

## Carmine Brown - Another Halloween

**A Carmine Brown and The Wiccan Sisters of Walker's Creek story, about modern day witchcraft in West Virginia. A tale told in 12,980 words, or thereabouts.**

**"There are good sensible people who talk of seeing Devil Dogs in the woods of West Virginia. Some call them the White Things. Strange creatures, half man and half wild dog. Some say they're abominations, which have been breeding deep in the woods for centuries. Others say the Devil Dogs were summoned by witches, who lacked the power to get rid of what they'd called up....."**

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There were now two meetings a week for The Wiccan Sisters of Walker's Creek. New members too, once a few whispers had spread about genuine spells being used, spells that worked. Not everyone made it past Carmine and her aptitude test, which wasn't really an aptitude test at all. It was just a way of saying no to some would be wiccans, without upsetting people too much.

The curious and the crazy were simply told they had no aptitude for being modern day witches. Dealing with Gill Paisley had been more difficult. She'd been sent by the local church, probably to make sure that Walker's Creek wasn't going to be like Salem. Not that the ladies in her group were calling up Lucifer or putting curses on their neighbours. Carmine decided to turn Gill into a double agent.

"You're an intelligent woman Gill." She'd told her. "You're welcome in our group, as long as you don't blab everything you see to the Sunday congregation."

After Gill had cast her first working spell, she'd become hooked and was now a senior member of their sisterhood. A few disgruntled crazies had started annoying the local paper, but nothing had come of it. To the local community, the Wiccan Sisters was just an excuse for a few bored ladies to have a coffee morning and bake cookies. They did of course bake cookies and Philomena Gillis made the best coffee within three states. Though Carmine knew her best friend simply as Phili.

Other things went on in the back room of Kabler's General Store though, some of which would have excited a few folk in Walker's Creek and terrified others. Their group had expanded quickly to the point where they'd needed somewhere with space and Chelsea Kabler had been a good friend since they'd both been rug rats.

"We've all finished making things go fizz or splat." Said Chelsea. "Please bring in Mary now; she's probably grown since last month."

"She has and got chubbier." Replied Carmine.

Carmine didn't usually bring Mary to the meetings. Accidents can and did happen; residual energy from spells could hang in the air for hours. There had been a small fire once, though everyone had laughed about it afterwards. Her group understood though, that magic and three month old babies, weren't a good mix.

"Too much bad mojo." As Phili had so eloquently put it.

All the dozen or so members of the sisterhood knew her of course and they all became unbearably broody when Carmine mentioned Mary. Vic had brought their daughter and he was waiting with Curtis Kabler in the living room.

"Ok everyone, I'm going to fetch Mary. No more conjuring or casting please."

She'd brought her daughter into the back room in her carry cot, leaving Vic and Curtis to watch TV and share tall stories about hunting. Not that Vic was a hunter; he just tended to listen to Curtis.

“Oh, she’s adorable, so alert.” Said Clara Santucci, another new member of the sisterhood. Clara was right; her daughter had reached the alert and obviously curious stage. She chortled, gurgled and looked at everything around her, with wide open eyes. Yes, there were still a lot of naps being taken, but Carmine could see a real change in her daughter. Chelsea was gently prodding Mary in the tummy, making her gurgle and laugh at the same time.

“Has she spoken yet ?” Asked Chelsea.

“She’s three months old Chel.” Replied Carmine. “Give her another nine months and she might be saying Mummy or Dadda a lot.”

“Too much by the time they get to five or six.” Said Clara. “My Brad drives me nuts.”

They all laughed, while Mary gurgled at them and squeezed Chelsea’s index finger in her tiny hand.

“Did you see that ?” Asked Chelsea. “You must bring her more often.”

“Maybe, when she’s older.”

“I heard you’re working again.” Said Gill. “That must be quite tough ?”

“It is, but we all know that one wage doesn’t pay the bills these days.” Said Carmine. “My boss is fine with me bringing Mary into the office and I think Nina would adopt her, if I let her.”

“That’s the girl on the front desk, isn’t it ?” Asked Chelsea.

“Yes, she’s been so good.”

Nina had talked about ‘accidentally’ forgetting to use her contraceptive pills for a while and Chelsea had been sounding out Curtis, about starting a family. It was true that having a baby around made women broody, she could see it happening. Dear sweet gurgle monster Mary, might well be starting a mini baby boom in Walker’s Creek.

Her wiccan sisters began to pick up their things and leave. Everyone had someone to go home to, even if it was just several cats and late night TV. One or two had female lovers to go home to, which did change the nature of their skills in a few subtle ways. No one cared who anyone was sleeping with though, sisters were all just fellow sisters of The Wiccan Sisters of Walker’s Creek. Carmine had even drafted up a few rules about such things, once the membership had grown to a point where rules were needed.

“Anarchy might be fun, but ultimately pointless and tiring.”

She’d told Phili, before they’d spent a weekend producing a first draft of an aims, rules and regulations pamphlet. It didn’t cover everything of course, but all the major do’s and don’ts were in there.

“There’s a bag of deer meat in the freezer.” Said Chelsea. “We’re making space for this year’s hunting season. You’d be doing us a favour if.....”

“Thank you Chel, that’s appreciated.” Said Carmine. “When I was off work to have Mary, I think we’d have been living on Rice-A-Roni, if it wasn’t for a few kind friends.”

Not just them, the annual deer hunting season in November and December, enabled a lot of families to fill a few freezers with free meat. Times were still hard , the woods still treated like a larder. Some even went after wild boar, though most of Carmine’s neighbours were happy with deer meat. Curtis was in the kitchen with Vic, drinking root beer.

“Deer hunted last year, but still delicious.” Said Curtis.

Chelsea gave her a large bag of frozen deer meat, enough to last her and Vic through until at least Christmas. It wasn’t just the Kablers helping them out, quite a few of the sisterhood had brought round a few bags from their freezers. There was no fee for joining The Wiccan Sisters and everyone knew that bringing up a kid was expensive.

"Thank you." Said Carmine. "Believe it or not, I was a vegetarian in my teens. Now I'd happily eat Bambi, and his mom."

"Wasn't Bambi a girl?" Asked Curtis.

"No a boy my love, I Googled it once." Added Chelsea, offering no further explanation.

"Are you going to be joining us this year Vic?" Asked Curtis. "After the crazies have been out there shooting anything that moves of course. A few of us will be going out on the 31<sup>st</sup>, if you'd like to come along?"

"Don't tease my husband." Said Carmine. "You know full well that he's been learning to shoot a rifle all year."

Curtis gave a huge sigh.

"Not another newbie, looking like Rambo." He said. "You don't need half the junk they try to sell you."

"Hey old buddy..." Said Vic. "Do I need to start bringing up a few things I remember from your bachelor party?"

"Why, what did he do?" Asked Chelsea.

"I see a memory surfacing.... A stripper covered in strawberry...."

"Ok, ok, wear what you like." Said Curtis. "Just remember to bring a rifle and some ammo."

Carmine hadn't invited many people over since having Mary. There had been plenty of friends dropping in for coffee, but not a single meal with friends, around her kitchen table. She was working and looking after Mary, but mostly she'd just lost the habit of inviting people over.

"Why don't you both come over tomorrow night, unless you have plans?" She asked. "I haven't cooked for more than two in months."

"Sounds good to me." Said Curtis.

"Fine, though I still want to hear about this stripper." Said Chelsea.

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It was tempting to feed Chelsea and Curtis with their own deer meet. Money was still a little tight, but Carmine bought four good quality steaks in Charleston, during her lunch break. Hanratty Realtors had been really good about her bringing Mary into the office, and Nina seemed happy to be unofficial nanny. Carmine bought a small gift for Nina while she was out buying meat. Nothing expensive, just a beautiful Poinsettia in a proper clay pot. It didn't stop her from feeling she was taking Nina a little for granted, but it helped ease her conscience.

"Oh thank you, it's beautiful."

"Just a little thank you..... When you have children, I promise to help you as much as I can."

Nina was a gem, helping her clean broken glass out of her hair, after all the nastiness with Constance Hubbard out in the car park. She hadn't discussed Mary's christening yet with Vic, but she was going to see how he reacted to the prospect of Nina being a God parent for Mary.

Dark by the time she'd left work with her shopping on the back seat of her car and Mary safely strapped into her carry cot. The dark cold nights weren't pleasant, but Carmine liked the Halloween period, most modern witches did. Their real night of power was Walpurgis Night on the 30<sup>th</sup> April, but Halloween had become.... Traditional and no one can resist tradition. Vic came out to help carry her shopping.

"Ahhh, I see a six pack of imported beer."

"I spent a good chunk of next month's food allowance, but they are our best friends."

"Really? I quite like the Santuccis."

She jabbed him in the ribs, before carrying her daughter into the house. Vic had once had a bit of a crush on Clara Santucci in high school, which was now a running joke between them. Their six month old cat came out to meet her, rubbing his face against her leg.

"I think Mac Two suspects you might have bought cat treats." Said Vic.

"As if I'd forget."

Long dead Constance had killed her much loved cat Mac, so the new arrival had been called Mac Two, of course. He was young and living up to his name, always rushing about as though chasing unseen imps caught up in the wind. Vic had turned up with Mac Two after a shopping trip to Charleston, refusing to say where he'd come from. Probably so that she couldn't return him. The loss of the original Mac had hurt her so deeply... like losing a close friend. Mac Two had been a kitten then, quickly working his way into her affections. Carmine gave their cat a few treats and began getting the kitchen ready for a meal with company.

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The other three drank beer with the occasional glass of wine and the steaks had been delicious. Carmine was still breastfeeding and drinking root beer. She loved root beer, drinking gallons of the stuff.

"Mary will probably develop an addiction for root beer." Vic had told her.

Not that Carmine resented being the only sober person in the room, even if it did mean their guests claiming the sofa for the night. Carmine enjoyed listening to the stories, once minds had been cleared of inhibitions.

".... And you're really thinking of making Nina one of Mary's God parents?" Asked Chelsea. "Isn't she an atheist or something?"

"It doesn't matter these days Chel." Carmine replied. "Lots of God parents aren't really that religious. Besides, it's just my way of thanking her for being an unpaid nanny."

"Yeah, it's not as if she's a Satanist or something like that." Added Vic.

"What do you mean 'something like that,' Vic." Yelled Chelsea. "Your wife is a practising witch and a damn powerful one too."

A row was inevitable, but they'd all been friends for years and what was said on boozy nights, tended to be forgotten the next day, or at least never mentioned again.

"You're not Satanists though, or proper witches." Said Vic. "Sorry.... I mean you're not the sort who curse people's cattle, or conjure up storms."

"We could, we could.....You tell him Carmine.... Tell him." Shouted Chelsea.

Crap ! She sort of knew what Vic meant, thought she was tempted to give him a black eye.

"Powerful spells get noticed." She said. "Just using them can corrupt those with a weakness for power for its own sake. We could alter the weather and lay curses on our enemies, but such things tend to have..... Consequences."

"See.... Fuck you Vic, we're the real deal..... Proper witches."

"Easy Chel, Vic has trusted my skills in the past."

Carmine fetched more beer from the fridge, knowing the conversation would move onto safer topics, like religion or politics.

"It's the Satanists causing all the trouble in Brewster's Hollow." Said Curtis.

Mac Two seemed to agree with him, climbing up onto Curtis's lap and purring at him.

"Sorry, he was locked in our room, but he's something of an escape artist."

"No problem, he looks quite comfortable where he is." Said Curtis.

"Are you talking about the Devil Dog sightings in Brewster's Hollow?" Asked Vic.

"I heard that people had been seeing The White Things." Said Chelsea.

"Same thing, all names for the dogs that aren't just dogs." Said Curtis. "The Satanists have called them up, everyone knows that."

"There is the missing McCready boy." Said Vic. "Even Doc Warner was talking about a satanic cult being involved."

It was tragic and rare, but kids did go missing in their part of West Virginia. There were a lot of disused mines to fall into and some fairly unpleasant wildlife. Once in a while a kid went missing, though Carmine doubted if it was the work of a satanic cult.

"Everything gets blamed on Satanists." She snapped. "Have you ever met a real live Satanist around here?"

"I've seen them." Said Curtis.

Even Mac Two seemed interested, looking up at Curtis.

"You've seen Satanists?" Asked Chelsea. "You never told me."

Curtis gave that sigh, the one that goes with thinking you're the only intelligent person in the room.

"No, listen to me! I mean the Devil Dogs." Said Curtis. "I've seen them twice near Brewster's Hollow. Once right where the poor McCready boy was last seen."

"Yeah, yeah, so this is Curtis Kabler's wind up for this year." Said Vic.

"No it's the honest truth. May God strike me down if I'm lying."

"I hate to doubt you, but you do have a long record of telling tall stories." Said Carmine.

"Yeah, stop it honey, the poor McCready boy might be dead." Added Chelsea. "What was the poor kid's first name? Anyone know?"

"I'm not lying and I think his name is Liam."

"Enough, you've wound us up too often." Said Vic.

"Get me a fucking bible and I'll swear on it. I'm telling you the truth. Go on, even wiccans must have a bible or two about the place."

"Honey, ease up." Said Chelsea.

Normally Carmine would have let it go, but if the jackass wanted a bible, she'd find him one. They had the large family bible that had come down through the generation. The first death written in it had been that of her great grandfather, the latest entry was the birth of Mary. Heavy though, it banged down as she put it in front of Curtis.

"You lie on my family bible and.....Just don't lie Curtis."

She sat down and decided not to trust Curtis and his newfound respect for the bible. She looked at Mac Two and aimed a spell in his direction. Quiet words, spoken in her throat, but unheard by all around her.

'Listen well my little friend

Know the truth from a lie

If he lies you will react

And bite him hard in his thigh.'

Curtis seemed unconcerned, as he put his right hand on her bible.

"I swear by almighty God, that I have seen the Devil Dogs, twice."

No lightning bolt, no tumult of angry angels.... Not even an angry cat, sinking his teeth into a liar.

"Fine, I accept that you think it's the truth." Said Carmine. "Give us some details?"

"We're all friends." Said Chelsea. "Lighten up people."

"Sorry, please tell us about what you saw?" Asked Carmine.

“First time I was hunting deer near where the road goes round the McCready place.” Said Curtis. “I was being careful, keeping myself hidden as best I could. It was a week or so outside of hunting season.”

“Idiot !” Snapped Chelsea.

“Anyway, I saw something walking across the road, as if it didn’t have a care in the world. It must have been about five feet long and stood too high off the ground to be a dog. White fur it had, a dirty white. As I watched it turned towards me, as though it had heard me. The face was a man’s face, but with a dog’s snout.... I swear it.”

“What did it do ?” Asked Vic.

“It ran, really fast. There’s a fence there, had to be a good five feet high. It went over the fence without slowing down and vanished into the trees.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about it ?” Asked Chelsea.

“Because you’d just think I was lying or crazy. The second time the damn thing went up on two legs to get a good look at something. It must have been over six or seven feet tall, once it was up straight. Not like a bear doing tricks, it stayed upright for at least two minutes.”

“Did it do anything else ?” Asked Carmine.

“No just ran off like the first one. It was no ordinary dog though. It’s the Satanists, summoning up some really bad shit, that they can’t get rid of. Had to happen, fucking Satanists.”

“Is the deer hunting good near the McCready place ?” Asked Vic.

“Yeah, pretty good. Why ?”

“There’ll be four of us going out to hunt on the 31<sup>st</sup>.” Said Vic. “Might be a good opportunity to look over the area where Liam McCready went missing. Might not see anything, but you never know.”

“That’s a pretty good idea.” Said Chelsea.

“Yes, I’d come too if I wasn’t going to be at home, looking after Mary.” Said Carmine.

“Don’t worry about your husband.” Said Curtis “I’ll take really good care of him.”

“Just don’t rubbish my kit, or call me Rambo all day.” Said Vic.

“As if I ever would..... Crap ! Your cat just bit me.....Really hard.”

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Vic knew he’d be in for a long day of teasing, once the others saw the clothing he’d bought from the store in Charleston. There were quite a lot of reflective patches and he had a backpack containing a few items he’d been told were essential. Actually he’d bought everything the store suggested, it was how he did things. He’d gone by the book when learning how to use a hand gun and the same again with his brand new hunting rifle.

“Holy shit Vic.” Said Ben Quigley. “Sure you’ve got enough reflective patches on that jacket ?”

“The deer will run right into Kentucky, out of pure embarrassment.” Said Andy Wheeler.

Vic sighed inwardly and accepted his fate. He was the newbie hunter and being the target of endless banter was part of the job description. There’d only be the four of them and they’d all known each other for years. That was how it was with hunting deer, you took friends with you and usually it was an all-male activity. Carmine had become a little huffy about it once.

“It’s so primitive...Like cavemen heading off to hunt mammoth, while the women get left to gather nuts and berries.”

That had never stopped her eating the meat though. This winter was going to be different, eating meat he’d hunted, rather than something out of a friend’s freezer. Provided he managed to hit anything though, live deer moved about more than targets.

“So, first time.... Bring any bullets Vic ?” Asked Andy.

"Hey leave my buddy alone." Said Curtis. "I promised his wife that I'd stop the bigger boys from teasing him."

A group chuckle.... Shit! He was really in for a day of it. Vic wasn't proud of the feeling, but a part of him was looking forward to the next newbie arriving, with his shiny new hunting jacket and backpack full of junk the store had talked him into buying. Then it'd be his turn to dish out a little ridicule.

"There are usually a few deer in the woods behind the McCready place." Said Curtis. "If we head that way, I can show you where I saw what we talked about."

Ahhh, Vic sensed a reluctance to mention the Devil Dog sightings, in front of his hunting buddies. It looked like a good opportunity to get a little payback.

"You mean where you saw the Devil Dogs?" Asked Vic.

"What? You're not becoming a tin foil hatter are you Curtis?" Asked Andy.

Karma was wonderful if it was working in your favour and a bitch if it wasn't. Poor Curtis looked as though he wanted to find somewhere to hide.

"Ok, ok, have your fun, but I know what I saw."

"Too much cheap moonshine." Commented Ben.

Curtis ignored them, speeding up his pace and heading down towards Brewster's Hollow. Just as they were about to leave the treeline, Vic saw a large deer, turning to look away from them. It was a magnificent creature, but Vic only saw a freezer full of free meat for his family. The others saw it too, going quiet, as Vic aimed his brand new rifle at the deer.

'Hold your breath before you pull.'

His instructor had told him, time after time. There was a need to breathe faster, a desire to pull back the trigger, before the deer moved. Vic fought back all the emotions and gently eased back the trigger.

'Boom.'

He didn't quite believe it, when the magnificent beast, crumpled and dropped to the ground.

"Yay, you lost your cherry Vic." Said Andy. "Well done."

"Dropped like a stone." Added Ben.

Curtis was the first to reach the deer, down on his knees beside the creature.

"Where did you aim?" He asked.

"For the heart."

"You got it.... Good shot." Said Curtis.

In theory the best cuts of meat went to the one who brought it down. In practise Curtis would probably do the job of butchering the animal, giving them all neat and tidy freezer bags, full of the delicious meat. Carmine was right though, there was something very primal about hunting. Vic felt he'd provided for his family, in a far more concrete way than coming home with a pay cheque.

"Heavy, it'll take all of us to carry it back to my truck." Said Curtis.

"Will we get time to see the road where you saw.... It?" Asked Vic.

"Should do, as long as the weather holds."

"No fun in trudging through mud." Added Ben.

The weather didn't get a chance to turn. The deer had been looking away as Vic had fired, as if startled by something. That memory had gone though in the excitement of the hunt. It seemed to come out of nowhere, the snarling creature with sharp claws and bared teeth.

"What the hell?"

"It's going for Curtis."

"Shoot it."

It was all so fast. Who said what became a fast tumble of words. First the thing with dirty white fur seemed to go after their dead deer, then it veered off towards Curtis.

"It's got me !" Yelled Curtis. "Kill it, kill it, get it off me."

Vic felt caught in slow motion, trying to get his rifle off his shoulder and aimed at whatever was attacking Curtis, while the rest of the world seemed to be running at top speed.

"Jesus, it bit me ! Kill it !" Shouted Curtis.

Ben was first to fire, but his shot either missed, or the creature wasn't hurt badly enough to notice being shot. It was away, leaving Vic with an image of a dog's snout, covered in the blood of his old friend.

"Fuck, I'm dying !" Shouted Curtis.

No he wasn't, not yet at least. Vic worked for the local power company and he'd seen death come for people far too often. He'd seen kids fried on high voltage power cables, but the worst had been the death of a fellow power company worker. Clearing branches away from a transformer with a chain saw. He'd slipped, the saw cutting deep into both his legs. First he'd screamed and shouted, while Vic called for medical help. Then the man had gone quiet for a good hour, before dying of blood loss. Vic had tried applying pressure to wounds, there were just too many of them. No, Curtis might well die of his wounds, but probably in hospital from an infection or rabies.

"Look after him, I'm going after it." He shouted.

He could still hear Curtis yelling and complaining for a good fifty yards. The thing ran like a dog, but jumped like nothing he'd ever seen before. Straight over the top of a high fence, that Vic had to clamber over. His rifle would take time to aim and the creature was moving far faster than he was.

"Damn thing, if only Carmine was here with her fire spells." He muttered.

There were a lot of old mines in the area. It seemed that just about all of West Virginia had been dug up or mined into, at some point in time. Old coal mines were the most dangerous and the thing with white fur, was heading towards the most infamous.

'Mine Workings – Keep Out'

Said the words, painted on a metal sign, which was rapidly rusting away. Soon the sign would be gone, wandering kids left to their fate. The Lucky 13 Mine, though no one could remember why it was lucky, or what the 13 signified. Never that commercial, the mine had provided coal for the local towns, before closing in the thirties.

"Oh no, you don't."

It was going into an entrance to the mine, almost lost in the gloom between the trees. It was get off a shot then or not at all, so Vic aimed his hunting rifle and gently pulled back on the trigger.

'Boom.'

The noise reverberated round the hollow, sounding like an entire army in battle, as the noise echoed off the nearby hills. He'd hit it ! Vic had seen the damn thing flinch, before running into the mine. He turned and retraced his steps, harder work now he was going mostly uphill. Ben was stood, while Andy wrapped something around the hole in Curtis's leg.

"How is he ?" Asked Vic.

"Still noisy. All that shouting over just a scratch, that's already stopped bleeding."

Curtis had been relieved of his trousers, to reveal a lot of congealed blood. The wound might not be life threatening, but it was far from being just a scratch.

"Need any help ?" Asked Vic.

"Did you get it ?" Asked Curtis. "It fucking bit me Vic, in the back."

"I saw it flinch, pretty sure I hit it."

"For God's sake, stop shouting." Said Andy.

"Yeah. Man up, I've had worse shaving cuts." Added Ben.

It was that mean part of him again, loving the tables being turned, as it was the turn of Curtis to take some teasing. Schadenfreude the Germans called it; pleasure derived by someone from another person's misfortune. Smart people the Germans.

"What are you using as a bandage?" Asked Vic.

It looked like the carcass wiping cloth, which Curtis had used to wipe down the deer he'd just killed.

"It's all I could find." Said Andy. "Better than nothing."

"Take it off, I've got all the right stuff in my pack."

"Really?"

"Yes, all the things we're advised to bring, in case someone gets shot, bitten or breaks something."

There it was again, that warm glow of smugness, as he handed his nice new and unopened first aid kit to Andy.

"Hey, there's everything in here." Said Andy. "Even pain killers to shut him up a bit."

"Right here guys, lying right here." Said Curtis.

"Give him the whole bottle." Muttered Ben.

Vic tried his phone, as they all had. There was no reception, which is why only fools wandered through the woods on their own.

"We could take him to the general hospital in Charleston." Suggested Vic.

"No, not there. I'm not sure about my insurance." Said Curtis. "Take me to Doc Warner, he'll fix me up."

"The Doc is at my place, giving Carmine and Mary the once over." Said Vic. "We'll take you to my house then, quicker than going into town."

"Holy Crap Curtis!" Yelled Andy. "That thing has given you a gnarly looking bite on your back."

As Andy cleaned the bite up, they all got a good look at the wound. It was gnarly alright, and right in between his shoulder blades. Not deep, but wide and ragged at the edges.

"Do you think I'll need a tetanus shot?"

"Oh yes buddy, and a course of rabies injections." Answered Andy.

"Oh no, not those."

"Better than dying Curtis, better than dying." Said Vic.

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Carmine suspected that Phili had a bit of a thing about Doctor Tim Warner. She always managed to find an excuse to come over; when she knew the local doctor was likely to be around. Doc Warner was happily married and a good twenty years older than Phili, but when did common sense and logic ever have anything to do with sexual attraction. Doc Warner had just finished checking Mary over, the child he considered something of a miracle. Carmine had been trying for a baby for years, with no luck at all.

"I'll ask the lab to rush the bloodwork, but I think Mary is just about the healthiest and happiest little girl, in Walker's Creek."

She'd always been told by her friends, that patience was required and that one day she'd get pregnant. Doc Warner had told her and Vic that they were two fertile adults and there was no reason they shouldn't start a family, one day. There had been that day when Mary Laverty had given her a parting gift, casting some kind of spell on her. The result had been Mary and a doctor who still seemed amazed and treated her child like a gift from above.

"Truth now Tim, how likely was it, that I'd ever have a child?" She'd once asked him.

“The shape of the uterus is often a factor... Just be grateful you have Mary.”

There was a commotion outside, a truck door slamming and lots of shouting. The guys were all supposed to have gone hunting in the old truck Curtis seemed to think was retro, rather than ready for the scrap heap. Ben Quigley had insisted on using his own 4x4, probably a wise decision.

“Sounds like the hunters are home.” Said Carmine.

The noise seemed to increase, with a lot of shouting from Curtis. Phili ran to the window, pulling the curtains to one side.

“They got one.” She said. “There’s a deer in the back of the truck, a big one. Oh, Curtis is limping and he just took a swipe at Ben.”

The front door opened and Vic came in, looking at her and shrugging in an odd way.

“Sorry... Curtis needs the Doc and the others.....” He said.

“They made me wait, while they loaded up the deer before me..... In my own truck.” Yelled Curtis.

“It’s a really big deer, truly magnificent.” Said Andy.

“And it’s quiet.” Added Ben.

Four civilised men had gone out to hunt, yet four madmen seemed to have returned. Curtis was limping badly, yet still trying to thump Ben in the ear. His old hunting jeans looked to have been cut about, barely holding up, the belt left unbuckled. There was blood on his trousers too, quite a lot of it.

“Did you get in a fight ?” Asked Phili, with far too much enthusiasm.

“No we got attacked.... We think it was after our deer.” Said Vic.

Doc Warner was up on his feet, steering Curtis towards a large old wooden chair, where Vic sometimes sat to read the paper on Sunday morning.

“What attacked you ?” Asked Carmine.

“One of those Devil Dogs.” Snapped Curtis.

Instant quiet, as Doc Warner carefully pulled down Curtis’s ruined jeans. Curtis was looking around at his hunting buddies.

“Come on guys, I know what I saw.” Said Curtis. “We all saw it, Vic even shot it. Back me up here.”

“It was all so fast.....” Said Ben. “He’s right though, if it wasn’t a White Thing, it must have been its first cousin.”

“Did you really shoot it Vic ?” Asked Phili, again with enthusiasm.

“Yes, just as it was running into the old Lucky 13 Mine.”

“That place !” Said the Doc. “If there is anything weird and nasty down in Brewster’s Hollow, that is where it would live. A death trap, that needs better signs and boarding up properly.”

Everyone clustered around, trying to get a look, as Doc Warner removed the makeshift dressing, which covered the wound on Curtis’s thigh. The gash was long and nasty looking, but it wasn’t bleeding anymore.

“Nothing serious, but it needs cleaning and a proper dressing. Can someone get my medical bag ? It’s in the trunk of my car.”

“I’ll get it Tim.” Said Phili.

Ahh the blindness of love. Phili insisted on calling the Doc by his first name, even though his brow furrowed, every time she did it.

“Looks like a claw did this.” Said the Doc. “A bit large and deep for a boar attack. Maybe you guys did meet a Devil Dog. It is Halloween after all.”

“Shit ! I forgot that.” Said Curtis. “Maybe they come out at Halloween ?”

“And starve for the rest of the year.” Said Ben.

The wound was cleaned, which caused more noise from Curtis. Once a proper dressing was in place, Curtis stopped yelling and cursing every few seconds.

"He was bit Doc, right in the middle of his back." Said Andy. "A really nasty, gnarly looking bite."

Off came his shirt, revealing at least three tattoo hearts, with girl's names under them. Nothing they hadn't seen before, but that didn't stop Ben from teasing him yet again.

"Anne Vines, weren't you about twelve when you dated her?"

"Wait until I'm healed Ben.... Payback time then buddy, payback time."

The dressing on the bite had come lose, allowing some blood to ooze out and run down his back. As Doc pulled off the dressing, they all made various noises, to indicate that the bite looked a few points beyond gnarly.

"Well, that isn't a dog bite, I've seen enough to know what they're like." Said Doc. "Not a human bite either, I've seen a surprising number of those too, over the years."

"What was it then Doc?" Asked Curtis. "Can someone take a pic?"

Phili again who always seemed to have an iPhone in her hand and a taste for questionable excitement. As Doc cleaned up the bite, she showed the pic to Curtis.

"That is..... Nasty." He said. "Will I need a tetanus jab Doc?"

"Yes and I'm afraid you'll need a course of rabies shots. You'll need to go into the general hospital in Charleston at some point. They'll send you a letter or call you, depending on how urgently they want to see you."

"Not rabies shots, crap." Said Curtis. "I hate hospitals, do you have to report it?"

"Yes and you need to go, or they'll send the cops to get you. You can come back with me to my place, to get the tetanus and first rabies jab."

"Now you mean, right now?"

Poor Curtis, he'd probably heard other people talking about how painful the rabies jabs could be. It had to be bad, Doc Warner was actually patting Curtis on the shoulder.

"Now I'm afraid. The sooner you get the first injection, the more effective it'll be."

Less noise, as Vic helped Curtis to dress. Everyone looked worried about what kind of infection, Curtis might have picked up in the woods.

"You've seen a lot of bites Doc. What do you think got him?" Asked Andy.

"No idea... The front teeth have left a bite that looks like a dog bite. The wound is wide though and ragged, too wide for a dog bite. For now, it goes into the 'I haven't a clue' category."

"A Devil Dog bite." Said Phili. "Can I put the pic on Twitter, Curtis?"

"Do what you want with it."

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Carmine had felt anger growing in her, mixed with frustration. She'd had an argument with Vic, over his use of the term 'not proper witches.' They'd muttered and grumbled at each other right up to bedtime, before sleeping as far apart as they could get.

"Did you see that?" Yelled Gill. "I lit a candle with my frigging fingers."

A meeting night for The Wiccan Sisters of Walker's Creek, once again in the back room of Kabler's Store. Gill had just created enough of a spark between finger and thumb, to light a candle. It was wonderful, something almost miraculous, yet only a tiny hint of what some of them were capable of. Vic's comment had hurt, because it was true. Her group weren't proper witches, but they could be.

"Brilliant Gill, I knew you could do it." Said Carmine.

The Devil Dog had bitten Curtis, one of their oldest friends. He was beginning a course of painful injections and the wound in his leg was causing some concern. It was infected and Doc Warner wasn't sure with what.

"Antibiotics are far more targeted than people realise. Unless you know the specific bacteria, it can be really tricky to get the infection under control."

Doc had told Curtis and admitted that the lab were having problems identifying the bacteria causing him to be unwell. Carmine had a plan, one that would excite some of her group, while terrifying the coffee morning wiccans.

"Can I have everyone's attention..... Please."

Phili knew what was coming and had already volunteered for the extra training necessary. The rest were looking at her expectantly. She might actually drive some of the long standing members away. They'd been part of Rachelle Ware's original group, when the sisterhood performed no real magic at all. That was all before Rachelle had been incinerated of course, by Constance Hubbard.

"As you all must have heard, Curtis Kabler was bitten by what looked like one of these Devil Dogs, which has left him with an infected leg."

"They're abominations." Someone shouted.

"Indeed they are," agreed Carmine, "not everything in our world is a creature of God."

"Evil, pure evil." Said Chelsea.

Having Chelsea there helped. Carmine had a course of action in mind that was extremely dangerous. Chelsea had obviously been crying, her face looked puffy, her eyes red and sore. That just might be enough to get the sisterhood sufficiently angry to agree to her plan.

"Something needs to be done about them !" Yelled Phili, right on cue.

"Yes, the cops are useless."

"And the state people.... Just pen pushers."

"What do we pay taxes for ?"

Great, she had an angry sisterhood, just itching to give someone, or something a hard time.

"We can take care of this problem." Said Carmine. "It'll be our gift to the people of West Virginia, though few of them will ever know about it."

"How do we do that ?" Asked Gill. "We're not State Troopers."

"I don't even own a gun." Someone commented.

Carmine looked at the candle Gill had lit, still casting its small amount of light, over the centre of the room. So tempting to point at it, while she quietly intoned the required spell. Mary Laverty had trained her well though.

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

Carmine remembered and stood totally still, looking at the candle, as it burst into a small explosion of orange flames. Some of the hot wax flew through the air, adding to the effect she'd hoped to produce.

"Most of you can be trained to do that." Said Carmine. "Much more too, perhaps even mastering spells that I have trouble with."

"Us Carmine ? You really mean it ?"

A quiet voice, Lizzie one of the oldest members of the sisterhood.

"Nothing is compulsory." Said Carmine. "I know some of you think of this wiccan group, as somewhere to meet friends over coffee, maybe share a few recipes."

General laughter, though none of it meant unkindly.

"Oh no dear, I want to learn how to do that." Said Lizzie.

"Good, good." Said Carmine. "I know Phili is going to join me and I suspect Chelsea will be joining us."

"Oh yes, I want to burn those fuckers." Spat Chelsea.

"I'm not sure at my age... There are the grand children to think about."

One of Rachele's coffee morning wiccans. Carmine had known everyone for years, some since she'd been a child. She didn't want anyone to feel judged or under any pressure.

"No one has to do anything they don't want to." Said Carmine. "That's why we fought a war of independence. Train with me or don't... No one is going to judge anyone. We have a chance to be real witches though, realising our full potential. Then those who want to, can come with me to the Lucky 13 Mine."

"You're going there ?"

"That's where the Devil Dogs are." Said Carmine. "That's where we'll find them and kill them."

"Fuck yes !" Shouted Chelsea.

Eventually there'd be a few mutterings about Chelsea's profanity, but now there seemed to be a lot of wiccan sisters, wanting extra training.

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Training progressed well, every member of the sisterhood quite capable of casting fire spells, sufficiently powerful to ignite most combustible objects.

"Pieces of two by four don't move though." Carmine told them. "Soon we'll need to meet in the woods and create a few moving targets."

Curtis was cause for concern, the look on Chelsea's face telling everyone he was no better, without a question being asked. They'd stopped seeing him, as negotiating the stairs down from their apartment, became difficult for him.

"Doc Warner is talking about him being admitted to hospital." Said Chelsea.

"Didn't the last lot of antibiotics work ?" Asked Lizzie.

"He felt better for about two days. Doc Warner says he's run out of broad spectrum antibiotics to try on him."

Carmine had complete respect for modern medicine, but she was beginning to suspect that Curtis was afflicted by something too old and dark for antibiotics to cure.

"Have they identified the infection yet ?" She asked.

"No, it's still a mystery."

"I feel awkward asking and you can say no, obviously." Said Carmine. "We could probably do a better job of healing him ourselves. I think Curtis isn't sick in the way Doc Warner means."

At one time the looks on the faces would have been dubious. They trusted her now though, which brought its own pressures.

"I'm so glad you offered." Said Chelsea. "I didn't like asking and we've all known Doc Warner for years. He's struggling to do anything for Curtis, I can tell."

No one was asking her if they could really do it. Carmine just hoped she wasn't about to fall flat on her face.

"Go upstairs and bring him down." Said Carmine. "Do you need help ?"

"No, coming down is easy, it's getting him back up there that's the problem."

There was a lot of bumping about, before Chelsea arrived, half carrying her sick husband. There were a few mutters about how bad he looked, which stopped when he entered the room.

"I know, I look like shit." He said. "Can you really fix me Carmine?"

"We can, the sisterhood. We'll need you comfortable in the centre of the room. Are there some cushions Chelsea?"

"Yeah, I'll get them."

"Do we need to draw a circle round him?" Asked Lizzie.

"No, we're not doing that kind of magic."

Curtis was soon propped up on cushions in the centre of the room, covered in a beige duvet. He did look like shit, but hopefully his skin would soon lose its grey pallor. His eyes were still alert, watching the women of The Wiccan Sisters of Walker's Creek, as they stood in a circle around him.

"Hold hands and don't let go." Said Carmine. "Move forward Phili, we want poor Curtis right in the centre of our circle."

"Poor Curtis..... Do I look that bad?"

"Yes honey, now shut up." Replied Chelsea.

Carmine prepared herself, settling her mind on just one word;

'Heal.'

No rhyme, none of the standard healing spells. She was going to simply concentrate on that one word, while pulling in energy from the others. Carmine was going to drain her sisters of their spiritual energy, but not enough to harm any of them, she hoped. It was her first attempt at such a thing.

"Hold hands and don't let go until I say." She said.

She gave them a second to pull and tug at each other, until the circle looked stable.

"Now..... Imagine energy leaving your body, to go out through your arms. Imagine it flowing into those around you, until it all comes to me. Like yellow flames, licking across your arms, rushing towards me. Give me all you can my sisters, all the energy you have....."

No need to imagine, the yellow fire became real, though it was a cool flame. A lot of blue in with the yellow, as it moved around the circle, before covering her in a cloud of pulsating power. Some of the circle began to speak, startled by the cool yellow flames.

"Quiet my sisters, no voices, no words."

When it seemed the right moment, Carmine let go of the hands either side of her, disconnecting herself from their energy. Her sisters had given as much of themselves, as was safe. It was probably more than enough to heal Curtis.... It had to be enough.

'Heal.... Heal.... Heal.....'

The word shouted silently in her head, over and over again. The yellow energy mixed with blue, left her and settled over Curtis, hiding him from her view. It didn't matter, she still felt him there, receiving part of the life force, of over a dozen wiccan sisters.

"Don't hurt him." Said Chelsea.

"Quiet until it's over."

'Heal.... Heal.... Heal.....'

Carmine carried on, until the cool yellow flame cleared, leaving a man who looked to be asleep.

"It is finished." Said Carmine.

"Looks like he slept through it." Said Chelsea.

Phili took the duvet off him and Curtis looked to be in a deep slumber. Carmine shook him gently and was relieved to see his eyes open, almost immediately.

"I was worried you might be hurt and you were having a nap." Said Chelsea.

"There was this place, in a dream..... Beautiful." Said Curtis.

"You just received the energy and goodwill of every sister in the group." Said Carmine. "No wonder you had a good dream. We need to look you over though."

"Here ? Right now ?"

"Come on honey, you've got clean shorts on." Said Chelsea.

Everyone chuckled at Curtis and his discomfort at being parted from his trousers. Carmine gently removed the dressing from the wound on his leg.

"What is that stuff ?" Someone asked.

"I can't be certain, but I think it's whatever was infecting the wound." Said Carmine. "It's been killed and driven out of him. I have read about such things....."

"It doesn't hurt.....Not at all. Damn it Carmine, it worked." Said Curtis. "It actually fucking worked."

"Less colourful language honey, we have guests." Said Chelsea.

Carmine didn't even want to touch the dry black dust, which filled the dressing. She let it all fall to the ground, leaving barely a scar on Curtis's thigh. Gone was the grey pallor from his skin and the pain. It was like something out of the ancient books she'd read. Such things had no place in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America, but they'd all witnessed it. Evil, pure evil had been defeated and driven out of Curtis.

"Any pain at all Curtis ?" Carmine asked.

"No, none at all. Shall I stand up ?"

"Turn over first, I need to look at that bite."

After his trousers, taking off his shirt didn't seem to bother Curtis at all. Once again Carmine removed the dressing, causing more of the dry black dust, to fall in a pile on the floor.

"This will all need removing from your house Chelsea." Said Carmine. "Every speck of this stuff has to be cleaned up, the floor properly cleansed."

"I'm sure we'll all help." Said Lizzie.

"Yes, of course."

"I just feel so much better, can I get up now ?" Asked Curtis.

"Do you see that Carm, in amongst the dust ?" Asked Phili.

"Yes, I see it..... Stay where you are Curtis."

"Holy crap." Said Chelsea.

"What ? What's going on ?" Asked Curtis.

"Keep still..... Whatever it is, it's dead." Said Carmine.

Curled up in the dressing, which had covered the bite. It looked like a grub, barely an inch and a half long. Curled up and dead, though Carmine still took care, when picking it out of the dust. She showed it to Curtis, mainly to stop him fidgeting about.

"Was that inside me ?"

"I think it was, though the only trace of the bite is a small scar. Once again, the evil has been killed and driven out of your body. You've been lucky, it might have killed you."

"It's like something off the TV." Said Gill.

"Do you have a jar Chel ?" Asked Carmine. "I'd like to keep this thing."

"Yes, we've got loads of jars in the store."

"Cleanser with colloidal silver too.....Rub it all over Curtis, while he's under the shower and then use a little on the floor."

"Not sure how much of that we have." Said Chelsea. "It's a bit pricey for Walker's Creek."

"I've got some." Someone muttered.

"Me too... good for eczema." Added Clara.

"And good for cleansing any trace of the evil, out of the Kabler's home." Said Carmine. "Please give what you can spare to Chelsea."

"We will."

"I'll be ok now though, won't I?" Asked Curtis.

"Overkill Curtis, probably enough energy used to kill a hundred evil grubs." Said Carmine. "I'd bet anything that you'll have no further problems."

"Nuked it huh?"

"Yep, we nuked it."

"What do you think it was doing to me? Why was it there?"

"I don't know Curtis, but it's gone.... Don't have sleepless nights over it."

"Come on honey, shower time." Said Chelsea.

Vic was too busy to drive her about anymore. Her unpaid chauffer was now a baby sitter, looking after Mary. Carmine went out to her car, sure that there was some herbal cleanser in the trunk. She noticed Phili following her out.

"What is it Carm? Thirty one or thirty two years we've known each other?"

"Closer to thirty four Phili, I stopped counting a while back... Your point is?"

"I know your worried look... What do you think that thing inside Curtis was doing?"

"I don't have a clue, but it's dead."

"Do I need to give you a Chinese burn Carm? I will if you don't talk."

Phili would never betray a confidence and she really did need to tell someone. She'd tell Vic about her suspicions of course, but he wasn't wiccan.

"We really have no idea how these Devil Dogs are created." She said. "We're not knee deep in them, so it can't be by having pups. Just maybe some of the old folklore tales are right."

Phili gasped, putting her hand over her mouth, as she understood.

"By a bite! It makes sense Carm..... Poor Curtis."

"Curtis will be fine now, I'm sure. But we have to kill them all Phili, every single one of them."

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A cold cloudless night in Brewster's Hollow, with a bright half moon illuminating the road. They decided to meet nearly a mile from the McCready's place, where a track ran off into the woods. Their vehicles would cause some curiosity, if anyone drove by, but no plan is ever perfect. Besides, few drove through that part of West Virginia, especially at night.

"You know I didn't want either of you to come?"

"I know, but we're here now." Said Vic.

Just Vic and Ben, she'd kept the guys with their rifles down to a contingent of two. In truth Andy hadn't been that keen and Curtis was still convalescing.

"I left him with a six pack and a pizza." Chelsea had told her.

Vic and Ben were going to stay just near enough to the mine entrance, to take care of anything that might escape. Not that bullets were guaranteed to be effective, but every round they carried, had been blessed and ritually cleansed.

"Just don't come into the mine after us, that fight is for the sisterhood."

"We won't." Said Vic.

"We'll watch your backs." Said Ben.

Mary had been left at home, being looked after by three wiccans, who were considered a bit too elderly to run through disused mines. In their defence, they'd been more than willing to join the

fight against the abominations, the Devil Dogs. Lizzie had to be eighty, but insisted on being with them.

"I've lived here all my life Carmine Brown..... You're not keeping me away."

There were seven of them and only four out of those seven, were going to enter the Lucky 13 Mine. Cramped tunnels weren't a good place for crowds and they might need to be running pretty fast when they left.

"Fire in a disused coal mine...." Carmine had told them. "We've got to be very careful and be prepared to run if we need to."

Three of the sisterhood outside the mine, ready to fry anything attempting to escape. Carmine was going into the mine with Phili, Chelsea and the unstoppable Lizzie. Phili was good at hurling fireballs and Chelsea..... Well, Chelsea was who they probably invented the term 'Hockey Mom,' to describe.

"There are days when I think my wife could scare off a gut shot grisly." Curtis had once said.

When his wife was well out of earshot of course. Lizzie was all hard core anger and aggression, but she could cast fire spells as well as any of the sisters. All four of them wore backpacks, containing at least two flashlights and most things they might need and a few they probably wouldn't. Carmine admitted to being a little OCD, when it came to what she considered 'essentials.' Strangely,

considering they were about to enter a disused coal mine, they each carried a large flaming torch. As Carmine had pointed out, during the meeting to finalise their plan;

"These things are animals and most animals are scared of fire."

So the torches might help, or they might not. Like so much of their plan, it was all down to luck and a little faith. There was no plan or map of the old Lucky 13 Mine. In those days coal mines tended to grow to follow the coal seams. Amazingly Lizzie knew a woman even older than herself, who had described the mine with just one main entrance, which led down to three separate coal faces. It seemed Lucky 13 hadn't been much of a mine, but their coal was cheap.

"You mentioned a main entrance. Were there other entrances?" Carmine had asked her.

"All over dear, those old holes in the ground had a habit of collapsing. Sometimes they'd just leave the hole to the outside, especially if it made the air a bit sweeter. I never remember another entrance you'd trust, but the Lucky 13 had a lot of airshafts."

The old lady had laughed at her own joke, as she described a death trap of a mine. No proper safety inspections, pit props made of any old timber that came to hand. The mine finally closed after a gas explosion had killed five, including a young boy.

"I thought they went broke?" Lizzie had asked her friend.

"Oh no dear.... No one would dig the coal, after the explosion of nineteen thirty two."

Carmine stood, flaming torch in hand, wondering if it was madness to willingly enter such a place.

"Are you all ready?" She asked.

"I've been ready for something like this, since I was fourteen." Said Chelsea.

Nodding heads, all ready to go. They'd been through the plan so many times, that it had begun to lose meaning. Like a word repeated far too many times. It was now or never, though Carmine wasn't seriously thinking of calling it off.

"Follow me and look out for the McCready kid, he might be down there."

The passage inside the entrance was an anti-climax. No pack of ravening Devil Dogs, no half eaten remains, not even an unpleasant odour. It just looked neglected for decades and there was the ever present smell of coal. Sometimes her torch found crystals within the rocks, causing them to sparkle.

"It's not what I imagined." Said Phili.

"If it wasn't so dangerous, it'd be a nice place to visit." Said Carmine.

No elevators or mechanical winches, the old local mine had relied purely on men with strong backs. The way to the active coal face was down, always down, along passages with deceptively gentle gradients. After half an hour of walking, they were deep below the surface.

"Look, over there on the left..... Looks like a half-eaten deer." Said Lizzie.

It was and it was there first indication of anything nasty lurking in the Lucky 13. Half a deer with a crushed head, both its rear legs bitten down to the bone.

"They're smart." Said Phili. "Who is going to miss a few deer in West Virginia?"

"Might even be roadkill they've dragged back here."

"There's plenty of that for them to eat." Said Chelsea. "We're number one state for driving cars into wildlife."

No one chuckled, as they examined the deer by torchlight. The head did look as though a truck had driven over it. Were the Devil Dogs intelligent? It was something Carmine hadn't even considered. Steal cattle and people began to look for a culprit. No one gave a damn about roadkill.

"There are a lot of other things that live on roadkill." Said Phili.

"Not this deep..... It's them..... Stay alert and be ready to cast fire spells." Said Carmine.

Ten minutes later, they passed the first signs of the explosion, which had probably caused the mine to be abandoned. Scorched and broken pit props, whole sections of the wall covered in soot, which still had the acrid smell of burning. The passage roof had partially collapsed for about ten yards, but there was still enough space to walk past it.

"This place now feels a lot less pretty and pleasant." Said Phili.

"There's an odour too, reminds me of old Ed's place." Said Chelsea. "He kept about a dozen hounds in a shed out the back."

"I smell it too, now you mention it." Said Carmine. "Not that strong yet, but definitely an odour that shouts dog at you."

There was no warning when it happened, there probably never is for such things. There was a snarling noise, followed by the sound of claws skidding over the rock floor. Something with white fur ran past Carmine, causing her to gasp. She managed to wave her torch over just the right spot. They all had a good look at the creature, before it hissed at them and ran further down the passage. Probably too good a look for the sake of their future sanity.

"Christ! Did you all see that?" Asked Phili. "Did we all see it, or am I going crazy?"

"A dog, definitely a small dog....." Said Lizzie. "That face though..... like a child's....."

"I didn't think they'd have young ones." Said Carmine.

"You should all know that face, I know I do." Said Chelsea. "I looked at it every day on the local TV station and in the paper. That was Liam McCready, or whatever he's become."

"Oh no, yes..... Now you've said it, I can see that face in the paper." Said Phili.

Carmine wanted to give up and run, but knew she couldn't. It all made sense after finding the grub in the bite one of the Devil Dogs had given Curtis. The McCready kid might even have come to the mine of his own free will, once the change had taken him over.

"Was my husband on the way to looking like that... Thing?" Asked Chelsea.

"Perhaps..... But he's cured now." Said Carmine.

"Maybe we can catch Liam and cure him." Said Lizzie.

"No, he's one of them now, there's no reversing that." Said Carmine. "We all saw that thing, it's not the McCready boy anymore.... Just a monster using his face. It needs to be destroyed, with the others."

"I'm not sure if I could kill it." Said Phili. "That face....."

"I understand Phili, I really do, but it will grow and infect others." Said Carmine. "Just catch it if you can and I'll kill it."

"I don't mind killing the fucker." Said Chelsea.

They kept seeing it, as though the foul creature was trying to upset them. The face of Liam McCready with the snout of a dog in the centre of his face. There was nothing human or childlike about the animal snarls it made, or the scratching of its claws across the floor. At one wider section of the passage, Carmine let fly with a ball of flame. The beast was quick and her fire missed, but came close enough to make it yelp and run off.

"I hope it stays gone." Said Phili.

"It kept reminding me, that we might well have been hunting my Curtis...." Said Chelsea. "If he hadn't been cured."

"I singed it....I can smell burnt fur." Aid Carmine.

"I still don't think I could kill it." Said Lizzie. "That poor boy's face on..... That monster."

Carmine decided not to argue anymore. When it came to it, she'd destroy the monster that had been the McCready's youngest. Hopefully it would be with the other abominations, so she could destroy them all together. Carmine's main worry was fatigue. After casting a dozen spells, she was fit for nothing, often collapsing to the ground. The others were there though, to carry on if she fell.

"We're there, the place where one passage breaks into three." She said. "The smell of dog could be coming from any of the tunnels leading to coal seams. We'll need to search them one at a time."

"We could cover more ground by splitting up." Said Lizzie. "Be quicker too."

"No, I've seen lots of movies." Said Phili. "Splitting up always gets people killed."

"That's the movies honey." Said Lizzie. "This is real life."

A group chuckle, which they badly needed.

"None of us have any urgent meetings to attend." Said Carmine. "We'll stay together and search each coal face, carefully."

"We might not need to." Said Chelsea.

There was a large puddle at the entrance to each side a tunnel, a dip in the floor, where the constant trickle of water from above, had left about an inch of water. Mud too and it was the mud Chelsea was examining.

"Just a few scuff marks in the mud of passage one and passage two, but look at three and it's full of claw print, or paw prints, or whatever you want to call them."

"You're right, I could almost kiss you." Said Phili. "If you weren't so covered in mud."

"Just one passage to explore." Said Carmine. "Come on, let's get this done."

It was getting wetter as they went deeper and the smell of coal seemed to be losing to another stronger odour. Devil Dog odour, probably from quite a few of the creatures.

"There..... Christ.... It's huge." Said Lizzie.

Grubby white fur, far dirtier than the thing that had once been Liam McCready. The body of a dog, at least six feet long, stood far too high on four legs. No real dog had ever stood that high off the ground. Claws on the end of each leg and a dog like snout, coming out of a human face. Carmine had worried about meeting more people she recognised, from posters of the missing, or the TV news. The man's face on the first dog was unknown to her, as was the face on the female, who followed the male.

"More of them....There must be six or seven." Said Phili.

It ran out in front of them, as if goading them. The small Devil Dog, with the face of Liam McCready. It ran out and barked at them, with a bark that sounded like a threat and an insult. There was a boom, loud enough to make her ears ring and the creature was blown apart.

Carmine looked at the others and Chelsea had been hiding a shot gun somewhere, one with the barrels shortened. She'd just fired both barrels at the Devil Dog with the face of Liam. Carmine wanted to shout at Chelsea tell her that was why she'd told them not to bring guns. No point in shouting, they'd all be deaf for several minutes. The boom of such a weapon in such a confined place. Lizzie was holding her ears and screaming, though Carmine heard nothing but a hum in her ears.

It was pulling itself back together. Guns weren't only deafening and likely to cause a cave in, they were also useless. She watched, as the creature seemed to suck back the soft tissues blown out by the shot gun blast. Blood, brain matter, viscera... All being pulled into itself, bringing it back to life. No, that couldn't be allowed to happen.

'Fire.'

In her mind she imagined fire, a ball of it, hotter and brighter than the sun. When she was happy the idea was capable of becoming a reality, she released the ball of white hot flame. Her will became reality, the thought a spell, the spell a weapon. The Devil Dog was engulfed in fire. There was no coming back from that, nothing can be reborn once it was nothing but dry ash.

"Oh, so many." She muttered.

Through from the other passage they were coming, a dozen of the White Things, the Devil Dogs of Brewster's Hollow. The entrance acted as a barrier, forcing them to enter one at a time. As the largest lunged at her, Carmine pictured fire again and pointed with her left hand.

"No honey, never point or hold your hands out, ever."

She could hear Mary Lavery telling her off, but sometimes pointing seemed to help. Her left hand became a flame thrower, covering the monster's left side, in sheets of fire. It yelled and ran, but didn't die. Fur aflame, it went for the others and there was the boom of Chelsea's shotgun yet again. No use shouting that the gun was useless, they'd all be deaf again. Carmine felt as though her ears had to be bleeding, the pain was so severe. The gun might not be completely useless though. The beast would take time to rebuild itself, giving the others a chance to use fire.

"No you don't."

Her voice sounded muffled, even in her own head. A large creature with a female face, was coming at her, perhaps the mate of the male she'd just set alight. No time to use a spell, as the monster knocked her over, scratching her face with its claws. No bite though, which was a relief. She might have been on her back, with three hundred pounds of Devil Dog standing over her, but she hadn't been bitten. Her torch was still in her right hand, still burning brightly.

"Fuck off !"

Carmine rammed the torch in its face, causing it to shriek and snarl. She then ran the torch over its body fur, turning it into a mass of flames. There was light now too, as everything seemed to be burning. Devil Dogs, pit props, some of the coal left in heaps in the thirties...It was all now alight and filling the passage with heat, light and quite a bit of smoke. Carmine got to her feet and noticed that there wasn't an inexhaustible supply of Devil Dogs. There still seemed to be about ten or twelve of them, still jostling to get into the passage. She heard Phili scream out in pain, but had no idea why.

"No more, enough is enough !" She yelled.

There was a lot about elementals in the old books, especially fire elementals. They were treated as dumb brutes, summoned and then discarded, once they'd served their purpose. Carmine had read

rarer works though, ones which hinted at fire elementals, Ifrits who were almost divine, almost as blessed as the angels. She'd toyed with the idea of summoning one and sealing it within a circle, capturing it until it gave up its secrets. Now she was desperate, there just weren't enough of them to kill another dozen Devil Dogs. She did the unthinkable, summoning a fire elemental, without protecting herself or her friends, from its deadly heat.

"Creature of flame, answer my summons."

She saw it in her mind and once again the thought became a spell and the spell became reality. In answer to her will alone, the creature of fire, appeared right in the centre of the Devil Dog pack. Carmine almost felt sorry for the abominations, as the creature of flame touched them, bringing death by fire with every touch.

"Carmine, over here." She heard, though her ears still stung.

She collapsed, fatigued from calling up whatever was causing the Devil Dogs to scream and die. As she lay there, waiting for enough strength to move, the creature of flame walked up to her. It looked like a man, with eyes as dark as pitch. There was a mouth too, in amongst the flames, which covered it from head to toe.

"Thank you." She said.

Was the answering smile just imagination? The elemental, if that was what it was, walked towards the creature still fighting her friends. The large male Devil Dog was burned, shot with two loads of buckshot and yet it was still on its feet. Phili was on the ground, leaving just Lizzie and Chelsea to fight the monster. The thing she'd called into being merely touched the beast, the slightest brush with one of its hands of fire. The Devil Dog screamed, as its body was turned to dry grey ash.

"Call it off now Carmine." Yelled Chelsea. "The heat....."

"Send it back." Said Lizzie.

Carmine didn't know if she could, even if she'd wanted to. She lay on the ground, feeling some energy retuning. At that moment, she didn't want the elemental to leave, it still had work to do. There'd be other White Things deeper down the mine, other evil Devil Dogs. Chelsea was fiddling with the shotgun, probably reloading the damn thing. Carmine rolled over and came up onto her knees.

"Fire that gun again and I'll make you eat it!" She yelled.

It isn't every day you see a witch summon a creature of fire. Chelsea dropped the shotgun and looked terrified. Carmine concentrated, feeling some kind of connection with whatever she'd summoned. No words, just a thought in her mind. The creature walked past her again and entered the narrow passage, which led deeper into the Lucky 13 Mine. Almost immediately, there was the sound of dogs screaming and the smell of burning flesh.

"We need to leave." Said Carmine. "The creature of flame will create an inferno."

"What did you summon?" Asked Lizzie.

"An elemental, if it is what I called up..... I'm not really sure. What happened to Phili?"

"The big one rubbed up against her when its fur was alight." Said Chelsea. "It doesn't look good."

It didn't, Phili's jacket had been burnt away and the blouse underneath it. Her left arm looked like bacon, left in the pan to go extra crispy. Her best friend wasn't screaming though, which was surprising.

"Did you give her something?"

"Three strong pain killers." Said Lizzie.

"Good, but no more.... She has to walk out of here under her own steam."

It felt so cruel, dragging poor Phili up off the ground, forcing her to walk.

"It hurts Carmine, leave me alone.... So painful."

"Some pain is better than being dead Phili. Lean on me and keep walking, ok?"

"I'll try. Did we win Carm, did we get them all?"

"I believe we did."

Everything seemed to be burning and it was an hour's long hard trudge up to the surface. There was even the occasional vibration, as pockets of deep gas were ignited by the elemental. It was a struggle to breathe the hot acrid air, but eventually eager hands were there to help them. Even Curtis and Andy, who had decided to see if their help was needed.

"Crap Carmine, it looks like half of West Virginia is alight." Said Curtis.

"She summoned something, a creature of flame." Said Chelsea.

"What did you summon?" Asked Vic.

"I'm so tired and people will come." She replied. "We need to leave here."

Carmine had a vague recollection later, of looking at a tower of yellow flames, as it rose high into the sky above the mine. Flames rising from all the airshafts too, making it look as though all of Brewster's Hollow was on fire. Fatigue caused her to leave the others to bandage Phili's arm and get her onto the back seat of Carmine's car. She could be healed, anything could be healed, but not that night. Carmine was just too tired.

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She woke in the passenger seat of their car, held upright by the seatbelt. Vic was driving, with Phili lying on the back seat, probably knocked out by pain killers. They were the last car in their small convoy, climbing out of the hollow on the old road. As she looked over to see if Phili was alright, she saw the flames, still rising out of the old mine.

"They'll probably leave it burn itself out." Said Vic. "It's not as if it's a danger to anyone, right out here."

"I'll heal Phili, but not tonight... Too tired. Tomorrow I'll call together the strongest of the sisters and heal her arm. What happened to her car?"

"Curtis is driving it."

"Good, she can stay at our place for a while."

"Lizzie was talking about you summoning up a fire demon." Said Vic.

"An elemental, though to be honest, it might have been something else."

"What do you mean?"

What did she mean? In her mind it had all been too easy, as if the creature had been waiting, just needing her permission to appear in our world.

"There are books which mention divine beings, created from fire." She said.

"Wow.... You think you summoned one of those?"

"Maybe....I am certain that it killed every Devil Dog in the old Lucky 13."

She was falling into a deep sleep, when she heard Vic ask about the McCready boy. That had been awful, but he had to be destroyed, along with all the others.

"I'll tell you everything in the morning.... So tired.... We're now proper witches though."

"I'm so sorry Carm.... I never meant that how it sounded."

"I know, of course you didn't. It was true though, we were just a coffee morning group, which dabbled in a few minor spells. Now though, The Wiccan Sisters of Walker's Creek are ready for anything. I must sleep.....So tired."

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~The End~

**The next Carmine Brown adventure will be for Halloween 2018**