had she come home drunk? She pushed against the floor and the sudden intense pain from the swollen palms of her hands made her retch.

'That's why I'm on the floor... The tattoo!'

She shook her head,

'Don't be stupid, 'she told herself. 'It's a reaction, a hallucination. Septicemia or something...'

She tried to stand and swayed as she reached for the lightswitch. Something sharp dangled from her left palm. She lifted it to see what it was. Hanging from the vibrant colored skin was a glossy black fingernail, hers, one of the ones that had been forced from its bed. Clara looked at her hands close up, examining them like she had never looked at

them before. The rawness had gone. The skin had healed, toughened even. Her fingertips now resembled the woody ends of rose stem.

Clara could not scream or cry. She felt herself fracture and sink deep within as she even began to admire the spreading tattoo.

'This cannot be happening,' she thought, 'it's too horrific. Or... this is madness.'

She slowly climbed the stairs to her bedroom, and fell onto her bed. The noise began again, startling her as it rattled into her ear. The buzzing of the tattoo gun swelled with its intensity, as she felt the puncture of the needle in her skin. She kicked off her shoes letting them fall and watched her feet slowly become covered in the black outline of the tattoo. It replaced the veins in her body, pumping the colored ink to the epidermis. Her toenails fragmented beneath the hideous design and as the invisible needle speared the souls of her feet she found the strength to scream over and over until she blacked out again.

Clara woke and slowly sat on the edge of the bed. She looked at herself in the full length mirror that leaned against the wall. She was almost covered in the tattoo. It was embedded into her, she had disappeared beneath the rose stem and the leaves and the thorns, she was sleeping beauty's castle after a hundred years. Her blood had begun to ooze from the pointed tips of the thorns, and slowly ran down her numbed skin.

The buzzing sound of the ink gun began again, rushing through her body as the tattoo continued to grow, demanding to be complete. The whites of her eyes turned green as she wept bloodied tears and her hair fell in thick black handfuls, pushed out by the black ink. The tattoo continued to spread until she felt like she would choke or be torn apart.

Then it stopped. The noise stopped. She was so tired from the agony and loss of blood that she could barely open her now grotesquely swollen eyelids.

Why has it stopped?

Clara could barely see in the mirror, but a pale unblemished patch, in the center of her chest began to manifest in the reflection.

*Is it over?* 

The silence gave her a minute hope, but the noise erupted! That pulsing, buzzing sound was louder than it had been. Clara could only watch as the rose tattoo slowly dissolved into the skin of her arm, pulling the thorns with it. She felt them dragging along the lengths of her veins, scoring her muscle. She watched, as her body began to convulse against the angry force within as the rose began to reappear on the skin of her chest, a pretty bud at first, then blooming in all its red gaudy beauty. It exploded through her splintering ribcage and the thorns ripped into her unbroken heart.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Donna Cuttress is a writer from Liverpool, U.K. She has had previous work published by Crooked Cat, Firbolg Publishing, Solarwyrms *Latchkey Tales* and Flame Tree Publishings *Chilling Ghost Stories*. Her work for The Patchwork Ravens *Twelve Days* artbook has just been released. Other works for Sirens Call Publications have been published in *Tales from the Gloom: Volume 1* and previous Women in Horror Month issues of *The Sirens Call* ezines.

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## Daddy's Little Girl | Mary Ann Peden-Coviello

The little girl, five years old and her daddy's darling, tiptoed down the hall in her bare feet. She rubbed a pudgy fist into one blue eye and sniffled loudly. A few delicate tears trickled down her cheeks. When she came to her parents' bedroom door, she wiped her hands on her daisy-sprigged cotton nightgown and crept into the darkened bedroom. The nightlight in the hallway cast her grotesque, distorted shadow over the big bed.

"Daddy? Daddy? Wake up, Daddy. There's a monster in my room."

"Uhhngh." Her father flailed an arm onto his wife's side of the bed, searching. His hand met with a trace of warmth on the mattress but encountered no wife who could be sent on the monster-removal mission. He flopped back into place.

"Daddy!" The little girl tugged on her father's arm. "Come on. There's a scary monster in my room."

"No, there isn't. No monster would dare bother my girl. Let's get you back into bed, and I'll show you."

The girl's father picked her up and cuddled her to his chest. She slipped her arms around him and tucked her head against his neck. Her breath sighed against his skin.

With his free hand, her father flipped on her bedroom light. "See? Not a monster in sight." Handling her like his greatest treasure, her father settled the little girl into her bed, unicorns dancing atop pastel rainbows on the sheets. He tucked her in.

"Can you stay with me a little while?" The little girl gave her best pleading look, complete with pout. More tears threatened. Curly blonde hair jiggled.

Her father brushed a few damp tendrils back from her forehead. "Of course." He sat on the edge of the bed and fussed with the covers a bit. "I guess Mama went to the bathroom or something, huh? This is usually her job, getting up in the middle of the night." He smiled down at the precious child who had slipped one hand under her pillow. "I think I like this, though. Just us."

"Can I have one more night-night kiss?"

"Sure, baby girl. Any time." Her father bent down, stretching to kiss the girl's downy cheek.

And she pulled her hand out from under the pillow, gripping a razor-sharp filleting knife she'd taken from the kitchen, slashing her father's throat in one quick stroke.

Her father grabbed the wound, blood spurting through his fingers. His mouth opened and closed in desperate spasms. He looked like the little girl's goldfish, the one she'd played with a few weeks ago. She'd enjoyed that game much more than the fish had.

Her father slumped forward, and the little girl pushed him onto the floor on the other side of the bed, the side hidden from the door. He landed with a thump on top of his wife's body. Her eyes were open wide, but she wasn't seeing the little girl anymore. She hadn't seen the knife either. She'd been kneeling on the floor, looking under the bed for the monster, when the blow had fallen.

The girl's father jerked away from his wife. With his last strength, he turned to look at his daughter. He reached a bloodied hand toward her, and then he fell back onto the floor.

"See, Daddy? There is a monster in my room. And it's me."

The little girl watched until her father stopped twitching. She poked him with her knife, but he didn't move anymore. She sighed and climbed out of bed. She was blood-splashed again, so she went to the bathroom down the hall. Under her breath, she hummed a tune she'd learned in kindergarten. She washed her hands and face. Then she looked down at her nightgown. Blood splatters had ruined this one, too. She took it off, tossed it into the corner on top of her first bloody nightgown, and padded back to her room. She put on another gown, this one decorated with happy, smiling puppies, humming her song to herself. How she liked that song.

She reached up on her tippy-toes and turned out the bedroom light, then crept down the hall again, no longer humming. The little girl rubbed her fists into her eyes, coaxing a few tears. Her feet were cold, but she put that discomfort out of her mind. She was on her way to her big brother's room. She murmured, trying one variation, then another.

"Brian, I'm scared. There's a monster in my room. Can you come sleep with me?" The little girl sniffled. A few tears trickled down her cheeks.

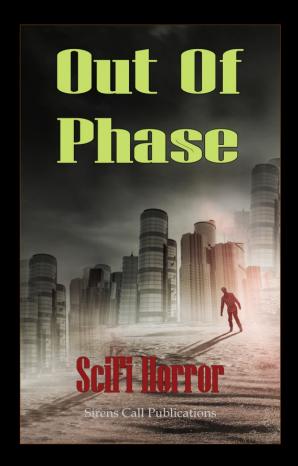
After all, there was a monster in her room.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Mary Ann has been writing, or at least making up stories, since she was a little girl. Marriage stopped that for a while. She began writing seriously again in the late 1990s. She writes horror, paranormal, and humor, She lives in North Carolina with her husband of over 40 years, an assortment of pets, and sometimes a visiting son. She's also a freelance copy editor. One of her bywords is that no one can edit her own work. Not even an editor.

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## Out of Phase: Tales of Sci-Fi Horror

Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and iTunes



## Lady of the Night | Louise M. Hart

In the summer of my fall I was bitten for the first time. At 15 years old, I was a girl on the threshold of womanhood, a child about to spill into a strange and unknown world, soon to become a lady of the night and refugee from sunlight.

Hand in hand, Dominica and I ran along the train platform. Her sweet touch marked me with a love that was simultaneously pure and portentous, symbolizing future delights of which I, on that bright and balmy morning, remained blissfully ignorant. I was a child, but beneath my skirt I had experienced the first throbs of maturation. Running towards the train, I became a deer nearing a bolder, stronger, predator's mouth, who perceived only the glowing smile on the lips of the friend I worshipped.

We boarded the train. Our laughter rang out, like bells announcing our arrival on a train of sullen adults engrossed in the ruminations of their troubled psyches. Dominica and I spent the journey chatting and giggling. My stomach churned excitedly, for I was about to embark on the first adventure of my sanitary life.

"Rebecca was excited, like you, last year," Dominica began. Suddenly, she lowered her eyes and her cheek twitched nervously. Rebecca had spent the previous summer with Dominica, but had failed to return to school after the holidays. A terrible sickness had overcome her. In late August she died. When Dominica returned to school she never spoke of her again nor did the other girls. Rebecca had never been popular and it generally thought Dominica had only invited her home out of sympathy for the plain and undistinguished girl.

In the mid-afternoon we arrived at Charlesbrough. Bundling from the train with adolescent fervor, a stony faced lad met us. He grabbed our suitcases, avoiding eye contact with me and mumbled to Dominica, "Hello, Miss." He led us to a grand car whose type I had rarely seen on the roads near my home, let alone ridden in. I decided in a flash that I disliked the young man intensely. He threw my case in the boot and Dominica shouted at him to open the car door for us.

My family was shamefully poor, but my uncommonly astute intellect and proficiency with the written word had awarded me a scholarship at the prestigious Grace Poole School. I was in every other respect Dominica's inferior.

The Charlesbrough countryside beckoned my eyes and mind, its wooded, emerald enchantment glistening at me through the car window. It was my first visit to the countryside. I had always dwelled in the same two bedroom house in the city with my mother, who had been born for better things.

We arrived at Charlesbrough Manor. The grandest house I had ever seen, it appeared to nestle beneath an inky throng of clouds, incongruous with the blazing blue mass that surrounded them. The sun shone brightly, but the Manor cast dark shadows. When we stood outside the door I looked up and two gargoyles peeped back at me, their faces hideously deformed and chipped with age. I shuddered.

The butler opened the door. "Ah, Miss Devereaux...I trust you had a pleasant journey." Dominica half smiled, but did not answer. Addressing the boy, who stood behind us, carrying our suitcases, he snarled, "Peter, take the young ladies cases to their rooms." Dominica and I

entered the house. I looked behind me and saw Peter spit violently. The butler slapped his ear and he winced.

The butler led us to the drawing room, where Dominica's mother greeted her with a kiss on the cheek. "Miss Kent," she looked at me sternly, "I have heard much about you." Mrs. Devereaux was a slightly portly, heavily corseted woman in her early 40's. She wore her dark hair in a bun and her face was round and unmarked by lines of age. "I shall ring for afternoon tea."

"Perhaps, Miss Bush could join us?" My friend said Miss Bush was Dominica's holiday tutor, hired to teach her the essential customs and conduct of ladies of her class and social status. When the butler arrived, Mrs. Devereaux asked him to summon her. Dominica suddenly became animated in disposition, her smile suggesting that someone of unique significance was about to arrive.

Entering the room, like a creature from another reality, a reality in which beauty was as commonplace as harshness seemed in the confines of Charlesbrough Manor, Miss Bush's eyes smiled at me in acknowledgement of my presence. My lips reciprocated. Dominica rushed towards her, but she had eyes only for me. I stretched out my hand to greet her. She shook it gently. Dominica kissed both her cheeks.

The handshake sealed my fate. Observing Miss Bush's elegant demeanor and fine features, I knew that I was to become entrapped in a love, whose name had been unknown to me until that moment. In Charlesbrough Manor the world seemed different, life seemed different, even Dominica no longer seemed like the dear and trusting friend she had become over the last year. But, when my hand touched Miss Bush's I knew that I would be okay.

During the first few days of my visit I saw a different aspect of my friend than I had previously seen. Dominica, it seemed, had been replaced by a petulant and thorny child, who bickered with her mother, berated servants and frequently ignored me. Only in Miss Bush's presence did I glimpse the friend I thought I knew. I began to question why she had invited me.

I spent most afternoons exploring Charlesbrough's extravagant grounds. The trees were sturdy and strong and the grass lustrous. When I pushed my body through the woods, the world seemed vast, unknowable, and the eco system far more extensive and sophisticated than my lone, ignoble presence.

During one of these afternoon sojourns I tripped over a felled tree. Tumbling to the ground like a clumsy infant I clasped my right leg and noticed a deep scratch below my knee. "Oh, my dear..." I heard a voice cry behind me. I looked up and saw Miss Bush. She looked so concerned that I decided to act bravely and dismissed my injury as a mere scratch. Miss Bush crouched beside me and her voice became tender, she placed her hand on my knee.

"Oh, my dear," she reiterated. To my astonishment her head bent towards me and two moist and amorous lips enveloped my lesion. "All better, now." She guided me to my feet and we both walked through the woods, talking in hushed tones, her hand resting on my shoulder.

Every day Miss Bush shared afternoon tea with the Devereaux's and I. I maintained my distance, but my soul licked every inch of her elegant physique and my eyes bore through her obstructive attire into the creamy substance of her skin. I dreamed of a day when the two of us would be alone again.

Dominica avoided me, like an unpleasant reminder of her adolescence. Thus, I existed for the hour every day when Miss Bush was present. Mostly, I spent my time alone, but was never lonely, for Miss Bush was forever within reach of my consciousness.

One morning I heard some unusual sounds emanating from the stables and advanced towards them slowly and as quietly as I could, fearing that the wicked boy servant, Peter was abusing the poor creatures inside. The doors were closed, but I peered through a gap. Inside I saw Dominica and Robert, undressed from their waists down and engaged in an act of deprivation. Dominica's face was distorted with pleasure and repulsion. Her slobbering mouth opened and issued hymns to the death of innocence. I froze, simultaneously aroused and appalled. My heart beat between my ears. Then, I heard Miss Bush whisper my name behind me. I dared not look and rather, bolted like a maimed beast.

I could not look Dominica in the eye again. At mealtimes we exchanged only the most superficial pleasantries and I secretly wished that I could go home. Miss Bush regarded me with knowing looks, she, too, had seen Dominica and the boy. When night time arrived and it time to go to bed I felt relieved. Finally, I could escape from the horrors of the day and retreat into the subconscious realm.

In bed, humors of the mind and soul afflicted me, like phantoms unseen by the naked eye, but felt in the solar plexus of my somatic subjectivity. In visceral despair my body twisted and gyrated. My sheets and nightdress were soaked with the perspiration of unease.

Finally, I fell into a deep sleep. My closed eyes drifted towards the bedroom door and Miss Bush entered as though the door were mere air separating me from her earthly presence. She swooned towards me, pulling my bedclothes off the bed and lowering my underwear and then, hers. She slid her warm and angular body on top of mine and began to push against me, riding me as I had seen Peter ride Dominica. We breathed in unison, deeply as though constricted and freed by desire. My body began to shake, I opened my mouth and screamed, but nothing came out.

I awoke with a start and clasped my lower stomach. A deep pain penetrated my cervix. I rose from my bed to urinate, but recoiled when I pulled down my pants and saw a red stain in the crotch. My urine too was stained. The day I had always dreaded had arrived. I had become a woman.

Dominica and her Mother provided me sanitary wear and I retired back to bed. Humiliated, I lamented my lost youth and only arose at tea time when I knew I would see Miss Bush, again. I walked into the drawing room a little late and sat at the table. No one mentioned my condition.

Miss Bush entered the room, sniffing the air and looked directly at me. She smiled as if proud to be alive. I blushed and turned away, but still she watched me. I ate anxiously and still she watched me. Everyone else seemed oblivious to her gluttonous eyes. When the meal was over I returned to my room.

I swore that I would stay awake all night. I dreaded the previous night's events repeating. Eventually, my door knocked. "My dear, my dear." It was she. As though entranced I opened the door. She pushed me onto the bed and ate me.

When the act was over I lay in a pool of blood and cum. Miss Bush pressed her lips against my ear and whispered, "And now, you will be mine." She bit my neck with the full force of her power. Her teeth broke my flesh and swallowed every inch of my being. She

became glorious and hideous, a beast satiated by pain, a pain relieved by voracious blood. And then, she left me alone with my detritus.

I had no choice. I needed to escape. Thus, like a common criminal, I dressed and ran from Charlesbrough in the middle of a covetous summer night. I left the house and did not look back.

For twenty years I roamed back avenues and alleyways afraid to expose my true nature. Neither woman nor beast, I remained to the outside world always 15 years old. My soul concealed more torture than any humble being could conjecture. I was compelled to feast on the blood of innocent's, whilst the world regarded me as an innocent. My face was a mask. My heart was dead.

By occupation I became a prostitute. Searching for a cure for my plight, at night I devoured the literature of vampirism. I discovered no cure, but I became very wealthy. Men of all types and social standing would pay to degrade me. I, in turn, degraded their daughters and nieces.

After every bite my conscience would enslave me. I would gladly have taken my life had it been possible, but I was doomed to live. Thus, on a summer day 20 years thence I decided to revisit Charlesbrough Manor.

I knew not if Miss Bush would still reside at Charlesbrough Manor, but my instincts suggested that I would find her there. Her type needed a cover. I recognized the butler who opened the door. It was the ghastly Peter. He snorted and I pushed past him, calling Miss Bush. I rushed up the staircase and opened the drawing room door.

Miss Bush reclined on a chair. She recognized me immediately. Surrounding her was a small group of girls; all looked about 15 years old. "I knew you would come home," she smiled.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Louise M. Hart is a British author and poet. In 2013 her first novel, The General Paralysis of Sanity, was published. Later this year her second novel is to be published.

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After a gruesome betrayal, Vampire Sebastien Vilmont is flung into a whirlwind cat and mouse gave of survival.



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### Interview with Su Haddrell, Author of Bodies

Phrenic Press, the short story imprint of Sirens Call Publications, recently released *Bodies* by author Su Haddrell so we decided to sit down with her and ask her a few probing questions. Keep reading to find out what transpired!

## Sirens Call Publications: Welcome Su! Why don't you take a moment to introduce yourself?

Su Haddrell: I live in Worcester with my boyfriend/partner in crime, and our cat, and my day job is insuring classic cars and military vehicles. Aside from writing, I also paint and sew and I've recently started to learn to play the drums. I love a good movie or gaming night with the other half and our friends, but I'm just as happy curled up with a good book for the night.

#### SCP: What made you decide to become a writer?

**Su:** I've been writing stories since I was a kid and one of my English teachers used to say it was my strong point. Life got in the way a little after university and I lost my mojo with it. Meeting some wonderful people at conventions inspired me to get my head back into the game and after a few beta reading opportunities I started working on my own writing again.

#### SCP: What is Bodies about?

**Su:** *Bodies* is a World War 2 horror story set in a small town during the Blitz. The locals are working hard to clear up after the bombings, but realise that people are going missing and they're not finding any remains in the rubble. Two young lads are happily exploring and hunting for shrapnel after school and come across an intriguing new treasure.

SCP: What is the one thing you'd like readers to know about *Bodies* before they read it? Su: Beware the ickiness! I enjoyed building the tension in this story and focusing on the little details.

# SCP: What is your writing process? Do you consider yourself to be a planner or a pantser?

**Su:** I'm definitely a planner! Stories tend to spend a lot of time brewing in my head and I'll start by researching the kind of subject matter and setting I want to use. Then I'll work on my characters until I have a rough beginning, middle, and end structured. Once I have that, then I'll start writing. Once in a while, I tend to 'pants it' so the story might go off on a tangent, but when I read it back the following morning I decide I like it. I really enjoyed the research for *Bodies*, as a lot of the history books in the library focus on the big WW2 events, and I needed to know more about the kind of lives that people were living from day to day during the Blitz.

### SCP: What is the hardest challenge that you have faced as a writer?

**Su:** Making time and mentally focusing on 'Being a Writer' is hard work, especially since I've got back into it and started spending more time thinking up ideas and working on editing a novel. I don't beat myself up if I don't do a word count, but writing has to take up focus and head space – it's more than just sitting in front of a keyboard. I find the routine of writing every evening helps me and it ensures that it stays as much of a priority as my day job, my other interests, and my family life.

### SCP: In your opinion, what sets *Bodies* apart from other short stories?

Su: I have no idea how to answer that question!

## SCP: Fair enough! Are you reading anything right now, or have you read anything recently that is worth mentioning?

**Su:** I've just finished reading A Closed and Common Orbit by Becky Chambers which was lovely. It's the sequel to her debut novel A Long Way To A Small Angry Planet and continues the journey of one of the characters in the earlier novel. A Closed and Common Orbit had the same loveable 'lived in' feel as the first one and the characters were just as well thought out and portrayed. I can't put my finger on quite why I didn't quite like it as much as A Long Way... but it was wonderful to escape back into that universe again.

#### SCP: How do you define success as a writer? Have you been successful?

**Su:** I think our definitions of success are fluid. I was chuffed to bits when I got my first story published – it was validation that what I wrote was actually any good! So I'm a successful in that I'm now a published writer, but I'm not a published writer with a novel in a high street book store. There's always a bigger fish! My Mum tells people that I'm a writer and I'm still embarrassed because part of me doesn't consider myself a writer in the same view that random strangers we meet do (for example, I'm not someone like Neil Gaiman and haven't got myself a massive film deal on my latest best seller!). However, I have made progress in my field and that in itself is a mark of success so I'm content with that.

## SCP: Do you have words of wisdom about writing that you want to pass on to novelists and writers out there who are just starting out?

**Su:** Read as much as you can. Cultivate your creativeness – observe everything and make notes on interesting things that spring into your head. Hang around with likeminded people – meeting fellow writers at conventions inspired me to write again and their encouragement and guidance helps me to keep going.

### SCP: Anything else you'd like to share?

**Su:** Support your fellow writers! Reviews on their Amazon pages can do just as much good as just buying the story itself. Blog, share, review and compliment – it is writer food for the soul!

Thank you Su for taking the time to answer our questions! Now let's take a short look into *Bodies*...

## An Excerpt from Bodies

George dived to the ground, scraping his knees on paving and feeling the dirt scuff into his face. The whistling sang overhead, finally punctuating in an explosion that sounded too close for comfort but in reality was probably around a half mile away. George lay still for a few seconds, feeling his heart thrumming and the blood pumping through his legs. He got to his feet and brushed himself off. His cousin Stan was already up and casting his eyes towards the horizon. George followed his gaze and watched the rising dust and smoke hit the cities blue sky.

"Jerry's a bit early today!" Stan said, his voice eager with excitement. "Let's go and look!"

George shook his head.

"I got to get back. I promised Mother I'd help with taking blankets down to the shelter

tonight."

Stan made a face. "Just say you 'ad to take cover for a bit. She won't mind."

George thought on this carefully, chewing his thumbnail and admiring the pillar of smoke emerging from the rooftops. He shrugged and Stan grinned, a wide toothy smile that got him both in and out of fixes.

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The boys ran across the road and helter-skelter though the rubble. The dusty piles of brickwork offered hidey holes and endless hours of scrambling and exploration. The sun was low in the sky, lighting up the scattered cracked glass like precious jewels. George followed Stan and climbed over a crumbling brick wall with rather less finesse than his lankier cousin. They drew closer to the destroyed building and the air stank of smoke. The fire fighters were hard at work, balanced precariously on ladders and clutching at hoses. George watched them with admiration. He had argued relentlessly not to be sent out of the city but he was too young to be a Fire Watcher. He wanted to stay with his family and they had reluctantly agreed. His mother looked after his younger sister Rose and his father worked through the day at one of the local factories but was an Air Raid Precautions warden during the blackouts. George's cousin Stan had stayed in the city to help his mother after his father had died several years before the war. They lived in the same street and had found friendship in their walks home from school and combined shrapnel hunting efforts. Stan had once got into real trouble when he bought a trophy into school that turned out to be an unexploded bomb. After that, the pair kept their treasures hidden in a tin that they buried in George's back garden.

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The boys sat on the roadside opposite the building and watched the fire fighters hard at work. They were largely ignored so long as they stayed out of the way. The fire didn't seem too bad, but the building had been destroyed. It had been a local shop with a flat above it just on the corner of the street. All that was left now was dust and brickwork. A flicker caught George's eye. He turned his attention away from the smoking debris and squinted into the sunlight. Something on the ground, just on the road near the side of the shop, glistened. The sun reflected brightly so it flashed like light caught in a mirror. George nudged Stan and nodded in the direction of the treasure. Some piece of shrapnel lay there for the taking. Stan's eyes lit up when he saw what George was pointing at and he nodded eagerly.

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The trick was to reach the treasure without being called out by the Fire Watchers. They were currently distracted by an issue with their hydrant and were busying themselves with fixing the problem. George casually got to his feet. Hands in his pockets, he wandered into the road, carefully looking sidelong at the truck and its workers. Stan hissed at him. George turned and scowled.

"What?" he mouthed silently. Stan gestured for him to hurry up. The boy shrugged and turned back, gazing at the prize on the ground. The shiny thing moved. George froze. He was still a few feet away and it was difficult to distinguish what it actually was. It lay flat on the ground, glistening in the early evening sun. George took a pace forward and the thing moved again. He cocked his head to one side and watched. The thing on the ground shifted again and all at once George realised that it wasn't shrapnel or metal or anything. It moved like thick tar being pulled apart. George's longing took over once more—what a find! He looked around

again and then made a dash for it. The viscous substance moved just as fast. It shifted and strained across the ground, brown and fungal and quicker than a slow worm through grass. By the time George reached its initial location, it had got to the curb on the other side of the road. It stretched down into a water drain and vanished. George stopped and chewed his thumbnail.

"Oi you!" called a voice suddenly. "Move along now boy, it's dangerous 'round 'ere!" The Fire Warden looked sternly at him, a long hose draped over his shoulder. George stared back, momentarily at a loss. "Go on, get!" the warden gestured. The boy looked at his cousin and they ran.

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Rita stood in the canteen van shifting her weight from one foot onto the other. A group of the ARP lads closed in on the vehicle and she began to bustle about arranging tea and sandwiches. The lads were blackened and weary, but still jostled each other for a smile from her. Rita, having some idea of what they had been through, was happy to oblige. She didn't have much in the way of glamour, but she could afford to doll up her hair and put on a spot of lippy if it would give them a bit of a cheer.

"I don't understand it." One of them was saying. "Four nights in a row now and not a single body." He slurped at his tea and then wiped the back of his hand across his mouth.

"We should be grateful for small mercies," His companion told him. "Four nights and no deaths. Jerry'd have a fit if he knew!" A couple of the other men murmured their agreement.

"Just coz there ain't no bodies, don't mean there ain't no dead." The first man said. He was tall and stocky, a man used to having his voice heard and using it to his advantage.

"What you on about, 'arry?" his friend replied. Harry looked around at the group, ensuring he had their attention.

People are still missin'," he said. "My pal John said his brother was at home when their house was hit, but they never found 'im. He's been missin' ever since." The group closed in around the van for warmth. The guns continued to roar overhead and the sky was red with fire.

"My neighbours disappeared a couple of nights ago. They mighta left the city, or just be holed up in a shelter somewhere, but I ain't seen them in a while." said one of the younger lads, shovelling the remainder of a ham sandwich in his mouth.

"Anyone know if they found any bodies over in Wigston?" Harry asked. His friend screwed up his face.

"Don't be morbid, we ain't goin' to go round asking if anyone's seen any bodies now are we?"

Harry gave him a stern look.

"We've got to stay alert is all I'm saying, Jim. For all we know this is some new Jerry scare tactic." The group descended into jeers and jokes. Rita eavesdropped on the conversation with interest. It was good that no one was getting hurt while the raids were going on. The lads were doing a fine job out there.

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George couldn't sleep. The memory of the moving slime on the road disturbed him more than he cared to admit. He'd immediately told Stan all about it, but his cousin had just laughed it off and said that he'd found a bottle top or something and didn't want to admit it. When George pressed the matter, Stan had teased him about being afraid of monsters in the dark and so he'd finally let the matter drop. The public shelter was cold and he was grateful for the warmth of his cousin quietly snoring beside him. There were four of them sharing a blanket and George was mildly jealous that Alice's head was resting unconsciously on Stan's shoulder. The shelter had been built to hold most of the local neighbourhood—around sixty people. It was split into varying sections, but there weren't quite enough bunks for everyone, so often George found himself huddled in blankets and sharing warmth with a few others. The night time orchestra of explosions and gunfire continued unabated above their heads. Sometimes the great booms of noise were so close that the whole shelter shook. During the day the war was a great adventure, but at night time, when they huddled by lamplight in cold shelters, singing to drown out the noise above, the war was a lot closer and a lot scarier. George tried to sleep. Bursts of gunfire shook him awake. He tried not to think about the slime going down the drain. He wanted to believe what Stan said about him finding a bit of scrap. He'd definitely seen something move into the sewers though, and it wasn't like anything he'd seen before. He'd seen plenty of foxes in his neighbourhood and was aware that rats came out to raid the bins, but he'd never heard of any kind of brown slime climbing out of the drains. He snuggled deeper under the blanket and closed his eyes. His mother was sitting beside him, knitting a jumper by candlelight. The gentle click of needles during the lulls in the bombing echoed around the chamber. She was murmuring in conversation with Mrs Hodgkinson, one of their neighbours.

"My 'usband was saying they 'aven't found any in days." George's mother was saying. "Scaring them a little it is..."

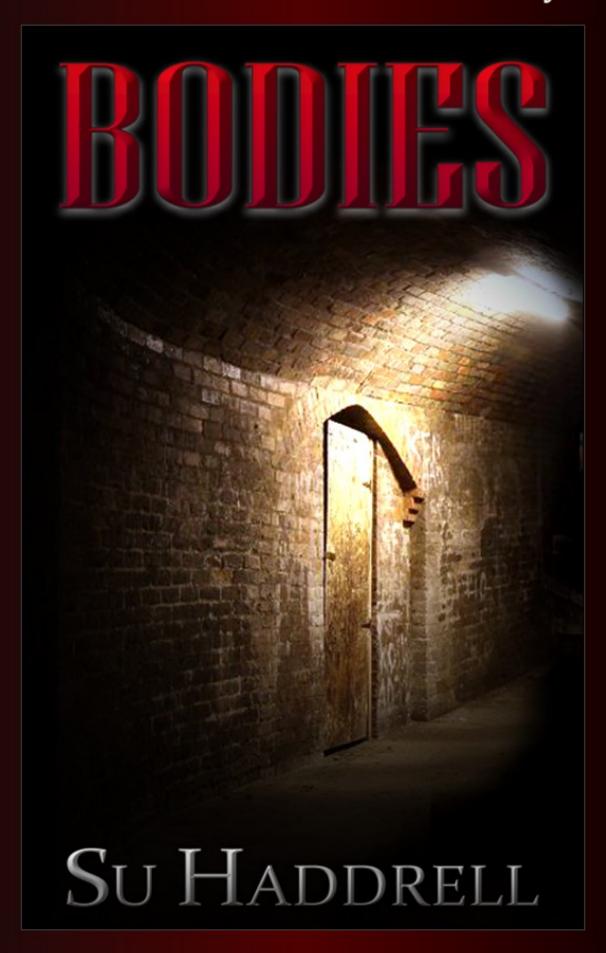
## Bodies can be found exclusively on Amazon for purchase or borrow!

<u>US | UK | Canada | Australia | Germany | Italy | Spain | France | Japan | Brazil | Mexico India | The Netherlands</u>

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR – Su Haddrell is a British writer living in a picturesque and peaceful area of Worcester that's been cleverly disguised as a noisy council estate. She has had stories recently accepted and published in anthologies by Fox Spirit and enjoys editing and beta reading for other authors. In addition to writing, she also paints, sews and organizes the UK's only Judge Dredd convention. She loves rum, her cat, her boyfriend and movies where things explode within the first 14 seconds.

## There are horrors beneath the city...



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