

Adult/32yo  
(spl email)

## **ONE STEP BEHIND**

*It's always just one step behind. You may have heard the footsteps. You most likely have seen the shadow. We all have felt the presence. When the hairs on the back of your neck stand stiff, when you get a sudden chill, or when your legs are more restless than usual. That is when it is near...just one step behind you. Prayer won't help, running won't get you any further away, and stopping will only give it time to prepare. However, there is one night per year when it can be negotiated with. On All Hallows Eve the veil it hides behind is thin and it welcomes making deals, but always with a price. It was on a night like this that it finally got one step ahead of fourteen year old Jack O'leary.*

"Will you hurry up?! The streetlights are already turning on!" Jack's yell was muffled through the felt skeleton mask he already wore, but his frustration was still clear to his mother and sister.

"You can wait five more minutes Jack," his mother snapped back. "We are just waiting for the glue to dry!"

"You can't expect me to be a witch without warts." Sallys voice calmly followed her mothers. "Besides Jack, trick or treating is always more fun when it is dark."

Jack let out a groan and stepped out onto his front porch to impatiently wait for his little sister to finish getting ready. His spirit was lifted rather quickly as the smells and sounds of Halloween pervaded his senses. The smell of fireplaces being lit for the first time and fallen leaves on the seasonal breeze. The sounds of children running from house to house collecting their various treats, or the rustling in bushes while someone hides in hopes of scaring their friends. And best of all, the dim light that comes from the Jack o' lanterns in front of each house on the street. Jack loved this time of year more than most. Some kids were in it for the candy and pranks, but Jack loved the feeling that an October night would awaken in him and the other children. The feeling that there is something more to this night than just fun. The feeling that something could be waiting around every corner. The feeling that on this night, and only this night, the shadows are just as welcoming as they are daunting. Suddenly the door opened behind Jack and a green witch, warts and all, flew by him on a black broom with a cackle that echoed down the street.

"How do I look deary!?!!" Sally croaked at her brother in her best wicked witch voice. Jack had to catch his breath but managed to gasp out, "Wicked sis. Absolutely horrible."

While Jack may have loved Halloween, Sally absolutely adored the holiday. She had many of the same reasons she enjoyed this night, but she also was a fanatic about the history of the night. She insisted on calling it by its Pagan name of Samhain and was known to carve as many pumpkins as she could get her hands on during October. She always said it was to protect them from things that cross over from the land of the dead.

Sally was particularly excited for this year, because now that she was ten she was allowed to go trick or treating with her big brother and without mom tagging along. She even told them they could stay out until ten!

"Make sure to keep your gloves on honey." Mom muttered while adjusting the scarf she had managed to hide underneath Sally's costume. "I don't want you catching a chill out there."

"I'll be fine mom!" Sally groaned as she shrugged her mom off of her.

"Jack. Please keep a close eye on your sister, and come straight home if there are any problems!" Their mom had to essentially yell down the block to them as Sally had already grabbed Jack by the hand and was dragging him away. "And no big scares Jack!"

"Trick or treat!"

"I got a king size!"

"Who gives out apples?"

"Did you just see that shadow move?"

"Watch for cars Sally!"

"I see you hiding their Jack!"

The night was well underway. Jack and Sally, as Skeleton and Witch, had covered their block and the next four blocks to the west. Their pillow cases were growing heavy with candy and their feet ached from their haunted march, but the two had no intention of slowing down. At this point in the evening there was no remnant of sun to be seen on the horizon. Darkness was more present than ever on this moonless Halloween night. That didn't dissuade Jack or Sally, but they both began to watch the shadows a bit closer as they found themselves further from home.

Their pace slowed and they began to talk in between houses. They pointed out costumes they liked, pumpkins Sally wished she had carved, and eventually shared how special this night was for them as siblings.

"I'm really glad I got to come out this year." Sally said while giving her brother a light side hug.

"Me too kiddo. It was really great of mom to let us go alone this year." Jack responded while tearing open a bag of chocolates.

Sally stopped walking, "Not just because of that Jack. I'm glad I get to be out here at all! Last year was the worst." She looked into the dark sky while she spoke.

"Yea..." Jack's voice became a bit shaky, "but you are doing much better now. You have barely even missed any school this year. I bet you make it the rest of the year without getting sick again." He quietly said to his sister and himself.

"I hope so. Sometimes it still hurts ya know." Sally rubbed the center of her chest. "Not my heart. Just where they cut. Even if they did a good job with the stitches."

Jack was anxious to change the subject. His sister's surgery had made last Halloween the scariest of his life, but not in the way he liked. "Enough of that talk. We have lots more houses to get to!"

They continued on their way, but there was something looming over the two now. Fear? Or was it something more tangible? Sally was the first to notice it. As she turned around from the front door of a house she saw, just out of the corner of her eye, something standing right behind her. It couldn't have been more than a step behind. But just as quickly as she had seen it, the shadow was gone.

"Was there another group of kids up there with us?" She asked Jack as they walked to the next door.

"No. The only other kids are all across the street." Jack motioned to the group of turtle ninjas across the road.

Sally turned to look where Jack was pointing, but it was there again. Just out of the corner of her eye, and one step behind her, but she definitely saw it as she turned.

"WHO IS THAT!?" She yelled with wild eyes.

"Woah kid! What's going on?" Jack laughed as he saw his sister spin on the spot.

"I swear Jack! There is someone behind me. I could almost feel their breath on my neck."

Jack looked behind the bushes they had just passed, stood behind his sister, and gave the whole street a good once over. "Sorry to say it Sally, but I think you might be scaring yourself this time."

Sally was not convinced, but she shrugged it off and tried to distract herself by focusing on the intricately carved jack o'lanterns at the next house. One had been skillfully carved with a shaving technique that allowed the artist to create a sugar skull that belonged in a museum. Yet she still felt a chill. She still felt the hairs on her neck stand upright. She still felt like she was being watched.

This feeling stuck with Sally for the next few blocks. Each time she turned, her eyes would race to catch the figure that was just out of sight. Each time she walked by a hedge she

would hear it shake just as she passed. Each time she exhaled she swore she heard someone else exhaling in sync with her. Half an hour of this was enough torment. Sally let out a scream that caused Jack to jump into the street. She took off running without her broom, hat, or her precious bag of hard earned candy.

Sally was not one to scare easily. Jack knew this well as he had been trying to get her to jump for years, but as he watched his sister abandon her candy and costume accessories he knew something was wrong.

"SALLY!" Jack hollered down the street after his sister. As he ran to catch up the condensation from his breath began to soak his mask. He tore it off and doubled his efforts to catch her. It was already almost ten and they needed to start heading home. Jack would be in big trouble if the first Halloween he was put in charge they missed curfew.

Almost two blocks later Jack caught up to his sister, but not because he was faster. Sally had stopped and was staring at something in front of her. She was frozen to the spot. Jack frantically waved his hands in front of her face while other trick or treaters made a path around them. Sally's eyes looked lidless. She stared into the dark in front of her without making a single sound. Her breath was shallow and quiet. Just as Jack was about to grab his sister by the shoulders and shake her out of her trance, Sally dropped to the ground. She started breathing quickly, grabbing at her chest, and her face contorted with agony.

"NO! NOT AGAIN!" Jack cried out as he scooped his sister up. People nearby stopped to try and help, but Jack was already running with Sally cradled in his arms. They had walked almost a mile from home, but Jack thought very little about the cold air burning his lungs, or the ache in his legs.

"Just a little further Sally. We're almost home! Mom will know what to do Sally. Just stay with me!" Jack pleaded with his sister as she stared with horror at something floating above them. Jack could not see what she was looking at, but the way her eyes stared unblinkingly at the sky he knew there was something. Something that had scared his sister. Something that Jack would protect her from at all costs.

Jack's mom must have seen him running up the streets. She was outside of the house with her car keys the second that Jack stepped onto the lawn. "What happened? What did you do Jack!?"

"I don't know Mom! She said she saw something and next thing I knew...." Jack tried to explain while his mom took Sally from him and laid her down on the backseat of the car.

Before he could even catch his breath, Sally and his mom were gone. Jack sat on the sidewalk telling himself that they would get things sorted at the hospital, but he couldn't shake the feeling that this night was just going to get worse.

As he wiped tears from his cheeks he saw something. A dark figure just out of the corner of his eye. Each time he turned his head it would elude his gaze. He stood up and did a quick 180 degree turn. Then he froze.

It was there. It wasn't running anymore. It wasn't hiding anymore. At least not in the conventional way. In front of him was a shadow. Or maybe it was smoke. Or maybe it was a physical being. To Jack, at that moment, it was all three. He froze on the spot and felt his eyes widen involuntarily. As he felt his face contort, his mind flashed with an image of Sally staring unblinking into the dark.

"It was you!" Jack was able to say in just a whisper.

"Always has been. Jack" A rattle came from the figure that sounded like an amalgamation of various voices. A skeletal face emerged from the shadow as it spoke.

"You hurt Sally!" Jack was now able to speak a bit louder.

"Oh no no silly boy. I simply open the door. They are the ones who walk through. Sure they need a push sometimes, but I hardly consider that to be malicious."

"Who are you?"

"I'm not a someone. I'm more of a something. Something that has been following your sister for awhile now. I was finally able to get one step ahead of her tonight.'

"One step ahead?"

"But that is behind us now. What we need to talk about is WHY YOU CAN SEE ME."

The figure seemed to phase in and out while it spoke, but with its last words it seemed to surround Jack in darkness. Jack began to shake, but the figure continued.

"You shouldn't be able to see me. Not even tonight. Then again, I don't really know all of the rules. So let's just treat this as a lucky roll of the dice for you Jack. How about we make a deal?"

Jack stayed frozen.

"Your sister will be gone at midnight. That is a fact. I have known for awhile, and I think you have sensed me coming as well. She certainly had some idea."

Jack began to silently cry while the figure circled him.

"But she doesn't have to be gone! I do love a deal, and tonight is a great night for one." The figure waved its hand and a nondescript jack o'lantern appeared. The bright flame inside made Jack squint as he looked. "Here is the deal Jack O'Leary. You bring me another child's soul by midnight and I will trade it for your sisters. All you have to do is get someone to look through the top of this pumpkin and stare at the flame. Just a glimpse should do it."

Jack was shaken from his trance. "I can help her?"

"Only you Jack. Do we have a deal?"

Without hesitation Jack grabbed the jack o'lantern from the figure. Just as quickly as he took the pumpkin, the figure turned to mist and vanished. "Better hurry Jack O'Leary. The clock is ticking."

Jack was frantic. He only had an hour until midnight...to take someone's soul...

Could he do it?

Jack was unsure about the answer to that question, but he didn't have time to contemplate it. As he ran off he heard the rattling voice just behind him, "Clocks ticking Jack. Tick tock. TICK TOCK!"

Jack ran down his street, but there was nobody to be seen. At this late hour most children were at home stuffing their faces with candy. The porchlights had been turned off and the only light outside of most houses were the jack o'lanterns still lit, "As tradition demands", Jack could hear Sally's voice echoing in his mind.

He frantically sprinted to the next street over. Only darkness. The next street was the same. He spotted a group of teenagers egging a house on the next street, but they ran as soon as they saw him. Sweating and checking his watch, Jack looked down another dark street with fifteen minutes already wasted.

"Uh oh Jack! Not looking good for Sally!" The voice taunted in the dark.

His pace quickened as he continued his desperate search. For what he wasn't quite sure. Jack had not been able to give his task any real thought. Who's soul would he take? Would they deserve it? Would they know what was happening? He pushed those thoughts from his mind and focused on what he knew; this is what will save Sally.

"Can you do it Jack? Do you have what it takes?" This time the figure seemed to whisper in his ear.

Jack checked his watch again and saw that he now only had half an hour left. Luckily this street was the last one he would stop to check. On this street he saw a house that looked

very different from the others. This house was not lit by a single jack o'lantern, but illuminated by what seemed like hundreds. On the porch was a girl about his age, dressed as a witch, and waving at Jack. "I love your jack o'lantern! Are you carrying it for protection?"

"Jack! She's perfect. You won't even have to trick her. TAKE HER!" Screamed the figure in Jack's mind.

Jack walked up the pathway to her porch, keenly aware of the hundreds of hollow eyes watching him approach. He made his way up the few steps leading to the porch and locked eyes with the girl. "Don't you need to say something?" She asked while holding back a bucket of candy.

"Umm..Trick or treat?" Jack muttered, his eyes looking only at the lid of the jack o'lantern he held.

As she put a hefty handful of candy out Jack realized he had abandoned his pillow case when Sally collapsed. He took a few pieces and put them in his pocket.

"I thought it was a little weird that someone was still out so late, but now I'm really confused. Why are you out without a candy bag?" She questioned while she put the rest of the handful back in the bucket.

"It's been a weird night I guess."

"Well Samhain is a great night for weird things to happen!"

She used the traditional name for the holiday. Like Sally. Jack tensed up as he realized this similarity.

"Is that why you are carrying your jack o'lantern? To protect you from the spirits?" She placed the bucket on the porch and reached her hands out for Jack's pumpkin. "I love jack o'lanterns most of all. As if you couldn't tell. " A soft giggle escaped her lips while she motioned to the yard filled with carved faces.

"Did you make all of these?" Jack asked, but held tight to the tainted gourd in his arms.

"Not just me. My little brother helped. If you think I love Samhain you should meet him!"

"Is he in bed already? Worn out from trick or treating I bet."

"No..." Her smile faded. "He didn't get to go out this year. He sometimes gets sick, and this year it is pretty bad. But I stayed home to pass out candy so he didn't feel left out."

Jack's heart sank, but as he looked down he caught a glimpse of his watch. Only twenty minutes until midnight.

"That's...that's really nice of you." Jack put on a fake smile and held the jack o'lantern out for the girl to inspect.

"Ahh. It's a small sacrifice for my kid brother." The girl looked at the jack o'lantern the way a museum curator might inspect a new painting. "This is wonderful! I love a classic face. What kind of candle did you use? The glow is much brighter than any of mine!" Her hands moved toward the lid of the pumpkin.

As she lifted the lid Jack held his breath. "This is it." He thought to himself.

"YES! YES!" The voice grew excited with anticipation.

Just as the lid to the jack o'lantern was lifted, but seconds before the girl could gaze into the flame, Jack snatched the pumpkin from her and ran off the porch.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING JACK? SALLY IS GOING TO STAY WITH ME NOW!"

"I guess that's my trick for the night." The girl said to herself while the bone clad boy fled from her house.

Jack ran without purpose. As he ran he felt a chill running up his spine. He felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. He started to feel something just one step behind him. He ran with tears and sweat streaming down his face until he looked up and realized that he had run home.

Mom's car was still gone. His watch read 11:58.

"Only two minutes left for Sally. Too bad her brother didn't have the guts. Then again he is a skeleton!" A voice cackled from the shadows as the figure appeared before Jack once more.

The figure enveloped Jack in shadow. Thoughts of Sally flew around Jack like a twister of memories. Then the darkness pushed them all out. Jack was surrounded by the dark and only the dark. The second hand of his watch pounding in his ears at it inched closer and closer to midnight.

It was in those last seconds that Jack noticed he was not in complete darkness. The jack o'lantern he held was still glowing bright. "It's a small sacrifice..." he whispered to himself.

Jack threw the lid off of the pumpkin and stared into the flame.

As Jack's limp body dropped the figure spoke, "Very commendable. Perhaps we can make one more deal."

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"You're a liar mom!"

"I swear! Every year for the past twenty years!"

"A shadow follows you while trick or treating. Every year?"

"I don't know if it's really a shadow. I swear once I saw a skull in the dark. But enough scary stories. It's time to get candy! Just keep checking the corner of your eye."

Sally O'Leary gave her wife a kiss as she left the house to take their two kids trick or treating. "Make sure to keep the jack o'lanterns lit!" Sally reminded her as she jogged to catch up with her rambunctious kids dressed as ghosts.

As the night went on Sally kept checking each dark corner, shrub, or walkway. It wasn't long before she felt the familiar chill run down her spine. Shortly after the hairs on the back of her neck began to stand. And now she was catching a glimpse of a dark figure each time she turned her head. It was back, but just like the last twenty years, it wasn't something she feared. She had come to be comforted by the annual presence.

Twenty years ago it terrified her on the worst Halloween of her life. The night she almost died, and the night her brother disappeared. She tried not to think about that night most of the year, but on this night the figure was a reminder of Jack. A reminder of how much fun they had before that last Samhain took a turn for the worst.

As Sally watched her kids enjoy the night she stopped thinking about the past and focused on the present. She got lost in the new memories she was creating.

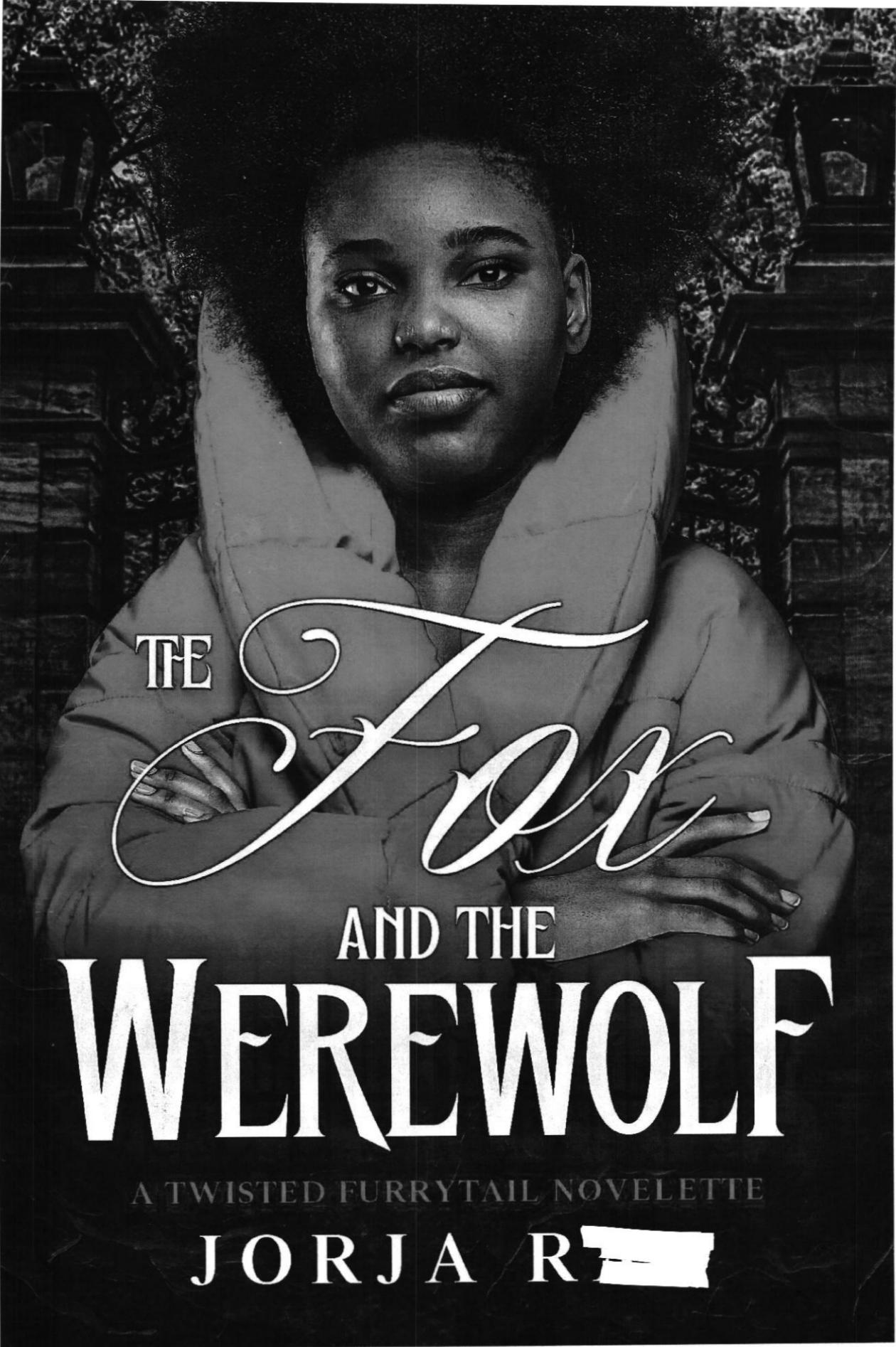
"Mom! I didn't see any shadow following us out there."

"Well then you must be lucky! It was breathing down my neck all night!" Sally tickled her son's neck as she made light of her stalker for his sake.

After the kids were in bed Sally stood on the porch putting a new candle in the many jack o'lanterns she had carved this year. She checked the dark corners of the yard for her friend, "Till next year! Have a blessed Samhain stranger."

She closed the door and turned off the porchlight. The yard was enveloped in darkness, except for the dim light from the numerous jack o'lanterns on the porch. Out of the dark it emerged. The shadowy figure manifested itself in the yard and a skeletal face emerged from the shadow while it stared at the house. Windows showed lights being turned off room by room while the figure observed. A bony hand raised itself to the face and removed the felt skeletal mask.

"Goodnight Sally. Happy Halloween." Jack O'Leary whispered. As he turned away, his figure slowly dissolved into a dark mist that was carried off in the night with the fallen leaves of the season.



THE *Fox*  
AND THE  
WEREWOLF

A TWISTED FURRYTAIL NOVELETTE

JORJA R 



It was 3 a.m., and I had just locked up the bakery after setting the yeast donuts to rise. I needed to return in two hours to pop the delectable treats into the oven. I usually went back to bed during this interim. Unfortunately, I had run out of black food dye and needed more for the royal frosting embellishments for my fall-themed creations. I could have sworn I ordered extra from my supplier; however, it was not in the pantry.

Flipping my black and red curly hair over my shoulder, I hurried to my car on the brisk autumn morning. I wished I had remembered to put on a hat to cover my ears against the wind. My oversized red, puffy jacket would need to suffice. It was my old standby and showed its wear and tear. It was cozy and reminded me of days with my grandmother sipping hot cocoa and eating warm chocolate cookies on the porch while watching the dried leaves blowing about in the breeze. I couldn't bear to part with it.

Reaching my beat-up old Beetle, I got in, buckled my seatbelt, placed the key into the ignition, and turned. The grinding from the ignition made my heart sink into my stomach. It is the epic sound of waves crashing against the shore on the rocks of my life.

"No, no, no, not today. I don't have time for this." I tried again, firmly putting the clutch as far down as it would go, but still no love from my bug.

"Craptastic," I cursed under my breath. "I can do this."

The nearest all-night supermarket was a mile away. I could walk there and back quicker than calling a rideshare or getting a delivery. I knew walking in the wee hours of the morning in the city was a bad idea, but it was either walk or open late. As the sole proprietor and employee, everything depended on my ability to persevere through any obstacle. Muttering to myself, I started walking and chanted inside my head that I was a bad 'ass-pirin,' vixen who enjoyed Zumba and aerobic kickboxing class. I was large and in charge.

My cross-body bag only had room for my cell phone, cards, and chapstick. Usually, I clipped my keys to the strap with a carabiner, but it would be wiser to hold onto the pepper spray just in case I ran into a mugger, rapist, or ax murderer. I reassured myself I was prepared should any monster of any variety jump out of the movies at me.

I hurried along and in the back of my brain, I remembered that thick girls do not walk to the grocer for food dye in the middle of the night or any time. My thighs were already beginning to chafe in my jeans. I was not a living large lady because I was lazy and had gained weight from overindulgence. This viewpoint is the way most of society sees obesity. Genetics was not my



friend in the form of low metabolism and extra adipose tissue; plus, I owned a bakery, meaning extra sugar and carbs. I was built like my Italian grandfather. His wife, my grandmother, taught me how to be a pastry chef before I went to school in Paris. Any good chef knows they must taste-test their products. I only took minuscule nibbles from each pastry, cream, or confection. Those bites added up. Mostly, I loved my curves. I just would rather have a working car at this moment.

I made it to the store and bought every container of black and orange dye so I did not have to make another unexpected visit before my emergency 'Zon order came in. I made a note on my phone to order extra green and red in November. I refused to be facing another crisis come the Christmas season.

I hurried out of the store with my purchase. It was a little before four, so I had plenty of time to make it home and get the fresh donuts into the fryer and the sausage rolls into the oven before I opened at 5:30. I only had a few regulars so early. I smiled at the thought of one in particular. The man came in every morning right as I was opening the bakery. He always ordered two sausage rolls and a large black coffee.

I was deep in thought about my favorite customer. I was next aware of hearing a low growl coming from a dark alley. I picked up my pace, but the biggest dog I had ever seen jumped out at me as I walked. I turned and took small steps backward in the direction I was headed, wondering if I should run or stand still. Because I now thought it might be a wolf hybrid, the hound followed me tentatively while making a humongous, noisy ruckus. Instinctually, I sprayed it in the face with my pepper spray and did a front high kick in the kisser. I ran back to my shoppe as quickly as my chubby legs could propel me. My shaking hand slid the key into the lock. Several false attempts scratched the metal, which made it look like someone had tried to break in. Once I opened the door to the familiar and comforting bell jingle, I threw the deadbolt and sank to the floor, trying to breathe through burning lungs.

In 60 seconds, the security alarm started blaring. I had to haul my ample body back up and over to the keypad. I entered the code wrong the first two times but successfully got it on the third. A moment later, my phone rang. It was the security company.

"This is Scarlett," I answered breathlessly.

“This is Ace Security. We noticed your alarm and entry codes were compromised. Our policy is to check in on a third attempt before alerting the police. Please state your password if everything is okay. If not, repeat the statement, ‘Your order will be ready at six.’”

“Nine tails is the password, and everything is secure. Thank you for checking in.”

“No problem, ma’am. If you feel your safety may be compromised, please sound the silent alarm.”

“Yes, sir!” I huffed out, feeling like my lungs were still on fire but better than before. Thank goodness for my aerobics classes at the YMCA I attended four days per week!

Inevitably, the time to open came around, and I managed to have the necessities done and in the display case. I unlocked the door and flipped the ‘open’ sign. I had just reached the sales counter when the first customer entered.

“Good morning, Romulus. The usual?”

“You know it, Scarlett!”

I bagged up his order and went to hand it to him when I noticed his eyes were puffy and bloodshot. His jaw had a large dark purple bruise across the lower mandible. I moved around the counter and ushered him to a small table, sitting him down.

“Shiitake mushrooms, what happened to you?” I laid one hand on his shoulder and lifted his chin to examine the damage. Romulus grabbed my hand and pulled it gently away while hissing a little on an exhale.

“It’s not too bad. It probably looks worse than it feels. I just had an accident at work,” Romulus said but did not let go of my hand. “It’s not a big deal.”

“Nothing little about that. Have you iced it? Let me get you some,” I moved to pull away, but he did not let go of my hand.

“I am fine. I am a fast healer. It will probably be gone by tomorrow.” He smiled at me and I could feel the warmth radiating from his hand into mine.

I sat down across from Romulus and looked into his eyes. They were a beautiful shade of violet, but I suspected once the red came out, they would be blue, similar to my own eyes. His hair was straight, long, blond, and styled in a low ponytail. He wore way too tight black jeans and a red flannel shirt buttoned over a white undershirt. He had his sleeves rolled up loosely to his elbows. He was staring back at me as I stared at him, and I wondered what he saw. Did he see the phat, multiracial girl with cocoa butter skin, with her huge Afro pulled into a puff, or did he



see just a fluffy baker with flour on her apron? I hoped for the former. There is so much more to me than just a good donut.

We both realized the moment had passed, and I regretfully pulled my hand away. The bell chimed the arrival of a customer, and I automatically said, “Welcome to Kitsune’s Tasty Tricks. I’ll be right with you.” I pulled my pen out from behind my ear and wrote my phone number on a napkin.

“Call me later so I can check on how you are doing. Do not forget to file an accident report for worker’s comp!”

I slid the napkin across the table without looking at him, knowing a blush was rising in my cheeks. He could either take my bold move as a concerned barista/pastry chef or as the invitation to move to a personal level in our relationship. The worst that could happen was that I would be embarrassed every morning as he came in for breakfast for the rest of my life.

The customer who walked in was wearing a slick business suit and tie. I couldn’t recall seeing him before, but something about his cologne registered with my senses. I did not like it at all.

“What can I get for you, sir? If you're interested, I have fresh sausage rolls straight out of the oven. Coffee is fresh and hot.”

“Just a cup of joe. Large. Black. That is how I like my women and my coffee.”

I inwardly rolled my eyes while I got his drink. I had heard it all. So many men think they’re intellectual masters and a riot regarding pick-up lines. The stranger reached into his jacket pocket for his wallet, and I thought I saw a holster. The man handed me a \$10 bill and his business card while telling me to keep the change. He turned his back and left.

I glanced at the business card, which read Dante Moriarty, Business Consultant. I rang the coffee up, putting the money in the till and the change in the tip jar. The business card went in the trash.

Romulus watched the transition intensely before pocketing my number. “I’ll call you later,” he waved and left.

“What a day and it is only six in the morning,” I mumbled to myself.

At 3 p.m., I closed the shop and headed to my apartment over the bakery. I was exhausted, and as soon as I opened, shut, and locked the door, I kicked off my shoes. Feeling the

lush carpet beneath my toes, I sighed with contentment. I placed two fingers on my lips, kissed them, and placed them on the picture frame on the Davenport near the entrance.

“Hi, Grandma, another great day downstairs at the bakery.”

I untucked my T-shirt and stripped out of my tight jeans. It was technically too early for wine, but I poured myself a glass anyway and went to draw a bath. Bedtime no later than 8 o'clock every night because of my early wake-up call. Tonight, I was more than exhausted. I put lots of extra bubbles into my bath and just relaxed as the water heated my limbs and soothed the ache out of my muscles.

After getting out of the tub, I decided not to get dressed and started my transformation into my other half. My nose and mouth elongated while my ears grew to a point. My limbs shortened as my bones rearranged themselves. My fingers and toes grew into claws. I was covered in rust-colored fur with a black belly and tip of my tail. I jumped on my sofa and circled a cushion several times before finding a perfect spot to curl up. I wrapped my fluffy tail around me and placed my head on my paws.

I must have dozed off because the next thing I knew, I could hear my phone chime, indicating I had a text message. I stretched and started my transition back. I would've liked to have gone for a run, which I usually did on my non-gym days. With my car broken down, I wasn't sure how to get to the woods outside the city limits. I picked up my phone and smiled at the message.

“This is Rome. I feel better already. I hope you are well. I'll see you in the morning.”

I pondered how to reply since his message could be taken platonically or with more interest.

“I'm so glad you're feeling better. Come a few minutes early, and we can have a cup together.”

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The following morning went so much better. I still needed to deal with my car, but it could wait until my day off. I closed the bakery every Monday. Most of the time, I did not need my car in Chicago, with readily available public transportation.

At 5 a.m., Romulus knocked on the window. I let him in so we could have our drink together. He brought a small bouquet of sunflowers and handed them to me.

“These are for you.”

“Thank you so much,” I handed him his coffee and sausage rolls. “Try this pumpkin tart and tell me what you think. I am working on a new recipe with Italian meringue.”

“Oh,” he groaned. “I have died and gone to heaven.” His eyes rolled and I felt myself warm with his praise. “Where did you learn to do this?”

“Officially, Paris. My great-grandma taught me informally. She was Ethiopian and learned to cook for my Italian great-grandfather. Her recipes were better than anything I learned to do in pastry school.”

“That is an interesting combination,” Romulus replied.

“Their relationship was due to the Italian occupation before World War I,” I chuckled. “Legend has it that coffee originated in Ethiopia. So I like to say, ‘I make a mean java and sinful cannoli,’” I laughed.

“What about the fox with all the tails?” Romulus commented on the bakery name and decor.

“Kitsune means ‘fox’ in Japanese. My father was an immigrant from Tokyo. So, I am a first-generation American on both sides. The mythos of Kitsune takes on different variations. He can have a different number of tails depending on the story or how powerful he becomes. According to legend, Kitsune can shapeshift into human form to trick others. I particularly like the Vulpix Pokemon inspired by the beastie. I enjoy some of the anime fandoms. The ‘No Fox Given’ pun is particularly clever and fun.” I shrug my shoulders. “I changed the bakery's name when I inherited it from my grandmother to try to tap into the kitsch market.”

“That makes sense!”

“What about you? You must work close by. You are here every morning,” I inquired.

“I own the butcher shop a couple blocks from here. I...” Romulus got a scowl on his face and looked towards the door.

“Ugh, I am not open,” I murmured under my breath when I noticed Dante shaking the door handle. “I will be right back.”

“You don’t have to answer that,” Romulus reached over and placed his hand over mine.

"It's fine," I plastered a smile on my face and opened the door. "Mr. Moriarty, you came back. Just a black coffee this morning?" I went around to the counter and poured it for him without waiting for a response. "Large and black!"

"Yes, like I like my women."

"So you said. I'm on a diet."

He just chuckled at that.

"Was there anything else? We are on a date, and the shop does not open for another 10 minutes," Romulus interrupted while standing up to his full height. He was something to behold at well over 6 feet tall, with a barrel chest and muscles bulging from his flannel.

"I'm sure there will be. I always get what I want." Dante pulled his jacket aside, showing the grip of his holstered gun, and slammed a \$100 bill down on the counter. He winked at me and sauntered out.

"Can you believe that guy? He has some audacity!" I rang up the coffee and put the change in the donation cup for the local animal shelter, not wanting his insulting tip in a lousy attempt at seduction. I turned back to Romulus, seeing him struggling to keep calm.

"Hey, it's okay. That man is just a creep. Seriously, Rome, it's fine," I talked to him calmly. I took him by the hand and brought him to the back so we could have privacy away from the storefront. "He is just strutting his stuff to make up for other deficiencies," I joked.

I reached up and put my arms around him for a quick hug. He smelled like the woods I liked to run in: pine trees and moist, rich, dark soil. He wrapped his arms around me and inhaled the aroma of my neck while I was in his embrace. As a shifter, I didn't think anything about it. A scent is a more critical and sensory experience than sight or hearing. I pulled back and he seemed much calmer.

"How about I take you on a real date? Dinner after you close?" he asked.

"That would be wonderful. I should be done by three."

"Be careful. I don't like that guy." He kissed my cheek and left.

I only let myself feel excited for a few minutes before I went back to my day. I had not been on a date for a while and was pretty sure I had no idea what to wear if it required more than jeans and a chef's coat.

That afternoon, I was taking out the end-of-the-day trash when I smelled sick, cloyingly sweet cologne. "Mr. Moriarty, I'm sorry. I am not interested."

“That is too bad because I plan to take you to dinner.”

“I appreciate the offer but I already have plans.”

“They have changed,” he said, grabbing my arm. “You would do well to be with me. I am a powerful man in Chicago. My brother heads the Italian Family.” I could feel my canines lengthen and my claws emerging as my body instinctively started to shift into my animal counterpart.

That is when I heard a snarl. That colossal dog was in the alley and did not look happy. In the light of day, I was confident he was a wolf. He jumped and bit into the bicep of the arm that held me. I pulled away and fell to the ground. I scrambled backward away from the beast who hunted me and the wolf.

The animal let go and growled at Dante. It jumped on him and knocked him down. He was on the mobster’s chest with saliva dripping from his jaws. After giving the warning, the wolf let Dante up and growled again. Dante grabbed his gun, waved it, and took a shot into the air, then took off down the alley. The wolf approached me and licked my face before taking off in the opposite direction of Dante.

I pulled myself to my feet, using the fire escape to support me. I hurried back inside and locked the back door. My breaths struggled in and out in a staccato rhythm. I was unharmed but confused, wondering what the heck that wolf was doing around again.

The front doorbell chimed. Cursing silently over forgetting to lock it, I called out, “I’m closed!” as I walked through the kitchen.

“Good, because I was planning on taking you out.”

“Oh, Rome, thank goodness it’s you. You will never believe what just happened. I have to change, then I will tell you about it. Come on up,” I invited him up to my apartment.

We climbed the stairs and I kissed grandma’s picture like I always did. My hands were shaking now that the adrenaline in my blood was flowing. Romulus noticed. My whole body started to shake, with nothing to occupy my mind except what had just happened. He pulled me into an embrace and led me over to the sofa.

“You’re okay. I am here now. I won’t let anything happen to you.” He rubbed my back and offered soothing words.

When I calmed down, I told Romulus what had happened. “Dante can’t seem to take no for an answer. It’s like he is hunting me,” I sobbed.

“Scarlett, he is hunting you. He is a narcissist and a stalker. We will figure this out. I got you.”

“I’m sorry. Look at me. I am an emotional mess when we should be going on our date. The jerk ruined our first date. Now, Stupid is ruining our second before it even started.”

“That guy has not ruined anything. We are still going to go out.” He rubbed his thumb over my tear-streaked cheeks and kissed my lips chastely. Butterflies hit my stomach while my body warmed to his touch.

“Okay then. Where are we going so I know what to wear?”

“I thought we would get out of the city. I brought a picnic. You might want to dress comfortably in layers.”

I changed into clean jeans and a T-shirt. After lacing up my hiking boots, I pulled on an orange sweater and grabbed my red puffy jacket.

Romulus led me to a motorcycle parked just around the side of my building.

“Have you ever ridden before?” he asked, handing me a helmet.

“Does a moped in Europe count?” I joked while fastening the chin strap.

“Only if it was a Harley,” he smiled back at me. I held on tight to his waist while we rode. The adrenaline that hit me from the fast ride made all the stress just melt away. This man was safe and his steady heartbeat against my cheek soothed me. Before long, we rolled to a stop. I opened my eyes and realized we were in my favorite part of the woods.

“This is amazing!” I gushed as Romulus helped me off the bike. He then dug into the saddle bags for our meal. He spread a throw blanket onto the ground and laid out a charcuterie spread and sparkling cider.

“I was not sure if you drink, so I played it safe,” he supplied.

“You did good! I do sometimes in the evening, but it’s not necessary.”

The blanket was small enough to fit in the bike’s saddlebags, which gave us the added bonus of requiring close proximity while we dined. We talked and got to know each other better. Once we finished eating, we went for a walk.

“I love coming out here, Scarlett. It just makes me feel at home.”

“Me too. There is something about the open air that speaks to my soul.” I shivered, and he put his arm around my shoulders.



“This was lovely. I would love to do this again sometime if you are open to it.” I said before stifling a yawn. “I’m sorry. I start work so early. It has been a trying day.”

“I would love to keep seeing you here or anywhere. Let’s get you home.”

Upon arriving back at my place, I was nearly asleep. Romulus walked me up to my apartment. I opened the door and he leaned in to kiss me goodnight. Before his lips met mine, he growled deep in his throat and shoved me behind him. He rushed inside and I saw him shift into the giant wolf I had seen twice before. His flannel spit up the back, and his jeans tore at the seams.

Dante was standing in my living room, pointing his gun at me. “I want you! If I can’t have you, then nobody can!” he spat out the cliché, seemingly not noticing the enormous wolf that suddenly appeared between us.

Shifting into my fox form, I made myself smaller and deadlier. Romulus went low and tackled Dante. The gun went off and I jumped for the madman’s face. Between the two of us, we took care of the intruder. He was not going to get up again. My hunter was no more.

I shifted back and stood in my living room naked. Romulus transformed back to his human form more slowly, and he moaned while holding his hand to his hip, which was bleeding through his fingers.

“Are you shot?” I gasped and rushed to his side.

“Yes, I think I am okay though. Do you have a first aid kit?”

“You need a doctor, not a first aid kit,” I replied dryly.

“I’ll be fine. Help to the bathroom so I don’t bleed all over your carpet.”

“Huh, like Dante, here?” I chided. Romulus just shrugged his shoulders.

I reached for him and put his arm over my shoulders. I was strong from hefting 50-pound bags of flour and sugar. We made it to the bathroom, sitting him down on the edge of the garden tub. I reached for a towel, tossing it to him so he could cover his lap, and then put my bathrobe on to cover my exposed body.

Looking at his bullet wound, I could only see the entrance, not an exit hole.

“The bullet has to be in there. You need to go to the hospital,” I implored Romulus.

“I can’t go. That means questions and blood work. Both are bad for me. You are a chef, and I am a butcher, meaning we are both good with knives. We can do this.”



“Fine, but I reserve the right to say I told you so if you end up with a hellacious scar or gangrene and lose your leg.”

“Ladies love scars, right?” he joked, and I dumped a bottle of rubbing alcohol over the makeshift surgical instruments before pouring the rest on his wound. He made a sibilant whistle but did not move.

“I prefer a living man versus a dead one. Thank you very much. Putting on a fresh pair of sterile gloves, I pressed gently against the wound, looking for obvious signs of the bullet. I plunged my eyebrow tweezers in and grabbed the fragment without too much searching. It was almost like his body was rejecting the projectile on its own and looking for the path of least resistance.

“Stitches or stop the bleeding and let it heal?” I asked him.

“Do you have any superglue?”

“Be right back.” I retrieved the adhesive. Romulus pinched the wound closed while the glue dried, holding the laceration in place. I put a large band-aid on it and went to clean up. He stood and reached for my hand, making his towel fall off. “Thank you.”

I nodded and continued my task. “I think you should stay here tonight so we can monitor for fever and infection. I am sure I have a shirt and sweats that will fit you. I like them extra roomy for obvious reasons.” I waved my hand down my body, not wanting to meet his gaze.

“Hey, we both have secrets we need to discuss soon. Seeing you like this is incredible.” He placed his hands on my hips and pulled me to him. “I still owe you a good night kiss.”

That kiss was searing hot. Had I not had a dead mobster in my living room, I might have noticed more intensely that a naked man was in my apartment, and I was only wearing a bathrobe that barely concealed my curves. Shifters do not get overly excited by nudity, especially when they are part of a group. Being in my residence and treating his wounds was a more intimate encounter than the fact we were naked; still, it had been a while since I had been in a skulk.

After a moment, we both pulled away. I got Romulus the promised clothes. He pulled his phone from his destroyed pants and called someone he knew to help with the body since the Chicago Police Department did not deem investigating gunshots in my neighborhood a worthwhile activity. I dressed in my least frumpy pajamas and cleaned furiously. I did not want to know what was happening. Ignorance would be bliss. I went downstairs and put a ‘closed for



business' sign up for the next day with some free coupons to ease the sting of inconvenience. I changed my voicemail to indicate I had a 24-hour flu and was resting.

I was needlessly scrubbing pristine counters when I felt two strong arms wrap around me from behind. I turned around and Romulus lifted me onto the counter like I weighed nothing at all.

"Rome," I started looking him in the eyes from my new vantage point.

"I am a wolf. I have been coming here every morning for weeks because I like you. That creep, Moriarty, has been stalking you for over a week."

"The alley coming home from the store?"

"Yes, he was there. He disabled your car and followed you. I followed him. It was at that point I knew things were getting dangerous. I knew he was unraveling when he finally came inside and hit on you."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"About Moriarty? I thought I had it under control and did not want to scare you."

"No, that you like me," I laughed.

"How could I know how you would react to my wolf? I was not aware of your fox. You don't smell like other shifters."

"It is Kitsune. I am only half Japanese, so my inheritance is complicated, especially when my second tail gives me attitude."

"I understand. I deal with the whole lycanthropy curse. I get impacted by the full moon but can transform at will other times, too. I am just not as strong or mean."

"If I have only seen the smaller version of you, then I can only imagine what big teeth you must have with the lunar one. Let's go back upstairs. My bed is calling me, and you need to rest." I hopped off the counter and took him by the hand.

"I am too wired to sleep," Romulus replied.

I looked up at him from beneath my lashes and said, "Me too!"

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Adult

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### The Piano Man

Charles Clavier loved pianos. Like most obsessions, his fascination began at a young age. He remembered watching his grandmother's delicate hands dance along the keys while creating the most beautiful concertos he had ever heard. One day, he gently sat upon the piano bench's edge while his grandmother was playing. He gazed at her hands, soaking in every flick, tap, and stroke of the keys. His grandmother smiled down, reached one arm around him, and pulled him into the song. She let him experiment with the keys. He quickly learned that a gentle touch resulted in a quieter note, and a hard hit resulted in a loud note.

"How does it do that?" he asked. In response, his grandmother beckoned him to look inside the body of the piano. He watched, fascinated, to see the hammers jump to life and hit the strings with each different tap on the keys. From that day on, Charles's love for pianos consumed him.

He begged his parents for lessons, and though they didn't have much money, they could see that Charles would not take 'no' for an answer. They scraped together what they could, and Charles began to take piano lessons from a lady down the street.

Charles absorbed each lesson and practiced for hours each night. Soon, he outgrew the content his teacher could provide, and he moved on to another more experienced teacher who gave lessons at the local school. This pattern continued until he was taking lessons from the renowned Martha Gould – the grand master pianist of the state's most prestigious symphony. At the age of 16, he was her youngest pupil ever. Normally, his family would never be able to afford lessons from Ms. Gould, but Charles was offered a scholarship due to his unprecedented talent.

Ms. Gould was reluctant to take Charles on at first. She didn't think that children possessed the maturity necessary to truly master the music, but the symphony's board of directors insisted as it would bring some much-needed publicity.

Charles proudly entered the concert hall for his first lesson with Martha Gould. He had put on the most professional outfit he owned: a polo shirt, khaki pants, and black tennis shoes. He made sure to scrub his hands and fingernails clean so as not to dirty the grand piano. Even though he knew he had the talent, he wanted to be sure to make a good first-impression, but he was only greeted by a sour glare.

"You're late," Ms. Gould spat. She looked Charles up and down, and turned her nose up in a sneer. She turned her back on Charles and headed toward the piano without another word.

Charles was positive he wasn't late. He had left 30 minutes early just to make sure he would arrive on time, but he knew better than to contradict his new teacher. Silently, he followed Ms. Gould and sat beside her on the bench.

"Play," she commanded.

Charles looked around for some sheet music, but seeing none, he assumed she wanted him to simply play any song. He straightened his back, placed his foot lightly on the pedals, and arched his fingers over the keys. Just as he was about to play his first chord, his concentration was interrupted by Ms. Gould shouting, "Wrong!"

"But I haven't even played anything yet," Charles protested.

Ms. Gould scowled at Charles with such intensity, he wanted to shrink to the size of a bug and hide beneath the pedals of the piano. "If you are the prodigy that everyone thinks you are, you would know that you are sitting one inch too far from the piano and you are not in the correct position to play Liszt's 'La Campanella'!"

Charles's heart sank into his stomach. Liszt's "La Campanella" was considered to be one of the hardest piano pieces to play. Some of the world's most accomplished pianists would practice for years and still not be able to master the song. Surly Ms. Gould was joking, but one look into those ice-cold eyes, and Charles could tell that she was not joking.

"Liszt's 'La Campanella', Ms. Gould? I'm sorry, but did you ask me to prepare that piece for you, Ma'am? If so, I don't believe I received that message," Charles squeaked out meekly.

"No, I did not ask you to prepare that piece," Ms. Gould said condescendingly. "You should already know it."

Charles simply stared wide-eyed with his mouth hanging slightly open. He wasn't sure how to respond. He knew that Ms. Gould was a tough teacher, but this seemed ridiculous.

Ms. Gould sighed exasperated, "I can see that I am going to have to dumb things down for you. If it were up to me, I would turn you out this instant and never let you set foot in this place again. But, sadly, it is not up to me. The idiots of the board of directors have decided that you should perform with the orchestra next month as a ridiculous publicity stunt." Here, she stopped, as if reliving this dreadful conversation with the board. Charles wondered if he should say something when her expression changed to one of pure malice. "So, I have decided, what better way to execute their brilliant plan than to have their precious prodigy perform one of the most complex and challenging pieces to have ever been written?"

Charles saw her plan now. If he failed to perform well with the orchestra, Ms. Gould wouldn't have to teach him anymore, and clearly that is what she wanted.

"Now play!" she shrieked.

The next hour consisted of Charles guessing at what to play, and Ms. Gould constantly interjecting with, "Wrong," "Idiot," and "Again!" At the end of the lesson, Charles felt physically and emotionally drained. But if Ms. Gould's goal was to crush his resolve, she'd be sadly mistaken. Charles

was determined to master "La Campanella" in a month and to perform it so flawlessly that Ms. Gould would have to acknowledge his talent.

Every day after school, Charles practiced with Ms. Gould, and every day she simply yelled at him and hardly let him play. Every night, Charles practiced hours on end teaching himself to play "La Campanella."

At his final lesson before the concert, Charles played "La Campanella" perfectly. When he finished, he looked up at Ms. Gould, but she simply looked at him in disgust. "You may have played the notes correctly, but you have no connection to the instrument. A true musician knows every minute detail of the three pedals, the eighty-eight keys, and the two hundred thirty strings so intimately that they become one with the piano. This is something you will never be able to achieve," and with that, she left Charles alone and dejected.

The next night, Charles put on the tuxedo the symphony had lent to him and gazed at himself in the mirror. He looked like a true musician, but Ms. Gould's words rang in his ear. Just then, there was a knock at the door, and his grandmother peeked her head inside. "Are you ready?" she asked.

"I think so," Charles replied. His grandmother was about to leave the room, when Charles said, "Grandma, am I a true musician? Ms. Gould said that a true musician knows the instrument so intimately that they become one with the piano."

His grandma reached out and cupped his face in her hand. "Baby, you know the piano more than anyone I know. Ever since you were little, you loved to play and you loved to know the inner workings of it." Charles smiled at the memory. "But more important than knowing the piano intimately, you *feel* the music and you find the joy in the song."

Charles looked into her kind eyes smiling at him. He smiled back. His grandmother always knew just what to say. "Now, we better get going so you don't miss your big musical debut," she chuckled. They all piled into the car and drove to the symphony. Once inside, Charles's family walked to their seats in the front row and Charles headed back stage.

"You're late." Charles didn't have to turn around to know who was speaking to him, but he did so anyway. There stood Ms. Gould. Charles didn't think it was possible, but she looked even angrier than ever. "You're going to fail, and when you do, I will make sure you never play for another orchestra ever again." Then she stormed off. Charles simply stood his ground, took a deep breath, and waited for his moment to join the orchestra on stage.

The lights went down, and the musicians began to play. They sounded amazing. Every note in tune, every crescendo in unison, every pause in perfect timing. No amount of negativity from Ms. Gould could dampen Charles's excitement. Soon, the conductor was announcing Charles's name. He felt himself walking out on stage and taking a seat behind the piano. Just before he raised his hands to the keys, he glanced out to the front row. He saw his family beaming with pride. He inhaled and began to play. His fingers took over; they danced across the 88 keys like ten trained acrobats. Every stroke, touch, and tap, was perfection. He could feel the audience being pulled in to his performance. Every member was enraptured. He was doing it! He was performing one of the most challenging pieces ever written with one of the most prestigious orchestras in the country. He was one with the piano and he had found his joy in the music. Everything was falling into place.

As he entered into the final movement of the song, he dared to glance at his family once more. He expected to see his family smiling, captivated by his performance, but instead he saw his parents tending to his grandmother. Her eyes were closed and she wasn't responding to their words or their touch. What was happening? This wasn't how this night was supposed to go. He stopped playing and ran off the stage. He heard the conductor say something, he saw some of the other musicians stop playing, he heard a collective gasp from the audience, but none of that stopped him. He had to get to his grandmother. By the time he made it to the house, medics had already come and taken his grandmother out to a waiting ambulance and his parents were standing outside.

"Mom, Dad...what..?" stammered Charles.

"Oh Sweetheart, we're not sure what happened, but it doesn't look good," his mom said.

"We're sorry about your performance," his dad said while giving Charles a hug. His performance. Charles didn't realize until then that he had left in the middle of his performance. Ms. Gould would be furious...or thrilled. He'd have to find another piano teacher, but none of that mattered right now. Right now, he just wanted to be with his grandmother.

His family got into the car and followed the ambulance to the hospital. It felt like they had been waiting in the waiting room forever for any kind of news about his grandmother. Finally, a doctor came through the double doors and approached them. "I'm sorry. We did everything we could, but your mother suffered a severe heart attack. She didn't make it through." He said some other stuff about peaceful death, and funeral plans, but Charles wasn't listening. This couldn't be happening.

Charles woke up the next day, to his name plastered all over the news. It was being reported that he had a mental breakdown and couldn't handle the pressure of performing on such a big stage at such a young age. Local news stations had interviewed Ms. Gould who said, "I was against a child performing with the orchestra for this very reason, but no one listened to me. Clearly, Charles Clavier is not the prodigy he was thought to be." Her words hurt, but Charles didn't care; he was still too much in shock over the death of his grandmother. He turned off the tv and went back upstairs to his room.

Weeks after the funeral, Charles was still moping around the house. "Why don't you play something?" his mom suggested, "That always cheers you up." Charles just shrugged his shoulders. "She wouldn't want you to give up on your dream," she said and gave his shoulder a squeeze. Charles didn't have to ask who she meant. He slowly got up and sat at the piano. He raised his hands to the keys and began to play. He played one of his grandmother's favorite songs. The tears rolled down his face and dropped on the keys like they wanted to be a part of the melody. He played it flawlessly, but he couldn't find the joy in the song.

Eventually, he approached the symphony's board of directors about continuing his lessons, but they refused. Charles tried to find other teachers, but they all denied him. It appeared that Ms. Gould's harsh words had a larger impact on Charles than simply hurting his feelings. Everywhere he went, he was rejected. Charles tried auditioning to prove himself, but time after time, he wasn't granted access because they were worried about his mental health. Not a single school would give him an opportunity. Without a scholarship for playing the piano, Charles had no hope of affording college. He wasn't sure what to do.

Even if he couldn't play for an orchestra, he still wanted to work with pianos. His life's obsession had been the piano for so long, there wasn't anything else that interested him. He decided to get his piano technician's license. It didn't pay much, but at least he could work with pianos, tuning them and playing them on a daily basis.

Years went by. Every once in a while, someone would recognize his name and ask, "Hey, weren't you that kid who had a mental breakdown while playing the piano at the symphony?" Charles would simply say they were mistaken and continue with his work, but one day he received a phone call that made his blood run cold.

"Clavier Piano Services, how can I help you?"

"Yes, my name is Martha Gould and I need my grand piano to be tuned. Is that something you can handle?" At first, Charles thought it was a joke. It wasn't enough that Ms. Gould had ruined his chance at a career as a pianist, now she was calling to mock him as well? After a few moments of silence, Ms. Gould asked, "Well?"

Realizing that she genuinely was asking him to tune her piano, he finally replied, "Yes, Ma'am, I can do that for you."

"Good. How soon can you get here?" she asked tersely.

"I can be there in half-an-hour," Charles said.

"Make sure you are," she replied and hung up.

Charles stood there for a few minutes. Did Martha Gould just hire him to tune her piano, and did he just agree? Maybe he could call her back and tell her he couldn't take the job, or maybe he could simply not show up. No, if he did either of those things, she would ruin his piano tuning career just as she had ruined his piano playing career. He'd have to take the job. Charles continued to ponder his options as he loaded up his truck with supplies. What would he say to her? Would he let her have it? Would he forgive her? It seemed like she didn't even remember him, maybe he wouldn't have to say anything at all.

By the time he arrived at Ms. Gould's house, he decided his best option was to simply get in, do his job, and get out without saying much at all. He rang the doorbell.

"You're late," were the first words out of Ms. Gould's mouth. That phrase sent a shockwave of anger pulsing through Charles's body, but he remembered his plan and simply said, "Where's the piano?" She led him to the living room, and there was the most gorgeous grand piano Charles had ever seen. He walked over to it and ran his hands over the keys. It was a beautiful piano, but clearly it had been neglected. Some of the keys were chipped, the pedals were scuffed, and upon opening the lid it was clear some of the strings had been strained and were in need of replacing. Charles knew this piano would need a lot of work, but he also knew never to assume what the customer wanted. "So, what's wrong with it?" he asked.

"How should I know?" Ms. Gould spat, "You're supposed to be the expert." Again, Charles felt a surge of anger, but this time he couldn't keep it in. "A true musician knows every minute detail of the

three pedals, the eighty-eight keys, and the two hundred thirty strings so intimately that they become one with the piano," he mumbled.

"What was that?" Ms. Gould retorted harshly.

"You once told me that a true musician knows every minute detail of their instrument, but clearly you don't. So, you must not be a true musician." Charles responded. His tone was even, but his anger was boiling beneath the surface.

"When would I have told you that? I've never met you before in my life," she said, turning her nose up at Charles the way she did on the first day they met.

Charles couldn't believe it. This woman had ruined his chance at a career as a musician, and here she was standing before him, and she didn't remember him? "Charles Clavier," he said slowly, "A few years ago, you were my piano teacher. You told me to play Liszt's 'La Campanella,' and I did so perfectly, yet you told me I would never be a true musician."

"Well, it looks like I was right," was all Ms. Gould said. The two of them stood across from each other, glaring at one another, daring the other to break the silence first. Eventually Ms. Gould spoke up, "You know, I do remember you, now. You left in the middle of your performance because you couldn't handle the pressure."

"I left in the middle of my performance because my grandmother was suffering from a heart attack," Charles cried.

"Probably from your terrible performance," Ms. Gould retorted with a sneer. She turned her back on Charles and headed toward the door.

At that moment, something snapped inside Charles. In one swift movement, he had cut one of the strained strings from the piano and was using it to strangle the life out of Ms. Gould. He didn't even realize what he had done until he felt the blood from her neck trickling over his fingers. He let her lifeless body slump to the floor. He stood there for a while looking from his hands, to her body, to the piano and back. Eventually, he washed his hands, he repaired the piano, and he packed up his supplies as if nothing had happened.

Just before he was about to leave, he went back and sat at the piano. He began to play "La Campanella." This was the first time he had played that song since that dreadful night, but he played it without a single mistake. He had played the piano many times between then and now, but never that song and never with this much emotion and feeling. He hit the final chord and stood up. He turned to face the body of his former piano teacher. "Well, Ms. Gould, I have played the notes correctly, and I have a connection to the instrument. I know every minute detail of the piano so intimately that I become one with it. This is something you will never be able to achieve," and with that, he left Ms. Gould alone and forgotten.

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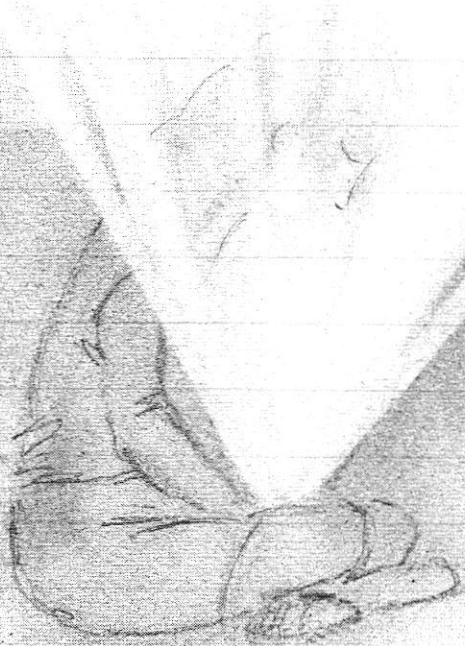
43 yrs.

5+

Fountain

80817

gmail  
com



As I stepped outside the diner, my face puckered objectively as the cold breeze from outside hit against it.

This afternoon was unlike any other. There was a dense fog, so thick you could not see through it - almost tangible.

I reached into my pocket searching for my keys.

I was eager to make my way home.

With keys in hand, I made my way to the car quickly.

Something caught my eye as I was about to enter my car.

A bright light shined in the distance.

I found myself staring at it unable to blink. It was mesmerizing!

I suddenly felt a tug at my jacket. A bit shaken, I looked down only to find a small malnourished dog looking up at me.

I smiled down at it, and surrendered over a muffin I had saved from <sup>the</sup> diner.

It quickly snatched it and scurried off into the fog. I looked back in the direction of the light only to see it was gone.

Feeling disappointed I settled into my car and turned on the radio - static...

As I drove off I heard a loud yelp in the distance. I hit the brake abruptly and glanced in the rear view mirror. I couldn't see a thing. I rolled down the window and the fog trickled in slowly.

Again, I heard the distant cry - echoing...

The pup must be injured, I thought.

I got out of my vehicle, stretched my arms before me trying to clear the way. I moved cautiously stumbling through the mist.

I whistled in an attempt to draw the animal to me.

I could hear its sad cry  
now closer.

The fog seemed to usher me  
along as I made my way  
through shrubs and trees.

It was clear I had ventured  
off the road.

I managed to find the dog  
nestled next to a large tree.

Its leg tangled between long branches.

It appeared as if the old tree  
was trying to wrap its limbs  
around it - refusing to let go.

I knelt down and attempted  
to release it from its tight grasp.  
The dog whined and once  
free, it nipped at me!

I fell backwards, I then found  
myself staring up into the  
gloomy sky.

Instantly there was a  
luminous light that managed  
to peek through the thick fog.

I felt a sense of peace  
run through me.

It was hypnotic.

Soon after, I felt wet kisses on my face. The little dog had returned. I welcomed it into my arms with a big hug! Carefully I got off the floor and there I stood amidst the fog. No matter what direction I faced, visibility was poor.

In a panic with pup in arms, I ran deeper into woods.... hoping to stumble across the road.

The fog seemed to cradle me as I motioned through it. I was determined to find my way back - my efforts seemed to be redundant.

Tired, I collapsed by a weathered stump, dropping the dog into my lap.

I closed my eyes momentarily and upon opening them I was engulfed in the radiant light once again.

Startled I held the pup close. The dog felt familiar and safe.

I shook my head in an attempt to loosen the spellbinding grip it had over me.

I squinted my eyes hard and refocused my glance around me. I had to find my car and go home.

It was this moment when I felt my arms weigh heavy. I looked down to see the pup almost dissolve into my lap - a light came through where he once layed!

Overwhelmed with disbelief I gasped!

I succumbed to it -

There was nothing I could do - nothing I wanted to do - Its radiancy over powered me and consumed me!

I inhaled its glow and became wrapped in it.

I realized then that the dog was fictional all along - bait!

I had unknowingly played its game - a pawn of sorts.

I could not move.  
My mind raced -  
my body did not.  
Immobile , I smiled.

Once there was a young girl who lived in a small town with only 500 people living there. The town had a dark past( murders and major crime). It was one of the murders that put the girl in foster care. Sadly none of the foster parents were kind but the girl didn't care. She caught a deadly disease that was spreading rapidly through the town and she died 2 days after.  
The end

Elizabeth Elmer

21 y/o

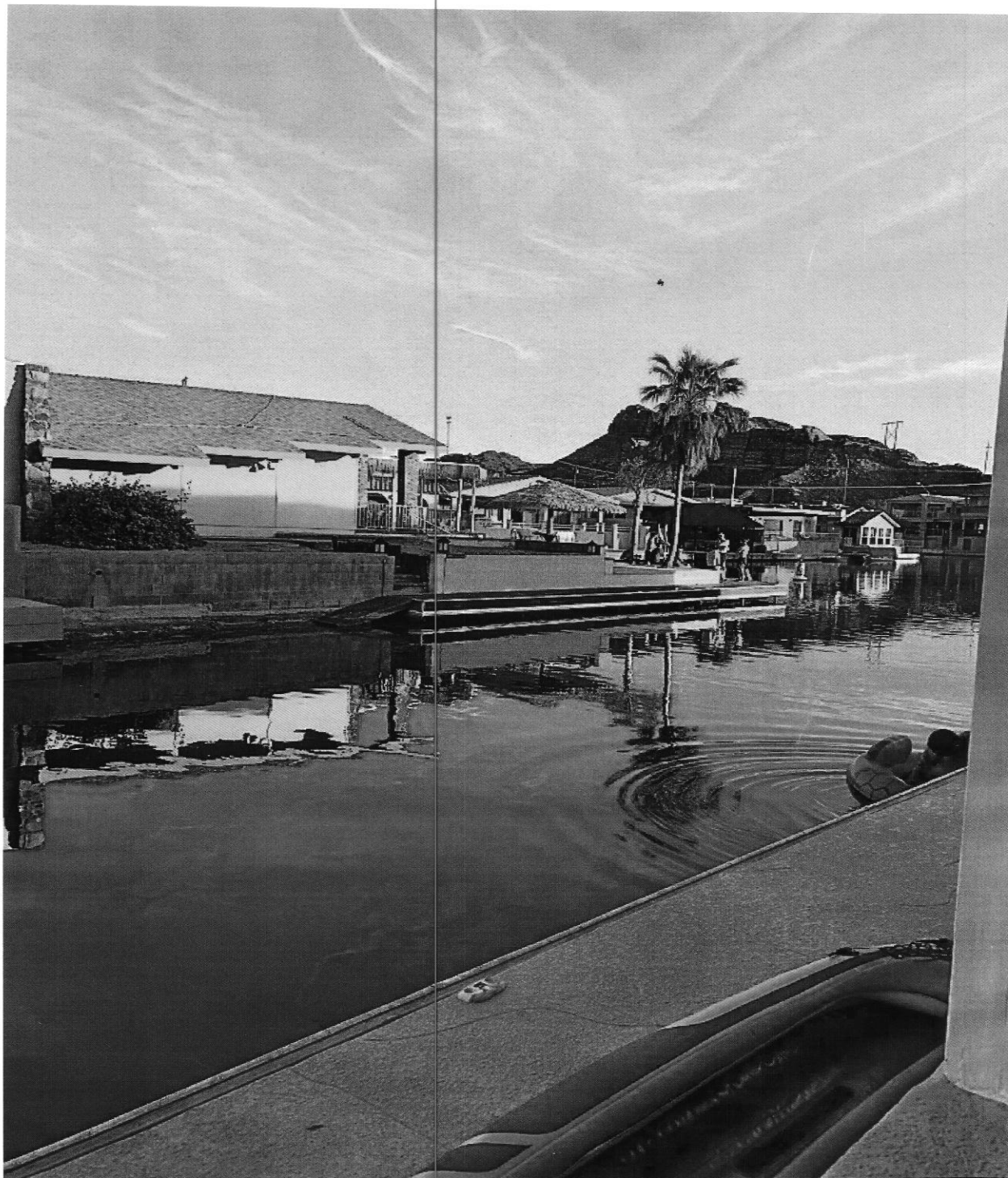
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# Murder at Moovala Keys

By Dana Kn...

Colorado Springs, CO 80911

Entry Category - Adult



## Murder at Moovala Keys

"Can't wait to get away this weekend to our Airbnb in the Moovala Keys!", said Becca. She thought to herself, it will be a great get away break for the monotony of college classes. In fact, she thought I really need this right now. I am under so much stress with college graduation coming and the wedding. I just want to get with my friends to de-stress.

The Moovala Keys was a resort area near Lake Havasu along the Colorado River. Speed boats blaze up and down the river with skiers and tubers pulled behind. Sometimes they had races but always it was full of people. Many had pontoon boats too with BBQ grills and beers flowing, a normal sight as partiers often frequented the area. Spring break was almost here and the place was buzzing with young people.

As we got closer to the Airbnb we could see the boat ramp with the river in the distance. My favorite part was using my stand up paddle board to motor around the canals that linked you to the river. Everyone unpacked the car taking in our bags and food and wine we brought. It was going to be a great weekend of fun and relaxation. Becca and Kim rode together. Amber and Taylor flew into Phoenix versus making the big drive and rented a car. They arrived as we were unpacking. The boys would meet us here later. Doug and Bo usually arrived late, it was their M.O.

"I'll take the upstairs room with Kim", said Becca. "The bathroom is bigger so we need it because you know we have longer hair LOL". "Whatever, like we are getting out of our bathing suits all weekend and our hair will just be wet", chimed in Amber. "We will just take the main level bedroom and the boys can stay downstairs", said Taylor.

Everyone got all settled. The boys arrived shortly after 9:00PM and unpacked in the basement. We all sat around on the deck looking at the stars soaking in the heat and stars well into the night reminiscing. Laughter could be heard while music played loud. The neighbors probably hated having a rental next door. We all agreed to wake up early to get out on the river.

That is when it all got kinda sideways. Kim and Becca had been best friends since kindergarten. Kim was going to be Becca's maid of honor in her wedding next month. As the girls planned the wedding and bachelor party, Amber started saying weird comments about how she thought it should be done differently. Or why didn't we do a destination bachelor party in Vegas or Nashville like everyone else. It was evident that she was jealous, not being asked to even be in the wedding party. Or so we thought.

The next afternoon after a day of boating everyone was tired and sunburned. We all gathered for a taco bar and margaritas since the wine was all gone from the night before. Doug and Bo decided to take the boat for a spin down to the bar off the river. They told us they'd be back around midnight. Margaritas started to flow. I know Taylor was having way too many. She started to slur her words.

Texts uncovered in the investigation from Becca's phone recovered from the canal.

3/1/23 at approximately 1:10AM

Becca's hone

*Hey lol are u up?*

*IDK, I'm just so happy*

*HuH, wait what*

*LOL quit messing*

*Ha, ha*

*Bullshit, funny you got me*

*I hate you, I'm pregnant too*

*I'll tell you what your gunna do,  
Dump Taylor!!!! NOW!! Or else!!*

*No HER!!*

Bradley's phone

*Yep. What's up?*

*IDK if I am*

*I'm in love with someone else*

*I'm not, hate to do this on text but  
I slept with Taylor an um she is prego*

*No I'm serious, I am calling off the wedding*

*Becca, I'm dead serious, I don't love you anymore*

*WHAT? Idk what do to do now*

*Your gunna do what, kill me?*

Simple as that, the text messages are what got her. She is now in prison doing life. They took her baby away and Bradley has custody. At first they thought he was an accomplice but later texts in the investigation cleared him. He wasn't there at the time of the murder and his lawyer proved that it was all done by Becca.

The AirBnB in the Moovala Keys is still a rental today. The partying renters never know about the murder that took place there. All the neighbors swear though that on dark weekend nights right around spring break, you can hear a woman moaning and a baby crying long into the night.



## Scary story Contest Alicia Colon

1 message

Alicia D

To: "spl@wsd3.org" <spl@wsd3.org>

Wed, Oct 25, 2023 at 3:59 PM

Name: Alicia Colon

Address: 7400

Number: 1-604

Age: 32 years

### A Warm Embrace

"Good night" I say timidly as I peek over the frame of my mother's bedroom door. I hate seeing her when she's like this. She's laughing and smiling genuinely, something I don't see often lately, and leaning forward into the conversation she is having with my dad. My ears pick up a part about us moving somewhere "*bright and warm*". It sounds like a nice change from the chronically cold and damp I've known all my life. He died last year though. He responded to a call for a house fire and didn't make it out. We always knew of the possibility but it never felt real until it was and by then it was too late for us to do anything but face our new reality.

"Oh good night my love." She chokes out the words attempting to compose herself through the giggles and clears her throat as she gestures her hand up toward the space next to her. "Say goodnight to your father. He says he loves you very much and he'll be in to check on you in a little bit."

"Good night dad." I say low and cringing as I turn to walk down the hall to my room. I lock my door at night now. I never used to before. I never even closed it at night before; I felt safer with my door at least cracked open, but when he left a sense of security that I didn't realize was there before was ripped off of us like a band aid fused to hair; exposing our vulnerability to ourselves. The night after he died, when I went to sleep, I realized how his presence was like the way he used to hold me, his strength and warmth would make me feel safe, like nothing bad could ever happen to me as long as he was there.

I know my mom feels it too. Though she shows it differently. I also know that she isn't really talking to him but I don't know if *she* knows, not really. I worry that her grief and yearning for what we had has blurred her vision of reality. The reality I still live in.

When I started locking my door at night was when I started waking up to the sound of it creaking open. I never bothered to open my eyes. I knew it was mother acting as my father. She always says he will be in to check on me as he always did until he died. Now she does it on me on his behalf though she can't acknowledge that it's really her. Each night I wake up to the sound of her frantic footsteps up and down the hall, the jiggle of the door handle, the heavy breathing and sometimes a wheezing outside my door as if her frustration at not being able to open it somehow constricts her airway. It startles me but at least she makes no further attempt to come in. Eventually she gets tired and goes back to bed.

Before, her behavior would disturb and scare me and still I keep a *healthy* distance but I know that she is struggling to cope with the loss of my father. I know what it feels like to lose a father. It's painful. The emotions so strong that the agony bleeds into a physical pain. But I don't know how it feels to lose a life partner of nearly two decades while still having your child under your roof to care for. And I pray I never do.

I crawl into my bed and shut off my lamp before I give in to the comforting cradle of my covers and the darkness and wait and listen for the steps along the hall. I try to stay up as long as I can for her break-in attempts so that I am not startled awake by them. I find myself more annoyed than anxious when I can hear her coming but I am so tired tonight that my lids give under the weight and my thoughts trail off incoherently.

The jump in my heart rate and the stinging sensation of my hair standing up all over my body at the sudden sound of creaking wood under her slowly gaining steps makes me realize I dozed off.

I'm not sure if it is my imagination, a bleed from a dream into consciousness, but the smell of smoke begins to register in my nose. I try to think of a possible source. A logical reason something would be burning in the middle of the night. It doesn't smell like food and she banned incense and candles worried that they might contain sage which she read somewhere might prevent my father from being able to visit us.

it's not cold enough yet to turn on the fireplace but for all I know with her state of mind these days she'd burn logs at 3p.m. in August. The smell is getting stronger though, too strong. My eyes begin to burn and water and an involuntary cough escapes as I exhale. Heart racing, instinctively knowing *something is wrong* but not wanting to accept it I get up and head towards the door; my escape. Holding on to that same hope I held onto when my dad was in the hospital. *It's bad but it's not THAT bad. It'll be alright.* I grab the knob. Hot but still touchable.

"Mom!" I call out. "Mom! Where are you?!" I choke on the last word and can barely get it out. The smoke is burning my lungs and I feel a desperate need to escape but I can't leave her. I can't lose her too. I drop to the floor, remembering my elementary school training from when the local fire department visited and crawled to her bedroom door assuming she is trapped in there trying to escape. Her door handle too hot to grasp, I realize her room is the source. On my belly, I look around the floor for something to protect my hand so I can get her out. All I find are two smoke detectors with the batteries laying next to them. *She is the source.*

Choking, I rasp out one last attempt "Mom! I can't open the door. Use a sheet or anything to grab the handle and get out of there now!!" I begin to sob at the absence of response "Please mom. PLEASE! Come with me."

Relief. Forgetting the burning in my chest, my blindness, relief is all I feel when I hear her. "Im over here!" She calls out casually, clearly unaffected by the smoke yet, from the other end of the hall just past my room. "It's ok my love." She says lightly. Lovingly. "We can go. Im sick of the cold dreary place let's go somewhere warm and bright. Some place beautiful." I stand up as I crawl passed the thickest concentration of smoke to find her smiling, completely unfazed or possibly oblivious to the disaster around us. Our home burning, the memories and our belongings along with it.

Taking my hand in hers she leads me down the hall. Down the hall towards her door; in the direction of the fire. Opposite of any escape from the house.

"Mom! We have to go!" I say sternly, now through tears as I realize what she intends to do. Her fingers tighten around my wrist as I try to fight free invoking her other hand to reinforce her grip on me. "Pleeasee" I plead desperately, inciting no reaction or response from her now. The determination in her walk and her resolute expression shows me she is acting on a mission long planned out. My pleas wont do anything to move her now. She had no doubt anticipated them.

Acknowledging the empty space beside her, her expression softens to a smile as she says " I love you too. We'll be there soon."

Terrified as the implication of the last words confirm her intentions I stop merely resisting her and begin to fight to free myself, abandoning any restraint I had to avoid hurting her. I reel my legs around and kick her feet out from under her forcing her to release me. I run to the front of the house where the smoke isn't as dense signifying safety.

As I swing open the front door I gasp in the crisp midnight air. I step forward to leave the house when I feel a familiarly comforting warmth envelope me. It embraces me in a cozy cradle, like when I was a small child in my father's lap.

Now I understand. We *are* going to be ok and we will be happy and together, as a family. Someplace far from this hellhole. If Hell is cold and wet I have no doubt it's here. Now we will all be somewhere warm and bright. I step back in and close the door and greet him as I imagined greeting him a thousand times and what I would say if I ever had just one more chance to see him.

"Hi daddy, I've missed you so much."

Ariana M.

(719) 888 8888

27 Years Old (Adult)

## Jane Doe

October 30th a crisp fall day. Leaves danced down off of the trees in shades of orange, brown, red and yellow. They were so crisp you could hear the crunch of them under your feet. The last dark and creepy evening before Halloween. The veil felt paper thin. More thin then any other year. Jane had just finished her last college course of the night. It was about 6:00 p.m. Due to her being a full time college student money was beyond tight. Jane had sold her car to pay for the last of her books. Jane had no type of family near or for that matter no family at all. No one cared that she walked 2 miles to school and to her run down apartment. Jane was feeling very creeped out that night. Maybe, it was because she knew would have a long night of bartending. At the local club that was known for fighting and one murder about 20 years ago. Jane thought to her self why would she pick up a shift the night before Halloween? Then once she finally got home to her run down one bed room studio apartment she then realized why. Jane was attending school yet she hadn't picked out a major just yet. Jane knew school would eventually pay off and land her a carrer. She couldn't imagine bar tending for the rest of her life. She turned on her semi warm discolored water for her shower. Jane got out of her shower and started to put her long brown hair up in a tight bun. Jane sighed deeply as she started to do her make up. She kept thinking off all the lonely, demented, not attractive creeps that would flirt with her. The thought Jane had was even worse. She had to flirt back with them so she could make enough money for the rent. She put on her sexy fairy costume. She sprayed neon glitter all in her tight neat bun. Jane took a deep breath and then was on her way to walk another 3 miles to the club. Jane arrived to work about 10:30 P.M. Everyone in the club was dressed up for

Halloween. Jane was pouring drinks left and right. Jane had noticed it was 12:00 A.m. Officially the day of Halloween. Jane took her first break of the night. She leaned outside the club wall and took a very long and slow drag off of her cigarette. A drunk man in a vampire costume approached her. Hey, baby you got a light. Jane very annoyed lit the man's cigarette and he was on his way. Jane put out her smoke with her high heel shoe that was starting to leave blisters on both feet. She turned her back for one second and felt a huge blow to her head. 1:00 A.m. Early Halloween morning Jane's boss Mike went out side by the brick wall. There was no sight of Jane. All Mike saw was blood on the bricks. Mike assumed it was just fake. Mike did not find it to strange that he couldn't fight Jane. Mike thought about all the times Jane said she was just going to dissaper one day and not tell a soul. Jane's belongings were not at the club anymore. Mike thought she packed up early and snuck away on her break. Mike headed back inside the club. 2:00 a.m. still early Halloween morning the fog was so thick. So, thick that it apperaed you could cut it with a knife. The air was bitter and cold. Fresh blood droplets were scattered all around that run down town. One large streak of fresh blood covered a tree deep in the old abandoned woods. Halloween evening quickly approached. All the trick or treats ran up and down the streets begging for candy. Halloween night came to an end. Jane's bones were found 20 years later. Since there was no I.D. or missing persons report for Jane. She became Jane Doe. She has remained Jane Do ever since. Ironically, for years no one knew they were calling her by her acutal name Jane. No one knows what led to Janes demise. No one ever knew or cared to ask what she endured that early Halloween morning.

## Campfire Stories

A cold breeze blew down the rocky slope, whispering through the grasses and stirring the hair on her head. She tightened her hoodie around her and squinted up to the mountaintops.

The sun was gone now, but a diffused red glow spilled across the clouds like a stain. It was beautiful, but it also made her uneasy. She had been hiking and camping with a group of friends, and now she made her way back to the campground. Alone. Gravel crunched under her Hoka boots as she made her way up the steep incline.

Her breath hissed harshly in her ears and her heart pounded as she approached the grassy clearing her group had chosen for their camping spot. Voices echoed back to her. The sound of ice growling and grumbling as fumbling hands stirred the cooler, groping for cold Silver Bullets rolled down the slope.

"Getting trashed again," she muttered through gritted teeth, shaking her head. For the thousandth time she cursed the fact that she had even come, regretting the moment she had let her friend Anne talk her into it.

Just as she rounded a bend in the gravel path, and the glow of the campfire hove into view, her foot slipped beneath her and her knee slammed down into the gravel. She gave a sharp cry of pain and cursed, grabbing her knee and dragging herself upright.

The dark shadows of dusk surrounded her, so she dug out her phone and tapped the light on, shaking. A bright gash of crimson oozed from her knee, slowly sliding down her leg through the gray dirt, darkening as it slid wetly through the grime toward her sock.

She cursed again and limped up to the warm flickering fire. Surrounding the rough stone ring were her friends. Mostly. Anne, her long blond hair loose and fluttering in the wind, sat hunched forward, bundled up in a thick fleece blanket against the cold wind. Her camp chair was up on the two front legs as she leaned toward the heat of the dancing fire. Aaron leaned back, chugging a beer, his booted feet propped against the stones. Jessie was wearing Cam's big Carhartt jacket, with only her eyes peeking out and reflecting the flickering flames. Cam came stumbling back from a nearby copse of trees, zipping up

his jeans and belching. Kerri chucked a silver Coors can into the fire, popped open the cooler again, and began digging through the clattering slushy ice.

And then there was Damon. He sat upright on his camp chair, his greasy dark hair whipping in the icy wind slicing through the group like a blade. His dark eyes glittered above his pale hollow cheeks. Red pinpricks of flames shimmered in his dark eyes. He looked like an animated skull. Leah shuddered involuntarily and dragged her camp chair into the circle.

“Where have you been? We’re telling ghost stories. And you’re late.” Though it was dark, it looked like he was staring at the blood crusting from her knee down her shin. His tongue licked out, preternaturally long, and slid greasily across his lips.

She stared across the fire at Damon. It snapped. Whipped. Sparked. Sputtered in the burgeoning wind. And it seemed to wax in power and intensity.

“So what’d I miss?” She asked, eyes narrowed.

Damon chuckled. “Cam fumbled over that old hook on the car handle one. Stupid. Now it’s my turn. You guys will love this one. Now quiet. Listen.”

Leah stared through the flames at Damon. A couple of hours earlier, that piece of garbage had come onto her. Tried to kiss her. She had shoved him away and stormed off on a hike to clear her head. He had shouted apologies and stormed off himself. Last she had seen of any of them. Now he’s sitting here telling stories. The nerve...

Suddenly his raspy voice broke into her musing. “Hearken! Eons ago, this land was free of you people. An entity waited. Bided it’s time. The aspens and the spruce- the cold cold waters, the ageless rocks held this spirit. This spirit hated. Hates. And waited. People arrived, scrambling and scratching like vermin. Desperate for a golden promise buried in the granite. They scraped. They drilled. Poked. Prodded.”

The entire group was silent. Spellbound. What in the hell was he talking about? The wind waxed. Its cold breath scraped her face, stung her eyes. The flames leaped and roared, hungry and eldritch. All

eyes glued to Damon. It didn't sound like him, but it did. It didn't look like him. He looked like a pale skull, eyes glowing in the manic reflected fire. He leaned forward, toward the fire. His dark hollow eyes fixed on her bloody knee. He sniffed deeply, his tongue caressing his upper lip.

"These vermin- parasites. They brought devices that roared and blew the rock apart- freeing this entity. They made mines- roads deep in the earth. I- I mean, this entity- bided its time. Then, when the mine was bustling and the golden veins were flowing forth, I, I mean, this spirit- pulled the mountain down upon the mines! Crushed timbers! Splintered bones! Burst skin! Glorious!" Damon screamed. The group gasped, recoiled.

Stunned silence, punctuated by the flames, definitely growing in fury, though not being fed. Punctuated by the shrieking wind, howling, wailing, sounding like voices moaning an unspeakable language.

"When the mines collapsed, and swallowed the men, and the equipment, and the gold, this entity was trapped. Then..."

Here, Damon stood suddenly, his camp chair clattering behind him. He beat his chest. He hissed, "Then THIS one appeared. His greasy, wormy, vermin mind soft and ready. He found the mine. Ignored the signs. Dug, scraped his fingers till they bled. Flung dirt and ore. And. Here. I. AM!" His voice roared and screamed, the wind swirled the monstrous fire into a hellish column.

The group recoiled in horror. The flames spun and rose as Damon's arms flung wide, his head jerked back, and primordial, guttural laughter belched forth like legions. The darkness poured on as if it were the wind itself, but the fire grew and grew and grew.

719

Tim K

Adult



Library, Security Public &lt;spl@wsd3.org&gt;

## Scary Story Contest

1 message

Ash Mo

To: "Library, Security Public" &lt;spl@wsd3.org&gt;

Tue, Oct 24, 2023 at 6:49 PM

Ashley M.  
Age 32/ Adult

### Past Reflections By Ashley Montoya

Dave woke to the sunlight creeping in through his blinds and his alarm clock on his phone screaming "ring ring." Dave sleepily got out of his bed and went to start his morning routine, he had the wet white cotton towel over his face. When suddenly Dave heard a whisper in an eerie voice "I know, I knooooow Dave." Dave quickly threw the wet towel down and anxiously looked around his bathroom and bedroom and saw no one, not that he expected there to be, after all he was a single child raised by a single mother who was consistently at her nursing job at the local hospital.

Dave walked to school that morning with his friends. After school Dave had football practice. As he had the hot water running and he was removing his football uniform, Dave swore he heard screeching of tires and then all of a sudden the same hauntingly familiar voice from this morning said "Why?" Dave screamed into the nothingness, "What do you mean why?" Dave hurriedly put his uniform on and decided to scurry home to take a shower.

When Dave got home everything seemed normal, doors were locked, it was just Dave at home. Yeah! Everything seemed pretty normal. Dave heard his stomach rumble that is when Dave decided to warm up some leftover pizza from the night before. Dave pressed the start button and within seconds the whole microwave spontaneously combusted, Dave thought to himself "What a strange ass day." as he settled on a cold slice of leftover pizza.

A little while later David finally gets into the shower, he is washing shampoo out of his hair. When he realizes how hot and scolding the water that is falling in his head feels. He quickly tries to adjust the water spinning all the shower nozzles. When finally the water just totally stops. Again Dave heard the voice only this time it says "Come here Davvvvee, Come find me."

Dave slowly walks towards the bathroom door, when all of a sudden he sees a random reflection flickering in the mirror. Dave steps forward "Hello? Anyone there" Dave rubs his eyes and thinks "Man I am really losing it." Just as Dave puts his hand on the cold door knob.

Dave here's the voice again "Comeeeeeeee hereee." Dave gets closer to the mirror when he finally can make out the outline of a boy who looks to be about 18 his age. The figure in the mirror looks directly into Dave's face, just as the figure does that. Dave notices that the figures face changed from a teenage guy, to a corpse looking face with maggots coming out of his eyeballs. Dave screams. Just then the reflection morphs back into a teen boy. "It's me Dave, Jake!!!"

All of a sudden adrenaline runs through Dave's body. This can't be real, Dave starts to flash back to Junior year. It was a Saturday night, Dave and his girlfriend at the time had been drinking and Dave had just gotten a car as a gift from his Mother. Dave and his girlfriend decide to leave the party when they pull out onto a dark road. All of a sudden the car makes a huge thud and Dave and his girlfriend both lean forward from the impact. Dave looks at his girl and says "Wtf was that?" Dave gets out of the car and so does his girlfriend his Girlfriend shrieks at the blood of pool surrounding Jake's lifeless body in front of Dave's car. They both agree to never say anything, they didn't want to risk their futures and something like this could ruin Dave's future as a football star right?

Dave snaps back into the present. Jake from the mirror says "You do remember don't you?" Then Jake says angrily "You wanted to ensure you had a future even if it meant taking mine from me.?" All of a sudden Dave feels a pull towards the

... and within seconds Jake reaches out and pulls Dave through the mirror. Mirror pieces shattered all around Dave's bathroom floor.

Just then Dave and Jake both end up in a cold dark space, Jake says " You wanted a future but you sacrificed mine, Now you will have my fate and be lost in the abyss forever and ever." Jake diabolically laughs, as Dave drops to his knees screaming " NO!" Jake continues to laugh.

THE END!