

Chapter Twenty-Five, "The Graveyard"

Death followed in Papa's wake. She walked through the woods, towards the old Colonial house on the hill, all the trees withering and dying as she passed.

A group of about ten Blind Dead followed her; the rest were out destroying Bolton. Those following Papa clawed and flailed their way through the woods, more used to sand or rock than dirt and twigs. Nature abhorred them.

Flies buzzed around them, birds flew away, crickets stopped chirping. Nature could tell that they were wrong and wanted nothing to do with them.

Papa walked, feeling that floating would be too vulgar a display of power. She slowed as she and her followers reached an old graveyard. It was overrun with weeds and big, gnarled trees that reached out of the ground like the clawed hands of a witch.

Here Papa and the Blind Dead felt at home. The ground was sour, its holiness long since desecrated and destroyed. Papa smiled as she saw the house on the hill above the graveyard. They had approached from the back of the house instead of from the front and the road through the woods, beating their own path to get here.

The graveyard seemed to welcome them as they entered. Papa felt elated, confident. Yet under it all was a weariness, a little cautionary voice telling her that she didn't know what Asa had planned. There could be traps anywhere.

Yes, that was Asa's style. Sly, deceitful, the kind of person who would lay a trap where you felt most welcome and safe.

This thought passed through Papa's mind just as she stepped on a strange-feeling stone set into the ground at the base of one of the gnarled, unholy trees. Sensing danger, she immediately darted aside, her superhuman speed coming to her advantage.

There was a whirring sound - some kind of mechanism coming to life - and a large pole that had been well-concealed in the tree came crashing down on the place where Papa had been standing only a fraction of a second before.

Two Blind Dead were there now and they got the full force of the trap. On the end of the sturdy pole

was a large section of wood on which many wooden stakes had been nailed. They punctured the Blind Dead through the head and the chest, mutilating them and pinning them to the ground.

Papa looked down on them in disgust, watching as horrible black bile seeped from their wounds. She did nothing to help them.

Looking at the sprung trap with some admiration, Papa smirked a bit. She urged her remaining followers to get going and she started floating, hovering above the ground instead of walking, deciding that that would be best at this time.

The moon looked down on the little group, peeking through the clouds without comment. A massive wind swept through the graveyard and blew off Papa's top hat.

"Shit," she said and whirled around to retrieve it.

She knelt down and reached out to grab it. It lay on the ground slightly cock-eyed. Her fingertips had just touched it when she heard them.

Wolves.

There were wolves behind them, following them; somewhere out in the woods. They just couldn't resist howling at the moon when they could see it and had given away their position.

Papa gasped in surprise and cast her mind out wide, like a net, sending it out across hundreds of minds, the decaying hunks of flesh infecting the heads of her Blind Dead. She used their ears like sonar, triangulating across the town.

And found them.

Camille and Kimberly, near a few wolves. Following her. So, Camille had found a way out of the ground, had she? Well, she would pay. They both would. Papa resolved to destroy Kimberly and make Camille watch. Then she would personally take care of that hairy little bitch herself.

Papa picked up her hat, smiled and popped it onto her bald head. She looked dashing, beautiful and totally insane.

"Quiet!" Kimberly said to the wolves.

They wouldn't listen to her. Kimberly shot Camille an annoyed look and Camille put a hand on the howling wolf. It instantly quieted.

"That's the third time now," Kimberly said.

"They're on edge," Camille said. "They know we're close."

"But how? Aren't they just regular wolves?"

Camille shrugged. "It's complicated."

They got moving again, quietly making their way through the woods. They had found Papa's trail,

her mental trail. Kimberly had tracked her through this stretch of woods. They both knew where the mad vampire was headed.

"So, what's with the Walkman?" Camille asked.

"Oh," Kimberly said. "Bowie. Keeps me focused."

Camille smiled and just looked at Kimberly for a moment. She was a mess. Soaked in blood and rainwater, short hair tussled out at all angles, headphones around her neck blaring Bowie.

And yet, Camille thought she was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. And that was when it came out. Just came out, unprompted, unplanned.

"I love you," Camille said.

Kimberly smiled back, blushed.

"I don't care why you're here," Camille continued, "what's happened to you, what you've become. We can be together now. We can...not grow old together."

Kimberly laughed.

"I love you, too," she said.

The wolves whined, afraid. Camille and Kimberly got back to business. There was a clearing ahead, an ancient graveyard on a slight hill, which wound up to the old Colonial house upon its top.

"She's here," Kimberly said. "I can feel her."

They crept into the graveyard. Tombstones lined the ground like dying, broken, misshapen teeth. A few gnarled trees creaked like they were alive and trying to reach out for them.

"It's quiet," Kimberly said.

"I'm not going to say that it's too quiet," Camille said.

"Good, I'd never forgive you if you did."

"Come out, we know you're there!" Camille shouted.

On the other side of the graveyard, Papa popped up from behind a tombstone like some kind of eerie automaton at Disneyland. She tipped her hat to them.

"You got me," she said. "I give up!"

The smile on her face was anything but welcoming. Camille and Kimberly approached cautiously as thunder cracked in the sky above them.

"Oh, what's a girl to do?" Papa said, over-acting her part. "Caught by my own design. Betrayed by my own acolyte. The horror! Help! Please someone save me!"

She laughed, a hideous sound.

"You seem awfully chipper for someone who's about to have her heart ripped out of her chest," Camille said.

"Such tough words," Papa said. "I should spank you. Kimberly, would you like to watch?"

Kimberly said nothing.

"Not going to play?" Papa asked.

"I'm done playing," Kimberly said.

"But you're so good at it," Papa said.

"Let's get this over with," Camille said.

She intended to close the distance between them as fast as she could but Kimberly stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. Camille looked back at her with a questioning gaze.

"Careful," Kimberly said, "there could be traps."

Camille nodded.

"Traps!" Papa said. "How quaint and Gothic. You've read *Castle of Ortranto*, haven't you? You English majors. Of course, I suppose I'm British, which is essentially the same thing. In a way. I was born before the Normans invaded. We didn't call ourselves British then."

"Where are you little followers?" Camille asked.

"Around," Papa said.

"I'll bet. Hiding? That's not like you. Not tonight, anyway."

"No, it isn't, is it?"

She snapped her fingers and seven Blind Dead stood up, all of them hiding behind tombstones, all of them between Camille & Kimberly and Papa. The wolves growled and approached the dead women, hunger on their faces. Camille looked around at the Blind Dead, sizing them up.

"You don't think I could tear through them all in a blink of an eye?" Camille asked.

"On the contrary, dear," Papa said. "I'm absolutely sure of it. But I'm also sure that you'll be too busy to do so."

"What do you mean?" Camille asked.

"What I mean is that I know how much you care about your friends. It is a weakness, I'm afraid."

She snapped her fingers again and a figure fell from a tree right in front of Papa, a figure Camille recognized, a figure who didn't fall all the way to the ground. The noose around his neck stopped his fall.

It was Manny.

He struggled on the end of the noose, the life draining out of him, his face purple, his hands clutching at the tight rope.

"Manny!" Camille screamed.

She ran towards him as fast as she could, which was quite fast. Kimberly was barely able to keep up

with her.

"Wait!" Kimberly yelled. "Camille, it's a trap!"

Camille was mere feet away from Manny now and she stretched her arms out to catch him. Just a few more feet.

"It's an illusion!" Kimberly screamed. "It's not Manny!"

Camille saw the truth - smelled it - just as Kimberly's hand dropped onto her shoulder. She saw Manny change into a Blind Dead right in front of her eyes. She felt the trap spring just as she saw the glint of evil in Papa's eyes.

But it was too late.

The ground under her feet gave way, being merely a strip of fake grass. She and Kimberly dropped into the large, deep hole together. It seemed to Camille as if they fell in slow motion, a horrid way to fall, since it seemed that Camille could see every detail.

She saw the sides of the hole; worms wriggling in it. She saw the look on Kimberly's face, one of shock and sadness. She could see below them, to the bottom of the trap, where at least a dozen sharp wooden stakes waited for them.

And then it was over.

They hit the bottom. Camille landed feet first, a wooden stake entering her heel and traveling up her leg, ripping through muscle and bone. It wasn't fatal but the pain was incredible and she screamed, falling against the wall of the trap. After a moment, she managed to turn and look at Kimberly.

Her lover had landed on her back, wooden stakes impaling her lower left leg, her stomach and puncturing her back on the left side.

The stake in her back hadn't gone all the way through. It made her back arch in an unnatural way and she struggled to get off of it, screaming all the while.

Papa looked down at them from the top of the hole, a jack-in-the-box with a top hat grinning madly.

"Oh, you're not dead," she said. "That's disappointing. That trap was meant for me, you know? But I wasn't stupid enough to fall for it. Then I thought, 'who is following me? Oh, yes, two very stupid bitches.' And I thought I'd utilize it for my own purposes. Neat, huh?"

Camille could hear her wolves attacking Blind Dead on the surface above them. Their growls were fierce, powerful.

"Kill!" she screamed. "Kill them all!"

"Unlikely," Papa said. "Throw me one of those, would you please?"

A moment later, a wolf was tossed into Papa's arms. She held it by the throat, choking it.

"Don't you hurt him!" Camille said.

"I really wish you had died in the fall, dear," Papa said.

"Sorry to disappoint you," Camille said.

"I wasn't talking to you," Papa said.

Camille looked at Kimberly, who had almost managed to pull herself off the stake in her back. She looked up at Papa in terror and tried to pull her leg off the stake. It was no good, she was still in too much pain.

"Catch!" Papa said.

She threw the wolf as hard as she could at Kimberly. The force of the blow was such that when the wolf hit Kimberly - square in the chest - it drove her into the ground, and pushed the stake all the way through her chest and into the wolf's body, impaling it. It died instantly. Kimberly's head crashed to the ground, her cheek tearing open on another stake.

"Kimberly!" Camille yelled. "Kimberly!"

"Don't worry, dear," Papa said, "she not dead. Not yet. I must be going, though. See you soon."

She gave them a little wave and disappeared. Camille paid her no mind and grabbed hold of her leg. Screaming in pain, she pulled it off the stake and slumped against the earthen wall of the trap. Blood poured from her wound but she could already feel it healing.

She dropped to her knees and crawled towards Kimberly, weaving her way between the stakes. She reached her and put her hands tenderly on the girl's shoulder.

"Kimberly," she whispered. "Are you okay?"

When it came out of her mouth, she realized just how stupid it sounded. Her lover was broken and bloody, close to death.

"It just missed my heart," Kimberly managed to say.

Her gaze was fixed above them, past Camille. She looked delirious.

"But I can feel the wood pressing against it," she continued.

Camille reached for the stakes, meaning to break them off.

"Wait," Kimberly said. "You might push a splinter into my heart and kill me if you try to move me."

"But it's your only chance," Camille reasoned.

"Go," Kimberly said. "Go kill her. And, then, after it's done, come back and help me."

"No," Camille said, tears filling her eyes. "You're lying. You want me to go so you can die without me seeing. Well, I won't go."

A hand grasped Camille with such fierce strength that she didn't realize at first that it was Kimberly's hand.

"I wouldn't lie to you," Kimberly said. "Now go."

"No," Camille said.

"Let the Beast out," Kimberly said.

"I can't leave you."

Kimberly punched Camille in the face, hard. Camille felt the Beast stir.

"Let it out!" Kimberly said.

She punched Camille again.

Camille growled. She heard shuffling above her and looked up. A Blind Dead was looking down at them. Camille grabbed hold of a free stake, broke it off and threw it at the dead woman.

The stake impaled the Blind Dead right through its open mouth, exiting through the back of her head. The thing slumped forward and fell into the trap. She sailed through the air, surprisingly graceful. Her head struck a stake, her skull bursting open. Her body fell against the wall in a heap, now truly dead.

"Go kill them all," Kimberly said.

Camille jumped out of the trap but it wasn't she who emerged.

It was the Beast.

To Be Continued...

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