

Glade Hall

Chapter 6 – Three Witches

“Emma Hooper felt something hostile was in the deep cellar, something that didn’t want them there. It was that feeling, like a spider’s web brushing against your face in the dark. Only it didn’t stop.”

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~Then~

Eloise Ward wasn’t the first woman to ask The Glade for power, it had already been going on for centuries. She’d been born into an English farming community of Germanic ancestry, in about eight fifty AD. Not that any of those terms would have meant much to her, or the use of the word Witch, to describe the powers she possessed. Hexe was the term she’d have recognised, the women who ruined crops and cursed whole families. All nonsense of course, Eloise had quickly learned that very few of the women who claimed to be able to curse your neighbour, for a fee of course, had any real power at all.

“Grind it slowly Rose.” She said. “It works best as a thick paste.”

Her youngest sister nodded at her and worked the contents of a pan with a wooden spoon. It wasn’t an evil smelling concoction, but a balm to calm the skin sores caused by several common diseases. It had the perfume of lavender, which they grew in their own garden. Rose was the youngest, barely able to walk when a bad winter had taken the life of their mother. Eloise was the eldest and had been forced – by necessity to take over the role of family matriarch. The middle sister, Maude had been old enough to help with the household chores, but it had been Eloise who had run the house and kept everyone clean and fed. Their father had been a good man, who’d worked the land from sunrise to dusk. He’d lived for another five years after the death of his wife, until hanging himself from a beam in their barn.

“Teach me how to do that.” Said Rose.

Eloise had been thinking about a thousand things and the wooden handle of the broom in her hands, had pushed out two buds, which were beginning to open. Cherry blossom on the long dead wood of her broom handle. It was bizarre and it was a massive waste of the powers she’d worked so hard to obtain.

“Useless ! Nonsense.” She said. “Fill up two more jars of unguent and we’ll go to The Glade again.”

“All of us ?” Asked Maude.

Maude was in disgrace, she’d been caught getting herself felt by a boy from the village. They’d all taken a vow of celibacy, it helped the efficacy of their potions and powders. Besides, they all knew the village people were terrified of them, especially Eloise. The local boys might see bedding one of them as a challenge, but there’d never be any question of marriage.

“Do you promise to be virtuous ?”

“Yes sister.”

“Then you can come.”

Eloise was about to rub the blooms off her broom, but relented and let them flower, putting the broom close to the window. They weren’t bad people, even if the locals did think they’d killed their own father. He’d been lonely and had decided to end his life once his daughters were old enough to run the farm on their own. In a world where everything revolved around religion, the girls were

effectively atheists. They saw no mortal sin in suicide, or saw it as a terrible blot on their family name. There were the animals they stole to sacrifice, but those thefts were usually blamed on travellers. They lived near the main road that took people west, or east, depending on how you viewed it. There were always convenient travellers with strange physical features, to blame things on. They had owned a few chickens, which had been the first sacrifices offered to The Glade, but they were now offering larger creatures, with more blood to cover the stone. A huge stolen pig, a male, was locked away in their barn. It was difficult to handle and had already given Rose a few nasty bites.

"We'll take the pig with us." Said Eloise.

Her sisters looked happy but said nothing. Eloise was the only one of them with real power. Her sister's made good quality potions, powders and unguents. There wasn't a child for miles around who hadn't been treated with their lotion for measles. Like most people who would eventually be called witches, they were really just herbalists and apothecaries. They did occasionally cast spells, but when Eloise cast them..... they actually worked.

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The pig had been given a natural sedative with its food. Just a few herbs to relax the creature and make it easier to lead across the mile or so of countryside. They had no cart or other way of getting the large boar to The Glade, so it had to be walked there. It had been stolen from a farm over three miles away and it had taken all night to drag the brute back to their barn.

"He's behaving himself." Said Rose.

"It's the extra Valerian." Said Maude. "I knew it would work."

The poor pig looked half asleep and kept bumping into trees, but at least it was easy to handle. They pushed the brute and pulled on a rope around its neck, until they were on the oval of grass between the standing stones.

"Tie it to the stone." Said Eloise. "They won't mind."

They all needed a moment to rest, but they also knew that the spirits of The Glade hated to be teased. They'd have seen the offering and its blood had been promised, simply by bringing it there and tethering it to the standing stone.

"What are we going to ask for this time ?" Asked Maude.

Eloise loved her sisters, but they were there simply as pig pushers and carriers of paraphernalia. They didn't share her abilities, her gifts, so they didn't understand that only one thing really mattered. Only one thing was really worth asking for.

"Power of course." Said Eloise. "Until it works right every single time."

"Oh, that again !" Said Maude.

"What about wealth this time ?" Asked Rose.

"Wealth will come with power." Said Eloise. "It has to work if we follow the same ritual. If it doesn't then we have to know why and fix it."

"The spirits just get fickle some days." Replied Rose.

Eloise was close to striking her sister. She didn't know it, but she was behaving like scientists of the future. Something had to work every time, the effect had to be replicable, every single time. If not ? Then you didn't have a true ritual written in your journal, but something that might work, unless the spirits were fickle.

"Damn !" She shouted.

The shadows appeared, moving about near the smaller stone. Eloise ran her palm over the rough stone, causing her blood to flow. She knelt and begged for forgiveness.

"I meant no disrespect." She said. "I just wish to know how to serve you better."

The stone glowed, lighting The Glade with a warm orange light. Lamps were never used in there, among the yew trees, it was known that the spirits hated light. Maude had the best hand writing, so they remembered everything and it was put in their journal later. Or tried to remember everything ! Sometimes the ritual failed and the stone didn't glow. There was a price for failure, sometimes a very painful one. Her knee still gave her constant pain from a strange inflammation and there were odd looking wounds on her legs. Were they just fickle, the ancient spirits, or was she simply missing something obvious ?

"I come to offer this creature as sacrifice." She said.

"As always, I seek power. Real power !"

She nodded at her sisters and all three of them began to push the large boar against the stone, using the rope to bind it tightly.

"Tighter." She said. "It will squirm as the knife bites."

Rose had more rope, but trying to work with just the glow of a half moon was difficult. Eventually the pig was tied tight and Eloise stabbed it in the shoulder, to test the bindings. It tried to kick her and began screeching, but it was unable to move.

"Hold it, just in case."

Her sisters leant against their sacrificial pig, as she pushed her knife into its throat and ripped through the major arteries. Blood gushed out and went everywhere, covering her dress and shoes. Eloise didn't care, she cut again, several times, going deeper. Some of the blood soaked the grass. But most went over the standing stone.

"It has worked my sisters !"

For a precious few seconds the yellow glow of the stones lit up The Glade, well enough to see properly. Still too pale a light to read by, yet still enough to recognise her sister's faces. Eloise did what she'd often wanted to do, but had lacked the courage. She turned and looked at the shadows, now illuminated in the yellow glow. She saw them for what they truly were and in that understanding, was the answer to so many of her questions. Her sisters still had their heads down, not daring to look upon the ancient spirits.

"I know why now." Said Eloise. "Our sacrifices are no longer adequate."

The illumination subsided, leaving them in just a very faint yellow light from the largest of the stones.

"Do we have to sacrifice people now ?" Asked Rose.

"No..... Ourselves."

They moved back, but Eloise stretched out her fingers and held them both in an invisible net. She had no idea how she was doing it, but she pulled them both towards her, forcing them to kneel in front of the stone.

"Don't be scared my sisters. We'll be with them, be one with the spirits. Forever !"

"You're hurting me." Pleaded Rose.

"Pain is necessary, pain is part of the process. A small price to move unseen through the centuries, maybe millennia."

"She's mad !" Yelled Maude.

Mad indeed, they'd see. Eloise lifted her hands up, palms facing the sky. She imagined flames and they appeared in the centre of her hands. It hurt; it was in fact, pure agony. She ignored the pain, it was needed for what came next to mean anything. Eloise gave much of her power to the flames, watching a column of fire rise into the dark night sky.

“Keep still or I will show you real pain.” She barked at her sisters.

The yew trees parted to allow the fire to rise and form a large ball of flame above, what would one day be called Oxfordshire. When she thought the moment was right, Eloise let the fire descend and cover her and her sisters. They screamed, but Eloise grabbed each of them by the neck, holding them tightly against her.

“It won’t hurt for long.” She said. “Then we’ll be with them.”

It was agony and the burning went on for far longer than she’d hoped. Eloise began to scream when the fire ate into her bones, yet the spirits refused to let her die. Her sisters had gone, she’d felt their souls depart. The spirits of The Glade wanted more of Eloise though, a real test of her strength. It seemed hours later when she died and escaped the constant exquisite agony of the flames. She felt herself floating among them, part of the shadows, yet unseen by any but the most careful observer. Her sisters were still with her, though they would always hold a grudge. Even as shadows, they would still be the ones without power. Eloise on the other hand, had hundreds of years to perfect her rituals and gather yet more power.

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~Now~

Dan Freeman got off the train from Oxford at Paddington station and remembered why he travelled to London so rarely. The crowds, all trying to get to somewhere very quickly, or dawdling about and blocking his way. No one seemed to walk at a proper pace and few seemed to be aware of their surroundings. Ants in a hive, all frantically trying to get to somewhere or other.

He saw the sign for the taxi rank and decided to treat himself. There was no way that he was going to follow the crowds down to the underground trains. Crowds on a hot day were bad enough, without being crammed into a metal tube with them. Dan had left his car in Oxford and taken the train to avoid the hassle of driving all the way. He wasn’t about to be stressed by half an hour trying to find the right line, all the changes and people trying to trip him up with their tiny cases on the end of long handles. He leant into the open window of the first taxi on the rank.

“The hospital for tropical diseases.” He said. “It’s in WC1.”

“Fine. Get in the back.”

Dan settled himself in the back of the taxi and decided that the few extra pounds for the taxi fare, was definitely worth it. He watched the streets of London go by and wondered again at why he’d let himself get talked into visiting Oliver.

“You picked a nice day for it.” Said the cabbie. “First sunshine we’ve had for days.”

There was a lot more small talk, which stopped after Dan mentioned that the purpose of his visit was to see a dying friend. The fare and obligatory tip removed twenty pounds from his wallet, but Dan arrived at the hospital feeling fresh and ready for anything. Just as well, as the first reception desk had never heard of Oliver.

“But he was admitted with a badly infected face.”

“You want communicable diseases.”

The young black girl smiled and pointed him in the right direction and ten minutes later, he was putting a bunch of grapes and a few magazines onto Oliver’s bed. He had a room on his own, but that was hardly surprising. The two visitor’s chairs had been put against the wall, so he dragged one over to sit next to his troublesome lodger.

“June wanted to come.” He lied. “But we’re busy with the summer weather. Anyway, how are you doing?”

Oliver had a lot of tubes in his left arm and one or two that went under the sheets to be plugged in somewhere. Not just the left side of his face, but his shoulder and much of his chest was covered in thick bandages. His one good eye was glaring at Dan.

“How does it look like I’m doing ?”

Oliver’s voice was like that of an old man and as he turned, Dan saw dark lines and sores on the side of his neck. He involuntarily pushed himself further back on his chair.

“They can work wonder these days..... the doctors.” He said.

Dan noticed that Oliver’s one good eye had turned slightly yellow.

“Nahh, I’m not stupid Dan.” Replied Oliver. “They sent the lady round to ask about any pets I might have and who needed to be contacted. I’m dying, probably soon.”

The contacted part was worrying, June had already been moaning about them being stuck with funeral costs to pay. Expensive these days, were funerals.

“Thanks for coming though, it means a lot. I want you and June to have all my stuff.”

Now Dan felt guilty, they’d already been through his room, looking for any of their stock he might have purloined. They’d found two bottles of tequila and one of Jack Daniels. June was already talking about taking his van as payment for stolen booze.

“Just concentrate on getting well.”

Every time Oliver moved, Dan could see more of the bad side of his face. It looked as if he was rotting away before he’d actually died. And there was a slight, but unmistakable smell of something that had gone bad. A nurse opened the door and smiled at Dan.

“The doctor would like a word.” She said. “If you have a moment ?”

He tried to hide his relief at getting away from seeing more of Oliver’s bad case of lurgy.

“Yes of course.”

Dan followed the nurse, one question uppermost in his mind. As he sat on a chair, looking across the desk at a woman in her forties, he didn’t wait to be introduced.

“What he’s got..... Is it infectious ? I have a wife and I run a pub.”

“I can appreciate your concerns Mr Freeman, but Oliver has a common form of bacterial infection. Lots of people get it every year and anti-biotics usually sort it out. It’s just that for some reason, Oliver’s immune system isn’t fighting it.”

Dan felt his heart slow down and stop its hammering in his chest. The doctor obviously noticed his relief.

“I’m sorry.” She said. “Someone should have told you.”

“It looks terrible.” Said Dan.

The doctor’s phone rang and Dan found himself being shown to a waiting area and given a cup of coffee. It was a quiet area of the hospital and he’d begun to wonder if they’d forgotten him. After an hour, he decided to give it another fifteen minutes and go home. Oliver wasn’t a proper relative, he was just the nasty kid he’d known at school. No one had even had the decency to tell him what was going on !

“Mr Freeman ?”

“Yes.”

Another nurse and Dan is taken to another part of the hospital and shown into a room with comfortable chairs and soothing pictures on the wall. It was identical to the room where he’d been told that his father had died and Dan knew what was coming next. The doctor arrived and sat opposite him, the look of sympathy etched onto her face. How did doctors do it ? Cope with giving

the 'We're sorry for your loss,' speech to hundreds of grieving relatives. It had to be hell, it had to grow calluses on your soul.

"I'm sorry Dan, we did what we could....."

Oliver was dead and Dan found himself editing her words, just remembering the important bits. June would want to know of course and the regulars at The Copper Kettle. Her last few words were a little ominous.

"Someone will be in touch with you..... about the arrangements."

Crap ! June was going to kill him, he'd be sleeping on the sofa for a year, maybe two. How much was a funeral these days ? Two or three thousand at least, probably a lot more than they'd raise by selling Oliver's crappy old transit van.

The signs were confusing and every corridor seemed to have an exit sign. Dan ended up lost and walking past the room where Oliver had died. The door was wedged open and two young men were removing tubes and preparing the body to be moved. Dan saw Oliver fully, all of him, naked from the top of his head to the tips of his toes. The infection was hideous, yet the two men joked about, without a care in the world. They must see so much though, probably worse than Oliver with his running sores and putrid odour. Dan gasped and held onto the door frame.

"I'm so sorry..... we didn't think..... were you a relative ?"

"He must have been in so much pain."

"Would you like to see someone ? I can get a nurse."

All Dan could see was just past the young man's left elbow. Oliver, looking as though some hideous fungus had grown over his face and then descended over his body and into his crotch. There were hideous running sores. No one deserved to die like that, even someone who stole his tequila.

"I'm lost." Said Dan. "Can you point me towards the exit ?"

"I'll take you myself..... I am so sorry."

Probably worried about a complaint, his young guide had apologised another dozen times, by the time Dan reached the street. He found a coffee place that sold sandwiches and sat in their window for a while, watching people go by. June would complain, but he'd make sure Oliver had a proper funeral. The coffee and sandwich left another hole in his wallet and Dan went onto the street to hail a passing cab. The driver was quiet this time, which was a bit of a relief. Dan would sit on a seat at Paddington Station until an Oxford train left. He'd had enough of London, of illness, of crowds and the unusually hot day.

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Alice Hooper had decided that allowing her son to run free, while they investigated the cellars of their new home, was a bad idea. An employment agency was looking for a local woman to help her look after her little monster. But in the interim, Mrs Hargreaves had agreed to look after him for a few hours. Their party of explorers was comprised of just the four of them. Jerry and her of course and Emma with Dean. They'd all been supplied with flashlights, though Jerry had drawn the line at them wearing hard hats.

"A little over the top my dear."

Emma had provided detailed drawing that she'd found in amongst the pre-purchase disclosures. They'd all studied the two basement floors that acted as storage space, a wine cellar and general dumping ground for unwanted furniture.

"This is the interesting bit." Emma had told them.

A door leading to a third basement level was marked on the drawings, but no detail. There were just a few squiggles to indicate some walls and a note, which simply said.

'Extent of archaeological excavations.'

It was a real life mystery and right under their feet. Sadly there were no areas of the world rumoured to contain dragons anymore, but a mysterious hole in the cellar had to be almost as good. Jerry had insisted on sending a letter to English Heritage, informing them of his intention to investigate the pre-roman foundations. Alice viewed that as wimping out, it was their home. Anyway, it was likely to take them months to respond to the letter.

"Are we all ready?" She asked.

Dean had a small back pack with spare lamps in it and a few tools and much to Jerry's horror, Dean and Emma carried crowbars. It had been a long fight to get him to agree, but in the end common sense had prevailed, or her stubbornness as Jerry preferred to call it. They were all nodding at her, her little gang of tomb raiders, or cellar marauders.

"Let's go then."

There were two main sets of stairs that led down to the cellars and another three sets of stairs that linked into what had been, the areas used by servants. One set of servants stairs was at the back of the kitchens. Alice decided to descend into basement below Mrs Hargreaves kitchen.

"So you're going down there then?" Asked the cook. "You'll probably find nothing but a few rats. I'll look after the little one and have coffee and toast ready for when you're finished."

"I'm sure we'll work up a good appetite." Replied Alice.

The first cellar wasn't in the least bit dark and mysterious. It had been the dry goods store for the hotel and everywhere was well lit by modern lighting. A long corridor went between about eight side rooms.

"This place is huge." Said Dean.

"Mrs Hargreaves has two freezers down here and a place to store tinned food." Said Jerry. "But otherwise, it's been empty since the hotel people left."

"I mentioned to Hilda about using more of the shelving for tins." Said Alice. "Just in case we're cut off for a while by snow or something."

Jerry had stopped and was looking at her as though he didn't recognise her.

"Mrs Hargreaves told you her first name? I've been asking her for weeks."

"Erm, it's a woman thing Jerry. Get over it."

No keys were needed to get through the door at the end of the corridor and down another set of stairs. They were still in areas that had been spruced up by Oleander Hotels. The lighting was excellent and 'No Smoking,' signs were everywhere.

"This was their linen store." Said Emma. "And obviously a place to dump broken furniture."

"A pity that not all of it was taken away." Added Alice.

There were several broken chairs in one alcove and about four busted beds, all piled up in a heap. Broken table lamps, sacks of ruined cutlery and bin liners full of unidentified refuse. It was all strewn around them.

"I didn't realise they'd left all this crap behind." Said Jerry.

"Ewww it's disgusting." Said Emma.

Oleander Hotels had obviously decided that leaving the junk in the second cellar, was easier and cheaper than having it removed. Dean had opened a bin liner, to reveal several unwashed kitchen uniforms.

"I have a man coming in to quote on cleaning up The Maynard Chapel." Said Jerry. "I'll bring him down here too."

"There must be several skips full of junk." Added Emma.

Alice found the door to the stairs down; there were several signs on the door, warning of various health and safety risk to anyone daft enough to go through the door. The biggest sign was made of plastic and had yellow letters on a blue background.

'Staff found beyond this point, will face instant dismissal.'

Someone with a sense of humour had added another line in magic marker.

'And a date with Plonker Harris.'

Alice tried the handle and wasn't surprised to find the door was locked.

"Time for your WD40 and keys on a string Jerry."

There was nowhere to sit, so they all stood and watched as Jerome Hooper used half a tin of WD40 and tried every key he had, three times. It was obvious that only something pretty drastic was going to get them through the strong wooden door. Dean was brandishing his crow bar, like a medieval knight, squaring up to an opponent.

"I'll have a crack at it Mrs Hooper."

Alice was tempted to let him try, but she didn't want to have to explain to his mother, why he'd been taken to hospital with serious crow bar shaped wounds.

"No !" She said. "It's not that I don't have faith in you. But I'm sure that if your mother was here. She'd be insisting that you didn't."

She hadn't noticed Jerry finding a solid and heavy piece of a bed frame, until he used it as a battering ram on the door. Again and again, he slammed the pine beam into the area around the lock, until the door burst inwards, parts of it clattering down the stairs beyond. Jerry ! Her Jerry, scared of doing anything to even slightly annoy English Heritage. He dropped the bed frame and grinned at her.

"The doors are modern." He said. "Probably bought at a DIY place in Oxford."

"Wow, wicked Dad !" Said Emma.

Jerry pushed the remainder of the door back and pressed the light switch. Nothing happened, not even a glimmer.

"Looks like we'll need our flashlights." He said.

Alice turned on her Maglite and followed him down the wooden stairs, her daughter and Dean following close behind. The stairs went down for about thirty feet and ended on a rough earth floor.

"I don't like this mum." Said Emma. "I can feel something bad is down here."

"It's just the effect of what we found in the chapel honey." Said Alice. "We're all here with you, nothing bad can happen to you."

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Tommy Milner wasn't completely surprised when he found the dead sheep. One out of twenty, he'd known the spirits of The Glade would punish him for taking Emma away from them. It could have been far worse, his mother had told him of various hideous punishments, meted out to those who opposed the spirits.

"What happened to it ?" Asked Lysette.

They were friends again, his refusal to follow up on her sexual advances seemed to be forgotten.

Tommy was glad, he had far too few friends to want to lose one over something so silly. He knelt down and pulled the poor things wool back, to examine the gash across its throat. In medieval times the ghastly wound would have been blamed on wolves, but there weren't wolves in Oxfordshire anymore. It had tried to run and had died with its head pushed through a barbed wire fence.

"Probably scared by a dog." He said. "Then it ran into the fence and kept pushing....."

"Terrible." Said Lysette. "Do you get many dogs on the estate ?"

In truth he'd seen very few anywhere near Glade Hall. They were two and a bit miles away from the village and well off the beaten track for tourists. Plus, there was the well-known bad reputation of the place, to keep casual visitors away. A dog was an easy lie though.

"A few." He said. "Their owners don't realise that a bit of playful chasing is really sheep worrying and can lead to..... well this !"

There was a strong fence on two sides and the electric fence on the other two. It was no dog of course, it was the spirits showing him that there were consequences to his actions. He picked up the rear legs of the sheep and dragged her out of the fence.

"I can help you carry her." Said Lysette. "If you want to take her away now ?"

"No, but thank you. I'll get one of the lads to come up here in the farm land rover."

She followed him as he checked over the two sheep nearest to the dead animal. They began to skitter away from him, but a handful of feed brought them back. No marks on them, no further warnings to behave. They knew he treasured the sheep, that they were truly precious to him.

"I'm going to check the rest over and keep watch tonight." He said.

"I could help, if you'd like ?" She asked. "You'll need some sleep."

"That's nice of you. Thank you."

As she leant in towards him, Tommy didn't avoid her. His lips met hers and lingered a little longer than was probably proper. To hell with it, they were both adults and he liked her company. They checked all the other sheep and found nothing wrong with any of them.

"I'll bring a sleeping bag and see you tonight." She said, as she left.

She really wasn't his type, at all, yet his heart beat a little faster as he walked back to the farm, to arrange for the dead sheep to be picked up.

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Emma Hooper felt something hostile was in the deep cellar, something that didn't want them there. It was that feeling, like a spider's web brushing against your face in the dark. Only it didn't stop.

"Honestly mum ! We should leave and go upstairs." She pleaded.

"Then you'll always be scared of this part of your home." Replied her mum.

"She's right." Added Dean. "We have to see what's down here."

"We should Emma." Said her dad. "Just to make sure Oleander Hotels haven't dumped more bags of crap down here."

Emma aimed her flashlight around, seeing nothing but the foundations of an older mansion and signs of some kind of excavation. The nagging in her head wasn't showing any sign of letting up, but she could handle the feeling of panic.

"I'll carry on." She said. "For now !"

It was an odd kind of cellar, with solid stone walls, but just bare earth as a floor. There was a table with a few dusty archaeology tools and some rusting metal chairs round it.

"When was the dig here Emma ?" Asked Jerry.

"Originally years ago, the 1950s I think. Definitely before the Church bought it."

"Didn't that TV show dig down here ?" Asked Dean.

"Yes, but they just reopened the old dig and found nothing new. Or claimed to find nothing new."

The abandoned dig and general neglected state wasn't helping her nerves. Emma really wanted to be upstairs with the promised coffee and toast. There was a spoil heap and a decaying sieve, with half of its frame rusted away to nothing. Someone had found a few things with the sieve and they were spread out over a nearby trestle table.

"Why would they leave these behind ?!"

She hadn't expected an answer, it was just that the jewellery lying on the table was quite a surprise. Gold, definitely gold, some with rough cut stones that glittered in the light from her Maglite. Emma recognised a gold torque with amber jewels around it. It stunned her mind, like finding Tutankhamen's tomb at the bottom of the garden. Her mother was also looking at the jewels, but neither of them had worked up the nerve to pick anything up.

"It should all be in a museum." Said Emma.

"Worth a fortune, the find of the century." Said her mum. "No sane person would just walk away and leave it here to gather dust."

Emma took her camera out of its case and turned it on, enjoying the reassuring glow from its LCD screen.

"I should take pics of everything." She said. "Can you light provide some light Dean?"

"Yes, of course."

He followed, lighting up each section of the dig, just enough for her camera to work its own magic and provide enough of a flash to get a perfect picture. The jewels on the table first and then she worked across the entire cellar in sections. It was surreal, watching her parents being illuminated by the camera flash, only to be swallowed up by the darkness again.

"There are inscription here Emma." Called her dad. "In the new part of the dig the TV people must have excavated."

An old wall of unknown origin covered in a language she'd never seen before and she doubted if anyone else had. It was another find like Sutton Hoo, maybe bigger, yet the TV people had walked away and locked the cellar door. Emma got it all on her camera, recorded on an HD memory card. Her battery was still at half charge too, as she felt something crunch under her foot. There was a piece of canvas covering something.

"I need help." She said. "There's something buried over here."

Dean helped and her dad, to remove a canvas sheet. Under it was a broken Steadicam ! It was such a contrast to find an expensive piece of 21st Century technology, buried next to something so old that it hurt her mind to think about it. The TV camera looked as though a hammer had been used on it.

"Why would they just leave it here?" Asked Dean.

Emma noticed something dark under an edge of the camera and it looked like an old blood stain.

"Light it for me please."

As Dean aimed his flashlight, she took a picture and then examined it on the viewing screen. It looked black now, old blood always does. There was no doubt in her mind that they'd found a large pool of blood, under the smashed Steadicam.

"I'm not kidding." She said. "This looks like a huge pool of old dried blood."

Dean helped her pull the cover right off the destroyed camera and the pool of blood continued on, under the dry earth. It was a lot more blood than anyone could loose and survive.

"I think someone died here." She said.

"Fine !" Said her mum. "Now I agree with my daughter, almost a first. We need to leave here, now !"

"I need another few pics mum."

"These had better not be for Facebook ?!"

"No mum. I promise. Just for our records."

She took pics of the camera and the dried blood. She also covered the last third of the cellar. She thought she saw a shadow in the corner and felt relieved when her camera flash revealed nothing but a blank wall.

"All done." She said, as she put her camera away.

They didn't suffer the indignity of running, but they walked fast. Soon they were in the reassuring glow of decent lighting in the main basement area.

"We should call the police." Said her father.

"Aww dad !"

"What do you suggest then ?" He asked her.

Emma had already thought of what they really needed to do. She'd realised the obvious next move as soon as she'd seen that glint of Saxon gold on the trestle table.

"There's no evidence of a crime dad." She said. "We need to get in touch with the people who made Dig Quest and ask them why they left a fortune in gold and busted camera in our basement."

"And a huge pool of dried blood." Added Dean.

"Yes, that too."

Her mother was looking a bit irritated by something.

"I am not going to make a habit of it." She said. "But once again, I find myself agreeing with my daughter."

"How do we do that ?" Asked her father. "Didn't they all go off and make TV bakery programmes or something ?"

"Trust me dad. Five minutes on Google and I'll have a number to call."

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Wendy James left work late and noticed that Sean was still there, cleaning some of the old original 17th Century panelling. Nick was in a panic again about losing the contract and the stress was becoming contagious. Jerome Hooper had arranged his own quotes to have the chapel cleaned and young Emma had booked people to refurbish the outdoor pool. On its own it wasn't much to get in a panic over, but Nick still had the jitters from previous threats. Wendy was now arriving at eight and leaving at eight, at least until the current paranoia settled down.

"Good night Sean." She yelled. "Don't stay all night."

"I won't."

She went to her car and cringed as soon as she had her hand on the door handle. They were still in there, scrunched up in a bag in the glove compartment. By the time Wendy was behind the wheel and putting the key in the ignition, she was sweating.

"They have to go." She mumbled.

Putting the strange dolls in a carrier bag had been easy; getting them in the trash was the real trick. She'd put them at the bottom of a bin liner and emptied her kitchen bin on top. She'd tied the bin liner up nice and tight and it had gone in the communal bins behind her apartment.

Wendy had gone out at three am to dig in the large communal bin, find the bin liner and then dig through the stinking garbage to find the dolls. She had no idea why she'd done it ! She wanted rid of the damn things, yet found it impossible to throw them away with any kind of permanency.

The bag had to come to work with her, to be thrown into one of the skips. Again she'd clawed through piles of rubble to recover them. It had taken her an hour of scrubbing to get the dirt from under her nails. Wendy thumped the wheel of her car and then pounded the dashboard.

"I'm fucking possessed or something !"

She opened the glove compartment and brought out the cheerful looking carrier bag, which advertised a local store in nice bright orange letters. They were inside, the dolls that seemed to be impossible to lose. She put the bag on the passenger seat and could only think of one sensible option. She was going to drown them. The A44 crossed the River Glyme near Enstone and the water

was running fast. She'd stopped the car that morning and thought about throwing herself into the water, but drowning them was better.

They were just wood of course, they wouldn't really drown. Wendy knew she was close to the edge, but she was still just about on nodding terms with sanity. The fast water would take them out of her reach and make it impossible for her to recover the dolls, even if she wanted to.

"Like flushing the ciggies when I wanted to stop smoking."

That was a bad example and just made her feel more depressed. She never had completely given up smoking. Wendy started her car and drove along the driveway, turning south to leave the estate near Tommy's farm house. The road from there would take her straight towards the river and the bridge. No stopping this time, or at least only for a second. She'd throw the little bastards over the edge from the car.

There was little traffic and it was completely dark by the time she saw the bus stop and knew the bridge was only a few yards past it. Her hands were sweating on the wheel, her heart pounding in her chest. It had to be done though, she had to be free of them. As Mrs Hargreaves had told her; "Some people believe these ghosts can hurt them and that belief can lead to real harm. Refuse to believe in all the nonsense and it has no power to harm you."

"I refuse to believe !" She yelled.

She pressed the window button and let it come all the way down. No getting out of the car, she'd just find it impossible to throw the bag into the water. There was no traffic, she'd move to that side of the road and throw them over the parapet as she went past. Some sort of internal mechanism was nagging at her, telling her that was a bad idea. There was no traffic in sight though and headlamps showed up for miles on the small backroads.

"Now, now. Do it now !" She yelled.

Far too fast, she slowed down and moved to the other side of the road, the carrier bag in her hand and ready to throw. Wendy mounted the pavement, ignoring the shuddering as her wheels ran over the paving stones. She threw the bag high, watching it in the dull yellow street lighting, until it vanished over the bridge parapet and into the darkness.

"Yes !" She yelled.

She'd done it, there would be no recovering them now. The Glyme twisted and turned for miles, even becoming wide lakes in places. The dolls were gone, irrecoverable and she felt fantastic.

The school bus was out late to pick up some disabled people to take to a meeting with their local MP. It was one of the few vehicles in the area with a tail lift and seating that could be moved to accommodate wheelchairs. The police later mentioned how fortunate it had been, that the bus hadn't yet picked anyone up, at the time of the incident. No one, especially the deceased driver, could explain why he was driving in the dark with no lights on.

As Wendy moved herself off the pavement, she saw the front of the bus. It was far too close to avoid and the driver hadn't taken any steps to avoid her. She was only driving slowly, but the bus was doing a good fifty miles an hour when it hit her car, head on. It was the price for throwing them away, for rejecting their gift. She knew that, as she merged with the glass and metal of the front of her car and then the bus. Strangely, Wendy's last human feeling, was one of huge relief.

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