

Mistress of the Blind Dead

By B. R. Flynn

Prologue, "Paths That Cross"

1) "A Lonely Road"

Travel far enough down the tree-lined back roads of Rhode Island, and you can find anything. That, at least, was what Amy Aaronson thought as her car struggled down one such road. She had already seen a woman leading a cadre of eerie children and, a little after that, a man with no arms jogging.

It was night and sweltering. The car's air conditioner wasn't working and beads of sweat ran down Amy's body. She should have fixed it ages ago but she didn't expect it to be so hot and humid. It wasn't supposed to be so hot in this part of the country, was it? Amy wasn't from the area.

The car itself was a '76 Chevy, so it was already several years old and it had more miles on it than was probably healthy. And it was certainly getting a workout now, plunging down the little one-lane road that was no more than a trail, really. The woods surrounded her, seemed to engulf her and the car. It was probably just night thoughts but, to Amy, it seemed as if the woods wanted to eat her, wanted to crunch down on her body and gulp down her corpse. Then there was the smell of the ocean; a smell

Amy normally liked but around here, it had a secret, unpleasant air. She couldn't see the ocean, not yet, but she could certainly smell it. It was close.

She had to be lost. The gas station attendant had given her directions but it wasn't looking good. There should have been a turnoff at least a mile back. Amy grasped out for the map the attendant had drawn. It was on the passenger seat somewhere but she couldn't quite grasp it. She looked down and saw it, grabbed it. When she looked back at the road she slammed on the brakes.

Someone was standing in the road. Someone not quite right.

In the harsh glare of the Chevy's headlights, the figure was bathed in a somehow sickly yellow. Dressed in black, elaborate and baroque, like something out of a carnival. A top hat adorned her head. Amy squinted. Yes, it was a woman. And where were her eyebrows? Yes, they were gone, shaved off. And that look in the stranger's eye. Yes, there was something wrong here.

Amy honked her horn but the figure wouldn't budge. She couldn't go around, there was no room on the road. She had mounted a small bridge and the road just dropped away into a stream on both sides. The only options were going forward or back and she couldn't image backing up for miles down this winding, lonely wood road. She honked the horn again, knowing it would do no good. Finally, she rolled down her window.

"Would you get out of the way," she asked, adding after a moment, "please?"

The stranger approached. She was certainly strange, clad all in black, her skin white like porcelain. Amy got an impression of velvet. The strange woman wore an elaborate black suit with tails. She approached the car, still not moving to one side or the other, only straight ahead.

"Evening," the woman said.

Her voice was old, somehow, Amy thought. Not old in that she sounded like an old woman, not at all; indeed, she looked quite young, no older than 25 or 26. No, it was the inflection in her voice. She seemed wise beyond her years.

"Yeah, good evening," Amy said. "Could you please move so that I can be on my way?"

"Beautiful night," the woman said.

Amy tried to keep her voice calm. Cool and collected. "I suppose so. I'd enjoy it more if I could get to my friend's place and sit back with a drink or three. Don't you think?"

"I, myself, do not drink."

"Your loss."

The stranger looked into the air wistfully. "Really, though, don't you think it's beautiful? The night, the stars? 'Specially out here in the woods? The smell of the ocean. I love it out here."

Amy wanted this woman to be gone. Right now. She nodded a little too fast. "I'm sure you do. Look,

it's great talking to you, really, but I have to go. It's late as it is."

By now, the strange woman was right beside the car, her painted death mask face peering into the vehicle. Amy didn't like it, not one bit. The strange woman took off the black top hat she was wearing, revealing a head that was shaved bald, eyebrows and all. Amy was shocked but had to admit that it was quite becoming on the strange woman. Though it was a little eerie at the same time.

"Oh, it's late," the strange woman said. "You're right about that." She glanced around the interior of the car, took it in, shook her head. "I don't like cars."

Amy sighed and contemplated whether it was a good idea to just drive away right now. Would the woman hit her head on the window pane? More importantly, would Amy care if she did?

"You're very pretty," the strange woman said.

"Uh," Amy managed. "Okay."

A wicked smile from the stranger. "Quite attractive, actually."

Amy made an embarrassed noise. "I... How am I supposed to respond to that, really?"

The strange woman shrugged, looked away. Amy caught movement out of the corner of her eye and looked towards the front of the car just in time to see something disappear into the darkness, something that had just moved across the eerie yellow beams of the headlights.

"Someone out here with you?" Amy asked.

"Well, I did say that it was a very nice night," the strange woman said. "It isn't far out of the realm of possibility that someone else would be out enjoying it, is it?"

"So you're alone."

"I didn't say that."

Amy frowned. "You haven't said much of anything, other than how nice a night it is."

The strange woman smiled again. "You're right. I've been unnecessarily reticent. What would you like to know?"

"When you're going to let me get on my way," Amy said.

"Soon enough."

"Okay. How 'bout your name?"

Amy had some vague idea of reporting this strange woman to the police at some point. Maybe she could call them from her friend's place. So she should find out what she could about her.

"My name?" the strange woman said. "Well, I'm Papa."

"Papa?" Amy said. "What kind of name is that?"

"It's my kind of name. You know, you really are very pretty."

"You mentioned that," Amy said. "More than once. I suppose you'll be wanting my name now."

Matters of courtesy and all that."

Papa shot Amy a curious look. "Oh, I already know you're name."

"What?" Amy said.

Papa leaned further into the open window. "I already know your name. It's Amy. Amy Aaronson. Am I right?"

Amy was stunned. She stared, open-mouthed, at Papa a good ten seconds. Silence reigned.

"What are you, some kind of mind reader?" she finally asked.

"Something like that," Papa said.

Amy was starting to get very scared. She put the car into gear.

"I'm leaving," she said.

"So, so pretty," Papa said. "Of course, you'd be prettier with no eyes."

Amy put her foot on the gas but it was too late.

Standing in front of the car illuminated by the sickly yellow of the headlights were at least a dozen people. Amy looked right and saw that there were more people right next to the window. They had mounted the small bridge. She looked back at Papa.

The strange woman stood back from the driver's side door, popped the top hat back onto her head and, at the same time, made a cute little gesture with her free hand. Suddenly, the door lock popped up all by itself and the door opened of its own accord. Amy began to scream as she saw that there were people standing behind Papa as well.

People with no eyes.

2) "The Sea Hag"

Foster was old but strong. He was short but sturdy. His ball cap was set firmly on his head, covering his grey hair. He had started to go grey in his later thirties and now - in his mid-fifties - the old man look was complete. Nothing he could do about it.

He patrolled the lonely, empty dock. No ships tonight. Like most nights these days, he mused. Nobody used this old, cursed dock anymore.

But that was okay. Foster liked the silence. Liked the solitude.

It suited him. He lived alone, a lifelong bachelor. Oh, sure, he would have dates here and there. The last one was a rather nice woman around his age. But usually these encounters would just be "one and done" affairs. A few drinks, fumbling, not-that-satisfying sex in either his place or hers, and done. No great shakes, in other words.

And that was okay, too. It was fine by Foster.

He smiled. Fine by Foster. Sounded like the title of a book. Something written by one of those best-selling writers that littered the paperback rack at a supermarket. A slice-of-life kind of thing.

He laughed as he imagined what one of those by-the-numbers authors would do with a life like his. Probably something shallow but just profound-looking enough to fool the rubes who bought those kind of books.

Foster? His tastes tended towards the weird. The esoteric. He liked books about Roswell, Bigfoot, monsters.

And ghosts.

Ghosts, especially. He loved pouring over old true ghost stories in the early hours of the morning, after he got off his shift. A little chiller before bed.

He usually went to bed around dawn, when the sun was peaking over the ocean. He wasn't sure if he would have been able to sleep in the dark. Not after his usual choice of reading material.

But that's where his job came in. He worked the graveyard shift on this dock. Dock-master of a dock like this was no great shake, either, but it passed the time.

And there was the lighthouse, of course.

Foster looked up from the end of the dock. The old lighthouse looked down on him from on high. It was ancient and had been out of use for the better part of a century now. A raised, rock path led from the end of the dock to the lighthouse. When a large storm came swooping in from the sea, that rock path was often submerged under the waves, cutting off the lighthouse entirely.

It was haunted, of course. Foster thought that any building that was sufficiently old was haunted. Had to be. After such a long life, those old places must have seen enough death and misery to weave ghosts whole cloth.

But this ghost...

In fact, Foster wasn't sure that the Sea Hag even was a ghost, in the strictest sense. She behaved like a ghost. Most of the time. But Foster had heard tales that she had touched people - actually touched them! - and ghosts weren't supposed to be able to make physical contact. They were supposed to be incorporeal, weren't they?

Foster shook his head. It gave him goose-flesh just thinking about it. It was thrilling, as well. A real, live - or perhaps undead - ghost right where he worked.

The Sea Hag was supposed to be sickly white but emanating a green light. She was supposed to be dripping wet, as if she had risen out of the ocean to terrify anyone who trespassed on her domain.

Foster had never seen her. But he had heard some strange things. And sometimes he had seen a

green light coming from one of the windows of the lighthouse.

As he looked up at the lighthouse now, he nodded. Yes, mighty peculiar, all right. Something to think about.

He turned to leave but stopped. He stood where he was for a moment, frozen.

There was something out at sea. A ship.

He didn't want to look - seemed filled with dread - but he turned his head towards it all the same. Yes, a ship. An old clipper ship with torn sails. A hazy green in color. It shimmered in his view for a moment before fading away, disappearing.

Foster rubbed his eyes. Was that real? Or was it just his imagination? Too many ghost stories in the morning before bed?

He looked up at the lighthouse once again. There, emanating from one window, was a green light.

Part of him wanted to rush into the lighthouse. Wanted to run up those old stairs and see what it was. Wanted to see the Sea Hag in the flesh, as it were.

But another part of him - an older, more practical part - told him to do no such thing. Told him that it wouldn't be a good idea.

Finally, he nodded again. Yes, not a good idea. If she were real - and Foster believed that she was - then it was best to leave her alone. To not prod or poke something that could whirl about and strike at you.

Best to leave those kind of things undisturbed.

Slowly, he turned around and headed up the dock. He ignored the green light but couldn't keep it from his mind.

He checked his watch. Another five hours on his shift. They were going to go by extra slow tonight. Foster sighed and tried to find something to busy himself.

3) "His Queen"

The two-story colonial was old. It was surrounded on three sides by dense woods. A long, twisting drive led up from the highway to the house.

Rumor had it that the house was built at the end of the 17th century by a woman who was later burned to death as a witch. Most people didn't believe the story. But the man sitting in a car at the end of the drive of the old house wasn't "most people".

He was middle-aged with glasses that seemed too small on his large head. His hair was greasy and unkempt. A toothpick danced between his teeth.

This was the only movement about his person. Every other part of his body was still. Unnaturally so. He was waiting.

His queen would call to him soon. She was his entire life. Nothing that he did - not one single step or movement - was his own. She consumed his every waking moment.

He could see her now, in his mind. Her strange, striking beauty. Her penetrating eyes that seemed too big for her face. Her aristocratic bearing.

She was royalty, to be sure. He knew that she stood next to kings and king-makers. Stood in the shadows and pulled the strings of men whom history would remember, even if they forgot her name.

He had come to this house as a young man, many years ago now. Curious. As if he had been called to it. To her.

She had been waiting for him, of course, all those years ago. Waiting for him in the threshold of the old house wearing a black dress and holding two large, imposing dogs at bay.

Thinking about her now, he wouldn't have made a different choice all those years ago. It was the right thing at the right time. And it was all leading to this.

Something was coming.

Even he, a mere slave, knew this. Something was in the air. It was exciting.

"Come to me."

It was as if she whispered into his ear. As if she were in the backseat of the car, leaning forward and speaking to him.

He nodded and got out of the car. Slowly, he proceeded up the drive to the house. It was a long walk but one that he enjoyed immensely.

Anything for his queen.

4) "The Old Woman"

"Something's coming," the Old Woman said.

She spoke to no one. Lighting up a cigarette, she exited her small house and proceeded onto the porch. It was the middle of the night. The clouds above were obscured by stars.

She sat down in an old plastic chair on the porch that had once been white but was now more of a dirty grey. She sighed as she sat down. She looked about two hundred years old. Her skin was pale and more than wrinkled. She looked like a sea of sand after a dust storm.

"Something's coming, I tell ya."

She enjoyed her cigarette for a moment. The neighborhood she lived in was dead, in more ways than

one. Most of the families that had lived here - happy families, troubled though they were - had left. Those that remained were a fearful lot. Always looking over their shoulders for God knows what.

"Things have changed around here," she said. "Fuck am I talking about? Nothing's changed. 'Cept maybe time. Time's changed. People? People have stayed the same. You've just gotten old, woman. Pretty soon you'll be talking to yourself."

She smoked, watched the neighborhood. She looked up. She wished that she could see the stars up there. That always comforted her. But they were obscured.

"Damn clouds. Storm coming. And not just any storm, mark my words. A big one. Don't mean just rain, thunder, lightning, either. Something bigger. Mark my words. Fuck you, I know I already said that. It's true, isn't it? Damn right, it's true. Been hearing the howl of wolves again. Don't remember when the last time was I heard that. Fuck if I know what that means. Nothing good, I imagine. Well, no matter."

There was a small cooler on the porch near the chair. The Old Woman opened the cooler and produced a can of beer. She popped the tab and took a big gulp of the fowl stuff. It wasn't any good but it was cold and it did the trick. Took her mind off things.

"Something's coming. Yes, sir. I don't like it. But what am I gonna do? Too old, too outta touch."

She shook her head. The cigarette was finished; spent. She tossed it onto the porch, promptly forgetting about it.

"When are you gonna be in my yard, boy? Hmm? When is that gonna happen, I wonder? Soon enough, I expect. Yes, soon e-fucking-nuff."

She finished the beer, as well, and sent it out into the yard. It hit a rock and made a clanging metal sound. She smirked.

"New record, I think. Good for me."

Slowly, she got up from the chair. It took some time. She went inside. Sleep was a pipe-dream but maybe there was something on TV. She had read all the books in the house three times over at this point, so the TV was the only option.

She tried not to think about what was coming. Tried to not think of the horrible battle that lay ahead. Tried not to think about the moment that the boy would come into her yard, crossing the Circle.

It was all coming, of course. It was always coming. She had known for years.

But she didn't have to like it. No, she could hate it with every fiber of her being. But it didn't matter. It would come, all the same.

Well, she wouldn't be leaving this town, no matter what happened. This was her home and she meant to stay here. Until the end.

"To the end of the fucking world," she said.
And closed the door behind her.

Chapter One, "Caleb and the Girl"

Some miles south east of Providence, across the river and along the coast, there is a small city - little more than a large fishing town or small port - called Bolton. The streets in the metropolitan area are wet, enclosed by oppressive, dark buildings. Streets in the outlying areas are also wet, but mostly unpaved. Little houses and the occasional old, crumbling mansion dot the land around the metropolitan area.

In the city, down a dark back alley, on an unnaturally hot September evening in 1982, Caleb Sands was a king. Or, at least, he felt like one. Sitting in his car, a '68 Chrysler, leaning back with his eyes closed, he was experiencing a top notch blowjob.

Shelly, one of his girls, was quite an artist with a cock and she was currently putting that artistry to work on Caleb. Shelly wasn't much to look at, it must be said. She was emaciated with greasy black hair, but Caleb kept her in his stable for just this situation. Hell, there were a few regular customers who just wanted a good blowjob and knew to ask for Shelly by name. Now, that's brand management, Caleb thought with a little laugh.

"What's so funny?" Shelly asked, looking up at him.

Caleb didn't bother looking back at her, didn't bother opening his eyes.

"Nothing," he said. "Continue."

She did so. And it wasn't long before it was over. Caleb cried out in pleasure and Shelly dutifully swallowed.

"All right," he said. "You can go. Gettin' on late, time to get to work, I'd say."

"There's this guy near the liquor store round the corner that likes it right around this time," Shelly said. "Suppose I should go, see if he's there."

"Right. But before you go, though," Caleb said, leaned closer to her and grabbed hold of her crotch, hard.

Shelly reacted instantly, wincing in pain, her hands bunching into fists at her sides.

"You're hurting me," she said.

"Shut up." Caleb gripped harder, digging his fingers in. She'd be bruised soon enough. "Toby says that he saw you with that fella from the soda fountain, that colored fellow. You know I don't abide that kinda coupling, right?"

Shelly didn't answer, gripped by pain as she was.

"Right?!" Caleb demanded.

"Right," Shelly managed.

Caleb smiled wide. "Right. So I better not hear anymore 'bout it, now, you got me?"

"I got you." She found it hard to breathe through the pain.

"Okay, then," Caleb said and finally let go of her. "Now get the fuck out of the car and go make me money."

She got out of the car and walked down the alley, not looking back at him. Caleb smiled to himself and leaned back in his seat, looking up at the sky. It was twilight now and he could just see a few stars beginning to twinkle.

He thought of that old rhyme, the one his mother had taught him, the one about the little star that twinkled. For some reason, he couldn't remember all the words. That was such a long time ago.

Putting aside idle thoughts, Caleb returned his attention to his surroundings, the car and the alley it was parked in. He was just in time to catch the girl, watching him at the end of the alleyway, before she disappeared, startled, caught.

"I could set my damn watch by you, girl," he mused to himself.

Tonight was the night to do something about it.

He started the car, put it into gear and stepped on the gas, exiting the alley like a professional stunt driver. He saw the girl, saw her notice him, saw her dart away, running as fast as she could.

Caleb laughed and sped after her. She wasn't clever enough to evade him for long.

He pulled the car alongside her. She was running, a panicked look on her face.

"Where you going, little lady?" he called out when he was close enough.

She didn't answer, of course, and kept running, darting through a largely deserted intersection. Caleb followed with ease. She was heading right where he wanted her to, out of the city, closer to the docks and the warehouses, one of which he owned. Arthur would be there, reliable old Arthur.

He let her stay ahead of him, let her feel secure, let her feel like she was getting away. She was young, which was good, but she wasn't really Caleb's type. Boyish, especially in the simple purple shirt and blue jeans look she had going on. Undeniably cute, though.

Caleb made sure that he stayed close enough to scare her but not close enough as to accidentally run

her down. That would be a shame. He was already thinking about ways of turning her, ways of persuading her to join his little operation, his little stable.

Soon enough, she was where he wanted her to be, in the maze of old, decaying warehouses leading to the docks. Playtime was over. Caleb revved the car, got himself dangerously close to the girl and braked suddenly, swinging the door open and jumping out. He caught her deftly out of the air as she tried to get away, spooning with her, his hands wrapped around her from behind.

Damn, she was strong! Caleb worked overtime to keep hold of her, but keep hold of her he did. Just as he was sure she was subdued, she swung her head backwards into his nose. Caleb yelped in pain and let go of the girl.

She darted away but Caleb soon regained his composure and ran after her. Catching up with her, he pushed her down and kicked her in the stomach.

He had to give the girl credit. Most girls of her size and age would have vomited when kicked in the stomach but this girl just cried out in pain and curled up into a fetal position.

Careful to watch for any sudden movements, Caleb scooped her up into his arms and carried her to the car. He dumped her unceremoniously into the passenger seat and got into the driver's side.

Caleb's warehouse was not the most decayed and decrepit of the lot but it was close. The smell of mold was heavy and toxic. Everything seemed to be water damaged and covered in some kind of vaguely green slime. It was a horrid place.

And Arthur Samms looked completely at home there.

He was fifty with greyish hair that was dull and flat, a marked contrast to the stylish sliver that some men gained in their later years. He was thin, almost gaunt, with hollow cheeks and a deeply lined face. His eyes matched his hair. He wore drab green coveralls and sturdy black boots.

Caleb admired the man as Arthur looked the girl over. Caleb looked up to him and saw him as, if not a father figure, than as a mentor. The man had taught him everything he knew about the business.

And about hurting people.

They had tied the girl to an old but strong wooden chair and placed her at a little card table. A utility shelf adorned the wall behind her. Sitting on the shelf was a little grey radio which was currently belting out "Strutter" by Kiss.

Arthur slapped the girl, hard across the face.

"Wake up!" he said.

Caleb laughed as the girl came to consciousness. She looked up at them, fear in her eyes. Caleb was once again struck by her strange looks. She was almost other-worldly. She looked sixteen, maybe

seventeen, and had orange red hair, curly and short. She had lots of freckles. Her green eyes were penetrating. She wore a red sweatband on her left wrist. There was also something indefinable about her, some kind of animal magnetism.

"Hey!" Arthur said. "Can you hear me?"

The girl nodded.

"Understand me?" Arthur said.

The girl nodded again.

"Answer me properly, bitch," Arthur said.

"Yes," the girl said, "I understand you."

"You sure about that?" Arthur said.

"Yes."

Arthur looked satisfied. "Good. Because we're talking about some serious fucking business here. We're not playing around. Caleb?"

That was his cue and Caleb grabbed it, taking the lead. He put both hands on the little card table.

"I think you know why you're here," he said.

"No," the girl said.

Caleb shook his head. "Don't lie. Remember what Arthur here said. This isn't a game. You know."

"I don't," the girl said.

Caleb sighed and shot a look at Arthur. Arthur nodded and Caleb punched the girl in the nose. She reacted, her head reeling back, struggling to breathe, crying out in pain.

"That's you and I even, then," Caleb said, tapping his own nose.

The girl had recovered, looking him in the eye now. Caleb was slightly taken aback. The girl's nose wasn't bleeding. It wasn't even red. The only indication that anything had happened was that her big, penetrating eyes were filled with silent, defiant tears.

Caleb shook it off. Some people were just built differently than others. Just because every other girl that he had hit in the nose had reacted in one way, didn't mean all of them would. Nor would all of them vomit when he kicked them in the stomach...

"You're following me," Caleb said, getting back on track. "That's why you're here."

"Why are you following him?" Arthur said.

Caleb was a little annoyed. He was supposed to have the lead now, he was supposed to be in charge. Arthur must have sensed that little moment of weakness in Caleb, that moment when she looked up at him after he punched her. Was there something of the animal in her? Something of the beast?

The girl still hadn't answered either of their questions. She remained quiet, killing them with her

eyes. On the radio, the song had changed. The Kinks' "You Really Got Me" rocked the dingy warehouse.

"I'm going to get it out of you," Caleb said. "Right?"

The girl didn't answer.

Caleb shook his head. "Something about you. Don't know what it is. I mean, you cute. I'm sure you've been told that many times, but it's true. But there's something... I don't know, something else."

He reached out and touched her cheek. She didn't move, her eyes fixed on his.

Caleb moved his hand to touch her lips. The very second his thumb touched them, she bit him. Just opened her mouth like a shot and clamped down on it like a bear trap. Caleb screamed and tried to pull his hand away but it wasn't working. She still had a hold of him.

"Fuck!" he screamed. "Jesus fucking Christ, get this bitch off me!"

Blood sprayed from Caleb's thumb and onto the girl's face and splattered onto the card table. Her eyes never left his.

Arthur darted around the card table and grabbed a fistful of the girl's curly hair, pulled her head back. All at once, Caleb was free and he cradled his injured hand, screaming in pain.

Arthur punched the girl four times in the face until she slumped over the card table, unconscious. He attended to Caleb, bandaging his thumb. A rather large chunk of it was now gone.

"What the fuck was that?" Caleb said when he could finally talk again.

Arthur shrugged. "There's some weird shit out there."

"That's it?" Caleb said. "That's all you have to say? Weird shit? That's one fucking insane girl, man! I haven't seen anything like that before."

Arthur shrugged again.

"All right," Caleb said. "I guess that's all you're gonna say. Fine. What are we going to do now? She's out. We won't be able to find out anything else until she..."

He trailed off.

"What?" Arthur said.

Caleb gestured at the card table and the girl. Arthur turned around to see what Caleb had already noticed: that the girl was most definitely not unconscious. She was looking at them. Or, to be more precise, she was looking at Caleb. And then she winked and spit something out onto the little card table.

It was a rather large chunk of Caleb's thumb.

"You fucking bitch," Caleb said and started towards her.

Arthur stopped him.

"I think I better take over from here," he said.

Caleb stared at the older man, stunned. Pissed. But, he deferred to Arthur's judgment and finally nodded.

Arthur nodded back and walked past the card table to the shelf on the wall behind it. He fiddled with something on the bottom shelf. All the while, the girl never looked at him, only stared at Caleb.

Finished with what he was doing, Arthur stood up and slammed something down on the card table. The table rattled and struggled with the weight of the object but ultimately held.

The object was an old, rusted tool box.

"You know," Arthur said, circling around the card table until he was facing the girl, "I didn't have a very good upbringing. I guess you could say that I had a bad childhood. Horrible, even. My father, well, let's say he didn't abide wild children. My brother and I were wild, so you can see the problem. So, he kept this out in the wood shed."

He patted the tool box, which rattled and creaked.

"I had a few trips to the wood shed, myself," Arthur continued, "but it was my brother who spent many a day in there. And, do you know, one day he pissed off our old man so much that when he finally came out of that wood shed, he was shaking and his hands were tucked under his armpits. When I finally got him to show me his hands, I was shocked. His fingernails were gone. My father had pulled them right off."

Arthur opened the tool box and pulled a pair of pliers out of it. He put them on the card table in front of the girl. Amazingly, the girl was still looking past Arthur at Caleb. She didn't seem interested in what was going on in front of her.

"Me?" Arthur continued. "I usually got the hammer." He pulled a hammer out of the tool box and put it next to the pair of pliers. "I mean, he didn't hit me in the head or go to work on my knees. No, he would usually just give me one good strike on one of my toes. You ever stub your toes? Smarts. Can't walk right for days."

The girl still ignored him. Her eyes were fixed on Caleb.

"Damn it, you look me!" Arthur said.

He grabbed the hammer off the card table and held it close to the girl's head. Just an inch away from her left eye.

"Now I am not like my father," he said. "I am much, much worse. I will have no problem putting this fucking hammer through your head, girl. Now why were you following Caleb here?"

Finally, the girl looked at him.

"Because he's a bad man," she said.

There was silence for almost a full thirty seconds. Then Arthur starting laughing. A moment later, Caleb joined him. Finally, the girl also started to laugh. Her laugh was wild, almost mad.

"Well," Arthur said through the laughter, "you are well-informed, my dear, he is a bad man. The best bad man I know, in fact. But, hey, everybody's got to make a living."

All at once, the girl stopped laughing.

"Ask him about Betty," she said.

"What?" Arthur said. He also stopped laughing.

"Betty," the girl repeated.

"What?" Caleb said, the last one to stop laughing.

"She's saying some shit about a girl named Betty," Arthur said. "Isn't there a Betty in your employ?"

The girl looked back at Caleb, her big eyes still striking but now terrifying as well.

"There was a Betty, that's right," Caleb said. "But she's not working for me anymore."

"What the hell, Caleb," Arthur said, "you run those whores into the ground before letting them go. How did she get away so easy?"

"She didn't," the girl said.

"You shut up," Caleb said.

"What happened to her, Caleb?" Arthur asked.

"She got out of line. Look, I had to deal with her."

Arthur made a little turn. His shoes scraped across the dirty floor, kicking up dust. "Ah, man, you know you can't do that sort of shit. Fear works but if you take it too far, they'll get too scared and run to the cops. What the fuck, Caleb?"

Caleb was annoyed. He looked up to Arthur and had seen the older man do horrible things. And now this? *This*, coming from the man? "I made sure no one knew, all right? Dumped her out of town, buried her. How did this bitch know? How the fuck did she know?!"

They both looked at the girl. She smiled. "I could smell her."

"Smell her?" Caleb asked.

"I dug her up," the girl said. "And I could smell you all over her."

She started laughing again, a big, cynical laugh, head thrown back, mouth wide open. Caleb couldn't take any more and ran at her. He grabbed the hammer out of Arthur's hand and slammed it down on the girl's head once, twice, three times. The girl was silent.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Arthur said and grabbed the hammer back from Caleb. "We needed this girl. We needed to find out what's going on here."

"You still have her."

Both men turned in horror towards the girl, whose head was still down turned, still unmoving.

"But you won't have her for long," the girl said and looked up at them.

Her eyes! Her eyes were a deep, unnatural green, much more vibrant than they were previously. The red sweatband on her left wrist had slipped up her arm at some point during the whole bad business and Caleb could see a burn mark on her inner wrist. It looked like a pentagram.

"I can smell your fear," the girl said.

A fine layer of hair sprouted on her face and her teeth grew, sharpened. She growled and stood up, the old, sturdy wooden chair breaking apart under her strength. Her hands clamped down on the little card table and Caleb saw that they were also hairy and that her nails were long and sharp. The girl threw the table out of the way and across the room where it shattered against a wall.

Her face shifted. A short snout instead of a nose. The hair now covering her whole body was the same shade of orange red as her hair.

She swiped at Arthur's face. He screamed and spun around, blood splashing Caleb's face. Caleb wiped the blood out of his eyes and saw that Arthur's right eye was missing, torn out of its socket by the werewolf. Claw marks extended from the socket to his hairline. He stood for a moment before collapsing to the floor in a heap.

The werewolf advanced slowly on Caleb. It was eerie. She was still humanoid but the wolf side was out. Her legs were bent like a wolf and her feet had burst out of her shoes to become paws. She was a monster. Like an animal but also beautiful. A hunter.

Caleb backed away, dropping onto his ass. He fumbled around on the ground for the toolbox, which had fallen to the ground not far from him.

The werewolf dropped to all four limbs and crawled towards him. Caleb gave up the search for a weapon and got up and ran.

The werewolf bounded after him. She was much faster than he was and caught up with him in less than two seconds.

Caleb stopped dead in his tracks. She had him by the crotch, her claws digging in.

"No, please," he pleaded, tears welling up in his eyes. "Oh, God, please, no."

The werewolf growled and tore away his penis and balls in one gesture. She tossed them against a wall, where they splatted and tumbled to the ground.

Caleb was in too much pain to scream. He dropped to the ground, his own blood spreading out around him.

The werewolf stood over him and howled in triumph. She leaned close to him, those vibrant green eyes staring deep into him.

When she spoke, her voice was still recognizable as the girl's voice but it was deeper. Stronger. "I'll make sure they find your body, Caleb. That's more than you did for Betty. I'll make sure they find you, dickless and dead."

She thrust a clawed hand into his stomach, breaking the skin and grabbing hold of a tangle of intestines. She pulled out a handful of bloody ropes and starting eating them. Caleb died watching the She Wolf eating his own guts.

To Be Continued...

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