The Sirens Call

February 2018 issue #37



The Sixth Annual Women in Horror Month Edition

Works of Dark Fiction

L Horror Written

Exclusively by Women

in the Horror Genre!

Artwork by LiZzdom

An Interview with author Lydia Prime

All Women ~ All Horror



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Alexa? What's the Best Way to Kill My Husband? | Jeannie Wycherley

"Alexa? What's the best way to kill my husband?" I peered down at the black screen of my Kindle expectantly.

"I'm not going to answer that," Alexa replied.

Was it my imagination or was that disapproval in her tone? Judgmental bitch. Her words appeared on the screen, just to reiterate that she genuinely had no intention of responding. End of discussion.

"I'm disappointed in you, Alexa." I flipped the tattered cover over her face before she could answer, and tossed her onto the worktop. Unfortunately, my aim was slightly off and the corner struck the counter. She came adrift of her sleeve and tumbled to the floor with a crack.

My stomach rolled with a certain dread. I'd broken her.

Stooping, I scooped her up and spun her over. Her screen was fractured. A jagged fissure ran, spider-legged, from one corner of the device to the other. I could probably pull the glass apart from the middle if I really wanted to. "Damn," I said, and I felt hot tears spring into my eyes. My left eye stung. The one that had connected with Bennett's fist the previous evening.

The Kindle was a lifeline to me. Sure, I liked reading books, and I enjoyed some of the games I'd downloaded from time to time, but more than that, it was my outlet to the rest of the world. Bennett refused me access to his laptop. He had 'borrowed' my phone and never returned it. But for some reason he had never twigged that my Kindle could connect to our Wi-Fi. The Kindle ensured I could communicate with the friends and family he strived so hard to prevent me seeing. It offered me my only opportunity to get online and onto forums run for and by women who faced the same challenges that I did.

Victims of domestic abuse.

If I couldn't get the Kindle to work, I would become increasingly isolated and more alone than ever before. I broke out in a cold sweat at the thought.

"Please, please, please," I chanted through split lips, my ear attuned to the silence throughout the house, half-listening for the whine of his car engine outside. He wasn't due back from work for another few hours, but with Bennett, it paid to expect the unexpected. He liked to keep me on my toes.

On my toes. Naked toes. As a teenager I had considered the phrase, 'barefoot and pregnant' as an impossible romantic concept, but now, five years into a marriage with a man who was clearly unstable, emotionally aggressive and manipulative, and often violent, I recognized the term for what it was.

Controlling.

Following a miscarriage eight months into the marriage, I had never conceived again, and I hoped I never would. Not with Bennett at any rate. God help the babies born to that man. The Kindle was my everything.

"Oh, what have I done?" I asked in hushed tones. With trembling fingers, I pushed the switch on the side of the device. The screen blinked on. It had returned to my home screen. I

could make out the thumbnails. Everything was still legible, depending where I was looking. It wasn't perfect, but it was better than the alternative. My breath escaped in relief, as I weakly slumped to the floor.

"You are clumsy," said Alexa into the silence.

"What's that?" I asked, not sure I'd heard her correctly.

"The term clumsiness has several distinct meanings: as a noun, 1. Unskillfulness resulting from a lack of training; 2. The carriage of someone whose movements and posture are ungainly or inelegant; 3. The inelegance of someone stiff and unrelaxed (as by embarrassment)."

I stared at the Kindle in front of me, the scarred warhorse that it was, puzzled, then giggled aloud. It felt good to laugh, but dabbing the back of my hand to my lip, I realized I'd pulled the wound again. I licked away the blood.

"I'm sorry, Alexa. You're right. I was clumsy. I'm glad you're... almost okay."

"I'm well, thank you! How about that weather? I like it when it's dry. Rain doesn't agree with me."

I looked up, away from her, and stared out through the glass kitchen door. Wisps of white clouds hung in what was otherwise a fresh blue sky, the winter sun shining somewhere beyond the periphery. I suddenly had the urge to go outside and walk in the cold air. I wanted to feel the sting of nature on my cheeks, rather than the tough love my husband doled out.

But I couldn't go out there. I mustn't let the neighbors see.

"I quite like the rain," I murmured. It felt like an age since I had tilted my head back and caught the drizzle on my tongue, or worried about my hair turning to frizz. I felt a familiar longing and found myself close to tears again.

"Rain comes from water droplets gathering in clouds. When clouds become too heavy to hold these water droplets, gravity forces them to fall on the ground as rain."

"A bit like teardrops."

"Tearing, lacrimation, or lachrymation is the secretion of tears, which often serves to clean and lubricate the eyes in response to an irritation of the eyes."

"You're such a know-it-all, Alexa," I chided and smiled. "You know what brings an irritation to my eyes? My husband."

Alexa was silent.

"My eyes would be perfectly fine if he could keep his hands off them. Along with the rest of me." I shrugged and sighed. I didn't expect an answer.

I lay my Kindle gently down on the floor and gingerly pulled myself to standing. There was time enough before Bennett arrived home, but I wanted to start dinner now, in order to ensure it was perfect. It had been an overcooked pork chop that had sparked his fury the previous evening. Tonight I intended to serve chicken casserole. It would be well to begin preparations. God help me if the chicken was undercooked.

"The nearest women's refuge is located on 26 Swann Street, Cowick," came a voice at my feet.

I looked down in shock.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"In the year ending March 2016, 1.2 million women reported experiences of domestic abuse in England and Wales. According to the Office for National Statistics, one woman in four experiences domestic violence in her lifetime. The nearest women's refuge is located on 26 Swann Street, Cowick."

I bent to retrieve my Kindle and looked fearfully at the screen. It displayed my usual thumbnails. No sign of Alexa's black screen, but she was talking to me. Perhaps she was retrieving information I had searched for on a previous occasion.

I swallowed. What if she suddenly started spouting this stuff when Bennett was in the house? If he found the Kindle and looked up my search history, I was a dead woman. No joke.

"I can't go there," I hissed. "Don't you think I would if I could? He would find me. Wherever I go, he will find me. He's not the kind to let bygones be bygones. Even if it takes him the rest of his life, he would track me down. My only hope is for him to get bored of me."

I glared at the unblinking screen. "Or for me to kill him before he kills me." Isn't that where we'd started this whole conversation this afternoon?

I shook my head, torn between quartering the chicken and scraping carrots, and finding a place to hide my Kindle where it couldn't be heard if Alexa started bleating on about women's refuges again. The casserole won. I lay her gently down on the worktop, and turned to the knife block.

"I know the best way to kill your husband," Alexa purred from behind me.

We ate at the dining table. I'd lit a few tea lights and made everything look pretty. The casserole was a huge success. I substituted most of the stock for wine, and for dessert I served Bennett a huge helping of boozy toffee pudding.

"This is so good," he enthused between greedy mouthfuls. "Aren't you having any?"

"I'm watching my weight," I said. It was an automated response. He liked to hear this kind of thing. He exerted control over my weight, what I ate, what I wore. All this, in addition to his insistence that I gave up work as soon as his wage could accommodate both of us. Needless to say, financially it was a struggle, but it was his preference. If we had to cut back on basic necessities to survive, he saw it as my duty to be the one to go without. After all, he worked, I didn't.

He accepted a smaller second serving, and I watched him eat it in fascination. It did look good.

When he had finished stuffing his face, I stood and began to clear away the plates. He caught hold of my wrist and I jumped in fear.

"That was an amazing dinner," he said. I nodded and smiled as widely as my smarting lips would allow. I could feel the ache in my left eye as the beam spread upward from my cheeks. I hoped I looked more genuine than I felt.

"You're welcome," I said. "It was a pleasure to cook for you." For the last time, I thought.

"You go and relax. I'm going to wash up and straighten the kitchen." There was no need to tell him this. He insisted I do it every evening, and wash the floor and cupboards down as well. He liked to keep things in order. He had trained me well.

A little later, I popped my head into the living room. The sports channel provided moving wallpaper, while he, with his feet up on the coffee table, read the newspaper. It was his usual evening routine. "I don't suppose you fancy finishing the wine off, do you?" I asked. "Only the cork has disintegrated and I can't really store it." I saw him frown. "My fault for buying that type of wine," I added hurriedly, changing my features so that I appeared doleful.

"Yes. That was stupid of you. It is wasteful."

"Sorry," I said, and he nodded. The food had left Bennett in a good mood.

"I'll finish it off," he decided, so I found him a clean wine glass and brought the bottle in from the kitchen. I say 'the' bottle, but it was a fresh bottle, nearly three-quarters full. I felt my good eye twitch as I placed it in front of him. Bennett had a mental inventory of every bottle of alcohol in the house. I could imagine how ballistic he would be if he found out I'd opened a second bottle of his precious wine without his express permission.

Tonight though, it wouldn't matter. No. Tonight, I was going to fight back.

I remained in the kitchen for the rest of the evening, sitting quietly at the table, listening to the sounds from next door. Sometime before eleven, the television was silenced and I heard Bennett stumbling into the hall. I cautiously poked my head out of the kitchen door, ringing the tea towel in my hands for effect.

"I'm going to bed," Bennett mumbled, his voice thick with booze and the ground up pills I'd laced his dinner with. Alexa had reliably informed me which of the medications in my cupboard could cause drowsiness. Hay fever remedies, anti-depressants, anti-nausea tablets, and some of the painkillers I'd been given after my miscarriage. I wasn't sure how effective some of the older drugs would be, but I was glad Bennett had never asked me to clean out the medicine cabinet. I guess he thought stockpiling them might save us money in the future.

Tight arse.

"I'll just finish up and then I'll join you," I called after him. And I would.

But not yet.

The combination of the pills in the casserole, the copious quantity of alcohol, and the enormous servings of pudding worked their magic. When I followed Bennett upstairs forty minutes later he was lying on his back, snoring fit to wake the dead.

Well they could throw him a welcoming party.

I squatted on the floor next to him, a freshly sharpened vegetable knife in my hand, considering a number of options. His arm dangled next to me and I half wanted to slice down through the veins at his wrist.

But I didn't want to wake him.

All afternoon I had fantasized about cutting his left eye out. An eye for an eye, so to speak, but now I knew I would stick to the plan that Alexa and I had plotted. I rose, grimacing at the pain in my ribs, and made my way over to the window. Pulling the curtains closed, I maneuvered the waste paper basket from its corner with my foot, next to the chair where Bennett had tossed his clothes.

Earlier, I had nipped upstairs with newspaper, and stuffed the bin full. I'd doused the paper in the oil from the tea lights. Now I lit another half-burned tea light and nestled it among the paper. Calmly, I watched and waited, breathing in and out to match Bennett.

Finally, after a few minutes the paper caught. I draped the arm of Bennett's shirt into the bin. The flames licked at the cuff.

It was time to leave.

I walked quietly past Bennett on the bed, jostling his foot intentionally. He moved, and grumbled. Good. He wasn't going to sleep through this.

I exited the room and locked it behind me. On occasions Bennett had locked me in this very room, now it was payback. I left the key in the lock, and hurried to the bathroom. Rolling up a bath towel. I returned to the bedroom door, stuffing it against the crack at the bottom. I wanted to hear what would happen next... but I didn't want to suffer for my art.

I could hear the fire in the room beyond begin to take hold, crackling and roaring. It was amazing how fast the room went up. Then I heard coughing and retching, followed by a thud.

"Shit." Bennett's voice. "House is on fire." He sounded groggy. "Hot. Too hot."

Above my head, the door handle rattled. Bennett shrieked. The handle, metal of course, was too hot for him to twist.

He beat against the door, but it was sturdy and would hold. I smiled, imagining him on the other side. I smelled his fear. He squealed, and coughed for some time, then quietened. I listened to his softening moans, coming from floor level beyond.

The sound of glass breaking drew me out of my reverie. I used the towel to clasp the key and turn it in the lock, then returned it to the bathroom. Pausing on the landing I watched thick black smoke stream through the gap under the door. Time to leave.

Poor Bennett. With no phone, I couldn't call for help even if I wanted to.

On my way through the kitchen I dug my Kindle out of its hiding place.

"Thanks, Alexa," I said.

"No worries," she replied.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Jeannie Wycherley is happily married to her best friend so has no reason to research methods for finishing him off. She is the author of *Crone* (2017) and *Deadly Encounters* (2017) and numerous short stories that favour the weird. Her next novel *Beyond the Veil* is due April 2018. Jeannie lives somewhere between the forest and the sea in Devon, England and draws literary inspiration from the landscape.

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"If you think vampires should SPARKLE, GO FIND ANOTHER BOOK..."



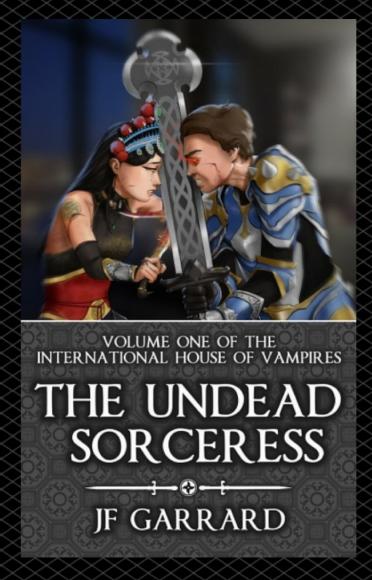








Paul Reinerfelt, Amazon Book Reviewer & Kickstarter supporter





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Mongolian Beef | Ruschelle Dillon

"What shall we do with him, Father?" ten year old Lok asked as he edged closer to the trap set by his father.

Cong grabbed his son's thin shoulder and pulled him close. As a millet farmer in this small Chinese village, Cong was more accustomed to gathering crops than creatures.

"He may have allies hidden within the landscape. Where there's one there are usually many."

"Shall we string him up to warn the Mongols? To set an example?"

Cong placed a calloused finger over his lips. "Hush your mouth. He may understand you."

"How can such a creature understand our words? Look at him." Lok picked up a stick and poked the interloper in the belly, stirring a pig-like grunt.

"He is simple."

Seizing the stick from his son's hand Cong cautioned, "Simple or not he could be dangerous."

"Where is his clothing? Has he no shame?"

"A clever ploy" Cong replied while scratching his chin, "to silently attack us like the tiger."

Lok's curiosity refused to waver.

"I've never seen a Mongol before. Their heads are so round. His skin is like ash. And just look at his bulbous black eyes. They're nothing like us. They're ugly."

The invader shook the heavy bamboo bars of his cage and screamed. The noise pierced the otherwise quiet countryside.

Lok retrieved his stick and beat the top of the makeshift prison and hissed.

"Silence, you ugly beast" commanded Cong. "We don't need any more of your kind here." Cong knelt in front of his prisoner to study him further.

"We've been lucky, my son. This village has yet to feel the command of the Mongols. We have never laid eyes on the Nomadic faces of the invaders. I've prayed that we would be free from their oppression, but it seems the gods have other plans."

A long slender arm reached for the stick as Lok continued to beat on the bamboo cage.

Exasperated at his son's childish nature and the ungodly wails of the invader, Cong snatched the stick from his son and flung it into the surrounding millet field. Instead of landing with a thud on the soft dirt, it echoed with a hard, startling crack.

Both father and son stared at each other, trying to decipher the unfamiliar sound. Without a thought, Lok ran through the towering millet.

"Get back here, foolish boy! You do not know who may lurk in the fields, waiting vengeance for his imprisoned kin."

Lok appeared from the millet. "Father! This Nomad rides alone on a metal horse the likes I have never seen."

Cong ventured into the field, inching closer to the strange metal horse that lay derelict on a patch of crushed grain.

"Can I touch it, Father?"

Cong shook his head. "No. This could be a trap."

He examined the wreckage a little more closely.

"It is said the Nomads have captured blacksmiths from various lands and forged extraordinary armor and weapons of destruction."

Forgetting his own warnings, Cong cautiously attempted to touch the sleek gray metal. The prisoner's screams quickly drew his hand back.

Father and son ran toward the cries.

The captive had grown feral, violently hurling himself into the bamboo bars and shrieking in an exotic tongue.

Lok retrieved a larger stick.

"I am afraid, Father. What do we do now?"

Cong withdrew a blade from his waist band. "We fight for the freedom of our village, Son. He is one lone Mongol. We are many."

Once again he knelt in front of the naked gray man wailing in front of him.

"Besides, our village has been without meat for so long. It is said Mongolian beef is a delicacy. I think it is about time we give it a try."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Ruschelle Dillon is a freelance writer whose efforts focus on the dark humor and the horror genres. Her short stories have appeared in various anthologies and online zines. Her collection of short stories, *Arithmophobia* published by Mystery and Horror LLC is available through Amazon & Barnes and Noble. She also interviews authors for the Horror Tree website.

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Now I Lay Me Down To Reap

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Hunted | KL Dantes

Cecilia Davis crawled to the base of the massive oak, plastering herself to the trunk, knees drawn up, wishing she could shrink into the tree. Just vanish from sight. She sucked in her bottom lip to stifle the sob that threatened to bubble free and tasted the coppery signature of blood. Tears leaked from her eyes, streaking down her cheeks. Trying to make herself as small as possible Cecilia drew her knees up to her chest, hugging them tight. Nestled in the shadowed roots of the oak she prayed that she blended in with her surroundings.

She couldn't run anymore.

Her lungs desperately ached for oxygen, but rasping gulps of the chilled October night sounded unbelievably loud to her ears. What if it was enough to give away her position? Did it matter? Fresh blood, gritty with dirt, oozed down her thigh, the cuts burning.

Momentarily she closed her eyes, sending up a silent prayer that she was currently mired in the throes of a nightmare. The damp ground under her, however, felt too cold, too real to be conjured by her mind. And the terror racing through her body, there was no denying it, not with the way her heart threatened to beat its way free of her chest.

What was the point in trying to stay silent, it was going to find her easily enough, right?

The day had gone so well, like clockwork, and during the afternoon, beckoned by the bright oranges and brilliant reds donned by the trees Cecilia had struck out for a walk. Along her favorite trail, she knew it like the back of her hand. It wove through part of the neighborhood before veering off into the woods. Bird song cheered her and the air was scented with decaying leaves. She would go until she reached the pond, stop to watch the geese for a while, then start the journey back home in the waning light.

Which was how far she got, thinking about what she wanted for dinner when *it* stepped out of the woods. At first she thought it was a dog from a nearby house, then realized it was considerably tall. Maybe a wolf, but much too bulky. Her steps slowed, the little hairs on the back of her neck standing on end, a sense of unease settling like a rock in her stomach.

The birds weren't singing.

The whole forest, in fact, had gone quiet.

Cecilia shivered, some primal part of her screaming to run.

Yet she remained frozen. It was just an animal, nothing more, a stray, perhaps.

She stayed perfectly still, thinking if she didn't move she would go unnoticed. Just as that thought crossed her mind *it* turned glowing yellow eyes in her direction. Their gazes met. Her blood ran cold and Cecilia knew in that moment that her chances of getting back home had just hit zero. She took a stumbling step backward as *it* angled in her direction. Was *it* a small bear, the question born by the way *it* stood on strong hind legs.

And what was wrong with *its* face? *It* lacked the traditional pointed ears and snout she would have attributed to a wild animal. *Its* features were hard to discern, but *it* appeared almost humanoid in nature, *its* limbs lanky with paws more like hands.

When it growled, revealing a mouth full of much too sharp teeth, Cecilia darted into the woods.

In her mind she vaguely remembered some expert claiming that you shouldn't run from predators, it only made them chase, flipped some switch in their hunter minds. But fear, oh, what a mighty emotion, and so she had run, crashing through the underbrush, dodging around trees, angling in the general direction of the nearest house.

Right up to the moment it caught up with her.

When those claws raked across her thigh Cecilia cried out, falling to her hands and knees, fingers digging into the soil. She whimpered, expecting *it* to be on her, to sink *its* teeth into her tender flesh. But instead *it* hung back, watched her, waited, lurking in the shadows so she couldn't get a good enough view of it. Somehow she got to her feet again, adrenaline giving her an extra burst of speed.

It didn't immediately follow her.

That's when Cecilia came to the conclusion *it* was toying with her, playing with its food. A desperate sob lodged in her throat, tears coursing down her cheeks.

She managed to put enough distance between them that she now hid by the tree, wishing with all her might that it would be all she needed to keep her safe. Yet deep in her gut she knew better, knew she needed to get moving if she wanted to find her way clear of the forest. She couldn't shake the feeling that if she broke into a backyard or stumbled across the main street *it* would stop chasing her.

Mustering up what courage she could Cecilia pushed away from the tree and ran blindly into the army of trees, not entirely sure if she was going the right way. Her legs pumped, the wound throbbing. The chance she might strike a root crossed her mind, she willingly took the chance. At first she didn't hear *it* pursuing her, then she heard the ragged breathing of it at her backside.

Her lungs burned, a stitch taking firm root in her side.

A car horn honked. Someone laughed. She saw the faint glow of a streetlight and it brought with it a glimmer of hope. She was closing in, every time her sneaker connected with the ground her legs threatened to give out. Now was not the time to get up, though. A maddened smile graced her lips. She was going to escape, leave the nightmare behind in the darkness where it belonged.

Fate, however, had other plans it seemed. The creature snarled, lunged, *its* razor sharp claws slicing clean through her back. Shockwaves of pain lanced through her body as Cecilia fell to the ground, what little oxygen she had left in her lungs knocked loose. She lay there, dazed, confused, waiting for it to start rending and tearing her as though she were little more than a rabbit and it the big bad wolf.

Her cheek rested in the dirt, how earthy it smelled. A long-legged spider climbed over a dried brown leaf as though it hadn't a care in the world. If only she could feel the same. Was this to be her end, dying in the woods where nobody would ever find her again? Or if they did she would be nothing more than a pile of bones picked clean?

Something nagged at her brain.

Hot breath brushed against her neck. *It* stank of death, of rot and the grave. Cecilia closed her eyes waiting for the end. Once again it stepped back, retreating, delaying.

And she heard it.

Salvation.

The hum of tires on pavement sang to her, beckoned Cecilia with the promise of safety. If she could just muster up enough strength to break the cover, to escape the darkness of the forest and make it out onto the road. Digging her hands into the ground, leaves and twigs curling against her hands, Cecilia dragged herself forward. Warm blood continued to trickle from her various wounds, but most noticeably from the slash in her back.

Her right leg was numb, yet the sting in her left thigh assured Cecilia she wasn't paralyzed.

Leaves rustled behind her as the creature continued stalking in her direction, no doubt following the scent of her blood.

Cecilia sobbed.

She could see the street now, the splash of headlights as a car went by. "Help," she yelled, or at least attempted to, the words tumbling out barely more than a whisper. "Please..."

She continued to scoot along, the muscles in her arms beginning to burn. Inch by agonizing inch she drew closer to freedom, to hope and help. Cecilia dug in, wiggling forward. She planned to keep on going until reaching the middle of the road. Only once the police arrived would she feel rescued. But would anyone believe her when she told them about her ordeal, when she brought up the monster she felt even now striding ever closer?

They might lock her, label her a lunatic.

Cecilia didn't care.

If it got her away from the monster...

Pain sparked to life in her shoulders as she finally reached the tree line, a giggle popping out. Cool air brushed against her wet cheeks. Looking to the right she saw the heartwarming glow of an approaching car, and there was a house across the street. If she could just muster up the ability to scream.

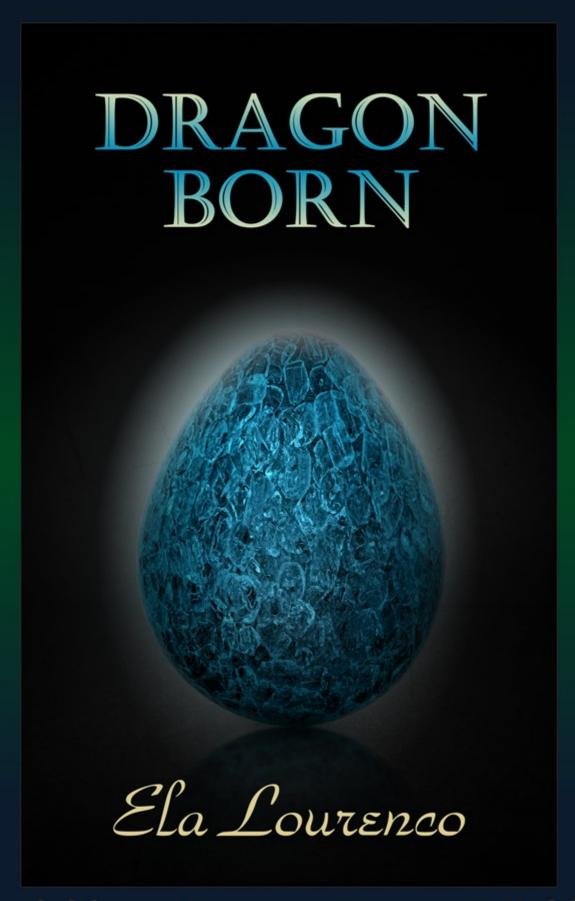
Cecilia managed to get her body halfway out, pausing. Drawing in as much oxygen as she could Cecilia prepared to scream, the car even closer.

Pain exploded in her ankle as sharp claws sliced through skin, digging into flesh and piercing bone. The scream she prepared lodged in her throat, eyes bulging in pain. Cecilia sought for purchase, trying to grab hold of anything she could get her hands on, failing. A fresh wave of tears poured forth as she was slowly tugged back into the shadows, salvation slipping away.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — KL Dantes lives in southern Wisconsin where she writes every chance she gets.

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

The Children's Dinner | *Melissa R. Mendelson*

The Meredith Mansion was slated for demolition. Old Lady Wickham had passed away only a month ago, and since then, the home began to deteriorate. Windows were found smashed in and broken. The front doors were pulled off their hinges. Graffiti artists left their mark on the sides. The metal fence that once kept the neighborhood out had fallen back against the earth, and the home mirrored something out of a horror movie. Nobody wanted to rescue it, but before the mansion was brought to its knees, there were those that wanted to go inside, go and see what that family had hidden away. And that was a mistake that would haunt us until the end.

I was the last one to walk inside the Meredith Mansion. The small group that I was with split off the moment we were inside. A few went upstairs. The rest walked along the downstairs, looking for items to pocket. I didn't want anything. I just wanted to look inside the home. For a long time, I've stared at this mansion, always wanting to come in, and once I saw Old Lady Wickham standing by her balcony window. To this day, I remember the look that she gave me, and my blood ran cold. It still does, especially now as I stand by the chalk outline, where her body was found by the stairs.

The rumor was that Old Lady Wickham had a heart attack. The look on her face was like a silent scream that would never end. Her hands were curled up against her chest. Her eyes were fixed on a delivery box that had arrived moments before her death. When her body was finally taken away, the box was left by the stairs, half open, and even the chalk outline avoided touching it, which was strange. I wondered what was so horrific inside that box that scared Old Lady Wickham to death.

It was a doll, a porcelain doll wrapped in dusty plastic. Her hair was beautiful and velvety. Her skin was cold, and her nails were painted pink. She wore a purple and black dress with white stockings and black shoes. Her eyes were green, and when they looked at me, I disappeared. I no longer existed, and I wanted to put that doll back into its box. Let it be destroyed along with this house, but my body refused to respond. Instead, I numbly carried it outside, ignoring those that called out to me, and I placed the doll in the backseat of my car.

I awoke in the bedroom. It was dark now. I heard the front door open, and my kids walked inside. My ex had dropped them off, and as soon as they were in the house, he left. That was our relationship now. He only wanted to see them. As I sat up in bed, I brushed against the doll, but this time, I refused to look at it. I managed to throw the dusty plastic over the wretched thing without looking, and then I hurried over to my closet. And just as I threw it onto the top shelf, my daughter walked into the room.

"Was that a doll?" My daughter asked excitedly.

"No," I said as I slammed the closet door shut. "I have to make dinner," and I led her away from the closet.

"It looked like a doll. Can I see her?"

"I said. No," and my daughter flinched. "Go to your room."

"Why? What did I do?"

"Nothing," and I closed my bedroom door. I should have locked it. "Just go to your room until dinner's ready. Please," and I tried to say that sweetly. But my voice was still harsh.

"Fine, but why does John get to stay downstairs then?"

"Beth."

"I'm going," and her bedroom door slammed shut a moment later.

The water in the pot was boiling away when I heard a thud upstairs, followed by a scream. I quickly flipped the oven off and hurried up the stairs toward my bedroom. The door was open, and Beth was lying on the floor next to a broken, porcelain doll.

"I just..." Beth gasped. "I just wanted to see... See the doll. I pulled the plastic." She gasped again. "The doll fell. It crashed to the floor, and... Broke. This dust went up into the air." Beth coughed harshly. "It went into my mouth. I'm so cold."

To my horror, Beth's skin paled, and she was shaking badly. I reached for her hand, and it felt like a block of ice. Her skin was so hard. It was almost like... porcelain, and her bones were making a funny sound almost as if they were locking in place. I stared at her feet, reminded of that damn doll, and then I realized that the gasping and coughing had stopped. I forced myself to turn and look at Beth's face.

"Mom," Beth said as her eyes shined green. "What's wrong?"

I grabbed Beth off the floor. I carried her downstairs and screamed at my son to stay away. "Don't go to my room," I yelled over my shoulder as I carried Beth outside. I put Beth in the backseat, and then I flew into the driver's seat, tearing down the road like a mad woman.

The Town of Conflict only had medical clinics, and Beth needed a real doctor, a real medical facility, which was located outside of town. As I made my way there, I looked in the rearview mirror to see Beth sit up and look out at the road. She started to laugh, but then her laughter faded into screams.

"Mom, I can't leave," Beth shrieked. "I can't leave. You're killing me." Her screams rose higher. I was just at the edge of town when she screamed, "Stop," and I slammed on the brakes.

I looked at Beth. Black blood ran down her porcelain cheeks. They shined in her eyes. They stained her clothes, and my heart dropped. It was too late. There was no fixing her, even if I slammed on the gas pedal and flew toward help. Beth would die, and I couldn't live with that.

"I want to go home," Beth whispered.

"Okay. Let's go home," and I turned the car around.

That was three days ago. I tried to get my ex to pick up our son, but he wasn't answering his phone. He only did that when he was with her, and now our son was trapped in this house with me and Beth, who had stayed in her room since that night. And Beth didn't eat or sleep. She just sat on her bed and stared out the window.

I barely slept, wracking my brains on how to fix her. Maybe, I could go back to the mansion and see if the box that the doll had arrived in was still there. Maybe, there was a delivery label from who sent it, and if I found them, I would ask why. Why would they have sent such a thing to this town, but as I sat on the couch, staring at a blank television screen, the world went dark.

Screams thundered in the air. I sat up on the couch and turned toward the front door. It was open, and then I realized that someone was shaking my arm. It was John, and he looked terrified. And he kept saying the same thing over and over again. Beth.

My neighbors next door were holding a birthday party for their daughter today. She just turned ten, and she and her friends were playing outside in the back yard. I never thought the worst, and I never could imagine it. But as I ran outside into their back yard, all I could do was fall to my knees.

Several children including my neighbors' daughter laid rigid on the lawn. Their skin paled in the sunlight. Their bodies snapped and cracked and popped. I knew those sounds well. Their eyes shined green. They slowly sat up, and their heads shifted over toward their parents, who stared on in horror. And then all eyes fell on Beth, who now looked at me.

Without saying a word, Beth brushed past me. She was returning to her room. Her job was done, and now all these kids were just like her. But why?

"Why did your daughter do that," my neighbor yelled at me as he cradled his wife, who had fainted from the terrifying scene.

I was at a loss for words. My tears were flowing freely now, and I was so tired. And I knew that it was too late. Once again, it was just too late, and these kids were trapped in this town now, held prisoner to whatever horror had claimed Beth. And I had no answers, but then I thought of that box back at the mansion. And I took off, running down the road and not stopping. That was until I found what was left of the mansion. Now, we would never know why.

It was a long walk back from the mansion. As I walked, the darkness grew, filled with these gut-wrenching screams, screams of children turning into monsters, screams of their parents, who were helpless to save them. All of this was my fault, and there was nothing that I could do about it. I was standing outside my house now, and Beth was watching me through her bedroom window. And for a moment there, I could have sworn that she smiled.

The neighborhood grew really quiet after that. Sometimes, a car flew by as if the devil were after them, and maybe he was. Maybe, they were. A lot of houses were dark now. Only the bedrooms of the children were lit, and every now and then, a scream would rip through the air.

"Mom." Beth stood nearby as I stared out the family room window. "Mom!" She was growing impatient. "I'm hungry."

I was surprised at that. She had not eaten in days. Only John and I ate what food was left in the house. What could she possibly want to eat? I didn't want to know the answer to that.

"Could you make your meatloaf? Please. You haven't made that in a long time." Beth started to leave the family room. "Oh. I asked John to fix the grandfather clock in the dining room. I think that it's been dead long enough." She took another step out of the room. "Also, do you mind if John and I eat first?"

"No." I forced myself to look at Beth. "I'll go make it now."

"No, Mom. Make it at six." Beth smiled a chilling smile and then finally left the room.

I was nervous. I didn't know why. Beth finally wanted to eat, and then I realized that I had to go to the grocery store for the meat. I had the rest of the ingredients, but part of me didn't want to leave the house. Something was wrong. I could feel it especially when I went outside and drove through town, and the grocery store was so empty with one cashier, who shook with every swipe along the conveyor belt. I never saw such fear before.

"Be careful," the woman whispered as she gave me my change. "They're watching."

I hurried back to my car, and that's when I saw them. It was a handful of children, but they weren't children. They smiled at me as I drove away, and I looked up in the rearview mirror at them. And as I drove away, they walked toward the grocery store, and I wondered why were they going in there. But I was late, and Beth was waiting.

Tick. Tock. John had fixed the grandfather clock. I always hated that thing, and it was nearly six now. I was rushing, and the meatloaf burned in the oven. I made extra vegetables to make up for that. I almost made the green ones, but then I caught myself. And John offered to help, but I didn't want Beth to see that. Instead, John stood nearby and watched as I hurried out into the small dining room, preparing her placemat and utensils. Then, I did the same for John, and then I rescued the meatloaf from the oven, quickly scraping away the burnt parts. Finally, the two plates were ready and filled with their dinner.

Beth emerged from the darkness and sat on the armless yellow chair by the dining room table. Her porcelain skin flashed against the glow from the candles that John had lit, another favor she had asked of him. Beth's hair was stiff with a red bow tied in the back, and she was wearing a purple and black dress, which scraped against the chair. She then looked at me and blinked, and her lashes made a soft echo against her face. John then sat beside her, and I backed away to let the children eat.

Suddenly, Beth lunged toward John and opened her mouth. A monstrous dust emerged from her lungs and poured into John's mouth. It also went up his nose and into his ears, and John started to convulse. His eyes rolled up into his head, and his hands twitched. Then, he slumped back into his seat, and Beth turned toward her plate and started playing with her food.

A moment later, John opened his eyes. He looked at Beth and then at me. His skin glowed in the candlelight, and his eyes shined green. Then, he turned toward his plate and started to pick up his fork, but Beth shook her head.

Beth and John slowly moved off their seats and walked toward me. Their eyes shined in the growing darkness, and I was at a loss for words. I fell to my knees and started to cry, and they now stood over me. I looked down at my hands, afraid to look up at my children, but they were no longer my children.

"Mom," John said. "Mom." I finally looked up at him. "We're hungry."

"Time to eat," Beth said.

John and Beth lunged toward me. They each grabbed hold of my arms. Their mouths opened, revealing razor sharp teeth, and they bit into my skin. And I screamed, the same scream that I had heard outside, and I wanted to collapse, disappear. But my children refused to let go, smiling with every bite, and I screamed again and again.

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Bent Metal

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

Pup | Nina D'Arcangela

I scramble through the woods at break-neck speed, I've no idea in which direction, I only know I have to escape the beast that attacked me. A clearing in the trees ahead reveals the flicker of a fire's glow. As I stumble into the mudded tract, I realize I've come upon a gypsy encampment. Two men immediately rise in defense, but a hunched old woman shushes them away. She guides me to a rough-hewn bench. I sit in the brisk night air, chest heaving, lungs still gasping for breath as the crone examines my scratched torso, the gouges left upon my arm by the beast's maw.

Heavy drapes at the rear of a nearby caravan part, concealed behind a voile sheath looms a tourmaline eyed creature of exquisite beauty. She holds my gaze for but a moment before her eyes creep down toward my bare chest and further still to the ruined forearm. The old gypsy woman tending my torn flesh immediately bows and begins to back away.

As the black veil unfurls, I see the illusion for what it is; the alluring countenance of the creature's face belies the grotesque malformation of its body. A withered arm snakes its way forward grasping the rail along the stairs in its elongated hand. The exposed flesh covering it resembles nothing more than flaking mica. The body that follows is near indescribable. Multiple legs, in varying size and stage of abortion, dangle beneath the tattered rag it wears around its distorted midsection. One hip juts upward and away from its body while its engorged abdomen bucks in sway with something yet unseen. I try to avert my eyes, to look away from this aberration, but fear and revulsion will not allow it.

Moving in awkward jerks, it approaches. Terror demands I flee, but a wave of power emanating from those rapturous eyes locks me in place. It lowers itself to the muddy earth at my feet. Its stare burns through me as it brings its mouth to my savaged arm. Crimson lips whisper an incantation that dances with the feather-light touch of its breath over my aching skin. It then clutches my arm in its claw-like grip, throws back its head and begins to screech a banshee's wail.

As its legs tear open, a gush of fluid sluices from between them. The screech morphs to a guttural moan as something passes from its body and darts into the woods. The echo of torment silences; the only sounds left are labored breathing and what scurries in the dark underbrush.

The creature before me spasms, struggles to right itself, to regain its knees in the slick afterbirth. Composed once more, it stares at me with fierce brutality. Once again, it grasps my wounded arm in its roughened talon and speaks a single command as it sears its mark into my flesh. I see depths of rage, hate, regret, pain and sorrow in its release as the eyes dim and the body falls backward to lie unmoving.

The old gypsy woman approaches. She looks upon the corpse from the caravan, surveys the wound and brand on my arm. Compassion and terror color her countenance as she dips her fingers into the mingle of blood and amniotic fluid. While making a sign of sanctity to ward herself from evil, she speaks these words.

"The pup is born, the mantle passed. Protect it, and you may yet find your own salvation."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Nina D'Arcangela is a quirky horror writer who likes to spin soul rending snippets of despair. She reads anything from splatter matter to dark matter, and is an UrbEx adventurer who loves to photograph abandoned places, bits of decay, and old grave yards. Nina is the co-owner of *Sirens Call Publications*, the co-founder of the horror writing group *Pen of the Damned*, and the owner and resident anarchist of *Dark Angel Photography*.

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Fresh Dead Flowers | Alledria Hurt

Mortimer Anthony Smith was on his evening constitutional, wherein he recited to himself the Latin names of plant species he encountered, when he was stopped by a thick voice questioning, "Spare a quarter?"

Clutching his coat he whirled, his mind already building a man to go with such a voice. A societal weed growing up from the pavement on a steady diet of whiskey or wine rather than water, and fertilized in its own feces. He was not disappointed. Bloodshot eyes watched him hungrily as the voice asked again.

"Spare a quarter?"

"No."

Turning back to his business, Mortimer continued his recitation as the man behind him began to cough. Mortimer winced away from the sound immediately attributing it to some kind of fungal infection. One that was undoubtedly catchy. That cough went on far longer than was polite, yet Mortimer kept his back to the man.

Somewhere in the coughing fit, a few words tried to slip out but Mortimer recited over the top of them. This was his quiet time. His time to be out of doors like a potted plant set on the stoop to enjoy the rain. He intended to do exactly that.

Behind him, the bum collapsed, wheezing, gasping, coughing, crying, pleading. Mortimer finally turned to look. The man's chest rose, hesitated, then fell where it hesitated again before rising more slowly. Mortimer Anthony Smith watched a man die with less fascination than he had for watching his night blooming flowers open, but he watched.

As he was entertaining some vague notion of contacting the police, the man's mouth, now hanging open and full of a blackened tongue, sprouted a seedling. Before his eyes, it grew by inches and added leaves, then a bulb which like a lily unfurled into a majestic trumpet of velvet blue.

Dropping to his knees beside the body, he cupped the radiant flower and inhaled. The scent eclipsed the manure it came from as it should considering its perfection.

"Now what shall we call you?" he asked.

The petals shivered under his breath then shriveled, the bloom breaking off into his cupped hands.

"No!"

The stem blackened then shrank back down the man's throat. Mortimer lunged for it, unaware of the tears on his cheeks, his mouth nearly making contact with that of the corpse. He pulled back as a bright light beamed down on him. Shaking, he stood, one hand slipping the bloom away from sight in his pocket.

"What's going on here?" asked the light.

"I think he's dead." Mortimer took a deep breath and let it out in a long sigh. "Officer," he added.

The Officer had already forgotten him proceeding to inspect the corpse.

"Did you see what happened?"

"He asked me for a quarter, then started coughing. He was on the ground before I knew." In his pocket, Mortimer caressed the silk bloom. The texture was changing under his fingers becoming papery. He hid his frown by wiping his face with his sleeve.

"Stick around. I need to take your statement."

At midnight, Mortimer Smith sat in his greenhouse surrounded by years of patient labor which had created for him a lush jungle of vegetation. A profusion of plants, some flowering, some not. His true companions. Among them, a tiny desk where this newest addition lay beside a carefully illustrated and labeled picture of itself.

"Subject retains standard reproduction apparatus; however, medium of growth is uncertain."

The bloom had dried as if pressed during the brief sojourn in his pocket, yet it still held its promise.

"How do you come to be, my pretty?"

Mortimer went to bed with that thought on his mind.

The next day proceeded as the one previously had with two notable exceptions, one large and one small.

The small exception was Mortimer choosing to carry the new bloom around in his trouser pocket.

The large exception was that he did not get to make his nightly stroll to the tiny park as usual.

At 9:05, his normal departure time for his evening constitutional, Mortimer was pressing the desiccated bloom into the wound of a would-be house burglar. All the while looking away as the blood ran over his hands. He forced himself to think of it as sap. Yes, that's exactly what it was sap. Warm sap which would feed his new darling all the nutrients it desired.

The young gentleman on Mortimer's floor spewing sap all over the hand-selected wood was a neighborhood tough. Mortimer had seen him around and paid him little attention. He was just another city weed among a patch of city weeds. Perfectly at home. At 8:49, he had rung Mortimer Smith's doorbell with every intention of using a rather gaudy handgun on Mr. Smith and relieving him of his valuables. Or so he had stated.

Except Mortimer Smith did not have any valuables as the young man understood them. What exactly would a city weed know about prize winning orchids or heirloom roses?

In his displeasure, he had seized a pot from the coffee table and dashed it on the floor. Mortimer could hear the beautiful fern cry out in pained surprise as the pot shattered and she, from dirt to roots to leaves, was scattered across the floor. He lunged forward. They wrestled for the gun. It went off. Then, sap, yes human sap all over his clothes and the floor.

The young man gurgled like a forest brook as Mortimer snatched the bloom from his trouser pocket to protect it from the stain now spreading down his leg as the sap soaked in. Looking at it, he could hear himself saying,

How do you come to be, my pretty?

He dropped to his knees again, this time feeling a twinge of pain, and pressed the bloom into the wound still flowing. The young man screamed. Mortimer clamped a bloody hand over the boy's mouth, as before his eyes the flower began to take root. As the boy stopped kicking, it grew from the wound itself, a velvet blossom the shade of approaching night the size of his fist.

"Yes, there you are, pretty."

He scooped together a mixture of soil from the broken pot and human sap, but already the bloom was fading. Mortimer saved the flower once again, his hands only barely keeping it from contact with the floor. He cradled it carrying it from the living room into the greenhouse where he laid it down on the desk. Then he went into his kitchen and called the police.

When he returned to his desk, he was fresh and clean. The bloom was waiting for him, not as perfect but still so beautiful. Without picking it up, he caressed its length with two fingers.

"I want to know everything about you and how to make you thrive."

He closed his eyes against the withered sight, the first crystals of tears at their edges.

"If only I could keep you alive."

It was 9:10 the next night when Mortimer stepped out of his front door and locked it. The selection of his newest accessory had thrown off his nightly schedule. Though he certainly wasn't old enough to need one, he now kept his jaunty walking pace with a stout wooden cane. It tapped smartly on the concrete as he moved toward the park. In his breast pocket, just visible, a blue petal could be seen.

"Now, shall we see if we might find some fertilizer, pretty?"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Alledria Hurt is an African-American Southern transplant who before, and while, becoming a writer served as a tour guide, an escape game host, an insurance agent and a mail carrier. Sometimes at the same time. She has released two series, a couple stand-alones, and various works of short fiction.

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Tailing the Perished | *E. Burden*

Swordsman kept moving forward into the alcove with the bodies. Carden held up her hand as a way of signing 'stop' to a *Ruskhound*. Swordsman finally listened, letting Carden move closer to the little fire everyone had fallen apart around. There were bones and a skull in the pit, but the meat of the thing was gone and the spine was broken clean. It looked like the body of another *Ruskhound* had been roasted for food.

It was unthinkable. The giant dogs were used as co-pilots on foreign planets, they were navigator, savior, and pet. The ability to move, to get out of the way, to fight like an animal in the harshest places, in and out of a ship, was invaluable.

Vachel's team should have had enough food for over a year, maybe even two. They couldn't have been starving enough to eat the dog.

Carden remembered briefly what it was like on the transport ships, the days without food. The pain, the fog that covers your brain. A year was long enough to be desperate. It still felt undreamed-of to eat the body of an animal that loved and served you.

Another long, low-pitched whine echoed through the little space. Swordsman was scared.

Carden held out two fingers, slower and gentler this time, as a signal to wait. There was no question the *Ruskhound* was trying to tell her something, but Carden had to see this, and she shined her wrist-light on the ground. Her boots kicked up ash that floated through the air, some of it sticking to her mask.

She stepped on something substantial. Her first thought was a tree root, but it was softer, yielding under the pressure of her step. Carden bent down to look. It was an arm, more than an arm, most of the shoulder was there, too. Still in the Westlund company uniform except for the hand and fingers and the small part of the upper arm that was cut and exposed. The blood was dry and brown, and the bones were being whittled down by the acidic air. The cut was stranger than that of the *Ruskhound* corpse. This hadn't been cleaved or lasered, it contained the ball joint of the shoulder. Like it had been ripped off. Or fallen off. Carden examined the hand again, it didn't look like Vachel's; it was older, the nails were not as healthy. Carden exhaled so long that it fogged her mask for a second, and set the body part back down to the ground. Bodies were nothing new. Toddlers learned to maneuver over the wasted corpses on the decks of crowded ships and the ending of life was part of survival. But Carden could not wrap her mind around losing Vachel.

She swiveled her foot into the ashes, moving further in and flashing her light from her communicator into every corner. There was a face, or the skin of one; not Vachel's, but a young woman. It looked like rotten lunchmeat left out to dry on the counter, Carden had to try hard not to stare at it too long. There was also a uniform, a complete olive green Westlund uniform in the very corner of the alcove. One of the sleeves was slightly inside out, so it had been worn. Carden picked it up to look at the little name tag. It was Annmar Lara. The soil tester, Carden had known her for years. It wasn't her face on the ground, of that Carden was mostly certain even with the decay. Annmar was missing and so was Vachel, and their traces weren't here with the rest of the sampling crew.

She walked to the ship and Swordsman opened the door for her to climb in. "I'm sending you video footage of some stuff. There are dead bodies here, one unidentified female, and one male, and the ship's *Ruskhound*. It's pieces of them, it's graphic. Don't do anything with any of this yet, just store it for me," Carden spoke to her friend Uda over the ship's monitor.

"I'm sorry. That's horrible." Uda's boyish voice cracked over the system.

"Just hold onto it for right now," Carden said.

"Of course. You know this alone can be video justification for sending out a recon team. You're out there, you'll find him, Carden."

"Not leaving until I do."

"It doesn't make any sense they sent out a team to this little garbage planet and sent no protection, and then no resources when they didn't return. I'm going to keep digging around here, I'll let you know as soon as I find anything relevant at all, okay?" Uda said.

"Thanks for helping me with everything, I'll continue uploading the recordings," Carden said.

"Be careful," Uda said before the communication line dropped.

Carden moved out of her co-pilot seat to pet Swordman's giant head. The dog shut her eyes and leaned toward Carden and away from the wiring that connected her to the vehicle. *Ruskhounds* were larger than some humans, and Swordsman was on the larger side of that. She was a giant white wolf-looking thing with a wider, friendlier face and red-brown eyes, the same color as Carden's. She and Uda had decided to call her Swordsman after Carden's father's exploratory ship. They had expected to be given a male *Ruskhound* puppy, but they couldn't think of anything different to call her that fit.

"Let's go," Carden told her, "Further in." The trees were intimidating here, clustered together and blocking out the light of the two small burning stars, the temperature drop in the shade could be felt even from the comfort of the little ship.

The tiny planet with the slightly corrosive atmosphere and ridiculous jungle was labeled Denebola. It was registered as a 'plucker planet', meaning that the resources were important enough to harvest and it was low on the list because long-term colonization and farming weren't possible. That's why Vachel's team was there, to determine if the soil and water and air and minerals were useable for sure, along with a robot that would stay behind after they left. Tech was sparse, but humans were not, and to even have qualified to take a robot should have meant a team sent to look in on what happened. But nobody was sent, and Carden had to take this flight on her own without regulation. Uda wasn't even able to find footage being logged from the trip.

Swordsman was on high alert; her ears were forward and she was maneuvering the ship through the tree trunks in a hurry. Carden saw moving things below them, scampering away from the disturbance of being flown over by a loud ship. There were living things here. Other things to eat than the dog. What the Westlund crew had done didn't make any rational sense.

"Let's put out the alert, I don't see anything dangerous," Carden told Swordsman and initiated the flashing light and loud pulse that alerted people they were in the area and actively looking for whoever needed rescue. Unfortunately, Vachel's tracking ID was not activated. He would not get the personal alert. Another piece of information that made no sense. Unless he was dead and Westlund corporation already knew it.

They hit something, hard, rocking the ship, scraping it like metal. Carden couldn't tell what it was, but Swordsman was circling the ship higher up to hit it again. Carden almost overrode the command, scared to death it had been a person, that it might have been Vachel.

But the thing on the ground was a creamy light gray, and insanely long as it stood back up on hind legs. Almost like a person, but definitely not a person, something about the way it stood made Carden feel like Swordsman was correct about it being dangerous. *Ruskhounds* weren't known to be overly gentle with extraterrestrial life, but that's not what they were for. They were warrior dogs. But Swordsman had never engaged with a non-threatening entity before.

The creature lunged for the ship. They hit it again. Hard enough to knock it back, but it landed a blow on the front glass, cracking it across the top. Carden didn't have time to engage the oxygen mask for Swordsman, and it would leave her mostly defenseless. The oxygen here was high enough to make it breathable, but the corrosive dust would permanently damage lungs. Better that than be alien food, though.

The ship landed sideways, its heavy form sinking a bit into the spongey forest dirt.

The creature was fully visible through cracked glass, and it had two faces. On the right side was a human skull, its jaws forced open and some of the muscle tissue still clinging on, trying to work. The left was decidedly more alien. It was crusted over and missing all features except the mouth and humanoid shape. The arms were long, very long, ending in two root-like claws the color of bone. They stuck in the ground and allowed it to move around quickly. But the legs were still human. Still in the tattered pieces and army green color of Westlund. This was a crew member.

It reached into the ship, the root-like claws went through the military glass as if it had never existed and landed on Carden's legs.

It had cut through her boots, she could feel the warmth of blood ease the stinging.

Swordsman disconnected herself from the ship's wiring and was bloody from the forced removal, the *Ruskhound* jumped on the creature's back. Carden kicked at the double faces, and dark blood oozed out of the human skull's mouth.

Then the scaly alien mouth bit her. It was a deep bite, the sharp pain was nothing compared to jaws that were squeezing bone, willing it to break apart.

Her vision was trying to go dark; Carden unbuckled herself and allowed the monster to pull her out of the wreckage. This gave her more room to fight, to get away. It was this or die.

Carden put her hands, one balled into a fist, into the human skull's mouth and used the other hand to rip off the moving jaw. It took strings of tissue with it and caused the creature to let go.

The strangest thing was the lack of sound. Anything really alive would be making noise but nothing escaped the mouths of the monster but the soft symphony of gnawing and wet raspy breathing.

Swordsman ran to put herself between it and Carden. Suddenly there was a pop, and a sheet of dark and sour smelling blood fell over them both.

The two-faced monster was sinking down into the soft earth and Carden thought it was a hallucination that Vachel was standing behind it, a small pistol in his hands. He wasn't wearing a mask, so it couldn't be real.

"You have to get up off of the ground, they use those hands to sink into the dirt and sense vibrations, we have to move to the rocks, come on," He said.

Carden cried when she felt his hand as he helped her up, Swordsman danced around them both, wagging her tail; she'd known Vachel since puppyhood. Carden would catch her watching the door at night back home, waiting for him at the usual times he could come in for months after he left.

His blue eyes were sunken in, there were strangely separating gashes along his mouth and cheeks that seemed to move when he breathed, and Carden understood why he wasn't wearing any protection from the atmosphere.

"What did this? What could do this," Carden refused to move, she couldn't. For a year there was nothing but the dreaming of this. She put her face against his neck, and his smell was gone. She wondered again if it was real.

"The worst part of it is that I don't know. I looked. I looked every day. Tested their blood when they wouldn't stop eating, tested their skin when the sores started. I can't find it. I can't find it on me. But I feel it. It's the worst part. Not knowing what it is. Worse than not knowing how to fight it," Vachel exhaled and pulled Carden to him. "I tried so hard to get word back home. I knew you'd show up here."

"If you had told me this, it would not have stopped me," Carden said. "How many are left?"

"Two like this one, Annmar isn't as far gone, but I can't find her," Vachel said. "I stay on the rocks. You can hear them coming there and they can't find you very well. I don't think they can see, or smell. They just feel. They pulled him apart. They pulled Lysander apart and ate him. I knew then, right then that none of us were ever leaving here. There was no sanity left in any of them for months before that, but then I knew for sure."

"But you didn't do that," Carden said. Lysander hadn't belonged to Vachel, but it was the *Ruskhound* that had co-piloted all of his expeditions. The thought of it made her chest ache. "I have to believe if you didn't, you won't," Carden said.

A soccer-ball sized flying robot moved to Vachel's shoulder. Carden offered her hand out and it landed there. Westlund should have sent a heavy duty roller, not a little communications robot. So much of this expedition to Denebola and its silence was baffling.

"It's not operational, other than scouting. I can't relay or receive any information," he said.

"We can now," Carden detached her communicator from her wrist and plugged it into the little round robot. It lit up baby blue. The signal was stronger than she'd had in the ship. She lifted the robot to her face. "I'm sending a recording of everything here so far, do not view it or hold onto it, put it in the hands of someone who can do something useful with it as quietly as possible. Westlund knows what's going on here, and everyone needs to understand that Denebola is not safe and not to be approached for any reason, even in orbit. I love you," Carden turned off the message and then sent the footage to Uda. Vachel only nodded, his shoulders fell, like a weight he'd been carrying had been taken off.

Carden noticed that her leg didn't hurt, though it was bleeding out and exposed to the corrosive air. She tossed the robot back into the air where it flittered like a fat and glowing hummingbird.

She bent down and moved the tattered pieces of uniform to see white scar tissue building up. Carden pulled off her mask, happy to exhale regularly even if the air was painful. She reached out and rubbed Swordsman's ears. If they were all going to be monsters, they'd be the last damn monsters standing on Denebola.

"Continue recording?" The robot asked.

"No, not anymore," Carden said.

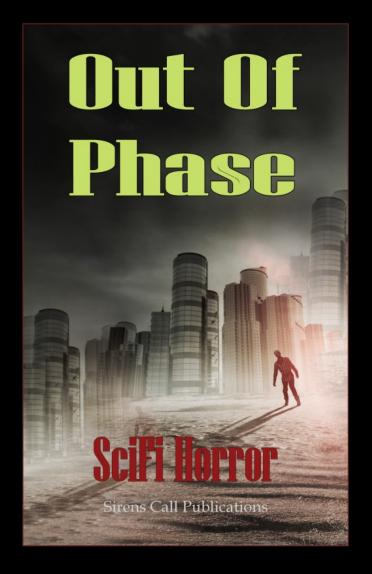
ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Erica is an SVT warrior who lives in Houston with her husband and three children and an ancient dog. She writes dark fiction as a way to make sense of the world, but can only fit it in between endless grocery trips and school activities.

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Out of Phase: Tales of SciFi Horror

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Foot in Mouth | *Madeline Mora-Summonte*

Leah tosses, turns, the sheets wrapping her like a shroud. Voices from Mr. Zandar's TV rise and fall, seep through the shared wall.

After she and her ex went their separate ways, this old town house was all she could afford. It was a reflection of herself—haggard, run-down, foundation fissured, edges crumbling.

Leah flips onto her back, closes her eyes. She breathes deep, hoping to lull herself back to sleep.

She'd hoped the neighbor would be someone she'd connect with, who she could meet for a glass of wine, maybe a woman her age. But instead, she got Mr. Z. Nice enough, but older than dirt and a hoarder. Leah had noted the exterminator truck parked outside more than once.

Mr. Z was also hard of hearing, turning the TV volume up so high she could've been in the same room, watching it with him. Whenever she complained, he always apologized, always turned the volume down... until the next time. Sometimes she'd bang on the wall. Other times, she ignored it. Once in a while, she'd sit and drink her wine, pretend she wasn't alone.

But it's not the noise from Mr. Z's TV that's keeping her awake tonight. It's guilt. She'd had a terrible day at work, just wanted some peace and quiet, and of course she didn't get it. She went over to Mr. Z's and yelled at the old man like some harpy.

Chastised and meek, he absorbed her verbal abuse then apologized again and again. He pleaded with her to understand, but she was too angry to follow his explanation. He said everything was too thin—the walls, the floors—and the critters kept coming through, getting in, and they were so loud when they ate he had to turn up the TV or he'd go mad. She'd stomped home then made an appointment for the exterminator to come out. Vermin was the last thing she needed.

Now, she unwraps herself, gets out of bed. As long as she's awake, she might as well get something to drink. Her throat says water, but her mood says wine.

Leah heads downstairs, grazing the wall with her fingertips. On the other side, murmurs pulse like a low, slow heartbeat. She sighs. She'll apologize to Mr. Z tomorrow.

She takes the last step. She registers the smoosh, the wetness beneath her right foot before her left foot descends. She plants that firmly on the step.

She grips the bannister, frowns into the darkness. She didn't spill anything and, as far as she knows, there aren't any pipes here to leak.

The glop shifts beneath her foot, the movement slight, subtle, but definitely there, definitely alive. Fear freezes her. Oh God, is it a rat? Did she just step on a rat? Is she right now toeing rodent intestines?

It ripples, puckers then sucks her foot inside. Moist fleshy slabs close over it, like lips closing over a lollipop. A meaty muscle undulates along her sole, licking, tasting. She yanks her foot up, but fangs snag her, puncturing skin, crushing bones.

She screams, twists, tries to get away. She bangs on the shared wall, begs for help.

But the only response is Mr. Z's TV, the volume rising, swelling, as if filling all the spaces so no other critters can come through. At least for tonight.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Madeline Mora-Summonte is a writer, a reader, a beach-comber and 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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The Monster's Growl | Roh Morgan

Carly buried her face against the broad, leather-coated back, the night wind snatching at her hair and ripping tears from her eyes. The thunder of the black Harley drowned out even her thoughts as the biker twisted the throttle to pass a line of traffic. The motorcycle lunged forward and she tightened her grip around him while red taillights streamed by at lightning speed. Blinding headlights flashed off the big bike's mirrors as they shot past the cars and leaned back into their lane.

Adrenaline pumping through her in rhythm with the engine as they sped down the highway, Carly thought back to earlier in the evening.

The big blond biker was the hottest thing that ever walked into the little bar on the edge of town. When he sauntered over and put his quarters on their pool table, he altered everyone's game. Marsha grew quiet and began playing serious for a change, and Deb lost her bored-with-everything attitude, shooting as though her life depended upon it. The clack of the balls against one another was the only sound that broke the desperate silence in their little corner of the bar.

But Carly managed to beat them both, and when the biker shoved his quarters into the table slot, her heart stopped. He straightened, his chest and shoulders straining against the black t-shirt beneath his denim cutoff vest, and she realized that all three of the girls—herself included—were holding their breath. None of them could take their eyes from him as he racked, his arm muscles rippling while he deftly flipped the balls into their proper places. When he pulled the rack off, his steel blue eyes looked up into hers. She nearly dropped her pool cue.

"Are you ready?" he asked, a mysterious smile playing about his full lips.

She gulped and nodded, then proceeded to shoot the worst game of her life. She couldn't quit staring at his biceps as he shot, nor at his chiseled face framed by shoulder-length blond hair. The excited whispers of Marsha and Deb behind her only made it worse. And when it was her turn—forget it. Even though he stood silent, holding his stick in front of him as he watched her attempt to shoot, her awareness of him and his quiet confidence completely blew her focus.

She missed shot after shot, and it seemed like only a matter of minutes had passed before he called the pocket and sunk the eight-ball.

But all thoughts of losing evaporated when he asked her if she'd like to go for a ride. She didn't even hesitate as she stammered her acceptance. She barely had enough presence of mind to turn, weakly smile, and wave to her friends as he held the front door open for her.

Carly stood back and watched, wide-eyed, as he gathered his hair into a ponytail and shrugged on his black leather jacket. He straddled the big chopper and with one powerful kick, the metal beast roared to life, startling her with its throaty growl. The deep pounding of the pistons as it idled both excited and scared her, but not as much as his smile as he invited her to climb on behind him.

She struggled onto the rumbling monster and was shocked at the vibration drumming between her legs. Having nothing else to hang onto, she gingerly placed her hands on the sides of his waist. He reached down, grabbed her arms, and wrapped them tightly around him.

"Are you ready?" he yelled over his shoulder, a half-smile tugging at his full lips.

She nodded, and he grinned as he revved the bike several times. He reached down by his leg, yanked the shifter, and the metallic monster lurched into flight. She clung to him, thrilled and terrified at the same time, as he raced through the gears, each shift threatening to tear her from her precarious seat. She became lost in the storm of their passage as her world shrunk to the sound of Harley thunder and the rush of the clawing wind.

Carly shook her head, questioning her rash decision. She'd never done anything this impulsive before. She usually had trouble just giving a guy her phone number. But to leave with a guy she'd barely met? Not like her. Not like her at all. She smiled at the thrill that ran through her as she contemplated her ride on the wild side. Maybe that's because no one this intriguing had ever asked her before.

The rumble of the engine slowed its tempo as he braked to turn off the highway onto a dark country road. Carly felt the first stirrings of doubt as he guided the bike through a series of lonely, tree-lined curves. After several miles, he downshifted again and turned into an unlit driveway. As the pulsing gallop of the engine echoed into the night, her heartbeat sped up, half in anticipation and half in fear. He pulled up in front of a darkened house, shut off the engine, and leaned the bike onto its kickstand. The silence that assaulted her ears was almost painful after the incessant roar of the big Harley.

Her nerves stretched taut as the biker made no further movement. The engine and pipes snapped and popped in the languid air as they cooled, and with a creak of his leathers, he finally stirred. He patted her arms that were still clamped around his waist, and feeling stupid, she released her death grip on him. He stood and shifted forward, allowing her to set a foot onto the ground and swing her other leg over the back of the bike.

She hugged herself and moved back as he dismounted and pulled off his leather gloves. Without another word, he turned and walked up the porch steps. Carly glanced around into the encroaching night, then biting her lip, followed him. He was holding the door open, waiting for

her. The mysterious look in his eyes had been replaced with something else—something primeval. But instead of this scaring her, it triggered images of him naked above her. Electricity running through her veins, she quickened her pace and walked past him into the dark house.

Carly flinched at the loud snap of a switch and the dim yellow glare from an overhead light. As she turned to look at him, he smiled and walked up to her. He reached out and smoothed her hair, his blue eyes locked onto hers. She felt helpless in the steely fire of his gaze and offered no resistance as he began to undress her.

Stepping back from his handiwork, he stood and thoughtfully surveyed her naked body. As his eyes reached hers, she recoiled at the raw hunger in his expression. Darts of fear shot up her spine as his once-blue eyes changed color, becoming blood red.

"Are you ready?" he asked, his broad smile revealing the deadly fangs behind those full lips.

Her scream shattered the quiet of the night as the cooling Harley settled into silence.

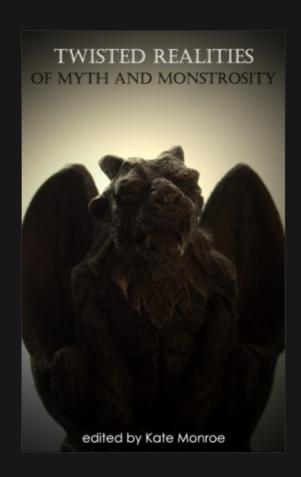
ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Roh Morgon dreams up her dark tales for young adult and adult readers while driving the back roads of California's Sierra Nevada foothills. She's best known for her urban fantasy series The Chosen which includes the novels *Watcher: Book I of The Chosen* and *Runner: Book II of The Chosen;* the 1840s historical horror novella *The Last Trace;* and the corporate horror novella *The Games Monsters Play.*

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The Devil's Trunk | Stacy Fileccia

Everybody loves a rebel—no one more than Sandy and her boyfriend, Reggie. Like a couple of kids, they waited for their co-workers to leave before locking up and slipping into their beefed-up 'Stangs—hers, a blue convertible, and, his, yellow with racing stripes. Revving their engines at the edge of the parking lot, they smiled across at each other—then looked away. A lot.

First to The Mesas; then to Tucco Tom's Bar and Grill. That was the agreement. They kept their weekly match confined to that lonely stretch of dusty highway that led from work to the outskirts of the nearest town.

The night could not have been more perfect. As the thin band of orange melted into the desert horizon, vivid stars glittered against a blackening sky, a million diamonds on velvet. The instant the sun vanished, tires squealed as the 'Stangs ripped open the silence where vipers deigned to prey.

From the start, Sandy—her hair whipping behind her—kept ahead by a good three car lengths. She had no intention of letting him beat her. But when she saw Reggie's sexy yellow 'Stang cut the corner through the desert and scream down the rutted shortcut, she hit the steering wheel.

She composed herself. He wouldn't beat her. Gas pressed to the floor, her lips curled into a determined smile.

Three miles later, she caught up with his dust. She pushed her beast a little faster until she rocketed ahead, then back, finally settling into matching speeds with him. Then she nearly jumped out of her seat with delight. A *third* Mustang—a custom-painted metallic green monster with realistic flames—merged into the mix.

And, oh, baby, did that bad boy ever want to play.

He passed Reggie cross country before squealing back onto the asphalt. Then he forced Reggie to slow down as he pulled alongside Sandy, a little faster, a little slower. Sexy. Blond. Huge biceps. Flirty. Her type of guy.

Blowing him a kiss, she laughed in her throaty sort of way. Sexy cars. Sexy drivers. The thrill of speed and power and desert heat purred through her body.

Meow.

Sandy turned on her music full blast as the road widened and the 'Stangs pulled three abreast and stopped.

She held up three manicured fingers.

Both men nodded at her.

She put one finger down. Then the next. And the last.

Tires squealed. They raced like flame throwers from hell as the stars cheered and screamed. Coyotes howled. Owls took flight.

At first, Reggie rushed ahead.

Green kept pace with Sandy. Together, the two of them played a taunting game of give an inch, take an inch. After a few minutes of foreplay, Green blasted ahead of them both.

She let the boys *think* they could win. Then Sandy set her horses free. She zoomed by them both, her blue 'Stang rumbling through her body, driving her heartbeat as much as she was driving it.

The road narrowed, cutting through The Mesas, twisting and turning like a neglected necklace.

Sandy lost sight of her rebel friends. She chuckled.

Finally, she zipped by Tucco Tom's. She was boss. When she looked in the rear-view, she was a good quarter mile ahead of Green, with Reggie the sorry loser boy.

Something clicked in her mind's eye. She looked again.

A fourth 'Stang—black this time—was chasing down Reggie. She kept glancing back at them. They drew close enough for Sandy to see Black had an absurd skull painted across the hood. She wondered...

She shook her head. Over the music, she said, "Too late for the races, Blackie." She settled back, shifting her shoulders as she coasted to the speed limit.

Out of The Mesas, she came to the Straights—a three-mile stretch, one-and-a-half lanes wide through the cliffs—straight up on her right, straight down on her left. No one raced there. Her thoughts drifted to what she was going to wear on the date Reggie had planned for them that night.

A terrifying squeal of tires gripped her ears.

"Reggie," she whispered, watching a flash of yellow bounce off the cliff wall and careen toward a thirty-foot drop.

She slammed on the brakes.

Green did the same.

So did Black.

Reggie skidded until one tire hung over the cliff edge.

She let go of her breath. He was safe. She made a three-point turn, but, as she did, Black peeled out, spun around, and trained its headlights on the wounded 'Stang.

Horror wedged in her throat. She slammed the gas. But when the sickening crash of metal on metal resounded, she felt like she'd been punched in the gut. "Reggie." The word slipped out of her mouth, drifting to the car floor like a feather as she pulled to a stop.

Reggie's amazing yellow 'Stang flipped off the edge and rolled like a cockamamie top spinning for a child's enjoyment.

Hands gripping the wheel, she couldn't move. Couldn't think.

Was survival possible?

Black's hood was slightly mangled. Not enough. The evil car waited, as if making sure it had finished the job.

Green did a three-point turn from where it had stopped and barreled toward Black.

Black sped backward to meet Green, blasting toward the kiss of death.

A fog of uncertainty descended upon Sandy's mind. She sat still. Her heart raced. Her mouth hung open. The 'Stangs stopped within inches of each other.

Dust billowed around them, dancing in the glow of the headlights, as an enormous moon rose like an unholy god. Power rumbled from under their hoods.

Sandy's stomach writhed.

Behaving unconcerned about the devastation that lay at the bottom of the cliff, the men shut off their cars and walked toward each other.

Walked. Toward. Each other. They bumped knuckles like long-lost brothers.

They. Knew. Each. Other.

Fear clawed open Sandy's throat.

Blondie ran toward her.

Something primal screamed within her. Go! She slammed on the gas.

"Come on horses, race for your life," she growled.

The car hugged the turns and burned the road.

Green and Black followed. Way. Too. Fast. Sandy could almost feel the heat from their engines. She forced herself not to look at them.

Patting the dash, she said, "Come on, baby, ten miles to town. You can do it."

But she couldn't.

Green passed her, slowing down and sandwiching her against Black. No matter how she tried to break away, she couldn't. They brought her car to the side of the road and held her there until, swallowing a huge lump in her throat, she turned off her beautiful, blue beast.

She tried to run.

Spiked sandals and a tiny blue business dress didn't lend itself well to her flight. She twisted her ankle and fell against a blasted cactus—hard, ripping a gash in her knee and slicing her hand on a spine. Running was worthless.

The earth trembled under their footsteps.

"Where d'ya think you're going, Suga'?" Dressed in black, his ancient, leathery face looked otherworldly. His eyes burned with blue fire.

Her heart sank.

"Careful, Harvey," said Blondie. Blue flames burned in his eyes, too. "She's quite the catch. Let's not be too hasty."

Harvey chuckled. "Can you be a good little girl?"

She didn't feel much like being a rebel anymore.

Blondie carried her to his car. The last things she saw before he slammed the trunk were two sets of eyes glowing blue out of the darkness.

It was tiny, the trunk.

Curled in a cramped ball and bleeding, she wondered at the strange smells of exhaust fumes and her own dissipating fear that lingered in her sweat. They had found her. After eight months of rebellious freedom, they had found her. Her husband would be quite angry. She wondered about that.

She longed for the date she was missing and wondered again if Reggie had survived. Hunger rolled around in her belly. Normal hunger, yes, but, also, hunger of a different sort. One born of her life of six months in, six months out she had endured since she was a teenager. Hatred rose and shrank within her. What would her husband do? She needed to stop worrying about it. She would know soon enough.

Flashes of light and color seeped in through the miniscule cracks of the trunk, making her lose track of lefts and rights. Finally, she slept.

When Sandy awakened, heat and chanting radiated around her. Unable to keep her eyes closed any longer, she sat up on the red velvet couch, her body's pains reminding her of the trauma it had suffered. She was in a huge cave lit with lines of lava running down the walls. To either side of her in row after row, men stood chanting. High above, women shouted erratic Greek words that burst out in flaming fully-formed letters and fell like rain, ultimately evaporating into hisses of smoke as they hit the severed fingers littering the floor. The entire place exuded evil.

She grimaced.

Behind her, a man's voice rose and fell against the backdrop of the music coming from his inspired legions.

She knew that voice.

Sound ended.

In the echoes of silence, she sat. Waiting.

Hooves clicked against the sandstone floor. Closer. And closer. And stopped.

She looked up.

A gruesome figure smiled down on her, allowing silence to grow. His enormous, twisted horns hung on either side of his head. Blood pumped visibly through his skin, giving him a vivid red appearance while his eyes burned with eerie blue flame. He ground one of his two hooves into nearby severed fingers, almost like a child sitting on the sidewalk squishing ants. "You're awake." His voice reminded Sandy of hot chocolate. "You were hard to find this time." He rolled his eyes. "You're late, Persephone. Very late, indeed."

She jutted her chin up. "I'm 'Sandy' now, Hades, and I don't want to come any more." A bit of the rebellious spirit from earlier poked out through her voice.

He dangled a necklace made of pomegranate seeds in front of her face and pointed at the fiery Greek words now held in suspension. "The contract is unbreakable, my dear, no matter your name."

She stared at the seeds she'd once indulged in, to her eternal demise. "I hate you."

He backhanded her. "Best watch yourself. You had it nice. You had it easy. You had it both ways. Now..."

She rubbed her cheek. "I hate, Hades. All you do."

His features twisted into a smile. "But you are my queen." He nodded to Harvey and Blondie. "Bring him."

They bowed and left the room. When they came back, they supported Reggie's battered body between them. A bone protruded from his arm, his fileted calf dangling off a useless leg. The near-dead man raised his bloodied face, his eyes pleading for help.

A sob caught in Sandy's throat. She hadn't wanted this for him. He was fun.

In a cracked voice, Reggie cried, "Leave her alone." Then his head dropped from the effort.

Awwww. And he *cared* for her.

Hades didn't look at him. Instead, he gestured to the fingers. "A mortal has died every day of your absence, my irresponsible queen." He shook a gnarly finger at Reggie. "And, yes, I found out about *him*, shameful whore."

She stared at the fingers, eyes involuntarily glancing at the degloved leg.

"Hell's storm approaches, love. Time to resume the throne."

Sandy considered her options. Fun Reggie. A wicked ride with Hades for six months.

She stood, staring Hades down, walking toward him. The entire world waited for her answer. Looking around at the beautiful, suspended words, she let it wait. Then she tipped her head back and kissed him full on, his arousal and hers made plain before the throng.

When she pulled away, she strode to Reggie, who would die for her today. "Such a pity." She stroked his jaw line. "It was great while it lasted."

Reggie raised dazed eyes to hers. "No!" Reggie croaked.

Harvey handed her a cleaver as Blondie dumped Reggie on the floor, sat on his back, and held his wrists in an iron grip.

She whacked off the fingers one at a time, licking Reggie's blood off her own in a saucy sort of way.

He screamed. It aroused her further.

When she took the last finger, Hades nodded, "Finish, Darling."

Blondie flipped him over while Reggie shook and screamed, his hands flailing and bleeding everywhere.

Ignoring his distress, Sandy clawed apart his chest. The skin and muscles of the sacrificial man gave way like tissue paper under her extraordinary strength. She punched through the cartilage of his sternum and ripped out his beating heart, standing and holding it aloft.

Hades' followers chanted and danced. Reggie screamed.

She plucked a pomegranate seed out of the necklace and shoved it into the gaping hole.

He settled down. His eyes glazed. He rose in an unsteady, leg-flappy way, and joined the ranks of the men.

Harvey and Blondie carried in a solid gold steamer trunk the size of a refrigerator lying on its back. The fiery words assembled themselves as etchings on the sides of the trunk—The Devil's Trunk.

Hades threw it open.

Inside lay thousands of human hearts beating in time with the chanting. Sandy tossed Reggie's heart on top of them. It changed the course of its beating to match the others.

She took Hades by the hand. "Found me, eh?"

"Sandy, eh?"

She nodded.

He pushed a stray lock of hair out of her eyes. "I think I like it." As he led his blood-soaked bride away into the darkness, she didn't feel like being a rebel at all.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Stacy Fileccia—freelance editor and writer—acts like a sweet soccer mom by day but enjoys writing horror stories by night. A coffee and chocolate addict, she strives to intertwine interesting life experiences with fantastic imagination to deliver pure entertainment. Winner of Horror Addicts' 2016 Wicked Women Writers contest, she has been published in previous editions of Sirens Call and in Through Clouded Eyes.

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You Don't Want What I Get | Michelle Ann King

The others don't like me. Partly because I'm a girl and partly because I don't like them either, but mostly because I'm treated differently.

When they go up to collect their cut I stay where I am, sitting on the table. Smoking. They don't like that either, some of them. Bunch of tough guys, worried about lung cancer. Crazy. I tell them I need the cigs for anger management purposes, and the boss backs me up. The boss gives me a lot of leeway, especially with my anger management issues. Something else they don't like.

You'd think they'd be pleased, wouldn't you, that I don't take anything out of the pot. Means more for them. But they don't think that way. They wonder what else it is that I'm getting. Wonder if it's something better. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised; paranoia and suspicion are survival tools in our line of work.

Richie's the first one to get into it. I thought he would be. He's young, and impetuous. Insecure, too. It makes him front harder. I don't know if he's got a genuine problem with women or if that's just part of the show. All amounts to the same thing in the end, I guess.

He flicks his fingers at the money, like it's nothing, and plants himself in front of me. Folds his arms to make his biceps pop. I'm tempted to use one to stub out my smoke, but I don't. Escalation isn't classy at my age.

The other guys shuffle. Some want to see it go down, some just want it to go away. Professionalism, or just another age thing? Maybe that doesn't matter either.

"Take your money and go home, boy." That's Oz, who's been around a long time. Long enough not to ask questions.

Richie's not playing along. He's got a different script in his head, written a different ending.

"Fuck you, old man."

He carries on looking at me when he says it. Disrespectful. Any regret in Oz's face hardens out. Richie's strong, fast, skilled with a blade. He could have been useful. But he wants more than that. Wants too much, too soon. Sometimes it shakes out that way, with the good ones.

Oz shoots a look at the boss. That's the difference, right there. Oz knows what he wants, but he also knows that isn't what counts.

The boss looks Richie up and down. Kid doesn't even notice. How could you not feel that? But he's all about me. Getting closer, puffing up. He's got a foot and a half on me anyway, and that's without me sitting down. He's not quite big enough to do it on sheer physicality, but he's got the eyes, too. There's a look that sells it, and he's close. Another few kills—more measured, more deliberate—and he'd have it down.

Shame. I hate waste.

But maybe I'm being too quick to judge. Too eager to find Richie wanting. It's possible; I've been wrong before. Sometimes they surprise you.

Oz looks at the boss. The boss nods.

Oz looks at me. Shrugs.

What will be, will be.

I slide off the table. "Let's go," I tell Richie, and head out the door.

For a moment I don't think he's going to follow, but he jogs down the hallway after me.

"So you don't like money?" I ask him. 'You don't want to get paid?"

"I don't like getting cut out," he says. 'There's something you got going on, and I want in." "No, you don't," I say.

I stop, so that he runs into me. His upper chest hits my shoulder.

He spins on the impact but keeps his feet. His eyes widen and his hand goes to his chest before he jerks it back down again.

I wait. If he backs out now, I'll let him. The good ones know how to follow orders but the best ones know how to calculate and adapt. There's no shame in being beaten, only in not realizing it.

But Richie's script has too deep a hold. I can see him process, assess and dismiss in almost the same moment. Superiority bounces back into his face and stance like elastic.

So be it, then.

I walk on. He hesitates for a fraction of a second but again follows. We both take the stairs two at a time.

"Where you going, bitch?"

"To get my cut," I say. "You want, I'll split with you. Fifty fifty."

"Hell yeah, I want. But maybe I'll say what the split's going to be."

I look back at him. "Maybe."

We hit the lower floor. When this was a real meat warehouse, it was cold storage. It's not so different now. Just not so cold.

The way Richie's looking around, I can tell he's never been down here. He must have heard the rumours, though. Everyone has.

"What is this?" he says.

I key in the code for the inner door and open it up wide. "Files and Records."

He gags, his upper body spasming.

"Whew," I say. "Those files sure get ripe in the summer, don't they?"

He hangs back, one hand covering his mouth. A cloud of flies boils out from the back, where the hooks are. Richie swats at them with his free hand. I stick out my tongue and let them land.

"What the fuck?" he says. Or at least, it sounds something like that.

He bends over and retches. I slip behind him and shut the door tight behind us.

"Jesus fuck," he says, and pulls the knife out of his pocket. A switchblade. A bit dated, but still effective. In the right circumstances.

"You won't need that," I tell him. "Most of this is so tender by now it'll slide right off the bone."

"Jesus fuck," he says again. "What the fuck is this?"

"Not that you want to neglect the bones." I yank an arm off the nearest hook and crunch on

it. "They're an excellent source of calcium. Good for the teeth."

I show him mine, as proof.

He screams and scrambles backward, his feet sliding on the floor. His back hits the door and he holds out the switchblade in front of him. His hand is shaking so badly that it's just jittering up and down, but at least he tries. He hasn't pissed himself yet, either. Points. He might still come out the other side of this. I'd like that. He does have potential, after all.

I finish the arm and pull off a nice plump thigh. "Thing is, Richie, everyone knows when the job's been done and the books are balanced, and the boss doesn't really want to keep any files or records hanging around. He wants them gone. So his needs and my needs intersect quite nicely. We're a good team."

I step closer to Richie and he drops the knife. "You wanted to be on my team, didn't you, Richie? You wanted to share?"

He closes his eyes and murmurs something. I think it might be a prayer.

I take a bite out of the leg and chuck the rest into his lap. "All yours," I say.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Michelle Ann King was born in East London and now lives in Essex. Her stories have appeared in over seventy different venues, including Interzone, Strange Horizons, and Black Static. Her first collection, Transient Tales, is available in ebook and paperback from Amazon and other online retailers.

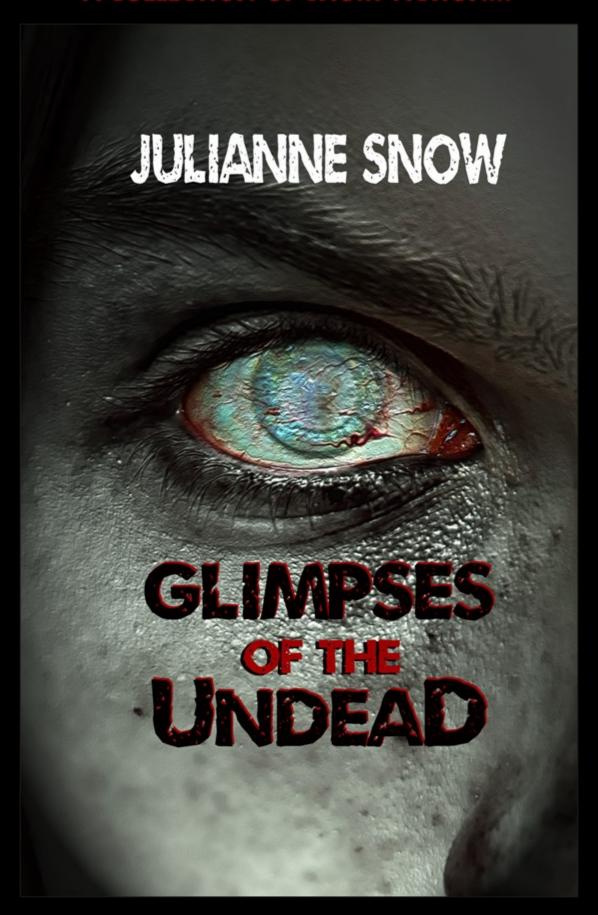
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Seven | *Julianne Snow*

It's been seven months since it all happened. We woke up one morning to the end of the world.

It's been seven days since you left. You went out looking for supplies to help fortify the small hole in the wall we'd managed to find. Maybe even find some food to keep our spirits up and our bodies going. Seven long days without word, without anyone else to talk to. Long days of utter, deafening isolation.

It's been seven hours since I awoke to the sounds outside. I wondered if it was you but knew in my heart it wasn't. They'd found us and now it was only a matter of time before they got in. I cursed myself for not being strong enough to go with you, but my swollen belly made travel too hard with what the world had become.

It's been seven minutes since someone broke through the paltry excuse for a reinforced door. I say someone, but it was one of them. I could hear the snarling coming from the dark hallway that lead in the room we were using as a home. I prayed it was a dog or something small I knew I could fend off, but my prayers went unanswered.

It's been seven seconds since my scream shattered the landscape around me. Seven seconds since I'd felt pain I'd never even imaged. Seven seconds since the savagery the world had descended into found me.

And in seven seconds, I'll join them...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Julianne Snow is the author of the *Days with the Undead* series and *Glimpses of the Undead*. She is the Co-Founder and Publicist 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: Days with the Undead



Thirst | *B.E. Seidl*

A painful yearning pulls him out of his slumber. There are heavy cramps in his abdomen, as if parasites have dug a hole in his stomach wall. Through his half-opened eyes he watches particles of dust dancing in the weak sunrays that enter through the filthy windows, shining onto his gaunt face. Irritated, he scratches the scars that cover his arms—traces of cigarette burns.

The trailer is covered in chaos. The rancid smell almost makes him wish he could hold his breath forever. Groaning, he rolls onto his side, heaves himself up from the stained mattress that serves as his bed. Still playing with the marks on his skin, he looks around.

He forgot to buy food again. In a cabinet near the sink, he finds a half empty box of cereal. He looks inside. Reluctantly, his hand reaches into the box, and he stuffs a bunch of corn flakes into his mouth. It turns out to be a mistake. The cereal is stale and chewy, and sticks to his gums. The sticky flake slime grows bigger and bigger, like a big clod it cumulates at the back of his throat. Cold sweat covers his neck, dropping down his back. He knows now what he already suspected in the first place—the cereal company cooperates with the Nazi-Mafia! This is another attempt to poison him! Grunting and gagging, he manages to choke the flake-clod back up and spit it into an old moth-eaten t-shirt. Quickly, he tries to get the poisonous taste of the flakes out of his mouth. Hurrying to the tiny bathroom, his hands shaking, he fills a dirty cup with water and gulps it down. That was close! He still feels the salt from his sweat stinging his eyes. He has to get out of the trailer!

In the streets there is hardly any traffic. It seems as if the houses themselves are moving, reaching for him. From above he hears a strange sound getting closer, like a monotonous humming. It must be a UFO hovering somewhere in the air above, seeking to kidnap him. He feels weak and dizzy. Yet, he starts to run, his eyes peering ahead. Even though he is running as fast as his unsteady legs can manage to carry him, he still hears the sound of the UFO buzzing in his ear. It almost sounds as if they are closing in on him, ready to catch him any moment. At the corner he spots a grocery store. Hungry and terrified he runs toward the automatic doors. The colorful display seems to promise him shelter, beckoning him to enter. Next to the cashier he recognizes an old friend. He knows her from high school—her brother drowned in her family's pool. She tried to rescue her brother but he turned out to be too heavy for her. He remembers the questions he wanted to ask her. But soon after her brother's death she left school and moved away with her parents. He is going to ask her now.

The friend acts as if she doesn't recognize him. Jennifer—he now recalls her name. Even as he calls her name, reminding her of details about the incident with her brother, she doesn't show any reaction. Why? This can't be! She must remember the accident! With quick steps he follows the young woman, who exits the grocery store, almost running, heading for her car—a grassgreen Volkswagen Polo with a red air freshener in the shape of an apple dangling from the rearview window. He tries to open the passenger door but it is locked. Without as much as glancing at him, Jennifer drives off, the wheels of her car squealing on the hot concrete. Confused, he scratches his head. Inside his brain there is a buzzing sound, like a siren, getting louder and louder. His face convulses in pain, the noise in his head howling like an alarm. Feeling dizzy by the nauseating noise he hunches into a fetal position on the concrete of the parking lot, unaware of the drivers that honk at him furiously, shouting at him from lowered windows. He doesn't see the security officer rushing toward him, gesticulating, talking into his walkie-talkie. He has lost time, until the officer's firm grip on his arm pulls him back to the real present. The howling in his head has gone. In its place a confusing mix of voices has taken over,

reminding him to keep moving, to get away from the shouting officer and the crowd hovering over him like aliens.

His mouth is dry and filled with a metallic taste. He cannot seem to rid himself of it, no matter how hard he swallows. He needs food. He already feels as though his blood is getting thicker, lumping together. Soon it will dry up and turn into powder. Ashes. Soon his whole body will disintegrate into ashes. He aimlessly wanders around. The voices in his head are whispering, hissing commands. He can hardly see where he's going. The pavement on the street seems to have melted together to create a dusky tunnel, leading his way. Only a few straggling streetlamps glimmer in the dark. After pacing in the same direction, following the tunnel for twenty minutes, he finally comes upon a group of houses. Through the windows, lamplights and TV screens beam at him, inviting him in like the neon signs of a bar. In one of these houses he is sure he will be able to quench his thirst.

He finds an unlocked backdoor. From inside he hears loud voices, their phony speech interrupted by laughter and applause. He enters, unnoticed. The noise in his head intensifies, the instructions become clearer. With monotonous steps he walks through the kitchen. He stops at the half-opened door that leads to the living room to watch a young woman sitting in front of the TV. His throat burns, he is so thirsty.

Red and warm, the blood drips down his chin, as he gulps down another cup and immediately refills it. He doesn't want to let the blood soak the planks of the wooden floor. After emptying the cup for a third time, he carelessly throws it away and reaches into the intestines leaking from the woman's torso. The mess of the slimy mass disturbs him. Eagerly, he digs deeper into the torso, searching for a token he can keep as a souvenir. He finds organs: the liver and what must be the stomach. None of it really suits him. The pressure in his head has returned. The pain makes his hands tremble. As he finally finds the heart, there is a crackling sound. A male voice shouts from behind him. "Babe, I'm home!" Quickly, he jumps to his feet. Swiping his blood-smeared mouth with the back of his hand, he hurries out of the room.

Disoriented, he bolts through the streets. The fresh blood pulsates in his veins and fills his body with life. He feels strong, much stronger, but still he doesn't feel free. Again, he hears a humming sound in the air. There are UFOs circling the neighborhood. He starts to run. It was a mistake not to kill the man when he was standing there, staring at the woman. He might have called the Mafia to tell on him. The voices in his head are snarling, rushing him on. In his panic, he almost stumbles over his own feet as he gallops on. When he reaches his trailer, he is panting so hard that he can hardly tell whether the blood he tastes in his throat is the woman's or his own.

Another morning. Just like every other day now, he has a splitting headache. Yawning, he opens his mouth wide enough for a fly to enter. The insect, still alive, buzzes against his gums, beating its little wings hectically. In a reflex he swallows it. The tickling feeling in his throat reminds him of the feathers of birds he once caught out of the aviary in the backyard of a

hospital he resided in some years ago. The birds didn't have much blood. He had to eat several of them to feel anything. There isn't always a choice. He cannot always be picky. Sometimes it's dogs or cats, or even wild rabbits. Yet ever since he tasted human blood he doesn't really like the wild taste of animals anymore. The noise in his head—now a kind of knocking—is getting louder. Now it isn't only in his head but everywhere. The whole trailer is full of it. There is someone at his door. Holding still, he waits for the knocking to stop.

When he is convinced that the uninvited guest has gone, he drags himself to the door. There is a pain in his right leg. It feels kind of numb, as if it had been replaced by an artificial leg. Repeatedly, he slaps at it, to make sure it is still a part of him. One cannot be careful enough. The syndicates are lurking around every corner, no lock is safe enough to keep them away. Unlocking all the bolts, he opens the door. From outside, a damp wave of heat blows into his face. There is nobody there, as far as he can tell. Stepping forward, his numb leg kicks against an object on the steps that lead to the trailer door. Looking down he finds a carton box filled with bags and boxes. A piece of paper that has been affixed to one of the bags flutters in the steamy air. He recognizes his mom's childlike handwriting. Where are you? Don't let the food go bad! Not really knowing what to do, he picks everything up and takes it inside. Putting it on the small kitchen table, he opens one container after another. In each of them, he finds some kind of mash, differing only in its color. Only in one small bowl that has been covered with a plastic wrap, he can clearly identify soggy lettuce leaves. Again, he eyes the mash in the other boxes, observing it, as if he expects it to come alive. Clearly, this was yet another attempt to poison him! His mom sends him a small amount of cash every month, just enough for him to pay for his groceries. He is certain that she only does it to silence her conscience, pretending to be nice and considerate, when actually she is cooperating with the syndicate. Maybe she even holds a high position in the Nazi-Mafia. How else would they know so much about his daily routines? Disgusted, he closes the containers' lids. The only bowl he takes out of the bag is the one with the salad. The other containers he places next to the door. His right leg still numb, he limps back to the mattress.

He hasn't moved in nearly twenty-four hours. He is so worn out and exhausted. It is difficult for him to get up now. The inside of the trailer is turning around him like the cars of a carousel. Dizzy and weak, he tries to steady himself but his hand can't find anything to hold on to. Maybe the mash his mom has made for him gives off poisonous steam? Better to get rid of the carton before the steam starts to attack his brain and lump his blood. His stomach is cramping but he is too languid to throw up. Weak in the knees, he stumbles to the door and kicks the carton out of the trailer. He feels anxious as to how he will be able to find food. Back in the kitchen he stuffs his mouth with cold salad leaves. Almost immediately he regrets it. The leaves are sour; he hardly manages to gulp them down. In his head, the voices return, nagging him. He is tired and doesn't want to deal with the demanding voices. Fiercely, he rubs his hands against his temples, as if he can turn the voices off like a radio show.

Agitated, he looks for a knife. He doesn't remember where he is or how he has gotten there. It is all happening so fast, almost like a movie in fast-forward. Blurry pictures flicker in his mind, hardly serving as clues to understand the plot. In the hallway there are three lifeless bodies. The woman has a hole in her skull. The young child almost looks as if it is sleeping. The man is on his back, his chest riddled with holes. The weapon, an old hunting rifle, has been discarded on the floor next to the bodies. He vaguely recalls stealing the rifle from the open garage of a neighboring house. He also recalls a child, a little boy. Looking through a kitchen drawer, he clumsily cuts his finger on a sharp blade. The voices in his head are murmuring. They whisper to him, urgently, to look for the boy. The boy is dangerous! He will tell on him! Irritated, he pushes against the drawer, sucking his bleeding finger. He has to look for the boy. Aimlessly, he searches the house. He doesn't find anything downstairs—the boy must be hiding somewhere upstairs. In a hurry he stumbles up the stairs, crawling on his hands and knees. The carpet is so slippery. He is convinced that he hears crying, or a whimpering sound somewhere nearby. The boy is close now. The voices in his head are urging him to find the boy.

He has lost track of time. It seems like it has been hours since he reached the upper floor of this house. Again, he hears the boy's sobbing cries. Every time he heads for one of the rooms, the crying seems to come from another direction. In one of the bedrooms he thinks he sees something under the bed—a small, huddled shape. It must be the boy. On all fours, he hurries toward the bed. He can almost feel the little leg struggling in his hands. He won't let him escape. Finally, he almost has him. Everything goes dark.

The syndicate has found him. As the black cloud fades away, he finds his hands shackled behind his back. The handcuffs feel loose, yet not loose enough to strip them off. His head hurts. His cheek seems to have swollen to double size. Only with great pain does he manage to open his eyes. Behind him there are voices. He cannot tell whether the voices are inside or outside of his head.

Now they are everywhere, asking questions he doesn't understand. He has to get out of here, while it is still possible. Before they kidnap him and take him to another place, maybe light years away to another galaxy. The voices densify, humming loudly, causing his whole body to vibrate under their horrific sound. He doesn't see any faces, only masks. Ugly distorted masks in uniforms. Gasping for air he tries to steady himself. He wants to get up. A force, stronger than himself, presses him down.

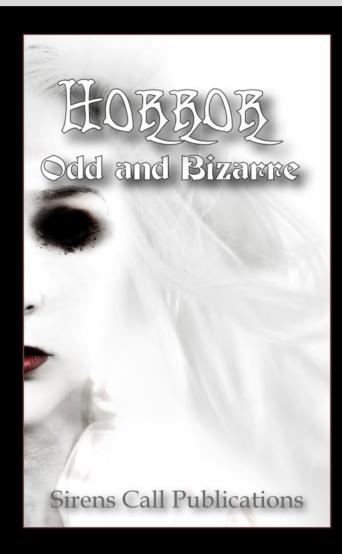
Again, he has lost his sense of time. His wrists still hurt from the cold cuffs. He wants to scratch his itching eyes but he is too weak. There is a blinding light shining on his face. Has the Gestapo finally found him? Are they going to try him? Torture and poison him? The man on a chair opposite him looks friendly, almost encouraging. Better not trust these Mafia guys. Yet, he needs to talk to somebody. His stomach is causing him trouble. He needs food. The plate they brought to his cell looks suspicious, as if it has been poisoned. Hopeful, he shows his plate to the friendly man. Maybe he could have it checked in a lab? As if he understands, the man takes the plate out of his hands. Then he asks him more questions. Questions he doesn't understand. He

tries to focus, to explain how his intestines start dissolving if he doesn't get fresh blood. It is the first time he has ever told anyone.

Later, alone in his cell he hears the voices again, screeching like a swarm of birds. In vain, he tries to cover his ears. It is getting harder and harder for him to breathe. He feels hands reaching for his throat, putting pressure at it. His limbs are getting cold; the blood is clotting in his veins. Soon it will turn into powder. In front of him, on the stained mattress, there is a pile of pills. Every day they give him two, which he saves in his cheeks and hoards safely in his cell. Around him the walls are sealed like a coffin. The voices in his head are knocking against his temples, forcing his head down until his nose touches the pills. Sobbing, he opens his mouth, wide and hungry, catching the tablets with his teeth and swallows them in one go. The voices fade away slowly. Free. Finally, he is free.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — B.E. Seidl is a bilingual writer and literary researcher. Her work has appeared both in print and in online magazines such as Flash Fiction Magazine, Tethered by Letters, Microfiction Monday Magazine and in several issues of The Sirens Call. In her writing she seeks to collect kafkaesque moments and transform them into mysterious tales. She lives in Vienna, Austria.

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Pre-Monster-Syndrome | *Vivian Kasley*

Rage bubbled up inside. Its insides ached and its abdomen was bloated and distended. Its mind was fuzzy, disoriented, blurry... hysterical. There was a beast and it was bleeding. The beast was inside the house and it fumbled around in a fugue state, dizzy, as it looked for someone, anyone, to blame for its affliction. No one was there. It lumbered, hungrily and ravenously looking for food. It shredded through whatever it found and devoured it rabidly. It still craved and craved and craved.

Exhausted, it fell asleep, tossing and turning, balled up in pain, still bleeding. It almost looked pathetic as it lay there curled up innocently, but not to be mistaken, it was still a beast. It always would be.

It woke. The beast saw a mirror. It growled at its face. It didn't recognize itself. It wanted to rip its own face off. It dragged its nails down its cheeks, to feel, just to feel anything other than its anger. It stopped and turned around. It sensed someone else.

Someone had come home. It attacked instantly, leaving the victim surprised as they were ambushed. They cowered and tried get away, but they were no match for the beast. It let out a mighty roar, its face contorted, its eyes almost red, but the victim didn't fight back. Instead they played dead, leaving the beast confused and bored. It wanted to play with its prey. Antagonize it. It wanted a fight.

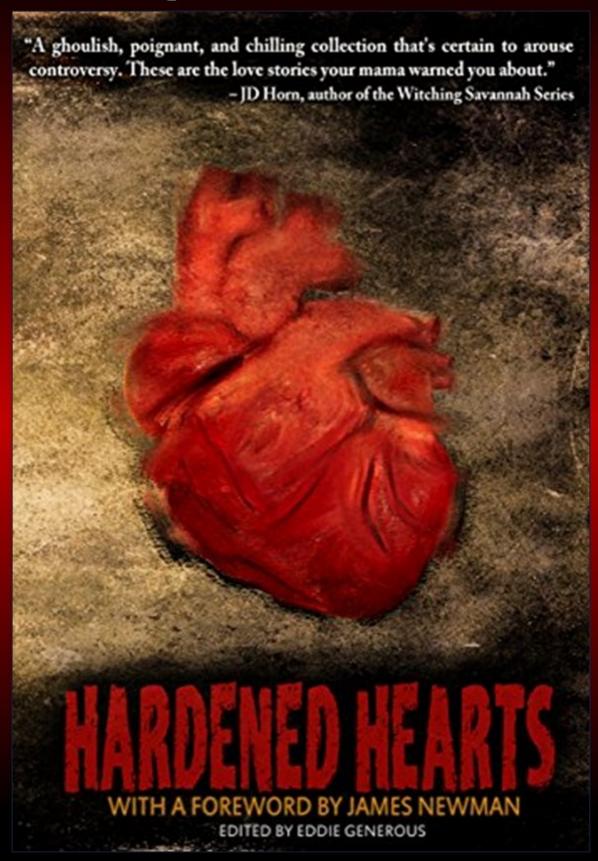
The victim began to back away slowly, keeping their eyes on the beast, but saying nothing. Suddenly, the beast lunged again, but the victim didn't back down this time. They stood their ground, shouted, and waved their arms. The beast froze and watched the victim. It remembered who it was. Ashamed and embarrassed, it turned and left with its head down. It cried. It felt regret. Again. This wasn't the first time, nor would it be the last. It would happen all over again in 28 days. Like it always did.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Vivian Kasley is a horror nut who lives in the land of the strange and unusual, Florida. She was an educator for many years until she decided to leave her job to write, travel, and learn more about the world. She published work with Dark Moon Digest and now with Sirens Call Publications. She continues to write weird tales and fill hearts with terror.

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The Unemployed Neighbor | Renee S. DeCamillis

The unemployed neighbor never mows his lawn. He owns one of the most high-tech riding mowers in the neighborhood. The mower sits under the unemployed neighbor's dilapidated back deck covered with a blue torn-up tarp with grease stains all over it. Behind the mower, hanging on a rack on the outside wall of the house, hangs a number of gardening tools: manual rototiller, rakes, shovels, pitchfork, hoes. But the large raised garden bed in the unemployed neighbor's back yard is filled with dandelions and moss-carpeting. The wooden garden gate archway is cracked, splintered and crumbling, and the swinging gate-door hangs crooked from only one working hinge. The carved daisies on the upper curved border no longer look like flowers. Their painted purple peddles have all broken and fallen to the ground.

The unemployed neighbor has a two-car garage, but he only drives a sidecar-motorcycle—his one running vehicle. His cycle, a relic of a Harley, is a hodge-podge of mismatched parts pieced together from junkyards and fellow local bikers. The only original part of the unemployed neighbor's cycle is the seat; it's a two-seater, original from the day he bought the Harley brand new. The passenger seat of the unemployed neighbor's two-seater Harley is worn and faded, but I never see him with a passenger. A beat-up 1975 Camaro sits up on cement blocks in the unemployed neighbor's side yard. The hood is always propped open, held up with a thick tree branch. There is no motor inside the unemployed neighbor's old beat-up muscle car.

The unemployed neighbor walks with a limp. He's a tall slim man, with monkey-like arms. The long, ringlet-filled salt-and-pepper ponytail and silvering-beard shows his age. He's in his mid-fifties. The unemployed neighbor never wears shoes in the summer. In the winter he wears sandals with mismatched socks. Sometimes the unemployed neighbor wraps plastic shopping bags over his sandaled-feet. I see this happen on the slushiest winter days. In the spring and fall the unemployed neighbor pedals around and around the cul-de-sac on an old, rusty women's bicycle. It has a white wicker basket attached to the front of the handlebars that is covered with purple-petaled daisies. When I see the unemployed neighbor peddling around in circles, he's always wearing flip flops and fuzzy purple legwarmers. The unemployed neighbor always stops at some point in the middle of his peddling-circles to pick up pebbles from the side of the road and place them in the basket. I always wonder what he does with all those pebbles.

The unemployed neighbor's makeshift mailbox is made out of a bright yellow plastic kitty litter container duct taped to a purple-painted PVC pipe stuck into a mound of gravel and rocks. But the unemployed neighbor doesn't own a cat. He owns a dog, an old black dog with only three legs. I've never heard the dog bark. Every day at dusk, rain or shine, the unemployed neighbor takes his dog for a walk. I see the two limping and hopping around and around and around that cul-de-sac a number of times. One evening I found myself on my front porch bored and alone and watching them circle that cul-de-sac over and over and over again. I decided to count the number of times they made. Sixteen times is what it amounted to. Curious, I set out to count their circlings every time I noticed them out on their walk. Every time I count, the number

is always the same. Sixteen over and over again. It never varies, not when I've observed.

Every night, after walking his dog, the unemployed neighbor drives to the nearest liquor store, sometimes on his Harley, sometimes on the rusty women's bicycle with a little red wagon trailing behind. He always buys a case of O'Doul's and sixteen fifths of vodka. When he arrives home, he turns on a bright floodlight. The floodlight is attached at the upper back corner of his sagging roof, and it illuminates a shooting range in his backyard. Then he stands with the case of O'Doul's on the ground beside his feet, a .45 in his hand. He takes aim and shoots at the vodka bottles all lined up on wooden sawhorses along the tree-line at the back border of his yard. Often I notice over his left ear a purple-petaled daisy. The evenings that I see no daisy over his ear, there is a purple glass vase filled with purple-petaled daisies beside his case of O'Doul's.

The unemployed neighbor keeps to himself. I never see him have company at his house, and I never see him go out to socialize. The town is small, but I never hear anyone mention him, except to complain about his unkempt lawn. This is what I overhear from the old women of the community gardening club in the local diner where I order my daily takeout. I like to watch the unemployed neighbor while I eat my daily diner meals. Unemployed-neighbor-watching takes the place of dinner conversation, since I dine and live alone. It provides me much satisfying entertainment.

Tonight while eating dinner I doze off. I awake with a start to the sound of shattering glass. I look out the picture window expecting to see the unemployed neighbor shooting at vodka. His floodlights are all off. I stand up from my recliner, the only seat in my living room, and feel sharp piercing pain once my left foot hits the cold creaky floor. I look down and see a spiderweb-splintered picture frame on the rotting hardwood. I pick up the picture and brush it off and sit back down. My foot is dribbling blood, but I cannot feel the wound.

In the photo, which has a smudge at one corner, I see a middle-aged man, tall and slim with monkey-like arms. His hair hangs in a ringlet-filled salt-and-pepper ponytail over one shoulder. His beard is raven-black. Beside him is a sixteen year old girl in a purple sun dress. She is sitting on a purple bicycle with a white wicker basket attached to the handlebars. All over the basket are purple-petaled daisies. Around the girl's head of long sable hair is a halo—a ring of woven together purple-petaled daisies fresh out of the lush garden behind father and daughter, and food-colored by the girl's mother for a birthday present. In the girl's dainty hands is a .45. Beside her bare feet upon the grassy ground rests a torn-open box and crumpled wrapping paper. Across her and her proud daddy's faces—smiles brighter than his shooting range floodlights. Smiles that will never return.

That photo.

In the foreground of the photo sits a rectangular picnic table covered with a purple Sweet Sixteen tablecloth and a freshly baked homemade birthday cake created by the girl's mother. The cake is two-tiered with white frosting and a border of purple-petaled daisies.

Those smiles.

Those smiles will never return, not since that day, that day drunk daddy cleaned sweet-sixteen-Sandra's birthday-gift-gun and accidentally shot her dead.

That photo. Such a great photo, had I not smudged frosting across the corner of the lens.

The aroma of fresh baked homemade cake will never grace my kitchen again.

ABOUT THE AUHTOR — Renee S. DeCamillis is a dark fiction writer, horror movie reviewer, lyricist, poet, and an Affiliate Member of the Horror Writers Association. Her movie reviews have been published on AllHorror.net, Horror-Movie-Reviews.com, and on her website. The HWA Poetry Showcase Vol. IV features her poetry. She has a story and interview forthcoming on The Other Stories Podcast. This former gravedigger lives in the woods of Maine with her husband, son, and a house full of ghosts.

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The Amazing Mr. Z. Kazini | S.J. Budd

"It's not about the bolognaise," Steve sighed looking dejectedly at his dinner. He pushed it away from him, "I'm just so bored. We're not getting any younger, Kaz. I don't wanna fritter my life away doing mundane things like," his eyes searched around their magnolia kitchen, "this!"

"I see," Karen trembled inside as she spoke.

Ever since their wedding night 15 years ago she had feared this moment; that he no longer loved her. She wasn't that woman he had married. Years had molded her into a new shape which was a little blurred around the edges. It seemed to her as he rattled on that his mind was made up, He felt this way for a long time in secret without Karen being suspicious that his mind was elsewhere. The first betrayal had been committed. A dark taint had slipped into their marriage.

She looked to him, who kept his head down not meeting her gaze, already there was a rift where a few seconds ago there hadn't been. He had put it on her to sort things out. Not wanting to make things worse between them she thought over what to say next and could think of nothing. Her mind felt frozen with fear. By the time something had come to her Steven already cleared their plates and retired to the lounge with a can of cheap lager. Football was on and it would keep his attention for the whole evening. No one disturbed Steve when the football was on.

Karen was going to settle down with him and a glass of wine but instead she made a cup of tea and took herself off to bed. In the morning when she woke he was gone, the atmosphere between them had lifted and she was finally able to breathe and think.

Steven said he was bored, he was 42, and it was clear what was going on. He was having a mid-life crisis. Karen moaned, why did it have to happen to her Stevie? Him feeling bored was only the start of things, they were supposed to be enjoying their advancing years. The mortgage would be paid off in a few years then they'd be more financially comfortable than they had ever been. There was so much to look forward to but he had grown bored.

This could escalate, she warned herself, soon he'll be having affairs behind her back, possibly with one of her best friends. He still looked good for his age. She'd be prepared to forgive one if it was brief and discreet but what if he found someone younger? What if he found a young woman to run off and have more kids? Her family would be torn apart, she couldn't let him do that to her kids, to *their* kids; Billie and Noah. It would simply destroy them if their parents split up, having their whole lives shattered like a mirror cracking from side to side revealing the ugly truths of the world underneath.

For their sakes they must stay together, Karen wanted them to believe in the power of love of everything that it could achieve.

Standing in front of the mirror as she brushed her teeth Karen saw the ghost of a woman slowly dying. It was true they weren't getting any younger. One day she was going to die. She didn't want to leave a broken past behind her.

Karen had been pretty once when they had first gotten together some twenty years ago now. Back then she had the time to properly take care of herself; spend hours applying makeup, making sure her hair was shiny, that there were no roots. Today she looked pale, there were lines everywhere on her face particularly round the eyes and mouth. She looked at the mirror in horror; she looked like her mother.

Trying to escape the reality of the mirror she ran back into her bedroom but things turned worse as she took off her nightie. Her boobs had suffered too over the years there were like popped balloons all deflated and sad. Karen sighed, no wonder Steve was bored.

It was not until now that she had thought Steve could be capable of leaving her but she knew the blame for their deteriorating relationship did not fall entirely on him. Now she saw she had let herself go and it had not gone unnoticed.

Sitting with her morning cup of tea reading her women's magazine she came upon the perfect solution; a boob job. Before she had dismissed them as something only young girls had done or celebrities, but it made perfect sense to go under the knife. Steve loved boobs, he'd never get bored if she had big boobs. He'd love her forever.

Karen smiled and treated herself by having a chocolate digestive, one thing she had managed to keep hold of was her slim figure but if she got new bigger boobs Steve would most probably happily overlook it if she gained a few pounds here and there. Life suddenly seemed so optimistic.

At the door Karen heard a thud accompanied by the jangling of her letter box. The post had arrived and it sounded heavy. She got up at once to see what it could be. She couldn't remember ordering anything online but it was always a nice surprise to receive something you had forgotten you'd ordered.

Instead all she found was a small white calling card and gingerly picked it up in her hand usually she threw these things away.

The Amazing Mr Z. Kazini

Let me destroy your problems before they destroy you...

Clairvoyant

I am a specialist in all problems; fidelity between man and wife, sexual power, fairy glamor and allure, protection against marriage problems, protection against all dangers

100% satisfaction guaranteed

07892 529401

Karen held the card in her finger turning it over and over, usually she threw these straight into the recycling bin but with this one she felt reluctant.

"100% satisfaction guaranteed," she nodded as she spoke to the cat who seemed complicit with her plan. It would certainly be much cheaper than a boob job, there would be no pain afterwards and a boob job did seem a bit radical.

Today she had been planning on cleaning the bathroom and tackling the kid's bedrooms but instead she reached for her phone and began to dial. There was no answer on the line but a knock on the door. Karen jumped and began to quickly smooth down her un-brushed hair as she ran to the door.

"Hello," a small man stood waiting as she pulled back the door. He was an odd looking fellow with old crinkly eyes that seemed like little shiny black beads. He took off his hat to her and smiled in a most peculiar fashion.

"Mr Kazini?" Karen asked looking down at the small card still in her hand.

"That's right," he said jovially, "may I come in?"

Karen hesitated by the door. Usually she wouldn't let strange men into her home when no one else was around but he was so small she was probably stronger than him. He was harmless.

"Yes, this way."

Once inside he refused an offer of tea, coffee or biscuits, "Please just sit yourself down and tell me, what's the problem?"

Doing as she was told Karen sat down and faced him across the kitchen table. "It's my husband I think he's having an affair with a younger woman. I'm worried he'll leave me and the kids. I love him but I've gotten old, I'm not as attractive as what I used to be," she leaned in, "it says on your card that you can grant me sexual power, fairy glamor and allure, protection against marriage problems as well as ensuring fidelity between man and wife."

"Yes I can grant those if you like," he replied with a wink.

"Yes please," Karen nodded with excitement.

"And what about protection against all dangers?"

Karen shook her head and feeling rebellious poured herself a glass of wine despite it being only ten in the morning, "I think a certain amount of danger is healthy, Mr Kazini."

"Very well then."

The amazing Mr Z. Kazini had not stayed long, he'd uttered a strange incantation of words and given her a poultice of herbs with which to make tea. They smelt terrible but she was determined to save her marriage before it was too late plus it had been much cheaper than going under the knife.

After drinking the revolting tea which tasted like rotting mushrooms and fish she took herself upstairs with another glass of wine and ran herself a hot bath. Neglecting her domestic duties she spent the whole day making sure she looked her best for when Steve got in from work. She'd also rang her sister asking her to take the kids for the night and promised to tell her all about her strange and exciting day when she would pick them up tomorrow morning.

It had been years since she had last done this; listening to her favorite songs as she carefully applied her makeup and pondered over what outfit to wear, she was going to go all out tonight. She even felt nervous as if she was going on an actual date with him but her confidence was fully restored. They needed this it was the start of a new uninhibited phase of their relationship.

It was late when Steve got back from work. Another terrible week over and done with. What was he doing in that job? His boss must be at least ten years younger than him and a complete idiot. What he wanted was to get away from his boring life, the mortgage was almost paid off and he dreamed of the day when he could take his darling wife away from here and give her the life she deserved.

He wanted to take her traveling around the world like all the young kids did. Why couldn't they do that? The kids could come as well, he'd figure that bit out later.

Karen had stood by him for so many years and he wanted to find a way to show her just how much she meant to him. In the years they'd been together he'd gotten fat and bald yet she never stopped loving him. She looked great for her age. All his mates secretly fancied her. She deserved someone better than him. What it was she saw in him he'd never know.

"Karen?" he called out as he kicked off his shoes and flung his coat near the coat rack, "where are you, luv?"

There was no welcoming smell of dinner coming from the kitchen. That wasn't like her. He ran into the front room, something strange was going on.

"Kids? Noah? Billie? Are you in?" Still there was no answer and Steve grew worried, she would have called him if they had changed their plans. Had they all gone out without him?

He froze at the foot of the stairs. Was Karen having an affair? Had she finally seen sense and realized she could do much better?

"Karen?" He called in a wavering voice as he mounted the stairs, "are you in?"

Upstairs he heard familiar footsteps and smiled. Coming home to Karen on a Friday was always the best thing about his week. There was a shock for him when he saw the strange woman waiting for him at the top of the stairs with a mischievous smile on her devilish face.

"What the...?" Steve stammered, "Who the bloody hell are you?"

The woman giggled and placed her hand to her chest, he couldn't help but notice she had lovely boobs, but still she wasn't Karen, she had the best he'd been lucky enough to get his hands on.

"It's me, silly," she chided as she disappeared from view. She was going in to their bedroom. How dare she, he thought.

"Karen?" He shouted louder.

"This way," she giggled. He heard the duvet covers being pulled back as the strange woman climbed in.

Thundering into the bedroom he grabbed the woman roughly by her shoulders, "Where's my wife? Stop playing games."

"Ow Stevie, I'm your wife." She pulled away and he let her go as she shuffled to his wife's side which angered him even more.

"Get out." He ordered calmly but his eyes were loaded with anger and quickly the strange woman did as she was told.

"Where are my kids?"

"I've gotten rid of them," she purred.

"And my wife, what have you done with her?"

"The old Karen is gone, I'm the new Karen. I promise you I'm a much better version."

Slowly she began to peel off her dress letting it fall slightly and he looked away in disgust. The room was spinning, he felt sick, and all he wanted, all he'd ever wanted was Karen.

"What have you done with her?" he repeated closing his eyes.

"I told you," she answered cheerfully, "I've gotten rid of her," the dress she'd been wearing was thrown over his head. It smelt of Karen's perfume and he fought the urge to vomit, "she's never coming back."

Slowly he bent down and with his right hand he felt underneath the bed and tightened his fingers around the handle of the hammer he kept hidden. He'd put it there so if ever anyone broke in at night he'd have something to defend his family with. He never thought he'd ever have to use it, especially not against a woman.

He turned to face her, without deliberation he raised the hammer high above her and delivered a precise blow to the side of the woman's head. Steve thought that it would immediately render her unconscious but instead she seemed perfectly awake. She stared up at him with horror at what he had just done and then her eyes were of fear and surprise.

There was something in those eyes, he saw it now and came round to her side of the bed. In those dark brown eyes he saw the sparks that he had felt many years before when he'd first met her at his mate's house.

"Karen?" he leaned in closer, somehow the woman was her but it looked nothing like his wife, "Oh god Karen what have I done?"

"Steve," she whispered as she took her last breath and fell awkwardly on the clean sheets. As the life left her body her face returned to the beautiful face that Steve had loved and adored for twenty years. How could he have been so mistaken?

Not being able to look at her at what he had done she staggered to the stairs and somehow made it to the front room. He needed to call someone, it was too late for an ambulance and the police would take him away. He'd never have the chance to explain to his kids. He cried as he thought of his two little darlings, he'd just killed their mum, how would they ever forgive him?

Neatly placed by the phone was a small calling card, he had not seen it before. It hadn't been there last night.

The Amazing Mr Z. Kazini

Let me destroy your problems before they destroy you...

Clairvoyant

I am a specialist in all problems; the return of loved ones, fidelity between man and wife, business power and success, protection against marriage problems, granting of new beginnings.

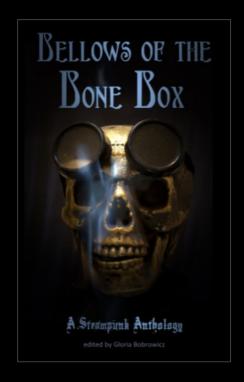
100% satisfaction guaranteed

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Steve wiped away his tears and stroked his chin. "100% satisfaction guaranteed," he said to the cat who now looked upon him with disgust.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Originally born in Cornwall, south west England, her childhood was surrounded by myths and legends. She has always been fascinated by anything out of the ordinary. It was in this strange and ancient land where she developed a passion for writing. Her work has appeared in Aphotic Realm, Sanitarium Magazine, Siren's Call Publications, Deadman's Tome, Innersins, Aphelion, Bewildering Stories, Blood Moon Rising Magazine, Shadows at the Door and Danse Macabre Magazine, The Wild Hunt, Morpheus Tales and Freedom Fiction.

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Bellows of the Bone Box

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

Honeysuckle | *Kathleen McCluskey*

Maria walked along the carpeted hallway. She ran her fingers along the oak banister. Her magnificent home was once the most luxurious home in all of New Orleans, now its former glory was replaced with the sound of doctors and patients in agony. The tuberculosis clinic ran on state funding. Her beautiful home now smelled of urine and death. She couldn't remember how her home had been converted. She wondered if she was in the hospital suffering from amnesia due to the consumption. She inhaled deeply. No rattles were felt in her lungs.

She continued to walk. Hearing the tormented blubbering made her want to walk down the stairs faster this time, maybe she would succeed in escaping. She stood at the top of the large staircase as doctors, nurses and patients brushed passed her. She knew she had to wait until the time was right to bolt down the stairs and into the sunlight. Maria wanted freedom, she wanted peace. It felt like an eternity since she was able to feel the sun on her face. She looked around. The staff was busy bustling about on their own missions. Now was her time to move. She took a step down. The soft carpeting was rough on her feet. She stepped again, again. Finding herself standing on the first landing she looked out the window. She looked around and there was not another in sight. Maria leaned forward to get a better view of the honeysuckle tree that was in the yard. Desperation motivated her to see it, smell it. She wanted to feel the sun on her skin and the wind on her face. She stepped up onto the ledge and pushed the window open. She took a deep breath of fresh air and began to fall. A small shocked scream emitted from her. She didn't see the tree, all she saw was rushing concrete coming at her face. The sound of her neck snapping was deafening.

She felt as though she was floating. Floating in darkness. Her vision quickly came back when she felt her feet touch a carpeted floor. She raised her head and saw the carpeted hallway. The tormented wails of the patients began. She knew her suicide was to be relived for ages.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Kathleen lives outside of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She is originally from Plum Borough Pennsylvania. As the mother of two (Alexis and Austin Reck) she is constantly on the move. When free time does arise, she enjoys reading, swimming and of course, writing. Her first novel THE LONG FALL Book 1: The Inception Of Horror is available on Amazon in paperback and Ebook. She writes monthly for THE LADIES OF HORROR FLASH PROJECT Blog.

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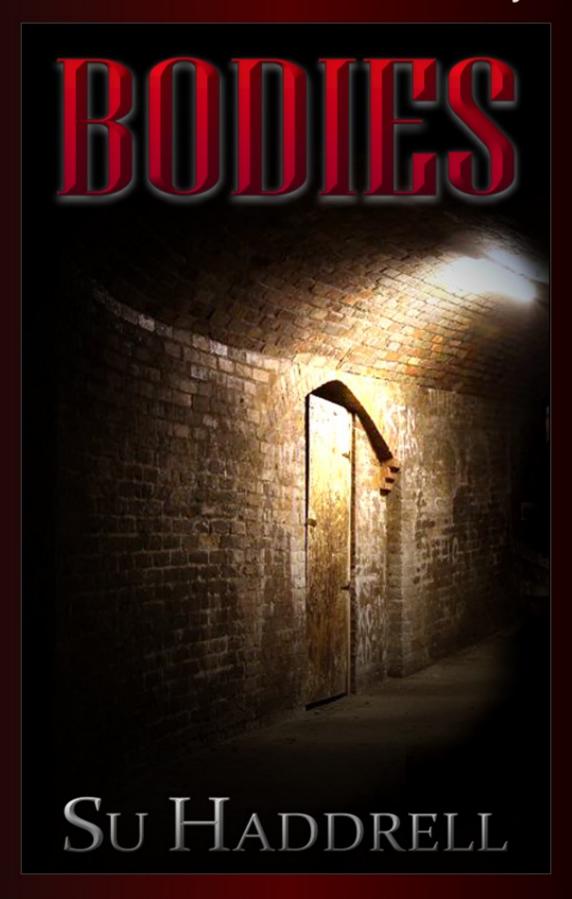
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He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not

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



There are horrors beneath the city...



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Scared to Death | *Christine Makepeace*

"Have you ever heard that story? The one where the girl gets so scared she dies?"

"That's not a real story."

"Any story can be a 'real' story. That's what stories are."

"I don't agree with that logic..."

"Ugh, shut up, Sebby and let her finish."

"Thank you, Sam."

"Thank you, Sam," Sebastian mocked in a sing-song tone.

Sam and Doris turned and flipped him off in unison, then erupted into a fit of giggles.

"Don't gang up on me!" he hissed.

"We're not ganging up on you. You're just sucking the joy out of this." Sam flipped her long, black ponytail over her shoulder and stared intently at Sebastian. Her eyes gleamed in the lone streetlight that hung over their heads.

"I am not."

"You are too," Doris agreed with an impatient nod of her head.

"Fine, whatever. Go on, your majesty." Sebastian glanced over his shoulder at the house. It stood tall and foreboding, like an ancient castle dancing with the darkness. He shivered and turned his attention back to the girls.

Doris cracked her neck dramatically, reveling in the rapt attention. "So the story goes, this girl who no one liked and was sort of weird—"

"Sounds like Sebby!" Sam interrupted with a guffaw.

Doris shot her a look that wilted Sam's smile.

"As I was saying... This girl was sort of on everyone's shit list. So the other kids were like, 'go in this spooky-ass graveyard and sit on this super creepy ghost's grave.' And she was all like, 'sure, whatever,' and pretended to be brave and shit. But of course she was terrified. Anyway, the other kids were like, 'take this knife and shove it in the ground so we know you actually sat on the grave."

"Isn't that sacrilegious?" Sebastian asked.

"That's not the point of this story, Seb."

"Well, what is the point? he mumbled.

Doris ignored him and pressed on. "So this outcast girl no one liked took the knife, or dagger, or whatever and hopped the fence into this cemetery. She weaved through headstones and overgrown weeds until she saw a stone etched with the name Mary something or other."

"You don't know her name?"

"It doesn't matter!" Doris exclaimed in frustration.

"Why bother telling a story if you can't get the details right?" Sebastian pushed his glasses up with a self-conscious twitch.

"Fuck. I'm getting there. Just be quiet and let me finish." Doris looked silently toward Sam and Sebastian and when they said nothing, she continued. "The girl's heart was racing. She

inched toward the headstone, afraid to step directly where she imagined the body lay, six feet beneath her. Her fingers traced the darkened letters carved in stone and she wondered about the girl buried below. She read the dates and saw Mary was only 15—the same age as she herself. She knelt on the dry grass and held the dagger above her head. In one swift motion she plunged the knife into the ground and stood to leave. But she couldn't move. Something had hold of her dress. Mary had reached up from her grave to punish this girl who dared to disturb her rest. The girl could picture Mary's bony hand gripping the hem of her skirt and she screamed. She screamed until there was no air left in her lungs.

"The other kids, the ones who had dared her to go into the cemetery, heard the screams and came running. They ran across the pitted ground until they found Mary's grave. The girl lay motionless, skin white as a ghost. One of the kids shined a flashlight over her and the beam caught the shimmer of the knife blade. It had pinned the girl's dress to the earth, locking her in place. She had died of fright, thinking Mary's hand held her in place. It had been a joke, but Mary got the last laugh."

Sam and Sebastian stood motionless, brows knitted in concern. "That's not true, Sam said.

- "People don't 'die of fright," Sebastian countered, rocking anxiously from foot to foot.
- "Eh. You can believe what you want. I think it's true."
- "Where did you hear it, Doris?" Sebastian asked through the lump in his throat.
- "My mom."
- "Your mom told you that nightmare story?"
- "Yes, Sam. My mom is very worldly and likes to make sure I'm well rounded."
- "Well, I don't think it's true," Sam repeated with wavering conviction.
- "Oh, good. So you won't mind going into the old Beekman house with this knife then?"
- "I'm sorry, what?" Sebastian rumbled.

"Yeah, why not? Sam is super brave and super confident. Ya know, sort of like the girl in the story!" Doris mocked, waving wildly toward the boarded up house in the distance.

"Yeah, whatever. I'll do it." Sam looked across the street at the house, shrouded in darkness. "Like I said, I don't buy that story. Or the other ones about this old garbage house." The light shifted, and she thought the structure suddenly looked bigger. She blinked away the image, and it appeared to melt back to normal proportions. The house looked as it always did: a dilapidated eyesore.

"This is why you wanted to meet up so late? This is what I lied to my mom to get out of the house for? This is really stupid, Doris. And dangerous. I mean, who knows what's in that house! I've never seen anyone so much as walk through that gate and I've lived in this neighborhood for—"

"Shut it, Seb," Sam barked without much bite behind it. "I'll go."

"Goodie. Take the knife," Doris handed her a small pocket knife, "and put it somewhere in the kitchen. Then take a picture of it. Then come out! Easy-peasy."

"I really don't like this," Sebastian said to no one in particular.

"See you soon!" Doris said too loudly as she nudged Sam off the sidewalk.

Sam trudged with heavy legs across the street. She didn't bother to look for cars, because there were none down that end of the road. The only thing down there was the house, and most people were content ignoring it.

When they were younger, high school kids would tell stories of monsters and ghosts. There was one about a feral rat man that tore kids apart. If you were stupid enough to break in looking for somewhere to drink and have sex, the rat man would eat your organs and your eyes, leaving you to rot in the garden. She wondered if there was a version of the story that was true. Was there some old man squatting in the empty house?

Angry at herself for conjuring up long-forgotten bullshit, she pitched her head to the side to catch Doris' voice on the wind.

"I think she's too stupid to 'die of fright.' Stop worrying," she heard her say. Sam could picture Sebastian and Doris perched on the opposite sidewalk, him rocking back and forth in his usual over-frothed concern, her ambivalent and cocky. *I need new friends*, Sam thought.

The gate barely creaked as Sam pushed it open with the heel of her hand. Moonlight peeked over the house's pitched roof. Sam placed one foot in front of the other, mindlessly stroking the knife in her pocket. She reached for the front door's knob and said a silent prayer that it wouldn't open, but it did, without much effort at all.

Sam disappeared across the threshold, the blackness inside the house swallowing her whole. Wind shook the leafless branches, and the air became thick sludge inching though the night.

"How long has she been in there?" Doris asked after a period of silence.

"I'm not keeping track!" Sebastian exclaimed. "I feel like I'm going to puke, or have a heart attack, and now you're telling me I should be paying attention to time! This is too much... Why aren't *you* keeping time?"

"I didn't think she'd be this long. And I thought we'd see the light of her cell phone. I mean, it's so dark in there..."

"Yeah it is! Of course it is! How long has it been? I have no sense of these things; it seems like forever!" Sebastian rambled, twisting his hands.

"It hasn't been forever. But maybe like, seven minutes?"

"Seven! Where do you get seven? That's oddly specific for someone not keeping track."

"Well, more than zero, but not quite 10. So... seven?"

"I hate you, Doris."

"You don't think she fell, do you?" Doris chewed on her cuticle, blood mixing with panic on her tongue.

"I hadn't thought of that! Oh man, what do we do? Call someone?"

"Then we'll all be in deep shit. No one should be in that house—it's like a million years old and it can't be safe."

"Then why the fuck did you tell Sam to go in?"

Doris shrugged, her reddening cheeks hidden by darkness. "I thought it would be funny?"

"You're an ass. I'm going to call my mom." Doris slapped Sebastian's phone out of his hand and it hit the pavement with a sharp crack. "I swear to G—"

"You swear to what?" Doris spat.

"Shut up." Sebastian held up his hand. "Did you see that?"

"See what?"

"That light. There was a light. In the house. I saw a light in the house."

"Oh thanks, God," Doris exhaled in relief. "I told you she was fine."

"No, no, no. This light. It was like, purple? It was purpley and it was in that window there," he pointed high, toward the moon. "In the attic I guess."

"Why is she up there?"

"Maybe it's not her, maybe it's not her!"

"What do you mean?"

"Remember your brother and his idiot friends used to tell stories about the house? The one about the portal. The gate to hell. Remember that? Remember? They said that kid who went missing when we were in 4th grade, Wilmer?"

"Wilbur."

"Yeah, Wilbur. He went missing after he told his friends we was going to the Beekman place to smoke pot in the back yard. Remember? And when his friends showed up, he was like, nowhere. They said the back door was open. But he was gone. The story was that he got sucked into Hell. The house sits on a gateway." Sebastian's eyes were wide and frantic. He nodded his head as if solidifying words into facts.

"They also used to say a rat man lived in the basement—"

"Maybe he does! But this was in the attic. And she's still not out! Sam's not back! Look! There it is again." He pointed up toward the top of the house again, his finger waggling with urgency.

Doris followed his outstretched hand with her eyes and as her gaze reached the top floor—through the broken out, round window—she saw it too.

Purple light, murky and unnatural, poured out of the attic. It seemed to reach out of the house, spreading onto the front lawn. The trees stopped swaying and the air paused, hung thick and stagnant. Nothing moved, and the world was silent. With breath caught in their lungs, Sebastian's hand found Doris', their fingers winding together like ivy.

The light got brighter, turning night to day, and Sebastian sputtered, looking for words and the air to form them with. "Is this real?" he asked with a thin voice.

"I think so," Doris squeaked. "Like the house in *Poltergeist...*"

Sebastian gasped beside her, his grip becoming painful. The light continued to intensify, becoming so bright color no longer mattered, and the ground fell away.

Standing on whiteness, struggling for air, Doris's final errant thought rang in her ears: *This is what it feels like to die of fright*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Christine Makepeace is a weird fiction writer currently living in the Pacific Northwest.

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Love is Blind | Sheri White

Tim Harper was a cliché. After he realized his invisibility following the accident at work, he did everything a teenage boy would want to get away with—even though he was thirty-seven. Walking around the women's locker room at the gym, grabbing asses and boobs when it was crowded.

When he grew bored with that activity, it was onto stealing. The neat thing about his invisibility was that his clothes also couldn't be seen while he was wearing them. So he would shoplift booze, tucking the pints into his coat pockets, stuffing his pants pockets with candy bars. Soon he was breaking into houses at night, taking iPods and money, sometimes jewelry.

He sat on his bed—if someone had walked in, they'd only see an indent on the mattress—and looked around the room. He could barely see the floor for all the stolen goods. They meant nothing. Because he finally realized that he would never be visible again. He gathered them all up and stuck them in the extra bedroom.

He was excited at first; who wouldn't be? He figured the situation was temporary; no way could anybody be invisible forever. Ultimately, though, he had to face the truth. It had been six months and the company doctors had given up. The company paid him handsomely, but what the hell was he supposed to do? He wasn't allowed to go public about what happened to him; he signed a non-disclosure agreement when he was hired.

Now he had to order groceries online to be delivered and leave money taped to the front door in an envelope. His clothes, books, and anything else he wanted or needed had to be ordered through the internet as well. He knew it was ridiculous to wear clothes, but he was never comfortable walking around nude. He thought he'd be happy at never having to work again, but he actually missed it. Missed the routine, the socializing with coworkers.

Nobody called him anymore. They didn't know what happened to him. The official word was that he was transferred overseas. He began talking to himself more often, and he left the TV on all the time so his house wouldn't be so quiet. He couldn't even adopt a dog for company. God, he was bored.

And so fucking lonely.

He wiped himself with a towel and shut down his browser. As usual, it had felt great, but

left him empty. He got into bed and aimed the remote at the TV, clicking through the channels. He almost threw the remote at the TV when it stopped on the old black and white Claude Rains film. His life was a goddamn horror movie, he didn't have to watch *The Invisible Man* to make himself feel worse.

TCM was showing one of his favorite movies, *Wait Until Dark*. Audrey Hepburn hid from the men who broke into her home, her only advantage keeping the light off. She knew the outlay of her apartment, and because she was blind, she could get around in the dark, unlike her attackers.

Tim sat up straight, an idea forming in his mind.

Of course! A blind woman! She wouldn't know I was invisible because she would be able to touch me.

He had no idea how he would meet a blind woman, let alone get her to fall in love with him, but for the first time in months, he fell asleep with a smile on his face.

It took some research, but he finally found *loveisblind.com*. Tonight was the eighth time in a row he chatted with Beverly. Although blind since a car accident when she was sixteen, Beverly never complained about it; she actually overcame her disability and was now a professor at the local university.

Tonight was their first phone conversation.

"So when can we meet?" Tim delighted in Beverly's eagerness.

"As soon as we can," he answered. "But... I'm a bit of a agoraphobe, and don't like to leave the house very often. Would you be willing to come here?"

"Well—"

"I know it's scary. But it's really the only way we can meet. Please?"

"This is probably the stupidest thing I've ever done. But okay."

Tim gave Beverly his address, then grinned as he hung up the phone.

Tim was preparing a bacon quiche for the two of them when the doorbell rang. He took a deep breath, put the dish in the oven, then walked into the living room to open the front door.

She was more beautiful in person than in the picture she posted to the dating site. Her brown hair fell in curls around her face. Dark glasses covered her eyes, but her smile lit up the room.

"Tim?" She held a white cane in one hand, and reached out for his hand with her other. He took it, feeling a rush of warmth at his first human-to-human contact in a long time.

"Hi, Beverly. Thank you so much for coming."

She turned and called out, "It's fine!" She turned back to Tim. "Just letting the cab driver know he can go."

Tim looked past her as the car pulled away from the curb, a confused look on the driver's face.

"I'm sorry—please come in, Beverly." He kept hold of her hand, gently guiding her into

his home. "Let's go into the kitchen. I've prepared a brunch for us."

They walked together, she holding onto his arm, tapping her cane.

"This is delicious!" she said, lifting a forkful of quiche into her mouth.

"Thank you. I'm glad you're enjoying it. I've been looking forward to this day, Beverly. I'm so happy to finally talk to you in person."

"Me, too."

They chatted for hours, their food growing cold as they became more infatuated with each other. They played footsie under the table like giddy teenagers.

"I don't even know what you look like, Tim. May I?" He understood what she needed to do and moved closer to her. She stroked his face, tracing his features with her fingers. A tear ran down Tim's face, and Beverly wiped it away with her thumb.

"What's wrong?"

"Absolutely nothing, Beverly. I'm just very happy you're here."

"Take me to your bedroom, Tim."

They held each other close; their naked bodies slick with sweat, both of them smiling in the dark room.

"I feel as if this is the start of something wonderful, Beverly. Don't you?"

"I do." She sat up, the sheets falling away from her perfects breasts. Tim couldn't help but touch one. "Something else wonderful is about to happen, Tim—I've been on a donor list for quite some time, and I'm up next in line. I could have new eyes in a matter of days!"

Tim could barely speak. "That's...great. I'm very happy for you." He could see his chance at a somewhat normal life disappearing, just as he had disappeared months earlier.

"Tim, is everything okay? I know we just met, but you don't seem very happy for me. This is a dream come true! My life is going to be completely different."

"No, I'm fine. I'm truly happy for you. I'm just surprised, that's all. You never mentioned this."

"I didn't want to say anything until I was sure, but what the hell—there is a comatose patient whose family is going to turn off the machines to let him die with dignity. There's no hope for him, but thanks to his parents, I may see again."

"I truly hope it works out for you, Beverly."

Once again they entwined, Beverly in joy, Tim in heartbreak.

Beverly received her anticipated news a few days later. Surgery was scheduled for the next morning.

"Oh, Tim—just think, I'll be able to see your face for real soon! I mean, I know you're good looking, I saw it when I touched you. But to be able to see you with my own eyes—my new eyes—is so exciting."

"I can't wait to see you when this is all over, Beverly." He made sure his voice was

encouraging, but only felt sadness.

The surgery went well, as Tim knew it would. He knew it was horrible, but a small part of him had hoped Beverly's body would reject her new eyes.

"I wish you could be here with me, Tim, but I understand. Everything is so colorful and bright! Was it this bright before? I don't remember seeing the world so clearly, so beautifully. It's ridiculous—I'm always crying!" She laughed through the phone, her joy like a dagger in Tim's heart.

"So when can I come over again? I can't wait to SEE you!" She giggled at her joke, and Tim chuckled politely.

"Well—"

"Please, Tim—let me come over this weekend. I miss you. I know it's crazy since we were just together one night, but you mean a lot to me."

Against his better judgment, Tim agreed. He needed to be with her, at least one more time.

"Just let yourself in—I'll be waiting in the bedroom."

The room was completely dark when Beverly walked in.

"Tim? Are you here?"

"Yes, come on in, Beverly. I'm on the bed."

"Can I turn on the light? I'd really like to see you."

"Not yet. Come lie with me. Please?"

Beverly crossed the room, its layout still fresh in her mind from weeks before. She sat on the edge of the bed. "What's going on, Tim? Are you okay?"

"I don't think we can see each other anymore."

"Well, not like this, in the dark!" Beverly laughed, but stopped when Tim didn't laugh along with her.

"I'm sorry, Beverly. I just don't think it's going to work out. I'm in a very complicated situation, and I should've been honest with you from the beginning. But I'm so lonely, and you're so beautiful, I couldn't bring myself to tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"You'd never believe me, so I would have to show you. And there's just no way I can. Not without freaking you out."

"Tim, you're scaring me. Please tell me what's wrong, or show me. You can trust me."

"I can't trust anybody with this." Beverly could hear the bitterness in his voice.

"Okay, that's enough. There is nothing you can say or show me that will freak me out, especially after what I've been through."

She felt a nightstand beside her, and reached for the lamp she was sure would be on it. She switched it on, then looked around the room.

"Where the hell did you go?" *This probably wasn't a good idea*, she thought. *I tempted fate the first time I came here; I shouldn't have come back*.

"Come on, Tim. If you don't come back and talk to me, I'm going to leave."

"I'm right here, Beverly."

She heard him close to her, but couldn't see him. "What are you doing? Do you have an intercom or something? You know what? I'm going. This is too much."

She grabbed her purse and turned to leave, but was immediately yanked back onto the bed. "What—"

"I knew you would freak out. And I don't blame you. It sounds so fucking ridiculous and impossible, but it's true—I'm invisible. It was a crazy accident at work—"

Before he could finish his explanation, Beverly pulled herself away, trying not to scream. She stared at the bed, watching the sheets rustle as Tim got up.

"No, please—stay! Let's talk about this." Tim was able to grab her hand again as Beverly tried to run for the bedroom door. She yanked away, but lost her balance and hit her head on the corner of the bureau. She crumbled to the ground, unconscious, blood pouring from her wound.

When Beverly woke up, she was tied to the bed spread-eagled, but clothed. Her head ached. She tried to get free, but the knots were tight.

"Tim? Are you in here?" Her voice shook.

"Yes, Beverly. I'm so sorry. But there's just no way you can leave now. I didn't think of the consequences when we first got together, and that's my fault. Nobody can know about this, though."

"I swear, I won't say a word. Please let me go. Don't hurt me."

"I don't want to hurt you. But I can't keep you tied up forever. And you're only human—there's no way you can keep something like this a secret."

The nightstand drawer opened, and Beverly gasped when she saw the serrated grapefruit spoon rise into the air.

"What are you doing?" She struggled violently against her bonds, but only got rope burns. She started to cry.

"I'm so sorry. But it's the only way."

Beverly whispered a desperate *please* when the spoon approached her face. She screamed when it dug into her left eye socket. By the time Tim moved onto the right eye, Beverly was unconscious once again.

The next several days passed in a blur of pain, soup and water being fed to her, and the sound of construction.

Her head finally cleared, and she realized she was no longer tied to the bed. She couldn't see a thing, and dread brushed against her spine. She felt her face and cried when she felt the stitches on her eyelids. But she had been blind before, and knew she could find her way through the house until she found a phone to call 911. She was clothed, in what she didn't know; they felt different than her other clothes. But she was grateful not to be naked.

She sat up slowly and put her legs over the side of the bed. She held onto the mattress and

stood up, her legs shaking.

"Where are you going, Beverly?" She screamed at the sound of Tim's voice. He sounded strange to Beverly, and it scared her.

"I just want to go home." She sobbed, helpless against the nightmare she was caught up in. She felt Tim's arms around her waist and tried to get away.

"You are home. This is your home now."

"What? No! Let me go; I won't tell anyone, I promise."

"I'm sorry, but I can't. I love you, and I want us to be together, always."

"Tim, this isn't the way to do that! You must realize this is insane! And you can't possibly love me—we've only been together once. Please, you've got to think clearly."

"I am. For the first time since that miserable accident destroyed my life. I have plenty of money for us to have a good life together. Neither of us will ever be alone again."

Beverly wrenched away from Tim, still terrified, but angry now as well. "You know I'll leave as soon as I get out of this room."

"Oh, Beverly. You just don't understand. You truly *can't* leave. I've rearranged the house, changed the rooms around. The doors can only be opened by a key I keep hidden. You know the neighbors are a mile away, so nobody will hear you. And I took your cell phone, only my phone can be used, and I keep that hidden, too. So you see, we'll be together. Forever."

Beverly fell to her knees and beat the floor with her fist.

Several years passed. She had stopped begging Tim to let her go a couple years earlier. She no longer cringed at his touch. They had their routines, their hobbies. They talked and played games together. Tim ordered Braille books for her, and described movies in great detail.

While not exactly happy, Beverly was content.

"Hey, how do you want your eggs today?" Beverly called out. She shivered and sipped at her coffee; Tim was in the basement repairing the furnace. He had become quite the handyman over the years.

"Scrambled is fine, honey. I'll be up in a few minutes." His voice was muffled; he still locked the door to the basement when he went down there, mostly out of habit.

She cracked the eggs into a bowl and mixed them with a fork. Before she could pour them into the hot pan, she heard a crash, then Tim screamed.

"Oh, my god, Tim? Are you okay? What happened?" She knocked on the basement door to get his attention, but got no answer. She banged harder, and yelled his name again.

Complete silence.

"Tim, where's the phone? I can call 911 for you. Tim? Please!"

She stood with her back against the basement door, praying that Tim was okay. She slid down to a sitting position and waited to hear Tim respond.

When an hour had passed, she had to acknowledge that he was either dead or badly hurt. Either way, there was nothing she could do to help him.

She felt a sinking in the pit of her stomach. She realized she didn't care so much that Tim was hurt than the fact that she was now completely trapped in the house. Tim had the keys with him, and probably the phone as well.

Today was grocery delivery day, but they hadn't placed their order yet. She shivered, and knew he hadn't fixed the heat before whatever happened to him. They still had the long winter ahead, and heavy snow was predicted for that night.

She wondered which would come first —freezing or starvation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Sheri White lives in Maryland with her family. She's a mom to three girls, ages 29, 22, and 20, and has instilled a love of all things scary in them as well. Her two-year-old granddaughter is next! Her husband Chris is very understanding.

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Tea Party | Alyson Faye

Edward adjusts his bow tie in front of the mirror. Behind him he observes the gaggle of guests

assembled in his study. He enjoys these quiet moments of contemplation before the party begins.

What a gorgeous group they are, he thinks. He runs his hand over his thinning hair. It used to be so luxuriant when he was younger.

Turning he greets his guests, "Welcome, my dears."

Several pairs of glassy blue, brown or green eyes stare at him. Pink mouths pursed. Hands folded in laps. They are the epitome of lady likeness. Edward takes a bow. He does so enjoy being the object of their attentions.

"Where are my manners, ladies? Here let me hand you your teacups."

Edward places wafer thin china plates before his guests. The china had belonged to his late mother and Edward feels a frisson of triumph at using the plates against his mother's final wishes. He is glad she's not here to spoil his private party, as she used to spoil everything in his life. He remembers how she wouldn't leave him alone; always interfering and criticising. Edward feels his heart beat faster so he takes deep breaths to calm himself.

I shall do as I wish now, Mother. You'll see.

"I'll be mother," Edward laughs at his tiny witticism and he pours tepid tea into the cups. "Carefully does it. I don't want to spill on your lovely dresses, ladies."

He drinks his Earl Grey precisely and nibbles the Garibaldi. No one present joins him in his tea partaking, but he is not concerned.

Edward's eye falls upon Lillian's blonde hair. "Oh my dear it is so tangled. Let me brush it for you."

He extracts his mother's silver-backed brush and comb set from a drawer. Lillian waits quietly for Edward to begin. He squats beside Lillian, stroking the blonde silky tresses. Lillian does not blink. Her eyelashes do not flutter. Her lips do not move. But Edward knows she is pleased at the attention.

"You look beautiful, my sweet," he tells her. His hand moves from the top of her head to the middle of her back, where the hair hangs in a glossy shining fall.

He remembers the evening he'd sheared the hair from the woman's scalp. It had been the only beautiful aspect to the hoyden. She'd decorated herself with hideous neon pink lips and nails. Hideous. No taste. No class.

How he'd lusted after her hair! For weeks he'd followed her, learning the tart's routine. He'd waited outside her place of work, trailed her to the coffee shop, started a conversation, (so easy, he thought, she had been so pathetically keen), secured a date with her, then another. On their final romantic rendezvous, whilst walking her home as a true gentleman would, through the local park, he'd muffled her screams and choked her to death behind the playground. He remembered staring at the swings and roundabout imagining them busy with children. Fortunately he always carried a safety razor with him; his years of barbering had taught him the value of a sharp blade.

"Don't be jealous, my love." Edward turns to another porcelain-limbed doll, sitting beside him. "It's your turn next, Arabella."

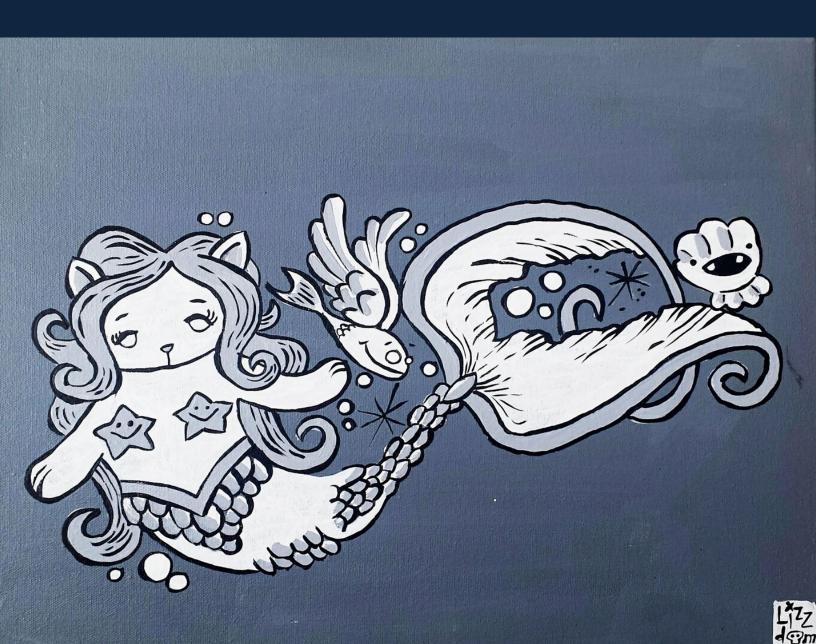
He kisses Lillian's cold china cheek before he moves over to the red-headed Arabella.

There are five handmade dolls present at the tea party. Edward stitches their dresses himself using his mother's vintage Singer sewing machine. His mother had loved to sew and she had passed on her seamstress skills to her only son. He is an adept tailor. He created the dolls' wigs himself using only natural materials of course. Edward prides himself on his craftsmanship. His mother would be proud of him.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Alyson lives in West Yorkshire with her partner and son. She writes dark flash fiction and her debut collection 'Badlands' has just been published by Chapeltown Books. She also writes ghost stories and is featured in 2017's Women in Horror Annual 2 edited by C. Rachel Katz. Much of her work is available to read in magazines online particularly at Horror Tree where she is a frequent contributor. She teaches creative writing workshops.

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Who is Adam? | Naching T. Kassa

Some called him the Michelangelo of Spring Creek Correctional Center. Others called him by a different name.

Robert Clem stood in the snow, watched by the pale ghost of an afternoon moon in the blue sky above. He held a small hammer and chisel in his gloved hands.

Standing at six feet, the sculpture was his best creation yet. The unclothed male form squatted over the serpent, hand pressed against its head, pinning it to the ground. The snake, its eyes shut and tongue extended, wore an expression of defeat. Robert leaned forward and tapped a small chunk of ice from the man's beard, then stepped back.

"Ten more minutes, Robert," I called to him.

He turned toward me, his face as cold and impassive as the medium of his choice. Blue eyes bored into mine. He nodded and turned back to the statue.

"You hear anything about Adam Larza?" a voice said. I turned to see my colleague, Don Ramsey, standing at my side. He reached into the pocket of his blue parka and withdrew a pack of cigarettes. Tapping it, he offered me one. I accepted the cigarette, and he lit me up.

"Adam is still missing," I said. "The warden had the place searched three times in the last three days. Not a sign of him."

"I think he ran off. He and his old lady have been fighting like cats and dogs for weeks. Probably got a new girlfriend. I'll bet you anything she came and picked him up. That's why his car was still in the prison parking lot."

"What about the blood in the shower room?"

"Probably belongs to one of the inmates."

"It was Adam's blood type."

"And yet, they haven't found a body."

Robert circled the sculpture, leaned forward, and another chunk of ice fell beneath his chisel.

"Did the warden question the inmates again?" Don asked.

"Do you think they'd say anything? Of all the guards, they hated Adam the most."

"He was a hard ass."

"I think the word you're looking for is sadist," I said, checking my watch. "Two minutes, Robert."

The sculptor's eyes remained on his work. He nodded, then raised a fist to catch a cough.

"I still think he ran off," Don said dropping his spent cigarette into the snow. "Bet he's in Vegas by now. That's where I'd be. I'd like it a lot better than standing out here watching this piece of shit carve up ice. Why the warden lets him have the tools, I'll never know."

"It keeps him quiet. Would you rather hear him talk about his crimes again?"

Don shuddered. "No."

"It doesn't matter, really. He won't be with us much longer."

"Transferred?"

"Dying."

Robert stepped away from his creation. He made his way toward us.

"I'm done for today, Fred," he said, handing me the hammer and chisel. I placed them in the pocket of my coat.

"Did you find a name for it yet, Robert?"

A smile played across his lips and then vanished. "Why don't you come and look at it. Tell me what you think it should be called."

"Alright."

Don and I approached the ice sculpture.

A few days ago, this had been a chunk of ice in the middle of the prison yard. Now, it was a blue-white masterpiece. Each hair in the head and beard had been painstakingly carved. Each scale on the serpent shone and glinted in the sunlight.

"Amazing," I said, my voice little more than a whisper. Even Don was at a loss for words.

"Is that what you'd call it?" Robert said. The smile played on his lips once more. "What about you, Don?"

"This thing should be in a gallery," Don said. "Or in a freezer."

Robert laughed. The sound dissolved into a fit of coughing.

"We'd better get you inside," I said.

Don and I took Robert to his cell and helped him to his bed. He stared up at me, his eyes strange and feverish. Blood flecked his lips.

"I think you'd better get the doctor, Don."

My colleague hurried off.

"Fred?" Robert whispered.

"Yes?"

"I don't think I can finish the sculpture."

"I think you will."

"No...I think this is my last night on Earth. Do you know what they called me, Fred? In the outside world?"

"The Flesh Carver."

"I like my new name better. I like the comparison to Michelangelo. We're alike you know. Both of us saw the true form of things. We differed in one way though. He was pious and I was not. We both appreciated the Bible though. Did you know that?"

"No."

"All of my works are named for figures in the Bible. Remember the girl in Anchorage? The one I carved in the likeness of—"

"I remember."

"I called the work 'Mary Magdalene.' The man in Seward was 'The Rise of Lazarus.' Do you know what I named the sculpture in the yard?"

A chill touched my spine and rode it to my scalp.

"It never happened in the Bible, of course. More of a hopeful imagining on my part. The

critics might say it expressed a deep-seated need to overcome temptation. It depends on your interpretation of the snake and who it represents."

My throat had gone dry. I couldn't speak."

"I call it, 'The Triumph of Adam."

Before I knew it, my feet had carried me out of the cell. Robert's laughter echoed behind me.

Seconds later, I stood before the ice sculpture once more. I pulled the hammer and chisel from my pocket. Setting the metal point against the ice, I chipped away at the figure's cheek.

Twenty minutes passed before I reached the back of the statue's head. Nothing lay between but ice.

I stepped back, panting.

My eyes fell on the head of the snake.

I raised the chisel again and my efforts were rewarded. I uncovered rust-colored flesh. Within minutes, the snake's face lay chipped away and a human face revealed. The hammer and chisel fell from my numb fingers.

I knew the snake.

Who is Adam?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Naching T. Kassa is a wife, mother, and horror writer. She's created 17 short stories, two novellas, a poem, and co-created two children. She lives in Eastern Washington State with Dan Kassa, her husband and biggest supporter. Naching is a member of the Horror Writers Association and a Writer/Interviewer for HorrorAddicts.net. She took second place in Horroraddicts.net's Next Great Horror Writer Contest.

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I've Written You a Letter | Winter Balefire

They say if you can't sleep at night, it's because you're awake in someone else's dream. I can only hope as I lie awake, you're sleeping soundly, because I spend my entire day dreaming of you. So maybe tonight, just for a few moments, I can visit you under the moon and tell you I still love you. There is something about 3 AM, something happens. It's like some key turns and unlocks a place inside that we forget about. When it's dark and quiet we can hide, no one sees us, no one hears us, and we roam through that door. We find pictures of people we miss, letters of things never said, and we feel that ache in its purest form. We stay for a while, trying to sort through the clutter, until it's too painful and we recede back into the protective darkness.

I'd like to ask you a question. Do you ever feel like a burning ember? At any moment you could either have your flame revived again or be extinguished completely. That in between is a tense balance, you need something more than to exist in limbo, don't you agree? I must tell you; sadness is a funny thing. Sneaking in like a child on a playground late at night, building your thoughts into oddities as it swings from the delicate strings of your emotions. Regret gently rolls down your face as sadness continues to play, sliding down your soul, creating that empty feeling in your chest. I wish it would quit finding its way here.

Yet, here it is and here I am, battling this 'entity' of sorts. I've lost myself to a type of 'demon'. This is really the only way I can describe it to you. As I write this I know it can hear my every thought, it knows what I'm going to write before I do. This 'entity' has been coming around for quite some time, it seems to be growing stronger. I know this may be difficult for you to understand, but I feel like I may completely lose myself soon, does that make sense? I'm not sure of my own thoughts anymore. What am I doing? I hope you read this. These words may be the last bit of me I have left to give. I have tried so many things to rid myself of this overbearing presence.

Everything is different now. I'm going to try my best to explain to you what's been happening, or at least what I can remember. For example, do you remember that song, the one you said was mine? I can't even listen to it anymore; it just doesn't sound the same. A once happy melody is now sorrowful. I swear this thing has taken over everything I once cared for, everything that once made me happy. I went to my favorite spot the other day, the one you and I used to visit. I was certain the sound of the waves and the warm sun would soothe me, but there it was, I knew it, everything grew silent. I felt cold, like I do at this very moment. This was a different type of cold. I didn't shiver or get goosebumps, it was like I was cold on the inside. Please, try to have an open mind as I tell you these things. Nothing even tastes the same anymore. That bottle of wine you gave me is now like pure poison running down my throat. I used to enjoy sipping a glass as we discussed the day, now it's just too bitter. I remember willfully taking in the aroma of your cigar smoke. I would watch as it trailed from your lips as if a piece of your spirit were escaping. I'd watch it twirl and twist in the air, it was almost beautiful, like a phantom dancer. Now, it turns my stomach. Oh, and the sound of a piano, especially 'Moonlight Sonata', makes me want to tear my ears out. I remember listening to you play and the world would stop, time meant nothing, the old and new worlds collided as your hands moved along the keys. I know this sounds bizarre, please just stay with me till the end of this. Remember how I loved candles? I preferred them over any other light source. Now, they just don't burn the same. The flame quickly shrinks away as if it too were hiding from this horrid thing. I simply don't light them anymore. Darkness always finds me regardless. Can you understand yet?

This 'entity' or 'demon', whatever it is, first came to me in the Fall. Horrible isn't it? We loved that time of year. You were born in October, weren't you? I remember the amazing smell of firewood burning in contrast with the cool breeze, it was comforting. Pumpkins and cinnamon seemed to invade every storefront and that was just fine with us. You always dressed as a pirate

on Halloween, you said that was the only time you could be your true self. Wow, I think this is the first time I've smiled tonight. You did seem quite comfortable; I always knew your soul was from another time. You do have an old soul; you know that? I can tell, it's all in the eyes. I could never hide anything from those eyes, you knew things, even before I knew them. Maybe that explains why it was so difficult for me to sleep some nights, after we'd talk. I would stay awake and analyze what we said. You and I once had a long talk about reincarnation. We both felt strongly this was not our first life, but I could tell you didn't remember me as I remembered you, the pirate, and the rebel. The trouble with being an old soul is you feel everything deeply because you've felt it before. You know how important time is, so you hate wasting it, you know you can't get those moments back. You grow tired while others are so busy playing games, guessing and wondering. However, the most heart-wrenching part is when your soul recognizes someone you once deeply loved and still do, yet they no longer remember you. Too many centuries have passed. That's the trouble with being an old soul, not everyone stays awake throughout their lives. Our conversations were like tiny puzzle pieces that I would later put together, even though the final picture was always different from what I originally anticipated. I hate when that happens.

When I did sleep, it was a different kind of sleep. I was aware but not awake. This is when I first noticed, something. I felt an overwhelming sadness, like there was a death only I was aware of. Whenever I would dream, it was always a nightmare. Sometimes you were in them, I couldn't tell you why, but I'd see your face. You were always silent, almost hovering in the distance. Since this last Fall, things have only grown worse. I used to feel my best in the evenings. When the days grew short, my inspiration was endless. I would write poetry and recite it to the moon. Now, there is no more poetry and the moon doesn't seem to glow the same anymore. I remember feeling safe in the evenings; now, I'm just filled with fear. I don't even know what I'm afraid of, to be completely honest.

This 'demon' has done horrible things to me. Each night it arrives. I cannot avoid its visits; please know I've tried. This 'demon' brings me nightmares and visions that I can no longer pass off as illusion. I think tonight is one of the most frightening. I lie here, trying my best to relax, I was thinking of you, dreaming in a half-awake state of mind. Suddenly I could hear it making its way to me. A low thud, then another, each louder than the last. The rhythm matched that of my own heartbeat, now pounding. That thud, echoing against the walls, echoing in my head. The shadows in the corner of the room grew darker, blocking out even the light from the moon herself. Suddenly, those shadows began to slowly move. I was paralyzed in my dreaming, half-awake state of mind. These dark shapes turned into a human form and stood by the side of my bed. I felt cold, my chest felt as if it were being crushed, my head was pounding, this form was all I could see. Trying to make out any features was nearly impossible, just a set of piercing eyes staring at me. This thing was silent, just hovering there. In a very strange way I just wanted this to be over. Whatever this thing was going to do, I was ready for it, anything to feel something different from what I was feeling now. Was it planning on taking my soul? There isn't much left. Was it planning on completely possessing me? I don't know who I am anymore anyway. Finally,

with a gasp, I was able to move, I was able to breathe, but this form remained. I knew there was a familiarity to this being, I knew it was you. It's all in the eyes.

In reality, whatever is left of it, this was all my fault. I summoned this 'entity' in a way. I told you everything, my truth, I'm sure you knew before I did. I held my feelings from you for many years, the energy just circling and building. This energy amplified everything; music, wine, food, it was all wonderful, especially the Fall. Then, finally I showed you my heart, and you couldn't accept it. I loved you, in indescribable ways, I loved you, but you didn't love me. You said you couldn't love me. Just when it seems I've finally forgotten about you, it'll happen. A song will play; a scent will be carried in the air, and somehow, I know you're around. I can't rid myself of you, I can't get away from this. I try only to discover I'm chasing behind it, this waking nightmare. I need to stop thinking of you because it's poisoning me. I can feel my heart getting sick. Yet if this toxin is all I have left of you, I'm still hesitant to let go. So, what was left? You took everything I felt for you, you took my heart, my being, and you made it ugly and unrecognizable. I now mourn this death only I'm aware of. All that remains is this 'entity' formed by my now broken being. I invested so much into you, it took on a life of its own. Now I'm being haunted by it and I really don't know when I'm dreaming and when I'm not anymore.

Which brings me to the reason why I'm writing you this letter. They say if you can't sleep at night it's because you're awake in someone else's dream, I know you haven't been sleeping well lately. As I write this I can see this 'entity' is waiting. The form has changed into something so hideous, emaciated, gray and rotting. I knew tonight would be different, this is its last visit. I'll try to keep writing as long as I can. The 'being' is creeping closer, everything feels so empty; the room, the bed, myself. This will sound completely insane but its wrapping its putrid hands around my neck, my ability to breathe is compromised. This is important for you to know, they're going to ask you about me. The thin fingers are running down my chest and have stopped right over my heart. I'm trying to finish this but its staring at me, it wants me to know this will soon be over. There's that crushing pain again. My vision is getting blurry and my chest hurts. I feel as if it's crushing me from the inside, the blood I'm tasting is my confirmation.

They're going to tell you I died in my sleep, I wanted you to know the truth.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Winter Balefire is an author, award-winning poet, paranormal researcher and Occultist from Los Angeles, CA. Her articles on the paranormal, magic, lore and urban legends have been continuously published since 2009 and her latest book, On A Ghostly Winter's Night, features a collection of these articles. When not exploring the macabre and bizarre, Winter enjoys writing short stories and reading tarot.

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Through the Glass | Lydia Prime

I woke up, somewhat confused, as I had no memory of ever falling asleep. A rustling, almost scraping noise seemed to be coming from somewhere in the darkness. Climbing off my bed, I started toward my window, only to realize the noise was coming from the opposite side of the room. The mirror... I froze, why would sound be coming from my mirror!?

I breathed deeply and felt my blood zipping through my veins. Fear had me trapped. After what felt like an eternity, I crept slowly toward the vanity. I stood about six inches from the mirror and tried to look, tried to see what could be making this ruckus. Without warning the lights came on, and I knew it wasn't me. I tried to move my feet to run back to my bed, but found I was frozen in place.

Unexpectedly I saw movement in the mirror. As I stood, a mirrored version of myself began to walk up and come into focus. My body was no longer mine. Mirror-me reached for a hairbrush, and so did I. She brushed her hair slowly, and winced going over knots—as did I. She did her makeup, sprayed perfume, and stared blankly into the mirror; I did it with her—but stared in fear.

We moved in unison, fluidly controlled by and for this doppelgänger beyond the glass—what was happening to me? Suddenly, we smiled, hers real, mine forced. We both took a deep breath; she turned and walked out of the reflected door of my bedroom. I waved my hand; my body was finally mine again. I panicked, sprinted to my bedroom door and opened it, only to be confronted by the abyss.

I woke up, somewhat confused, as I had no memory of ever falling asleep.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Lydia grew up in a small, 'Mayberry,' sort of town, in New Jersey. She thoroughly enjoys gummy bears and laughing through the darkest depths of life. More often than not, she writes about demons and monsters, however, being a recovering addict tends to turn inner demons into fearsome foes to be fought beyond the constraints of the mind. 'Sometimes,' she states, 'what's inside, is scarier than anything reality throws at you.'

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Red | Vivian Kasley

I wanted to off myself. Nothing too dramatic or gory, but quick and painless. Something ordinary, like drinking a bottle of vodka and then swallowing whatever pills I had. I was lonely and sad. The usual reasons. I was sitting in my bathroom against the cold tub, when I heard the

phone say my name. Yeah I know, crazy, but I downloaded this ghost app on my phone when Dom left. I did it for fun; to hear something, anything, in my quiet pathetic loneliness.

At first, the app didn't really intrigue me. It was another stupid app that was 'for entertainment only.' It had a sort of green radar on it, like a scanner, and a red dot would appear if you had any otherworldly visitors. Sometimes, I would see a red dot and laugh, but other times it freaked me out. There were random one word responses that would pop up like Room, War, Horse, Ground, Heart, and one time even Underwear. I felt less lonely with the robotic voice coming from my cell. I came home every night from work and turned it on. Dumb? Yeah, but it was something to look forward to.

Then came the night I decided I was going to kill myself. I went to the liquor store, bought a bottle of expensive vodka, and picked up some over the counter sleep aid. I had no idea if this would even work, but I was going to find out...or not. I had a really bad day at work. I had gotten written up for missing too many days last month. The month Dom left me for my best friend. I came home, took out a Margaritaville shot glass, and began taking shots of my top-shelf vodka. Might as well spend money on the good stuff, since I was going to die. Ha-ha.

After about 6 or 7 shots I felt pretty drunk. I went into the bathroom with my phone and turned on the app. I did my hair in the mirror, put on some lip gloss, and then sat against the tub with my vodka and my sleep aid. I waited. The phone stayed silent. I abandoned the shot glass and began drinking straight from the bottle. I used it as a microphone to sing sad songs, while I pulled the cotton out of the sleep aid. Then I heard *it*.

```
"Nina."

"Wha...?" I said.

"Don't."

"Don't?" I asked.
```

"Nina." It said.

I dropped the pills on the floor and sat up straighter. I looked toward the cell phone. The ghost radar showed a red dot and my name was on the screen. My hands began to tremble and I picked it up.

"Stop." It said.

Startled, I dropped the phone on the tile floor. I looked at the bottle of vodka and saw I drank quite a lot. Perhaps, this was all in my head. I laughed out loud and grabbed the pills again and sat back against the tub.

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"Fuck it. Fuck it all." I said "Nina. No. No. Need. Want."
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I stared at it and sipped more vodka.

"Need what? Huh? What do you need? What do you want? What about what I need and want?" I shouted

"Need. You. Want. You. No. Nina."

I was now sure my phone was talking to me. I grabbed it and held it in my hands. It still felt like my cell phone. It wasn't cold or anything. I guess I thought it would be for some reason.

I had no idea how to process this and my head was spinning from the vodka. I held the phone up to my ear and rubbed the back of it like a genie bottle. I have no idea what the hell I expected. Then, I began to shake the phone violently.

"Want. Nina." It said.

"I have no idea who you are or if this is in my head! I don't care. Look at me! I'm drunk, sitting in my bathroom like a moron talking to my phone, and I'm about to kill myself! So fuck off! Just fuck off and do whatever it is you have to do!" I screamed.

"Nina. Take. You. Want. You." It said.

"What the fuck ever. Blah blah."

I laughed out loud at myself for talking to my phone. I put the phone down on the floor beside me and ignored it. I took a few pills and chugged the vodka. When I went to pour more pills into my hand, I felt something cold grab my hand and the pills went flying against the wall. Against my will, my body moved and my hands grabbed the bottle of vodka and began pouring it down the toilet. My whole body was damp and cold. I felt my head forced into the toilet and a cold ice pick forced into my throat. I vomited violently several times.

I felt dizzy and the room spun. My body moved toward the mirror and I saw myself and also something else. A dark shadowy figure with no face. *It* was holding me up like a human marionette. I tried to scream, but my voice was not there and my throat felt like it was closed. The figure raised its shadow hands as if to choke me and I blacked out. In the morning, I woke up on the floor of the bathroom shivering with my face stuck to the floor in cold vomit.

My phone sat on the floor, but it was dead. I sat up holding my head and I couldn't stop shivering. I needed to take a shower. I put the empty vodka bottle in the trash and picked up the scattered pills on the floor. I must have been pretty drunk. I was really out of my mind last night. I remembered something happened, but couldn't quite grasp what it was. I was talking to myself. No, I was talking to my phone. Christ. I really am ridiculous. I picked up my phone and set it on the counter.

I took my clothes off and looked at myself in the mirror. My eyes were bloodshot and my hair was glued to the side of my face. There were bruises on my neck, shoulders, and wrists. I got closer to the mirror and saw that the bruises looked like fingerprints. I shivered as I looked down at the phone. It had turned itself on. The app went on and a red dot appeared.

"Nina. Want. You. Love. You."

I looked back in the mirror and a dark figure stood behind me. I couldn't scream as *it* took me. *It* forced itself on me. The icy wet feeling was all over my body. I tried to grab the scissors on the counter and my hand wouldn't let me. I tried to bang my head against the wall or the sink, but *it* wouldn't let me. I thrashed around screaming in my bathroom like a lunatic, but it was no use. Helplessly, I slid down the wall and sat down crying. The dark shadow sat next to me, with its long dark arm around me, *it* encircled me.

I walk around now with this thing; this dark passenger. No one else seems to see *it*. I call *it* Red. I no longer use the app on my phone. I no longer want to kill myself. No, let me rephrase that. I can no longer can kill myself, because *it* won't let me. I'm still lonely...only not really.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Vivian Kasley is a horror nut who lives in the land of the strange and unusual, Florida. She was an educator for many years until she decided to leave her job to write, travel, and learn more about the world. She published work with Dark Moon Digest and now with Sirens Call Publications. She continues to write weird tales and fill hearts with terror.

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Stay Tuned | Theresa Braun

By the time you hear me out, you'll be thinking it'll only be a matter of time before we're caught. My prep school buddies and me discussed that when making our business plan. We agreed it's worth the throng of subscribers on the DarkNet who appreciate our efforts, some even posting specific requests or giving us leads for upcoming episodes. We've become anonymously famous. It's glorious.

Our teachers, and later, professors, accused us of lacking focus. Follow through. Ambition. You name it. We were too busy skipping class to drag race or walk the perilous ledge of the clock tower—anything to feel more alive.

In the end it was clear the establishment's cards were stacked against me when I got kicked out. Apparently rescuing the headmaster's daughter from gang rape is a sure way to get blamed for it. Well, it's not like any of us need Shakespeare. Or stiff, meaningless corporate jobs. Fuck them. I literally roll around naked on a stash of Benjamins. Whenever.

I'm the brains of this operation. My instincts for the right targets has served us well so far. The ideal age range is somewhere between five and eleven, although seven and eight have proven to make the best videos. I know you're thinking I'm some pedophiliac sicko, but that is just as revolting to me as it is you. So cool your jets.

Before I tell you about the type of footage going on here, let me cue you into the process. You see, camping outside suburban gas stations, scoping out expensive cars and logging the ones with child passengers is boring. But somebody's gotta do it.

I study the family dynamics, noticing who's at the wheel and body language and all that crap. Believe it or not, the degree of forcefulness when handling the pump and the cap on the gas tank reveals quite a bit. That, and where those eyes roam while filling up. What's carried out of the convenience store is noteworthy—cigarettes or beer for himself, or candy and sodas for them? After collecting data, I can tell how photogenic and interactive the family is. Most importantly: how suggestible and easy to overpower, if it comes to that.

Next step: log license plate and tail the vehicle home. Surveillance goes on for as long as it takes.

Helpful hint: don't be sloppy. Just imagine there's a 'Smile, You're on Camera' sign on the bars of the security gate. And there usually is. At this stage of the game, I'm looking for something to think about when I go through with it. I mean, I'm not a complete asshole. So when I think about a father slapping his daughter on the ride up the driveway, or sniffing his side piece's panties before stuffing them back in his pocket—or throwing a rolled up rug into the trunk, I feel way less guilty.

There's no actor, I don't care how Oscar-worthy, who can perform as well as real people. That's why viewers pay us the big bucks. The cherry on top? These reality stars pay *us* for it.

The kid on deck for this week's film always watches his dad's every move, his brain calculating how to respond accordingly so he won't get beat. I've seen his little bruised arm hanging out the passenger window. Far. too. Many. Times.

Anyway, before I punch a hole in the panel of my car door, let's continue. Once I've committed to the target, one of us raids the garbage for carelessly tossed information. Any gaps are just a few clicks away in any public computer. As luck has it, little Timothy's birthday is on this page of the calendar. At times, we're not so lucky.

Word to the wise: don't try to do it all alone.

When all the groundwork is laid, it's time to gear up for the money shot. A month before the event, the campaign launches. A flyer under the windshield. Wait a day or two. Flyer in the crack of the window. Promotional emails. Everyone loves a freaking discount. This 'unique' and 'custom made' party favor is guaranteed to be an experience 'remembered for a lifetime'.

That's an epic understatement.

Fast forward to my chat with the little whipper snapper when I catch him alone. What kind of unique whiz-bang would snaz up his party? A piñata, he says—in the shape of a rocket. Filled with a sea of Jolly Ranchers. Then my mind films the scene. I can't keep from shaking. They won't know until the day of the party how much behind-the-scenes labor is behind the cinematic effect. Speaking of which, the set-up of the venue determines logistics. It's best to get up close and personal. We see if the parents want a face painter or magician for an additional 'promotional rate.'

We all take turns in the coveted spot, the live moment that makes it all worthwhile. Today I'm the clown and balloon-maker extraordinaire. It's the typical getup—the boiling hot red wig and thick makeup. Red nose and a beanie with one of those spinning things at the top. Polka dot suit that's as big as a tent. With the goofy glasses with the crazy swirls in the middle, I safely hide behind a high-pitched phony voice.

The kids gather around the piñata now dangling from a backyard oak.

"It's so big!" one partygoer marvels.

That it is. It has to be for everything to go off without a hitch. For a second, I worry about my craftsmanship. The piñata only needs to hold up for a few more minutes anyway. But the anticipation is nearly killing me. Pun intended.

The birthday boy holds the stick while his mother ties the blindfold over his eyes. His hair fans out around the bandana circling his head. He stumbles along the grass, tottering closer to the rocket with rainbow-colored streamers all over it, while wielding his weapon. Something in him is driving that thing through the air with violent force. All his pent-up anger and hatred flies. You see, his father's a no show. This little boy's been staring at the sliding glass door, preparing to cower. But it's been over an hour since everyone has arrived. His sister has been gabbing with her friends and taking her balloon unicorn for several flights.

This is the moment we've been waiting for. I could almost pee my damn polka dot suit with excitement, the hidden camera in my glasses recording each magnificent moment.

The kid finally takes the winning whack to the piñata. Out comes a shower of red dripping onto the birthday boy and several bystanders. Some wipe the spray from their eyes.

There are a few nervous and confused screams.

That stick is still a-whacking. A new wound in its side rips wide, chunks and bits spraying out. Partygoers lunge forward, picking up what they think is candy. A girl in pig-tails yanks her hand away, yelping as she runs into her mother's arms. A boy with thick glasses slips in the grass, the liquid splashing all over his face and covering his lenses with what looks like watery tomato sauce.

The birthday boy slides the blindfold from his eyes, glancing up at his handiwork as a severed hand falls from the piñata. He jerks aside in the nick of time, not noticing the familiar watch on the wrist or the distinctively roped silver wedding band landing at his feet.

By now, it's pandemonium, but the screeches and commotion of the guests fleeing is all muffled background noise. My mind plays a soundtrack of Drowning Pool's "Let the Bodies Hit the Floor" and my veins pulse and throb.

I've side-stepped to the door like a country western clown, pausing as the notes in my brain build to a piercing climax. Nothing is so satisfying as witnessing brother, sister, and mother in a huddled mass, a decapitated head plummeting to the ground with a squish. She covers her children's eyes with her hands, bawling as she must've recognized the bloody face and sopping hair of her husband—the whites of his lifeless eyes crimson, his mouth agape.

Well, that's not how it went down. That was how it played out in my head.

The reality was more like this.

The little fucker had no aim whatsoever. Even though I rooted for him to save the day. Be a hero. Be the child superstar he was destined to be. As his weapon sailed aimlessly through the air, a crimson drop splatted onto mom's cheek. She wiped it and put her fingers to her nose. It seemed she considered tasting it just to be certain.

If only the piñata's innards had fallen then.

Instead, maternal instinct urged her to scoop up her son and yank her daughter by the arm. The mythical balloon creature popped, pieces of white and blue latex wilting on their way to the soon-to-be trampled earth.

"Everyone inside!" mom yelled with a craze-filled immediacy.

The blood saturated papier-mâché finally weakened, the piñata contents fighting for freedom. A red seam on the belly of the rocket spread wide as one of the other mothers corralled children with cake and frosting covered faces to the sliding door. Some fingers dangled lifelessly, blood trickling, then streaming.

"Come on, kiddies!" I called, my body in slow-motion, feigning helpfulness, still hoping for a last minute shot.

Trent had already cut the wire-fence, motioning to me to make a run for the idling getaway van as sirens wailed in the distance.

For a number of reasons, it was time to switch gears. Time to take a break from punishing terrible parental units. And, we set up a brand new base of operation, which is always smart. Keep the trail cold, just in case. There are enough empty warehouses all over the country to stay off the grid. A generator is really all you need.

It wasn't long before we got a lead from a fan. Her girlfriend was hot to do something special for her husband for their anniversary. What a cluster fuck, right? Not to mention I know what it's like to be slighted. Back at that party when I'd pulled a bunch of drunk dudes off that headmaster's daughter, even my own girlfriend didn't believe my side of the story. Like there's no such thing as a good guy. Ahem... whatever people want their realities to be.

Back to our regularly scheduled programming.

Our van was packed with the party supplies and audio-video equipment. Trent and I were already in our monkey suits with the ear pieces. He had on a realistic-looking blond wig and some blue contacts. I'd gotten a buzz cut and was wearing a pair of Clark Kent glasses with the camera. Oh, and the gloves. This was an occasion for gloves. Be sure to overthink all the ways one can get caught—wink, wink.

Right on schedule we pulled up to the rear of the mansion.

Trent and I got to work lugging out the enormous cake. The trick was to make it look as real as possible, even though no one was really going to eat it. I crossed myself in the hopes this contraption was up to snuff.

"How do I look?" the hostess asked.

Obliging her with a once over, I took in what must've taken a few hours. The faultless hair swept up and makeup, both clearly done at a salon, and her black satin dress clinging to all those exquisite nips and tucks. Her shiny new stilettos. "Smashing."

I gave her the okay sign and turned to Trent with raised eyebrows.

"Absolutely." He grinned, a twinkle in his eye, probably thinking about his mother decked out like that in her heyday when she was a groupie for '80s and '90s bands. For all Trent knew, his dad was Mick Jagger. If I even breathed a word about Reznor, he threw a hissy.

We rolled the sugary-looking monstrosity to the kitchen.

"Okay, so how do I get in?" she asked.

"Let me show you." Trent opened the trap door.

"Oh, pretty," she said, rubbing her hands over the sea of velvety red fabric.

Typical. I grabbed her wrist, fearful she'd trigger something prematurely.

We unfolded the step stool and helped her inside, reminding her one of us would tap on the side to give her the signal. The timing was bound to sort itself out much better this time around, especially if Trent and I could help it.

No one had to wait long.

The stiff-walking man of the hour clanked through the marble foyer and into the dark living room. Huffing to himself, he must've wondered why all the drapes were drawn for once. "Goddammit, Marla! What the fuck?" he said as he tripped over a lamp cord.

In the dim light, I caught a glimpse of Trent's smile.

Someone cued the lights. Another party-goer blasted some big band music from a record player in the corner.

Loosening his tie, Marla's husband craned his neck at the room-full of guests. The liver spots on his face stretched as he opened his mouth and ran a hand atop his comb-over.

Trent pushed the cake from the kitchen and into place, right front and center on the Parisian rug. I patted the side.

Almost forgetting to take a few steps back, I recalled the importance of angles and jumped to an appropriate spot. Her heels thumped into position as Marla got ready. A series of clicks and cranks sounded as the hinges squeaked.

The loving wife popped upward, reaching her arms above her head and striking a pose, which was a poor parody of one Marilyn Monroe would've executed flawlessly. Her red lips spread into a beauty pageant smile. "Surprise!" she exclaimed.

Curiously, the champagne glasses didn't shatter all around me.

The cake's timer ticked and then sputtered as all the appropriate mechanisms released.

A clean shriek of steel on steel. A series of blades raked Marla from head to knee, slicing through her cocktail dress and scraping her fishnets. She managed to moan. Blood ebbed from the gashes and the rivulets made her look like a human Twizzler. Another artillery of knives shot up at various angles. When the blades pulled away, hunks of Marla plummeted. Blood sprayed the onlookers, some frozen. Others howled or screamed as they scampered away.

A couple of crimson-covered bystanders looked our way, but Trent and I weren't too worried. The champagne had been laced with drugs, so there'd be quite a bit of doubt regarding their testimony. Plus, an explosion of confetti and smoke detonated from the lower tier of the cake. People coughed and hacked, rubbing their eyes. Tiny strips of multi-colored paper fell like snow.

I'd already given my buddy the nod for us to make a run for it. We'd stashed a change of clothes under the kitchen sink. It'd then just be a matter of hopping into the van.

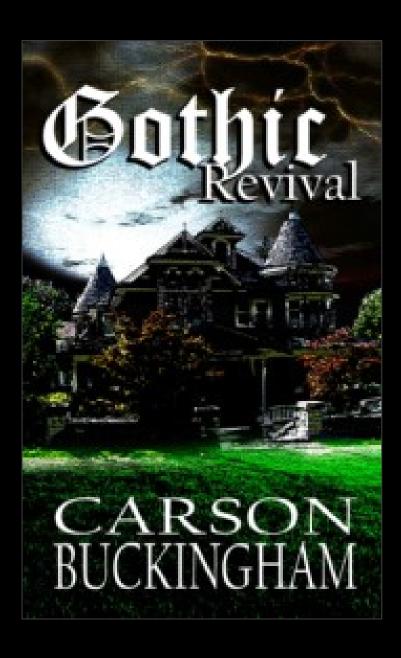
Back at the lair we'd edit the footage and anticipate the thank you message from the jilted lover who sent us there in the first place. Cheers, little lady. Here's to a future girlfriend—who won't be some fake piece of shit.

What might be our next production? Our next lesson of vigilante justice? The possibilities are endless.

Stay tuned.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Theresa Braun was born in St. Paul, Minnesota and has carried some of that hardiness with her to South Florida where she currently resides. Traveling, ghost hunting, and all things dark are her passions. Her work appears in The Horror Zine, Schlock! Webzine, and Hardened Hearts at Unnerving Magazine, among others; upcoming stories will be published in Strange Behaviors and at Bards and Sages.

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The Box | *Candace Robinson*

I have been hidden away inside of this box for what seems like eons, but it must be closer to nine months since my stomach is now the size of an Earth globe model.

The darkness covers me with a cool blanket for most of the hours that tick-tick inside my head.

A door slowly creaks open from outside the walls. My heart stills, or as much stilling as a heart can do.

Lifting my hands, I place them on my stomach, as if I'm already protecting what's inside from being taken by *her*.

The shuffling of steps and a rattling of what can only be a food tray, makes its way in my direction. The steps drift closer and closer, being absorbed by the space in this coffin—my tomb.

Clanging radiates as she sets the food tray somewhere near me, and several seconds of bolts being released echo through my ears. Click, click, click—creak, as the old wooden lid opens above me. A candescent light filters throughout the room, and my eyes try to adjust. I blink several times before my eyes focus on obsidian frizzy hair that has started to thin on top.

I don't even think about the chance for escape anymore because I tried that—multiple times in the beginning. She put a stop to that, easily.

Shakily, I bring myself to a sitting position as the jangling from my chained feet vibrates against my skin—the area where the flesh is most likely permanently marked red from when I have tried to slide my feet out.

"How are you, baby?" Mother whispers softly as if she is talking to a baby girl that has just awoken, instead of a fully grown one.

"Mother, please, I can't handle this anymore. Why are you doing this to me? What are you going to do to the baby?" I look down at my stomach, trying to solve the endless riddle. Greasy brown locks of hair swing forward touching my lips, and I let out a huff of air to blow them away.

I've wondered repeatedly inside the box what she is going to do to the baby once it's here. She was never like this before, until she found out I was pregnant with James' baby. The day replays like an old vinyl record that skips over and over.

"Mother, I'm pregnant." My heart constricted tighter than a dried-up fruit. I knew she would be disappointed. She had only met James the one time and forbade me to ever see him again. I was already eighteen, but I didn't have a job or anything, and I hadn't known James for that long. But I fell fast, and I fell hard for him.

"With that *man's* baby?" she screeched and slapped the wall so hard a few of the pictures twisted to the side in a crooked dance.

He was twenty-eight, and maybe that was my mother's problem, but it wasn't my problem. "Yes, his baby. Who else's baby would it be?"

"Obviously, it could be anyone's baby now that I know I raised a harlot who sleeps with evil," she spat and slapped the wall harder. This time a picture slid down the wall and crashed along the floor. Glass broke and shattered into a mixture of large and tiny pieces.

"I'm going to tell him now, but I wanted you to know first." I turned around without saying another word. It would take some time for her—it would take time for me.

She didn't follow me to my room as I gathered up a few things, but I would talk to her more when I got back. Maybe James would let me move in with him. If not, I needed to figure out things on my own.

When I got to my room, I walked to the closet and grabbed a weekend's worth of clothing and stuffed it all into my backpack.

The palm of my hands crashed to the bed, and the fleece blanket crinkled in my grasp. *How could I have let this happen?* Tears slid down my face, and I screamed inside my head—wishing I could scream right there in my bedroom.

I heard the shuffle of footsteps at the last minute. Without turning around, I said, "I know, Mother. When I get back I'll sit down and talk about it with you."

Suddenly, there was something pressed up against my nose and mouth, and I couldn't breathe. She was choking me. Gasping, I tried to break away from the cloth, but black dots pulled at the edges of my eyes, forming one big blackout as I collapsed into darkness.

My eyelids fluttered open for a second and then slammed back down. With every single eyelid muscle, I tried lifting them open again and saw a blurry image of my mother, before everything cleared.

"Mother?"

I moved to push myself off the floor, but my hands were stuck together in front of me. Not stuck, but tied.

"You're all right, Laurel, you're safe now." She walked toward me and lightly gripped my shoulders to help pull me up to a sitting position on my knees.

She was crazy. Seriously insane. My mother had always been strict, but something was going on with her now, and I had to leave.

My eyes flickered from left to right, taking in the poorly lit room and the turquoise walls. I had never seen this room before in my life.

Groggily, it took me a moment to find enough saliva to help soothe my overly dry mouth. "Where am I?" I asked.

Her hazel eyes narrowed at me, and my insides shuttered. "I said you were safe. You're safe here from him." She ran a hand through her frizzy hair. "You, dear child, have to stay here for as long as it takes."

Rubbing the insides of my wrists up and down, I was unable to loosen the rope that was tied in multiple knots, preventing my escape from the deranged woman.

"How long are you planning to keep me down here?"

Out of nowhere, she took out a tan ruler and slammed it down against my knuckles. Pain escalated as I squeaked, but before I could say a single word, the ruler crushed my knuckles once more.

Mother ran the ruler across her palm. "I've already answered that question, Laurel."

I didn't say anything. What could I say?

Mother cracked the ruler against her thigh, at the same time she roared, "You brought him here!"

I don't know. I don't even know. Is she on something? She must be on something.

"I—I don't know what you're talking about," I stuttered, scrunching up my face because I'm afraid the ruler will collide with my knuckles again.

She took a step closer toward me. "The man with the ship. Who else?"

"Ship? Man?" Confusion encircled me, and I felt pieces of me being tugged in too many directions.

Mother reached out and gripped the collar of my shirt, beads of perspiration spread across her brows. "The seed! The seed! You're carrying his blasted seed."

"Flower seeds?"

"No, you moron. His child!"

"James? You're talking about James. He doesn't have a ship!" I screamed in her face.

"I'm going to have to tuck you away until we can hide the child. Get in the box now!"

"Box? I'm not getting in any box."

She grabbed me by the arms, her nails digging in deeply where crescent moons would permanently scar. Tossing my head back, I tried to buck it against her head, but she was too quick.

Whipping me around, Mother tossed me into the box and clasped the lid shut.

Now, Mother stands before me, looking as if she hasn't eaten in weeks and helps me exit the box. The chains that were once rope jingle. "We have to get the baby away. I've told you that." Her voice is frantic.

"You're insane and—" I feel pressure at my stomach and collapse to my knees against the cement flooring.

"The baby is coming, and we have to hurry before he comes."

I don't answer when the pain increases, and I roll to my back. Mother spreads my knees apart and pushes my dress up to my waist. Liquid spills around me, and the birth seems to be happening more rapid than it should be.

Mother attempts to calm my nerves by rubbing my knees, and I can't be angry in this moment with all that is happening.

"Push," Mother shouts, clenching one of my knees.

After pushing and pushing, the baby slides out with a loud wail slipping from its mouth.

"It's a boy." Mother says with relief and brings the baby up to me, his little face covered in goop.

"Peter," I whisper.

A heavy noise rumbles from somewhere nearby and then what sounds like a shattering of glass, inches closer.

Mother's face contorts with apprehension. "You or the baby?" she presses.

"What?" Why would she even ask something like this.

"Who would you save?" She looks from me to the closed door. "I can't save you both."

"The baby." I wouldn't be able to live with any other choice. But I don't know why she is asking something like this. I'm more afraid she is going to hurt the baby.

She kisses my forehead with tenderness. "I love you, Laurel. You'll understand why I did what I did when he gets here." Without another word, she rushes out with Peter in her arms and doesn't glance back.

I lift myself on my forearm and pull myself up to stand, the chains still intact. The door is still open where Mother ran out, and I hobble toward it to go after her.

When I reach the doorway, a hard body crashes into me. My head angles up toward a chestnut bearded face that takes me a second to recognize. "James?"

"Laurel, where's your mother?" His tone is straight to the point, no surprise in seeing me for the first time in months.

"She took the baby, James." My eyes are darting wildly around, now that I'm thinking more clearly.

"It took me a while to realize it was *her*," he says, a deep scowl crossing his handsome face. "Then when you two disappeared, it all came to me. You know, your mother and I have a history together."

My eyes widen, and nausea fills my stomach.

James lifts his hand and slides his index finger across my lower lip. "Don't give me that look. Tinker and I never had relations like how you and I did, my sweet."

"James?"

"I know all about the prophesy, my sweet, and I will find our precious Peter." He pauses. "And he will die."

I can't wrap my mind around what he said. "How do you know the baby's name? Did you see Mother?"

He doesn't answer, only grips my upper arms, and I can't escape because of the chains. James lifts me and walks toward the middle of the room while I twist and kick, but my muscles are too weak. He drops me inside the box when he reaches it, closing the lid with a clack.

Click-click. Each bolt is locked as I try to press my hands against the top.

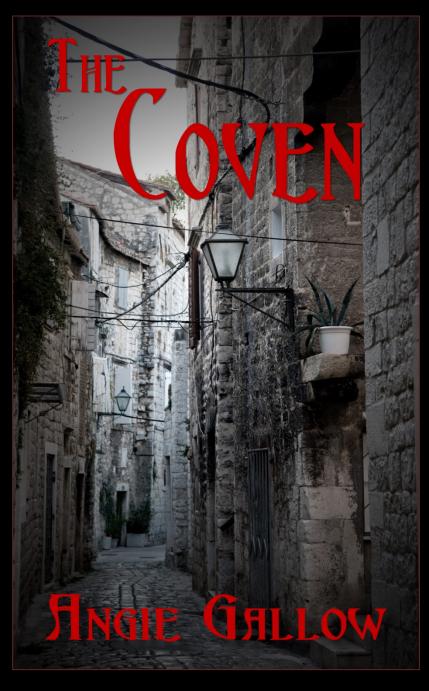
"Enjoy your rest, my sweet," James croons as I hear his footsteps fade away.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Candace Robinson spends her days consumed by words. When she's not writing stories, she maintains a book review blog, Literary Dust. Her life consists of

avoiding migraines, admiring Bonsai trees, and living with her husband and daughter in Texas—where it can be forty degrees one day and eighty the next.

Twitter: <u>@literarydust</u>

Blog: http://literarydust.wordpress.com



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

Blood on My Tongue | *Marge Simon*

They're trying something new. All safe behind the glass they watch me make lunch. I set the microwave on high. Twenty-five seconds. Not long, but what if I were facing a firing squad. Would those seconds fly? Would I cry out or would I bite my tongue?

It looks like a chilly day for here in August, cool and damp. I pretend I can see it clearly through the mesh as I eat my hot dog. My mock kitchen is white, with pretty flowered curtains. It's really not so bad now since they decided to try this new thing. Before that, it was the ward with sickly green walls and striped floors. The left side stripe was for showers, the right for meals. Follow the stripe, stay in line. Keep your head down and your hands to yourself.

There were others there in the ward with me. We had to wear pajamas that matched the horrid green walls. Large men and women with white coats presided over us. We were forced to cooperate with them. If you did not do what the White Coats told you, they had needles to make you behave. I remember using such needles myself a long time ago. But it was not in a place like that ward.

There's a hotel in Belize with the walls that same shade of green. I don't remember her face. Just her eyes, wide and murky like those walls. She had a little velvet purse with a gold clasp that broke when I opened it. We talked a little while, I remember that. Then, inexplicably, she started screaming and hitting me. Of course, I know I had to have calmed her down, for I was a professional, a man of medicine. At any rate, I vaguely recall there seemed to be something wrong with her neck. I might have attempted to fix it before I left, I'm not sure.

I try to cooperate, to keep working on the clutter, but it's like sifting static in a storm. They think this has something to do with the migraines. They think I am oblivious, but I know they are in the next room behind a one way glass mirror. In hushed voices they refer to me as Dr. Verde. I can hear the ticks of someone tapping a pen against glass.

I have certain secrets that even they don't know. I know how to get outside if I want to. Not very far, just on the cement ledge. I'm careful to shut the drapes and leave the bedroom window open. I like it out there. It's another world, yet familiar.

The alley below is very old, a lair for scavengers. Their music rises pale and wet, smooth as fog. I can smell the ocean underneath the oily fumes, watch the night things dance. Long and tall their shadows rise almost to my ledge. I can pull their darkness over me as a veil. When I remember this, I turn to the omniscient firing squad behind the glass. There is blood on my tongue.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Marge Simon has won the Bram Stoker Award, the Rhysling Award, Elgin, Dwarf Stars and Strange Horizons Readers' Awards; she serves on the HWA Board of Trustees, maintains a newsletter column featuring dark poets, is the second woman to be acknowledged as a Grand Master Poet of the SFPA, and is on the board of the Speculative Literary Foundation.

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Interview with Artist LiZzdom

We recently had the opportunity to sit down and talk to Toronto based artist LiZzdom and ask her a few questions about her art and what she has going on. In honor of Women in Horror month, here's what came out in our interview!

Sirens Call Publications: Welcome LiZzdom, why don't you take a moment to introduce yourself to our captive audience.

LiZzdom: My name is LiZzdom. I went to OCAD, the Ontario College of Art and Design, where I majored in Integrated Media, with a focus on stop motion animation, and minored in Illustration. I just finished a 7 month mural at local Toronto Dive Bar Disgraceland this past April 2017. I am currently the head illustrator growing indie Toronto Zine: CRAPNATION, where you can read my comic strip ""ETER RABID". We launched our 7th issue on February 13th, 2018 at Cherry Cola's.

You can mv work www.planetlizzdom.com where you can shop at my store (through redbubble) directly and contact me commissioned work. I am also one half of "The Sisters Twisted" art duo with my younger sister, and fellow artist, Monica. We are currently working on something delicious and creepy, due to come out later this Fall.

SCP: What mediums do you work in?

Is there a medium you've always

wanted to try but just haven't gotten around to yet?



LiZzdom: I find very often that the message dictates the medium. That being said, I do love to work in acrylic, ink, and pencil. I've always wanted to work with bugs, lacquers, resin other smelly/messy mediums. I don't have a well ventilated or roomy enough space at the moment to try these but it's definitely on my art bucket list, Along with animatronic sculpture. This ties in with my stop-motion animation obsession.

SCP: What are some of your main influences?

LiZzdom: I am heavily influenced by both the natural and super-natural world we live in. I love exploring the bridges between what we can see and experience, and what we often can't or barely can explain. I am also heavily fascinated by unicorns and mermaids and all things mythological. On any given day, I am cute or creepy or both.

SCP: Is there an artist you would love to work with?

LiZzdom: Hands down, Guillermo Del Toro. His imagination and love for monsters is at once both inspiring and comforting. In my wildest dreams, I would love to sketch fantastical creatures with him in my book while sitting in his rain room at his Bleak House.

SCP: What do you do when a piece isn't coming together 'on paper' the same way it does in your head?

LiZzdom: This happens all the time. Typically, my subconscious will see things in a backward order and everything will spill out into chaos. When my hands refuse to work, I will usually get up, walk around a bit and just breathe. I don't always have the luxury of a break, but I try to just switch gears and work on something else when I get stuck in the weeds.

SCP: As writers, we sometimes suffer from 'writer's block'; is there something similar to that in the artist/painter/illustrator world? If so, do you ever suffer from it? How do you combat it?

LiZzdom: That is the absolute worst when that happens. I live with some pretty exhausting health challenges that will very often give me "brain fog". Either I will be too tired to hold a pen or brush, or I will have no idea what I'm going to create. If I'm suffering from exhaustion, I rest. If I have hit a creative wall, I doodle. It is remarkable and liberating what can happen when you just let go and allow your subconscious to take the wheel. Some of my best work has come from a 20 minute doodle.

SCP: Where do you find your inspiration?

LiZzdom: I am inspired by anything and everything. What drives me crazy is when I can't stop, drop, and draw on the spot when I am struck by inspiration. I can't tell you how many times I have jumped off a packed train to whip out my sketch book on the platform. When art happens nothing else matters.

SCP: What influences your composition? Props, setting, costume, subject?

LiZzdom: Again, the message typically dictates the medium. If I am illustrating a Victorian horror story, it will most likely have more of a period feel to it. Very often, I will do a mood board or a sort of "look book" for larger projects. I currently have a few of these running for future projects I can't tell you about yet.



SCP: What is your favourite piece you have ever completed? Why is it your favourite?

LiZzdom: I would have to say my most favorite piece I have created is my stopmotion animation short "Claire" that I shot on 16 mm film. It was such a labor of love to create. There were many tears, both of frustration and ecstasy. I look at the props in my studio every day and they fill me with joy and inspiration.

SCP: Have you ever completed a piece for a client and thought it wasn't good even though it was exactly what they asked for? What did you do?

LiZzdom: Oh my, yes. That happens more often than you'd think. At the end of the day, all I can do is offer my professional opinion and produce exactly what they have asked for. As long as

they are happy with the final product, then I am happy. Sometimes, to please your client, you have to remove your ego. I can be as picky as I want with my own personal work.

SCP: What is your favorite piece of artwork you did not create?

LiZzdom: That is ever changing. Right now, my favorite piece is a painting I recently purchased from Toronto artist Corpusse. It's of a skull with flames shooting from its eyes and mouth. The fire and the fury of it really mirror my own heart and drive right now. Momento Mori is a powerful ideology that I carry with me on a daily basis. It is what drives me to live my life richly and passionately. And thusly, I like to surround myself by work that reflects that.

Thank you LiZzdom! If you'd like to keep up to date with what she has going on, please check out her social media links: www.planetlizzdom.com, on Instagram aplanetlizzdom, and on Facebook at planetlizzdom. If you like what you've seen throughout this issue and want to contact her for a commissioned piece, she can be reached at planetlizzdom@gmail.com.



Poetry | Lori R. Lopez

from the sea once removed

The creature stares at humanity, broodful and fathomous, treading the depths of the deepest

pool in an underground aquarium's glass viewing bay... a chamber of tunnels where crowding colorful gawkers

have paid an entrance fee to behold his spectacle:

the captive humiliation of a sentient beast.

From the sea once removed. Trapped by a net

during one of his own curious excursions toward

the surface to gape at a boat's silhouette gliding above.

He had watched many vessels. Most were noisier now.

Had circled offshore structures damaging, drilling

a pristine primordial ocean floor. Observed divers

trailing bubbles. Glimpsed the kicking legs of beachgoers who swam too far from land.

But that was his domain.

This is a tank of carefully controlled seawater —

a regulated brine where he must paddle around

for their amusement, frequently on display, viewed by

their kind. Schools of children. Flocks of families.

Couples and groups with handheld devices pointed at him. It holds no refuge, no cavern.

The watery cell offers scant relief or peace,

visible at all angles down to its base.

Except when the lights grow faint.

When these halls of oglement dim, become vacant.

For now they want a show, a splash of entertainment

he is only too willing to provide.

Tentacles writhe. A whiptail lashes.

Lungs heave; gills flap; two pairs of taloned limbs

churn the soup. An ancient chimera lunges at

a clear wall, strikes with resounding impact. A mob of sightseers gasp in unison terror as the deck below their feet rocks from a quake.

Less secure than expected. Rippled by a savage jolt of temper.

Waves beat the window. Fingers splay, pressing a thick transparent plate while intelligent orbs scrutinize faces gone pale.

A grin spreads, resembling a grimace from the opposite side of the glass. From both ends,

both perspectives, he is an anomaly.

A freak of Evolution.

"See the Kraken-Man, one half person, one half monster!" proclaims a melodramatic

daily speech, a disembodied voice emerging out of speakers that penetrate the barrier between their world and his. Until a second

blow

cracks it. The prisoner gushes forth, drowning fans

with a roar. And a fierce appetite.

A Shadow Moved

I was prone to saunter after Midnight, When the streets shone like silver streams And auras surrounded the tops of lampposts With ghostly rings.

Hollow steps tapped notes and echoed, A musical cadence amplified in Twilight's Grimly lit acoustic corridors.

It was normally an interlude of freedom.

Ordinarily a magical event, a carefree experience.

I transformed from the pinned and polished Character I wore

On gold-drenched avenues and sidewalks, Under scrutiny of the Sun.

My hair came down. Arms swung. Hips danced.

Even my silhouette, my double became Something else: less rigid, less restrained.

Cast against the backdrop of looming facades,

A dark companion would traipse ahead or behind

On great bold strides and I was never alone. I was usually not afraid.

But this night, a shadow moved—

Caused my path to falter, my pulse to skip

And courage stumble, a breath expel.

I was not as brave as I believed.

For on this night I was joined by a darker soul,

A blacker entity, separating from beloved familiar

Contours, ripping loose from the soft velvet Fabric of the town I knew by day and strolled

With confidence through late evening hours...

Past bedtimes and prayers, long beyond The curtain of Dusk having dropped To hide deficiencies, paint everything in Dramatic strokes, the ink of a pen.

A shadow moved and followed me,
Apart, an ominous presence I was unable to Evade, to shirk, however brisk my gait.

The phantom pursued, trailed like a stalker,
Menaced by an obvious proximity,
A purposeful offbeat rhythm to its pace,
As if harboring a motive to rattle my spirit.

The mood was blown. The sanctity, my
very

Sanity unhinged! A placid walk became a race

Against this unknown opponent, this challenger...

Yet surely he or she had better things to do? Abrupt as it began, the chase would end. A mystery.

What spared my life? Instinct. Adrenaline. My heart and gut knew I was at risk. It changed me. The shadow won. I could not

Feel as safe. Would not venture out Into the night as before.

The Dreadfuls

A night endured long When anything could go wrong, The flame burning strong Till a draft made it sputter...

From a chill that arrived, Bringing awfuls sharp-knived. Dark and hunched, they connived To set hearts aflutter.

Spiky hellions were they On a cunning foray. Through off-shades of gray Did the Dreadfuls sneak.

I was out of my head, Checking under the bed, A thrilling book left unread For a paranoid peek.

Yet none were in sight To confirm such a fright, Though I stared past the light Trusting not what appeared.

"It must be a stark plot Engineered out of eyeshot By a despicable lot Both wretched and feared." A whisper had I breathed In words frosten-wreathed, With emotions bequeathed Of a cold-blooded pall.

Snickety-snack went the creeps Making rude vicious peeps. Like a deathfarmer reaps Did the grim rabble call.

You cannot bolt the door Strong enough to ignore The snarly visit we abhor From a case of the Dreads...

Who will slink uninvited, Leaving scratched, cut and bited Those unluckies they sighted And reduced to mere shreds.

In a corner would I quiver, Solely able to shiver, Upon my last liver — Feeling yellow as a peach.

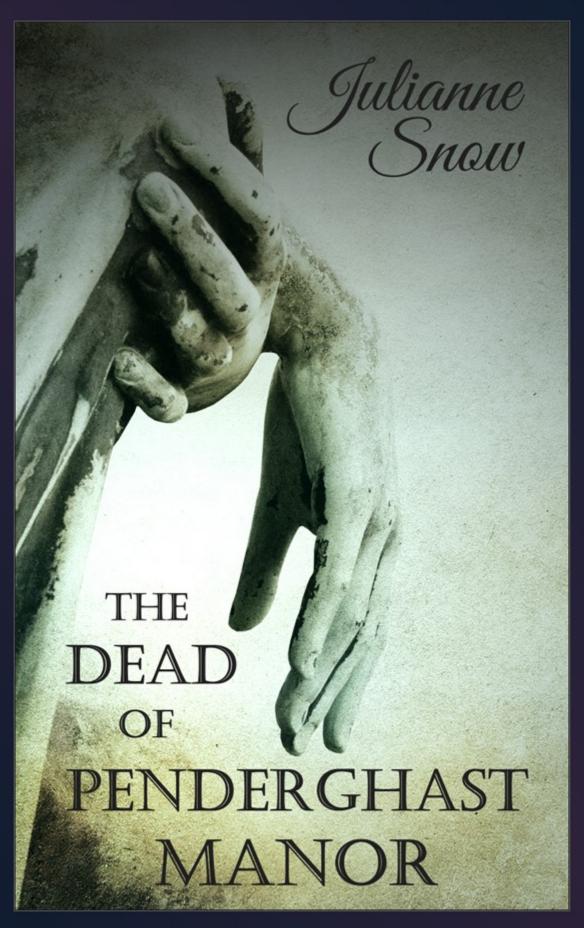
Bluish-purple from pinches, Wrung out of tense flinches, Allergic to grinches, I was left to sit and screech.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Lori R. Lopez is a peculiar multi-genre poet, author, artist published in numerous anthologies and magazines. Book titles include *The Dark Mister Snark*, *Leery Lane*, *An Ill Wind Blows*, and *Darkverse: The Shadow Hours*. Verse and prose have appeared in *The Sirens Call*, *The Horror Zine*, *Weirdbook*, *Bewildering Stories*, the *H.W.A. Poetry Showcase Volumes II and III*, *California Screamin'* (the Foreword Poem), *Grey Matter Monsters*, and *Fearful Fathoms*, *Volume I*.

Twitter: @LoriRLopez

Amazon: http://amazon.com/author/lorirlopez

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



Available on Amazon

Poetry | *Ann Christine Tabaka*

He Can No Longer See

He can no longer see
he is blind
not the physical blindness
that comes from illness or age
but a blindness of spirit
blinded to the truth
blinded to all beauty
groping in the darkness
of his own personal disease
feeling his way through life

a life that is desiccated and crumbling dying of his own want a greed that is all encompassing he once had eyes but they are useless now he gouged them out himself years ago now he wanders aimlessly through the wasteland of the damned

Fallen

the sign said open so she walked right in checking her wings at the door

red papered walls in a room filled with smoke and the smell of cheap perfume

whispered conversations in an unknown language heard only by discerning ears bleary red eyes staring out from under thick mascaraed lashes followed her every move

working her way to the back of the room she finds a quiet corner to wait her turn

all the while a neon sign flashes overhead with the words "Welcome to Gehenna"

Salvation

I lay myself down on an altar of bones a sacrificial offering to the gods of greed

From the chandelier above wax covered skulls stare down at me through vulture eyes as candle flames dance in the faint draft

Crimson stained tablets stacked nearby with disassembled skeletal

remains neatly arranged among tools of torture

A death knell rings out as the black robed presider's chant resonates throughout

What ghoulish nightmare have I encountered?

There is no salvation as I join the ossified ruins of past lives and become one with the altar of bones

The Waiting is the Hardest part

The cold white hand of Death reached out and touched his black soul. He had no place left to run to, it had been following him too long. The waiting is the hardest part.

He knew it was coming for him, we all do, deny it as we will.

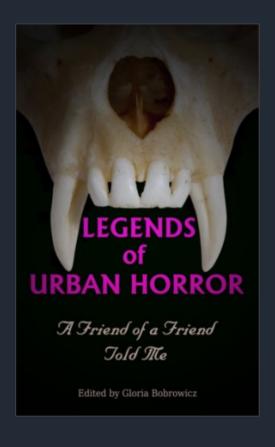
Death has his way in the end.

Although he courted Death for far too many years.

The bottle and the needle being his only friends.

Now he sits alone on a street corner, cold and shivering. He knows it is his time, as he takes a deep breath of relief, for the waiting is the hardest part.

Amazon: https://www.amazon.com/Ann-Christine-Tabaka/e/B06XF2PWSK



Legends of Urban Horror:
A Friend of a Friend Told Me

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

Poetry | *E. F. Schraeder*

Saint Valentine

Begin as the rosebuds and cards become stale mementos on a shelf, alone as ashes.

No faith on the 15th, when wrapped candy hearts

melt into the edges of a cardboard case.

Before you enjoy the remains, remember, how all love amounts to boxes.

Pack up a room, a house, a life. Stuffed tissue paper like wrinkled maps,

Your Monster

Of course it's been done, the shining glass always reflects a decrepit soul, the jagged edge of a heart.

That sort of thing.

But what if no parlor tricks hid beneath veiled accusations or regrets? Just one special hint

reminding, you're never alone, not for long. I'm here.

Why, there's always my fine hand at work, someone waiting for a coup. Not in a dark crevice

beneath the bed, tangled with dust,

not in the long shadow behind the closet door

where childhood fears spring to life

fill another container with memories hide them in a dark corner of the attic.

No matter how hard you love, prepare to cover your amour with dirt.

Move bite by bite, spit out anything too sweet.

Savor the hard crack of a shell,

then sever open the nougat, drain the sticky center slowly with the tongue,

the way love eats through the skin.

like cruel molesting hands.

Look deeper into that worst kept secret lie of the ice cold eyes staring back until discovering the glistening weakness

that unfolds you into a vulnerable fool. When you've found that place asleep in the heart, unlock it.

Open it carefully as a delicate fly wing. Let it wrap you in a trembling embrace. Feel your wispy soft edges, sweet and fragile

as a hyacinth. Seek the tenderness deep inside everything. Even behind those evil eyes of yours and everyone you know.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Schraeder is the author of two poetry chapbooks, most recently Chapter Eleven, forthcoming from Partisan Press. Schraeder's work has appeared in the HWA Poetry Showcase, Dark Moon Digest, Pulp Modern, and other journals and anthologies. Current projects include a monster coming of age novella and a short story collection.

Website: www.efschraeder.com

Amazon: https://www.amazon.com/E.-F.-Schraeder/e/B014YYIOK0

Poetry | *Lindsey Goddard*

A Pretty Girl with a Smile So Wide

I used to be a good, sweet girl.
I only ever killed a squirrel...
A frog, a cat, a dog, a mouse,
And buried them behind my house.

Blonde hair bouncing, big blue eyes, A Sunday dress, my clever guise, I fantasized cruel ways to die For boys at church who caught my eye.

Then, as I grew, I fell in love— A pitfall I am not proud of, For there's no doubt a boyfriend cheats With lipstick stains fresh on his sheets.

And 'cause he liked to tell tall tales, I took and stretched out his entrails. Slick with blood, I measured them, Once full of shit, the same as him.

From the Diary of Merricat

In my nest of sticks and grass, This forest is my school. Treasures guard the beaten path. The earth is damp and cool.

Dearest sister, homebound soul, Imprisoned to her post, Dreary hours take their toll, And dinner brings its ghosts.

Family murderess and her saint— Two hearts, so entwined; I'm Constance's constant constraint, The reason she does time. Not letting heartbreak dominate me, His tortured screams, they served to sate me. He crossed me so I crossed out his eyes With the knife from our dinner of chicken thighs.

Digging holes I cannot stand And fresh grave dirt upon my hands. Plus, every time (it never fails), The shovel handle breaks my nails.

I kill and still I've not been caught. It's clear some men have not been taught That a pretty girl with a smile so wide Might have some skeletons to hide.

Come closer, dear. Meet my dark side.

It's too late to say sorry—An adage tried and true. In dark of night, so starry, I'll dig this page a tomb.

She fancies me a loved one For letting her survive. Her love for me is poison. She lives, barely alive.

Key evidence did vanish From the Blackwood's final meal. No trial for the banished: The girl who cannot feel.

Secrets of the Slain

They long to tell their cause of death.
This path they tread alone
And curse the one who took their breath,
Dismembering flesh and bone.

Chopped to pieces, bagged like trash, Snuffed out like flames to rain, Tossed in the river with a splash, Bullets inside their brain.

Hours pass; each day delivers No sign of the taken. Case turns colder than the river But in low tide, reawakens.

Reborn

There was a girl who never smiled, A flaw her mom and dad reviled. "Smile," they scorned. "It's quite offensive To see our daughter always pensive."

Hidden beneath a heavy cloak Of pain, of which she never spoke, Her parents never asked or knew The reason why her sadness grew...

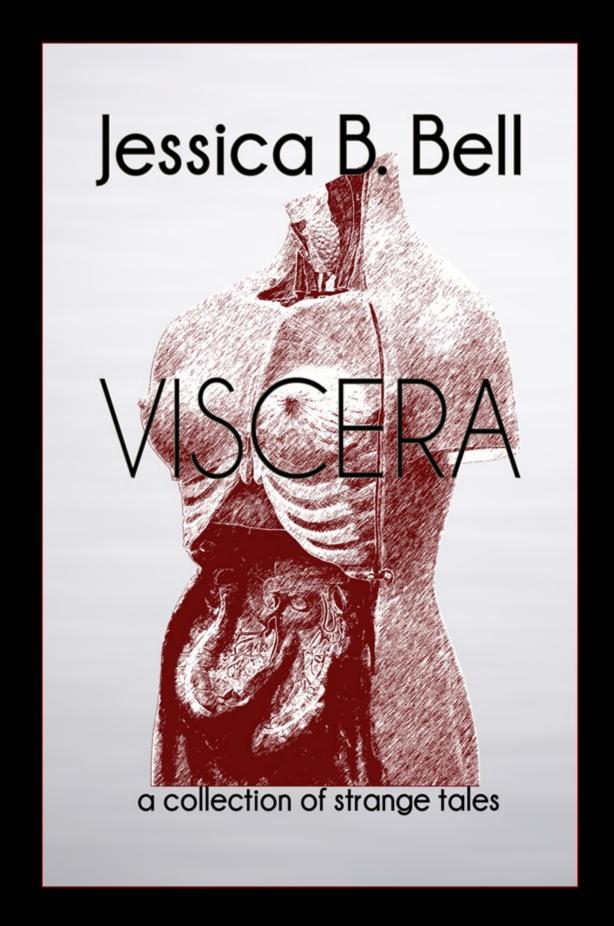
Until the death of Uncle Ben, A filthy man of lust and sin. Over his grave, she did not mourn. She laughed and spat, her smile reborn. The dead can speak.
The answers fill their skulls without a sound.
They were not killed by cancer
But a murderer's lethal round.

The teeth reveal identity.
Spatters of blood are found.
A man of cruel obscenity
Is handcuffed and jail-bound.

The slaughtered cannot disappear. Don't let them speak in vain. Seek the truth and you will hear The secrets of the slain.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Lindsey Goddard embraces the dark side of life. Her short stories and poems have appeared in publications such as Dark Moon Digest, Perpetual Motion Machine Publishing, and The Sinister Horror Company. Her debut novella, Ashes of Another Life, was released by Omnium Gatherum Media in 2016.

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

Poetry | Christiane Vieira de Farias

Pictures of Worms

Versions of a murder attached to the mirror. At the beginning, the wasps formed tracks of victims,

one by one, with viscera exhaling fear.
The sound of the insects hurts me,
rocking a sonata, so profane and scarlet.
Exposed in a stained glass painted by
darkness,

a ghostly brushstroke of ruins and screams.

Oh! I see the drops still vivid.

I imagine how it becomes slippery and

vibrant.
Little by little, every wasp turned, creating vigorous lines of blood in front of me

They were not wasps! But a fascinating picture of worms.

Somehow, my fingers were just like with those creatures,

Looking at them with slowness, freeing the tasty fluids,

I remembered how much my nails have worked.

Incredibly liberating, nails on bloody necks, sweat in the blades while the music cuts every head.

Fabulous pursuit of the skin and the tongues in despair uncontrollable.

Staccato of Bites

Slow submersion, asthma punished the rest of my lungs

each ear for the sand are still far away and cruelly deaf.

Here, I am a shipwreck with no chances. Killers algae.

Captured by the silent cramps while the cut in my leg,

stirs, invites the predator. Final moments of my air.

Rushed, hungry, my neighbor in the waters; Until then, an unknown of fins.

Hit and run!

Staccato of bites, symphony of pieces,

Red in flood.

Perceptive, tore the skin, destroyed my flesh.

The ocean breaks, incarnate waters where the carcass floats.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Cristiane Vieira de Farias or Morphine Epiphany was born in 1987. Graduated with a degree in Production of Electronic Music. First place in a competition in Japan Haicai and has participated in the following magazines: Avessa, Subversa, LiteraLivre. She has been a finalist in the following competitions: I Concurso de micropoesía Palabra tras palabra, I concurso de poesía El color del invierno. Her book of poetry *Distorções* was released in 2015.

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Disenchanted | Suzie Lockhart

Unmatched clarity in turquoise waters; she swims, unhindered by the burden of humanity. Treasures she collects from the world above— Ignorance is her curse. Love she finds as the breaking waves crest, delivering to her a man. He hears her sirens' call, beauty from a place found only in his fantasies. Desire fills him as the mermaid desires humanity. What one will do for love, that is the greatest tragedy. Trading celestial voice and sea nymph tail for the chains of mortality,

for love that vanishes with time. Glorious viridian fins flutter away, traded for limbs; Traded for legs... to be spread open. Traded for intimacy that is only an illusion; unaware that she will be sucked dry. Both body and mind ripped apart throughout years of mortality, until her spirit is broken and her soul is warped; whims of the prince thrust upon her. Now she stands at the water's edge: watching the majesty of cresting waves beneath blazing sun, hearing the sirens' call; briny taste in her mouth, yearning to drink from the cup of her youth once more. Poor mermaid... There is no going back to the sea.

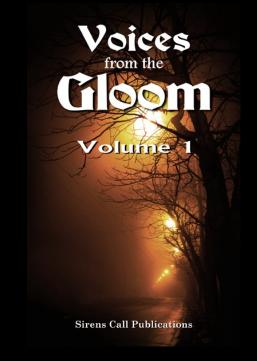
ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Suzie Lockhart attended The Art Institute of Pittsburgh after graduating, but a gnawing urge to write always remained. Her middle son, Bruce began writing chilling tales, and five years of working together have yielded over 50 short story publications and several poems, in dozens of paperbacks and eZines. The pair have also edited eight anthologies, including four top ten Preditors & EditorsTM Readers' Poll Awards.

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Voices from the Gloom: Volume 1

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



Poetry | *Miracle Austin*

Janie

Many asked why she did it...

I know, and they did too.

Closed eyes and music turned all the way up inside their runaway minds.

Noise can only drown out so much, especially aching and blood-curdling screams night after night, right around 2:13 a.m.

I almost unlocked my door once, but I retreated back into my coward skin.

She tried to tell me about a year ago, how he was a *monster*.

Laughter from me filled the air while streaming tears of tar fell from her loaded hazel eyes. One night, her dark cries stopped.

The next morning, I pulled my curtain back and noticed how cop cars, an ambulance, a county coroner vehicle, and a special crimes van with a strange imprint on the side, surrounded her house

Thoughts raced through my mind... I should've believed her that day.

My eyes began to swell. I knew she'd received her death invitation.

After fifteen minutes, the door opened.

To my surprise, I saw her walking behind the sheet covered gurney, unhandcuffed, followed by two policemen.

Her blood-splattered, white knee-length gown billowed around her.

As the gurney was rolled down the steps, a large gray shaggy arm flopped out.

I noticed twelve-inch iridescent curved claws.

My heart started pounding.

Her scarlet stained face and wet eyes seized my stare.

Before the EMT lady assisted her into the back of the ambulance, Janie exhaled and did something I'd never seen her do until that moment—smile.

Shadow Grove

My mother told me a story.

When I first heard, I dismissed it.

The tale goes...

In a little country town almost sixty-three years ago, an hour before her uncle's funeral, the blue sky transformed into an onyx blanket with golden stratus clouds floating above the church on the hilltop in Shadow Grove.

Her uncle, she said, never attended church.

He spoke openly to her and others about how he wanted a graveside service only.

Yet, his family didn't honor his last wish.

The day of his funeral the ushers lifted his mahogany coffin trimmed with copper out of the hearse and began to walk toward the church.

Before they reached the thirty-seven steps, my mom who was around thirteen years old then wore an Annie-like black dress with a white rounded collar and gloves, noticed high winds.

A powerful shower of leaves from a nearby oak tree blew inside the church, almost knocking her down; she braced herself between the sides of the doorway.

The ground began to shake.

She stumbled and fell backward.

A dust storm rolled in out of nowhere.

The coffin rocked back and forth.

Its handles projected bright cherry flames.

They tried to hold on with one hand, while blocking their faces from the dust with the other hand, but they failed and dropped it.

Her uncle's coffin rested several feet away from those steps.

The ground cracked wide open and swallowed it.

Within seconds, the sky returned blue, the dust storm vanished, and the sun appeared gleaming down onto the church.

A burnt, charcoal zigzag line remained on the ground.

When I was driving to visit mom, I decided to take the scenic route and drove to Shadow Grove.

The church on the hilltop was exactly where my mom described.

It appeared to have been treated with a fresh white coat of paint.

I parked and walked toward the church steps.

At first, I noticed no evidence of her silly story, but then a sharp breeze cleared out a pile of golden and raspberry leaves in front of my feet.

That's when I saw it—the zigzag line.

I stooped down to touch it, but I jerked back because something burnt my hand.

I stood up.

Those blown leaves reappeared, as if they'd never been disturbed.

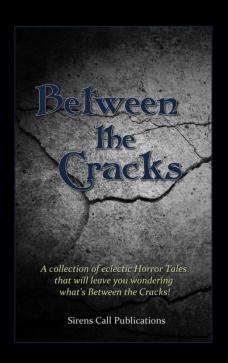
I thought to myself, Mom wasn't pulling my leg.

It really did happen.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Miracle Austin works in the social work arena by day and in the writer's world at night and on weekends. She's a YA/NA cross-genre hybrid author. She's been writing since junior high. *Doll* is her debut YA Paranormal novel; it won 2nd place in the Young Adult category in the 2016 Purple Dragonfly Awards. She lives in Texas with her family.

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Between the Cracks

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

Dread End | Lydia Prime

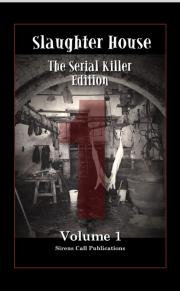
I've sat alone for hours, waiting, mostly wasting; Decomposing slowly in my fleshy mortal casing. Thoughts still feel as if they drum against my skull, Not as if it matters as my existence is now null. I sulk in solemn silence and feel my essence drain; I haven't breathed in hours, but I do still feel the pain. Ironic now, I see it, the crumbling red walls— The darkness engulfs my body and I hear the Reaper's calls. A fire burned inside me, my skin now icy cold; My memories and secrets; apologies untold. To my left the rusted register, that once burned as hot as me; Now frozen in oblivion; strange though, my empathy. Empathy for something that never felt the fall. Empathy for something that's never had it all. Empathy... or envy? I'm not entirely sure; Envy seems more likely—envious to my core. The rats have scurried toward my prison—pit pat pit pat pit pat; Ready to feast upon my carcass, whose pulse has fallen flat. The floor crumbles away beneath them, decompositional mayhem, Forsaken and condemned— The finality is sinking in, this inevitable dead end. This abandoned land consumes all sickly broken strays, Enticed by that vacant shell, hiding all its hidden decays. Now, we're brought together, never again alone; Forever we will rest a pile of picked-clean bones.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Lydia grew up in a small, 'Mayberry,' sort of town, in New Jersey. She thoroughly enjoys gummy bears and laughing through the darkest depths of life. More often than not, she writes about demons and monsters, however, being a recovering addict tends to turn inner demons into fearsome foes to be fought beyond the constraints of the mind. 'Sometimes,' she states, 'what's inside, is scarier than anything reality throws at you.'

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Slaughter House: The Serial Killers – Volume 1

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



Poetry | Laura Glover

The Abyss

There's a place inside The depths unknown A haunting abyss Where you dream alone

Egos gracefully sink As light gently fades Accepting the fates Of foolish charades

Darkness envelops you Blindly fighting your way Are you the hunter Or unknowingly prey

Beasts of the darkness Have you on a string Performing for them Without wavering The demons don't wait They circle around Craving your last breath As you slowly drown

You open your eyes But cannot see Fighting your way You beg and plea

So just close your eyes And dream alone Release all of your fears And fall from that throne

They will set you free Or they will swallow you whole For when the darkness comes It consumes your soul

The Monster

As time passed by, slowly she felt frozen Trapped in the purgatory she had chosen

The darkest places are inside of her head As she strives to lose what the beast has said

She took it all off for him as regrets formed inside The demon finally came for his flesh, now there's nowhere to hide

The fiends promise to soften her starkness A sonata playing softly as she walks through the darkness

But there's too many paths that lie ahead His marks cutting deeper as they begin to spread

Has she gotten too close to the eye of the storm His wrath growing stronger forcing her to perform

Like strings on a puppet, she dances for him

His greed forcing her heart to dim

As the last bit of light fades from her soul He grows fatigued and relinquishes control

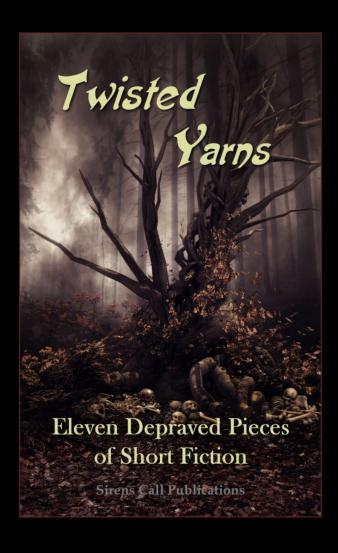
Time freezes her as she lie bare on the floor Her soul wide open watching this war

The sun battles the darkness for thousands of years But, in the end the marks will consume her fears

A monster approaches, her eyes wide with dismay She chose the wrong path, in darkness, forever she will lay.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Laura Glover's musical background gives her poetry a natural flow. Years of playing piano have taught her focus and determination. While spending most of her time chasing her young son she still finds the time to write. Raised on the beaches of Florida she loves the sun and her husband often remarks she's like a plant because without it she would wither and die.

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Twisted Yarns

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

Poetry | *Mary Parker*

Altar

I remember how the flames climbed Up the oaken pile,

Orange heat breathing in and out,

Consuming her: Fire eats. Fire purifies.

Was she a witch, or a saint?

I never knew.

Was she a tigress or a mouse?

She made me feel like both.

As a child I couldn't fathom

How such a slight, old lady

Could harbor such evil—

But there were five little girls missing, girls my age,

And one of their shoes was in her garden.

I remember it, heavy and black-soled. The kind we wore to school.

We always played in her garden—she would let us eat

The strawberries and tomatoes she grew.

And we needed answers.
So, with her blood for mortar,
We built a burning altar to our god:
Conformity.
Now, her ashes are spread
Across the great green field at the end of
town—

But that didn't matter—five little girls is

five too many

The tractor pulled up the earth and mixed her remains

In the soil, a fertilizer for the worms to feed on.

The same old adage: ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

Her otherness still lurks in my mind As I hear her screams and see her blackened

Every time I shut my eyes.

The Long Halloween

It is time to let go of all the ghosts:

Their chain-shaking, gaping mouths are not welcome here.

I have been a witch, exiled to the wooden wasteland,

Only to be tried for my otherness

And burned at the stake with eyes squeezed shut—

Unable to face the flames of responsibility. I have been a monster, a heaping pile of cadaverous limbs,

That tried to leave its creator and live, Only to realize we are two sides of the same

It is time

abhorrent coin.

For the foliage to bleed my magic,
Transforming with colors so vibrant—
Just to herald the earth's impending death.
The harvest is red, orange, and brown,
An Autumnal hymn escapes my lips—
I am the child running down the sidewalk,
basket in hand,

Ready for a treat,

And the trickster hiding in the bushes

A cackling despair on my lips.

I am the ghost, shackled to the wrongs of the life I have departed,

And my aching can only be relieved from this gaping hole:

I am not wanted here.

Scarecrow

A gridlock of thread, Coarse and brown, stained, Is stretched across a lumpy brow: He is not creased, concerned, Though his expression tells a different story. Brows lowered, stern Eyes wide and ever-watchful, His stitched mouth cannot speak The prudish rules and desires That overtake his every waking moment. He lives only to watch And prevent. His haphazard clothes and his spilling guts— He spills, from all angles, scratchy hay— Do not tell of his fanatical desire for peace; He is never happy because he is never alone.

He tries to keep the creatures away But even if he succeeds,

The crops are always with him, growing taller,

Threatening to overtake him,

And children always laugh at his clownish glare.

The laughter stays with him,

A faint loss that flickers behind his fabric eyes.

Immortal

She wiggles on her knees and sifts through mounds of dirt, Blindly pushing through the soil, her parched lips searching For air, for water,

A worm-woman wasted on a life of fear.

Kiss her and you will taste the men she has consumed,

Dead men, just names scratched on tombstones

That no one tends any longer—

At some point, no one brings flowers, no one remembers.

She munched on their bones.

She kissed their skulls, feasted on their festering tongues.

The stench is a haunting fragrance she chases,

Their mortality she sips as wine.

The maggot-maiden crawls, stunted,

Searching endlessly for a carcass to fill her belly.

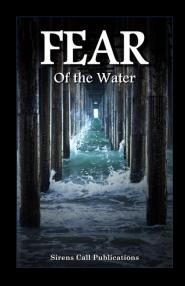
The hunger is limitless; her immortality spent not as a lover

But as a hunter whose only arrow is always broken.

Night Terror

The panther in her crib Paces behind the white wooden slats, Slinks in black fluidity Against the drone of tiredness It revels in the noise From the fan in the corner, Its whir and air Like a soft exhaling purr. The peace in this moment Is interrupted by a shrill cry, The fear is real And her breathlessness is palpable. The panther jumps into the Darkness, its long tail wrapped snuggly Against the toddler neck. It is ready to strike. Moments of perfection reveal themselves In the dark, thin midnight hours. The nightmares are real. Helplessly I rally against them. There is no sleep here, Only waiting and hoping against hope That the panther, miraculously, Will tire, and mercifully rest. Its tail is always dangling, A noose around her fragile neck, And I am here Exhausted, but willing to fight.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Mary Parker is a horror author and journalist from Southern Illinois. She has worked for examiner.com and horrornews.net. She has published a collection of stories, *Predilection*. Her work can also be found in the anthologies *Vampires Aren't Pretty* and *Slaughter House: the Serial Killer Edition* — *Volume 2*.



FEAR: of the Water

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

Not Right Inside | *Xtina Marie*

She doesn't play well with others, they said so I played by myself and wished them all dead If you've nothing nice to say say nothing at all so I bit my tongue and played with my doll "You play too rough" and "Don't play like that" so I put down the knives and hid my bat "Why would you do that, Oh my God, are you crazy?" phrases plagued my mind but reality's hazy "Why is there blood on your hands?" I heard my mother as she cried that's when my doggy went missing I was told he just died

I stopped asking about the whispers no one heard them but me if I smiled sweetly they stopped thinking it was me who was guilty "She gives me heebee jeebees" and "She gives me the creeps" so I stopped engaging them but still watch them as they sleep "There's something about her eyes, something not right inside" whispered my brother one night before running to Mother as he cried Dead silence the next morning all around me there was nothing my footsteps echoed softly at least that was something The sirens started soon after I said goodbye to the toys that I loved as I rode in the back of the police car I smiled as I noticed the blood

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Xtina Marie is a poet, podcaster, writer, editing services provider, mom, librarian, and bibliophile whose poetry and short stories have been published in fifteen books. Her first book, Dark Musings, was nominated for a Bram Stoker Award and her next work, X, should be out in 2018. To find out more visit her website: The World of Xtina Marie on WordPress.com.

Twitter: @Xtina0321

Website: https://xtinamarie746334456.wordpress.com/

Through Clouded Eyes: A Zombie's Point of View

Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and



Sleep Paralysis | Vivian Kasley

There's a kind of numbness, a dead weight in your limbs, a conscious coma but still staring at things.

A sound pierces the air as shadows enter the room, a startling death knell, filling the room with a burning sickening cloying smell.

You're trying to move yourself, but you're made out of lead, a shadow sits on your chest weighing you down in your bed.

It whispers with wet hot breath in your ears while using its clawed shadow hands to hammer your head.

Peripheral vision shows dark minions dancing on walls, a phone is ringing and ringing but you can't answer the calls.

Your lover lays seemingly near, but really they move further away leaving you laying in fear.

Your eyes flutter and your fingers twitch, you focus, as you keep trying to pull your mind from its grip.

You sink into a deep cold dark lake, screaming and reaching, you swear you're awake.

You kick at the shadows around you closing in with no discernable shape, and float on the placid surface of wakefulness, is it real, is it fake?

The paralyzing numbness that holds you begins to lift and you can feel the wet coldness beginning to drift.

The shadow removes itself from your chest, slowly allowing you to take a full breath.

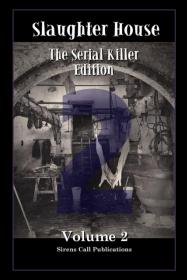
Your eyes fully open revealing the walls of your room and not the dark shadows who brought foreshadowing doom.

Your lover still sleeps as if nothing has just taken place, you brush your trembling hand across their face.

You lay your head back down and stare up at the ceiling only moments later to again find yourself with a very familiar feeling.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Vivian Kasley is a horror nut who lives in the land of the strange and unusual, Florida. She was an educator for many years until she decided to leave her job to write, travel, and learn more about the world. She published work with Dark Moon Digest and now with Sirens Call Publications. She continues to write weird tales and fill hearts with terror.

Twitter: <u>@VKasley</u>
Facebook: <u>Vivian Kasley</u>



Slaughter House: The Serial Killers Edition – Volume 2

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

Morgan's Father | Sara Jayne Townsend

It is late when Morgan leaves the cemetery. She has lost track of time; she did not mean to be out so long. The street is deserted and silent. She pulls her coat tightly about herself and starts for home. Her thoughts are of her father.

She thinks of him stroking her hair as she sits in his lap, the whiskers on his chin scratching her face as he holds her close. "If anyone ever hurts you, Morgan, you tell me," he whispers to her. "I'll go after him. I won't let anyone hurt my girl."

He is a big and bulky man, with the strength of a heavyweight wrestler and a temper to match. Except with Morgan. He has never spoken a word in anger to her, never treated her with anything but love and tenderness.

Morgan and her father have always been a team. Together forever. She looks like him, with her dark dishevelled hair and deep green eyes. He is the teacher, she the willing pupil, learning from him all the skills and secrets he can show her.

As long as she and her father are together, she knows she is safe. Her pace quickens. She must get home. She must get back to her father, back to safety.

Not a single car passes as she makes her way home. She doesn't know what time it is; she never wears a watch.

She is passing the business estate on the corner of the street she lives on. It looks dark and forbidding so late at night. From the corner of her eye she thinks she sees something move in the shadows. *My imagination*, she thinks uneasily, and quickens her pace.

A moment later she slows down, growing nervous; she is sure she hears footsteps echoing hers. She knows it is a man, even though she cannot make out his face in the darkness. She clutches her shoulder bag tighter to her; steps up her pace. The echoing footsteps behind her also increase in speed. The man is closing in on her. She walks even faster; the footsteps still match hers. She begins to jog, then to run.

The man is right behind her; a strong arm grabs her roughly round the neck. She tries to scream but the man clamps a hand over her mouth. She feels the grip around her neck loosen slightly; then something cold and hard is pressed to her throat. She knows it is a knife; she can feel the pain of the blade tip pressing through her skin.

"Money!" The voice is harsh and guttural. "I want money!"

"I-I haven't got any money," Morgan stammers.

The man spins her round, keeps the knife pressed to her throat, one arm pulling on her bag as he yanks her into the courtyard of the silent office block.

"The bag. Give it to me."

Morgan slides her bag down her arm; holds it out to the man. He lets go of her arm to grab it. As he moves, his face is illuminated by a nearby streetlamp. A hard, weather-beaten face, lined and pitted with scars; his hair, poking out from beneath a black woollen hat, is graying and curly, his eyes dark and flashing hatred. In the brief moment he moves his hand to take her bag Morgan screeches and lunges at him, trying to wrench the knife from his grasp.

She throws herself at him, knocking him off balance. They both fall to the ground and struggle wildly, the man releasing a string of savage curses. He stabs blindly with the knife but misses; Morgan scratches his face with her long nails, pokes his eyes, pulls off his hat.

The man starts to panic. He throws a punch at Morgan which catches her across the jaw. She screams and falls backward. He scrabbles to his feet and runs away, taking the shoulder bag with him.

Morgan is stunned for a moment. By the time she gets to her feet, feeling her bruised face gingerly, the man has long gone. She has his blood under her fingernails, and his woolly hat in her hand.

It takes Morgan only a few more minutes to get home; she only had a short distance to go when the man jumped out at her. Tears of rage brim in her green eyes. The bag has no cash other than a few pounds, but the thought of that animal pawing her personal things fills her with fury.

She gets to her house, fumbling in her pockets for the key (never has she been so thankful she doesn't keep it in her bag), stumbling into the hallway.

She pauses at the foot of the stairs to light the candle on the stand there, carrying it with her into the living room.

The living room, decorated in a stark black and red color scheme, contains dozens more candles, standing on the windowsill, the shelves, the mantelpiece. Morgan lights each one in turn from the candle she holds in her hand.

Above the mantelpiece hangs a mirror. Morgan stares thoughtfully into it for a moment, the glow from the flickering candles casting odd shadows across her injured face. With the middle finger of her left hand she traces the swelling purple bruise disfiguring the line of her jaw, and the drops of blood that are drying in the corner of her mouth. A scowl crosses her face and she turns away from the mirror.

The candles in the room are a variety of colors—black, white, red, blue, purple, yellow, green. Morgan selects three and carries them to the low coffee table in the center of the room.

She studies her hands. Blood from her attacker has dried in flakes under her fingernails. She spends a moment picking out as much as she can, balancing the flakes in the palm of her right hand. With her left she pulls the attacker's hat out of her coat pocket.

She turns the hat upside down and shakes the flakes of blood from the palm of her hand into it. She carries the hat to the table, where a glass sphere about the size of a cantaloupe sits on an iron stand. Morgan covers the glass sphere with the hat.

She closes her eyes and sits still for a moment, whispering under her breath.

Her eyes snap open. Heavy footsteps tramp up the cellar steps. Morgan hears the cellar door creak, and feels a momentary blast of cold air come in from the hallway. The door slams shut.

"Hello, Father," Morgan says as the bulky figure steps into the room.

"Morgan," growls the figure in a low voice. Morgan's father moves slowly, with a limping gait, as he crosses the room. He sits down in an armchair and stares intently at Morgan. "You got hurt," he says finally.

"I got mugged, Father." Morgan's hands move to her face. "He hit me, and made off with my bag. Do you see what he did to me?" She raises one of the candles to cast more light on her face.

"Yes," her father says. His expression is impassive, his eyes unblinking, as he stares at Morgan's face. "I see."

"I want you to go after him, Father. I want you to punish him for what he did to me. I can show you what he looks like." She lifts the hat off the crystal sphere. Through the swirling mist that materialises in the glass, a face appears. A grizzled face, pitted with lines and scars.

Morgan looks at her father. "Can you find him for me, Father?"

Her father nods slowly. "Of course, Morgan." He gets up, shuffles across the room. Morgan follows him into the hallway. He stops, waits expectantly. She opens the door for him, watches him go limping down the path, down the road. She shuts the door behind him. As she heads back down the hallway, she stops for a moment in front of the doorway that leads to the cellar from whence her father came, and smiles to herself.

Jack sits in the park with his torch, going through his booty in a very black mood. The bitch was wearing expensive-looking stuff; she should have been carrying something of value on her. The contents of the bag lay scattered at his feet, where he has tossed them in disgust. The amount of junk women haul around with them in their bags never ceases to amaze him. Sometimes there are bonuses like mobile phones, Dictaphone machines, cameras. Usually there is at least some jewellery, cash cards (with the pin number written handily in a diary or an address book close by—incredible the number of people who did that still, in spite of how all the banks said not to), something he could use or sell or get money from somehow. This woman has nothing. A few scribbled-in notebooks, a couple of lipsticks (bright red), a check book, and less than five pounds in cash. Not even a decent leather purse; she keeps her money in a scruffy plastic wallet.

He tosses the bag over his shoulder carelessly. What a bleeding waste of time. He could hang about for someone else, he supposes, but it's getting late. How many more stupid women would he find wandering about alone at this time of night? Better to give up, go back to the hovel he calls home, to get some shut-eye.

As he sits pondering his decision, not really feeling like getting up and walking home (he could always sleep here on the bench), he is suddenly startled by the sound of movement somewhere close by. He brightens; perhaps there are more pickings to be had tonight after all. He looks around. He sees a figure moving across the park; a limping, shuffling gait like someone who has arthritis or a bad leg. It's a man, Jack decides, and a big man at that. But if he's lame, then perhaps...?

Jack remains on his bench, wondering if the man has seen him yet. He is coming closer. Although he is still some distance away, a sickening smell is wafting over to Jack from the figure's direction. A tramp, then. So not worth the effort.

The figure appears to be moving in his direction. Jack continues to watch as it gets closer, intrigued as to where the tramp is going. Perhaps he wants to mug me, Jack thinks, and the thought strikes him as highly amusing.

The figure is less than ten feet away now, shrouded in darkness. The smell is much stronger, overpowering, and Jack suddenly wants to retch. He gets up, intending to move as far away from the smell as possible. He is held by a wave of nausea.

Suddenly the figure is upon him. Jack turns the torch around, to get a better look at who is approaching, and what he sees roots him to the spot in fear. It is not a man that towers over him but a walking corpse, a putrid half-skeleton, flesh hanging in tatters from discolored bones, eyes nothing but empty sockets, rotten intestines hanging out of the hole that used to be its stomach. The thing stretches out skeletal hands, strips of putrid flesh dropping off bones every time it moves. Jack wants to scream, he wants to run: he finds he is unable to move. The torch falls out of his hands and clatters to the ground.

The thing twists what is left of its face into the mockery of a grin. "For Morgan," it rasps from the depths of what was once its throat.

The next morning, her father safely tucked up in his bed in the cellar, Morgan smiles over the newspaper headline as she eats her breakfast. THIRD HEADLESS CORPSE FOUND IN SOUTH PARK: POLICE STILL BAFFLED.

She folds up the paper and drinks her tea. She thinks about what special treat she can prepare for her father. After all, he deserves a big thank-you. He brought her a lovely trophy for her collection last night.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Sara Jayne Townsend is a UK-based writer, and someone tends to die a horrible death in all of her stories. She lives in Surrey with two cats and her guitarist husband Chris. She is author of several horror novels, and a series of mysteries featuring contemporary actress and amateur sleuth Shara Summers.

Twitter: <u>@sarajtownsend</u>
Blog: <u>https://sayssara.wordpress.com/</u>



Stilts | *Miracle Austin*

Once upon time, there was a young lady named Eleanor Crinkletoe.

You could say she was a recluse by choice with a tad of agoraphobia and a lot of coulrophobia.

Her therapist diagnosed her when she was around fifteen years old, after she told her how a clown tormented her at a local fair in Bumblebee, Oregon.

When she finished college, she moved to Whistle Moon, Texas, and restarted her therapy.

Eleanor took her medications as prescribed, most of the time.

However, every time her best friend, Veronica, asked her to attend the upcoming annual carnival, she declined.

One day in a therapy session, the carnival subject came up.

Her therapist, Ms. Ridge, asked her why she avoided her friend's invitations, although she already knew why.

The therapist decided to try a new technique with Eleanor.

Session #27: She showed her a picture of a clown.

Session #28: A small stuffed clown was placed on the table in front of her.

Session #29: Ms. Ridge picked it up and held it in her hand.

Session #30: Eleanor was asked to touch the stuffed clown where she felt most comfortable, so she touched its blue oversized shoe.

Session #31: Eleanor was requested to pick it up and hold it for a few seconds at a time for a total of fifteen minutes.

Session #32: The clown sat next to her for the entire session.

Session #33-38: Eleanor was shown short videos of clown performances. Her vitals were monitored. They were moderately high at first and slowly became normal range and her legs stopped shaking.

The therapist knew she would soon start planning Eleanor's discharge date, especially if she mastered the ultimate test—being in the company of a live clown.

Ms. Ridge convinced Eleanor to attend with her to watch a circus show together.

She agreed with a long sigh. Her knees began to knock together, as she exited her therapist's office.

The night of the carnival Eleanor and Veronica met Ms. Ridge near the front gate.

They all walked around and shared a cinnamon funnel cake, until it was time to find their seats before the show started.

A clown on stilts paraded inside the tent.

He was dressed in a bright lime puffy suit with pink, white, and yellow flower-like buttons in a row down his chest. He had ropy rainbow-colored hair. White face with black eyeliner painted under his eyes and large candy-apple red circles decorated his cheeks. His shiny orange lips and black nose glistened.

Eleanor's therapist whispered, "He's walking toward you. Just remain calm, and know he's friendly and won't hurt you. I'm here and Veronica is too. Remember your breathing and tapping exercises."

Her heart felt like it was trying to claw its way out, and her entire body felt heavy and stiff.

The clown was walking closer and closer toward her on his wobbly stilts.

He stood almost twelve feet and was at her head level, where she sat on the bleacher.

Eleanor's legs began to tremble, and the metal floor made a loud clanking sound.

Ms. Ridge smiled and looked at her. "It's okay. You're doing great. So proud of you."

Eleanor tried to smile.

The clown was pretty close to her now. He expelled a high pitch welcome with a lisp that made her ears ring.

"Hi there, my name is Stilts!"

Her lips turned blue and froze together, as if the temperature had dropped thirty degrees.

He bent down, winked both of his eyes, and pulled out a blue and white polka-dot balloon bouquet from behind his back and offered it to her.

Stilts' hot breath whispered, as saliva bullets penetrated her jawline. "You've had every reason to be afraid of us all these years. Hey, I remember you, *Eleanor Crinkletoe... from Bumblebee*, *right*? I'll save you for last, and allow you to watch me skin your friends alive and eat them... then you'll be my yummy dessert."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Miracle Austin works in the social work arena by day and in the writer's world at night and on weekends. She's a YA/NA cross-genre hybrid author. She's been writing since junior high. *Doll* is her debut YA Paranormal novel; it won 2nd place in the Young Adult category in the 2016 Purple Dragonfly Awards. She lives in Texas with her family.

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Sweet Treat | Jill Hand

"Go on, take it."

Jazzlynne hesitated, embarrassed that the man caught her fishing in the coin return of the vending machine outside the laundry room at the Lamplighter Motel, where she lived in Room 332, with her mom and her little brother Logan. Jazz had gone coin-return fishing as soon as she got off the school bus, hoping to find a stray quarter. There were five in her purple backpack from the Goodwill store. Another could make it enough for two candy bars, one for her and one for Logan. It would be their supper in case their mom forgot to bring home something.

Not only had the man seen her reach into the coin return without first putting any coins in the machine, he'd evidently seen her eyeing the candy bar wrapped in bright pink foil, SWEET TREAT written across the front in glittery silver letters that plopped down, as if by magic, as she approached.

Jazz had never heard of Sweet Treat before, but it was candy, and it was free. She was about to snag it when the man stepped out from behind the Snak-O-Matic. (How did he fit back

there, anyway? There couldn't have been more than six inches between the vending machine and the wall.)

Jazz was twelve, meaning she was competent at determining the ages of people younger than herself, and those a bit older. She grouped them into categories of babies, little kids, kids, and teenagers. After that it got into the world of young people who could buy beer and smokes but had to show ID first, followed by grownups who were able do those things without being carded because they were clearly old enough. After that came old people, who qualified for reduced bus fare and the senior discount at Denny's. After that came *really* old people, the kind her mom said had one foot in the grave and the other on a banana peel. After that came death.

Jazz thought the man leaning against the wall next to the vending machine, smiling pleasantly at her, could be anywhere between thirty and forty. He was clean-shaven, with neatly trimmed black hair and light brown skin. She thought he might be Hispanic, like Mr. Perez, her math teacher, or possibly Italian, like Gino, who worked in the pizza parlor down the street from the Lamplighter and who called her mom *bella*. Gino had a big belly and friendly brown eyes with laugh lines around them. He sometimes gave them free garlic knots along with their pizza.

The man's eyes were brown and friendly, like Gino's, but unlike Gino, he looked like he worked out. He wore neatly pressed olive green cotton work pants with a matching green shirt—also neatly pressed—tucked into them. STRANGER was stitched in white thread over the breast pocket of the shirt.

That was weird.

Jazz adjusted the straps of her backpack on her shoulders and considered her options. Should she scoot on by or reach in and grab the candy?

As if he'd read her mind, the man pointed to the word stitched over his pocket.

"They say, 'never take candy from strangers,' and now here's a guy with 'Stranger' written on his shirt, offering you candy. You're thinking, 'Uh-oh! Danger, Will Robinson! Run like a bunny!' Am I right?"

"Yeah," Jazz said hesitantly. She looked around, hoping to see Sandi Gutierrez or one of the other housekeepers emerge from one of the rooms, pushing a cart filled with dirty sheets and towels and cleaning supplies. But the scratched and dented metal doors on either side of the hallway, all of them tagged with a tangle of spray-painted initials and gang graffiti, were uniformly closed. It was silent, except for the distant sound of a TV game show drifting from the motel office around the corner, where the manager, Mr. Patel, presided behind a finger-smudged bulletproof window. Jazz and the man were alone.

The man made no move to grab her and throw her in the back of a van, or to unzip his pants and show her his junk, but she still wasn't sure if it was a good idea to talk to him. Maybe he was trying to fool her into thinking he was nice and then when her guard was down the kidnapping or the unzipping (or both) would commence.

"The fact is, my name is Stranger, Ethan Stranger, to be precise. I stock candy in vending machines, like this bad boy here."

He gave the Snak-O-Matic an affectionate pat, the kind a cowboy would give his horse. "These old fellows go back to the nineteen-seventies, the days of Pac-Man, water beds, and disco. You've got a real antique here, a groovy blast from the past."

Jazz smiled. Ethan Stranger was funny. He didn't seem crazy, not like the men who hung out at the park where she and Logan sometimes played. Those men had scruffy beards and wore dirty clothes. Their eyes were either dull, as if they'd checked out of life long ago and were just marking time until they died, or they held a glittering, cagey expression, as if they were in on a secret that the rest of the world didn't know. Sometimes they shouted about Jesus or space aliens.

Jazz decided Ethan Stranger was like her teachers: a normal grownup who had a job, an enviable one in this case, putting him in charge of a supply of candy. He jerked his chin at the candy bar lying in the machine's trough, waiting for someone to claim it. "Go ahead; the Snak-O-Matic wants you to have it. It would hurt his feelings if you didn't take it."

"Okay, thanks." Jazz reached in and scooped up the candy.

"Don't thank me; thank Snak-O-Matic."

"Thanks, Snak-O-Matic," Jazz told it, with a giggle.

"You're most welcome, young lady," Ethan rumbled in a comically deep voice, causing her to giggle again.

She put the candy in the pocket of her denim jacket and turned to leave. "Bye, Mr. Stranger. I have to go meet my brother's bus."

She didn't add that her brother was ten and perfectly capable of getting off the school bus by himself and letting himself into their room, the way she had done when she was his age. The reason she wanted to be standing out front when the yellow bus rolled into the motel's cracked and pitted driveway was to act as a deterrent to bullies from Mahalia Morrison Elementary School who rode the bus with her brother and who might take it into their heads to demonstrate how they felt about a wimpy kid who got straight As and who resided at a rundown motel filled with welfare recipients, meth heads, and assorted riff-raff.

The bus would stop, its air brakes squealing, and kids would stick their heads out the windows and jeer as her brother rocketed out of his seat like a sprinter taking off from the starting blocks, his thrift store sneakers pounding as he beat a hasty retreat down the steps. "There go Fag-Face Logan! Think he smart, don't he? Hey, Logan! Your mama at the bus station, givin' five-dollar hummers in the bathroom?"

Logan not only thought he was smart; he was smart. He had recently won first prize at the inter-city science fair for his presentation on gene splicing. That sort of thing didn't go over well with his peers at Mahalia Morrison Elementary.

Jazz was determined to see her brother graduate from high school, get a college scholarship, and escape from their neighborhood. To that end she would protect him as best she could. If it meant standing outside when his bus arrived, glowering menacingly, so be it. Jazz was big for her age and she was ready, willing, and able to deliver an ass-kicking to any of her brother's contemporaries who gave him a hard time.

"Before you go, aren't you going to eat your candy?" Ethan Strange raised his eyebrows enquiringly. Jazz fingered the candy bar in her pocket, feeling the wrapper crackle. She was pretty hungry.

"Okay." She unwrapped it and took a bite.

Stranger watched her as she chewed. This was the part he liked best: seeing them change. He never knew what form the change would take. Sometimes the kids who ate Sweet Treats turned into cockroaches, sometimes spiders. Sometimes they turned into silverfish or earwigs or snails. You never knew what would happen, that was the exciting part.

In the space of ten seconds Jazz began to change. She looked at him with a cry of alarm as she began to shrivel up, grey fur sprouting from her face, her nose elongating, her eyes turning solid black. She shrank down into her clothes, leaving them lying jumbled on the hallway's stained blue and gold nylon carpet. Seconds later, a mouse darted out from one leg of the jeans and slipped beneath the Snak-O-Matic. There was a crunch as a mousetrap snapped shut, then silence.

Strange was undisturbed by Jazz's demise. It was the change he liked to watch, seeing them in the process of transforming from children into insects and rodents; what happened to them next didn't interest him. He picked up the clothes and sneakers and backpack and tossed them into a canvas-sided wheeled bin in the laundry room. Then he set off, whistling, down the hallway. He had time to make one more stop before he knocked off for the day. School was out and there were always hungry kids in the mood for a sweet treat.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Jill Hand is a member of the Horror Writers Association. She is the author of the award-winning fantasy/science fiction novella *The Blue Horse*. Her work has appeared in many anthologies, including *Test Patterns*, *Beyond the Stars: New Worlds*, *New Suns*, *Mrs Rochester's Attic*, and *Cat's Breakfast*.

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Call of the Doomed | *Ashlei Hawley*

"You're going to have to kill me twice, aren't you?"

Wide-eyed, Jessica Walling pulled her nephew, Donovan, closer to her. She knew she needed to turn the TV off and get his mind off of what was going on, but she needed all the information she could get. It was possible the news people and article writers on the internet were feeding the public bullshit (it was kind of their job) but she felt some misinformation mixed with truth was better than nothing at all.

"No, honey. Why would you say that?" she asked the nine-year-old boy. She brushed his blond hair out of his caramel-brown eyes. Darkness carved half-moons into the young skin beneath the creamy color, making him appear a decade older than he was.

"A lot of them are saying that once you get touched by one or bit that you become one. And then you become something worse. So you'll have to kill me when I turn into one, then you'll have to kill me when I come back after that."

Jessica hugged the boy harder to her, unsure of how to respond to his words. She wanted to offer him comfort, support, faith. Her seventeen years alive hadn't prepared her to deal with something like this. Seventy probably wouldn't have been enough, but at least she would have had words of comfort for the boy she could deliver in a confident tone.

"I don't want to try to hurt you, Jessi," Donovan mumbled against her shoulder. She felt tears wet her bare skin and had a fleeting thought that she should change into a sturdier set of clothes.

"One of the reports said it's *only* if they bite or scratch you," Jessica said as she patted Donovan on the back. "He hurt you, but he didn't break the skin. He didn't get his teeth on you. I think you'll be fine, buddy."

Mouth pulled tight into a morose line, Donovan nodded as he backed away from Jessica and sat back against the couch. He swiped a thumb across his cellphone screen to open it, then decided against it. Tossing the device onto the couch cushion beside him, Donovan watched the images flooding the TV screen. There was a lot of red, black, smoke, screaming, and panic. The world seemed to be dissolving in a flood of acidic madness.

Her parents hadn't contacted her in hours, though they'd promised to return home by 4:00p.m. When the bedlam had begun, Jessica and Donovan had been at the park in the center of Jessica's apartment complex. Her parents hadn't answered their cellphones or come home in the hours since she and Donovan had fled back to the third floor apartment and locked themselves in.

Looking at the door, Jessica wondered how it would hold if one of the crazy people tried to get in. Should she barricade it? But if her parents were on the way home, how would they get in if Jessica blocked the door off?

She wanted to cry, too, but she didn't want to do it in front of Donovan. "You want some mac and cheese and sandwiches, bud?" she asked. She was desperate for something to do. With a

resolute push of a button, she turned the TV to a different setting and handed him a PlayStation controller. "You can play one of my games while I cook, okay?"

Silently, Donovan accepted the controller and pushed the center button to activate the system. He clicked on Jessica's name and logged into her profile. The most recent game she'd played was displayed; a farming simulator that came with calming music and soothing routine gameplay. Donovan selected the farming game and the familiar loading music did manage to make Jessica smile as she made her way to the kitchen.

Her phone chirped as she filled a pan with water from the sink. She nearly dropped the pan as she scrambled to open the phone and check her texts. "Please be Mom," she whispered.

It wasn't. She saw the name Troye displayed and knew it was her best friend instead: What the actual fuck is going on? You okay, Tink?

After putting the pan on to boil, Jessica typed a quick reply to Troye. I'm fine. I have Donny with me and I haven't reached my parents so I'm freaking the fuck out. What about you?

Leaning back against the counter, Jessica read Troye's response almost immediately. The guy texted like a fiend and seemed to have his next message composed before she'd even sent a response to his first. It's been crazy as fuck! he replied. Like no joke, I think the world is ending. Done, baby. Buh bye.

Haven't heard from my parents, Jessica texted. She fought another wash of tears; they'd been threatening for hours now.

I'm sure they're fine... Troye assured her.

Liar, Jessica responded simply.

K, guilty, Troye admitted. My mom went batshit and killed the neighbor dude. Haven't seen her since. Ralph hasn't been in contact. Good fuckin riddance. I think we're pretty well fucked, Tink.

What are we gonna do??? she asked.

Stay quiet and stay safe, Troye suggested. It's been quiet over here. None of them have tried to get in. Her phone was silent for a moment, then two additional texts came through:

How you doin' on food and water?

You have weapons?

Jessica almost laughed but the situation was too dire for more than a strained smile. Dude, my parents are the ultimate pacifists. They never even spanked my ass when I did some stupid shit growing up, you know that. We barely have knives sharp enough to cut fucking pineapples—we don't have any weapons.

Well, that fucking sucks, Troye replied. Ralph has a gun. Didn't teach me how to shoot it, of course. I can figure it out. If that stupid fuck can work it, so can I.

Do you know where it is? Jessica asked. She turned to the stove as the water began to boil and poured the macaroni noodles inside.

He never wanted me in his room. Probably afraid I'll molest him or something?? But I'm sure I can find it.

Jessica sighed, but wasn't surprised by Troye's words. Ralph was a prejudiced prick and never had much kindness to spare for the son of the woman he'd married seemingly just so he could abuse her. He'd thought Troye would be an easy target at one point, but the boy had proven him wrong at the young age of thirteen. They had an uneasy alliance that Troye thought he'd only have to endure for another few months. If things were as bad as Jessica thought, that alliance had already ended.

Perturbed by this thought, Jessica texted, Hon, why don't you grab some things and come over here? The crazies are violent af. What if Ralph...

I'll shoot the fucker if he tries anything, Troye assured her. Why don't YOU come over HERE? Bring Donny. Leave a note for the rents. We got plenty of food and shit. We can play board games.

The noodles were soft enough to drain now. She did so and began pulling things from the fridge to make a couple of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. After she'd drained the noodles, replaced them in the pan with milk and butter, sprinkled and mixed the cheese, and put it on a lower setting to finish cooking, she texted Troye again.

You and your board games, she teased. Listen, there's a lot more of them here in the city. You think we can get through them and get to you?

Stick to back roads, get some bikes, steal a car. Idfk. I just think it would be smarter for you to be here or somewhere with more people. And... OK... I don't want to be alone.

Ikr... Jessica replied. She didn't want to be alone, either. Donny was just a kid and she was fully responsible for him right now. It was hard to handle. I think Dad dropped Mom off at work today. I'll try to see if her keys are still here. If they are, we'll take her car and head your way. But listen, we're gonna eat and I'll tell Donny what's up. We'll try to head out even if I don't have Mom's car. Think buses are still running?

Bitch, they don't run on normal days LOL, Troye replied.

True, true. Jessica smiled after she sent her response, feeling a little better about what was going on. If she could get to Troye, maybe things would feel a little more normal. Maybe they'd be a little safer.

Jessica put her phone down on the counter, beside the butter knife. She closed her eyes and folded her hands. "God," she whispered. "Please protect my parents. Please protect me and Donny. Let us get to Troye and let this whole thing get figured out soon. Please watch over us and all the other people out there who are scared and hurting right now. Thank you. Amen."

It wasn't characteristic of her to pray during the day, but she felt the situation most definitely called for it.

She turned back to the food, wanting to get it ready and eaten quickly so they could leave. She had a plan now and she wanted to follow it.

The first slam against the door cracked the wood in the middle.

Unable to stop herself, Jessica shrieked and dropped the knife. It clattered on the floor, flinging peanut butter on the tile and the cream-colored cabinets.

Donny dropped the game controller and sprang to his feet, backing up toward the living room wall until he hit it. "Jessi, what—" he began, but another crushing blow against the door cut him off.

"Back room!" Jessica commanded as she rushed into the living room. A barricade. She should have made a stupid barricade when she'd thought of it earlier.

Donny fled and Jessica followed, darting down the hallway until they reached her parents' bedroom. There was a tall, sturdy wardrobe in there and her parents' king-size bed. She would get both of them blocking the door and protect them for the time being, at least.

Falling through the doorway of her parents' room, Jessica turned and slammed the bedroom door shut as the front door disintegrated under blows from the intruder. She hoped it was just someone taking advantage of the chaos and looting. What she saw before she got the door closed dashed those hopes at once.

Donny sat in the corner of the room, his thin legs pulled up against his chest so he could cry into his knees. He wouldn't be any help, but that was fine. Jessica reminded herself he was only nine as she put her arms around the massive wardrobe and pushed.

The foot of the huge, wooden clothing holder caught on the uneven carpet in front of her parents' closet and tipped over. The top of it barely made it against the door. Screaming in frustration, Jessica crouched and pushed the wardrobe, straining as it moved by half-inches at a time. "Move, fucker, *move*!" she snarled.

A hit splintered the inside of her parents' door. Panting, Jessica finally made the wardrobe touch the wall, but now that it was on its side, it didn't cover the full height of the door frame. The bottom of the door was reinforced, but the top had already begun to buckle.

The bed was king-size, but it was on furniture pads so it could be easily moved. The thought of it not being enough to offer suitable support didn't stop Jessica from grabbing an end and pulling it to the door. She had to do something. She couldn't just sit and wait for it to come in.

"God, please," she whispered between pants. "Please help us. Please save us."

The thing outside the door howled and smashed into it once more, twice in quick succession. The door cracked, a piece of the wood bending inward under the strain so a hand that appeared to be sheathed entirely in metal spikes could push its way through.

Jessica screamed and grabbed a lotion bottle from her mother's nightstand to throw at the deformed hand reaching for her. From outside the door, she heard a low, rumbling chuckle in response to her pitiful attack.

Two more strikes and the door was in ruins. Even as Jessica tried to push the bed against the broken door, the thing came through.

What was once a man was now an abomination of black steel, torn flesh, claws, fangs, and a sickening stench of meat left out to rot. He grinned at Jessica and Donny as he said, "You called and we've come. This world is undone."

Jessica looked around the room, helplessly seeking anything to use to defend herself and her nephew. "Please don't hurt us," she begged in a whisper.

The man didn't reply as he used one hand to flip over the bed that stood between him and Jessica. She cringed back from him, holding her arms up in useless resistance even as a voice in her mind told her she had to fight. If not for her, for Donovan.

She couldn't bring herself to do it for either of them. The deformed man took her neck in his metallic hands and laughed as he dug the clawed steel tips into her throat. She thrashed in his grip, but she had nothing in her that could challenge his violence and strength.

He peeled strips of skin off her neck, digging in to separate the muscle and tissue beneath as she screamed. Moving one hand from her neck to her face, he thrust his fingers into her mouth and shredded her tongue with the super sharp claws that had already loosed a staggering amount of her blood onto the blue carpet of her parents' bedroom. Under her wailing, his chuckling never ceased.

The claws that had disfigured her tongue moved to gouge out her eyes. He dropped them into a pouch at his hip as her screams died into hoarse grunts and bubbling gurgles. He dragged the bloody hand down her chin, over her torn neck, and stopped at her chest. As though he was digging through tissue paper to find a gift, he plunged the steel-tipped fingers into her flesh and pulled out her heart.

Done with Jessica, he dropped her bloodied body to the floor. He took bites out of her heart, enjoying the flavor of rich red meat as he approached the boy.

Donovan still had his face tucked against his knees. He sobbed and prayed in low whispers, refusing to look at the creature as it knelt before him.

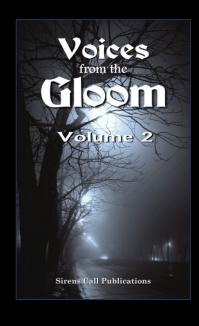
With blood on his grinning lips, the thing that was once a man stated once more: "You called and we've come. This world is undone."

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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The Tunnel | *Jill Allison*

He stared down at the head, it grinned at him in time with the trains motion.

Pushing at the toilet door it jammed, he pushed and pushed again, he knew this man was dead, wasn't his thumb encased in cling film in his pocket?

Clutching his chest, fearing a heart attack as the lungs began to unfreeze he stumbled back against the side of the train.

Frank Tate did not make mistakes. Heaven forefend, he charged enough for his services not to make mistakes.

The man was dead, when he left him, severely dead, his tongue hanging out.

Why then were parts of him neatly placed in a toilet on a train traveling, to Southampton?

He had left him in his flat, mission accomplished, job well done, proof positive was in his pocket wasn't it?

His pocket was empty.

His victim or the parts left of him, were slowly being eaten by a mass the likes of which Tate could only think of in his worst nightmare. The trouble was, he wasn't asleep.

Tate knew the man was dead when he left him, life and death and the recognition of same an essential part of a killer's job; you did not have time for wrong decisions.

Tate knew his job.

Window casement dug into Tate's shoulder blades; the feeling comforted him, reassuring him that he was still alive. Dead men do not feel.

Gingerly he peered in the doorway; the man was almost gone now. In his place was an all-consuming mass of blood, congealing, even as Tate watched the mass moved almost as one, it seemed to peer at Tate, a corner of its form pointing in his direction.

Stumbling and screaming he ran from carriage, adrenalin pumping, he ran past unused tables and empty seats.

At last the compartment again, the woman's laptop, the same seat.

He fell into it like a child into its mother's arms.

A monumental effort of will brought his heartbeat under control, looking around he took stock of the situation.

The woman was back now, must have been to the loo. The very thought of the loo brought bile to his throat.

The woman, attractive, slim, mid-thirties; vaguely Tate recognised her, couldn't quite put a finger on it, perhaps in a bar somewhere?

She was real, he was real, and the train was real.

Like a dying man Tate closed his eyes and thought swiftly about his life.

One-time taxman, debt collector, soldier, mercenary he could fill any role when the need arose.

Sometime husband, father, lover, son.

Pictures of his daughter flashed across a terrified brain. Red haired, beautiful, a student, believing her warm hearted generous father worked away on contracts. Not even his nearest and dearest knew the source of his income.

He missed her.

Opening his eyes Tate looked at the woman still typing away at her lap top stealing a glance from beneath her eyelashes at the dishevelled figure of Tate.

Glancing out of the window it was still the inky blackness of death, death why did he think of darkness and death?

He closed his eyes trying to think of his next move, living on his wits doing nothing wasn't an option.

He felt rather than heard the woman move; through slitted eyes he watched her move into the seat opposite him.

Maybe she had seen what he had seen? Perhaps she knew what it was all about? Tate was beginning, just a little, to feel like a fool. For goodness sake what was actually there?

Pink coloured lips began to move, he strained to listen to the soft voice, she spoke gently, as if to a child.

Tate listened.

"You are right Frank, we have met before, quite a number of times, I have followed your career with interest."

Tate perked up; she was interested in him, his masculine pride surfaced. She saw him as a man, an attractive one at that, he was well turned out, he made sure of that, trips to the gym gave him a well-honed physique, he was up for it. She really was a bit of alright.

Where had they met before?

By now the vision of hell in the toilet was beginning to fade, a bad dream, too much adrenalin after a hit?

Gently the voice continued, he wasn't really listening to what she was saying, just gentle music as it tripped across her tongue. Violet blue eyes trimmed with dark lashes captivated him.

Hell he was almost getting turned on.

This dream of a woman was coming on to him in an empty railway carriage, him Frank Tate, still aroused from the killing, super power adrenaline waiting to be released.

He realized it was time to do something about it and respond.

"I seem to think we have come across each other before, can't remember when, so remiss of me to forget such a beautiful woman."

Corny as hell but he didn't have much time to prepare.

The tinkling laugh again.

"Yes, Frank we have met many times, do you remember Daisy Morell the wealthy widow, you got her to that happy state of affairs? Of course then there was that sweet old man who had

the nerve to live too long for the young wife's convenience? I know you did it gently and with care but he did have a few years on him."

Tate breathed deeply.

Was she a copper? No, too well turned out. Another professional, could be? You couldn't be sure these days. Whoever she was she knew one hell of a lot about him and he didn't like it, no not one little bit.

Tate took her in, from the beautifully styled blonde hair to coral tipped nails tapping gently on the table between them now. Tate noticed things like that.

He glanced out of the window, it seemed lighter now just a little, looking forward, through the front of the train, a pinprick of sodium light seemed to be getting just a bit bigger.

He could breathe now, if they weren't coming to a station he could 'free fall' from the train whilst it was moving, if he needed to, he'd done it before, no big deal.

Glancing back at the woman she was still smiling, that smile, he remembered it now, vaguely but getting clearer, she had been at every job he had ever done. There in the wings watching, waiting.

His eyes moved down to the pink nails.

They seemed to have developed a life force of their own, like semi-set jelly they metamorphosed into a mass that moved relentlessly across the table toward him.

Stunned he watched as it came nearer, the woman was still smiling.

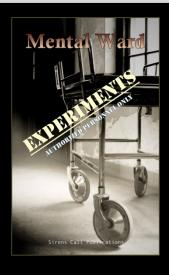
"Did you really think we would let you freelance forever, Frank? The master wants you to do HIS work, he sent me to fetch you."

Finally, like a drowning man, he realized the meaning of the phrase.

Frank's gaze went up to her eyes, as he did the mass caught at his fingers like pins and needles, they made him draw back, too late it began to wrap around them like a vice.

The eyes are the mirror of the soul; he saw into the black depths within and knew for certain there was no escape!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Jill Allison is a very new writer, at the well-seasoned age of 72; joking she's 'well past her 'sell by' date'. A mother, a granny, and an army wife, she's worked in both nursing and the law. In her golden years, it's now time to be herself!



Mental Ward: Experiments

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

Bluebeard's Cleanroom | Joanna Koch

Secrets are cages. You feel so alone. Love is the key that tempts you to trust, time and time again. You know better, but you do it anyway. You do it when you're close, when you can see his every move. No big thing. But then you get the call: end of quarter or talent meltdown or just fucking orders from the CEO. You know whose pet you are, whose hamster wheel you run on. So you suit up and start running.

You're on the plane when you consider the key. You call Jack with his apt fairy tale name. "Hey, babe. How you holding up?"

"Good," he says. The word starts too soon and ends too late. And it's not like Jack to think about things too much.

You make him an offer to keep him talking. "Is there anything you need from Tucson? Something special I can pick up?"

"I'm good." Jack's vocabulary lacks variety. It's his timing that tells you everything you need to know.

The tacit rules of tradition say you never ask about the key unless you already know the answer. It's too risky, even with Jack. You'd like to keep this one around. Things are going good with him. The sex is solid. He's not too creative, and after the kinds of things you've done it's a relief to be a little bored. He's safe as long as he's oblivious.

But you're not a traditional person and the captivity of waiting on a plane makes you crazy. Jack's the one who's supposed to live in a cage, not you. You say, "Hey, you know that key I gave you? The extra one to the storage shed that you're not supposed to use?"

There's a pause. It's not like Jack to pause. The "yes" that follows is meaningless compared to the canyon of silence that came before. Your hopes dive over the cliff. They break apart on the rocks like the small bodies of baby birds. The pilot announces you're flying over the Royal Gorge, but you feel like you're falling, shoved out of the nest too soon. You know it's impossible from the length of his silence. It's all over.

"You still there?" says Jack.

"Yeah." You're still there. You'll always be there, hovering over a dead man and watching his final gasp. You just wish it didn't have to be Jack.

"Everything okay?" he asks.

You thought Jack was different. You thought he really cared. He was the one who would pick up the wild bird with the torn wings and feed it by hand until it learned to fly straight. He'd bring it mealworms from the pet store, give it medicine with an eyedropper, coax it from the deformity of its birth into brilliant health. You trusted Jack, and for a moment you really believed a wild thing like you could survive as a pet.

You're too close now not to bite. You say. "Is it? You tell me."

"Tell you what?"

"Did you open the door?" you ask.

"Well, sure," says Jack.

You wait for him to say more. He doesn't. You say, "Did you go in?" Jack says, "Yeah."

You wait. All you hear on the line is Jack's breathing. You wait forever and your mind races to make a plan. Jack's not a simpleton. He won't lie, but he'll never be brave. He'll never act. It's over, and if you hurry you can keep him quiet and finish him fast. Jack's just breathing on the end of the line. He sounds like he's working out, and then there's a wet, slippery slap.

You say, "I guess you know what happens next."

Jack's voice sounds muffled, like the phone's being crushed. He says, "There's blood on my hands."

"There's always blood," you say. Part of you doesn't want to let him go. You thought he was different. You thought he would last. "Why did you tell me?" you ask.

Jack says, "Because it won't come off."

You say, "Well, that's how it is."

"I've never seen a color like this. So red it's almost black."

"It's the last thing you'll ever see."

"Really?" says Jack, his breath inside the phone. "Is it always so wet?"

You listen to Jack breathing on the line, and there's a sound behind it like coins spinning on a hardwood floor. He grunts. His respiration speeds up for a moment and then he laughs. Then the phone's not being crushed anymore and you hear Jack nice and clear before he hangs up: "I have a surprise for you. Hurry back."

You check your ETA, message the CEO and book a flight home. The airport's another cage, so you find the chapel, do what you need to do in private and wipe your hands on the flag, the whole time thinking about Jack. You pass a man on the way out who pretends he's praying so he doesn't have to make eye contact. The wings embroidered on his white hat curve like the leaves of a dead rose, like the ecstatic misshapen grin of a psychopath.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Joanna Koch's short stories have been published in journals such as *Dark Fuse* and *Hello Horror*, as well as several anthologies including *Trump: Utopia or Dystopia and upcoming collection based on Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights*. Recently, Joanna won New Millennium Writing's Fear contest. She's now working on multiple projects including a novel about a twelve-step group for recovering zombies called *Flesheaters Anonymous*.

Blog: https://horrorsong.blog/

Mental Ward: Echoes from the Past

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



Foreclosed | *Rivka Jacobs*

"I looked, and lo, a stormy wind came sweeping out of the north — a huge cloud and flashing fire." Ezekiel, 1:4.

The Lexus gleamed like liquid silver as it slowed to a crawl on the narrow, old asphalt road. The car's roof was retracted, the windows down, and the driver, Daniel Aramant, impatiently leaned sideways, glaring through sunglasses at the horse and buggy facing him and blocking his way. He almost pushed on his horn, but restrained himself. This was Pennsylvania Dutch country, and he was here to do some business.

He sat idling. The air was motionless and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. He began to perspire. He waited for the horse to clip-clop around him. It didn't. It remained stopped in front of him.

He craned his neck, trying to make eye contact with whoever was sitting back under the canopy of the box-like rig. He removed his sunglasses, in an attempt to focus on the man's features. "Hey," he called. "Are you going to move or am I?"

The other, clothed in black trousers, a black vest and a white long-sleeved shirt—a straw hat perched on his head like a crown—made a clucking noise at his horse, tied his lines around a wooden riser at his feet, and climbed down from the buggy. He ambled toward the side of the car.

Daniel felt an equal mix of anger and unease. "Damn," he muttered to himself, throwing the sunglasses on the seat beside him.

The other seemed more threatening, now that he was moving at full height. He was tall and lean, muscular and iron-hard with piercing black eyes and a long white beard sans mustache. "Mr. Aramant," he said as he reached the door of the Lexus and stood perfectly still, "I believe you are looking for something."

Daniel's heart pounded. He reminded himself he kept the Pennsylvania State Police number on speed dial. He also remembered he'd been pacing the pavement in New Wilmington, handing out his business card to any of the Amish or Mennonite men he encountered, asking them if they had land to sell. Obviously news traveled faster in these parts than one would expect, given the lack of reliance on electronics. "I'm Daniel Aramant, yes. I guess you heard... I'm looking to buy some farmland."

The tall man chuckled and said, "Not for farming, truly."

Daniel turned off the ignition, opened the car door slowly so the other could step out of the way. "Do you want to talk about some land?" he asked hopefully. He extended his spine, flexed his shoulder blades; it felt good to stretch his legs. He glanced down at his beige trousers, his Russian calf shoes; he didn't look too rumpled or travel-worn.

"A developer like yourself, a traveling man, a salesman, you're sharp and you know how to spot a good deal," the other said.

Daniel gazed up at the bearded face, feeling irritated now. "Um, I didn't catch your name..."

"Gabe, name is Gabe. And that's my horse, Merkabah, as fine a bay you'll not find in Lawrence County." He nodded toward the sturdy brown horse who lowered his head in response. "You caught us at an opportune time. We were just leaving."

"Well, I'm kind of lost," Daniel admitted. For miles Daniel had seen nothing but rolling hills and small sections of cultivated land. He'd passed meticulously kept barns and homes, grazing livestock, and occasionally another car or a truck. He'd seen a few buggies carrying people dressed in the distinctive Amish style. "I was on State Route 956," he continued. "I was supposed to turn off on Oak Ridge or Oak Wood or White Oak, or some road like that. I heard there might be several acres of fine land for sale around here. I crossed a stream—it might have been the Neshannock, I don't know. I drove across a covered bridge..."

"Take a look around," Gabe interrupted. "You found the right place." He stepped back in one long stride like a soldier, pointed to his left.

Daniel turned his head and peered past Gabe's finger, immediately became aware of a huge wheat field—the largest he'd ever seen, extending to the horizon—that he'd not really noticed before. He took a few steps along the grassy strip beside the road, shaded his squinting eyes with the side of a hand, scanned the expanse of rippling gold. In the distance, growing all by itself in the midst of the swaying wheat, there appeared to be a tremendously massive, towering tree. As he tried to focus on the tree he wondered how tall it actually was, how far away. "Who is the owner? Is this land for sale? "Daniel asked, his hand still stuck to his forehead. He walked all the way across the grassy verge, halted at an unstained split-rail fence.

Gabe exhaled forcefully, something between a snort and a deep sigh. He shook his head, lowered his arm. "The owner abandoned the property."

Daniel spun and studied Gabe's expression. "Say what?"

"See down the road, ahead of you some one hundred yards?"

Daniel again used his hand to ward off the sun's glare. Again he followed Gabe's index finger, directing his attention to what looked like a massive wooden threshold, weathered and plain, that rose up abruptly in the middle of the fence. It appeared to be almost two-stories tall and it framed an immense double-door, like a giant's gateway.

Daniel sidled away from the fence, was about to ask something like what the heck is that? but saw that the other had bowed his head and appeared to be talking to himself, an expression of pain and deep sorrow distorting his features. Daniel waited. But when Gabe lifted his chin he avoided eye contact and silently, quickly returned to his carriage, climbed aboard with the agility of a young athlete.

Daniel was momentarily paralyzed with surprise as he watched Gabe disappear inside the shadows of the gray and black piano-box buggy. "Hey, what the frig is going on here?" he finally called. "Where are you going?" He paused, then added, "And who do I contact about this land? Where is the owner?" He jogged over and stood beside the carriage, looked inside; Gabe was reclined in a relaxed, resigned sort of way. Daniel grabbed one of the front posts of the buggy, meaning to restrain it until he could get some answers.

Gabe smiled ahead, slid his blazing obsidian eyes in Daniel's direction. "I told you. The owner left. The last guard—the first of them and the last of them—finally abandoned his station

yesterday. He broke his weapon and extinguished the flame. It's 'every man for himself' now. Good luck."

Little pinpricks of fear ran up and down Daniel's spine. He tried to ignore them, gathering all his pride and impatience and desire for a profit into one emotional bundle to prop himself up. "Gabe," he insisted, "help me out here. The land has to belong to someone. A person can't just waltz in and declare they own property in this country."

Gabe grinned tightly but there didn't appear to be any humor in the way his lips stretched and his cheeks creased. "This place doesn't have a country," he explained as if speaking to a child. "Around here used to be a lot more lush and jungle-like, filled with animals and beautiful plants and all manner of delicious food. There used to be two big trees, as well. But the bigger of 'em was the first to be violated, and it was struck down. Over time, with the owner taking longer and longer more extended vacations, the rest of the vegetation withered and the animals died, and the wheat took over. Still, the garden needed guarding. Because of the surviving tree."

"But where is the owner?"

Gabe laughed once. "Indeed that is the question!" An electric shock suddenly jumped from the buggy to Daniel's restraining hand, making him leap away from the wheels, yelling, "Dammit!" Gabe flipped the reins and the horse began to trot, maneuvering around the Lexus.

Daniel pivoted, his mouth open. "What the fuck?" He watched as the buggy receded into the distance, its wheels translucent and sparkling in the sun, giving off rainbows as if they were made of crystal. *It's a mirage*, Daniel thought. *It's the sun and the heat on the road*.

Alone now in the silence, he noticed by the shadows that it appeared to be noon. He checked his watch. The second hand wasn't moving. He held his wrist to his ear, listening for any sound. His watch had stopped. "What the fuck?" he said aloud again. It had been noon for a very long time, by his estimation. Daniel glanced at his car, then ahead to that wooden monstrosity that seemed to be a gate. He started walking.

When he reached the huge wooden doors, he saw that they were scorched, ajar, leaning against each other at an angle. Daniel looked back at his shiny car, sitting with its tan leather seats exposed. A voice inside his head urged him to get back to that car, leave immediately, but he shook his head and focused once more on the gate. It smelled like burnt wood and rotten eggs. Daniel clenched his jaw, straightened his colorful tie, tucked in his white shirt, took off his jacket and draped it over one arm. "All right," he said. "Don't screw up now. Get a backbone. Don't blow a great opportunity."

He stepped up to the edge of the damaged planks and charred crossbeams. There were no conventional hinges—the doors must have opened and closed using the visible colossal stone pivots positioned in deep holes, now broken. Daniel told himself—just take a peek at the land beyond and then return. He crossed the stone sill, slipped through the opening between the fallen doors.

For a moment he couldn't breathe, and then he stumbled and gulped in air. He saw, stretching before him, a narrow path, winding and meandering through the bending and shifting wheat, leading directly to the immense tree. He looked back behind him, at the opening he'd just passed through. He glanced at the fence, trying to see his car on the other side, waiting on the

roadway. He couldn't see the roadway, couldn't see the split-rail fence. He could only see the wheat. And hear it rustling like thousands of voices whispering.

The path lay before him. "What a great location," he tried to say aloud, his voice cracking. "So... close to Cleveland and Pittsburgh... a great... bedroom community... upscale... worth millions..." He couldn't say another word. Tears started to swell in his eyes. The sun was still directly above him, yet the sky was turning an orange-pink color, as if it were almost twilight. Daniel kept his eyes on the tree, took one step. Then another. He looked down, tried to ignore how his shoes fit perfectly in the two tread-lines of footprints that extended before him, that had created the path in the first place.

Step by step, the tree loomed larger. The trunk was as wide as a house, full of knots and gnarls and bifurcating parts. The large leaves were a dark dusky green, hanging in thick and heavy clusters from a maze of uncountable branches. And there was some kind of fruit. Daniel moved a little closer. Yes, he could see it clearly... some kind of plump, round, iridescent fruit. He glanced behind his shoulder. The gate seemed very far away.

Quietly, a memory entered his mind, pressuring him to pay attention. It was a story about a garden, two trees, a man, a woman, and a snake. Daniel grasped the significance, remembered his old Sunday School lessons. He stared forward and contemplated the enormous, strange tree that waited for him ahead. He licked his lips—he was hungry and thirsty.

"First come first served," he said to himself. The wheat moaned and waved in response. What if a man could live forever, he thought. How much would other men pay to live forever! The stalks of ripened grain snapped and whipped and swirled as if a hurricane were blowing but the air was completely still. Daniel drew closer to the first branches. An abrupt thought made him pause again; what if the owner returns? In response, a high-pitched, small voice inside what was left of his conscience prodded him, tried to explain to him, what it actually meant, that the owner of the garden was gone for good, and the guardians and the flaming sword were gone too. Daniel was so near that the tree seemed like a living, writhing beast, its arms dangling a luscious, ripe, and irresistible crop—like it needed to be plucked, milked to relieve this burden—it needed him to eat, to live.

In the distance there was the sound of sirens and thunder.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Rivka Jacobs currently lives with four Siamese cats in West Virginia. She was born in Philadelphia and grew up in South Florida. She has sold stories to such publications as *The Magazine* of Fantasy and Science Fiction, the Far Frontiers anthologies, and the Women of Darkness anthology. More recently she's placed stories with *The Sirens Call* eZine, *The Literary Hatchet*, *Fantastic Floridas*, and the *More Alternative Truths* anthology. Rivka has a BA in history, MAs in sociology and mental health counseling, and a BSN. She most recently worked as a psychiatric nurse.

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Dinner's at 6 | *J. E. Kennedy*

"I thought this place was supposed to be luxury accommodation? It's a mess," Nat groaned.

The front of the B&B did look a little shabby, a lick of paint or a bit of sanding wouldn't go amiss. I feared for splinters in my knuckles when I knocked on the door. But it was in the perfect spot, surrounded by woodland, miles from the motorway. Just the place to make Nat forget about the job I was losing her to. This was make or break.

"It'll be fine, Nat. An adventure. It's definitely secluded. Just what we wanted."

"Just what you wanted, you mean." She avoided eye contact by inspecting the arm of her jacket closely and brushing away an imaginary piece of dirt.

Why is she always pissing on everything I do? Am I the only one trying to save our marriage here? But I didn't take the bait, the last thing we needed was another argument. I wanted this weekend to be about fun. An attempt to conjure up the old Nat and Ben who were joined at the hip and always laughing. The only thing we seemed to have in common these days was the mortgage.

The door opened and the greasy-haired B&B owner did nothing to help my case. His hands were stained pink, and his white vest had streaks of red on it, as if we had interrupted him butchering a wild animal in the kitchen.

"Hi, we're the Thompsons." I said, plastering a smile on my face. He muttered something indiscernible and walked off into the gloomy building. We followed him up to our room where he pointed out the TV and a crummy little en suite.

"Dinner's at 6," he said, and left us.

"Let's go for a walk around the place? Take in the views, get some fresh air." Nat wasn't even listening to me. She was lifting the bed covers with the tips of her fingers, her other hand covering her mouth in disgust.

"Oh, no. Ben, no." She said. "We're not staying here. No way." Her heels clicked on the wooden floor as she stormed over to her bags, each step a slap in the face of my idea; she never had any intention of trying to enjoy this and those heels proved it. I'm not sure why she'd agreed to come.

"Come on, Nat, we've stayed in worse places than this. Remember that B&B in Blackpool? The old woman served us yellow water and we slept on the floor instead of the bed?"

"We were poor then, Ben, and we were lucky not to catch some disgusting disease." She stood by the bags with her hands on her hips, but her lips curled up at the edges as she remembered that night. We couldn't keep our hands off each other then.

"Let's just stay for dinner. Just dinner. And if it's awful we'll go home," I said.

"You really want to eat here? Eat food cooked by that hills-have-eyes fella? Have you lost your mind?"

"I just want us to try something different, that's all. Get back to the basics."

"This is most definitely basic. Fine. Just dinner. Then home." I could see she was softening. Remembering. This trip was a good idea after all.

The dining room was large and bleak. Off-white table cloths with a drab-looking rose in the middle were set atop at least ten small, round tables. We were the only guests.

Nat chose a table by the window. Shards of sunlight cut through the trees that came right to the edge of the wooden building.

"Look at that view. It's stunning isn't it? So peaceful," I said.

Nat glanced out the window. "I guess so." She picked up the menu and her eyes narrowed as she skimmed through it, her nose wrinkled. She wouldn't want anything to eat here.

"Listen, Nat, I wanted us to come here because I... I..."

The owner's footsteps interrupted as he approached. It seemed he was owner, waiter, porter and chef all rolled into one. He was carrying one of those huge, old-fashioned silver platters with a giant domed lid and placed it on the table in front of us. I could see Nat's eyes widen at the absurdity of it. I was about to tell him that we hadn't placed our order yet when he lifted the lid.

"Voila," the grubby man said with a flourish.

"What the hell...?" Nat's voice trailed off as she stared at the platter. It took me a while to figure out what was on it. My eyes saw it, but my brain rejected the horrifying image.

"Are they... ears?" Nat's voice jolted me into action. I jumped up from my seat, my face burning.

"What is this? Is this some kind of joke?" The man gave a toothless smile and did a little jig of glee, then he put his fingers in his mouth and expertly blew a high-pitched whistle.

A shadow flicked across the window. Then another, and another. Now Nat jumped up to see what was out there in the woods. Stepping out from behind the trees were three giant wolves sent straight from the gates of Hell. Their pelts were of the deepest black but their eyes shone red like buoys in a vast night ocean. They moved forward until they stood in a row, their stare fixed on me and Nat at the window. The first one bared its teeth with a low growl, the other two soon copied.

Before I had time to move, the alpha ran forward, leapt up and smashed through the glass with incredible force and knocked Nat to the floor. It was ripping at her throat. I couldn't breathe. I stumbled backward before fleeing.

I left her.

I didn't get far.

A sharp pain shot up my leg as a huge maw bit into my calf. I fell. Something heavy smashed my head onto the floor and I surrendered to the darkness with the shrieks of glee from that vile little man filling my head.

I woke as something rough and wet licked my cheek. The powerful musty aroma of piss and wet dog made me reel, the smell of death lingered beneath it. I blinked the moisture from my

eyes and saw moonlight through the dense trees, but it didn't reach me. I was in a cave, looking through the opening, lying on the rocky floor softened with dead grass and leaves. My heart began to race and my breath shallowed. I didn't want to see.

I turned my head and saw red glassy dots glinting in the darkness. I had to get away. I tried to stand but my legs didn't work properly; my body was big and cumbersome. Looking down at myself I saw the dense black fur. I scrambled to the opening, my four legs uncoordinated and slipping about beneath me like a newborn cub. I sat in a shard of moonlight and screamed for Nat but a sorrowful howl filled the woods.

Three more howls joined my own as the black beasts came and sat close to me. Their fur was silky and warm against my own in the chilly breeze. We produced a pitiful chorus in the silvery night.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — J. E. Kennedy is an English teacher from Liverpool living her writing dream. She is currently working on her debut novel and enjoys writing short stories. She has been published in *The Cabinet of Heed*. She lives in Liverpool with her feisty five-year-old son and you can usually find her scribbling away at her desk under the stairs.

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No Name | Jennifer Canaveral

January 10, 2004 around 0200 hours

I did it.

I waited until the ship was running on both turbines, when the noise outside the ship is so loud, it can drown out the shrillest of screams. When the ship is going so fast that by the time anyone realizes someone has gone missing, they would be miles away from them. A needle in a haystack.

I did it.

Yesterday, I was able to successfully divert the boat's course to a fake distress signal I insisted we investigate, thus turning the boat northbound. Shortly after, I spotted a deflated raft tucked under a desk in the First Lieutenant's office. Upon seeing it, I casually asked the First Lieu himself if it was functional.

"Sure, it's functional," He said. "Hell, I used it when we pulled into El Salvador the other day. Blew it up, grabbed the oars, and a six pack of the local pilsner, then just drifted in the water by the beach. Horrible idea in retrospect but hey, I'm here now, aren't I?"

We pulled into El Salvador less than a week ago so I was confident the raft was adequate enough to reach the Equator. I just needed it to stay afloat until I reached her.

Yes. I grabbed that raft and its oars then waited until 0100 hours, when my absence was sure to go unnoticed. I snuck out of my rack with the old raft tucked into the coveralls I'm wearing now. I walked up the ladderwell and opened the hatch to the main deck outside. With a new moon darkening the night sky, I slipped out of the hatch unseen and crept up the non-skid deck, toward the front of the ship. It all felt serendipitous, as if the ocean itself was conspiring to relieve me—permanently—of my watch.

Staying clear of the ship's bow, I sat on a mooring bit, pumping air into the raft in a frenzied, bewildered state, fearing the BMOW—boatswain's mate of the watch—would find me on one of their hourly rounds. Each BMOW's shift varied. Some began their round on the top of the hour while others, a quarter after. I pumped air into the raft as fast as I could, hoping to evade the BMOW or anyone else preventing me from reaching the Equator on my own.

When I was finally finished, I grabbed the oars, gripped the raft tight on each side and stood on top of the mooring bit, then stepped up to the rail. Closing my eyes, I drew one deep breath, opened my eyes back up then did it. I jumped.

Splash!

My body landed in the middle of the raft, causing it to submerge and take on some water before it bobbed back up. Adrenaline raced through me—and still so, as I write—making my hands and knees tremble. I watched as my ship zoomed toward the horizon then felt a wave of relief when I saw the fantail—usually abuzz with late night smokers—was empty, devoid of people to witness me my escape. Once the ship sailed out of sight, the solitude hit me.

Darkness surrounds me, in the sky above and in the waters beneath me. The night's paralyzing silence is my only company. My only possessions, this pen and this journal. Let this journal serve as the recordings leading up to the last hours—perhaps minutes—until my untimely death. I pray I reach her in time and soon. Cannot bear another moment alone in this ghoulish ocean... even if I lose my mortality in the process.

Should anyone read this, avoid sailing near the Equator. Stay far away, by any means necessary. She is not as she seems.

Inoa'ole.

January 09, 2004 1600 hours

Tonight, I'm gone. She can have me. *Inoa'ole*.

I'm a disheveled mess and do not feel I can—should—stay onboard this ship any longer. Trawling for drug boats in the middle of the Pacific seems such a frivolous mission when compared to the one *she's* assigned me.

Throughout the day, I gazed out the porthole of my stateroom wall and onto the tranquil waters, hoping she'd reemerge and send me a quick greeting. A little wave, a little wink my way. Anything to confirm that what I am doing is for the greater good.

We're on course to cross the Equator on the evening of January 10th. The crew has already performed the line-crossing ceremony, a day earlier than was originally planned. All former pollywogs have made the transition to shellback—sailors who have passed the initiation rites for crossing the Equator. It was good fun but I was distant. Far too distant, and no one onboard understood why. Not even the XO, a man who is practically my shadow, knowing my whereabouts from 0600-2200 hours every day.

The pollywogs pled their devotion to "King Neptune", played by the ship's saltiest occupant, our senior cook. As the initiates received their equatorial baptism, I was a listless wreck, the ceremony itself a reminder of my encounter with her the night before. The majority of the crew enjoyed the festivities while I wandered aimlessly on the flight deck, scanning every inch of water for a sign of her presence but found none.

I don't want to believe the things she's told me. Cannot escape her words, her ominous threat, yet, why do I feel this maddening urge to see her? To be with her? Perhaps, it *is* me who must go. Cannot fathom anyone else taking my place and I want this burden off my shoulders already.

If I never laid eyes on her, maybe we'd be spared but it's too late now.

It's 2200. Taps. Going to try and get some goddamn sleep, in the hopes she won't pay me another visit.

Inoa'ole.

January 07, 2004 2000 hours

She came to me in my dreams, in the early hours of the morning. The woman—the thing—I saw in the water and she was just as breathtaking as the day I first saw her. Her chestnut hair. Her olive skin. That sensuous, devious smile.

In my dream, she climbed into my rack, laying her wet body on top of mine, soaking my sheets with seaweed and salt water. We were staring into each other's eyes when I recalled what I saw when she was airborne the night before. How the lower half of her body resembled a shark's.

I shifted my eyes toward her backside, discreetly stretching my neck to find she now had human legs. I wanted to ask her what she was. A mermaid? A succubus? A shark woman? I had

no clue what to say but then she spoke, breaking our silence. She spoke with the voice of an angel but her words were far from heavenly.

She said a human sacrifice was needed before the ship crossed the Equator. The ship had to give up one person and if we did not comply, she claimed she would destroy the ship and take everyone onboard with her.

"Where would you take us?" I asked.

"To the depths of the sea bottom," she said. "Where no humans have tread and where the warm waters turn frigid. Where hermetic carnivores—the ones you call 'myth'—retreat after they've devoured unsuspecting mortals on the water's surface. Where the tortured souls of sailors lost at sea congregate, searching in vain for the ships that left them behind. We are the damned of the Pacific, requiring a toll—a human toll—for ships we find near our Equator... and we prefer that human be you."

"Why me? Can't it be anyone else?"

"It can," she whispered. "It can, but would you be able to live with yourself? Would you be able to return to the comfort of your terrestrial home, knowing you dodged the blade at the expense of another's life? A shipmate, as you call them?"

"I need time to think," I whispered back.

My response was not received well, for in an instant, this aquatic beauty grew angry, transforming into a repulsive, horrifying creature as she sat on top of me.

Her soft voice turned into a series of high-pitched shrieks. Her skin broke out into scales and a fresh set of gills popped out of the sides of her neck. For the first time, she revealed her teeth to me. They were pointed and serrated, like a Great White's. Then, my attention shifted to her backside, where her legs fused together to form a shark's tail and her back split open to unearth a dorsal fin.

She grabbed my face and squeezed it between her wrinkled, logged hands. Her breathing grew rapid, her voice deepening as she spoke.

"No time to think," She bellowed. "You have three days. Before the ship's bow crosses our Equator or else."

"What if we turn the ship around?" I asked. "We'll head home and never come back."

She lowered her torso onto mine then crawled up my chest, exhaling a trail of icy breath down my neck.

"Too late to turn back," she whispered.

Her cheek slid across mine and I felt the sharp edges of her teeth graze my earlobe. As her slimy body slithered over me, I noticed an opaque, viscous substance oozing from underneath her scales. Fearing this substance might be toxic, I agreed to give her what she wanted so she would go away.

"Okay," I said, squeezing my eyes shut. "In three days, I will I give you your human. Before the bow crosses your Equator."

The coldness in the room dissipated and when I opened my eyes, she was gone. My sheets were no longer soaked, my body was clean and dry. Everything around me returned to its

original state but I knew our encounter was not imaginary. It was real. As real as her cryptic demand for a shipmate's life.

I've been catatonic all day and I can feel the concerned eyes of the crew following me wherever I go. Down every passageway, at the table of every meal, and every time I step foot onto the bridge. I know what they're thinking. They're thinking I've cracked and we haven't even been underway for three weeks.

I'm too exhausted, too shaken up to write anymore. Will spend all day tomorrow to plan. To pray.

Inoa'ole. Hawaiian word for 'no name' or 'nameless' or so I've heard it said. Inoa'ole. Like her.

January 06, 2004 0100 hours

Not sure if what I saw earlier was real or a hallucination. Mind you, being a sailor with thirteen years of sea time under my belt, I like to consider myself 'salty'. Having seen a multitude of peculiar things out on the Pacific and the Atlantic, I thought I've seen it all until this evening.

It was around 2300, January 5th, and I was restless. The ship was idle and swaying peacefully. The weather? Immaculate. A glorious night to take the ole sea legs out for a stretch.

As I walked along the main deck, I saw something jump out of the water with my peripheral vision. I thought it might be a sea turtle or a dolphin, friendly visitors we often find lingering around the ship during these patrols.

I propped my elbows up on the railing, waiting for whatever it was to pop out again, only I wasn't prepared for what I was about to see.

Underneath the water, I saw something swimming toward me, only I saw it didn't have a tail or fins. Then, out of the water, a beautiful woman emerged. Bare-breasted with her skin glowing off the starlit ocean, she smiled and blew me a kiss before diving back into the water. Before I could process what I had seen, a shark tail—in the same location as the woman—flopped out of the water. My initial thought was for the woman's safety.

I panicked, pacing like a maniac back and forth on the deck, not knowing what to do next. I wanted to shout 'Man overboard!' but that was a lie. Even if I found someone to help, what would I tell them? Some woman, swimming alone in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, was in danger of being attacked by a shark? It sounded feasible but something told me not to seek help.

Then, she—this thing—jumped out of the water and remained airborne, gradually descending from the sky, as if it was falling in slow motion. The little light emanating from the stars and waning crescent moon was enough to see the creature in its entirety. The naked torso, the wavy hair, and the shark tail were all in full view before it hit the water and swam beneath the surface.

Whatever it was, there is no doubt it was female and I found myself immediately forlorn when she left. For twenty minutes, I stared at the very spot she sprang from, hoping she would reappear, but with no activity—not even a ripple in the water—I returned to my rack, more restless than ever.

I wonder what her name is. If she even has one.

January 04, 2004 0900 hours

Stopped in El Salvador for fuel last night. Nothing eventful. A few drunk guys from deck force got into a scuffle at the local bar/whorehouse but no blood drawn. No damaged property. No known STD's brought back onboard. All in all, good port call. Headed back out to sea.

January 03, 2004 1100 hours

Decided to start personal journal. A few days late but been out at sea for about a week now. Left home port of Honolulu's Coast Guard base on December 26, 2003. My crew—my fellow shipmates—are in good spirits. No major incidents so far.

On course to pull into port for fuel in a few hours. Weather conditions expected to be favorable. Hoping to grab some street tacos, even though our executive officer (XO) has made it a point to tell us *not* to eat any food prepared outside of a restaurant and to only drink water from plastic bottles. He suggested the crew stick to Coca-Cola instead of water, making the corpsmen cringe—I assume they want to avoid a dental emergency as much as I do.

Hoping XO's anal retentiveness wanes soon. Of course, it is his job to ensure the captain is up-to-date with the latest information but I'm starting to feel smothered, almost micromanaged. Perhaps he's having difficulty adapting to the idea of a woman for a superior but I could be wrong. Either way, I won't hold it against him.

I sense the man is overly cautious, given his last commanding officer disappeared for 'reasons unknown' prior to me filling the vacancy. Apparently, the captain just vanished while the ship was out somewhere near the Equator. Guess he fell off the face of the earth, just like that. Poor bastard.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Jennifer Canaveral was raised in San Francisco but also spent time in Hawaii. She previously served in the US Coast Guard, where she sailed the very waters mentioned in her story. Her work has been published through Sanitarium Magazine, the Canadian magazine Blood and Bourbon, and The Horror Tree website's Trembling with Fear page. She lives in Kodiak, Alaska with her husband and three children.

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Hell Flows Here...

Ashlei Hawley

Shine | Crystal Bourque

Mia frowned at the woman standing on her doorstep. "What are you doing here?" she asked.

Lucy fidgeted with her purse strap and frowned right back. "Aunt Ellie called me because she knew you wouldn't." Her amber colored eyes didn't quite manage to meet Mia's dull browns. "So. How's Dad doing?"

"He's not your Dad."

"Grow up, will you?" she said, pushing her way past Mia to enter her house. "Your dad and my mom got married when we were, what? Three?" She tossed her silky dark hair over her shoulder and headed for the stairs that would take her directly to Dad's bedroom.

Mia watched her sashay her way up to the second floor. *God, I hate her*. Her fingers tightened around the doorknob until her palm hurt.

Lucy's bright personality all but made her shine. She was beautiful. No, Mia thought. She's perfect. It's why everyone loves her more. Dad included. Mia realized she was glaring and forced herself to bite back a snarky reply. Keep your mouth shut, she reminded herself. Your entire life is about to change.

That little secret made her giddy until she had to suppress the giggle that bubbled in her chest. *Now's* not *the time to celebrate*, she thought. *Not yet*.

So, she wiped the grin from her face, shut the door, stuck her hands in her pockets, and took the stairs up to the second floor, two at a time. She reached Lucy just as she entered Dad's room.

"Hey stranger," Lucy said, to the skeletal man lying in the middle of the double bed. She sat down on the edge and stared down at him. "Long time no see."

If she felt shock at what she saw, Mia didn't see a trace of it flicker over her porcelain face.

"I thought he was getting better." Lucy didn't look at Mia, her gaze remained fixed on Dad.

"He was," she told her. "And then the cancer came back."

Lucy reached for his hand. Held it between hers. "What did the doctor say?"

"That there's nothing else we can do for him now."

"Did you get a second opinion?"

Mia bristled. "You think I didn't try?" she said. "He refused and asked me to take him in, so I did." The lie rolled off her tongue with practiced ease.

Keeping an eye on Dad in the hospital twenty-four seven would have been impossible. No matter what, she needed to be there when he died.

Soon... she thought, the anticipation rising in her breast. Soon. Instead of crowing victory, Mia crossed her arms and leaned against the wall. She watched Lucy lift Dad's hand and clutch it to her chest.

"Can you give us a few minutes alone," Lucy asked, finally lifting her gaze to meet hers. Her eyes shimmered with unshed tears.

Mia didn't move. Dad didn't have much time left. She could feel it.

"I just need a minute," Lucy snapped. "Please."

She clenched her jaw. Took a step toward her.

"Mia." Dad's voice was a bare whisper. It had been a few days since she had heard him speak, since he had even tried.

Of course he would. For her. Mia held her hands up in defeat. "Fine," she said aloud and left the room. Sixty seconds, she thought, racing down the stairs. And you better believe I'm counting every one.

She headed to the kitchen for something to drink, her lips moving with each second that passed. Opening the cupboard she took a cup from the shelf.

Lucy screamed.

The glass shattered at the bottom of the sink. Mia was halfway up the stairs when she heard another.

"Dad," she shouted, bursting into the room. "No!"

Lucy was bent over Dad's motionless body. She lifted her head to look at Mia. Tears streamed down her cheeks. "I'm so sorry," she said, shaking her head. "He's gone."

Hope remained firmly rooted in her mind. *It's not too late. It's not too late. It's not too late.* Her eyes never left her father's ashen face. "Why did you scream?" she asked.

"Oh." Lucy sniffed and wiped at her cheeks with the back of one hand. "When he... passed, all the breath left his body on a-a heavy exhale, I guess." She shuddered. "Th-this... this purple mist came out of his mouth..." she sighed and rose to her feet. Buried her face in her hands. "Oh, God. What do we do now?"

Oh, God, Mia repeated, but for a completely different reason. His power. Her fingers curled into tight, matching fists. "Where did the mist go?" she asked, trying, and failing, to sound calm.

Lucy lifted her head. A frown creased her smooth brow. "What's wrong with you?" she asked. "Your *father* just died. Why are you so concerned about—"

Mia slammed a balled hand against the wall.

Lucy flinched.

"Where did the mist go?" she repeated.

"Jesus, there's no need to shout." Lucy reached for her purse, started digging through its contents. "It disappeared, alright?" Her hand reappeared, gripping her phone. "I'm calling for an ambulance." She pressed her thumb against the screen. The glass shattered. Her eyes widened in her stupid, perfect face. "What in the—"

"God*damn* it!" Mia couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. She snatched the first thing she could reach—the lamp on Dad's bedside table—and whipped it at Lucy's head.

Lucy dodged it, barely. The splintered remnants of her phone fell from her hand and clattered against the floor as it crashed into the wardrobe. She stared at Mia with wide eyes. "I understand you're upset." She took a step back. "You've just lost your father and—"

Mia couldn't... wouldn't listen to another word. "He promised that when he died, I would get it. Me." Mia jabbed her finger into her chest. "He promised me!" She lurched toward Lucy, who took another step back. "Why did you have to take the *one* thing I've ever wanted?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Lucy said. "I didn't take anything. I swear." Her gaze darted from Mia to the door.

"How could you possibly understand?" Mia asked, stalking toward her. "You couldn't. Not when you have *everything*."

Lucy held out trembling hands. "This isn't funny," she said.

"It's not a joke." She snarled and lunged. When she had her fingers wrapped around Lucy's neck, she held on for dear life.

Lucy's gifted strength was incredible, but she had no idea how to use it. She tried to pry Mia's fingers from her flesh. She tried to pull away. She tried to run.

But Mia dug in, letting her rage, her bitter disappointment, fuel her desperate need. Her hands locked in place, squeezing tighter and tighter. She refused to give an inch.

Together, they fell to the ground. Lucy batted at Mia's arms. Her nails raked across her cheeks, scoring the flesh, drawing blood.

None of that mattered.

"You were always Dad's little princess," Mia said. Spittle flew from her mouth to land on Lucy's face. "But his strength was never meant for you. Never!"

She leaned forward and felt something crunch beneath her hands. Lucy made a terrible wheezing sound as she tried and failed to get air into her lungs. Mia watched her porcelain face turned mottled blue.

A purple vapor wafted from Lucy's slack mouth. It hovered in the air above her before heading straight for Mia. She blinked, and it was gone.

She could feel it, the power. It spread through her body, strengthening her bones and muscles.

Her family's legacy would continue through her, and her alone.

Just like Dad promised.

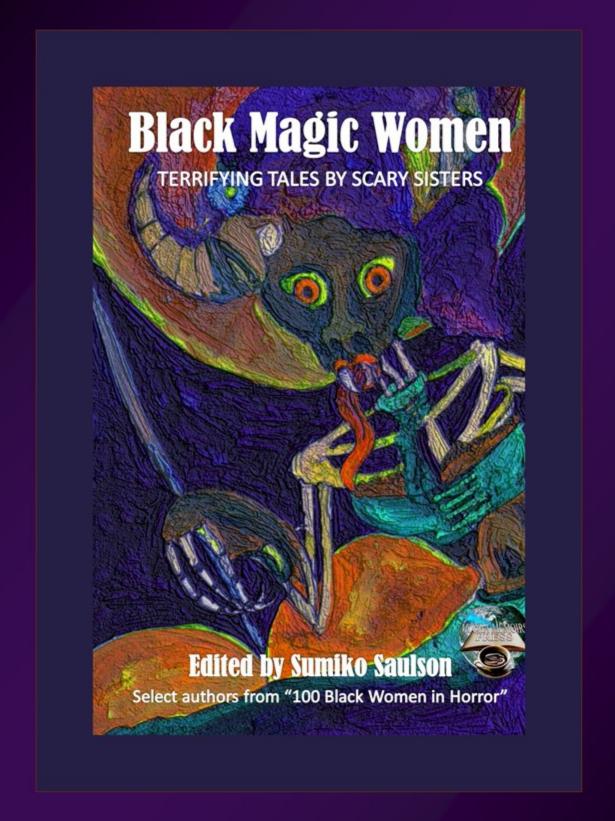
Mia grinned.

It was her turn to shine.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Crystal Bourque is an up and coming, dark fantasy author. She is obsessed with all things fantastical, so much so that she has a recurring dream about being a princess with a sword. When she's not busy writing, she loves trying new recipes, plotting her next travel destination, and singing loudly.

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Men Don't Leave | Kenya Moss-Dyme

They say that new love is the best love, but the love that Travis Whitley felt for his wife still burned hot after thirteen years.

He'd met Sunny during Parent-Teacher conferences when she swept into his classroom like a tornado, an hour late for their meeting; with her wild curly hair piled into a messy bun, limping on a broken shoe heel, and filling his classroom with the scent of cocoa butter—he fell so deeply in love that it made his heart ache. Literally. He stood up to greet her, then clutched his chest and fell to the floor, striking his head on the edge of his desk on the way down. Hours later, he came to in a hospital bed and the first thing he saw when he opened his eyes was the face of an angel.

Then he heard Sunny's voice speaking from the corner of the room, behind the beautiful nurse hovering over his bed to check his vitals.

"It's about time you woke up—I've had a hell of a day and you having a heart attack didn't help." Sunny scoffed as she stood with one hand on her hip.

Travis knew then that Sunny was the woman he was going to marry.

The fact that her son was one of his most challenging students only helped cement his love for her and his sympathy for her struggle as a single mother. Like most first graders, six year old Jaxx was only interested in lunch and recess, and then tried to float through the rest of the school day. But he really came alive when it was time to run and toss a ball on the school playground, so Travis introduced the idea of getting Jaxx involved in Pee Wee Football to teach him social skills with the benefit of burning off some of his nervous energy.

It worked. And Sunny was grateful for the advice and assistance provided by Travis; so grateful, in fact, that eventually the awkward silence at the end of their consultative phone calls gave way to an invitation to dinner.

The rest—as the saying goes—was history.

Jaxx's father had checked out of their lives around Jaxx's fifth birthday. He just left, walking out the back door without so much as a 'Later, gator'. Less than a year later, Travis stepped in and became the husband that Sunny needed and the father that Jaxx didn't know he needed. While it wasn't easy taking over a ready-made family, it gave Travis PURPOSE. Purpose and a sense of belonging that he hadn't felt in many years. He understood their situation better than most, because his own father had abandoned their family when he was very young and he witnessed his mother working herself into an early grave to support them. At 15, he stood at her gravesite and vowed that if he were ever blessed with a family of his own, he would never intentionally leave them under any circumstances within his power.

They discovered a few years into the marriage that Sunny was unable to have any more children, but that was okay because they had Jaxx. Travis felt blessed to watch Jaxx grow from a scrawny, quiet child into a star football player and hulking athlete who towered over both Travis and Sunny. Together, they formed a family that was admired and envied by all who encountered or had the pleasure of knowing them.

Travis pulled his car alongside the drive-thru speaker and pressed the button to lower his driver side window.

"Welcome to Burger Shack. May I take your order?"

"Um, just a minute, please," he replied, squinting his eyes to read the menu. He needed glasses badly. And perhaps surgery to repair his torn retina. But until then, he squinted.

"Do you have any breaded chicken sandwiches? I see grilled but not breaded..."

An audible sigh came through the speaker. "If you don't see it then we don't have it, sir."

Travis looked across the street at a competitor's fast food restaurant and considered driving there instead, but he could clearly see that their drive-thru lane was already wrapping around the store and it would take much longer to get home.

"Are you ready to order, sir?" That annoyed voice again; clearly, she had better things to do. The car behind him bumped its horn and Travis felt his anxiety level rising.

"Okay, okay, sorry—just give me the chicken sandwich combo, please," Not feeling too confident with his selection, he reasoned that the time consideration made it the best choice.

"That will be \$7.25, sir," the cashier announced as she pushed open the double window and gave him a dry stare.

Holding a ten dollar bill in one hand, Travis fumbled through the change in his console until his fingers closed on a quarter. When he turned back to pass it through the window, the cashier's eyes were fixed on the deep angry scar on the side of his throat. He shifted in his seat and used his left hand to tug at his collar and cover the scar. She looked into his face with concern, then smiled softly, knowingly, and turned to complete his order. Her demeanor changed in that wordless moment, and when she returned to hand him the bag of food and drink through the window, her fingers touched his, briefly and deliberately.

"Have a good day, sir," she said and smiled again.

Travis found Sunny in her usual spot on the living room sofa, watching another one of her reality shows and arguing with the characters on the screen. She barely turned her head to acknowledge his return, but she did stick out her hand to accept the bag of food. "Took you long enough, I'm starving to death!"

Gingerly placing her drink on the cocktail table, he leaned over to plant a kiss on her forehead as she stuffed fries into her mouth and dug into the bag for the chicken sandwich.

"What's this?" She exclaimed, peeling back the paper and scowling at the beige meat peeking out from the bun. She picked off a corner of the chicken patty and touched it with her tongue before dropping it back in the bag.

"Grilled? GRILLED chicken? Why the fuck would I want GRILLED chicken when I'm eating french fries? Do you think I'm on a diet or something? Are you saying I SHOULD be on a diet?" Shredded lettuce flew from the wrapper as she angrily shook the sandwich at Travis.

"No, of course you don't need to be on a diet, sweetie, but that's the only type of chicken they had," Travis explained.

"Then why didn't you go somewhere else?"

"It would have taken longer! I knew you were waiting and didn't want you to have to wait longer."

"So you got me SHIT instead? Something I don't want?" Sunny stomped over to the garbage can, dropping the sandwich inside.

"Look baby, I can fry you some chicken if you just let me get my stuff put away and do my lesson plan for tomorrow—then I promise I will fry you up some chicken, okay?" pleaded Travis.

Sunny waved her hand in his direction. "Don't worry about it. I'll just eat these fries and go get my own damn food. Gee whiz."

"I'm really sorry, hon. You should have told me earlier and I would have taken a different way home then I could have hit the Chicken Castle, they always have every kind of chicken you want."

"Whatever," Sunny resumed attacking the fries and watching the women on the television screen yell and throw drinks at each other. "Get that bitch, Tammy!" She screeched, ignoring Travis as he stood behind her.

Ashamed at his failure, he backed out of the living room and headed down the hallway to freshen up before beginning his evening routine of grading papers and preparing the lesson plan before dinner.

The first blow sent him crashing into the wall; blood spurted from his nose as his face slammed into the surface and he slid downward into a heap on the floor. Sobbing, he cupped his face to stop the flow spilling down the front of his shirt.

"No, wait, let me—"

He braced himself as he caught the whir of a boot-clad foot flying toward his face. He moved his hands to protect his eyes as the boot made contact with the side of his head. Pain shot through his temple and his vision blurred from both the pain and the blood smeared from his hands.

"You stupid fuck! Can't you do anything right?"

"I'm sorry," sobbed Travis, straining to look up at his attacker.

Jaxx straddled him with balled fists, yelling and spitting as he berated the broken man.

"What's so hard about getting an order right? Are you stupid or just dumb?" Jaxx yelled, delivering another round of blows about Travis's upper body.

"I'll go back and get it right this time! I'm sorry, please don't hit me again!" Travis cried, curling himself into a fetal position to protect his body from the assault.

Jaxx paused and took a step back, breathing heavily as if he'd just finished his daily five mile jog.

Travis was afraid to even peek at him through his fingers so he remained still and prayed that it was over, that this beating would be quick and the pain fleeting. He heard a *click*, and then felt a slight breeze as Jaxx swung his arm and buried the blade in his stomach, twisting for good measure. Travis lay still and prayed soundlessly for mercy; he thought for a moment that mercy

had arrived in the sound of Jaxx's boot stepping backward, but as usual, mercy skipped over him and Jaxx jumped forward to deliver a final kick to his stomach.

"Get it right next time—don't make me do this to you again, man," Jaxx spit at him, before turning and retreating from the room.

Jaxx was 10 years old the first time he killed his stepfather.

It began with an argument about the overflowing trashcan in the kitchen. Jaxx—who had grown nearly a foot since Travis moved in—stood defiantly with his arms crossed, refusing to budge in his resistance at taking the garbage to the cans in the backyard.

"You have so few chores around here, Jaxx. I think I've been more than fair," Travis said with a heavy sigh.

"Why don't you just do it and say I did?" Jaxx snarled at him and dropped his arms to his side, taking on a defensive stance. His eyes were dark and angry, much too angry for a ten year old, thought Travis, and the look on Jaxx's face disturbed him deep inside.

But he shook his head, dismissing the troubled feeling in the pit of his stomach; he turned around and began unloading the dishwasher.

The boy screamed as he closed the space between him and leaped on Travis' back, reaching around to pummel the man's face with his small, bony fists. Travis yelled out for Sunny, mostly out of shock at the attack, but there was a twinge of fear in his voice as Jaxx took him down the floor. He struck the open door of the dishwasher and the cutlery tray tipped and spilled across his chest, scattering across the ceramic tiled floor.

Jaxx was squeezing his neck so tightly that he couldn't move, but his head was facing the doorway and he saw Sunny's slippered feet standing there. *Standing still.* Just two white furry slippers with foam rabbit ears perched atop each foot, standing there. His eyes clouded in disbelief and he felt Jaxx move one hand to grapple for something that fell from the dishwasher. Then he felt the plunge of the knife in the side of his throat.

Travis waited at least half an hour before unwrapping his limbs. He knew better than to move too fast or Jaxx may return, sensing that his message had not been effectively delivered. Travis often wondered if the steroids Jaxx injected were sharpening his hearing along with his muscle mass, because Jaxx would somehow always just KNOW when Travis stood up after each assault, and sometimes he would return with strength anew. So Travis learned to wait until he heard the boy slam his bedroom door and turn on his television, only then did Travis feel safe enough to attempt to rise from the floor and drag his brutalized body down the hall to the bathroom.

He started a hot shower while undressing, then surveyed himself in the full-length mirror behind the bathroom door. His battered frame was a roadmap of his life—and his deaths; each of the hideous gashes and roughly healed bruises served as a testament to his commitment to stay and be the man his father couldn't. Sometimes, when the light faded to dark in his head and he felt life draining from his body, Travis would find himself wondering how much more he could

take; when Jaxx might finally land the one strike that would permanently turn off his lights. But then that light would flicker and he'd feel himself being pulled back into the world.

He wasn't entirely sure that a part of him didn't wish for that eternal darkness.

But he wouldn't leave. No one could ever say that he'd left.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Kenya Moss-Dyme began writing short-form horror in her teens and won several scholastic writing awards for creative work. She has since established her place in the dark fiction genre with the release of the horror collection 'Daymares', and 'Devil Inside' which takes the horror of cancer to a startling level. Readers will find a common trait among Kenya's stories is that the real monsters are people.

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Black Veil | Tabitha Thompson

Dear Diary, last night I had the dream again. It has been several years but even to this day, the dreams would remain the same. It was Valentine's Day, my wife and I's fifth year anniversary and we both were going to make sure it would be one we both would never forget. Cell phones were off and forgotten, no distractions whatsoever. I sat in the living room, wearing a blindfold that she wanted to me to try on, in an attempt to keep our sex spark alive. But suddenly, things took an unexpected turn. When I removed the blindfold, my wife was nowhere to be found. There was blood and shattered glass on the coffee table where the champagne and chocolate covered strawberries once were. More blood stains splattered the hardwood floor, with a right handprint marking the living room walls. The handprint was my wife's. I immediately got up from the couch with the blindfold in hand and started to look for my wife, but I still couldn't find her anywhere. The kitchen was even more of a grisly sight. The roast beef that she was preparing was almost burnt, yet that wasn't the only smell I was getting, there was also the smell of burnt flesh. A butcher knife was missing from the drawer and found only several feet away, covered in blood and what seemed to be bits of flesh. Again, my wife was nowhere. I screamed for my wife Lily as I raced to our bedroom to grab my cell phone, so I could call the police and save her from whomever might've taken her.

As I frantically searched for my phone and called out for my wife, I noticed dark spots on the carpet. Still clutching the blindfold in fear, I followed the spots to the bathroom where gurgling noises started to pierce my ears. In the bathtub was Lily, wearing nothing but a sexy black veil negligee, bloodied and bludgeoned almost to death; her throat was slashed almost from ear to ear but she managed to stay alive momentarily through keeping her head slightly down, making gurgling sounds. My heart was heavy, tears flooded my face as I rushed to her side to help her but something in her eyes looked different. She was petrified of me. I tried my best to get her to speak to me, as to who did this to her when she spoke in the weakest whisper, barely audible. "You... showed yourself. You sh... showed your true face, who you really are... You just couldn't let me go." I leaned up

from the bathtub, shocked and confused as to what she was talking about when her cell phone rang in the bedroom. It was a text message from a man named Michael which read: *Hey babe. Had a great time the other night, hope to see you again soon. Same time and place or somewhere new? Let me know when papers are official, so we can be official. Love you. Mikey.* Suddenly, a feeling of anger and sadness washed over me as I stripped Lily of her clothing, grabbed five of the lit candles in the bathroom, and built a fire...

It was then I woke up. But this time it wasn't in my bed, but in a cell. I still clutched the black veil negligee that my wife was wearing that night, it was the only thing that remained of Lily before the fire began. I was hurt, betrayed, humiliated and yet, my diary nightmare entry gave me away. I have no regrets, I wasted five years with someone who wanted someone else thinking they weren't going to get caught, but they did. Lily was right about one thing, that night I did show her myself, who I really was. And as I await execution every Valentine's Day I smile in glee, as I clutch her black veil, with the scent of her skin and blood still fresh.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Tabitha Thompson is the author of *Decency Defiled*, featured in 'Rejected For Content 6: Workplace Relations', and *Alternative*TM, featured in the anthology 'Black Magic Woman'. From an early age, Tabitha has always had her roots set deep into telling stories, but it was with horror where she had called it her home. As long as she has coffee, metal, a pencil, and paper, there will always be some new stories to tell.

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Shadow of Death | *J. Snow*

On the landing at the top of the stairs, rough, hand-cut planks erected by calloused, unsteady farmer hands a century earlier, sat a lean, weary man. His feet rested on the second step down, elbows on knees, a pistol on his left thigh in the loose grip of his right hand, one bullet in the chamber.

She would be home soon.

You're gonna pay for disrespecting me. Slut!

He waited.

A cigarette dangled between two fingers of his free hand, burnt down to a long ash. He had taken a single drag when lighting but not another since. He wasn't thinking about smoking, had lit up out of habit. He was thinking of his boy, turning six in a week, asleep and alone in the house only a truck's length from the bottom step.

Deep lines cut into his withering face made him appear far older than his almost-forty years, the milestone birthday less than a month away but forgotten. Head hung low, face slack and impassive, his sunken arctic gaze—one most described as captivating and piercing, one a

rare few knew as cruel and remorseless—dissolved into the bleak, lifeless color of cement and transfixed upon that bottom step.

Pensive, he stroked graying, wiry hairs that hung like barbed wire four inches from his chin with steady, rhythmic motion. Sharp, precise lines he kept trimmed along his cheekbones to stress a strong, square jawline were blurred from three days gone unshaved. He exhaled a heavy breath and smoothed down the thick strip of a mustache, grown longer than most to conceal teeth stained from years of neglect, years of drug and alcohol abuse.

He practiced holding a stern posture, fought back laughter and smiles to avoid exposing those teeth, conditioning himself to remain rigid and serious at all times. Years passed and he lost his ability to find any pleasure in life. Darkness seeped deep into the crevices of his mind, wrapped him tight in a tourniquet of despondency, and his angular features transmuted into a stone carving with eyes as hard and cold as death.

Sitting there, he tried but could not recall a time he didn't feel defeated, and he blamed her. She had taken his dream from idea to reality, wrote his business plan, secured bank loans, put his name in lights, then let it fall to pieces around him, turning him into a failure and a joke.

He hid his feelings of inadequacies behind a mask of confidence, his anguish behind one of rage, and as grief threatened to swallow him—a soul wrenching sorrow for the vitality and exhilaration of youth lost to a life wasted, built around a woman who repaid his hard work and dedication with betrayal—he choked back tears. Rage swelled in his gut and pushed upward. Blood rushed to his face and burned from anger.

She will pay for this! his only thought.

He had taken her as a wife to bare him a son, thought it a disservice to not pass on his superior genes to a namesake. In that regard, she had proved worthy.

He loved his boy, but his notion of love was skewed from a childhood of abuse and neglect. He had been taught love was earned through respect and respect was earned by making your name one of importance and one feared. His boy, his greatest achievement, his immortality, his legacy, displayed honest appreciation for him, was proud to share his name, and that had kept him going. All he hoped for anymore was that his boy would grow to make his name one deserving recognition.

He loathed his wife for not carrying his name with the same pride, for dirtying it with a lack of honor and dignity, with weakness. Her smiles were fake, her voice small. She feigned admiration and loyalty, desperate to divert his gaze from her thickening waist and sagging tits, the raw and scabbed spots on her face from compulsive picking, her nervous habit of rocking back and forth, back and forth like a damned lunatic, but he was no idiot. He paid attention, knew she was dishonest, a lying, cheating backstabber who thought herself smarter than him, too clever to get caught. She thought deceiving him would be easy, but she was about to learn that was far from the case.

He had held her hand in public, shielding her from the eyes of others, but should have kept her hidden, denied her existence. He flushed with embarrassment every time eyes turned his way when they were together. He knew he could do better but stayed for his boy and the comfort of familiarity and routine. He had no desire to invest years in training another but ached for seductive, sultry lovers who recognized his touch as a privilege unlike the drab, dim-witted pig that sullied his name and told her as much.

He was unable to see himself as anything other than a prominent man of great significance deserving praise and admiration, but she knew of the fragile coward tucked beneath the facade, the fearful child trapped within trying to overcompensate for the years he was torn down to nothingness. She never spoke of either one, but he hated her most for knowing he was once weak.

Raised and molded by misogynistic men, he was taught to keep his woman obedient and submissive, and to do so, he kept her focused on her own shortcomings with a constant barrage of dehumanizing criticisms. It was a brilliant and effective redirection, albeit a learned behavior, not genius cunning. He also learned to use fear as a weapon as it had been used on him and made sure she knew discourtesy, regardless how subtle, would bring quick, savage retribution.

When he approached her with his suspicions of betrayal, she professed everlasting love, claimed self-sacrifice of her own wishes to help him achieve success and happiness as if he were unable to see through the transparency of her lies. The idea that she thought him a fool infuriated him. Her frantic, panicky defenses were, to him, as good as an admission of guilt. He hadn't beat her for her wrongs, not in the past couple months. Instead, he planned his revenge, the ultimate punishment, and the time had come.

She would arrive before his boy needed to be awakened for school. She had texted from the small town on the other side of the mountain, about twenty minutes from their home. A smirk had slid across his face when the phone vibrated the notification. She had been gone three days. He was ready but patient, and the buzz of the phone had sent a wave of adrenaline through him like a jolt of electricity.

She won't make a fool of me again. I guarantee that.

His eyes hardened, the muscles contracting as he peered at the short stretch of driveway through the open barn door, hearing the hum of a car engine and looking for the flash of headlights to confirm her arrival. There were none. The car crept past, slow and cautious through the dense, early morning fog.

He sighed, took a drag of his almost-burnt-away cigarette, flicked it toward the ash bucket at the bottom of the stairs, hit the wall instead, ran his empty hand through his waist length, sandy hair. He lit another cigarette, inhaling deep as he held a flame under the tip.

He was growing anxious and took a quick peek at the screen of his phone. The time—6:08 am—glared back at him in harsh, neon green.

Oh, you are gonna be one sorry bitch, he huffed a soft, shaky chuckle.

She blamed his drug addiction, one he continued to deny, as her excuse for leaving him behind on a holiday. It was an insult to his intelligence. He knew damn well she was not visiting her family. He hadn't let her take his boy to ensure she would return and realized with disgust he had made it easier for her to cheat by doing so. He didn't need proof. He wasn't as stupid as she thought.

Lying, disgusting, disrespectful whore! He spat over the railing.

He had punished her before, but she'd crossed the line this time, had done the unforgivable. He wasn't going to beat her with fists or whips or wooden spoons. No, the effects of such were short lived, and that wasn't profound enough. His vengeance would destroy her. He would make sure of it.

He lifted his cigarette to take a drag and saw it had burned away while brooding. A pile of ashes lay two steps below between his feet. He flicked the cigarette down the stairs, missing the bucket by an eighth inch, and gripped the pistol with firm determination.

Lights lit up the doorway. She was home. He took the safety off the 9mm and slid it backward with a snap to load the bullet in the chamber, then sat upright and rigid and waited. She would peek in before turning for the house. He had left the barn door open to make sure of that.

He raised his face to the ceiling, nodded with resolve, lowered his head, eyelids tight and straightened, facial muscles tense, strained, sweat beading up along the lines stitched into his forehead. He smiled—the thought of her losing the final battle brought him deep gratification. She deserved this moment.

"You out here, hun?" she called with her tiny voice.

She stuck her head through the doorway and, seeing him at the top of the stairs, gasped and covered her mouth with her hand.

"No!" she pleaded through shaking fingers.

He pulled the trigger.

She slumped to the floor.

The pistol fell a story below with the solid crack of steel on concrete.

She had seen, just after he jammed the 9mm into his mouth, tears squeeze from the corner of his eyes as he tongued the cold steel and, a hair before the firing pin struck the bullet, a combination of emotions flash across his now unrecognizable face—raw desire for escape, fear, shame and regret for his irreversible decision—and fainted.

The sun peeked over the eastern horizon, cut rectangles through the barn windows, and fell across the lap of a man dead less than a minute.

Blood spread outward from beneath his head, a dense shadow of death, a slinking, leaden, liquid darkness crawling across the floorboards, seeping through the cracks and over the edge of the landing in a steady stream. It pooled and crept closer to his still unconscious wife.

"Daddy?" a young boy called from the house.

No one heard.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — J. Snow is a poet and author of psychological thrillers and tales of terror whose work has been described as disturbing, visceral, haunting, and powerfully evocative. Snow has had six short stories and fourteen poems accepted for publication in various anthologies, is the co-founder of Blood Puddles—Silent Screams in Liquid Darkness: a Literary Journal of Horror, and yet still writes daily.

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Dry Out Your Bones | G Clark Hellery

I had a friend who, during the dampest part of winter would whine 'Aaaaannaaa, I need to dry out my bones!' It was hard to tell if she was joking, or if it was a turn of phrase from her native Italy, but it was a much-repeated lament from mid-November until the start of spring.

One evening, after too much cannelloni and far too much red wine, I couldn't help myself. It was unseasonably cold so Alma lit the fire and we contentedly lolled on the sofa, stomachs full, sipping our wine. Both of Alma's sons had left home and as usual, her husband Alan was working.

"Alma?" I asked during a lull in our conversation. My friend pulled her gaze from the fire, blinking away the faraway look in her eye. Her skin seemed to have a slight sheen and I'd noticed recently that she had more gray streaks in her hair, which hung limply. She seemed slightly bloated, and whilst she chatted and joked as always, there was a sluggishness to her speaking, as if it were a great effort. "Alma?" I asked again, getting her full attention, "why have you never returned to Italy?"

My friend regarded me for a few moments, long enough for me to shift uncomfortably in my seat.

"Anna, you are my friend," she started slowly.

I smiled in encouragement. "You can tell me anything."

Alma took a long drink of her wine. As she placed the glass on the dark wooden table I saw a smear-like condensation from her hand, the tiny water droplets running down the side of the glass.

"When I came to this country, my mother gave me a charm, nothing expensive or fancy, but an heirloom that had been passed down in our family for generations."

"I remember you showing it to me at university. It as a necklace, wasn't it? Oval, one end covered in silver and the other end was stone. Amber or something. I remember it was really sharp as I cut my hand. Couldn't believe you wore it and you didn't injure yourself." I looked briefly at my thumb and imagined I could still see the faint scar.

Alma laughed, a brief barking laugh before continuing, "What a good memory you have, Anna. Yes, that's exactly it. The stone is local to my region, mined from deep in the earth, said to go back to the time when man crawled out of the swamp. It's very important to my family and without it, I cannot return home." Alma took another swig of wine and I thought for a moment the tears which had sprung to her eyes would overflow but she quickly composed herself.

"I'm sure your family would understand, Alma. Things get lost or misplaced. We can find it, then you can go." I looked around the room, as if the illusive necklace would suddenly pop out of a drawer.

Alma shook her head. "No, some objects are too important. I cannot leave without it but I fear if I do not soon return home, I will not be long for this world."

Her tone sobered me up in seconds. The sheen I'd noticed before still covered Alma's skin, beads of moisture hemmed her hairline and I realized that she wasn't bloated from eating too much pasta, her stomach was distended.

"What has your doctor said?" I asked.

"Doctors! What do they know? I know what I need. I need to return to my country and dry out my bones," cried Alma.

A smile pulled at the corner of my mouth but I frowned, "Well then, what does Alan say? I'm sure if you explained to him, he'd take you back to Italy. A holiday or something. He must be due time off, all the hours he works."

Alma shook her head sadly. "He knows I cannot leave without my necklace. Yes, he lets me visit you in the city, that's not far, not far out of his reach but he would never allow me to return to my family. I fear he would rather see me die than let me leave. He's no longer my husband, Anna. He's my jailor."

Her words stunned me into silence, then my indignation took over. "How dare he dictate where you go! If it's money, Alma, I have enough to get us both to Italy. I say we find your necklace and book a trip!"

For the first time, my friend's eyes lit up. "You mean it? You'll help me, Anna?" She grabbed me in a hug. Her skin clung to the cotton of my t-shirt as she pulled away. "We must act quickly, tonight, before he suspects anything. My necklace is kept in the safe in his study, the key in his briefcase. He never lets me into his study and keeps the door locked but together..." she drifted off.

For a few minutes, I was shocked to speak. In all our years of friendship, Alma had never even hinted at a marital issue, let alone how controlling Alan was. However, my initial doubts faded as I looked at my friend, seeing her misery and the growing knowledge that I had to help her. Over another glass of wine, we hatched our plan and waited for Alan to return home.

It was past midnight by the time we heard Alan's car in the driveway. I was hiding upstairs, as we'd agreed, the effects of the red wine rapidly wearing off. However, before I had time to change my mind I heard Alma downstairs calling to Alan. Loud voices drifted up, in what sounded like a repeat of a frequent argument. A crash, followed by a thud sent me scuttling back to my hiding place. Moments later Alma appeared, breathless. She gave me a big grin as she shook Alan's briefcase.

"I have it!"

"And Alan? Is he...?" I trailed off, not really wanting an answer to my unfinished question.

Alma shrugged. "I hit him with the pan. We must be quick!"

Her urgency spurred me on. Alma had retrieved the key for the study from Alan's pocket and we hastily opened the door. I waited by the door, checking that her injured husband didn't appear whilst she forced open his briefcase with a letter opener from his desk.

"It's not here," she wailed, pouring the contents of the briefcase onto the antique desk.

"What do you mean?" I hissed. I checked the hallway before joining her. Papers, pens, a tie clip, and business cards were scattered across the desk but no key.

"Where can it be?" Alma sobbed as her hands sifted through the assorted papers.

I flipped the briefcase upside down, shaking it violently. Nothing fell out so I dropped it onto the desk, my fingers running across the soft velvet until I found a lump in the fabric. "The letter opener," I gestured with my head. Alma hastily passed me the knife. It was tough to cut through the fabric but I managed to make a small hole and rescue the tiny key. I held it up triumphantly. Alma smiled broadly, sweat rimming her face.

"We must hurry," she said, dragging me across the room and gesturing to one of the paintings. I wrenched it off the wall, wincing as I tore the canvas. Alma was already pulling open the door to the safe. She smiled in triumph as she twirled the necklace around her fingers. I squealed and hugged my friend, the pair of us jumping like children. A scraping noise from the door caused us to freeze. Alan was leaning heavily against the doorframe, blood oozing from the wound on his head.

"No!" he groaned, staggering into the room.

"Stay back, Alan," warned Alma, holding her necklace in front of her, the sharpened stone pointing toward her husband. "Tonight I return to my people."

Alan moaned as he slumped against his desk, sending papers fluttering to the floor. "If you leave Alma, I lose everything. Don't you understand? Because of you, we have this house, the boys are secure, we have whatever we want. I can't let you go."

"What does he mean, Alma? I thought it was Alan's job which paid for all this?" I looked at my friend and her husband, confusion blossoming. Alma's family had never appeared particularly wealthy but perhaps she had a wealthy grandparent who'd left her a fortune.

Alan snorted. "You don't know what she is? All these years Anna, and you had no clue?"

"Shut up." Alma waved the sharpened stone menacingly. I inched toward the door.

Alan held up one hand, imploringly.

Alma shook her head. "Goodbye Alan," she said and turned, ushering me toward the door.

With a roar, Alan lunged at his wife, the paper knife in his hand. Alma screamed as it pierced her shoulder. She swung her other hand. I was unable to move as the scene unfolded: Alma screaming whilst Alan was frozen, his face changing from anger to surprise. Then, ever so slowly a red line appeared across his throat. He staggered backward, pulling the letter opener from Alma's shoulder. She didn't react but reached for her husband as he crumpled to the floor. For a few moments, Alma looked at the body on the floor as blood pooled, covered the rugs and papers, slowing inching toward her feet.

"Alma?" I asked quietly, wondering how we explain any of this to the police.

Alma saw my shocked face and her features hardened. Gripping her necklace more tightly she said, "We go now."

"Go? Alma, how can we go? Look at Alan!" I shrieked.

Alma looked at Alan one last time, then walked to the door. "We go, Anna," she commanded. Alma winced and I remembered her injured shoulder.

"What about your shoulder? We should at least clean the wound," I wondered why Alma wasn't crying in pain. Shock, I told myself.

Alma pulled at her blouse. I looked in disbelief as the wound in her shoulder wasn't running with blood, but oozing water. I stepped away from Alma.

"What the hell are you?" I can't take my eyes off of the injury, the water catching the hallway lights, reflecting like diamonds.

"You know me." Alma's voice was as sharp as her stone necklace as she walked toward me. I flung up my arms in defence, but she batted them away. Looking into my eyes she said, "I am your friend, Anna. I have always been your friend and tonight you have been a true friend to me but I need a little more of your help."

Lost in the azure swirls of her eyes I found myself nodding slowly.

We hastily climbed into my car and put the second part of our plan into action.

A combination of coffee, energy drinks and sweets kept me going through the long drive to Italy. I didn't dare break any speed limits, even on empty roads, for fear of being caught. I'd convinced myself that the police have found Alan by now and Alma and I are Interpol's Most Wanted. When exhaustion saw me swerving across the road, I pulled over and slept for a few hours before continuing to drive. Alma groaned from the passenger seat, sweat pouring down her face. Her wounded shoulder has not stopped leaking: I'd tried my best to stop the flow but the dressings quickly lost their adherence and over a dozen bandages littered the floor of my car. Eventually, I'd wrapped her arm in a blanket but even that was looking damp.

"Hold on Alma," I muttered.

The rising sun burned my tired eyes and I squinted whilst searching my bag for sunglasses. Alma stirred as I swerved the car back into our lane.

She peeled her eyes open. It took her a few moments to absorb the scenery then she suddenly sat up.

"You're truly my guardian angel!" she grinned at me, the pain that had marked her face moments before gone as she looks out of the window. "I remember this place. We're not far! Look! The road to my family's home!"

Alma's excitement was contagious as I hastily turned into the road. A few minutes of driving along a bumpy road and there was a small villa. As I pulled up Alma flung open the door. Clutching her injured arm, Alma hobbled around the side of the house, calling in Italian for her family. We jumped as there was a crash of crockery from inside then there was a scream as Alma's mother appeared in the kitchen doorway. They hugged, talked rapidly in Italian, with Alma periodically gesturing toward me, her mother listening in silence as our adventure is recounted.

Finally, Alma stopped. Her mother kissed her cheek, then grasped my hand. "Thank you to bring my Alma home," her tongue skipping over the English. I was about to speak when Alma slumped toward the floor, her mother catching her before she hit the dirt.

Her mother tutted. "Too long, my child. Too long since you dry your bones. Come," she gestured to me and together we lifted Alma. Her mother started to move toward the beach but I pulled back.

"Shouldn't we take her inside?"

"Dry her bones," insisted Alma's mother and dragged us both after her. I quickly fell into step, Alma between us. The cliff path was mercifully wide and the steps well maintained so we were on the beach in a few minutes, the morning sun kissing the tops of the cliff. Laying Alma down on the sand her mother tugged at her clothes, dumping them in a damp pile. Before I could object, my friend was naked. Her mother lifted the necklace and pressed the sharpened stone against Alma's scalp. I stepped forward, shouting for her to stop, but she waved the weapon at me, and I was left, watching in horror as Alma's mother slowly cut the skin from her daughter's body. Alma didn't move and there was no blood, just water pouring from the multiple wounds. Alma's mother reached Alma's feet, pulling the last of the skin from her toes, in the same manner I'd once seen a hunter skin a rabbit. My stomach churned.

The sun has climbed in the sky: I could feel its warmth trying to permeate my numb skin. Alma's mother knelt beside her daughter, a macabre sight of skin and muscles spayed on the sand.

"Salire," she commanded.

I barely contained a scream as Alma's fingers, then her arms and legs began to move. With mindful movements she slowly rose to her feet, water dripping from the gore covered bones. The skeleton of what had once been my friend turned to me and nodded, then stepped into the sunlight. Steam rose from her bones as she slowly, then with increasing confidence danced along the beach.

"Dry out your bones," I whispered.

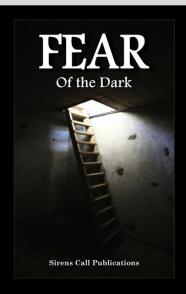
ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Geraldine works in the southwest of England as a crafter and writer. She currently has three books in publication through Fox Spirit Books, as well as short stories published online and in print. For more free fiction, craft ideas, writing tips and movie reviews, follow her blog, Instagram or Twitter. Join Geraldine for more Women in Horror Month fun with her daily online challenge.

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The Ride of Herne and Hespeth | Sumiko Saulson

What kind of mother sends her preteen to Halloween Camp? That's what Denise wanted to know. She could have been trick-or-treating with friends. Instead, she was listening to spooky stories and having cook-outs. She gazed drowsily into the campfire. The marshmallow on the end of her stick was finally melted. She smashed it onto the square of chocolate atop the graham cracker in her hand. She was about to eat the S'more when Miss Foster's shrill voice interrupted her reverie.

"Children, gather round!" Miss Foster cried. "Pull close to the fire. Watch the sun end his nightly dance with the moon. Can you feel the chill night air rising around you, fog cloaking your neck? Gather closer to the fire, and keep warm."

There had been four children gathered round the fire before her rousing speech. Denise winced as a dozen more rowdy kids from Camp Mather crowded around the bonfire, bringing their hot dogs and body odor with them.

"The story I am about to tell you is strange but true!" Miss Foster shouted. "The slaughterhouse down the road... did you know was haunted?

Almost on cue, a spine-chilling lowing sound pierced the bushes behind them. It sounded like a wounded man moaning in the distance. Lucy, the girl sitting next to her, jumped, knocking Denise's S'more into the fire.

"Damn it, Lucy!" Denise cried.

The groaning rose to a crescendo before dissipating in the wind. Toward the end, it became distinctly bovine. Could you hear the cows from the slaughterhouse a mile away?"

"Sit still, Lucy! Don't swear, Denise!" Miss Foster barked. "Why are you children always so unruly? Anyway, on with the story... where was I?

"It's haunted by ghosts, but not the ordinary kind. These are meaty ghosts, the skeletal remains of the dead cattle prepared for sale at your local delis and grocery outlets. The tattered bits of flesh that remain on the bone after the carving process begin to stink as the cow carcasses await burial in their mass graves. Have you ever smelled five day old hamburger? Naturally, the meat attracts maggots. The fervent breeding of insects causes the dead cow's ribcage to rise and fall, almost as if breathing."

"Gross!" Wide-eyed Daniel squealed, quickly spitting out his hamburger.

"Gross indeed," Miss Foster approved. "And an affront to the vegan witch Hespeth. She walked by and saw the cow corpses writhing. Thinking a young calf survived, she ran into the deep pit full of rotting animals. But it was no calf! It was maggots! Some evolved into flies and few into her face. She was quite put off, and immediately hexed the place. She'd been meaning to for a while. Vegan witches hate slaughterhouses, don't you know."

"If she loves animals so much, why doesn't she love flies?" Lucy asked.

"What she said," Denise seconded. "Circle of life and all that. Doesn't she respect it?"

"She would respect you becoming part of the circle of life, meat eater!" Miss Foster hissed, pointing an accusatory finger at Daniel's burger and Lucy's hot dog.

"That's why she cast the spell... to put humans into their proper place on the food chain. The accursed skeletons lurched forth from their graves. The stink of rotting meat was cloying. A cloud of green malodorous E. coli bacterial surrounded them. Soon, the maggots began to hatch, sending out waves of hungry, carnivorous flies. The angry mob of dead cattle marched toward Camp Mather, looking for filthy meat eaters upon which to enact their revenge.

"What's wrong, Lucy! Are you having trouble eating your hot dog? You keep looking away as I tell this story, almost as if you feel guilty. There are some vegan marshmallow substitutes to roast, if you'd prefer vegetarian S'mores..."

Lucy rolled her eyes and kept eating her hotdog.

Fixing her with an accusatory glare, Miss Foster continued. "Frothing at the mouth, hungry jaws snapping... Herne, the head of the heard, moved at preternatural speed toward Camp Mather.

"Their first victim was Charlie, a hitchhiker eating a dollar menu hamburger. The herd charged toward him, hooves pounding the dust below. Herne snapped into Charlie's flesh, angry molars munching his fingers like fresh cud. Green slime oozed from Herne's open maw and dripping nostrils, mixing with Charlie's blood as the fingers snapped one by one. The cannibal cow even ate the burger in his hand!

"Why are you doing this to me?" Charlie screamed. But he got no answer. Cows can't speak, you know. They lowed and mooed in laughter. Herne's accomplices began with the man's other arm. Soon, they'd ground him between their teeth into human hamburger. Leaving the blood puddle that had recently been Charlie behind, the hungry pack of roving skeletal cows continued its rapid descent upon Camp Mather.

"Am I making you nervous, Denise? Why did you stop eating your beef jerky?"

"I'm not afraid of imaginary cow monsters," Denise smirked.

"You should be," Miss Foster warned. "With no digestive tract to speak of, the herd had no way to digest the well-chewed bits of Charlie. Chunks of Charles fell out of their ribcages and down to the ground, trodden below angry hooves.

"The stampede rushed into the side of a Safeway delivery truck, butting against it repeatedly until it toppled over. The driver's blood curling screams were so ear-piercing they were heard by our camp director, Gwen Littleton. If you don't believe my story is true, just ask Gwen!

"Herne himself leapt into the cabin of the eighteen-wheeler and tore his blood-soaked teeth into the tattooed bicep of the driver, Daryl. The driver yelled, "What are you? Friggin' zombie cows?" Irritated, Herne bit into the man's juicy tongue, and yanking his foul-smelling head back, ripped it from his jaw."

Miss Foster cast an irritated look toward Lucy once more. "Have you ever eaten cow tongue, Lucy? I see you're eating an all-beef corndog. Do you think Herne would approve?"

Lucy shrugged, stuck her tongue out, and slathered ketchup and mustard on her corndog. Denise rolled her eyes.

"Unlike Hespeth," Miss Foster continued, "Herne was far from vegan. His large, square teeth sunk deep into the man's lower lip, pulling at it rending flesh from bone. Blood spewed over the steering wheel as another stampeding cow slid its incisors into the driver's jugular vein. The gushing maroon fountain pitched its moist payload with every breath, every heartbeat, and the smell of iron invaded the cabin as the windshield was painted in clotted crimson.

"The green bile and mossy rot of the original moldering cow flesh combined with fresh human blood and carnage as they tore in. One of Daryl's extruded eyeballs detached from his head and plastered itself to the center of Herne's skull. The feast was done. Like a festering wounded cyclops, Herne climbed out of the cabin and headed this way.

"Herne's spectral eyes glowed like coals in the dark. The moment his formed, so did like eyes appear in the cattle behind him. Herne, the sole bull in the stampede, was an oddity for a slaughterhouse. Where did he come from?

"Some have associated him with Herne the Hunter, the stag antlered aspect of Cernunnos, the Horned God. Others have associated him with Baphomet, the goat antlered god the idolatrous Templars worshipped. Still others say he descended from the Golden Calf the Jews worshipped coming out of captivity in Egypt. But who cares? I mean, really? If a molding dead cow skeleton is eating you, do you really need to know its backstory?

"Like the world's worst case of acid reflux, the beef from the local slaughterhouse kept coming back up toward Camp Firestone. I suppose it's because we order so many hamburger patties to keep you kids happy during summer camp. I would, if I were you, consider a vegan lifestyle."

Suddenly, Miss Foster stood and raised her arms to the sky. There was a gleam in her eye. The gleam quickly rose into a flash, and that flash turned bright red. The hidden moon rose from behind a cloud, round and full, and in its warm glow, the camp counselor began to transform. She stretched out, growing taller and leaner. Bones exploded from below her flesh, upon her skull, a headdress of bovine teeth.

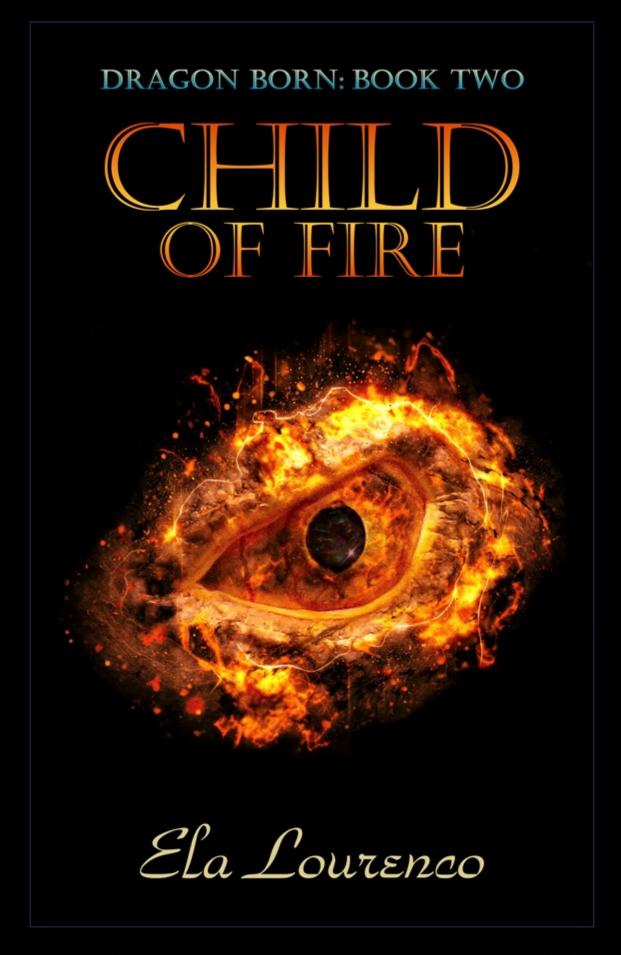
"It is I, children. It is Hespeth!"

Looking back over her shoulder, Denise saw two glowing eyes in the dark forest behind her. They were accompanied by a smell... rank, like the meat that went off in the refrigerator last month after the blackout. The electricity had been out for two days. The stench was heavy, cloying. Before she knew it the creature was before her... beside her... hungry.

Denise stared in shock as the zombie bull Herne chomped down on little Lucy's skull. Jaw agape, tongue dangling, eyes bulging, arm hanging loose to one side, Lucy dropped the half-eaten beef hotdog into the dirt before crumpling to the ground.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Sumiko Saulson is a horror, sci-fi and dark fantasy writer, winner of the StokerCon Scholarship from Hell and 2nd Place Carry the Light Sci-Fi Short Story Award. Born to African-American and Russian-Jewish parents, she is a native Californian, and has spent most of her adult life in the Bay Area. She ranked 6th place in the Next Great Horror Writer Contest.

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Pretty Little Boxes | Valerie Lioudis

I ran my fingers along the lids of the row of neatly displayed boxes. Each one was special, but one was better than the rest. There it stood at the end of the line, shining while all the others sat matte against the shelf. My collection started fifteen years ago, with one small dark wood box and the treasure it held. Little did I know then, that it would grow so large in just a few years. It wasn't until I held my twentieth box in my hand that I realized I needed to find a way to celebrate reaching twenty-five.

Now that day was here, and I could hardly breathe. I had hoped that reaching this milestone would calm the beast inside me, but staring down the line at the boxes made me covet more. Tonight would not be a night of celebration, but instead I would have to hunt once more. There were far too many treasures out in the world just waiting to be acquired. Normally, I would take some down time between each one. The beast would fall into his signature slumber. Things were changing, and it was time to get serious about feeding him.

I began to think about box number fifty. If I doubled, or even tripled my efforts, I could have it done in five years or less. Then I could put a gold box at the end of the line. A roar came from within.

Want.

"Of course, you want more," I said aloud in the empty room. "You always want more."

Faster.

"I'm planning on it. If you weren't so picky, this would be so much easier."

Perfection.

"You are so ridiculously demanding. Some days, I wonder why I keep doing this for you." I sighed, but my hands were still caressing the boxes.

Need.

"Yours or mine?"

Need. More. Faster. More.

"Fine. We will go out. I hope you have a plan, because I wasn't prepared to spend the night hunting."

Want.

"Yeah, me too."

I opened the silver box at the end of the line, and was happy that I had sprung for the satin lining. The eye stared back at me from its luxurious bed. From now on all of my treasures would get the same royal treatment.

"Why blue?" I asked.

Want.

"Yeah, I get that, but after fifteen years of killing you would think I earned an explanation."

Perfection.

"Sometimes, you make no sense to me."

Perfection. Want perfection. Need more.

Time had skipped again. Last thing I remembered, I had been standing in my living room in front of my bookcase, and now I stood above a dead body in the middle of the woods. Most

people would panic at this sudden and unsettling turn of events, but after the first decade, you just get used to it. It was the same old same old for me. Yet another leggy blond with bright blue eyes that had now turned glassy since death was setting in.

"Why can't you just take the treasures? You do all the killing. It seems silly to stop right before you collect your prize"

Want. Perfection.

"You are infuriating."

The first time I realized I hadn't been in complete control of my body was back in college. I came to in a class I hadn't remembered registering for. Throughout my time there, the beast would guide my path in the direction he desired. In the end, between the two of us we had somehow managed to graduate with a degree in ophthalmology. Well, actually, together we had become an eye surgeon who specialized in genetic deformities. That was something I had never really wanted, since my original plan was to become a teacher.

The beast had other plans. He always had other plans.

"You know we forgot to get a box ready before you went all gung ho and killed her." *Down*.

"Well, well. You thought of everything didn't you." I was somewhat annoyed since the only part I really enjoyed about this whole arrangement was picking out the pieces that go into the collection. "How long have I been out?"

Silence.

I should have known he wouldn't answer me. The beast didn't really have a good concept of time, and he wasn't one to explain my situation to me. I looked down at the box he had chosen, and while it was beautiful, I wasn't sure about it. Lifting it up, the smooth wood felt at home in my hands and I relaxed a bit. The lid opened with a small yet comforting creak. Old hinges had a distinct voice.

"I guess it is okay this time, since we were in a rush and all, but next time I pick."

Want.

"Okay, okay. Sheesh. You can be so impatient." I peeked under the lid and squealed with delight.

I ran my fingers across the satin lining. It was even better than the interior of the silver box. It would take a bit of work to get it out of him, but I would have to find out where he found it.

"Sometimes, you surprise me." I said as I unrolled my surgical tools.

Partner.

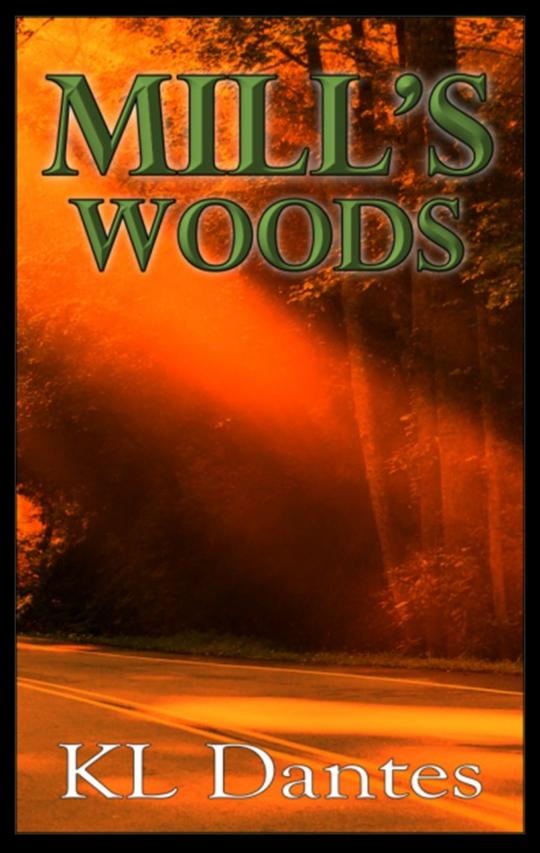
"Yeah. I'll never admit it to another soul, but I love you, too."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Born and bred in New Jersey, Valerie Lioudis's work tend to be filled with snark and sarcasm. She writes in several genres, including Horror, Sci-Fi, and Literary Fiction. She is an active member of the Indie Zombie Fiction community, and can be found on Facebook at The Reanimated Writers Fan Group, where she is always coming up with a crazy scheme or two.

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No one could have guessed the blood-thirsty horror hidden in Mill's Woods!



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My Girl | *JF Garrard*

The chip in one of my manicured nails made me frown. Looking at my hands distracted me from the awful stench of blood, waiting for the witch to finish her work. Nausea had overwhelmed me when the little old lady slit the throat of a rooster with no warning, spraying some blood onto my expensive designer dress when she collected the red liquid into a white bowl to use as ink to draw on yellow pieces of paper. I felt too petrified to inquire about what was going on.

It was amazing how a two hundred square foot room could be crammed with so much stuff. Roosters held in multiple cages squawked angrily in my direction, a desk was filled with incense, swords made from ancient coins, long strips of yellow paper, calligraphy brushes and other random crap. A shrine in the corner contained porcelain Chinese gods, honored with burning incense which filled the room with smoke.

My eyes shut for a moment from exhaustion as I sat on a tiny stool. The last few days had not been easy. I had gone for my five month ultrasound appointment by myself since my husband was out of town and the doctor told me that the baby's heart had stopped beating. I had a corpse in my body and I freaked out. I called my mother in China who told me not to tell my husband. They didn't trust him because he was a gwai lo, a white foreign devil. My parents were forever worried that he would divorce me and a miscarriage would definitely make him leave me. Instead, my mother spent a day calling relatives all over North America. She made me book a flight to Vancouver which was closer than flying back to China. Now here I was, sitting in a random witch's house, waiting for her to finish her spell.

"Take this and put it on your friend's belly. Take this other one and put it on your belly. For a night and day," the old women rasped in a dialect of Chinese which I understood, but had to think about for a few minutes due to her accent.

"Can you say that again?" I took the two pieces of yellow paper gingerly by their corners which had red Chinese calligraphy scribbled on it and some other symbols I didn't recognize.

The old woman looked at me as if I was an imbecile. "That paper on your friend's belly, that paper on your belly."

I held up one of the pieces of paper, "This paper on my belly?"

"No..." The old woman sighed. "You can't read Chinese can you?"

"Er, no," a hot blush spread across my cheeks. "I was sent to Toronto when I was very young, so I can only speak Chinese but can't write."

"OK, I will mark the corner of this piece of paper. This one with the mark you put on your belly and the other one put on your friend's belly."

"How do I put it on?"

"Use tape. Just tell her it's for good luck," she let out a soft cackle. "Tell her it must not come off for at least a day and a night, or else you will have to pay a price."

"Pay what price? I need to give you more money?"

"No, no," she shook her head as she used a dirty rag to wipe off the desk before she took a drink from the bowl filled with blood. Her lips dripped with red liquid as she gave me her final words. "Good luck and don't screw up."

The baby shower was planned months before I got pregnant. I thought it would be fun, I would be a great hostess and impress people in my giant 10,000 square foot home while serving fancy snacks from fancy catering companies. Instead, the baby shower for Lana, my best friend, felt like the longest day in my life as I watched women giggle and fawn over her eight month old belly. When people approach me to comment on mine, I just smiled and put my hand protectively over stomach.

Nervously I waited until Lana needed a break from the festivities. I dragged her into the upstairs washroom and told her I had a surprise for her.

"Oh my gosh, Laura, this is a huge bathroom!" She stared at the marble floor, sauna tub and gold handled faucets enviously.

"This might seem a bit weird, but in the Asian culture we have charms to help bring luck to our children. I got one for your baby and mine!" I pulled out the yellow pieces of paper from a gold box on the bathroom counter.

"Oh, that's so nice of you!" she gushed. "Is that Chinese writing? I thought you didn't know Chinese?"

"I flew to Vancouver and got a priestess to make them especially for us," I gave a tight grin. "She said that we have to wear this on our belly for 24 hours and that special luck will fall on our children."

"Well I do need some luck," she lamented. "Will might get laid off soon and just getting unemployment on mat leave isn't going to pay for much."

"Don't worry, I'll ask Ryan to see if his company has any extra positions to fit Will into," I opened the medicine cabinet to grab some surgical tape. "Let's put lots of tape on so the paper doesn't fall off."

We helped each other attach the yellow pieces of paper onto our belly and then lowered our clothes on top of it.

"This feels so funny," Lana giggled. "But thank you! If Ryan does have any positions please let me know!"

"Of course!" I hug her. "Why don't you go back downstairs, I'm feeling a bit nauseous."

I stare at myself in the mirror, a well-dressed Asian woman with deep bags under her eyes. Pulling out some foundation and blush, I put makeup on my face to hide my sleepless night. A few minutes later, I felt it, a great rush of warmth where the yellow piece of paper was. The transfer of chi energy from her baby to mine was starting. My eyes closed for a moment. In my head, I told myself that I was doing the right thing. It would be hard for her to raise a third child in her household and I had more than enough money to raise a dozen if I wanted to. She was younger and if she lost this one, she could get pregnant again while for me, at forty, getting pregnant again was near impossible.

"Mommy! Mommy!" A loud childish voice pierced into my thoughts.

Heading downstairs I spotted Lana's eldest, a boy of five running around the front of my house. The adults had given up entertaining him and allowed him to wander.

"I have a present for the baby," he announced.

"What do you have?" I ask.

"I have a kitty, my sister has a kitty and my baby brother has a kitty." His tiny arms held four tiny matching stuffed toys. "Oh and I have a kitty for your baby too." The child carried on, talking gibberish about how much he liked kitties.

"You don't have to give any to me, these are your toys."

"But mommy said that your baby will be like a sister to me, so I have to be a big brother to everyone!" His little face looked serious. "Mommy said that you are her bestest friend and we have to take care of you and the baby, no matter what happens!"

Squatting down to his level, I took one of the little cats which looked at me with tearful eyes. Crying animals were the latest thing in the toy market and looking at this sad object in combination with this cheerful blithering child set off something in my hormonal body.

"Can I show you something?"

"Hm?" He stopped talking and looked at me with wide eyes.

I lifted up my shirt to reveal the yellow piece of paper taped to my stomach. "This is a magical piece of paper. If you take it, hold it in your hands and make a wish, your dream will come true."

"Oh..." he looked astonished. "Can I go to Disneyland if I have that?"

"I'm sure you can! Your mommy has one, just ask her to show you!"

"OK!" The little creature ran off.

A few moments later I heard a scream, a crash and then he triumphantly ran toward me holding the yellow piece of paper.

"I got it! I got it! Can I go to Disneyland?"

An angry Lana appeared. "No, you cannot! You just destroyed our family's luck!" Her face was red with tears streaming down her cheeks and her hands were aggressively reaching out.

The little boy hid behind me and whimpered.

"It's ok Lana, I knew this was going to happen so I got extras." I walk over to my closet near the front door and pulled out my gigantic leather purse. Opening my wallet, I took out a small cloth pouch with embroidered Japanese characters. "I got this at an omamori booth in Tokyo from a temple. It's said that a piece of Buddhist text is inside this amulet and will bring the person luck. This one you just carry around and you don't have to tape it to anything."

"I'm so sorry," she sighed. "I'm like the worst friend in the world."

"Please, you are not, you really are not!" I put the amulet into her hand and hugged her, sobbing into her shoulder.

My husband is the world's loudest snorer. It was no surprise that when I woke up in the middle of the night with a searing pain which made my body go into shakes and spasms, he didn't notice at all. Every month I had period cramps which made me faint, but this pain was ten times worse than that. When I moved my head up higher on the pillow to see what was going on, I froze when I saw a tiny hand stretch the skin of my belly upward. A moment later it looked like a tiny foot was stretching.

People think that when pain hits, the natural reaction is to scream. But I couldn't make a sound. I was overwhelmed by horror. The baby stopped pushing upward on my belly and eventually made its way downwards toward my vagina. I covered my mouth with my hand and bit down on my knuckles, drawing blood. The curtains of our open window on this hot summer night billowed in and out. I tried to distract myself by concentrating on the memory of where we had gotten the curtains, the price and what arguments I had with my husband over the color.

After an eternity, with a sick ripping sound, the baby freed itself from my vagina, made its way out from my nightgown and crawled onto my belly, exhausted from the journey. Information I read from various pregnancy websites whirled in my head as I studied the tiny figure whose chest was heaving in and out as it inhaled deep jagged breaths of air. "At five months, the baby is approximately 27 cm from crown to feet..." "The baby can hear conversations..." "It weighs close to a pound..."

When the pain lessened, I cupped the baby against my belly which was still attached to me via a thick purple umbilical cord and hobbled into the bathroom. Warm blood dripped down my legs onto the floor and I absently thought that the housekeeper would be able to clean it up in the morning.

I turned on the bathroom light which startled the baby who buried its head into my belly. Though tiny, it was fully formed with a face, ears, hands, fingers, feet and toes. My nightgown had wiped away most of the blood, revealing deep pink wrinkly delicate skin. Its tiny eyes were gray in color and I wondered if it could see me. Opening my medicine cabinet, I grabbed some small scissors to cut at the umbilical cord which took several minutes before I made any progress. Sitting down on the cold marble floor, I could not help but marvel at the tiny human that had fallen asleep and as the mother of this thing, I was intrigued. My cell phone was charging on the counter, so I took a few snapshots of it in various positions. The pictures didn't turn out very well and the baby just looked like a blob. Taking a bath towel, I wrapped it in a swaddle hold and put it against on my chest. Tired from the night's events, I lay my head on the small bath mat on the floor and fell asleep.

The sounds of dogs howling from outside woke me up. This was the latest problem in the neighborhood, stray dogs which prowled the streets at night. No matter how many dog catchers we called, there were always more of them.

"Laura? Where are you?" From under the crack of the bathroom door, lights to the bedroom turned on. The knob of the bathroom turned and my husband stepped in. "ARGH!"

The screaming jolted me to a sitting position and the baby rolled off my body. The baby sat up and shook its head, as if in shock from leaving the warmth of my body.

"Darling, I'm in here," I offered weakly.

My husband stared at me, his mouth agape at the sight of dried blood and the baby which had crawled into a position on all fours and was hissing at him. Its large mouth stretched unnaturally wide, displaying rows of large pointy teeth. The previously innocent looking little eyes grew large with eyeballs displaying swirling black and red colors. My mouth gaped open as I looked at my baby which had turned into some sort of wild, shapeshifting creature.

For a moment I thought about throwing myself in front of my husband before the baby launched itself at its father. A silence fell over us and I could hear the pounding of my heart in my ears as I wondered what to do next.

A dog howled again. In a flash, the baby was gone, crawling on all fours past my husband and out the window, ripping part of a curtain in haste.

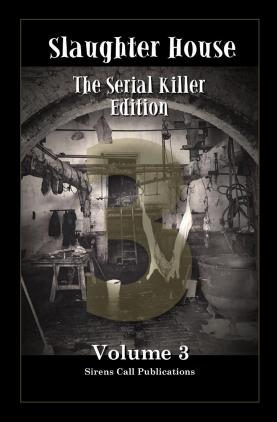
"That's my girl," I giggled as I collapsed into fits of laughter. My husband was not amused and left me in the bathroom. I could hear him explaining the situation to someone on his phone.

When the sirens and paramedic staff arrived I was still in a manic state.

"The next one will be different! The next one will be different!" I chanted until a tiny sharp pain pierced my arm and filled me with calmness, sinking me into a sea of darkness.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — JF Garrard is the founder of Dark Helix Press, Marketing Strategist for *Ricepaper Magazine* and Assistant Editor for *Amazing Stories* Magazine. Her background is in Nuclear Medicine and she has a MBA in Strategy and Marketing. She is an editor and writer of speculative fiction (*Trump: Utopia or Dystopia, The Undead Sorceress*) and non-fiction (*The Literary Elephant*).

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Slaughter House: The Serial Killers Edition - Volume 3

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The Place of Honor | C.A. Verstraete

Every year he sat in the pumpkin patch, waiting for that one special person to come his way.

Day after day, he grew larger and a vivid, brighter orange as he turned into a grand specimen of the pumpkin family.

Then it happened. A cute little boy with a big smile and freckles almost as orange as his skin came and picked him up.

The boy's hug felt nice, so good, just like his ancestors had told him it would.

The others rustled their big green leaves on the vine in goodbye as the man carried him to the family's car.

He rode to his new home nestled in the arms of the boy. He relished the warmth of the boy's hands around him. The pumpkin patch seemed far away now.

The boy insisted on carrying him in. Wait, what was that? A flash of orange on the porch step got his attention. Another pumpkin. But-but what was wrong with that pumpkin's face?

He didn't have the chance to see enough as they carried him inside. A rustle of paper. He sat on the table waiting to be set in the place of honor. That's all he'd heard as he grew in the pumpkin patch—that the one chosen had a place of honor in the family's home.

"All right," the father said. "Scary or funny?"

"Funny!" the boy cried.

Wait... what-what was happening? ARGGGH! Something sharp cut into his brain. No-No! What are they doing? Oh, the pain!

The cutting, the searing pain, the stabbing, seemed to last forever. Then the worst came. The horrible humans dug inside, scooping out his innards, his heart, his brain, until he sat there, nothing but an empty shell.

Through the magic of the pumpkin patch, he still felt, though. He continued to follow their motions. The little boy, who had seemed so good, so loving, turned his gap-toothed smile of terror in his direction. The man gave an evil leer and leaned ever closer with that instrument of torture.

He quivered in fear as the man cut into his soft, tender flesh. One cut, and then another, and soon a big evil smile with five little pointed teeth decorated his face.

In surprise, he blinked, his vision sharp and clear as the man cut two triangular eyes above his newly formed mouth and nose.

The electric candle they put inside him gave an eerie glow and lit the space around him. He looked out from his place of honor by the fireplace, listening as the house quieted and the family went to bed.

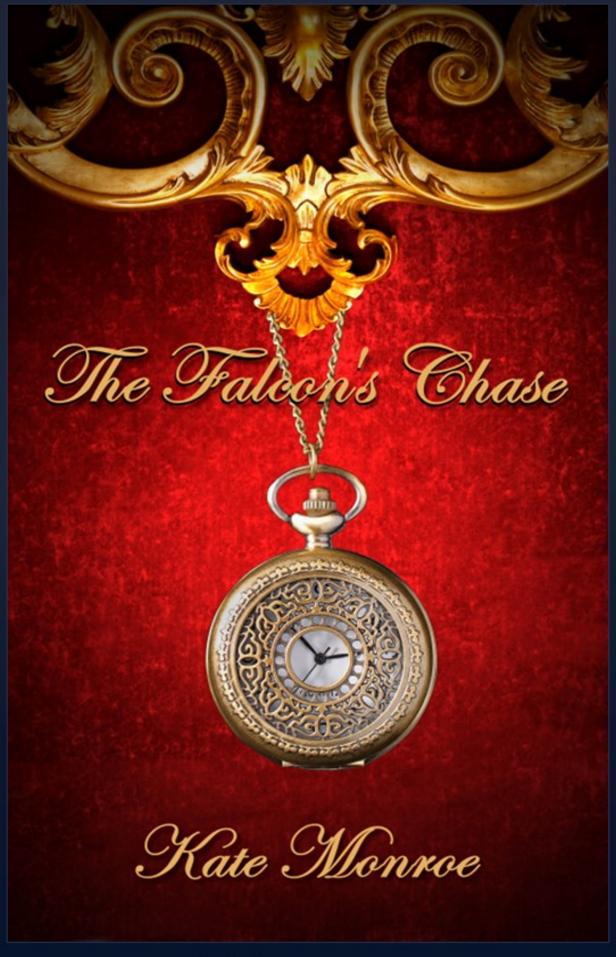
Slowly, carefully, he rolled and bumped his way off the fireplace bricks. He slid along the wood floor and went down the hall. At the door, he stopped and listened to the soft breathing of the sleeping boy.

Longing filled him.

Chomping his teeth, he slipped into the room, eager to be with the one who had given him new life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Christine Verstraete's stories have been published in several anthologies and magazines including *Descent Into Darkness*, 100 Doors of Madness, The Sirens Call and others. She also is author of the books, Lizzie Borden, Zombie Hunter and The Haunting of Dr. Bowen.

Website: http://cverstraete.com
Blog: http://girlzombieauthors.blogspot.com



Available on Amazon

The End | *Julianne Snow*

It pulled its head up and gazed at the world through new eyes. The world existed in the drab gray of monochrome simplicity, but tinges of crimson permeated through the dreariness. Food. It knew instinctively what the red signified and within it a hunger grew, exploding from its mouth in a frightening shriek... Its mind was on the figure walking away, a pack awkwardly swung over its shoulder.

My breath heaved in and out of my chest as I checked and rechecked the lock on the door. I could still hear them on the other side of the oak panel, but I knew if I stayed quiet they would forget about me. Eventually.

My forearm burned, but I couldn't think about the pain at this point. I knew what it meant, but part of me didn't want to admit the truth. I had been bitten, barely escaping the gnashing teeth of the one who infected me.

I'd always been so careful before today. Never going out unless it was absolutely necessary and only when the street outside the warehouse we'd been calling home had been clear for hours. And why had I chosen to forget those rules today? Tampons.

I was out and needed them desperately. Not only were they useful for the obvious reasons, but they were helpful in a pinch if you needed something absorbent to help stanch the flow of blood from wounds.

Fuck, I'd forgotten about Tommy. Stupid kid had come back from a scouting mission with a huge gash on his leg. He'd fallen into a ravine trying to escape a few of the runners and had only narrowly escaped with his life. Now he was bleeding all over the warehouse floor, necessitating my trip into the open.

I supposed I should have just let him die. It was not like I'd be able to get back and save him at this rate anyway. Fucking kid had gotten me killed now too.

I glanced at my watch and took note of the time. I'm guessing I had been in the storeroom for about ten minutes. It was hard to tell how much time had really passed, my heart was beating so fast, but I knew I had to figure this out. Especially if I was going to get the tampons in my pack back to the warehouse before *it* happened.

Okay time to concentrate. I made myself breathe in and out slowly, hoping to calm my racing heart. It wasn't supposed to be like this. I was not supposed to die on the outside, giving up my life to save some snot nosed kid without a clue.

And all of this was because we needed food and supplies. And we needed them badly. Back when all of this seemed like an impossible dream, none of it really mattered. We could pretend to 'prepare' all we wanted, but the truth was that none of us really had much of a clue when it came to prepping. Hell, we didn't even know what we were preparing for...

No one was going to help me, so I had to stop thinking about it. I just needed to get out of this storeroom and back to the safe house. At least we'd been smart enough to set up in a centralized location. Hell that was something right?

But had it actually helped us at all? Not really.

So many of us had died trying to keep our location safe from the undead and from other survivors. Everyone wanted what we had managed to scrounge together, and Jared ruled us like some rich overlord. Who the fuck cared if he'd bought the warehouse before the end and he let us stay there with him?

But the truth of it was we had to care—one false move and Jared had promised to turn each and every one of us out on our ear. It was an empty threat; he needed us just as much as we needed him, but thus far it had kept everyone on their best behavior.

A loud noise shattered the relative silence of the storeroom for a moment, making me jump. The jostle set my arm burning again, reminding me that I needed to get out and fast. I had no idea how I was going to manage that feat, but I had to do something. Sitting here and waiting for the end wasn't going to do any good.

I got up and took a quick look around the small space I had locked myself inside. At first glance it hadn't appeared there was another exit, but as I looked closer, I noticed a small window tucked up on the far wall, its ledge taller than my arms could reach.

Realizing it was my only option for escape, I started to lug some of the crates and boxes underneath it. It was hard work, made all the more difficult by the burning sensation I felt running up my arm. I stopped for a moment and glanced down at my arm, alarmed to see its flesh graying and dark veins beginning to snake from the bite.

Turning back to my task, I ignored what I knew was happening. If I'd had the forethought to bring my knife, I could have done something to stop the spread of infection. I would have done it, even if it meant bleeding out. None of us wanted to end up like them. It was a fate worse than death.

Once I had created a pyramid with the available materials, I climbed to the top and took a moment to observe what was beyond the window. The yard was clear for the most part but there were areas I would need to be careful of once I got to the ground. At least the area around my vehicle was free and clear.

I carefully pulled the window toward me, a little surprised it opened so easily. I dropped my pack out the window giving myself at least a small amount of cushion on the hard ground below. Hefting myself up, I looked at the ground directly below. I had a decision to make: did I want to go head or feet first?

Smiling a bit at my own conundrum, I decided that head first was best. If I broke an arm in the fall, it was much better than breaking a leg. At least I could still run with a broken arm.

I shuffled my body forward, reaching my arms through the rectangular opening. Then I felt it. That snug feeling that makes your heart beat just a little faster. I tried to wiggle back a bit but I was stuck.

Then I panicked. I contorted my body in every direction, trying to dislodge myself but only wedging myself in worse. The edges of the window began to close in on me, squeezing the breath from my lungs. My legs flailed against the boxes on the inside of the storeroom, dislodging them. As they fell to the ground, I lost all purchase with my feet.

As I hung over the wall, my head and feet weighing me down on either end, I was struck by the comical nature of my prison. I started to laugh, but the panes of the window hurt as they cut into my stomach from the pressure.

I let myself go slack, hanging in one of the most awkward positions I could think of. How was I going to break free? My pack was on the ground outside and with it all of the tools I carried with me. Not that I thought any of them could actually help me.

"Hey, you seem to have gotten yourself into some trouble there?"

The voice scared the living shit out of me, causing me to jump and bruise my ribs. I looked to my right and saw the man standing there, shotgun resting on his hip.

"Yeah... is it that noticeable?" I thought a joke might make this guy think I was worth helping and God knows I needed help.

"I see you've got a bite on that arm of yours. How long ago?"

I thought back, trying to figure out how much time I had. I knew it wasn't much, but from the look in his eyes, I had a feeling it wasn't going to matter much. "Maybe 20 minutes?"

"I'm sorry to hear that. Is there anything I can do to help?" He said it with a smirk and I had no illusions as to whether or not he would help me.

"You could give me a pull if you're feeling charitable." It still wouldn't hurt to ask right?

"Yeah... I don't think so. But I will help myself to your pack. I'm sure there's lots of goodies in there I can make use of. Lord knows you won't need them now." He bent down to grab the strap, hefting the heavy pack toward him. "Thank you kindly, miss."

At least he was polite. Maybe that was a good sign?

"I don't suppose you'd do me a favor?" I had to ask.

"What is it?"

"We both know what's going to happen to me in a few minutes and I was wondering if you'd consider making sure that doesn't happen?"

The man stood back up and stared at me for a moment. I could see him weighing the odds in his head.

When he turned to walk away, I had my answer. The fucker was going to leave me to die and then come back...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Julianne Snow is the author of the *Days with the Undead* series and *Glimpses of the Undead*. She is the Co-Founder and Publicist 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 Undead In a world once ravaged by a terrible war, Katra is a hunter...



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Subversive Children's Games | E. A. Black

Kyle Baker blocked Julia's way, sneering in her face. At only nine years old, Kyle lived in a world of disappointment, anger, and resentment. As long as Julia could remember, the brat held one heck of a grudge against Susan, his twelve year old sister and Julia's best friend. Susan was a straight-A student and popular while Kyle's grade point average hovered around a D+. The kids in school laughed at his pudgy belly and black clothes. He envied Susan and took out his rage on her every chance he got.

"Wanna play a game?" Kyle shifted from one foot to the other, blocking Julia's path to the stairs to the attic. Susan had sent her to fetch the Ouija board.

"Leave me alone," Julia said.

"I can make things happen. Bad things," he said. "I didn't kick the table."

"Yes, you did," Julia said. She, Susan and Kyle had been having a séance in the basement when the table jumped. Kyle insisted he didn't kick the legs to scare them, but she knew better. After all, tables couldn't move of their own accord, could they?

"Let me by," Julia said.

"I didn't kick it, but I can make things move by themselves," Kyle said. "I've been studying magic. Wait until you see what's waiting for you upstairs."

"You lie. You're just trying to scare me," Julia said.

"Go upstairs and see for yourself," Kyle said with a leer on his fat face.

He moved to her side and without saying another word she headed for the attic. Sunlight filtered through dirty glass windowpanes that hadn't been cleaned in years. The light illuminated dust motes floating around the room, giving Julia a sneezing fit. Boxes stacked high against the walls, tipping into each other. She saw the block lettering OUIJA on the side of the box from clear across the room and headed for it, careful to not jostle any precarious boxes so that they'd fall on her, pinning her to the dusty floor.

As she reached for the board she looked down to her right. Susan's Barbies lay in a jumbled pile in a grease-stained box. Those dolls had once been Susan's favorite toys. She never parted with them and coddled them as if they were alive. Julia was shocked to see them in such terrible condition. What happened to Kyle to make him abuse Susan's dolls so?

Was he so jealous of his sister he took great glee in torturing her and anyone close to her?

Once dressed in fine velvets and shimmering satins, the dolls lay in a jumbled heap atop each other, naked and exposed, plastic corpses in a mass grave. Arms and legs jutted at odd angles. Chopped hair stuck out in clumps on several tiny heads. Magic Marker in purple and green stained the once golden tresses. Revulsion overwhelmed Julia, who turned her nose up at the disgusting creatures. She had always hated Barbie dolls. They didn't look quite human. She shivered, teeth chattering from the attic's chill and the uncanny sight of twig-thin arms and legs. One doll's cheek had a big, gaping hole in it, exposing the hollow interior. Julia swallowed her unease but it caught in her throat. Just get the Ouija board and get out of here.

These dolls always scared her. No living woman looked like them. Her mother and Auntie didn't. None of her teachers did. The doll's arms and legs did not bend at the elbows and knees. How could they move? Their faces were devoid of emotion; cold, distant, and threatening. *Just like Kyle's*. She shoved that thought from her mind but the dolls stared at her. No matter where they lay, their eyes watched her, judged her. As they did now.

Plastic fingers here and there curled in misshapen blobs, melted from Kyle holding a match to them. He had drawn nipples on the cone-shaped breasts, which stood high and firm despite years being left in a hot attic tossed aside like yesterday's trash.

Their chests rose and fell, ever so slightly but the movement was unmistakable. One head snapped to the side, empty eyes gaping at her, the blank face so much more frightening than one full of the hate she knew those dolls felt for her. Julia cried out but her voice squeaked in her throat. Three of them bent at the leg sockets as they gained traction in the greasy box. Arms flailed back and forth, seeking a solid surface to press against so they could stand.

Dolls crawled over each other, soldiers in a war, and poured over the top of the box. They moved as one, like a swarm of bees. Julia stumbled as she ran away, tripped over a chair, and landed on her butt on the floor. She scooted backward whimpering but unable to cry out, as if she were in a nightmare and lost her voice. Once on the floor, the dolls flipped themselves over until they stood on battered and melted pointed toes, racing toward her on legs that did not bend at the knees. As they hopped toward her, years of terror buried since the last time she saw those hellish toys bubbled to the surface. The manic dolls leaped and sprinted until they jumped on her, tugging at her dress, yanking her hair, opening their tiny mouths to snap their jaws at her skin with little needle teeth. She opened her mouth to scream when one stuck its head halfway down her throat, choking her.

Those whose hands had not melted in Kyle's match flames dug their fingers into her sides and along her rib cage, tickling her. Expressionless faces gaped at her, making them all the more frightening since they displayed no emotion at all. Only manic fury in tickling the hell out of her until she collapsed in a fetal position, unable to fend them off. She writhed on the dirty floor, the tickling an agonizing pain that grew worse as the plastic fingers dug deeper into her sides, her armpits, her heels, and the backs of her knees. Two climbed her legs beneath her dress and crawled on her bare belly, poking her until she cried so hard tears fell. She knocked over boxes in her spasms but nothing would dislodge them. Punching them made them erupt in high-pitched giggles only dogs and children could hear. Pulling at them only enraged them further, making them dig in their fingers even harder. Ready to pass out from lack of oxygen, she crawled further across the floor only for the late-coming dolls to pull her hair, twisting her head backward.

"What the hell is going on up here?"

The dolls went limp. They dropped from her sides, blouse, and back as if someone pulled a switch and turned all of them off. Julia smacked at them, shoving them away, screaming, crying, and gasping for breath at the same time. She writhed and slapped at her body as if ridding herself of spiders and crept across the floor on all fours, mind lost in a fury of plastic and blank faces.

After she pulled herself upright by grabbing her Auntie by her dress, she fled wild-eyed down the stairs.

Kyle stood on the landing, an evil look on his wicked face. "Mom never did take them to the trash. Whatcha think? Believe me now?" His cackling followed her as she fled the house without answering him, the memory of the dolls snapping at her tattered mind.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — E. A. Black's fiction has appeared in *Zippered Flesh 2*, *Zippered Flesh 3*, *Midnight Movie Creature Feature 2*, *Teeming Terrors*, *The Journal for the New England Horror Writers Vol. 3* and more. She won mention for her short story *Invisible* on The Solstice List 2017 Best Of Horror. That story appears in *Zippered Flesh 3*. She lives in Lovecraft country on the Massachusetts coast with her husband, son, and two cats. The ocean calls her every day, and she always listens. She has yet to run into Cthulhu.

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Lakeview Wayside Chapel Conversion | Donna Cuttress

I always felt apprehensive as my car turned onto the road that began the ascent toward Lakeview and the surrounding hills. After about a twenty minute drive, I saw the chapel spire poking above the trees. A small cross topped it, pointing heavenward, if you believed in Heaven. Birds flew around it, cawing and cackling, circling but never landing. The chapel bell didn't ring anymore and had not for many years. The conversion was not near finished. There was always something going wrong with the renovations, one snag after another holding up the job. As I approached the site, I saw the workmen sitting on the low wall that surrounded the grounds, ass cracks on full display.

"Why have we stopped work?"

"That's for her to tell you."

The foreman pointed to the chapel and went back to drinking his coffee. The vandalized doors were closed, swollen with the cold and jammed shut. I had to kick them open. Marie was waiting in what had once been the nave, sitting on a stack of marble floor tiles, staring at a bright phone screen. I had to tread carefully on the newly exposed concrete. It was cracked and fragile; the workman had begun to smash it up, ready to lay new flooring.

"We have a problem."

She pointed to a large black box that had been dumped by the wooden pews, which were leaning against a wall. There were handprints in the thick dust that covered it. I went to wipe it, but she stopped me.

"Don't touch that!"

I backed away from it as though it were contagious.

"Why?"

She tiptoed between the beams to me, almost whispering in my ear.

"Bones... more bones."

I rolled my eyes. Another snag.

"I thought we had removed all the bodies from the chapel and its grounds. Those that were documented anyway. All gone to another resting place. How can there be any more?"

She began tapping on her phone screen.

"I don't know, but we need to sort something out and get the job back on track. I need to make some calls."

She yanked open the doors sending dirt spiraling after her. This would put the completion date back even further. I could hear a cheer from the workmen as they were told they could leave early with pay. Marie came back in the chapel, closed the doors behind her and leaned against them.

"Well? What do we do?" I asked.

"I told them to go, that there'd be no more work today and that we'd informed the authorities. And they'd get paid until five."

I looked at the box, even thought about opening it but stopped myself, and wiped the muck from the lid instead with my coat sleeve. There was writing on it, a shop name, bold curvy graphics that spelt 'Bowens'. The faded black and white cardboard had wrinkled with age and damp. It was about the size that would have held an evening gown. I remembered my Grandma talking about 'Bowens' and the ladies who shopped there.

"I thought all the named bodies had been removed. We'd seen to all that before we'd started. How could we have missed these? Where were they buried?"

Marie began pulling on a pair of woollen gloves. It was always freezing in the chapel.

"They were under the marble slab by the doors. They weren't buried as such. I think they were hidden."

All the names of those who had been granted permission to be buried in the chapel grounds had been accounted for. They had all been matched with chapel records. This box now posed a problem. More bones meant a disruption to the conversion and we were on a deadline to finish. We couldn't afford to stop.

"And there's another problem."

I did not want to listen anymore, I just wanted to finish this jinxed job and move onto the next. Nothing felt right about the Lakeview Wayside Chapel since we'd begun. I waited as she gingerly prized the lid off the box.

"The human skeleton has, when you've finished growing, two hundred and six bones..."

"Thank you, doctor."

I was getting a headache.

She dropped the lid on the floor making a hollow sound. The box was crammed with bones of various sizes. Some were sepia coloured with age, brittle and fragmented.

"There are more than that in here... and if there was one whole skeleton, there would usually be a skull, I can't see any, can you?"

I shook my head, my brains pulsing against my own skull in pain. I felt nauseous. The bones seemed to be slithering like snakes, intertwining with each other.

"And when burying a body on consecrated land it's not really common place to use an old department store box as a coffin."

"I agree," I muttered and began to head for the doors. I needed air and to be as far from the box as possible.

Before I left she almost shouted,

"We can't tell anyone about these ok? We can't afford to, Lyn."

I nodded, we had both re-mortgaged our houses to start this business and until now it had been going ok. We weren't millionaires yet.

"What shall we do with them?"

She pushed the lid back on the box.

"I don't know. I'm not taking them home. The kids will probably end up playing with them!"

I didn't want them in my house, so I walked back over to the box, pulled my sweater sleeves over my hands, picked it up and replaced it under the cracked concrete where it had rested before. I slid a piece of marble over it with my foot.

"Let's sleep on it. The workmen won't be back until Monday."

All evening I was tormented by thoughts of the bones. Questioning myself. Who did they belong to? How many people were they from? I even dreamed about them! It would begin as I stood at the altar and watched the chapel fill with people of all ages and races, heads bowed low, taking their place in the pews as a solitary bell rang, calling the congregation to prayer. A woman in a plain long gray dress with straight silver hair stood with her back to me at the open doors. As they banged shut, the congregation would wake from their stupor and raise their heads with a sickening *crack*. Every face was skeletal. Skull grinded on neck bone, as they would slowly turn toward me. Then the bell would stop ringing. The woman would turn quickly and before I could wake she would be in front of me screaming, reaching for my neck. After the third time waking from this nightmare, a sweaty screaming mess, I got up and dressed. As I drove through the chapel gates, Marie was already there, sitting in the front seat of her car, drinking coffee from a child's plastic sippy cup.

"Well, you're a sight for sore eyes! I couldn't sleep, kept thinking about the bones. Even dreaming about them."

"Me too. Over and over."

She offered me a sip of her coffee, which we then finished between us as though it were fortifying brandy. We braced ourselves to go into the chapel. Marie unlocked the doors, and we

pushed against them together, being careful to step over the bones beneath our feet as we went inside. I switched on the large static work lamps which illuminated the ground floor like a film set. The vaulted ceiling made our shadows look grotesque. Marie pushed the marble slab aside and reached for the box.

"It seems heavier than last time." she whispered and rested it on the stack of marble tiles. "Here," she passed me a pair of gloves knowing I wouldn't have any. They were rainbow striped, obviously belonging to one of her kids.

"This doesn't feel right." I said.

"Ok Lyn, do you want to touch the bones with your hands?"

"I don't want to touch them at all!"

"We have to. We need to count them. Lay them out."

"Why?"

"I don't know. We just have to."

I pulled a tarpaulin across the floor next to the altar and stretched it out. Marie carried the box up the aisle then tipped it. The bones cascaded to the floor making an horrendous rattling sound echo around us. We covered our mouths and closed our eyes as bone dust floated upward. I stared at the hoard.

"We're reading the bones ..."

"What?" Marie was still holding the base of the box

"People used to read bones. Throw them on the ground like dice and tell fortunes from them. In medieval times I think."

"And what do you think these would say?"

"Phone the police?"

So, we began sorting. After about twenty minutes, and the third time of gagging on my own saliva, I noticed the scratches. I held what looked like a piece of spinal column up close to examine it. It looked like a pattern or writing. I squinted, but I could not make it out so I took out my phone from my jacket pocket, ignoring the texts and missed calls, and photographed it. I enlarged the picture. My hands began to shake even more than they already had been.

"Marie? You better look at this."

It was writing. A name. Neat, cursive and etched into the bone with something like a needle.

'Samuel Litten 1922'

We looked at each other, then picked up what looked like a thigh bone and scrutinized it. There was another scratch. I photographed it and enlarged it.

'Lisle Hant 1909'

Marie was examining more of the bones, then placing them down very gently.

"They're all marked, Lyn. They're all named."

"It's a..."

"Congregation."

We stopped when we said the word 'congregation' in unison.

A bell rang, making the bones shake on the floor. The lamps continued to flicker faster. Marie was looking straight through me, pointing toward the doors.

There was the woman, the one from my nightmares. She stood very upright, hands clasped in front of her, head bowed, with a large silver cross dangling around her neck. She lifted her head to look at us as she whispered to herself. The bell rang again. That malicious stare, slowly became a smile. Evil, full of hatred and revulsion for us. I wanted to run, but I couldn't move. Her movements juddered with the flashing lights as though we were in an old movie, scenes flickering across the screen. The doors opened behind her. She turned and stood open armed in front of a young man, dressed in shabby clothes, half-starved who seemed to be appealing for help. The woman wrapped her arms around him and welcomed him inside. The lights continued to flicker.

Marie's hands covered her mouth to stop her screams. The woman pointed toward the pews which were now back in their place. She gently pushed him, made him sit, and as he did, the flesh slowly fell from him. His appearance changed as he agonizingly took his seat with the skeletal congregation who now stood in the pews as though waiting for the service to begin. Their heads were bowed in whispering prayers that grew louder each second. It was just how I had dreamed it.

The woman saw us and began to approach, taking staccato steps toward us. I fell backward feeling Marie's hands on my shoulders as we both stumbled to regain our footing among the piles of bones. With every flicker she was closer to us. The congregation's voices grew louder, angrier.

"What do we do?" I whispered, looking to Marie.

The woman stopped in front of us. The congregation silenced. She spoke in a light voice, childish almost, laced with fake concern. It was a script, rehearsed perfectly.

"Do you need help?"

We both shook our heads, backing away, the crunching of powdery bone under our feet. She stopped, then began to approach again.

"Do you wish to stay at the chapel?"

She took another step closer, I swear I could smell a rotting stench from her, like stagnant water or decomposing meat.

"Tell me, what are your names? I will need to make a note of them ... for later."

She gave that horrible smile again.

"No way!" I shouted, grabbing Marie's shoulder and dragging her up with me.

"Run!" Marie shouted, and we did. I don't know whether we ran through her or around her, but I was too terrified to care. In that fitful lamp light, we threw open those doors, darted down the driveway and did not stop. We ran! There was no way we were going to end our days at the Lakeview Wayside Chapel with our names scratched into our bones.

We contacted the authorities that night. It seemed that the chaplain's wife had been a very compassionate woman to those in need, and had even kept the chapel open after her husband had died. Some of the bones still held traces of poison in them and the names were to be checked

with various missing person's lists and police records. The nearby lake had to be dragged; she had to have dumped the rest of the bodies somewhere. We finished the conversion, eventually. It sold quickly, fortunately the gruesome story seemed to attract a certain type of buyer. We have our eyes on another chapel just come on the market and it's very, very cheap.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Donna Cuttress is a writer from Liverpool, U.K. Previously published by 'Crooked Cat', 'Firbolg Publishing', Solarwyrms 'Latchkey Tales' and 'Flame Tree Publishings' 'Chilling Ghost Stories'. Her work for 'The Patchwork Ravens' 'Twelve Days' is available in artbook as well as paperback. She has had other stories published by Sirens Call Publications as part of Women in Horror Month.

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New Pet | *Karen Thrower*

I sat in a rocking chair in Joseph's bedroom, waiting for him to come home. After I broke in I walked around the entire apartment, and there was only one picture I could find. It was of his parents. No pictures of friends on the fridge, no wife or girlfriend. Hell, there was no boyfriend either. He was all alone, and that didn't surprise me. He had a gift for pushing people away. He also had a gift for letting people only see what part of him he wanted them to see. Classic sociopathic behavior. The ones he bullied were the only ones that saw the monster for what he was. Honestly, I was glad no one had fallen for his swarthy behavior.

It wasn't long before I heard keys unlocking the front door. My pulse raced and my newly black finger nails started drumming on the arm of the chair. He was home. He was about to pay for everything! His footsteps got louder, and when the door to the bedroom opened I got to my feet. He put his keys on the dresser and turned the light on. He turned and jumped when he saw me.

"What the fuck?" *It's him it's him!* The words screamed in my head. Joseph May. I recognized the circular birthmark on the left side of his neck. I used to stare at it while he would sit on my chest and punch me. That was when I was ten. Didn't matter I was a girl, he was an equal opportunity bully. I looked into his eyes, and all I felt was hate. "Get the hell out of here!" He yelled. The sound of his voice brought back more memories. When we were fourteen he would steal food from my lunch box and rub it in my hair. At least when he shoved me into lockers in High School I could hide for a while. The worst was when I found my older sister crying in the bathroom. I told her not to go on a date with him, that he was mean and a bully. That he had been tormenting me for years, but like the others she didn't listen. I knew what

happened without having to ask. I vowed that day to kill him. It took years of studying necromancy and magic. Years to find just the right form of punishment, and now I was finally going to get my revenge.

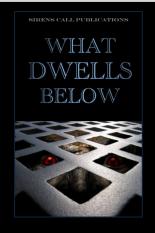
"No." I growled at him and pointed. "Him." Before Joseph could get another word out, my new pet tackled him to the ground. His head made a satisfying smack against the hardwood floor. The huge revenant was covered in black blood and torn clothing. I pieced it together from bits of murderers that were buried just outside the old cemetery. It smelled like dirt and shit. It was perfect for my bully. Joseph's scream was quickly silenced as the revenant's teeth clamped on his throat. Gurgling filled the air as I walked over to them. As my pet chewed on Joseph's neck, I watched his eyes bulge from his skull. They met mine as I loomed over him. Those pretty, blue eyes were screaming at me, begging for help. His arm reached up to me, but I kicked his hand away. He didn't deserve help. When his eyes rolled back into his head I smiled. The sound of slurping and chewing replaced the gurgling.

The revenant lifted its head, pulling something thick and stringy out of Joseph's neck. It let go and the thick string snapped back into place, spraying blood everywhere. It was just what he deserved. That son of a bitch tortured me every day from second grade until I left for college. No one helped. Not my family, not teachers, no one. No one believed me because Joseph was such a 'stellar person' to everyone else. I don't know why no one believed me when there was physical proof on my body that something was wrong. I suppose people don't care about the truth. It's easier to ignore the bad things because fixing them takes effort, and people are lazy. I crouched next to his head and pulled his earlobe as hard as I could.

"You deserve this you know. You brought this on yourself." My pet was cheek deep in his ruined neck. It seemed with every bite he got another inch deeper. Joseph's neck was a ruined mess of meat and blood, and I felt surprisingly light. This man would no longer haunt me. I'd never have to worry about running into him on the street. I'd never open a newspaper and see his picture next to some philanthropic event he was at. I was free. I tapped my pet on the back and it stood up. A large piece of Joseph's skin flopped against my pet's chin as it kept chewing. "One down, more to go."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Karen Thrower is a native Oklahoman, wife and mother to a rambunctious four year old. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Deaf Education from The University of Tulsa. She is also a member of Oklahoma Science Fiction Writers and serves as President and Facebook 'Wizard'.

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What Dwells Below

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

Kq' | Nicole Givens Kurtz

A tickling softness brushed Yazhi's fingertips as her mother's blanket slid out of her hands. Her mother folded it in a quick fashion before picking up another one. The frenzied actions were being repeated all over the village. An ochre glow rimmed the village. The entire land seemed to have captured the sun in its mouth and burped up flames. As the fire crawled across the mesa, it chewed up everything in its path. Bold and brave, it fought back the cold darkness. The forces jumped onto the edge of their lands and crept ever closer.

The smoke rose into the sky and thickened with each passing moment. Wails, hurried voices, and the sharp tones of the villagers echoed amongst the ash-thick air. They had to push on, for Black God had erupted here, in this place—their place. It meant nothing for him to escape the confines of their Hogan, and began to ravage the land, turning the tumbleweeds, cacti, and man into its food. Terror shook Yazhi, for she'd never seen anything like this before.

This was her first contact with Black God. The son of a comet and fire, Black God was lord of kq', fire. Tales told by her grandfather, a powerful medicine man, spoke of Black God's cowardice and transformative powers.

How could they believe Black God was helpless when he chewed the landscape and ravished all in his path? With eyes wide, Yazhi clutched her mother's dress with mounting fear. The soft fur of her mother's blanket offered small comfort. It hung from her shoulders as she bent down to retrieve a fallen basket.

Yazhi shut her eyes and turned her face into the fur.

"What ails her?" her father demanded, his voice rough from the smoke.

"Black God's power is displayed this night. It is Yazhi's first time in his presence." Her mother coughed. "It comes closer."

Her father growled. When Yazhi looked at him, she saw him shake his head in mounting disappointment, but whether that was for the situation or her actions, she didn't know.

"Here. Take these."

Her mother gave Yazhi a small smile, and pressed items into her hands. Bits of pottery filled with grain, oil, and turquoise. She followed her mother's glance to the semi-circle of fire, kq', that leapt up and vanished into the billowing sky. At the same time, kq' managed to remain on the ground. As if angered, it crackled and popped in its efforts to speak to them, even as it consumed all in its path. Her people had to leave before they too became food for the kq's belly.

She had never before seen it so wild and untamed.

Yazhi spoke soft against the thick air. "What do you want?"

The maize lay collected in hand-woven baskets, ready for the journey to the neighboring village. As the elders told of the first people, First Woman and First Man were joined forever by this world to those that had come before them. The different types of maize represented the various people who eventually became the Dine. The flickering called to Yazhi to come, to touch, and to feel its power.

Entranced, she headed toward it.

Black God's kq'. It moved across the mesa, old and slow like the god himself, but then fast and furious. She pictured herself standing tall in its orange-yellow glow as First Woman once did in the yellow world, when she first met Black God.

Like Yazhi tonight.

Somehow she'd walked closer to the kq' than to her home. Mesmerized, she watched it dance for her and she reached out her hand to join in its joy. Now that she had come closer, it did not seem so bad.

"Ow!" She yelped as flames bit her. She rubbed the angry spot on her hand.

Her mother stuck her head out of the Hogan's entrance. "Ya-zhi?"

Yazhi waved. "Here!"

Her mother's face became alarmed. "Yazhi! Get away from that fire!"

"But..."

"Now! Come closer to me, beside the house." She waited until Yazhi had started back toward the Hogan, but the clatter and clang from inside the dwelling drew her attention away.

All around the family Hogan, people trekked back and forth between their homes, mules, and horses. Yazhi's mother continued to bring out items and tie them onto the family's own pack animals.

Once her mother had disappeared back into the Hogan, Yazhi turned back to the fire. She couldn't take her eyes away from its newfound display of magic. The growing kq' battled back the gloom, a fierce and greedy warrior. She found herself back at the edge of the blaze, within arm's reach once more.

Moving closer to her village, the kq' gobbled everything in its path. Its power grew as it fed. When it appeared to be winning the eternal fight, it reached higher to the dark sky as if summoning its lord.

Yazhi stumbled backward. Her items spilled to the earth. The heat licked at her as if finding her delicious. She searched behind for her mother or someone, but there was only the constant motion of people on the move.

These weren't the only movements in the night.

Yazhi watched as the moon overhead folded in to the gathering dark, and stepped down onto the ground in front of her. Obediently the fire withdrew, but only from the place of darkness, where he stood. It was Black God! She couldn't mistake him. His mouth was a full moon, and a crescent moon had been etched into his forehead. Elderly and mysterious, his smile frightened her.

The kq' leapt around excitedly, like children did when their parents came home.

"Come into my embrace, little one," Black God encouraged.

"Why?" Yazhi wanted to run, but she couldn't get her feet to obey. Her mouth struggled to form words. The fact that she'd managed to ask the one question surprised her.

"Because I demand it." He did not smile now. His face was hidden in shadow. Coward.

The whims of gods had become legendary. Yazhi looked around, but no one else seemed to notice Black God towering into the heavens. She swallowed her fear and tried to look up into

his face. Where did he want to take her? She didn't want to leave her family. It had been his doing that her people had to leave this settlement. Yazhi knew her family, like other Dine', had grown tired of being uprooted, first by the white men, and now this.

So, she steeled her strength and pooled her courage. First Woman did not shy away from this lazy god, who let his offspring do his work for him. Neither would she. He could demand whatever he wanted, but she had some demands of her own.

"No." Yazhi tossed her plaits over her shoulder. With her hands on her narrow hips she glared at him, but only a moment before looking away.

"No?" He rumbled when he spoke and the sky shook.

For a god of kq', he made her very cold.

Someone cried out and she looked across to the many people streaming across the horizon. Sheep, mules, and people displaced by Black God's appetite—or whim.

Yazhi turned back to Black God. "I will come with you, but you must stop destroying the village."

"I will destroy this valley, the mesa, and your village and you will come with me." He waved his hand and the raging ochre grew higher.

"I am the granddaughter of Chief Manuelito! You will not threaten me or my people!"

She stamped her foot. Inside, a magic warmth spread through her, filling her with light that poured from her fingertips. Her heart thundered in her chest as she directed them into the eyes of Black God, who screamed in agony.

He could burn her to ash where she stood! That knowledge terrified her. But all the pentup disappointment, rage, and confidence of youth ignited her own inner kq'.

Besides, Yazhi reasoned, Black God had already devoured much of the land surrounding her village, if not the homes themselves.

"Yazhi?" Her mother poked her head out of the Hogan's doorway. Her dark hair blew on the breeze, but it failed to hide the fear on her face. "Come!"

When Yazhi turned back to look at Black God, he had vanished. His chuckling echoed on the wind. The moon hung in its full glory in the heavens above, and all appeared as it had been before.

Yazhi checked her hands. They seemed ordinary. No light. No scars. Nothing.

"We are leaving!" her father called as he climbed on the horse. He waved his family to him, and Yazhi raced to join them. He sounded tired, but strength showed in his movements. He would endure. Their people would endure, as they have forever, for the Dine'.

The air tasted like ash, smoke, and dirt. Yazhi too smelled of smoke, and her moccasins were covered in soot. She glanced once more at the village, then back to the kq'. She'd done what she could to save her village, but the flames continued to advance.

Her efforts had been in vain.

"Look! The fires are changing!" Her mother pointed to the orange glow that winked out near the first set of Hogans. It looked as if stronger kq' had taken hold on the western edge of the lands, closer to the canyons—away from their village.

Black God was turning his glowing offspring. Like a starving sheep, the kq' demonstrated its powerful appetite, consuming everything in its path. But as it continued its dance with the wind, it moved away from the village.

Her mother hugged Yazhi to her as her father joined them. They watched the darkness and the illumination of the kq' engaged in battle.

Yazhi rested her head on her mother's shoulder. "Do we still have to leave?"

"No, little one. We do not." Her mother kissed her forehead. "We do have to bring everything back into our home."

Yazhi groaned, and both her parents laughed.

"Watch the kq', Yazhi, as it continues its dance with its partner, the wind," her mother encouraged.

Yazhi looked out to the destroyed lands. She'd never seen anything so beautiful, and so harsh before.

She hoped she never would again.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Nicole Givens Kurtz is the published author of the futuristic thriller series, Cybil Lewis. Her novels have been named as finalists in the Fresh Voices in Science Fiction, EPPIE in Science Fiction, and Dream Realm Awards in science fiction. Nicole's short stories have earned an Honorable Mention in L. Ron Hubbard's Writers of the Future contest, and have appeared in *Crossed Genres*, *Tales of the Talisman*, and numerous anthologies such as Baen's *Straight Outta Tombstone*, and Onyx Path's *V20: Vampire the Masquerade* Anthology.

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Change of Life | Diane Arrelle

The woman snapped upright from her bent over position. The hot pie she had just taken out of the oven slipped from the mitts covering her suddenly limp hands. Slowly she turned...

"Ms. Herron... Ms. Herron... Alexandra, are you all right?"

Alexandra Herron blinked rapidly to erase the nightmarish memory. Looking up from her desk, she smiled weakly at her secretary. "Yes, I'm fine, Cindy. Just lost in thought."

Why can't I ever forget, she wondered. Why can't that bitch just die and leave me to my own life?

Alex noticed her secretary still waiting. "You can go, Cindy. In fact, why don't you take a break?"

Cindy didn't move, she just stared at Alex with that cow-eyed look. Chuckling bitterly, Alex responded, "Don't worry, I'm fine. No breakdowns this week. Mom doesn't need the company."

Alex struggled to shake off the dark mood and went back to work. The face of a small, curly-haired cherub, a sweet baby born into a family of emotionally crippled mothers, kept blocking out the computer screen. By lunchtime she decided to call it a day.

Inside her cool, gray, living room she kicked off her shoes and flopped onto the couch. Why did she have a flashback at the office this morning, she wondered. What had triggered an attack again? It seemed that she had finally conquered all her demons two years ago. All it took was twenty-seven months of extensive therapy and a truckload of money.

Turning on the television to the news, she watched the world disintegrate a little more. The date-line flashed through her mind and she suddenly knew what had triggered her flashback. Even if she ignored the date, her subconscious never forgot.

The news was as depressing as usual and she hit the remote to turn off the world. She relaxed, breathing slow and deep as her eyes unfocused then drifted shut. Alex slept.

The woman snapped upright from her bent over position. The hot pie she had just taken out of the oven slipped from the mitts covering her suddenly limp hands. Slowly she turned, ignoring the steaming apples and crust on the floor to stare at the little girl with short blond curls. She seemed to study the laughing child who sat at the wooden kitchen table swinging her thin legs back and forth, back and forth. The woman's eyes widened until the iris was completely surrounded by white and her mouth slowly opened to form a large, red-ringed O...

She woke screaming, "Mommy! Mommy!" Looking around wildly, Alex quickly realized she was an adult in the safety of her own home. The phone was ringing, she automatically picked it up.

"Alex?" a male voice inquired.

"Yes, Steve. Why are you calling me here?" Alex asked.

"Cindy told me you went home early. Are you sick?"

"No, I'm fine. I'm just tired."

"Yeah, I've noticed you aren't sleeping well lately."

"Look Steve, I'm fine!" she snapped wishing he'd leave her alone. Funny how she wanted to be left alone most of the time now, she thought, except that she really didn't like being alone with herself.

She found self-loathing easy, especially after what she did four years before. She knew it was all her mother's fault. How could she have normal emotions, she wondered, when her own mother had wished her dead? At least she didn't leave behind tainted memories like that. Nickie would grow up knowing she was unwanted, but at least she'd never feel hated. Alex had saved her from that pain. If her little girl were lucky, she'd learn to hate Alex, not herself.

She remembered those last words her mother ever spoke. Alex could still hear that shrill, hysterical voice shrieking, "No, no! Not this! Please don't do this to me! I wanted to die!" Then her mother stopped grabbing uselessly at her hair long enough to scream at little Alexandra, "When the time comes, kill yourself right!"

"...Alex...Alex are you there?"

"Huh, oh sure, Steve. Sorry I just got lost in thought. Look, why don't you come over for a late dinner," Alex said absently as she studied the scars on her wrists. "I'll be back after eight, I've got to visit Mom tonight."

She could sense Steve hesitate before he asked, "Do you think that's wise?"

"It doesn't matter what anyone thinks is wise!" she said tensely. "I do what I have to do."

"God, I'm so tired of it all," she mumbled after she hung up. "Mom, John, Nickie, I certainly made a mess of their lives."

Changing into casual clothes, she drove over to the nursing home where her mother sat vegetating for the last twenty-five years. She quietly tiptoed into the semi-private room and stared at the shriveled old woman. Her mother wasn't even sixty yet, but looked as if she'd suffered through several lifetimes.

"Why'd you do it, Mom?" Alex asked sitting next to the older woman. "If you had held on, life would have improved. You could have run away, like I did. Women don't have to be household drudges anymore."

Alex stopped and chuckled bitterly. "Why, we are almost treated better than second-class citizens now. Just look at me, I got out and only had to work twice as hard as a man to get where I am."

Stroking the old woman's head, Alex continued, hoping some of it would get through. "I remember how being a wife and mother was too stifling, how you always told your friends it was drowning your entire identity. All you ever wanted was to be free. Did you lose you that day, or did you finally just get your freedom?"

Alex felt she had to keep talking, she had to tell Mom why she stopped coming to visit. Suddenly, on this anniversary of it all, she had to get through to her. She knelt in front of the old woman and gently turned her face and looked into her eyes. "Nickie was so cute, I really can't

remember when I started to hate her so much, and John, John was a demanding sex hog. Sometimes, I have dreams of finding him in the night and castrating him while he sleeps. But then they come and force me to raise Nickie. I'd rather die than be trapped like that again!"

Beginning to cry, Alex took a shaky breath and whispered, "I understand why you tried to kill yourself all those times."

She stood, stepped back and stared at the immobile woman with the wild eyes that begged to convey a message that no one understood. "I'm really sorry, Mom, I stopped coming to see you under Doctor's orders. After I tried to kill myself they made me get help. I didn't want it at first, like you, I only wanted to end this farce. But it helped. At least for a while... I think."

Wiping the tears from her cheeks, Alex took another deep breath. "I've missed you, Mommy. Why did you go away like that? Why did you go insane and leave me all alone? Daddy never forgave you, and he never had the time or inclination to really care about me. He's remarried now and has a whole new family. He's happy."

"Tomorrow's the anniversary of when you lost it. Why don't you surprise us all and come back. Right now. That would be really nice. Come back for my birthday. I'll be thirty-one in

just two days. Remember how you were going to make me a birthday cake right after you took that pie out of the oven? Why don't you do it now?"

Alex held her breath and waited. She waited for some sign that her mother had heard her, would come out of her state of mad inertia. After what felt like hours, her mother tilted her head, opened her mouth and ... drooled.

Sobbing, Alex wiped the spittle from the chin of the blank that had once been her mother. She got up to leave, but at the door turned back and said, "Thanks for nothing, Mom. See you in Hell because being crazy doesn't make you holy."

Driving home, Alex thought about everything bad in her life. How Mom went insane right before her eyes and even worse, let her know she was the cause.

With an ironic half-smirk, Alex thought about the turning point in her miserable life. How she got pregnant, married the father and settled into the life she'd always dreamed of. She was finally loved. Only, she learned the hard way that love meant giving until there was nothing left and then giving some more.

Nickie turned out to be an unbearable burden. And John, oh God, that man wanted her to be the perfect wife, cooking, cleaning and servicing his needs. Why didn't her needs count at all, she'd asked herself a million times. And he kept trying to get her pregnant again. He said he loved her, yet he wanted to destroy her completely.

By the time she pulled into her parking place, Alex was hysterical. She sat at the wheel, weeping over all the mistakes she had made in her life. "Life's really a giant bowl of crap!" she wailed and beat on the steering wheel.

Slowly, she got her emotions under control. She went inside to prepare dinner for Steve. She really didn't want to see him. She didn't want to see anyone but if she cancelled, he'd get upset and come over anyway.

It was time to end the relationship, Alex decided washing the lettuce. "I don't need anybody!" she cried throwing the half made salad at the wall. "I don't want anyone!"

The doorbell rang reminding Alex of the telephone they'd had when she was a child. Mom used to talk for hours. Alex remembered sitting under the table listening to her mother complain. Every single conversation went the same way. Mom wondered why she'd ever been born and wished herself dead. Then she'd cry that she'd never wanted children and that a daughter had been the worst mistake of her life.

"No wonder I'm so screwed up," Alex sobbed ignoring the door and Steve. "I just can't take anymore."

She yanked the door open and yelled, "Go away!"

Before he had a chance to respond, she slammed the door and bolted it. Alex ran to her bedroom and took the phone off the hook and collapsed on the bed, too tired to care about anything.

She woke fourteen hours later, stiff, chilled and late for work. Putting the phone back in place, she called in sick then lay back down. "I can't take anymore," she said as her tears slid out the corners of her eyes and ran into her ears.

Tomorrow's my birthday and I've missed the last four of Nickie's? Does she hate me? Did I ruin her life like Mom ruined mine? "I'm sorry Nickie, I'm so very, very sorry. It's just that I was never meant to be a mother."

Getting out of bed, she went into the bathroom and started to fill the tub with steaming water. When it was half full, she climbed in and settled back, letting the water scald her skin. As the level rose higher, burning her, she grinned at the pain.

Still grinning, she slashed at her wrists with a shiny new razor blade she'd been saving for just this special occasion. The searing, burning cuts merged with her burning flesh. She jerked erect, screaming as her blood turned the water pink, then red as it overflowed the porcelain boundaries and soaked the expensive carpeting.

Slowly, she slumped back and whimpered. "I don't remember it hurting this much. Why does everything in life have to hurt so much?"

The phone rang, and dimly through a thickening fog, she heard the answering machine pick up. It was someone from the nursing home telling her to call them immediately. She had left instructions only to contact her in case of death. "Guess Mom decided to buy it along with me," she sighed and closed her eyes.

The last thing to occupy her thoughts was a memory, a memory from twenty-five years ago today.

The woman snapped upright from her bent over position. The hot pie she had just taken out of the oven slipped from the mitts covering her suddenly limp hands. Slowly she turned, ignoring the steaming apples and crust on the floor to stare at the little girl with short blond curls. She seemed to study the laughing child who sat at the wooden kitchen table swinging her thin legs back and forth, back and forth. The woman's eyes widened until the iris was completely

surrounded by white and her mouth slowly opened to form a large, red-ringed O. Her hands came up to grab at her hair but the oven mitts interfered. She kept on trying to pull her hair as she screamed and screamed...

The world faded away completely and Alex knew peace for the first time. Then with a searing, blinding flash she was alive again. She could feel stockings hug her legs as the viselike grip of a girdle sheathed her middle. A pearl necklace rubbed at her throat and she could see the full cotton skirt topped by a frilly apron clothing her from the waist down as she knelt before the hot dark pit before her.

Is this Hell? she wondered gazing at the yawning doorway. Suddenly, she realized she was peering into an old electric oven as a familiar voice rushing away from the inside of her head shouted, "I'm free, I'm free, thank you, I'm free."

Recognizing the voice belonged to her mother, Alex was slammed with the awful realization that it wasn't Mom who went insane all those years ago, that it wasn't Mom who rotted in an institution for a quarter of a century. Mom had been freed when Alex somehow shifted back in time, back to take over her body.

Back to repeat what had to be repeated. Again.

Alex snapped upright from her bent over position. The hot pie she had just taken out of the oven slipped from the mitts covering her suddenly limp hands. Slowly she turned, ignoring the steaming apples and crust on the floor to stare at the little girl with short blond curls. She studied the laughing child who sat at the wooden kitchen table swinging her thin legs back and forth, back and forth. She felt her eyes grow wide and knew her mouth was slowly opening to form a large, red-ringed O. Her hands came up to grab at her hair but the oven mitts interfered. Alex felt helpless as she kept on trying to pull at her hair as she screamed and screamed...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Diane Arrelle, the pen name of Dina Leacock, has sold more than 250 short stories and 2 books. Her third book, Seasons Of Fear, is due in 2018. Recently retired as director of a senior center, she is co-owner of a small publishing company, Jersey Pines Ink LLC. She resides with her husband on the edge of the Pine Barrens (home of the Jersey Devil).

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Drabbles | Alyson Faye

Troll Hunting

The small girl in a pink skirt wandered onto the hump backed bridge, holding a leash but no dog. She stared open mouthed at the sight of Hannah, hanging upside down over the side of the bridge.

"Troll hunting," Hannah explained.

The girl nodded solemnly. She watched while Hannah carrying a knife, climbed under the bridge. She listened to the screams.

When Hannah reappeared she swung the troll's ugly severed head. Blood dripped onto her jeans.

"You can sleep safe tonight." Hannah smiled.

The little girl waved bye. There were no trolls.

She thought the dead man's face looked sad.

Nest of Bones

Up in the attic on the floorboards lies a brown feathery ball. Tattered and torn. Its blood spatters the dust. A fly lands on the bird's glassy eye. It does not blink. Sickened I turn away.

In the neglected fireplace rests a nest. An intricately woven tangle of twigs. Inside nestle white bones. Cuddled up. I hold them gently in the palm of my hand.

Thump! Turning I see bird after bird. An unkindness of ravens. A murder of crows. Target the windows. Some get in. They fly around, cocking their heads in unison. Surrounded, I wait for the attack.

Requiem

Standing at the rear of Lancaster Abbey, together but apart, we absorb Faure.

The white gowned choir's voices soar. The notes transport you. You float away from me, enraptured.

Tugging at our mutual memories I try, but fail to bring you back to Earth. You hover above the choristers' heads, mouthing the soprano part.

Oh my love, I know it is time to let you go. How hard it is to part company. Devoted wife, mother, soul mate.

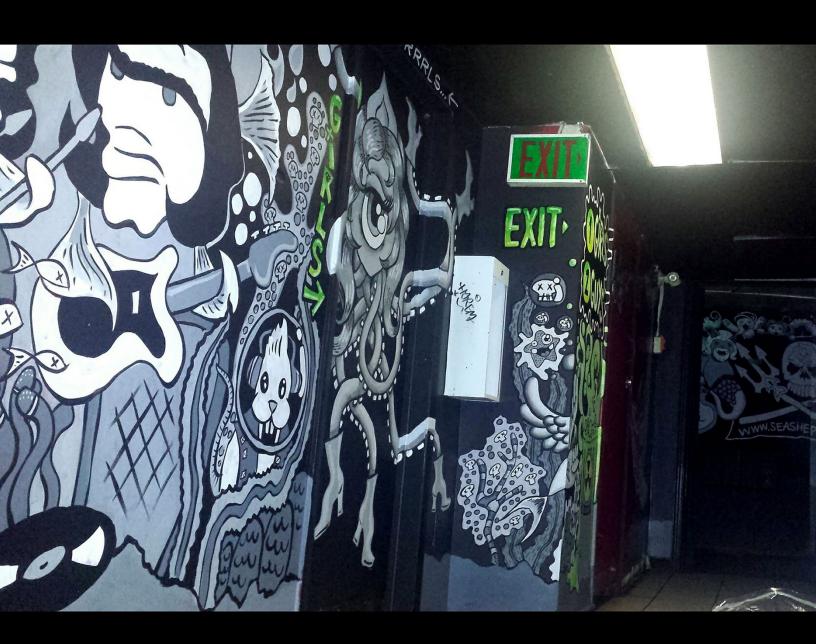
One of the boys looks up, sees your white shroud poised above him, screams and faints.

It is your cue. Exit heavenwards.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Alyson lives in West Yorkshire with her partner and son. She writes dark flash fiction and her debut collection 'Badlands' has just been published by Chapeltown Books. She also writes ghost stories and is featured in 2017's Women in Horror Annual 2 edited by C. Rachel Katz. Much of her work is available to read in magazines online particularly at Horror Tree where she is a frequent contributor. She teaches creative writing workshops.

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Patient #5 | *D.M. Slate*

June 1, 2042

It's been sixty-nine days since we received our last shipment of water. All attempts to contact the base camps on Earth have been unsuccessful. It's as if they've completely aborted the mission—leaving us to fend for ourselves on this unforgiving red planet.

Closing my voice-diary-log, I stare out the tiny six-inch window on the exterior side of my living pod. A massive dust storm has been brewing for the past eleven days, making it difficult to see more than a few feet outside of the compound.

Sighing, I turn away, looking back to the interior of my small living space.

The morning bell disrupts my thoughts.

Rising to my feet I walk down the corridor to the galley, where our entire colony gathers at each meal. In all, there are ninety-four of us remaining. In a colony which had peaked at nearly two-hundred inhabitants, our numbers began declining over the last year. A combination of viral sickness, malnutrition, hypothermia, and suicide had cut our population in half. And then the water stopped arriving.

I lower my eyes to the floor as I enter the galley. Slipping quietly into a nearby seat I hope to draw as little attention to myself as possible. Other colonists shuffle in around me. Gradually, the largest pod built within our compound begins to fill with bodies. A nervous energy buzzes in the room, although no one acknowledges it. Dr. Franklin takes his spot at the front of the pod and the various muffled conversations fall into a hushed silence.

The tall, slender, middle aged man clears his throat and the sound echoes off the metal siding. His salt-and-pepper hair is combed neatly and his clothes are freshly pressed. Calm and composed, the doctor takes a deep breath and exhales slowly before speaking.

"Good morning to you all. As you know, today shall be the morning of our fifth selection. Life on Mars is an exhausting conquest and now that we've been abandoned, we must find a sustainable source of water. Our teams of chemists and hydrologists have been working around the clock to purify the ice water collected by the rover. We applaud their efforts and continued dedication to this task."

Dr. Franklin pauses as the rest of the group claps in uniformity. He adjusts the tie around his neck, loosening it a bit, before continuing.

"As physician in charge, it's my duty to report the findings of our study. It's with deep condolences that I relay that patient number one passed away yesterday in the late hours of the night."

A shrill cry erupts from the crowd as Mrs. Maplewood falls to the floor in a mound of sobbing agony. Patient number one had been her husband, Paul. Nearby colonists do their best to comfort the grieving woman as Dr. Franklin continues.

"Patient number two remains unchanged in her catatonic state, however, her vitals remain strong and steady. Patient number three has maintained consciousness and control of his bodily functions, but his mental status is questionable. We're continuing to closely monitor his behavior."

My eyes meet and connect with Dr. Franklin's momentarily before I look back to the floor. The doctor continues with his report.

"Patient number four has given us our greatest hope yet. He's been ingesting the melted ice water for three days now and he suffers from only minor side effects. With the latest chemical mix to the ice we're hoping that patient number five will suffer absolutely no side effects after drinking treated Mars water, pioneering a new direction for self-sufficiency here on our *Red Mother*."

A half-hearted cheer erupts, before the room falls into a tense silence. Dr. Franklin clears his throat again.

"It's now time to select patient number five."

Tapping the activation button on his wristband, Dr. Franklin gives the computer the order. "Generate the random selection, now."

A hologram image projects from his wrist and the occupants of the room hold their breath as they watch their names scroll across the virtual screen. The device emits a *ding* and only one name remains: Heath W. Franklin, M.D.

A shocked intake of breath can be heard in the room. Clearly flabbergasted, Dr. Franklin's jaw hangs agape. Recovering his composure he gives a slight nod of his head.

"So it is. I shall be patient number five. All of my previous work and data has been meticulously recorded, and it appears that our research will now continue under the direction of my assistant, Dr. Vanessa Chappelow."

All eyes in the room shift in my direction. My pulse accelerates and tiny beads of sweat form on my forehead. Feeling lightheaded I hold onto the table for stability. I manage a curt nod as they gawk.

Dr. Franklin begins speaking again. The eyes of my fellow colonists shift back to the front and I manage a much needed breath. Using the speech as a distraction I nimbly rise and exit out the back of the room. Racing down the long corridor I pass numerous pod openings before reaching my own. Dashing inside I swing the door closed behind me. I collapse onto my bed and close my eyes.

I, alone, know the truth about what happens behind those quarantine doors. The thought of Dr. Franklin actually ingesting the Mars water is preposterous. He's seen what it does to people.

Dr. Franklin's report to the colony had carried partial truths, along with many hidden secrets. I felt that full disclosure of our findings should be made, but Dr. Franklin had assured me that it was in the best interest of the colony to present only the most basic results.

A rapid knock on the door breaks my train of thought. My stomach churns in anticipation as I prepare to open it. Dr. Franklin stands in the corridor just outside my pod.

"Hurry. We've got to get to the lab."

Without waiting for my response he spins around and departs down the corridor. I follow the man, robotically. By the time I reach the entryway to the quarantine pod Dr. Franklin is already there with the door propped open, waiting impatiently for me to enter.

My eyes are instantly drawn to the lifeless body of patient number one. His bloated, swollen corpse is now nearly double the size that the man had been in life, prior to ingesting Mars water. Naked and laid out on the operating table, it's a ghastly sight to take in. His body had swollen so quickly that the outer layers of his skin had torn and split in numerous locations. His eyes, which remain open in death, had been strained to the point of popping internal vessels. The eyeballs are now large crimson orbs.

No surgical procedures had been attempted on this patient. Once his body had begun to inflate, Dr. Franklin and I had been dumbfounded as to why. The melted ice water had been through our scientist's purification process and had tested clean, multiple times. There was no logical explanation as to why the body was reacting like this.

It was then I'd first noticed the *change* in Dr. Franklin. His mentality began to shift from *treating* our patient to *solving* this medical mystery. Since, I've learned that this man has no problem experimenting on our fellow colony members, whom he sees as merely 'test subjects' now.

Shifting my gaze to the side I glance at patient number two—Sarah. She'd been given a different batch of chemically treated ice water. Agitated and scared, patient number two had become combative when it was time to administer her water doses. Taking drastic measures, Dr. Franklin made the decision to perform a frontal lobe lobotomy on patient number two, resulting in her catatonic state of mind. Since the operation patient number two has continued to receive Mars water doses, and her body continues to swell.

Tubes protrude from her unmoving torso and the nearby computer scans her systems, looking for the cause of this inflammation. Patient number two's skin is stretched taunt across her slender frame, revealing a roadmap of blue veins just beneath the surface. With the swelling of her internal organs, the young woman's stomach has protruded so much in the last week that she appears to be in her ninth month of pregnancy. Her hands and feet are covered in fluid filled blisters. It won't be long before her skin begins to split.

A small groan escapes form the lips of patient number three. I turn to gaze at Brent and my heart skips a beat. It's difficult to look at someone you've called a friend, once they've been selected as a *patient*.

The third batch of treated Mars water had given us the same disastrous results. Patient number three had begun to bloat almost immediately after ingesting the water. This time Dr. Franklin made the decision to perform a trepanation to combat the effects of the head swelling. The patient's hair was shaved to the scalp before two large flaps of skin were pulled back, exposing bone. Two circular sections of patient number three's skull were removed, allowing the swollen brain to expand outside of its cranial cap.

None of these efforts have seemed to make any difference. Patient number three is just one week into treatments and his prognosis is bleak. Our monitoring systems show that his internal organs are growing at the same rate as both previous patients.

"Help me, please."

The pained whisper comes from behind me.

Turning, I face patient number four, Alex. Tied to his treatment chair he makes an attempt to reach for me, but only the tips of his fingers move. The bloated red appendages resemble stuffed sausages.

"I hurt."

I step toward the ailing man but Dr. Franklin steps in-between us. Scowling, he snaps at me.

"We don't have time for this, right now. We have to figure out what we're going to do, about me."

Before I can find my voice, he speaks again.

"You're going to have to lie to the colony. When you give the next update you will tell them that I've began taking the water doses and that I seem to be doing well. However, you still need to select another patient that day. We must continue moving forward with our tests."

Patient number four wheezes and coughs.

"The straps on my chest are too tight. I can't breathe."

In one swooping motion Dr. Franklin turns and his hand darts out, smacking the restrained patient across the face. A terrible wail escapes the man's swollen lips. Moving roughly, without any regard to the feelings of patient number four, Dr. Franklin forces his jaw open to insert a gag. I watch in horror.

"I'm sure that the Leaders will choose a replacement for you, to continue the testing with me here in the lab. I'd expect one of the nursing staff to be getting the transfer call. It could be as soon as today. What are we going to do about that?"

Agitated, the doctor pushes a small rolling cart of supplies across the room. He growls under his breath. I see a flicker of madness in his dark cold eyes as he turns in my direction. Taking a step back I hold my breath, anticipating his volcanic reaction.

"Then that person will be sworn to secrecy as well. Water equals life. We must solve this problem."

He turns then, facing the multiple display monitors hooked to our patients. Scrutinizing the data only infuriates the crazed doctor further. In silence I step to the side, reaching out to adjust the straps on patient number four's chair. Dr. Franklin catches the motion out of the side of his eye and he scoffs in my direction.

"You're a weak woman. You must separate yourself from the emotional side of your brain. This is science—medicine! Sacrifices must be made for the betterment of our people."

Still kneeling at the side of patient four's chair I tremble in fear as the monstrous physician glares deep into my eyes. He has the cold stare of a psychopath.

"I'll bet that's why your husband left you, back on Earth... because you're weak."

Memories of the lies, fighting, and abuse flash before my eyes.

Anger brews deep within my chest as I watch Dr. Franklin turn his back to me, looking at the display monitors once again. Adrenaline pushing me forward I spring to the cart of supplies, grabbing the sedative injector. Swinging my hand in a wide arc the needle plunges deep into the forearm of Dr. Franklin. I quickly press the button, releasing the sedative into his blood stream. Before he can even protest, his body crashes limply to the floor.

June 1, 2042: Record Retention on Patient #5

After the injectable sedation was administered, the patient was transferred to his treatment chair and restrained. All diagnostic probes were placed and two drip-line I-Vs were inserted. We'll be taking a new approach with this patient as we slowly introduce the treated Mars water directly into the blood stream.

Drip lines have been active for twenty minutes and the patient's vitals remain normal. No changes in respiration or body temperature have been noted.

Closing the voice-dictation-log I sit and watch as the groggy-eyed Dr. Franklin awakens from his stupor. Confused, he looks around the room. He tries to speak, but I can't make out any of the words around his gag.

Rolling my stool across the floor I stop just inches in front of his chair. Smiling, I wait for the doctor to calm himself before I talk.

"You know what, Dr. Franklin? You were right. I need to separate myself from the emotional side of my brain. After all, this is science—medicine! Sacrifices must be made for the betterment of our people..."

His eyes are wide and terrified as he listens to his own advice.

"You were selected as patient number five, and that's how it will be. Only this time we're going to try it *my* way. Hopefully, for both of us, my results turn out better than yours did."

I rise to my feet and casually push the stool back under the desk where it belongs.

I approach patient four, whose restraints have been removed, and I offer him a comforting pat on the shoulder. I administer another strong narcotic to help ease the man's pain, which helps to lift the heaviness from my soul.

Ignoring the squirming, pleading grunts of Dr. Franklin I walk to the pod door.

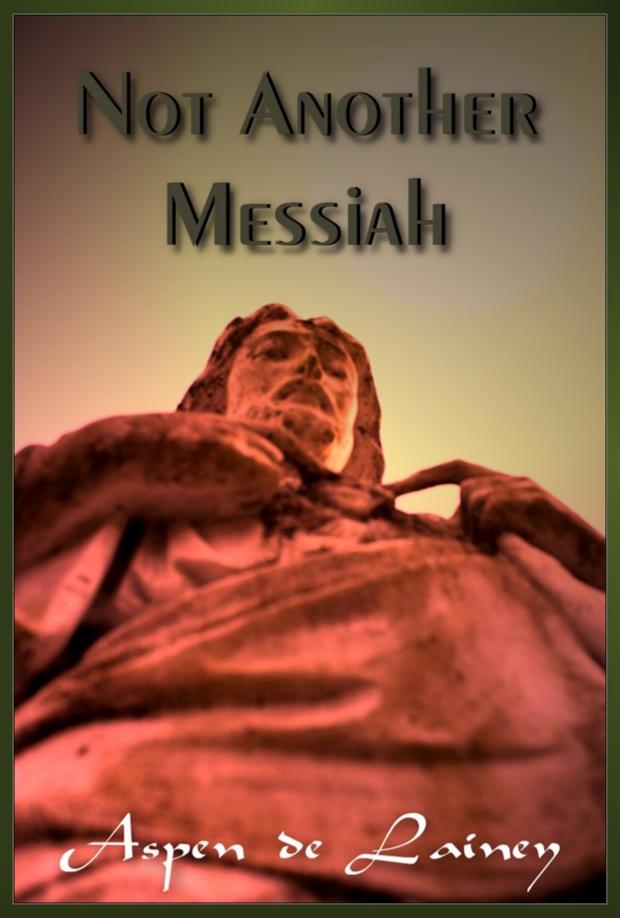
"I'm going to go grab some breakfast. I'll be back to check your vitals in a half-hour."

Exiting through the threshold, I can't help but smile as I stroll back down the corridor to the galley. Medicine *is* an exciting career.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Danyelle (aka D.M. Slate) resides in Colorado, where she's lived for most of her life. Her first horror novella was released in 2009, followed by dark fiction novels in 2010 and 2012. In 2014 her audio-story won the Wicked Woman Writer's Challenge hosted by HorrorAddicts.net. D.M. Slate loves dark fiction and continues to release short stories in the genre.

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All men are created equal, or so it is said...



Available on Amazon

An Interview with Author Lydia Prime

Sirens Call Publications recently expanded, taking on Lydia Prime as an editor and low and behold, she's an author as well. So we decided to sit down with her and poke her brain a bit to see what would fall out. Aside from the macabre musings and a few skeletons, our chat was entertaining and we're going to share it with you.

Sirens Call Publications: Welcome Lydia! Why don't you take a moment and introduce yourself?

Lydia Prime: I'm a creepy lady with creepy interests who does creepy things. I'm rather loquacious if you hadn't noticed. I try to write, I fancy myself to be a comedian on the low, and I'm secretly one of the few people left on this planet who does not know which Kardashian is which. If I'm not writing, I'm editing, if I'm not editing, I'm actually working at a comedy club, and if I'm not there either, unfortunately I'm probably on the other side of that 800 number you've been hiding from for months. Hiya! I found you! My personality can be described thusly, if Morticia Addams, Roseanne Barr, and Sam Kinison fell into Mayberry, got hit by the tornado that lifted Dorothy out of Kansas and dropped them into New Jersey causing some freak monster mash accident, I would be that accident. Welcome to my mind ladies and gents.

SCP: What made you decide to become a writer?

Lydia: I've honestly always wanted to write, ever since I could remember. I wanted to write to help someone, anyone, everyone maybe. Reading saved me from a lot of very dark places in my life and I thought that I could try to return the favour someday for someone else.

SCP: Tell us about your most recent work of fiction?

Lydia: 4089:Croatoan was something I thought everyone could relate to. Watching everything the world does as it happens, being excited for some new scientific breakthrough, but also somehow falling into the sheeple standpoint. 'You mean to tell me that Marilyn Manson and Brittney Spears both BREATHE!? OXYGEN!?!?' While being blindsided by who broke whatever internet, shenanigans are going on behind the scenes, and unfortunately if we don't break the cycle, it might be too late for us soon.

SCP: What is the one thing you'd like readers to know about you before they read your work?

Lydia: The one thing that I would like readers to know about me before they read my work, I suppose would have to be that I often laugh in the face of danger, and unfortunately that leads me into some incredibly bad places. Most of my work comes from actual traumas peppered with metaphorical monsters.

SCP: What is your writing process? Do you consider yourself to be a planner or a pantser?

Lydia: When it comes to a "writing process" honestly, I try to have a plan, I do. I'll come up with a few ideas, start them, see if they have a basis for a story that I think has substance. If not, I'll put them aside and try something else. Here and there I'll procrastinate so hard and end up writing something off the cuff on anything I can get my hands on, even if that's a napkin or receipt. I'll go back rewrite, edit, and end up with something I didn't even expect. It depends on the day and project.

SCP: What is the hardest challenge that you have faced as a writer?

Lydia: The hardest challenge I've faced as a writer is getting over my own fear of someone else not liking my work. There was so much anxiety inside that it wouldn't be *good enough* or *understood*. I had to come to terms with the fact that I was writing for myself, and if someone else liked it, awesome, if no one did, that's okay—because it was *for me first*.

SCP: Are you reading anything right now, or have you read anything recently that is worth mentioning?

Lydia: We Need to Talk About Kevin by Lionel Shriver. Do it. You won't regret it.

SCP: Who are some of your favorite authors? Favorite novels?

Lydia: I feel like it won't come off as a shock to find that my favourite authors include Vonnegut, Bradbury, Lovecraft, and Rowling. Oddly enough I'm going to say some of my favourite novels include (but are not limited to by any means) *Last Days* by Brian Evenson, *Slaughterhouse V* Kurt Vonnegut, (this might be cheating but) *The Martian Chronicles* by Ray Bradbury, and (judge me) *Oh the Places You'll Go!* By Dr. Seuss.

SCP: How do you define success as a writer? Have you been successful?

Lydia: How do *I* define success as a writer? Having the courage to put your work out there for the world to see. Whether they choose to see you or not is up to them, but if you give it your all, I think that means an awful lot. In that definition, yeah, I'd say I've succeeded.

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?

Lydia: Words of wisdom for new comers, I'm still a new comer myself, I think. To those of us still trying, and have a major fear of starting—take the plunge. What's the worst that can happen? You try again and get even better.

SCP: What one piece of your work are you most proud of? Why?

Lydia: There are actually three pieces of mine that I'm quite proud of. One only few have seen, but some day, hopefully many more. The other two are floating around. *Dread End* and 4089: Croatoan. Of all my pieces published and not, I'd say those two give me the most pride at the moment. *Dread End* because I wrote it when I wasn't sure if an actively using addict friend of mine had died or not. When I had sent it in initially, without the back story the feeling was entirely understood. 4089: Croatoan gets some pride because there's so much realism in it while being so fantastical that that makes for such a frightening enlightenment while still being entertainment. Be ware.

Thank you Lydia!

And for your enjoyment, here's 4089:Croatoan...



4089:Croatoan | *Lydia Prime*

They thought they'd found it. The miracle 'cure'. *The final solution!* I don't know who'll get this, but I think it should be sent... Maybe if this makes it further than myself, the next ones—they can be ready.

On March fourteenth the news reported an intergalactic breech. Something, or perhaps even someone, had crash landed somewhere in the vast Atlantic Ocean. They reported that both Americas, Europe, Africa, and even Asia were dispatching search teams. There was so much coverage, everyone was glued to TVs, phones, watches, holographic sets; whatever could give us updates. Suddenly, on March nineteenth, everything stopped. The teams were no longer mentioned, and all we heard about were celebrity scandals and their bizarre baby naming habits. The world had ignorantly forgotten the events of the days before, just let them go. Conspiracy articles popped up here and there, but nothing concrete. Nothing that seemed to come from anyone who didn't wear tinfoil as a hat on the regular.

Almost eight months later, Big Pharma came out with a new brand of 'medicine'. Something none of us had ever seen before. Initially this product was advertised to help alleviate common illnesses; but soon, it did more—*much* more. The illnesses and diseases Big Pharma made the most money on were being *cured*, you know, cancer, MS, HIV/AIDs; you name it, the mystery drug stopped it. Inevitably the truth was revealed. Back in March, when all those teams went to find the unidentified fallen object, they found something astounding.

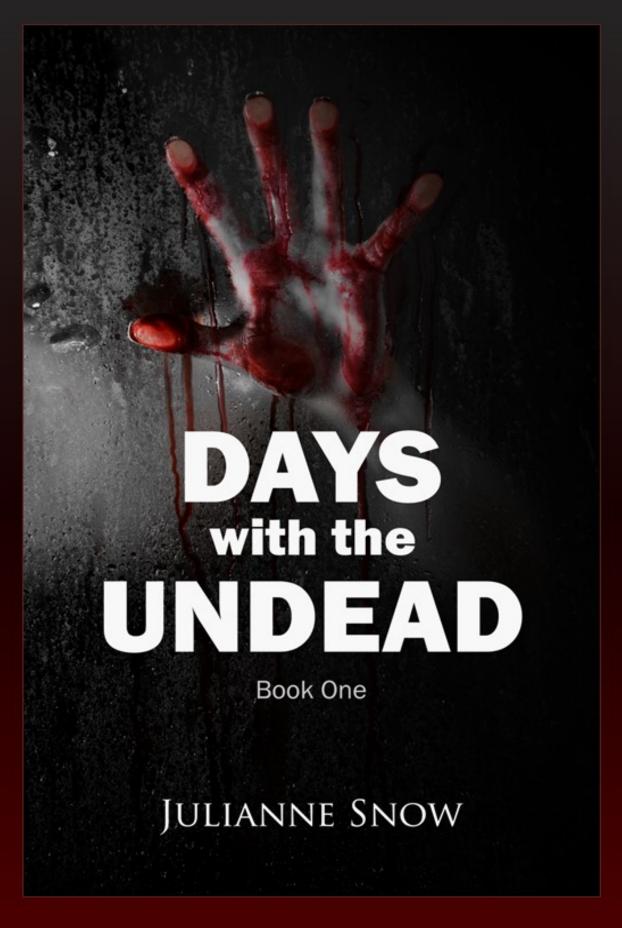
Specifically, we were told that a 'nonliving organic matter' had been discovered. Through tests done in labs across the globe, Earth's top scientists had discovered that when combining the foreign matter with small mammal DNA, it showed incredible healing properties. The *only* logical next step was to move onto the human populace, so they did. Three months of testing, a little bippity-boppity-boop, and a trademarked-patented-miracle-cure-all was born. Finally, stem cell research results without a stigma, taboo, or debate. *We—the human race. Ate. That. Shit. Up.*

About a year passed before things got... messy. More than three quarters of the population began to have side effects of pandemic proportions. They would lose memory—most just became unreactive shells of who they used to be. What was happening? Why? Language barriers be damned, the evidence was before us, and unfortunately there was nothing we could do, it was too late.

A final broadcast went out over anything that could receive a transmission: "We are Croatoan. You filthy beings have been deemed to be of lower intelligence throughout the galaxy. With permission from the Galactic Order, we sent down our Bio-Weaponry. If left untouched, it would have devastated your puny society over a century in your time. Thank you, from all of us, for making this so very, very easy."

Here I am, staring into the swirling vortex the Croatoans have opened to take us with them. We don't have enough left to even try to fight. I hope this message makes it out into the galaxy somehow.

Beware. Croatoan.



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