

MISTRESS OF THE BLIND DEAD

BY B. R. FLYNN

Chapter Two, "The She Wolf"

The She Wolf bounded out of the warehouse, knocking crates and debris aside as she exited the building. By now, it was the dead of night and there were almost no dock workers about. But that didn't mean the place was entirely empty. She narrowly avoided being seen by a group of tough-looking youths crowded around a barrel fire.

She hesitated, looked back at the warehouse before bounding away, further down the docks. Eventually, the docks turned to beach, and the sound of industry died away.

And she was able to calm down.

She transformed back into a girl. Her jeans were ripped to shreds, like they always were when she changed. She figured that she must own more pairs than anyone in Rhode Island. Or maybe the entire Northeast. She looked out at the sea for several minutes, staring at the water, bathed in moonlight from the West. Normally, she would have dismembered her victims' corpses and disposed of them as best as she could but they were so terrible that she wanted them to be found. Wanted their deaths to set an example.

Finally, she realized the state she was in, covered in blood and bits of intestine. Her hair was sticky with the stuff. Slowly, deliberately, she walked into the ocean. It may have been unseasonably hot and humid for Rhode Island but the water was cold, biting. The girl didn't mind. It cleared her head, kept the Beast at bay.

Her name was Camille Stoppard. She may have looked sixteen or seventeen but that wasn't her true age. She had been around for some time. A curse.

It had taken her some years to have any kind of real control over the curse. To assert some kind of dominance. Meditation helped. Water helped. The soft but strong pull of the tide. She looked up at the moon.

Why didn't the cycle of the moon matter? She frowned. It was in all the stories but had never

reflected her own experience. It only happened at night, of course. So the moon was involved in some fashion but it didn't seem to matter if it was full or almost entirely gone. Her emotions seemed to be more of a deciding factor. Even during the day when her emotions were high, she could partially change; teeth, claws, vibrant, supernatural eyes. She shook her head, closed her eyes and let herself be calmed by the water.

She got all the blood off her and walked out of the water. She turned towards home.

These days, home was an old house a little outside of town. It wasn't hers, of course. She had taken it. But as long as she kept the payments up, the water and the heat would be kept on and she could keep living there but it wouldn't last forever. Just like everything.

Except her.

The walk home was lonely. Camille followed a little path from the beach through the woods that led out onto the highway. From there, she walked down the highway to another path that led through a muddy, desolate area – almost a swamp – in which sat her house.

It was a crumbling, old house, not quite a mansion but large. Camille thought that the previous owner, a drug dealer, had inherited it, based on clues she picked up through various mail she had received mentioning property and money. She hadn't tried to get her hands on any of that money, deeming it too dangerous to do so. She got enough money through her job as a waitress and through money taken from the assholes that she got rid of.

As she entered the house into a little foyer, dimly lit by an ancient electric light, she briefly wondered what the police thought of the murders. Did they think they were the work of a serial killer? Or did the animalistic nature of the murders make them think that a wild animal was on the loose? She didn't know.

She stripped off her torn rags as she walked through the house, naked by the time she reached the little room that the former tenant had converted into a washroom. There, she tossed her ruined clothes into the garbage and walked down the hall, stopping at a little side table next to the bathroom. On it was a black radio. She turned it on and walked into the bathroom.

Flicking on the light in the bathroom, leaving the door open, she looked at herself in the mirror and didn't like what she saw. The sickly yellow light of the bathroom was certainly unflattering but there was more. The Beast was always there, even if you couldn't quite see it. Camille ran her fingers through her hair, revealing small patches of hair in her armpits. She was also quite hairy down below and a fine, almost invisible layer covered the bottom half of her legs. Shaving was a lost cause considering how hairy she was on a somewhat regular basis. No, only conventional haircuts made sense at this point.

The feel of the ocean was on her and she felt like a shower. Her blood wasn't up anymore and a nice, long, sensuous shower sounded good. Out in the hall, the song on the radio changed to David Bowie's "Moonage Daydream." Camille smiled.

She turned on the water, let it get hot and stepped inside the shower, pulling the curtain closed behind her. Stepping under the spray was heavenly, almost orgasmic. Camille opened her mouth, let the water cascade over her and forgot about everything for a good twenty minutes.

Snuggling up with a little blanket on an old, comfy couch in the downstairs living room a while later, Camille turned on the TV. It took nearly a minute for the tube to warm up and for the picture to form and what happened to be on the late show pleased her to no end. It was *The Wolf Man*. What were the odds? Camille fell asleep about halfway through the movie. It had been a long day.

She was asleep and so missed the news report on the missing young woman from Virginia. She had been reported missing by a friend of hers who lived in Bolton. Apparently, the young woman was supposed to go to her friend's house to spend a couple nights partying, but had never shown up.

A young woman named Amy Aaronson.

She awoke in the early hours of the morning to the loud, crashing sounds of a storm. She ran to the large windows and pulled the curtains open. The sky was full of dark, brooding clouds illuminated by bright, crackling shafts of lightning. Thunder shook the house and Camille had a feeling that the unseasonably hot weather was over. The storm was bringing Autumn to Bolton.

But there was something else, something that Camille couldn't quite grasp. She could smell it, though. Something in the atmosphere. Something was coming.

Something not good.

Normally, Camille would walk to work since she only lived a little over a mile from the diner where she worked but this morning she decided to drive. It was still raining and the grey storm clouds still hung over the town like a shroud.

The Stonewall Diner was a modest little place on the edge of town, just where the city started to give way to a little suburb and, finally, was overtaken by the woods. It was a nice place, especially for a greasy spoon, and Camille was well liked there.

She pulled into the parking lot around the back of the place, pitching the cigarette she was nursing into a gradually expanding rain puddle and walked towards the building. She stopped, sensing the man before he spoke.

"Hold up there," a voice called.

Camille turned and saw a man walking towards her. He was wearing a sheriff's uniform. He was middle-aged with dark hair that was a little on the long side. A small mustache completed the appearance.

This was the sheriff himself. Camille knew of him but hadn't met him. She searched her memory for a name, came up with Barnes.

"Sheriff Barnes," she said.

The sheriff nodded. He joined her on the small sidewalk to the backdoor of the diner. "Been meaning to catch up with you, little lady. It's Camille, isn't it? Stoppard?"

Camille nodded. "That's right."

Barnes nodded. "Right. Heading into work?"

Camille narrowed her eyebrows. "That's about the size of it."

Barnes cracked his knuckles, shifted his head. There was an audible pop. He looked away, towards the highway, then back at her. "Parents around, Camille?"

Camille cocked her head to one side. "No. I'm on my own."

"Aren't you a little young to be on your own so far from home?"

"How do you know I'm far from home?"

Barnes smiled. "A guess. I got a mind for this kind of stuff. It's instinct. Am I right?"

Camille nodded. "You are. I'm some ways away from my home."

"Then you can imagine my concern. Teenage girl alone in a small town. Working. A girl like that should have some protection."

"I'm not a child. I'm older than I look."

Barnes crossed his arms. "Is that so?"

Camille figured that she was going to be out here a little longer, so she fished a cigarette out of her pocket. She smacked the pack against the back of a hand, offered one to Barnes. He shook his head. She lit up, started to smoke. "Yeah."

"Old enough to smoke?"

"Yeah. Problem?"

Barnes frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Is there some kind of problem, sheriff?" Camille asked. "With me?"

Barnes shook his head. "Nothing specific, we've just been seeing a rise in crime recently. A few deaths. And I worry about someone your age. Especially working late, outside of town. This place is practically in the woods. Who knows what's out there."

"Trying to scare me?"

"Just being practical."

Camille smiled politely. "I have to get to work."

She started to leave but Barnes grabbed her by the arm. Camille looked at the offending hand, then up at the sheriff. "Will you please let go of me?"

Barnes held her gaze for a moment, then let her go. "Look, I checked around town. You're not checked into any of the hotels, you're not rooming at any of the usual places. What's going on with you?"

"I value my privacy. That's what's going on."

"I don't like it."

Camille looked straight through him. Smelled him. She didn't like what she smelled. He smelled rotten, like a pumpkin that had been left on the porch too long, bugs taking roost inside it. "You don't have to. Bye, sheriff."

Barnes chuckled in frustration as Camille pitched the cigarette away, opened the backdoor of the diner and proceeded inside. She could still hear him as the door closed behind her.

Manny was on the grill, a big, bald, middle-aged man. His deep, dark brown skin was beginning to wrinkle, especially around the eyes. He had a smile for Camille as she walked in.

"Hey, pretty lady," he said, "glad to see you weren't washed away by the rain."

"Me, too," Camille said. "Didn't see many cars in the parking lot. Dead?"

Manny nodded sadly. "Dead. People staying in, I expect. People 'round here know what to do when a storm like this sticks around."

"And what's that?" Camille asked.

Manny smirked. "Stay inside with some hot cocoa and lament the fact that Autumn is here and that winter is not far behind."

Camille laughed as she straightened the little hat she wore to complete her uniform.

"Well, then," she said, "let's hope the few customers we do have are good tippers, then. Mamma needs a new pair of shoes."

Manny smiled. Camille was about to head into the dining room when Manny stopped her.

"Hey," he said, "it's my birthday next week."

"Oh," Camille said. "Happy early birthday."

He rubbed his hands together, nervously. "Thank you. We're having a little get together, I wouldn't call it a party, but they'll be a few people over. Dana would love to meet you. She'd heard so much about you."

Camille scratched a temple. "Uh, I don't know if I can make it. My mom and all."

"I understand," Manny said.

Mercifully, he let her go and Camille headed into the dining room, order pad in hand. She had concocted a lie when she first started working at the diner, a nice little ditty about a sick mother that she had to attend to whenever she wasn't working. It helped keep her away from people outside of work and gave her time to follow assholes around and plan their murders; helped let the Beast come out and play when it wanted to.

But this sheriff was going to be a problem. He had checked up on her. He was trying to track her down. The lie about a sick mother would never work on him. She would have to give some serious thought on this matter.

Alice Cooper's "Billion Dollar Babies" was on the jukebox and Camille bobbed her head to the music as she took her very few orders. People liked her. She tended to be a bit glum most of the time but she was cute, looked young and always interacted with the customers. She had been withdrawn and in her own world when she was actually young but had been able to move beyond that, at least a little bit in the years since.

"He's got his eye on you again," Wendy whispered to Camille as she passed by.

Wendy was a fellow waitress, around twenty years old. She was pretty, with long, curly brown hair. Camille looked where Wendy was indicating and there he was.

The Toothpick Man, as they all referred to him, sat at his usual booth in the corner. In her section, of course. Camille sighed and approached him.

"What can I get you this morning?" she asked in the nicest way possible.

The Toothpick Man didn't answer for a moment. As always, he twirled a toothpick around his mouth and stared at her. He was around forty-five. He wore black rimmed glasses that were a little small on his rather large head. Said head sat on a spindly neck bordered by big shoulders and arms which ended in hands which seemed too small for his frame. He had black hair that was always dirty and unkempt.

"I'll have the special," he finally said.

His voice was a bit high, another thing that didn't seem to fit about him. Camille scrawled his order down.

"Something to drink?" she asked.

"Coffee," he said.

"Be right up."

She got away from him as fast as she could. He smelled wrong. Not rank by any means, but wrong. Everything about him was wrong. It was as if he were some alien projection into this universe trying to

pass for human. Camille did her rounds and collected her customers' orders. The Toothpick Man's order came up soon enough and she brought it to his booth, where he ate it efficiently, with no emotion or passion. It was simply fuel to him, Camille mused.

After about twenty minutes, he was ready for his check and Camille walked over to collect it. He payed with cash, as usual, and gave her a large tip. In his left hand, he played with a few small objects. Were they marbles?

"Did you know Amy?" he asked.

He said it as if he were asking about the weather or last night's game. Casual. No big deal.

"What?" Camille said.

"Amy. Did you know her?"

"I don't know an Amy."

Those eyes. Dead but staring at her. "Oh, I'm sorry. She's dead, you know."

Camille frowned. "Excuse me?"

"Well, dead is perhaps the wrong word. She is...absent."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

The Toothpick Man sighed, as if he was annoyed with her. "Did you know that a bolt of lightning is as hot as the surface of the sun?"

"You're not making any sense," Camille said.

"Am I not?"

"No, you're not."

Now it seemed as if he was pleading with her. Trying to get her to understand the complexities of some strange mystery. "There is a certain kind of frog that lives deep underground, in caves. They have no need for eyes. They've just gone over white and dead. Don't you find that interesting?"

Camille was stumped and didn't know how to respond. She went with professionalism.

"You sure you don't want any dessert?" she tried. And failed miserably.

"I'm sure," he said. "Excuse me."

She moved aside as he got up. As he left, he cast the objects in his hand onto the table. Camille didn't see him go. She was too focused on the objects he had left behind. They were stones. Four small, grey stones with strange symbols carved into them.

"He just creeps me out," Wendy said.

The two girls stood just out back of the diner, under a little roof area by the backdoor, shielded from the rain. Camille lit up a cigarette while Wendy pulled out her own pack. She couldn't seem to find a

lighter so Camille pulled another match from her pack and lit it up for her.

"Yeah," Camille agreed as Wendy lit up. "There's just something...wrong about him. Keep the book."

She handed the matchbook over to Wendy. It was usually Wendy who bought cigarettes - and the occasional alcohol - for Camille anyway because, although Camille had a driver's license that gave her correct age, well over the legal restriction, barely any convenient store clerk believed she was over age. They all assumed that the ID was fake. So she owed Wendy some matches, at the very least.

"Thanks," Wendy said. "You're right, there is something wrong with him. Hell if I know what, though."

Camille nodded and took a drag.

"He's eerie," she said. "Smells weird."

"I've noticed that," Wendy said. "Well, a little bit. Smells like lotion. Something like that."

"Lotion?"

"Well, it's like a strange brand, you know? I didn't recognize it, at least."

Camille shook her head. "That's not what I mean, though."

Wendy leaned back against the wall and took a long drag on her cigarette. "What do you mean? Spill it."

Camille was at a loss for words. "I...I don't know. Nothing. He just scares me is all."

Wendy coughed once. Twice. Nodded. "Alright. Do you think he's like a serial killer or something?"

"No."

"I totally do."

Camille smirked. "What?"

Wendy smiled. "I think he tools around in a little fishing boat with local women dragging behind the boat on fishing wire. Hooks in their mouths, like a fish. And if someones asks what he's fishing for, he comes up with some story. 'Oh, I'm just hunting dogfish, officer. Some sand shark.' No one would suspect anything."

"No one?"

"Totally."

Camille took another drag, looked up at the sky. The storm clouds still lingered, still spilled water from the heavens.

"Do you know an Amy?" she asked. "Know any Amys personally?"

Wendy thought about for a moment. "I know Amy Bradshaw. She runs the dress store in town."

"Something happen to her recently? Did she disappear or something?"

"Not that I know of. Did he mention her?"

Camille took a long, hard look at her cigarette, held out in front of her between two fingers. "He mentioned an Amy. Don't know if it's the same one."

Wendy coughed again. "You think she's one of them?"

"One of who?"

"One of them, you know. One of the missing."

Camille swung her head around to Wendy. "Missing who?"

Wendy looked at her like she was crazy. "You don't know?! I mean I know you don't watch the news much but you must have heard the chatter at this place."

"People talk," Camille said. "I just kind of tune them out most of the time, listen to the music."

"Well," Wendy said, "there have been a few people who have gone missing lately."

"Like who?"

Wendy counted them out on her fingers. "Like Donna Raynard from the movie theater, Laura Freeman from the docks, Yolanda, who works over on Elm at the beauty shop. Oh, Dennis, that prick who used to beat the shit out of his wife and people said fooled around with...you know, kids?"

Camille knew precisely what had happened to Dennis James. He was out at sea, in at least fifteen pieces, most of them partially eaten. The rest of the people, though, she had no idea about. She fiddled in her pocket, touching the strange, small stones that the Toothpick Man had cast onto the table. What were they?

Wendy looked at her watch.

"Shit," she said. "We better get back inside. Hedda is gonna kill us if we're not back on shift right now."

Both girls pitched their cigarettes into the parking lot and headed back to work.

That night, after Camille's shift was over, she headed home. Parking her car, a '79 Oldsmobile, in the little attached garage that had been added to the house some years ago, she headed inside, out of the rain.

She had to find a way to calm down, a way to keep the Beast at bay. Heading over to a nice stereo set up to the left of the TV in the living room, she put on a record, one by Donovan.

She turned up the music loud and danced, wild and sensuous, as the storm continued to rage outside. This usually did the trick. Donovan's odd, beautiful voice and his psychedelic music soothed the Beast within.

The blinds of the big picture window were partly open from the previous night. Camille had gone to

sleep watching the storm from the couch and had never closed them. Now, as she danced, she stole a glance outside just as a flash of lightning illuminated the dark.

Standing just outside the window, looking in, was the Toothpick Man. He was soaking wet and the rain pelted down on him but he was completely still, looking inside at her.

Camille ran towards the window as the lightning subsided, ready to hit the glass with a good smack and yell at the man. She reached it and the lightning flared up again.

He was gone.

Camille looked around frantically as long as the lightning persisted but he was nowhere to be found. It was dark again. Camille remained at the window, waiting for the lightning.

When it came again, there was still nothing.

Nothing but the smell of something wrong in the air.

Something bad.

To Be Continued...

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