

Carmine

A sort story of 11,500 words. A tale about modern day witchcraft, set in the sleepy neighbourhood of Walker's Creek in West Virginia. A cautionary tale for Halloween.

Never upset an ancient witch, even a dead one.....

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Carmine Brown was a married woman who admitted to being over thirty, though she'd fight anyone who wanted to know her exact age. No children yet, despite being married to Vic for close to ten years.

"You just haven't been blessed yet."

Was the throw away phrase she hated so much, that she'd stopped going to church for a while. Vic was seriously religious though, even gave readings from the good book some Sundays. Carmine had gone back to church, but still hated being told she needed to be patient. That was the trouble with living in a small community like Walker's Creek in West Virginia, everyone in the congregation knew all your business.

"You're still going tonight, aren't you?" Asked Phili.

Her best friend since nursery school, Philomena Gillis, who everyone knew as Phili. Oddly, despite her age and being well respected in the community, Carmine still took her friend upstairs to her bedroom to talk about Wiccan matters. Vic brought coffee sometimes, but usually he watched sports on TV and ignored what went on upstairs.

"Probably not Phili, it just seems such a waste of time." She replied. "None of the spells we're taught work and then Rachelle says it's because we're not practising enough."

Phili was looking miserable. Carmine knew her friend saw the Wiccan Sisters of Walker's Creek as a good place to meet her friends, but she wanted it to be about real witchcraft, genuine spells and techniques.

"Becca will be there and we both like her." Said Phili. "And you have to admit, Rachelle's coffee and homemade brownies are worth killing for."

"Then it should be called the coffee drinking sisters of Walker's Creek." She said. "I expected so much and Becca has seen Rachelle put an aspirin into a vase of withering flowers, and then claim she used her hocus pocus on them."

Phili was laughing now, Rachelle's claims for her witchcraft powers, were well known in the group.

"I remember her claiming to control the weather, until she got drenched that fall." Said Phili.

Vic arrived with coffee while they laughed, though he never stayed long once he'd put the tray on her dressing table. She loved Vic dearly and thanked God every Sunday, for bringing them together.

"I'll run you home later Phili." Said Vic. "It looks like we're in for some serious rain later."

"Thanks Vic, much appreciated."

Phili didn't live that far away and usually walked, but the weather around Halloween could be weird. One moment an unseasonal seventy five degrees, the next heavy rain, so cold that it seemed to freeze your bones. Vic went back to watch his game on TV, but the moment had been broken, the laughter stopped.

"Can I be really honest?" Asked Phili.

"Aren't you always! I remember you once telling me that seventeen was far too old to be a virgin and that I needed to get laid..... Go on though, out with it."

"I don't want to go to a Wiccan group where the spells work." Said Phili. "Crap ! I'm not even sure I believe in it at all, it's just a pleasant way to spend Sunday night. All the regulars feel the same way." "Everyone ?"

Phili just nodded at her and Carmine felt angry. Several years of her life wasted on spells that Rachele probably knew were useless.

"I practised hard Phili, even bought books online." She said. "Some I bought from antiquarian book dealers, they cleared out my savings last year."

She had cleared out Vic's emergency fund too, though she felt a little ashamed of that. Three of the books were by someone who called herself Constance H. Constance seemed to know stuff, seemed to have really wielded some genuine power. Her longest work was called 'Witchcraft, Magic and Oracles in New England.' Buying that book had maxed out her one and only MasterCard.

"This ! See this book Phili ?"

She took the much loved book off the shelf containing her Wiccan items. It had pride of place between a large piece of rose quartz and a porcelain owl. She'd wanted a stuffed owl, but Vic had put his foot down about having taxidermy in their bedroom.

"This used up our credit card, all of it !" She yelled. "Four thousand fucking dollars ! Now you're telling me it was all just an excuse for Sunday coffee with the girls ?!"

"You're upset Carm, maybe I should leave ?"

She sat next to her best friend and gripped her hand, so tight that she squirmed about, trying to stand up.

"I believed in it Phili, believed that I had something deep inside me. I really believed there was a power in my soul that I could tap into. This is what I think of Constance H and her crap."

She let go of her friend and opened the ancient book, selecting a page at random. There were several lines of text and a drawing of a summoning circle. There was a pentagram in the circle and words in a language far older than Latin. She built up a good ball of saliva in her mouth, before spitting onto that page.

"I spit on you Constance and all you stupid old women, pretending to have powers you know are total crap." She said. "I defy you ! If you're out there and hearing this, do your worst !"

"No ! You shouldn't do that with me here..... Just supposing....." Said Phili.

"Oh you mean a fireball ?! Come on Constance, scorch my arse !"

She looked at her terrified friend.

"See Phili, no bolt from above, no plague of boils. It's all crap, all of it."

Phili was crying and it brought her out of her anger.

"Not fair Carm, not right to do that while I'm here."

"So, it seems you do believe after all !"

Phili was away, out of her bedroom door and heading for the stairs. Her friend for over a quarter of century, was running away from her.

"I'm sorry ! Really sorry, don't go."

Vic had come out to see what all the noise was about, though he just watched without interfering. He was one of the good guys and the rock in her sometimes turbulent life.

"I can walk home before the rain starts." Said Phili.

"I don't mind driving you home." Said Vic.

"I'm so sorry Phili, please let Vic take you home."

"Ok, I'll call you tomorrow."

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It had to be about three in the morning, when something woke her out of a deep sleep. Something had woken her, but for a few seconds she had no idea what, until she heard Mac hissing and screeching. Their cat was nearly fifteen, he'd been ten when she'd fallen in love with him at the animal shelter. Usually he was about as active as a throw rug, but some nights he behaved like a crazy thing. They'd even plugged in a few LED night lights at key points round the house, to stop him bumping into things.

"Mac, stop it." She whispered. "Come here you daft thing."

There was nothing wrong with his hearing. He gave a loud chirruping noise and ran noisily into their bedroom, leaping up onto the bed. She held him, kissing the top of his head. Mac seemed really anxious, she could feel his heart hammering away in his chest.

"Hey baby, you have to stop chasing monsters in the dark." She said. "You're getting too old to get so stressed out."

He purred, relaxing them both. Carmine was almost asleep again, at that point where dreams and reality get mixed up. She thought she heard a woman's voice, calling her name. The sound from the lower part of the house woke her and it caused Mac to begin hissing.

"We both heard that."

It had sounded like something being thrown around in their kitchen and the usual culprit for such things, was still in her arms. Carmine wasn't a coward; in fact she prided herself on not being scared of nonsense. Still, the sound had been real enough and there was no harm in waking up the reinforcements. She ran the heel of her foot up and down Vic's leg.

"Sorry Honey, but I think someone is in the house."

"What?"

Mac gained their attention, as his hissing gained in volume, while his jaws opened wide. Like any cat he had his little idiosyncrasies, but he'd never howled and hissed like that before.

"Why is he doing that?" Asked Vic.

She wanted to scream, but he wasn't used to being woken in the night and his job needed a full night's sleep. He was an engineer with the local power company, one of the small army of guys repairing electrical transformers on poles and stringing new cables. A job that had its dangers, a job best done after a solid eight hours sleep.

"He hears the noises downstairs honey."

"What noises?"

A loud cash from downstairs saved her from throttling her sleepy husband. It sounded as though a window had been smashed in and they were both instantly out of bed and putting on gowns. Mac remained on their bed, still howling.

"We hear them buddy." Said Vic. "That doesn't help."

"Poor baby, he's terrified." She said.

"Stay here, I'll get the gun."

Most people scared her once they picked up a gun. Judy, their next door neighbour, had nearly shot a fuel oil delivery guy at one time. He'd been early that day and there had recently been a spate of burglaries. Vic had taken all the courses, he could hit the centre spot on a target every time. Then again, targets at the range didn't dodge about or fire back. Vic's 9mm automatic was in a safe in the wardrobe of the next bedroom along the hallway, the one they hoped to use as a nursery one day. As Carmine waited, she looked out of the window, gasping as she saw a woman standing near their back door.

"There's a woman outside!" She yelled.

“Ok, stay there, I won’t be long.”

At one time there had been very little crime in Walker’s Creek, but then the downturn had arrived and didn’t look likely to leave anytime soon. After the first group of burglaries, they fitted low wattage outside lights, which were left on all night. A woman was looking straight up into one of the lights, standing right outside their kitchen door. A tall woman in a white dress, though all light colours looked white in the soft glow of the lights. Her face looked middle aged, with a touch of something cruel about it.

“Is she still there ?”

Vic, pistol in hand, pushing the clip of bullets up into the grip. He took her attention and when she looked back, the woman was running away and vanishing into the woods behind their house.

“She’s gone, ran into the woods behind Judy’s place.”

“Close the door after me.” Said Vic. “I’ll go downstairs on my own.”

He seemed so calm, handling it so well. It was as if men were born with a gene for investigating noises in the middle of the night.

“I’m coming with you.” She said. “If they get you, I’d be left up here with just Mac for company.”

Even in the light from one of Mac’s night lights, she could see Vic wasn’t pleased.

“Sorry, that all sounded fine, until I actually said it.”

“Fine follow me, just stay well back.”

They left Mac howling on their bed and walked slowly along the hall and down the stairs. Vic was on the bottom step, when she felt a need to talk to him.

“Be careful honey.”

He glared at her and put his finger over his lips, while pointing the gun at the closed kitchen door.

They never closed any door, ever. Not since they’d brought Mac home from the animal shelter and welcomed him as the third member of their family. She jumped back, not expecting Vic to shout, as he burst through their kitchen door.

“Keep still ! I’m armed and the police are on the way !” He yelled.

Mac was rubbing round her ankles, so she picked him up and held him in her arms. There was no more noise from the kitchen, which was encouraging. Vic appeared, his head looking round the door.

“They wrecked the kitchen, but they’ve gone now.”

Not so much wrecked as made into a fairly impressive mess. Drawers pulled out, the contents of every cupboard strewn across the floor. The worst actual damage was to the back door, which seemed to have been kicked in, glass covering that end of her once beautiful kitchen. Carmine hugged Mac as she picked her way through the rubble. Vic handed her his cell phone.

“I think they’ve all gone.” He said. “Call the cops while I look in every room.”

“The cops..... Do we need ?..... I suppose we do.”

The mess could be cleared up, new doors easily fitted. It seemed their civic duty though, to inform the police. Not local police, everything ended up being routed through Charleston, which meant a bored cop turning up in about three or four hours. She called the number stuck on their fridge by a magnet and went through the process of reporting a burglary. Vic returned after about ten minutes, still holding his 9mm pistol.

“The rest of the house is undisturbed.” He said. “Maybe it was just the crazy woman you saw.”

“We don’t know she’s crazy.”

Vic waved his arm about, indicating their kitchen, with its new walk through back door.

“You’ve got to be mad to do something like this.” He said.

There were still over two hundred homes without power after a recent storm, there was no question of her husband remaining at home to see the cops. Two bored looking cops turned up after first light and did a fairly good job of recording the details.

“This looks like someone settling a grudge Mrs Brown. Have you had an argument with anyone lately, one bad enough to get someone this mad at you ?”

“No, we get on with everyone.”

Not quite true, but she couldn't think of anyone she'd upset to the point where they'd trash her kitchen in the middle of the night.

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Surprisingly she was early getting to work after such a busy night. She parked her old but reliable four door Honda in the car park behind Hanratty Realtors and decided there wasn't quite enough time to get a coffee and something for breakfast. She went through the glove compartment, before digging through the bag she carried everywhere.

“There has to be something edible.” She muttered.

The bottle of water was a good month beyond its use by date, but to hell with it, water is water.

There hadn't been a kitchen to make her usual coffee and toast before leaving home. She drank half the bottle of warm water, in a single long swallow. Then she spotted the bar of chocolate and decided that just maybe, the entire world didn't suck.

“Come to mamma my little Hershey Bar.”

The chocolate had just reached the right consistency in her mouth, to spill out and stain her blouse, as her mouth dropped open. The woman from the night before, was stood only a few feet behind her car.

“Shit !” Carmine yelled.

The dress looked yellow in full daylight and covered in a tiny red motive she couldn't quite make out. Ladybugs probably, yes definitely ladybugs. She'd seen her in the door mirror, but the woman looked further away in the rear view mirror, which was comforting, even if she knew it was an illusion. What did the woman want ? She looked the wrong side of middle age, with pale skin that bordered on prison pallor. Carmine was certain of one thing, she'd never met the woman before, ever. Her memory for faces was good, far better than most of the people she knew. Carmine pressed the button to lower the window and leant out, twisting her neck to look at the mystery woman.

“What do you want ? Why did you wreck my kitchen ?”

No answer, just a bony finger raised and pointed right at her. Carmine wasn't proud of it, but she squealed just a little and wound the window up again. She looked in the rear view mirror again and the finger was still pointing at her, accusingly. Who the hell was it ? She hadn't insulted anyone lately. Then an idea struck her, about Constance H, not liking her challenge.

“Oh, come on you silly bitch.” She muttered. “Constance must be long dead.”

She watched the woman, almost hypnotised by that pointing finger. It went on longer than any sane person should have been able to hold their arm straight out. Then tiny cracks appeared in the rear view mirror, like crazing on a piece of old china. The cracks grew, covering the surface, until the mirror shattered, covering her with tiny pieces of glass.

“Christ ! Fuck !” She yelled.

Carmine found out that car mirrors aren't made of safety glass, as a shard bit into her finger, as she tried to brush the bits out of her hair. She wanted to get out of the car, before all of her was either bleeding or covered in half melted chocolate. No crazy lady in the door mirror so she risked it, running a good ten paces from her car. No sign of her finger pointing friend, anywhere.

“What did I do to deserve this ?!”

She took her jacket off, using the inside lining to brush glass out of her hair. There was so much glass from such a small mirror. Chocolate too, it was amazing how far that small bar had managed to travel. Her blouse was ruined, but her first house viewing wasn't until eleven. More than enough time to clean up and buy a new top. Where was the woman in the yellow dress though ?

“You must be an Olympic athlete lady.” She muttered.

Panic as Carmine wondered where her finger pointing nemesis might have gone to. She walked round her car, even crouching to look underneath. Nothing there and the building where she worked was the closest, but still further than most people could run to that quickly. Hanratty Realtors, where she worked selling and renting property to the good people of West Virginia. She locked her car and crossed the car park, still being cautious and prepared to run.

“Did a middle aged woman, in a yellow dress just come in here ?” She asked Nina.

“No you're the first since I unlocked. Good heavens Carmine, what happened to you ?”

She had to look a mess, the blood from her finger mixing with the chocolate stains. Nina had been the receptionist for years and was famously unflappable.

“A woman attacked me outside. I think it was the same one who broke into my house last night. It might be a good idea to lock the outside door today.”

“Yes of course.” Said Nina.

Nina flipped the catch on the door and hung up the ‘Ring bell for attention,’ sign. It was something they rarely did, business was slow and no one wanted to discourage walk-ins.

“Oh, you poor thing.” Said Nina. “I'll come into the washroom and help you clean up, once I've called the police.”

“Oh, I'm not sure Nina, it's not good publicity.”

“We have to Carm, she might attack someone else.”

“You're right, I'll need to reschedule my viewing at eleven.”

Nina turned out to be a treasure, helping her clean-up, brushing off her business suit and going out to buy a new blouse. By the time the police turned up, Carmine was beginning to feel more her old self again. The police were less bored, her name had turned up in two cases in less than twenty four hours.

“So you're certain it was the same woman who was outside your house ?”

“Yes, I'm certain. I'd recognise her anywhere.”

“Wearing a yellow dress with red ladybugs all over it ?”

“Yes.”

He shrugged at his partner.

“Shouldn't be too hard to spot, call it in.” He said.

They examined her car, the front seats still covered in tiny pieces of mirror.

“How did she break it ?” One of them asked.

It was the weak spot in her attack story, one she'd been working over in her mind. The truth that the woman was probably Constance, a long dead witch, who'd used her wicked wiccan powers to break her mirror..... No, she was going to lie.

“My window was down, she must have thrown a stone or something.” She said.

She didn't believe it, as the words left he mouth. The two young cops didn't challenge her story though and if anything, they looked to be taking the case more seriously.

“I don't want to scare you Mrs Brown, but she might have thrown the stone at you.” One said. “If at all possible, I'd recommend that you work in the office today and keep the door locked.”

“Yes, I will officer.”

Carmine had already rescheduled the couple at eleven and her next appointment was in the office at three thirty. She sat at her desk and fought the impulse for several minutes.

“Attacked by a dead witch ! Come on Carmine, you’re not a kid.”

Once the idea was in her head though, it refused to shift. She brought up Google and typed ‘Constance H witch,’ into the query box. It brought back several pages of answers, including a piece from a local museum on early American history.

“No picture.” She muttered. “Not into selfies Constance ?”

Constance Hubbard had lived and died during the period when America was a colony of the British Empire. No one kept proper records then of course and it was assumed she’d died in about sixteen sixty. Quite literary for her day, she’d kept a journal and several notebooks on witchcraft, which were published two hundred years after her death.

“You must have known a thing or two, no one publishes two hundred year old rubbish.”

Died long before everyone carried an HD camera around with them as part of their phone. Still, she’d been quite infamous in her day, someone might have done an etching of her. Even an amateur drawing would be nice to see.

‘Constance Hubbard Witch Picture.’

Google brought back lots of links, all of them entries in various museums and libraries, but simply clicking on the image button, brought back nothing. She went back to the library links and noticed one was for the library just four blocks from her office.

“That’s more like it.”

South Charleston Public library boasted at having some unpublished work by her, including two of her famous notebooks. Most importantly they mentioned an unauthenticated drawing of her, attributed to her younger sister. Pity they hadn’t put it online, but they were open from nine until nine during the week. Carmine dialled Vic’s cell phone, getting his voicemail.

“Hi Honey, I’ll be home a bit late. Doing some research at the library, my usual obsession. Love you.”

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Something felt different about the world, as she drove the few blocks to the library. It was the feeling of being watched all the time, of someone following her. She parked as close to the library as she could, watching all the time for a thin dark haired woman in a yellow dress.

“Carm, you mustn’t let this get to you.” She mumbled.

South Charleston Public Library looked busy, though mostly it seemed to be groups of kids doing their homework. Carmine approached the counter and waited for the girl the other side to notice her. She was from that generations, the ones who never shouted in the street, or even thought about using bells on counters.

“What can I do to help you today ?”

She looked about nineteen, but keen and being keen often made up for years of experience.

“I saw online that you have some items here that belonged to Constance Hubbard.”

Carmine had printed the article before leaving the office, though some of it had vanished off the edge of the A4 pages. The note about the library was there though, including several reference numbers.

“Normally someone could take you, it’s in the reference area not usually open to the public.” Said the girl. “We’re short staffed though, a few have fallen victim to the flu outbreak.”

The girl was pretty with freckles, her ginger hair swept back into a pony tail. Carmine had sold very large damp houses to little old ladies; the kid didn’t stand a chance.

"It's just so important; my daughter needs some material for her thesis." She said.

She gave her the look too, the look of a woman who'd been through some terrible shit and deserved bucket loads of sympathy.

"I guess I could unlock the door and point you in the right direction."

Ten minutes later, she was stood at a table, with a large cardboard archive box in front of her. Ginny, the ginger haired girl with freckles, had informed her that the box contained everything they had on the late Constance Hubbard. It wasn't that late and Vic knew where she was, which gave her a good two or three hours to go through everything properly. She unpacked the box, laying everything out of the spotless wooden table.

"Where to start?" She muttered.

Various drafts of Constance's books were ignored, as all of them were put together years after her death. She ruthlessly removed everything that looked modern, including two first editions of the book that had cost her four thousand dollars. Everything that wasn't likely to have been touched or owned by Constance went back in the box, though her hand did hesitate when she picked up the first editions. How much were they worth? Just lying in a box in the library, probably untouched for decades. Hearing movement out in the hallway preserved her honesty, though it had been a close thing.

"Found what you needed?" Called Ginny, from the hallway.

"I think so, still digging."

The notebooks were in separate plastic bags, labelled with the dates they'd been written and a location. It appeared Constance had lived in West Virginia for a good chunk of her life. Carmine removed the oldest notebook from its protective bag and placed it on the table, before opening it to the first page. The paper was yellow, the ink used had faded and Carmine realised that wasn't the worst problem.

"Christ Constance, you could have written it in English."

It was probably what passed for English in the seventeenth century, lots of curly characters that made no sense to her. She looked at all the other notebooks and found them all written in the same style. Out of desperation, she flicked through the notebook in the best condition, assuming it was the newest. She was hoping to find something, anything written in a form of English she could read. Instead she found a full page drawing with 'Constance,' written under it.

"I knew it was you." She mumbled.

Shock set in, as she recognised the face of the woman who'd been behind her car. Carmine felt as though every inch of her skin was covered in goose bumps. There in that ancient drawing, was an exact likeness of the skinny old bitch who'd pointed at her, marking her for something. Signs everywhere saying photography was forbidden, but she took four pictures on her smartphone, all at slightly different angles. She'd found her attacker, the woman who'd trashed her kitchen. The problem was that Constance Hubbard had been dead for nearly four hundred years. She heard footsteps coming into the room and assumed it was Ginny.

"I found what I was looking for." She said, without turning.

"Is that the one following you honey?"

A female voice with a strong southern accent. She spun round to find the smallest and oldest woman she ever remembered seeing. So small a strong gust of wind would blow her away. Her face so lined that even her wrinkles had wrinkles. A kind smile though, as a hand was offered.

"Sorry, where are my manners. I'm Mary Laverty."

"Carmine Brown."

She took the hand, shaking it very gently.

"I saw one of them was following you, an old dead witch I mean."

Mary Lavery took a good long look at the drawn image of Constance, shaking her head as she did so.

"A bad one was Constance, one of the worst. Did you upset her?"

"I was angry, not really thinking about what I was saying." Said Carmine.

"That's no excuse honey, not for someone like her. Did you challenge her?"

"I suppose so, sort of."

Mary was looking at her as if she was a naughty child.

"That brings them back." Said Mary. "They're like children, the ancient witches. Any disrespect and they return for a while, to punish whoever insulted them."

"What will she do?"

"She'll kill you honey, unless you stop her. First she'll kill everyone you care for and then she'll come for you."

The room span a little, as Carmine took in and accepted for fact, that a long dead witch wanted her dead. There was an honest sincerity about Mary, she believed her.

"How do I stop her? I've never cast any spell that worked."

Mary took her hand without asking, holding it as she looked up into her eyes.

"You have something about you child." She said. "Power is there, even if you don't know how to use it. Be honest with me, why did you seek knowledge of witchcraft?"

No lies now, no excuses about knowledge for its own sake, or any one of the other dozen or more reasons she'd given Vic and her friends.

"I want a child, desperately want a child. I hoped to find a way of moving the odds of having one, a little more in my favour."

"A selfish reason, but I've heard worse." Said Mary. "I'll help you, do you have something to write my address on?"

Carmine had a new notebook for all the information she'd hoped to gather and a pen that worked.

Mary gave her an address way out of town, almost on the Kentucky State line.

"Do you have a telephone number?"

"No, nor an email address or social media. If people want to see me, they come and knock on my door."

"I will, one evening this week."

"Make it tomorrow honey, you need to learn how to defend yourself. If you don't Constance Hubbard will definitely kill you."

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Carmine Brown showed the picture of Constance to her husband and had every intention of calling on Mary the next evening. They were so certain that their home would be attacked, that Vic left the loaded 9mm pistol in his bedside drawer. After all that worry and preparation, Monday night was peaceful, they both had a proper night's sleep. Vic left early Tuesday morning, to repair cables up near Ripley. Not before he made her promise to call him every hour on the hour. The day went well though, no more surprises in the car park. Carmine even signed up a large sale, one with enough commission to take away any money worries for a while. If Constance had cursed her, she could curse her every day of the week.

"Maybe it was a one off thing." She told Vic. "Just something to put me in my place."

"Or it was nothing to do with dead witches and you just pissed someone off."

She'd been grumpy with him after that comment, though he had a point. She did seem to have a knack for making enemies, always had and probably always would. Motor mouth inherited from her father, though he always said she got it from her mother.

"Let's just hope it's over."

She told him, as they went to bed on Tuesday night. The sound of Vic screaming woke her up that Wednesday morning. It took her a few seconds to wake up properly, hearing her husband shrieking in their kitchen. She got up and put on her gown.

"What is it?" She shouted. "What's happened?"

Footsteps on the stairs and Vic was pulling his gun out of the drawer, checking the clip was full of bullets. His hand was actually shaking, as he flicked off the safety catch.

"Stay up here and call the cops." He said. "The bastards killed Mac."

"Oh no, not Mac."

She tried to get downstairs, while he held her, trying to stop her. By the time they were at the top of the stairs, it had become an undignified wrestling match. She hit him hard, in the chest with her fist.

"I found him, I brought him home. Let me see him!"

He held her and she let her muscles relax, enjoying the closeness.

"Fine, just don't touch anything. The cops are probably going to want everything left as it is."

She walked into the kitchen, Vic following her like an armed guard. Nothing had been trashed, it took her a while to notice anything out of place. Her vet had once told her surgery on cats was always tricky, because they had so little blood.

"Oh Shit Vic, he never harmed a soul!" She said. "Too dopey to even catch mice."

Carmine had never asked how much blood was in the average cat, but Mac's had managed to cover a good part of the kitchen top, where she prepared meals. Constance of course, Mary Laverty had said she would go after the people she loved and Carmine had loved her dopey cat.

"It was her, fucking Constance!" She yelled.

Constance had taken her largest carving knife and used it to pin poor Mac to the kitchen cabinet. Right through his chest, leaving him to dangle, his blood pooling on the surface below. She desperately wanted to take him down, but Vic was right. Three reported violent crimes in half a week, the police were going to want an undisturbed crime scene.

"I'll be careful, but I need coffee." She said. "I'm not going to get through the day without it."

"I'll make it."

"Thanks, I'll call the police from the lounge."

The police were quite excited about a third call about the same person being stalked, attacked, or whatever they decided to call it. As she hung up, Vic walked in with two large mugs of coffee.

"The cops will be here in under an hour." She told him. "They're sending a detective with them this time and a scene of crime guy."

"Jeez, it'll be Columbo by Friday."

An awful joke that was wrong for so many reasons, but she had to laugh. The coffee was good, it quickly got the wheels of her mind turning again.

"This is my battle, my problem." She said. "I want you to go and stay with your brother until I sort it out."

"No way, I'm staying here."

He handled the gun, it seemed to be his security blanket.

"You can't shoot a dead witch." She said. "I have to go and see Mary and learn how to send Constance back to hell."

"You stay, I stay." He replied.

"Then you'll end up as dead as poor Mac."

They were both stubborn, that was the problem.

"You'll just distract me from learning what I need to know." She said. "With you out of harm's way, I can concentrate. Just for a few days..... Please."

He glared at her while he drank his coffee.

"Fine, but I'll leave you the gun."

"Thanks."

"And only until Sunday. I'll be over at the usual time to pick you up for church."

"Hopefully it'll all be sorted out by then."

The scene of crime guy, turned out to be a woman and Carmine cried as she carried Mac out of the house in a sealed up evidence bag. It seemed an awful way for part of the family to be taken out of the house. The detective advised them to stay with friends for a few days, while they carried out further investigations.

"I've already arranged something with my brother." Vic had told him.

Bless him, she'd chosen a good one, he never mentioned that only he was leaving and that she was going to remain behind.

~ ~

Mary Laverty's house was so far off the beaten track, that Carmine wondered if she'd taken a wrong turn again. The road had become a track and her car wasn't designed to go off road, it barely coped with a bit of slush on the road. She had a weekend case on the back seat and hoped Mary took her in for a few days. They might be complete strangers, but going home was almost certain to mean her being killed by the ghost of Constance Hubbard. Her cell phone had long since given up on trying to get a signal and the SatNav kept trying to turn her left, straight into a drainage ditch.

"Where the hell do you live Mary?" She muttered.

The single storey house at the end of the track had to be her place, there was nowhere else to go. It was partially hidden in the trees, the sort of place where locals made moonshine in old films.

Carmine drove her car right up to the front door, getting it under cover of the trees. Not a good idea if a storm hit, but she was more worried about Constance finding her. She grabbed her case and approached the house, hoping Mary was actually home. There was no doorbell, probably no electricity or water either, apart from well water.

"This has to be one of your worst decisions Carmine Brown."

She thumped on the door with her fist, the sound echoing through the trees. Mary opened the door, her smile turning to a frown, as she saw Carmine's weekend case.

"Oh, who did Constance kill?" She asked.

"Mac, my cat."

"Come in and of course you can stay as long as you like. I have a few tricks of my own to hide your presence, Constance will never find you here."

The house was larger than it had looked from outside, stretching back some way, several rooms leading off a central hallway.

"You can have this room, I'll make up the bed later."

A room with a bed, a wardrobe and a bedside cabinet. The encouraging thing was a bedside lamp plugged into a wall socket, there was electricity in the house. Mary took her to the kitchen, which overlooked a vegetable garden at the rear.

"Sit yourself down honey." Said Mary. "Have you eaten?"

"No, I came straight from work. It's been a miserable day, constantly feeling that someone was watching me."

"I'll fry something up, is that ok for you ?" Asked Mary.

"Fine."

Carmine still didn't feel safe and it must have shown on her face.

"I guarantee she won't find you here." Said Mary. "I have my own reasons for wanting privacy and I've lived here for a long time, all the time strengthening the spells that guard the house."

Mary turned on a tap to fill a kettle, which surprised her.

"Tea alright ?"

"Yes, anything. You have water in the house then ?"

Mary put the kettle on the stove and sat beside her at the kitchen table.

"The state ran a scheme to get everyone connected to the power company, though it goes off at the first sign of bad winds. A pump fills a roof tank from the well and I had a septic tank put in about twenty years ago, maybe a bit longer. All the comforts of home, just so long as you don't mind spiders, they get everywhere."

"I'll survive." Said Carmine. "Thank you for taking me in."

"You should have come sooner."

"I know."

The meal was basic, but tasted wonderful, as did the tea. No early night though, Mary took her out to a barn, which had seen better days. Part of it had been filled with shelves and used as a store for tinned food.

"I tried to keep packets of dry food out here, but the bugs can eat through packets. They even chew the labels off tins. It has space for you to learn though and practise."

There was the usual junk that seems to fill barns no longer needed for farm equipment. Mary dug through a pile of wood offcuts, choosing two pieces that seemed to please her. She placed them in the centre of the barn.

"Did you learn the basics from the books you read ?" Asked Mary.

"Yes, but none of it worked. I was part of The Wiccan Sisters of Walker's Creek.....Please don't laugh. It appears everyone knew it was just a coffee morning group, apart from me."

Mary was actually laughing, which was a bit hurtful.

"Run by Rachelle Ware, yes I have heard of her." Said Mary. "A complete fraud of course."

"Oh yes. She'd have taught P T Barnum a thing or two."

"You have genuine power though Carmine, probably born with it. You probably understand the reason for repetition in spells ?"

"Yes to focus the mind of the caster." Said Carmine. "The words can be anything, as long as they help the caster visualise what they wish to accomplish. Rhymes help of course, easy to remember and repeat."

"Good, good." Said Mary. "I will demonstrate what I want you to achieve before we retire for the night. Repetition isn't always needed, if you can visualise quickly."

Mary led her back among the shelves, well away from the pieces of wood on the floor. There was no pointing, no waving of hands, Mary simply said one word. She didn't even speak it loudly.

"Fire."

The piece of wood burst into flame, which covered it in an almost blinding ball of heat. Quite quickly the flames subsided and vanished, leaving just a small amount of ash on the dirt floor of the barn.

"I'm not sure I could do that to someone, even Constance. And I don't think I'd ever be able to do that anyway." Said Carmine.

Mary had sat herself on an old crate, her legs dangling as she laughed.

"Sorry Carmine, I'm laughing at memories of myself when I started to learn how to do more than mix herbs and make ointments for eczema. I thought I'd never be able to get a real spell to work, it's impossible isn't it? Then when I actually had a head full of working spells, I was sure I'd never be able to use them on another human, even a ghost of a human. You will though, when Constance is threatening to kill those you love."

It made sense when Mary said it like that. Carmine stood up and aimed her finger at the remaining piece of wood.

"No honey, never point or hold your hands out, ever." Said Mary. "I know a lot of witches do that and they should know better. You're telling everyone you're going to cast and spell and who at."

"Constance pointed at me."

"Did she now?! She probably marked you in some way, we'll need to take care of that before we go to bed. All you need is your voice, your eyes and most importantly your mind. In the end, when you become a real adept at the art, your words will become so faint, your voice so low, that none will hear your rhymes but you."

It all sounded so wonderfully deep and poetical, but it didn't get her piece of wood incinerated.

Carmine put her arms by her side and relaxed.

"Ok Obi-Wan Kenobi, what do I do?"

"Think of something you'd like removed from your life, or the world in general. Not Constance, this spell has to work on anyone and last for your entire lifetime, maybe even beyond. Something you really hate or dislike, but nothing you're ashamed of hating, that builds up resistance to casting it well."

For Carmine there was an obvious candidate, which seemed to have blighted her married life.

"Can it be something like debt?" She asked. "I can't remember a time, when we weren't struggling to pay back something we owed someone."

"Debt sounds perfect, but keep your rhyme to using I, rather than we. Your spells are personal to you and can be written into a journal once you have a few. Remember fire though, keep it in your memory forever. Subtle spells to change and influence the will of others, may be very clever. In a desperate situation though, fire gets the job done. Now think of a first line of your rhyme."

"How many lines do I need?"

"Short and simple is easy to remember, three lines will do."

Carmine didn't like poetry that much, she'd never seen the point of it. She thought of the words though and tried to visualise fire as she thought of them. It wasn't elegant, but one three line group of words set the back of her neck tingling.

"All my life I've handled money well."

"But there never seems to be enough."

"Send my debts to the fires of hell."

Mary was actually applauding.

"Short and punchy, I'm not going to suggest changing a thing. You have ownership of your first spell Carmine Brown. Love and cherish it and it just might save your life one day. Now use it to burn that piece of wood. You can do it!"

Instinctively her hand came up, a finger pointing at the wood.

"No! Don't ever let me see you do that again."

“Sorry.”

Carmine imagined fire so intense that it was impossible to contain. So hot that it melted steel, turned firebricks to ashes. All the time she repeated the words associated with the thoughts and visions.

“All my life I’ve handled money well.”

“But there never seems to be enough.”

“Send my debts to the fires of hell.”

It took just four repetitions, before the wood began to smoulder, another two before it burst into bright yellow flames. It wasn’t the incinerated ash that Mary had produced, but Carmine was happy with her burning piece of timber.

“Well done, my first time took ten repetitions.” Said Mary.

She felt weak, as if her knees were going to buckle under her. She sat cross legged on the floor, her head in her hands. Mary came over and sat in front of her.

“Did I really do that ?” Asked Carmine. “You didn’t help, maybe just a little bit ?”

“No that was all you, which is why you’re feeling so tired. That will pass.”

She watched the burning wood, as it became just a pile of grey ash. She’d done it, but the wood wasn’t firing spells back at her.

“I will help you face Constance.” Said Mary. “And I have the start of a plan, which involves a trap for her. Destroying her would be nice, but trapping her for a few thousand years will solve the problem.”

Carmine couldn’t take her mind off the burning wood. Crap ! She’d actually cast a fire spell and it had worked. She almost wanted to go to Rachele’s house and incinerate one of her rose bushes.

“Can I do it again ?” She asked.

“No, you’re too weak and we still have that mark to find, the one Constance might have put on you.”

Mary helped her to her feet, leading her out of the barn.

“And I need to find sheets and blankets for your bed.”

“I’m so tired, I could sleep on just the mattress.”

“You say that now, but it gets cold out here in the fall.”

~

~

Carmine slept well and there had been no mark placed on her, or at least none that Mary could find. It looked like Constance had been trying to intimidate her and it had worked. Now she was in the delicious period between sleep and being awake, when nothing was a problem and the bed felt so wonderfully comfortable. It was odd though, there was a wall in her bedroom painted a hideous shade of yellow and a spider’s web up near the ceiling.

“Are you awake yet ?”

“I am now.”

Being awake let reality into her comfy existence. The air was cold, the bed felt lumpy and there really was a very large spider up near the ceiling.

“You must have found the shower by now.” Said Mary. “The water is hot, but don’t run it too long or you’ll empty the tank.”

The shower worked well enough and she felt ready for the day, as she sat in front of a large mug of coffee in the kitchen. Mary had a radio playing softly, a local station that Vic was quite keen on. They played an odd mix of music that included disco, hip hop and country. Willie Nelson sounds rather strange after a blast of Boney M.

"I have a good selection of cereals." Said Mary. "Check the dates though, I tend to eat things until they go green."

Bowls out ready and a quart of milk that smelt fine, even if it was two days past use by. There were lots of small boxes of cereals, some with faded labels. She chose a box of cornflakes, a mere two months out of date. To hell with it, she'd just cast a working fire spell, time to live a little dangerously.

"I get into Charleston once a week, though the garden feeds me in the summer." Said Mary. Carmine remembered seeing an old truck beside the barn, probably Mary's transport into town. It was a long way out of town with no phone. It crossed her mind that for an old lady, it was a risky existence. Carmine sat down with her bowl of slightly stale cornflakes and listened to the radio.

"We need to talk." Said Mary. "The early news had a story about Rachelle Ware. How well did you know her?"

"Did know her? What's happened to her?"

"She died in a fire in her car this morning. It might be just a case of shit happens.....Or."

"It might be Constance." Said Carmine. "She was just an acquaintance really, just a pleasant lady with delusions about being a witch. She definitely wasn't someone I cared for, not in the slightest." Mary turned the radio right down, so that they could talk.

"Constance doesn't know that." She said. "To her Rachelle looked like your mentor, head of your Wiccan group. That made her a perfect target."

"I can see that." Said Carmine. "What did happen to Rachelle?"

"It'll be on again, the station does an hourly news. She went to her car this morning, as she probably has done every morning for years. Today though, the car burst into flames, with her trapped inside. They're hinting at an electrical fault, but....."

"It's Constance, of course it's Constance. I have a best friend Phili out there. I must go and get her if that's alright? We can sleep in the barn if you like."

Mary was scowling at her, not pleased at all.

"No! Constance will have a slow death waiting for you. She killed Rachelle to draw you out of hiding. It's how she thinks and it's what I'd have done."

"You'd have done? We haven't talked about your past." Said Carmine.

"Nor will we! I have my reasons for living as I do and they're no business of yours. I do not owe you an explanation Carmine."

She didn't, not really. Knowing more about the strange and powerful witch would have been nice, but she had no right to know.

"No you don't owe me anything Mary and you're right about Phili. Going to her house will put her in more danger than simply leaving her alone. My husband comes home on Sunday though, so we need to get this done before then."

Mary turned up the radio and they listened to the news broadcast. Rachelle's death was huge for a local station, but it was obvious that they had no real information. Lots of waffle and neighbours saying what a truly awesome woman she was.

"That was Becca, who genuinely hated her." Said Carmine.

"Everyone becomes a saint once they die." Said Mary. "I do have a plan though, one that can take care of Constance on Saturday night. You'll need to be an expert at three spells by then, think you can do that?"

"I'll do it."

“Fine, then get ready to work harder than you’ve ever imagined working. My plan involves trees, actually one particular tree and a place in West Virginia that is a little special to Constance Hubbard. Did I mention that she’d once lived within walking distance of Walker’s Creek ?”

“No you didn’t.”

“She did, though the house she lived in has long gone. The garden went too, all her skilfully cultivated herbs. The tree is still there though, an English Yew, probably planted by the early settlers. An old tree by now, but it’ll probably outlive us all. This is what I plan to do.....”

There had been heavy rain, her old Honda nearly became stuck in the mud a few times. Eventually Carmine reached the main highway and began to recognise landmarks again. It had only been a few days, yet she felt as though her stay with Mary had gone on for years. She had three spells in her head now and she’d built up enough experience to cast them properly.

“You’ll need to cast shield to protect yourself.” Mary had told her. “Then use fire and lastly the force spell, when I tell you.”

It all sounded so simple, yet the force spell was advanced, usually only for adepts. Telekinesis really, though she thought of it as her push spell. Two fifty pound bags of fertiliser had been thrown back a good twenty feet by her push spell, but she’d been in a heap on the floor for an hour afterwards.

“Three spells and I’ll be too tired to even walk.”

“Just fire off the spells, I’ll do the rest.” Mary had told her.

Easily said, but she hadn’t built up enough magical stamina to recover quickly after one spell, let alone three. The thought of being on the ground, unable to defend herself....

“Crap Carmine, stop torturing yourself.” She muttered.

She was early, there was still a little daylight and she didn’t want to arrive at her house too soon. Carmine pulled into a service station on the outskirts of Charleston, filled her car with fuel and bought some junk food and a few cans of cola. It was all so ordinary, she even recognised a woman filling her car up and waved at her. If things went wrong, the woman would probably be on the news, saying how nice Carmine had been and what a terrible tragedy it all was.

“Supposing she just attacks me as soon as I get home ?”

“Constance needs to humiliate you before killing you.” Mary had told her. “She has rituals to adhere too, they’re important to her. Burn the book, issue the challenge and she’ll follow you to the tree.”

“But we can’t be sure she won’t just kill me ?”

“No Carmine, we can’t be sure. We have to hope.”

Her hands were slipping on the steering wheel, as she parked in front of her house. All of her seemed to be sweating and knowing it was just stress didn’t help. Routine helped, getting out of the car and checking it over before locking it. Finding her door keys, checking the front yard for the inevitable candy wrappers. All of it was normal, it all made her heart stop racing. She opened her front door and went inside, turning on the hall light.

“Turn on everything Carmine, make sure she knows you’re home.”

Crap ! Like putting out bait to catch a shark ! Carmine turned on every light down stairs and turned on the TV. It was still tuned to Vic’s favourite sports channel and soon the house was filled with the sound of cheering football fans. She checked the back door, which was a temporary repair and it looked solid, no signs on anyone breaking in while she’d been away. Upstairs next, picking up the book by Constance Hubbard. Burning it bothered her for all sorts of reasons, not least being the balance on her MasterCard. She’d be paying off the cost of the book for the next decade.

“Mary said you have to burn, so you burn.” She muttered.

More lights on and the radio in the bedroom tuned to a channel playing jazz. If Constance didn't know she was home by now, she just didn't deserve to be her nemesis. Now the hard part, giving it a good hour to make sure Constance was there, lurking about somewhere outside the house.

"It'll take you two hours to walk to the tree."

With a crazy dead witch following her the whole way. Carmine tried not to think about it and turned to her usual method of emotional comfort, food. They'd been buying a few candy bars here and there, adding them to a box for giving out at Halloween. Carmine poured the contents of the box over the kitchen table and selected a few of her favourites. Her need at that moment was huge and anyway, she'd replace them. She dusted and cleaned, which helped the time go by and stopped her panicking. At the time agreed with Mary, she picked up the book which had cost her a dollar short of four thousand dollars and carried it out into the back yard. After picking up her keys of course, she wasn't going to return to the house that night, maybe not forever.

"Constance Hubbard !" She yelled. "Do you hear me ?"

No answer, she hadn't expected one. So much of Mary's plan relied on blind faith, plus her huge yet unexplained knowledge of witchcraft.

"I have your book of lies, deception and nonsense."

Carmine opened the book at random and spat at the page. She then put it on the ground and moved back. Her fire spell didn't let her down, turning the book to an inferno in just a few seconds. If Constance hadn't hated her already, she would certainly hate her now.

"I challenge you ! Meet me at the Yew tree and we'll settle this, once and for all."

A response would have been nice... Or maybe it wouldn't. If a shrieked acceptance had come out of the dark, she might have picked up her passport and run for the airport. Carmine closed and locked the back door to her house and walked along the dark back alley, which led to the street.

"Confidence." Mary had told her. "Swagger as though you're the queen of all the witches. Burning the book will have surprised Constance, so she'll be cautious. Curiosity will make her follow you to the tree."

There was a shorter route by walking through fields and across open spaces. The rain had been torrential though, so she'd agreed a zig zag route with Mary. Most of it was along decent roads, with just the last half mile going cross country. It was actually a nice night for October, a sky clear enough to see the Milky Way.

"Crap, I'll need a lamp."

They had several, but she wasn't returning home for one. There was an all-night service station just a little off her route. They only had the cheap lamps that never work properly, or a huge one with a handle on the top for fifty dollars. The batteries were almost as expensive as the lamp, but she came away with a light, that cast a bright beam that seemed to go for miles. Just having it in her hand made her feel better. She kept to the route along the roads of Walker's Creek, noticing the number of cars on the road decrease, as time went by. Eventually she came to hole in a broken down fence, where a gate had once stood.

"You won't see me, but I'll be there." Mary had told her.

More relying on blind faith and Mary not falling asleep somewhere. Carmine rolled up the bottom of her jeans and began the tiring trudge across a very muddy field. It was slow work, sometimes having to feel down her legs and drag her trainers out of the mud. Persistence had always been her thing though, ever since school. Carmine kept on with the project until it was finished, no matter what it was.

“There will be stones left round her old herb garden.” Mary had told her. “The Yew tree is about twenty yards past the herb patch.”

She needed the light to find the stones and stopped for a moment to cast the shield spell on herself. It seems to work, though there was no way of knowing for sure. In theory she was now protected against most common aggressive spells, but she felt just the same. The only time she’d know if it had worked, was when she survived a spell used on her..... or didn’t.

“Please be there Mary, please.”

The light found the end of the line of rocks, but where was the right direction to go next ? Carmine went one way and dropped into a water filled hole, muddy water coming up to her waist.

“Fuck !” She yelled.

Carmine clambered out of the hole and carried on walking, hoping it was the right direction. The light showed just grass and small shrubs, until a few large branches obstructed her view. She had no idea what Yew leaves looked like, though she did remember something about the branches forming vast arches.

“Christ !”

The light had briefly shown a face among the branches. She stopped and became still, beginning the quiet rhythm of the repetitions required for her fire spell. She was scared to move the light back to her left, yet that was where she’d seen the face. It was her, as if she was hanging out of the tree, like a huge bat. Constance Hubbard was less than fifteen feet from her, eyes open and looking right into the beam of her lamp.

“Who are you that dares to challenge me ?” Yelled Constance.

Answering would spoil her spell and Carmine had no intention of talking to the witch’s ghost. She did what Mary had told her not to, but she was acting on pure instinct. After the fifth repetition of her fire spell, when her scalp was tingling with the built up power. Carmine threw both her hands forward, pointing the lamp and her fingers straight at the evil face in front of her.

“Fires of hell !” She screamed.

Ghost, phantom or something else, Carmine wasn’t sure of the nature of the thing that had killed her cat and then her friend. It could feel pain though and shrieked as white hot flames engulfed it from head to toe. Constance was old, ancient and hard to kill though. Her right hand appeared out of the flames, pointing straight at her.

“You shall die slowly for using your spells against me.” Yelled Constance.

Green flame came from the fingers of the long dead witch. The flames moved like liquid, oozing towards Carmine, spreading out to engulf her. She had no idea what manner of agony the spell was supposed to inflict, her shield spell caught the green flame and moved it harmlessly around her.

“Good, good.” Shouted Constance. “You have some skill, but you cannot win.”

Carmine knew her shield would fail and she was too tired to renew it. Her legs buckled and she was down on her knees, hoping for a quick and painless death, yet knowing Constance was likely to make her suffer for some time. She’d given up completely, assuming Mary had abandoned her for some reason. It surprised her to hear Mary shouting at Constance.

“Face me Constance Hubbard, try to kill me if you can.” Yelled Mary.

She was there, right on the edge of the light from her lamp. Dear tiny Mary Laverty, hadn’t abandoned her after all. Once again the phantom that had once been Constance Hubbard, was covered in fire. Not the spell of a beginner, but the clinging intense heat from the spell of a true adept. Constance screamed !

“Now !” Shouted Mary. “We must push together ! Send her straight at her beloved tree.”

Carmine was already tired, the spell would leave her with no defences, not even the power to run. She had to try though, Mary was relying on her. She muttered the repetitions, building the rhythm of the words in her mind, waiting for Mary to use her spell first. All the time Constance seemed to be surviving the white heat of the flames, her now skeletal finger pointing at her. No order from Mary, she too was chanting her spell and visualising the desired effect. Carmine saw Constance pushed backward by an unseen hand and used her spell to push her further back, right up against the trunk of the ancient Yew.

"See, it is done !" Shouted Mary.

Carmine barely heard the words, fatigue was causing her to fall forward onto her face. She managed to turn her head, to see Constance still covered in flames and being absorbed by the Yew tree.

"I know you ! I thought you were dead." Were the last words spoken by Constance.

The Yew tree folded itself around her, as if it was eating her ghostly form. Its branches pushed, while its bark chewed at her. Soon all movement stopped and just a motionless tree remained. It was as if the spectral form of Constance Hubbard, had never existed.

"She thought the tree was her friend, but I know the ways of trees better than her." Said Mary. "Her soul is trapped within the Yew until it dies and they live for thousands of years."

Mary helped her to her truck, which was parked not that far away. She let her sit for a while, to regain her strength, before driving her home.

"Is it really over ?" Asked Carmine.

"Yes, you won't be bothered by her again." Answered Mary. "I hope you don't stop learning spells though, you have a natural gift, which shouldn't be wasted."

It was still dark, the early hours of the Sunday morning. Mary stopped right outside her house, the only house in the street with light blazing from every window. Carmine had trouble opening the truck door, but eventually managed it. All she could think about, was getting a solid ten hours sleep, but Vic would arrive at around nine, to take her to church.

"Will I ever see you again ?"

"No, but I will leave you one last gift."

Mary held her in a hug, holding her longer than is usual for such a thing. Carmine felt a tingle at the base of her spine, which travelled right up to the base of her skull.

"Do you know what happened to the little girl who got what she most wanted ?" Asked Mary.

"No, tell me."

"She was happy ! Allow yourself to be happy Carmine Brown."

~ ~

Of course she tried to find Mary's house again, but never managed to find quite the right spot on that long winding track into the woods. Neither did she ever see her in the library again. Carmine took over The Wiccan Sisters of Walker's Creek, introducing the novel idea of casting spells that actually worked. All harmless pieces of minor magic of course, there could be no trusting Phili with telekinesis and fire balls.

As for Mary's final gift ? The following summer Carmine gave birth to a beautiful baby girl, who she named..... Mary..... of course !

~ ~

~The End~

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There will be more stories about Carmine and The Wiccan Sisters of Walker's Creek

