

Glade Hall

Chapter 12 – Lower Worton

“It wasn’t a warning from the Gods of old, it was total destruction of those who’d dared to attack the sacred glade.”

Σ

~Then~

Folklore and race memory can often be different from historical fact, but the destruction of Lower Worton by fire, was largely as Tommy Milner’s mother had told him. Generations of Milners had told the story to their children, until it became almost part of their family DNA. A memory of the local apocalypse had lurked in the minds of the future inhabitants of Oxfordshire. There had been new villages, called Nether Worton and Over Worton, as if a slight change of name might inoculate them against any lingering ill will against Lower Worton. The new villages were in the same area of Oxfordshire, but the closest was now two miles or more from The Glade. No one in modern day Oxfordshire would ever admit it, but there was an instinctive fear of that part of their beautiful English county. Something unholy lurked in that area, something of the darkness, something best left undisturbed.

Tommy Milner didn’t realise it and he’d have said it was nonsense, but repetition down the ages, can distort even the most important stories. There had been no Lower Worton; the village had simply been called Worton. No lower, upper or any other first part to its name. Worton meant a garden and it had been fertile land which grew an abundance of vegetables and herbs.

Time was also a victim of the story moving through generation of the same family. Tommy thought the village was medieval, but it had been there for far longer than that. His mother had talked of fifteen generations since the founding of Lower Worton. In truth the village had existed for over a hundred generations. The village name and that of his family would have sounded strange to his ears, but they were still his people, his blood. It was also a mistake to say that they’d been spared from the fate of everyone else in the village. His ancestors had run for their lives and only just managed to escape.

~ ~

The village had begun as a few homes for a tribe of Celts, who’d recently arrived in England. The land was fertile, so they’d remained and the village grew. A lot of Celts arrived in Iron Age England around that time and they all viewed each other as a threat. It was an age of petty wars and hill forts. The village grew and became prosperous, hiding behind hilltop fortifications. Despite the constant skirmishes with other tribes, the village flourished. They had The Glade close to the village and they quickly realised its potential. It was an age before people had become awkward about admitting a belief in the old ways, the Gods who didn’t rely on blind faith. Sacrifice an enemy in the right way and say the right words and if you were lucky..... The Glade rewarded your offering. No faith was required; rewards were immediate and often impressive. True, a few of their wise ones had died in a hideous manner, but it was assumed they’d made an error in the ritual. The Village flourished while others declined and their warriors were nearly always victorious in battle. Then the man from the east had arrived. He’d told then his name was Tavit and that their Gods were evil. Tavit brought half a dozen others with him from the lands to the north of the Mediterranean Sea. He talked of a benign God, who didn’t require sacrifices. Unfortunately, Tavit found favour with the village headman. “He’s done it.” Said Gunnar. “He’s convinced them to burn The Glade.”

“Then we must leave.” Said Svala. “I have relatives to the south, we can go there.”

Gunnar wasn't certain he wanted to leave the security of the village. Svala had given birth to a son, Olvir, only a few weeks before. The child would be put at risk from a hurried flight from the village and he was so proud of his first born son. His wife was busy, packing their few belongings into bundles and wrapping them in animal skins.

“Stop a minute.” He said. “We could remain and see what happens. Things will settle down once they've burned all the yew trees.”

His wife had come from the south, a tribe they were still officially fighting, but they seemed to be at war with everyone. Twice a year there were gatherings, when all grudges and matters of vengeance were forgotten, for a while. The tribes traded and they also found wives, everyone instinctively knew the problem of breeding constantly from within their own village. Svala had a little of the sight when he'd first met her. It had frightened off other potential suitors, but Gunnar found it fascinating.

“They can't destroy the trees.” Said Svala. “Their trunks are thick and their roots go deep. The creatures in the shadows will take revenge on the village, terrible revenge.”

She was ignoring him, still wrapping up their meagre belongings, for him to tie to the Oxen that usually pulled a plough. They'd discussed running away from the village, he'd just never expected it to happen.

“Svala, you'll be welcomed in your village. They might kill me !”

She stopped what she was doing and held his huge right hand in both of hers.

“My family would never allow my husband and father of my child to be killed.” She said. “Now get everything tied to the beast, we need to leave.... Now !”

“But..... My mother ?!”

“We've already talked about this Gunnar. I'll carry our son, but you need to be busy now.”

It was true, they had discussed his sister not wanting to leave the village and his mother being too old to travel far. That had been then though, when it had been just a wild idea. To do it ! To desert his elderly mother !

“Will it be that bad ?” He asked. “What do you see in the future Svala ?”

“Not so far in the future my husband ! We need to run, with just the clothes we're wearing if you don't hurry.”

“Tell me ! What does your sight show you ?”

Her eyes seemed to change as she looked at him. Svala had sacrificed several hens and a healthy Oxen at The Glade; it had left them hungry that winter. In reward she'd been granted more of the sight, though she'd refused to go into details. He loved his wife, but she also scared him slightly.

“I'll tell you what I see !” She yelled. “I see fire so intense that it melts iron until it flows like water. I see heat that can crack open bones and leave nothing but a white powder, where a man had once stood. I see nothing left of this village but a fine white ash. Now move my husband or we too will be nothing but ashes.”

He moved quickly, picking up the hide bags that held all they possessed. Gunnar tied what he could to their beast, the single Oxen he still owned. Everything else he would carry, Svala would just be left to carry Olvir and a few of her own things. It was really happening, they were running for their lives.

“We must run !” Said Svala.

Oxen don't really run, unless it's a stampede. Their beast was used to pulling a plough across a field and it had one speed, annoyingly slow. He pulled at its collar and hissed in its ear and managed to get it move slightly above a saunter. One of their neighbours came out to see what their beast was bellowing about. Then the whole world went crazy. The part of the village nearest to The Glade was

burning. Towers of flame began to rise into the night sky, accompanied by the terrible sound of screaming. Gunnar gave their beast a hefty slap across the rear.

“Move !” He shouted.

It was probably the smell of burning that made it increase its speed to a canter. Gunnar and Svala had to almost run to keep up with the Oxen that carried their entire world on its back. He had four hunting dogs, which he’d forgotten all about. By the time they passed through the southern gate to the village, only three of the dogs were with them. He was pleased, the dogs would help him hunt and fill their bellies, as they travelled south.

“Keep going.” Said Svala. “We must keep running.”

The flames seemed to have a life of their own, actually running over the ground like a morning mist. They saw several people they knew, overtaken by the burning mist and killed by the flames. They didn’t seem immune, despite Svala’s history of giving offerings to The Glade. At one point the flames began to burn the skin on their backs, but then they were gone. They only stopped when they could no longer move safely by the light of the burning village. On a nearby hillside, they brought the Oxen to a halt and looked back at the place they’d called home.

“Thank you.” He said. “I would have remained and we’d be dead by now.”

She held his hand, while his dogs kept close to him, emitting a strange whimpering sound. Only the Oxen seemed undisturbed, munching the grass at its feet. The village was now a large ball of flame, creating a light so intense, that it actually illuminated the underside of the clouds. It wasn’t a warning from the Gods of old, it was total destruction of those who’d dared to attack the sacred glade. Not quite total though, three people had escaped. He’d tell his son about the destruction, once he was old enough to understand. It had to be passed on, the knowledge of what happened if anyone attempted to destroy The Glade.

“We should be safe here until morning.” Said Svala.

~ ~

~Now~

There had been nothing on the TV news, or on the radio over breakfast. That was hardly surprising, a suicide at the John Radcliffe was awful, but it wasn’t national news. The first Emma knew of Sean’s death, was when Sheila called her at about eleven that Sunday morning.

“He was lying there all night Emma. Don’t they check on patients these days ?”

Emma was stunned, as though Sheila had hit her over the head, which in a way she had.

“Are they sure it was suicide ?” She asked.

“Didn’t you hear me Emma ? He jumped off the hospital roof. It appears the door to the roof was left open. No one cares these days, it’s criminal negligence.”

Dean was good, he hugged her as she cried, not asking any questions.

“I didn’t know whether to call you, but I know you were friends with him.” Added Sheila.

“I’m glad you did. Please call me if you hear any more details.”

“I will dear. It must have been quick, if that helps ?”

Emma cried solidly for an hour, while Dean hugged her. Eventually she told him what Sheila had told her. She never had asked Sheila how she knew about Sean’s death. Local news seemed to move through the village like morning mist.

“I’m certain about one thing.” She said. “It wasn’t suicide.....They killed him, the shadow creatures.”

“Mel is right.” Said Dean. “You’ll soon be at college. You can’t leave your parents at Glade Hall. We have to convince them to leave.”

It was the first time he'd volunteered to become involved in a Hooper family argument. She loved him for it, yet she had other ideas. Something had changed with the death of Sean, it was now personal.

"No ! We're going to destroy them." She said.

Just saying it out loud made it seem possible. She rubbed the edge of her sleeve over her eyes, vowing never to let them make her cry again.

"How ?" Asked Dean.

"We have information Dean, hundreds of years of history about The Glade. Fire obviously doesn't do the trick, but there has to be something that hurts them. Everything has a weakness."

He watched her as she tidied up and prepared to go downstairs and tell Alex about Sean. That was going to be tough, she just hoped she managed not to cry again.

"After the holiday we can go through everything we have." Said Dean. "And we can call Ginie, she must have a few ideas."

"Hermione too." She said.

"Oh crap, we're not going back into that crypt are we ?"

"No, there's a much more convenient way of talking to the dead. We'll see if Alex has a Ouija board, or find somewhere to buy one."

"That might be difficult on a Sunday, a bank holiday Sunday too."

"Then we'll make one, how hard can it be ?"

She was on a roll now, determined to stop waiting for The Glade to do something and take the initiative. She almost ran down the stairs from their room, Dean just behind her.

"We're going to be the subject of one of those crappy found footage films." He said. "I just know it."

~ ~

Mrs Hargreaves had finished clearing up after breakfast and was taking a five minute break, before planning lunch. It was easier with Emma and her young man being away for the weekend, the grownups were far less fussy about what they would and wouldn't eat. A roast of course, that was traditional for a Sunday. Something special for dessert perhaps, it was a bank holiday weekend after all.

"A homemade gooseberry fool." She muttered. "Quick, simple and they'll love it."

Jerry Hooper had spoken to her about her hours, on several occasions. He'd even offered to hire a couple of assistant cooks;

"To ease the load." He'd told her. "Let you have a nice lie in on Sundays."

"That not necessary Mr Hooper. The builders won't be here forever and Emma will be returning to college."

"Still, you can't work all day, every day. I'll end up in the tabloids, as some kind of employer from hell."

He'd smiled at her and obviously meant well, but she'd felt as though her whole world was falling apart around her.

"Please don't replace me with someone younger." She'd blurted out. "I had that in my previous job. I'm not as fast as I used to be, but I get there. This feels like my home now !"

"No, never Mrs Hargreaves. You have a job here for as long as you need it. You can't work every single day from dawn until late in the evening. I'll put an advert in the local paper, but you can interview them and choose who you want. They'll be helpers, not replacements."

That had been two weeks before and she had selected three women who looked worth interviewing. She was feeling tired these days, she'd definitely get them in after the long weekend.

"I do hope they're not flighty or superstitious." She muttered.

Hilda Hargreaves knew she had everything to make the gooseberry fool, but she wanted to check anyway. She opened the pantry and there was a large bowl of fresh gooseberries. Caster sugar there was tons of and she even had Greek yoghurt in the refrigerator.

"Vanilla pods where are you?"

Yes, a packet containing three was on the shelf. She'd need to order a few more, but she had enough for the weekend. Double cream was sitting helpfully on the front shelf of the refrigerator and she had almost everything.

"Icing sugar!" She muttered. "Good job you checked."

There were boxes of the stuff on a shelf in the basement. There was no longer a lock on the first basement door. Mr Hooper had the builders remove all the basement locks, apart from on the heavy door to the cellar.

"It's a family home Mrs Hargreaves." He'd told her. "I don't think we need to keep the dry goods under lock and key."

They had the hotel people to thank for the excellent lighting, rows upon rows of fluorescent tubes, all gently humming. She knew the set of shelves, but not exactly where the icing sugar had been put. Dean had been helping her to stack the shelves. He was a good lad and had promised not to tell a living soul, that she'd needed his help. She walked along the row of boxes, their emergency stores, just in case Glade Hall was ever cut off by the weather. There were far too many tins of tomatoes, but not enough packets of candles. Mind you, it had been a few years since Oxfordshire had experienced a really bad winter.

"There you are."

Emma had found a good one, her young man had placed every box, so that she could read its label. She picked up a box of icing sugar and turned to leave. She almost dropped the box, as she saw the dark haired woman in an evening dress. There was something vaguely foreign looking about the woman and her dress was far too tight across her chest. Hilda knew she was looking at one of the Glade Hall ghosts, by the flickering blue aura that surrounded her.

"What do you want from me?"

No fear, Hilda genuinely believed that leading a good and righteous life, meant not having to fear the dead. Her mother had often told her;

"Do the living no harm and talk no ill of the dead. Then you'll have nothing to fear from the living or the dead."

She could see the young woman well enough, but she couldn't hear her. The apparition was becoming quite animated, obviously talking to her at some length.

"I'm sorry my dear, but I can't hear what you're saying."

The ghost simply shrugged at her and vanished. Hilda headed for the stairs, still clutching the box of icing sugar.

"There are so many poor lost souls here." She mumbled. "Someone needs to pray for them."

The icing sugar went in the pantry and the large kitchen clock told her it was time get the roast in the oven. A nice piece of beef, she had it trimmed and ready in the refrigerator. Too much for just the two of them and the boy of course, but Hilda always ate what they ate. It wasn't strictly honest, but she was certain that Mr Hooper wouldn't object to her eating some of their food.

"It's not as though they go short."

She stopped short, reading the words on the fridge door, rubbed on by fingers, using tomato puree. The waste annoyed her, a brand new tube of puree and now it would have to go in the bin. Hilda was angry now, her face beginning to get a little hot.

“Not in my kitchen !” She shouted. “How dare you !”

She looked around, hoping to give the young woman in the tight dress a piece of her mind. The hussy hadn’t even died in a dress that fitted her properly. Hilda had trouble bending to pick up the tube of puree from the floor. Such a waste ! It went in the bin and then she fetched a J-Cloth from the sink.

‘You must leave here.

Or you will die with the others.

- Branca.’

How dare she ! Hilda used the J-Cloth to clean the mess off the fridge door and then polished it with a duster, until it shone like new. She was still angry, looking around for someone to yell at. Anyway, who the hell was this Branca ?

“No more !” She shouted. “Keep out of my kitchen.”

Anger wouldn’t get the family a lunch. She turned on the oven, giving it time to heat up before the beef went in. By the time she had the meat on a roasting tray, Hilda was feeling calm again. She just hoped Branca came back, so that she could give her a piece of her mind.

~ ~

Alex Godfrey and his vast circle of friends and acquaintances provided a Ouija Board. A few phone calls and a neighbour a few streets away had lent them an antique Victorian version of the game. It came with dire warnings about its value and strict instructions not to damage it.

“It was a parlour game to them.” Alex had told them. “Much in the way we play monopoly.”

Emma took the board from him and it felt old. There was a moon next to the word no and a sun next to the word yes. The entire alphabet was there and a large box at the bottom, with goodbye written in it.

“Lacquered hardwood.” Said Leonard. “No plastic for the Victorians.”

Alex had the small triangular marker in his pocket. Emma placed the board on the dining room table and Alex added the marker. The marker looked so small, but it was designed for just a single finger of each person to touch it.

“What does Ouija mean ?” Asked Dean.

“I know that one.” Said Leonard. “It’s Egyptian for good luck.”

“That’s a myth.” Said Emma. “A marketing guy made up the name, so it could be trademarked.”

They were all looking at her.

“Don’t look at me.” She said. “I don’t know how I know that. Glade Hall seems to have filled my mind with stuff like that, or the ghosts have.”

She placed her hand over the marker, or planchette as the Victorians called it.

“Hermione played this game at Glade Hall.” She said. “I can actually see her doing it.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t do this.” Said Leonard. “It might put you further under the influence of..... the spirits of that place.”

“He has a point.” Added Dean. “You are getting a bit scary Emma.”

“I’ll be fine. We’ll do it tonight, after dinner.” She replied. “Daylight interferes with the movement of the spirits through the ether.”

“Oh yes,” added Alex, “definitely a little bit scary.”

~ ~

Just the four of them sat round the table after dinner. Mel had gone home on the Saturday night.

"I have trouble sleeping if I'm not in my own bed."

Alex had called her several times, trying to get her to attend their séance, but both her phones were going straight to voicemail.

"I think Saturday was all too much for her." Leonard had said.

Alex and Leonard were opposite her across the dining room table, with Dean to her right. A circular table would have been nice, but they could all reach the Ouija marker without stretching.

"A bit less light I think." She said.

"There's a dimmer switch." Said Alex.

He'd barely stood up to lower the lights, when there was a ring at the front doorbell.

"Ignore it." Said Leonard.

Whoever was at the door wasn't in the mood to be ignored. The ringing increased in intensity, to the point where the buzzing sound was impossible to ignore.

"Crap ! I'd better see who it is." Said Alex.

They could hear raised voices at the front door and then Alex came in, needing help.

"Mel is here Leonard. I need your help."

"Can I do anything ?" Asked Dean.

"No, we're used to this."

They went, leaving the door open. There was a lot of noise from the front of the house and a woman's voice rising over the male ones.

"My attitude !..... I'd be less moody if you hadn't left me ringing the doorbell for ten minutes..... and for fuck sake, get a ramp installed."

They almost had to carry Mel into the room, the change in her was horrifying. Pain was etched into her face and she was sweating profusely. They sat her in the chair Alex had been using, right opposite Emma. Mel just sat there for a minute or so, gripping the edge of the table and surveying the after dinner wine and liqueur glasses.

"Wine Alex." She said. "Lots of it. I might as well catch up with the rest of you."

"How many pain killers have you taken ?" He asked.

"Pain killers ! If only I'd fucking thought of that !"

Alex brought her a large glass of red wine, which she drank quite quickly.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry." She said. "Emma, this is what a truly fucking bad day looks like."

"I'm just glad you're here."

"Alex left lots of messages, saying it was important."

"It is." He said, filling her glass.

"Well, I'm not driving home tonight, so I'll need a bed."

"You're always welcome here." Said Alex. "Are you ready for us to begin the séance ?"

"No. If you want me to reach that pointer thing, I need moving closer to the table."

Dean helped move her closer, lifting the chair with her still sat in it.

"Budge me round a bit..... that's it."

Once Mel was comfortable, Alex dimmed the lights and they began the séance.

"It's your coin in the slot now Emma." Said Leonard. "Tell us what to do ?"

"You must have all done this ?" She asked. "At college, after a party."

"Yes of course, but that was a game." Said Alex.

"This is real !" Added Dean.

She put her hand forward, resting her middle finger on the planchette.

“Tradition requires the middle finger.” She said. “But any finger will do.”

They all copied her, resting just their middle finger on the small planchette. It wobbled a bit as they all moved slightly to get more comfortable.

“Don’t move it !” She said. “Just follow it when it moves by itself.”

“Supposing it doesn’t ?” Asked Mel.

“It will ! I can feel her, she’s already here.”

“Hermione, are you willing to talk to us ?” Asked Emma.

The pointer moved so quickly, that only two of them could keep up with it. It rested right on top of the small drawing of the sun, next to the word Yes.

“Crap !” Said Dean.

“Come on, fingers back on.” Said Emma. “We need to ask Hermione a lot of questions.”

~ ~

Jerome Hooper wondered who the caller was, seeing the withheld number coming up on the phone. It was sure to be some idiot trying to get him to switch his energy provider, or ask him if he’d been involved in an accident. The weekend had been good so far, he was feeling mellow, a surfeit of goodwill to all mankind. He picked up the phone.

“Hello, Hooper here.”

“Jerry, this isn’t the office.” Said Alice.

“Probably a nuisance call anyway.”

“No, no it isn’t. Please don’t hang up. Is that Mr Jerome Hooper ?”

“Yes it is. Who is that ?”

“Another person working for you has died. Would you like to comment on yesterday’s suicide ?”

“Suicide ? What suicide ? Are you a journalist ?”

“I’m calling from Sketch News. Just giving you a chance to put your side of the story Mr Hooper. There have been a lot of strange deaths at Glade Hall.”

Jerry hung up and felt angry.

“A damn journalist Alice ! On about a suicide yesterday. Did you hear anything ?”

“No, but we do become a bit reclusive without the young people here. Emma seems to hear all the gossip between here and London.”

“Perhaps Mrs Hargreaves knows something ?”

“Don’t pester Hilda, she was looking very tired today. I know who to call.”

He watched his wife open the card box they kept on the mantelpiece. Dozens of business cards for anyone who might conceivably be useful during the refurbishment of the house. She picked out one card, turning it over and looking pleased.

“I knew she’d put her home number on the back. Sheila of Sheila’s Flowers. That woman is like the village telephone exchange. Anything going on, she’ll know it.”

Alice used her cell phone to call Sheila, just as the landline rang and showed another withheld number. The press were going to be like a dog with a bone. Jerry turned the ringer on the phone down as low as it would go.

“Sheila ? Is that Sheila Hewer ?”

“It’s Alice Hooper, Emma’s mum. Sorry to call you so late.”

“Yes, yes, we must. Come over for dinner one Sunday, we were just saying we become hermits over the weekend.”

His wife was one of nature’s chatters. There was no way of stopping her. Glaring at her made it worse, he’d learned the hard way. Any sign of his displeasure and she’d begin asking Sheila about

every pet she'd owned since she was a child. He got up and poured them both a large glass of brandy. By the time he placed Alice's glass in front of her, the conversation had almost reached the end of the small talk.

"Thank you for the flowers when I arrived, they were beautiful."

He sat back and sipped at his brandy, knowing his wife would soon get to the meat of the conversation.

"I called to ask if you'd heard about a suicide yesterday?"

"You have..... Sean ! Oh dear, Emma will be distraught when she hears."

"You did !? How did she sound ?"

"Oh, Oh, they were friends. Yes it does make you wonder if anyone in the NHS cares these days."

It would go on for ages and even only hearing one side of the conversation, he knew that Sean had killed himself. Another unnatural and unexpected death, if it could be said that death was ever expected. Jerry filled his glass and began to experience the warm feeling that only alcohol can give. Alice finished her call surprisingly quickly.

"Jerry ! Sean jumped off the roof at the John Radcliffe. Dead and left there all night. Found by a nurse coming on shift the next morning."

"Do they know why ? Did he leave a note ?"

"I didn't ask. Obviously we can't stay here now."

"Seriously ?! How can you blame a suicide on Glade Hall ?"

It was no good, she was giving him one of her intense looks.

"How many coincidences does it take Jerry ? How many strange deaths ?"

"Fine, but not until Emma is back at college. She's not been coping well with all the Tommy trouble and now Sean..... Moving might be the final straw for her."

Alice was a reasonable woman who just wanted to keep her children safe. Even he was beginning to worry about Jerry Jr being in the building all day.

"I have your promise then Jerry ? We move once Emma goes back to college ?"

"Yes. We'll pack and go to a hotel that same day, if you want."

~ ~

Emma waited for them all to put their fingers back on the planchette. Mel seemed reluctant, looking at the marker as though it might bite her. Eventually they were all ready for Emma to begin her list of questions.

"Did I free you from them, can you leave Glade Hall ?" She asked

The marker moved to the drawing of the moon, next to No. The marker began to move again and Leonard seemed to be their unofficial Ouija speller. He called out the letters, until the words became obvious.

"B E T T E R N O W Better now Thank you."

"I'm glad it helped." Said Emma. "We need to destroy them. Do you know how ?"

It was painfully slow, watching the pointer move from letter to letter on the board. They were all calling out the letters and Emma could see why the Victorians had become addicted to Ouija boards.

"C A N T B E D E S T..... Can't be destroyed."

"Crap, there has to be a way." Said Mel.

"Hermione would know." Said Emma. "She's been one of them since eighteen twenty."

"She might not be on our side." Said Alex. "In fact, we might not be talking to Hermione !"

The pointer moved frantically over the letters.

"Is me."

"We can't be sure it's her Emma." Said Leonard. "Unless you know something specific about her?"
"I don't." She replied. "I can read up and find some personal information on Hermione Wood, but not tonight."

"So this is all just a waste of time!" Said Mel.

They'd all stopped touching the pointer. It moved of its own accord, stopping for a second on each letter.

"May I come there?"

"Does she mean what I think she means?" Asked Alex.

"Yes of course you can." Said Emma.

"Careful." Said Mel. "You shouldn't just invite....."

The pointer was moving again, actually picking up speed as it ran over the lacquered wood of the board.

"Don't be scared."

"Oh crap!" Said Alex.

Some of the B movies had been accurate. There was a slight flickering of the lights and the temperature in the room did suddenly drop a good five degrees. Hermione appeared in the doorway that led through to the kitchen.

"I don't like this Emma." Said Mel.

"She means us no harm. I can feel it."

Hermione Wood was smiling at them. A perfectly normal looking seventeen year old girl in her best party dress. There was a slight blue aura around her, like a bad Photoshop cut and paste. Apart from that, she could easily have been a neighbour's daughter in Victorian fancy dress.

"Now you can see it's me." Said Hermione. "And we can talk properly."

There was a slight echo sound to her voice, but her words were clear, her diction perfect. Emma was so shocked to have Hermione in the room, that she simply stared at her for a minute or so.

Eventually Hermione broke the silence.

"You can't destroy them Emma, but you can weaken them."

"How?"

"Fire! Purge them from Glade Hall with fire."

Emma sighed, it seemed that Hermione knew no more than the others who'd tried to use fire.

"That doesn't work Hermione. Previous manor houses have been burned down several times. I've read Eloise's journal, The Glade has been burned at least twice."

The apparition that was Hermione Wood, looked over her shoulder, as if scared of something, or someone.

"Don't mention that name Emma. If she should come here, discover that I'm helping you. It would be dreadful! Worse than you could possibly imagine."

"Sorry, I wasn't thinking. Fire doesn't work though and the revenge on those that used it, appears to have been awful. None of them survived Hermione, ever."

"It weakens them Emma, slows them down. It might well take them another two hundred years until they can harm anyone else. Burn down Glade Hall and The Glade. It is the only way."

"I'm not sure. There was no reason for..... her to lie in her journal. I don't want my family to die in some act of revenge."

They were all looking at her, expecting her to say that she'd find a way of burning down her family home. It was insane, there had to be something more, a way to hurt them without dying from their vengeance.

"I hate to say this." Said Alex. "But maybe we should consider using fire."

"We'll help you, as best we can." Added Leonard.

Even Mel was smiling at her and nodding furiously.

"No !" Said Emma. "There has to be something else. Think Hermione, everything you've heard, every contact you've had with the..... others at Glade Hall."

It was strange to watch the ghost of a long dead girl, think things over. It was what she did though, stood there like a young partygoer, wondering where she'd left her purse. No one moved or said a word, until Hermione smiled at Emma.

"There is Lydia, she hates him."

"Do you mean Lydia Maynard ?" Asked Emma. "Who does she hate ?"

"James of course, her husband. He's the main cause of all your problems. Most people think it's the demons he invoked over the course of his very long life. It's James though, twisted about until he's almost impossible to distinguish from the demons. He gained his wish, to exist forever, if you can call what he's become existence ? He was the one who hurt your friend."

That was all too much for Mel. Alex hugged her as she glared at Hermione and burst into tears.

"Make it go away Emma !" Shouted Mel. "Get rid of it !"

"No ! She's here to help us. Be quiet and stop snivelling !"

Emma had no idea where that had come from, probably a part of her that was tired of all the drama and stress. It worked, Mel and Alex were looking shocked, but they were remaining quiet.

"Fine, I get that James Maynard is the main problem." Said Emma. "But why should Lydia hate him ? I thought they were soul mates ?"

"They were, until he needed a more precious sacrifice for his Gods. The local children just weren't good enough anymore and he'd run out of ageing aunts and second cousins."

"Not his own children !"

"Yes Emma, two sons. It had to be sons, they were the only suitable sacrifice he had left to offer. As I say, he gained a sort of immortality. Lydia hated him for it, but she was too much under his influence by then to move against him."

"Do you think she'll help us ?"

"Maybe, a mother's grudge against the man who killed her children grows with time rather than diminishing. I can bring her here, but I can't guarantee that she'll help you."

"Can you bring her here now ?"

"No, tomorrow night. I need time to find her and convince her to come."

"But she will come ? It's important."

Emma felt guilty for pressing Hermione. She might have all the wisdom of being a phantom for hundreds of years, but at heart, she was still a seventeen year old.

"Yes, I'm certain she will come, but there is something you need to know. She isn't like me, she isn't completely safe."

Mel was fidgeting and seemed about to issue another outburst. Emma glared at her, defying her to interrupt.

"What do you mean by not safe ?" Asked Emma.

"Lydia is of the darkness. She will help you to hurt James, but she will never be on your side. She's been twisted by too much contact with..... them. You can trust her up to a point, but she is likely to be..... Far more frightening than I am, maybe even terrifying !"

"You can't invite that into my home" Said Alex.

“Shut up !” Yelled Emma. “You were both urging me to burn my home to the ground, knowing I might die in the attempt. I’m fed up with cry babies ! I will invite Lydia here and you will help me defeat James. Understood !?”

“Yes, of course.” Replied Alex.

Mel was becoming a crumpled and crying mess. Emma hated to bully her, but they had both shown little concern about the safety of her family. It had crossed her mind that they both wanted revenge on the spirits of Glade Hall, without taking any personal risk.

“Mel ! You will stay here for the next séance !”

“Ok.”

Leonard alone was smiling at her.

“Well done Emma.” He said. “I should have talked to them like that, years ago.”

Hermione was still there, patiently waiting in her aura of shimmering blue.

“Please invite Lydia here.” Said Emma. “We’ll all be here to talk to her.”

~

~

© Ed Cowling – March 2017