

## Glade Hall

### Chapter 14 – Heating Oil

**“Then there had been the nutters, the extreme religious types. A body found nailed to a chapel floor, brought out the doomsday cults.”**

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~Then~

Not everyone who came to The Glade was evil, or even there of their own free will. Many were drawn by the effect of the darkness on some damaged part of their soul. The world wars drew the lost, the damaged and the bad to The Glade. Husbands had died, children lost, homes destroyed. Not that women were the only ones attracted to the area of darkness in Oxfordshire. Men found themselves drawn there too, many the victims of trauma from the trenches of the First World War and the killing of civilians during the second. The Second World War saw killing on an industrial scale, of men, women and children.

Call it evil, call it the darkness, it's all around us, infinitely patient and totally pervasive. Like bacteria it waits for an open wound to penetrate, but the darkness waits for emotional wounds. There has to be someone to blame for a lost child, a ruined home. Resentment can form a dark scar on even the purest of souls. There are no anti-biotics for that kind of infection; science doesn't even recognise its existence. The church used to hold exorcisms, but those dwindled in number with education and enlightenment.

“The devil's finest trick is to persuade you that he does not exist.”

— Charles Baudelaire

Devil, Lucifer, Satan, all names for the infinitely patient darkness. People needed names for something they didn't understand and The Devil served as good as any other name. Baudelaire lost his father while still just a child and he took part in the French revolution of eighteen forty eight. More than enough emotional wounds for the darkness to enter and infect. Perhaps he knew first hand, the battle of darkness for his soul ?

“The Devil pulls the strings which make us dance;  
We find delight in the most loathsome things;  
Some furtherance of Hell each new day brings,  
And yet we feel no horror in that rank advance.”

— Charles Baudelaire

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Nineteen forty seven and Muriel Fletcher had never heard of The Glade or Glade Hall. A childless widow of the Second World War, there were women like her in every street in the land. Church attendances were high, a third of the nation still regularly attended services. The darkness wasn't worried by the day to day observances though and few knew how to fight it. Muriel was a good woman, but losing Tom in the war had left her confused and angry.

“We won the war mum ! I heard the damn Germans eat better than us.”

Forced by lack of money to leave the home she'd shared with Tom, Muriel found herself back home, living with her mother. Austerity was breeding resentment among people who thought they'd be enjoying the fruits of victory. Rationing actually seemed worse than during the war and didn't seem likely to improve any time soon. The darkness did well among the unhappy and disaffected of the war, planting spots of infection in even the purest of souls. Muriel applied for a governess role in Oxfordshire, looking after three children. It wasn't what she wanted, but it would get her away from her mother and her constant whining. On a fine June morning in nineteen forty seven, Muriel found herself being met by a horse drawn open carriage at Blenheim & Woodstock railway station. "I hadn't expected anything like this."

"The family like to keep up the traditions miss. And what with the petrol rationing....."

Miss ! She'd begun leaving her wedding ring at home. Mother had told her it was putting off potential suitors.

"Do you want to live alone for the rest of your life ?"

Then her mother had gone off on her favourite subject; being a widow since Muriel was about five years old. No wars for her father, he'd died in an accident at work. A clerk with a good future, cut short by a pile of heavy falling boxes. She prayed that the family liked her. Anything to get away from mother and her ocean of bile and resentment against the world.

"How far is it ?" She asked.

"Fulwell isn't far, three miles or so."

They had to turn off the main road and head west towards Fulwell. Muriel had no idea why, but that change of direction caused a feeling of loss, close to desolation.

"Ohhhh."

"Are you alright miss ?"

"Fine, I'm just not used to travelling these days."

"Long journey from London miss, only ever done it twice myself."

Something was pulling her east, towards something further along the road they'd just left. The pull was so strong that she almost asked the carriage driver to stop and go back. Then the feeling went, as if it had never existed. Another half mile and they were at the country house. Built in the Victorian era, but trying desperately to look two hundred years older. Muriel hadn't much idea about architecture, or history. She was just hoping for a live in job.

"Muriel ! Can I call you Muriel ? We've been so looking forward to meeting you."

The new informality of post war Britain and the new money. The family had made money from buttons of all things, the millions needed on military uniforms. Now they lived comfortable on the proceeds and needed a governess for the children.

"Someone kind and caring."

Their mother had actually opened the front door for her, they only seemed to employ a cook and two maids. She met the father and there had been a brief conversation with the children. They'd even invited her to stay for dinner, a good sign she hoped.

"We'll need to take up references, but I think you'll be coming to live in Fulwell."

Muriel was a different person on the way back to the station, a much more happy and confident person. She had a future, she had prospects ! There might even be a well to do neighbour looking for a wife. All of the plans and fantasies went through her head, drowning out the dark infection that had taken root in her soul. The darkness was out there though and it had tasted her that morning. Muriel had resisted its call, but the darkness wasn't going to lose her a second time.

"Why are we going so fast ?"

The wheels running over the rough road had brought her out her dreams and back to the present. The carriage driver was lying on the seat, perhaps seriously ill ? Muriel had once been in a car doing a good forty miles an hour, speed didn't scare her. The two horses seemed to know the road, following every turn. She'd heard of horses taking drunken owners home on their own, but they seemed to be going faster and faster.

"Slow down you brutes !" She shouted.

No good, if anything they increased their efforts. Horses past their prime and unused to such exercise , they were covered in sweat, their mouths spraying foam. The poor things were killing themselves to take her somewhere at speed, but where ?

"I can't die now." She muttered. "It's not fair."

The carriage crossed the main Oxford road without slowing down, but there wasn't much traffic to get in its way. On the other side of the road was a rough track, marked by two old and worn stone posts at either side. It might have been a proper road once, but the weeds and shrubs were taking it over. Barely twenty yards along the old tack and the horses ran into a log across the road. A log too heavy and large to jump, avoid or push out of the way.

Muriel Fletcher found herself flying across the open carriage, to collide with the seats on that side and then the rear of the driver's seat. Her knee hit something hard and then her head. After that, there was a vague feeling of tumbling, until she became unconscious.

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Luckily the night remained warm; otherwise Muriel might have died from exposure. She awoke to find herself several yards from the carriage and just a few feet from a dead horse. It had thrashed about as it had died, carving furrows in the ground with its hooves. By some miracle it hadn't hit her, as it had struggled and failed to hold onto life. She stroked its head; the poor dead creature was cold to her touch. The other horse was gone, probably ran off in a panic.

"The driver, must find the driver." She muttered.

More luck, a three quarter moon illuminated the wrecked carriage. A few steps and her own injuries became more apparent. Nothing serious, just a lot of small cuts and bruises, but her knee looked swollen and was painful when she walked. She found the driver and realised she was alone in a part of England she didn't know.

"I didn't even know his name !"

She could have done with his overcoat, the night was beginning to lose the heat of the day. It was covered in blood though, as was the ground under the dead driver. His neck had been gashed at some point, he'd bled to death while still unconscious. The wound was awful, but Muriel had helped her neighbours drag dead loved ones from bombed houses. Finding dead children in the rubble had been far worse.

A choice now, which way to walk in the hope of finding help ? Fulwell was miles away, but she knew where it was. There might well have been a town or village quite close to her, she had no map though and all sign posts had been removed during the war.

"Who had that bright idea ?" She mumbled.

Oxford ? She was quite near the main road to Oxford, but that was a good five miles away. There was the chance of a late night driver picking her up. That thought frightened her more than the long walk back to Fulwell. Muriel had a deep seated fear of strangers, probably driven in deep by her mother. Then there was the strange urge to follow the call, which was gentler now, but still insistent. It had returned, Muriel had felt it as soon as she'd woken up. A nagging and insistent need to go in the direction the horses had been heading.

“All roads are the same if you’re lost !”

She found her handbag in the ruins of the carriage and her knee felt slightly better. Taking that as a good omen, Muriel limped along the overgrown track, in the direction of whatever was attracting her.

After about a mile and a lot of cursing her injured knee, she came to a point where the urge was to leave the road and go cross country. The moonlight showed her a harmless field, no cows or bulls, it looked to be just grass. Beyond it was an area of trees, a glade perhaps. Muriel had no way of knowing where she was going, but she found a gap in the hedgerows and entered the field. For a moment she just stood, mesmerised by the Milky Way in the sky above her.

“It really is a beautiful night.”

Her knee had become as painful as it was likely to get. Muriel walked through the pain, defying it to stop her. It was deceptive, the field had looked flat, yet she was struggling to walk uphill. By the time she reached the edge of the glade, she could see for miles in most directions. Nothing ! Not a single flickering light to indicate a town or village.

“People are broke.” She muttered. “Still using the wartime blackout curtains.”

The letter inviting her for the interview had mentioned a village called Enstone to the north, but where was north ? The only direction she couldn’t see was where the urge was pulling her. Into the dark glade full of closely planted tree. They offered cover though, perhaps somewhere to go back to sleep until the sun was up. Why did she feel so scared ?

“This is England.” She mumbled. “No wolves, no tigers in the undergrowth. What do I have to lose ?” Even the moon was now a sickly yellow colour, as she saw a path between the trees. Yew trees she thought, the sort that every cemetery had by its gate. Muriel had been to far too many funerals for someone her age. Not for Tom though, his final resting place was far away. She couldn’t even place flowers on his grave.

“It’s just not fair !”

The dark spot in her soul was tiny, but the spirits craved it. They didn’t pull too hard, that might panic her. Just enough of an urge for the woman to think it was her idea to descend into The Glade. Muriel followed the path, relieved that it ended on a wide oval of neatly cut grass.

“Someone must live close enough to cut it.”

There was even a standing stone to rest her back against, somewhere to rest until dawn. Her knee was agony now, jarred too many times during her long walk. Sleep was likely to be impossible. Muriel knelt in front of the stone, intending to rest her weary back against it. She knew in an instant that the stone was her destination, the place the urge had been bringing her to.

“Why ? Why bring me here ?”

Instinct took over, perhaps something long locked into the human race memory. She ran the palm of her hand over the rough edge of the stone, cutting deep, staining the stone with her own blood.

“I came ! I am yours !”

The darkness looked into her and decided she was unworthy. Once, it might have needed her, but it already had so many far better servants. The woman wasn’t that bright and her loyalty was likely to be questionable. There just wasn’t enough of the darkness about her. Besides, there was always the need for food. There were a lot of spirits who needed to feed, the woman would serve darkness, but not in the way she was probably expecting.

“Tell me what I must do ?!” Yelled Muriel.

The shadows came out the trees, barely discernible in the little moonlight that made it through the canopy of leaves. Muriel knew she was going to die, before the first one touched her. The persistent

nagging had gone, to be replaced by indifference. She'd been tasted and found wanting, she knew it. Even the agony as the shadow touched her, didn't surprise her. It touched her arm, penetrating her thin jacket and the blouse beneath. Her flesh instantly decayed where it touched, decades of putrefaction in a few seconds. Mercifully the pain and shock stopped her heart, before the spirits of The Glade, began to caress her internal organs. No word was said, no thank you given for the feast. The Spirits knew the woman was theirs to consume. A few nights of being almost corporeal for those who fed on her best parts. At least a week of feeling more vital and sustained for all of them. By dawn, all that was left of Muriel was a few bones and a few pieces of clothing. The clothes would rot and eventually the bones would be digested by the less discerning spirits. The woman from London had served The Glade in her own way, the best way she was able.

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### ~Now~

A good lie has to be as close to the truth as possible, simple enough to remember and then you stick to it. There is an urge to gild the Lily, add a few extra touches to add authenticity. That is how people get caught out in a lie, by the small changes. Emma was the third person to be questioned by the young policewoman, after Alex and Leonard. The police hadn't sent for anyone senior, obviously thinking it was the not unexpected death of someone with a lot of health problems. There was just the condition of Mel's body to confuse the issue.

"So, you were playing after dinner games?"

"Yes, a bit of monopoly and a Ouija board came out at one point." Answered Emma.

The board was out on the table, there seemed no point in denying it had been used. Emma had been through the story with everyone, many times.

"It's a toy you can buy in the high street." She'd told them. "The police won't make a huge thing out of it."

They didn't, the young police officer didn't even write anything in her notes.

"Tell me about what happened, when you first noticed something was wrong with Melanie Bascombe?"

So that was her full name, Emma had always known her as just Mel.

"We stopped playing games and just talked." Answered Emma. "Not about anything of importance, just small talk. For some reason I grabbed Mel's hand to emphasise something and she was cold. She might have been dead for a few minutes and we just hadn't noticed."

Emma cried then, able to allow herself the luxury of a few moments of grief. The police officer waited for her to recover.

"I know it's all been a huge shock. About what time were you aware of Miss Bascombe's death?"

Emma had intended to pretend to think about it, but genuinely needed a moment to get her thoughts in order. Her mind was now full of seeing Mel, looking like someone who'd been dead for a long time.

"We didn't start playing games until after dark. It must have been well after ten, maybe even eleven. I don't remember looking at a clock."

Maybe the police were trained to give the dead eyed look, maybe it came from dealing with the public for a few years. There was no reading what the police officer was thinking.

"Hmmm. The problem is that the paramedic who was first on the scene, estimates that Miss Bascombe had been dead for at least a week. There will be a full autopsy of course, but can you account for the apparent time discrepancy from your story?"

All their stories, Emma knew that Alex and Leonard would have told her the same story and Dean was likely to be interviewed next.

“No. I’m not a medical person, it’s a mystery.”

“As I said, there will be a full autopsy carried out on the deceased and you may be called in for questioning. You may then be interviewed under caution. Do you wish to change your answer about when Miss Bascombe died ?”

“No.”

It was all bluster. If the police really did think something sinister had gone on, they’d all have been taken to the local police station. It did depend on the autopsy of course and the eventual death certificate. Death by natural causes or as a result of previous injuries was fine. Unlawful killing was likely to mean the real questioning would begin, maybe charges being brought.

“We can hardly tell them we think she was accidentally drained of her life essence, by the ghost of a woman who died in the seventeen hundreds.” She’d told the others.

That hardly seemed a reason that was likely to end up on Mel’s death certificate. The police officer ticked a few things in her notebook.

“That will do for now. Please send Dean Jenkins in next.”

Emma was almost at the door to their room in the attic, the room taken over by the police as an interview room.

“And don’t leave the house, until you’re told it’s ok.”

There was no police officer guarding the front door. There would have been if they really believed Mel’s death had been murder. The others were in the kitchen, drinking prodigious amounts of tea.

“You’re up next.” She told Dean.

It was awkward, the house was still full of police and any of them might be within earshot. Alex passed Emma a cup of tea, about her tenth since the police had arrived. None of them had slept and they just wanted the police to finish up and leave.

“They finally took her away while you were upstairs.” Said Alex. “In a proper coffin. I never knew they did that.”

“The police will contact her people.” Added Leonard. “Part of their procedure.”

They just looked at each other, it was all they could do until they had some privacy again.

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Alice Hooper was trying to give her daughter some space. Emma had only returned from Broadstairs the previous evening. It had been a terrible morning, the media filling in holes in stories with their own ideas. There was a vacuum, a hole in the information the public knew. The media were desperate for something, anything to fill that vacuum. Alice was watching the mid-day news;

‘Cellmate of Thomas Milner found dead. It is being treated as murder.’

‘Has the killer of Lysette Anders claimed another victim ?’

It was everywhere, even the usually cautious newspapers were openly pointing the finger at Tommy. It was wrong, it meant he’d be unlikely to get a jury with an open mind. She hadn’t even heard Jerry come into the room.

“Mob justice by media.” He muttered. “Truly awful ! Emma will be upset.”

“All this on top of the death of that girl in Broadstairs.” Said Alice. “I know they weren’t really friends, but having someone die right next to you.....”

Jerry was giving her his serious look. He'd arranged for their phones to be diverted to an answering service. The media in their various forms, had been calling over fifty times a day. Then there had been the nutters, the extreme religious types. A body found nailed to a chapel floor, brought out the doomsday cults.

"The end will come with fire. It has been foretold !"

Stopping it all was expensive but it had worked. Every contact on their home phone and on every cell phone they owned, had been added to a safe list. They were put straight through by the system. Every other number was answered by people trained to sniff out the media and the loonies. Now they were no longer scared to answer their own phone.

"Perhaps we should move now." Said Jerry. "Leave it all behind, make a fresh start. What do you think ?"

"No ! We made a plan and we should stick to it. Soon Emma will back at college, among her friends. Is she up and about yet ?"

"Yes, Dean left to go into town for something." Answered Jerry. "You know kids their age. He's either buying a present for Emma, or plotting world domination."

They both laughed, remembering Emma's revolutionary period, when she'd wanted to overthrow just about everything.

"She's in the kitchen." Added Jerry. "Talking to Mrs Hargreaves about making blackberry jam."

"Now there's a good influence, no ghost and witches talk from her. Come on Jerry, we'll join our daughter for tea. Talk to her Jerry, she listens to you."

"Since when ?"

"Since always ! You've just never realised it."

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Emma's internal clock was out of sync still. Up all night talking to Alex and the others and then a long interview with a police office. She'd come home and gone to bed too early and woken up at five am. Her head ached and would do until she was back into her natural sleep cycle. She'd done it before while revising for exams. Up too late, skipping sleep entirely for a night or two. It seemed to make her more aware of her surroundings, but gave her blinding headaches.

"So, Nick said the oil tanks are only a third full ?" She asked.

"Yes, he had Wendy check that in July, before she..... Anyway, no need to worry Emma, that will last your family for years. The hotel had hundreds of room to heat and all the hot water for showers."

Emma had guessed Mrs Hargreaves would know. Their cook seemed such a quiet and unassuming lady, yet she seemed to know everything going on for miles. The fuel oil was part of the plan, the means of burning Glade Hall to the ground.

"I'm just looking for ways to be nice to my long suffering parents. I think I'll offer to arrange to have it filled up."

"Your mother was talking about installing one of those ground source heat pumps, very green she said. But you know her better than I do dear."

There were three separate tanks, two hundred thousand litres in total when full. The hotel hadn't wanted their guests to be cold on those freezing Oxfordshire nights. Emma had seen the tanks on the plans of the house, but hadn't known how much oil they still held. She was pondering on where to buy reinforced piping and a pump, when her parents joined her.

"No Dean ?" Asked her mum.

"We packed in a hurry and forgot a few things. He's buying a few bits to replace it."

"Mrs Hargreaves can order things like that, with the groceries." Said her dad.

The cook was nodding at her, always eager to please.

"I think he's buying me a secret present."

Her mum smiled at her.

"We all need pampering occasional." Said her mum. "Did you know Mel before the weekend, was she a friend?"

Emma was beginning to understand how a shared traumatic event drew people together, bonded them. She'd only known Mel for one weekend, yet she was mourning her like a lifelong friend.

"She was here once mum, one of the crew on Dig Quest. Alex asked her to give me some more information, for our mother and daughter project. Yes, we were friends, good friends!"

"Hmmm, our project. You must tell me about that, later."

Understanding was dawning in her mother's eyes. Her mum was a believer, she'd tell her much of what had happened that weekend. Not all of it course, she didn't want them to move before the plan could be carried out. Emma was going to have to keep things from her mother, there was no way she'd allow her to burn down Glade Hall and blow up the cellar.

"I was wondering." Said Emma. "I want to be useful. Perhaps I could arrange for the heating oil tanks to be filled up? Winter is on the way."

They looked a little confused, exchanging glances. They were keeping something from her, probably planning to move out of Glade Hall. Emma didn't care, as long as they hadn't planned to do it too soon.

"We were going to install a greener heating system." Said her dad.

Mrs Hargreaves saved the day, without intending to.

"Winters here can be dreadful." She said. "Freeze you right down to the bone in a draughty old place like this. You'll need good heating."

More exchanged looks, her parents wondering whether poor Emma could cope with being told about moving house again. It would cost a lot to fill the tanks, thousands of pounds. Her dad could afford it though.

"Fine." He said. "Find a decent company to fill the tanks. Nick Goodwood can probably give you a few telephone numbers."

"And later we need to talk about our project."

They left her to her tea and some cookies which Mrs Hargreaves had just put out to cool. Eventually she picked up two cookies for Jerry Jr and headed back to her room. As she expected, he was sat on the floor of her room, playing with Lego blocks.

"Oh Jerry, if I find one of those in my bare feet..."

He chuckled, the little monster actually chuckled. She gave him one of the cookies.

"You get the other, after you've put your toys away."

"Deal!!" He yelled.

A new thing to shout, probably something he'd seen on TV. Dean arrived just a few minutes later, emptying a carrier bag over their bed. He closed the door before talking.

"I bought four pay as you go phones." Said Dean. "And a pile of other bits we needed."

A pump dispenser this time, she really did love him.

"Cash, they took cash for the phones and didn't even ask for ID." He added. "Crazy! Crooks must love that."

She had to grin at him.

“You mean like crooks who want to burn down a few million pounds worth of grade one listed buildings ?”

Dean had the decency to look awkward.

“Well, if you put it like that. Should we be talking like this with Jerry about ? He does seem to be speaking well these days.”

Her little brother did seem to understand a lot and he must have heard her talk about quite a few things, that her parents wouldn't like. He'd never dropped her in it though, even accidentally.

“Jerry never talks about my private stuff, do you Jerry ?”

He was shaking his head vigorously.

“No. Love Emma.”

She ran her hand through his hair and kissed his forehead.

“Are you sure ? He is only three ! He might say something, just blurt it out.”

“No. I'm pretty sure he walked in on us once, the sort of things most little brothers would love to shout about. He never said a word. Jerry can be trusted.”

He was halfway through the cookie, covered in crumbs and looking content.

“I'm looking forward to him growing up.” She said. “I'm sure he'll make a good ally.”

“Against who ?”

“Everyone Dean, the whole fucking world !”

She went through the things on the bed, only the phones were for the upcoming battle. Toothpaste, shower gel, he'd even bought tampons.

“True love if a guy will actually put tampons in his basket of shopping.”

Trudy at college had told her that. She missed college and her friends. So much awfulness had occurred during the summer break. She kissed Dean, full on the lips.

“I can be a bitch, I know it. But always know that I do love you !”

He kissed her back, his tongue feeling hers in the way she found such a turn on. As his hand touched her left breast, she gently removed it. Jerry junior was watching, his eyes full of curiosity.

“Sorry I forgot.”

“So did I for a moment.”

She gave Jerry the other cookie, though she sensed his loyalty went well beyond filling his stomach.

“Did you see the pretty lady today ?” She asked.

“No, saw another girl.”

“Did you talk to her ?”

“No, you said they're not really my friends.”

“Good boy.”

“He's in danger you must know that !” Said Dean. “Every moment he remains in this house.”

“I know. Dad said I can fill up the heating oil tanks, I'll order it in the morning. We'll burn this place to the ground as soon as possible.”

There was a need for a weapon of some kind, or explosive charges, but Alex was handling that.

“How much oil ?”

“Just a little over two hundred thousand litres.”

“Will that be enough ?”

“Don't worry, that's more than enough.”

~ ~

Alex phoned a couple of old contacts who'd told him that Clem had returned to America. As one of their mutual friends had told him;

“He seemed to view it as his patriotic duty, to go home and fill his attic with guns.”

Yes, that was Clem, purveyor of over the top weaponry and always full of ideas on improving the world. Most of those ideas seemed to involve guns, lots of them.

“I can give you a number for him, in California.”

Alex had written it down and screwed up the paper it was written on, before throwing it into the flip top bin in the kitchen. After dinner he rooted through several days full of rotting kitchen waste, to retrieve the number. Clem was a bit of a nut, but he might know other likeminded nuts in the UK.

“Hey Alex, good to hear from you.”

He sounded genuinely pleased to hear from him. Clem had a view that all gays were going to hell, but only after the devil and his minions had finished beating them up. He obviously knew that Alex was gay, but they had an odd friendship. The kind not as rare as most people might think. They were friends, work colleagues, drinking buddies. Everything else was immaterial.

“California Clem ? You ?!”

“It’s changing Alex. Crap ! We even had Schwarzenegger as governor a while back.”

More small talk, lots about the other eccentric characters in the film business. No talk about Mel though, not until he was sure her people knew she was dead. Alex liked Clem, odd but it was just a fact of life.

“I was hoping to use your expertise.” Said Alex. “Perhaps buy something special. I hope you understand me ? Do you know anyone in Britain who might be able to help ?”

“You Alex ?! I never thought you’d see the light old buddy.”

There was a lot of laughter, which he joined in with. Alex had never seen himself in the role of anarchist or terrorist, but he was behaving like one.

“Remember Bo ?” Asked Clem.

Clem and Bo, their real names, even if it was an American cliché.

“Yes, heard of him, but I never met him, he was after my days in LA.”

“Give me your number and I’ll call him for you. Strangers make him a little skittish. I’ll give you a good reference and get him to call you.”

“Thanks Clem. I hate to say it, but it is urgent !”

“I guessed it had to be, for you to go all John Rambo. I’ll call him after we hang up.”

Alex leant back in his chair after the call ended, it hadn’t gone too badly. Bo being skittish around strangers was only mildly worrying. The real worry was how he might feel about selling weapons to a gay guy. Clem would mention that to him, wouldn’t he ?

“Did you get a number ?” Asked Leonard.

“Clem is getting Bo to call me.”

“Jeez ! We need to practise sounding butch before that meeting.”

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Emma got out of bed at three am, deliberately clambering over Dean, rather than exiting from her side of the bed.

“Sorry, can’t sleep. I’m going to read in dad’s study.”

Plausible denial was the key thing !

“Ohhhh. Want me to come ?”

“No, go back to sleep.”

He was asleep in seconds, but he’d remember her getting up with insomnia, sadly not a rare occurrence. It gave her a reason for being in her dad’s study. It gave Dean a reason to not come

searching for her. Emma was about to break the law in a major way and steal from her parents. Dean had to have plausible denial about all of it.

The corridors were warm now her father was closing all the windows at night. Stale humid air, the worst possible thing for all the precious eighteenth century wooden panels. Soon it would all be going up in smoke, even the cryptic ramblings of AG, the unknown scribbler of strange Latin warnings. Emma hoped that someone had taken photographs of everything, for posterity.

She walked quietly, making hardly any sound at all. She still didn't bother to put on a dressing gown; it was still far too warm at nights. She walked the house in just her panties, a thin nightie and a pair of Dean's slippers, confident of having the house to herself at three am.

Emma sat on the leather chair in front of her dad's desk and moved the mouse, watching as his PC came out of sleep mode. She was actually going to do it, steal from her own dad. How much did they need though? Alex would need money for the weapon or explosive, there was a requirement for a van, maybe a car too. It all added up and pumps for the oil and piping wasn't cheap.

"Fifty thousand." She muttered. "He'll never notice it's gone."

She'd watched him use the system so often, the passcodes and procedures had become lodged in her mind. There had been no intention then to do anything fraudulent, she just liked to watch her dad while he worked. Emma double clicked the right icon.

"Is everything on here dad?"

"Yes, all the money my company looks after."

The first screen was showing her all the billions of pounds her dad's company managed. Maturity dates, yields, recipient's bank details. Not that she could or even wanted to interfere with all that. There were rules, even her father called his office for transfers or adjustments to be carried out by his back office people.

"All carefully looked after Emma. With swaps, there's a potential exposure of over a trillion pounds." A Trillion, she couldn't really grasp just how much that was. She moved on, past the screen showing securities held in trust and many other financial instruments. Her head hurt trying to understand it all, but her dad did.

"What does your dad do?" She was often asked.

"He's something in the city."

Banking, Asset Management, Hedge Funds.... It had all sorts of names, but it all came down to her dad looking after a whole shit load of other people's money. She saw the name of a pop singer she particular liked and was tempted to be nosy.

"No! Get the money and get back to bed!" She told herself.

The personal screens, the family money. She had to enter a simple eight digit password to access those. The value of the house was on there and the loan needed to partly finance buying it. Every asset and liability her parents had, all neatly laid out on about three screens of information. The value of Glade Hall surprised her, much more than she'd imagined. She remembered her dad mentioning how much land was worth in that part of Oxfordshire.

"Just a little over five hundred acres of prime real estate Emma."

It was a colossal sum, but the house was bound to be insured, it was the kind of detail her dad was good at. Probably insured for more than it was actually worth. On the last screen was a net worth number, her parents were sixty million in the black. Good, she didn't feel too bad for helping herself to fifty thousand.

"Here we are."

There were several bank accounts, one was just for interest received on the various family investments. Her dad's accountants had been in, or rather a lady accountant and been sent in to go through his tax return.

"You really need to separate out your interest receipts." She'd told him.

He hadn't and probably never would. Her dad was a broad brush stroke guy, the minutiae of his own personal accounts just bored him. It was all in there, a hodgepodge of everything received on their small building society deposits, to the long term offshore stuff. Twice a year he transferred a good chunk of it to the general account, the one that paid the bills and her allowance. She scanned the dates.... Good he'd last moved money about in June. It was likely to be December when he looked at it again. By then she'd either be the hero of the hour, or dead.

"Is fifty grand enough?" She mumbled.

There was a lot of money there, a deposit in the Turks and Caicos Islands had just matured.

"Crystalized Emma, we call it crystalized when the interest is recorded."

"Then it's real cash?"

"Yes Emma, real cash."

She felt guilty again. Her dad had been so pleased that she'd been interested in his work and she was about to use it against him.

"Go for it girl and stop moping!" She muttered.

Two hundred and fifty thousand she tapped into the transfer window, a cool quarter of a million. That had to be enough to fund the troops, all four of them. No alarm bells, no screen saying that was an odd amount to move at three in the morning. Her own bank account was on a pull down screen, saved for when she needed those top ups to survive until her allowance arrived.

'Emma Hooper – Barclays – 20-25-xx Account number ending 675'

She selected her account and was asked to confirm the transaction. Next the difficult bit, the horrendous passcode before the money went anywhere. Two lots of eight digits, separated on the screen into two boxes.

"How do you remember that Dad? Do you write it down?"

"No, I use it so often I don't need to."

That was the problem with complex passcodes, people tended to write them down. Her father didn't, but he illustrated the other problem. Once people learned them, they never wanted to change them. Emma had watched her father use two fingers to tap in that passcode, hundreds of times, maybe thousands. Every number, every non numeric, every letter. Her hands flew over the keyboard and then she hit the enter key, before her nerves stopped her doing it.

'Transfer Confirmed'

It hadn't gone anywhere yet if course. At nine in the morning the bankers would arrive at work, carrying their cups of overpriced coffee. The clearing system would spring into action and her money would be on its way. The money would be in her account and spendable that afternoon.

"You're rich kiddo!" She muttered.

Guilt had been replaced by the excitement of being able to buy expensive weapons, an oil pump and a large van to carry it all. Emma put the screen back onto the one her father had been looking at and closed the application. Not perfect, there were history logs and activity files. Her dad never looked at those though, more boring minutiae.

"Oh Crap! They wouldn't need to give me a polygraph."

She'd been stressed and there was an area of sweat where her bottom had rested on the leather chair. It would dry off of course, yet she felt the need to rub her hand over it. She left the computer to go back into sleep mode and began to walk back to the room she shared with Dean.

Was Dean 'the' one ? Sometimes maybe, at other times..... She was young anyway, too young for that kind of commitment.

Emma didn't scream when she saw the hunter, she didn't even feel scared. A lot of spirits were drawn to The Glade. Some evil, some drawn like unwilling moths to the flame and all sorts of other combinations. If he'd wanted to hurt her, the hunter had a wicked looking knife on his belt and a longbow. They just looked at each other, for a good five minutes.

"I know you didn't hurt Mel." She said. "It was James Maynard, I know that."

Courage now ! After defrauding her parents, confronting a ghost dressed in animal skins was easy. Emma walked towards him, stopping barely six feet from the apparition. His face was younger than she'd thought it would be, barely older than Dean. Probably old for those days, when forty was a decent lifespan. He nodded at her, so she nodded back.

"Do you even understand me ?"

It was likely he didn't, there wasn't the slightest reaction. A minute later he removed the quiver of arrows from his shoulder and placed it on the floor. The longbow followed, placed at his feet. He pointed at them and nodded at her again.

"I don't know what you want."

He turned to his right and melted into the wall, gone in about a tenth of a second. Emma expected the bow and quiver to be gone too, but they were still there. A gift for her ? Some sort of offering ? A lot of weird stuff had been going on and not all the spirits were against her.

She reached down, expecting her fingers to go through the ghost's gifts. They were solid, a good twenty arrows in a quiver made of animal skins and a longbow. The quiver was heavy, so she pulled out one of the arrows. The tip was made of metal, probably iron, worked into a bullet shape. Serious arrows, designed to kill or maim whatever they hit. The bow too looked different from anything she'd seen in museums, far more intricately carved, with what looked like gold etched into carvings along its length. They were wonderful gifts, perhaps weapons to actually be used. Why give them to her if they wouldn't hurt her enemies ?

"Thank you !" She called out. "They're beautiful and I'll put them to good use."

The next problem was actually using the bow. It looked like a crash course in archery for Dean. Back in their room she locked the door and put the gifts on her dressing table. They looked strange, among the endless rows of nail polish and eyeliners.

"Come to bed ?"

A grumpy boyfriend, she'd woken him up. Emma got under the sheets and cuddled up to him, looking at the dull red LED numbers on the bedside clock. Two minutes after four, she was asleep before it reached the next minute.

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