

## **Chapter Nine, "The Curse"**

Kimberly was making breakfast. Camille could smell it. Meat Loaf's "Bat Out of Hell" was on the turntable as Camille cautiously descended the stairs. The morning light poured into the living room through the big picture window.

Camille wandered into the kitchen. She found Kimberly cooking, singing along with Meat Loaf as he pontificated about being torn and twisted at the foot of a burning bike. Camille smiled and remained quiet, not wanting to let Kimberly know she was there. Not yet.

Kimberly had found eggs and sausage in the fridge and had fired up the stove top. Skillet in hand, she cooked like a wizard, flipping the sausage without using the spatula that she held in her other hand.

Finally, Camille laughed a little. Kimberly - caught - spun around, luckily leaving the skillet on the stove top. She smiled, embarrassed.

"I love Meat Loaf," she said, blushing. "Well, this album, at least."

"Me, too," Camille said.

"Where are my fucking manners? Good morning."

"Morning."

Kimberly returned to cooking and spoke over her shoulder.

"You're going to be eating some of this, right?" she asked. "I can't eat it all myself."

"Sure," Camille said. "I'm really sorry about last night."

Kimberly stopped cooking, put the spatula down. She turned again, took a few steps closer to Camille.

"I'm the one who should be sorry," she said. "I should have thought it through. I was so insensitive."

Camille said nothing. A few minutes later, they sat down at the kitchen table to have breakfast. Kimberly dug into her eggs as Camille devoured a sausage link. Kimberly pulled a drumstick from her waistband and started to drum mindlessly as she ate.

"You have some great music," Kimberly said.

"Thanks," Camille said.

"Don't have much Bowie, though."

"I have a couple."

Kimberly looked at her pointedly. "Not enough, though."

Camille nodded, scarfing down what remained of her sausage. "You like Bowie, huh?"

"I love Bowie."

"He's pretty groovy. I love Alice Cooper."

"Only heard a few of his."

"He's a real rocker. Well, he used to be. Don't get me started on this new-wave 'I Am the Future' bullshit."

Kimberly laughed and took another bite of her eggs as Camille bit down on another sausage link with a chuckle.

"So," Kimberly said, "who's controlling those living corpses?"

She said it like it was normal breakfast conversation, like she had asked for the salt. Camille nearly choked on her sausage in surprise.

"You want to talk about this now?" she said when she got the sausage down.

"Now's as good a time as any," Kimberly said.

"Okay," Camille said. "Yeah, I think I know who it is."

"Oh, yeah? Witch or something?"

"Maybe. She definitely has some powers. I met her yesterday."

Kimberly looked surprised. "Where at?"

"A little coffee house theater, like a beatnik place," Camille said. "She put on a magic show."

"Just because someone can pull a rabbit out of a hat doesn't mean they can control an army of eyeless undead women."

Camille cocked her head to one side. "Yeah, but she has some real power. She made fire appear in her hand."

"My uncle can do that," Kimberly said. "He just needs a little preparation time is all. Can she do card tricks as well?"

"You don't get it," Camille said. "She was less than a foot away from me. This was no trick."

"So, what's she like?"

"Weird. She wears a top hat and some magician number. Lot of cleavage. Course, that could just be her stage outfit."

Kimberly nodded, dabbed her sausage link in her runny eggs and took a bite. She looked intently at

Camille.

"I want to know more about you," she said.

Camille shrugged noncommittally and didn't say anything. Kimberly ducked her head, tried to catch Camille's eye. Smiled.

"I could tell you more about me if that makes you more comfortable," she said.

"I mean..." Camille said. "It's a free country."

"I go to Brown," Kimberly said. "I major in English Lit. Minor in American History."

"Not music theory?"

Kimberly frowned. "Why do you say that?"

Camille nodded towards Kimberly's drumstick, which she was still tapping on the table. Gestured at it.

"Oh, right," Kimberly said. "The drumsticks. I don't even think about 'em anymore. Yeah, I love music but I don't know if I understand it, ya know? Don't know if I can study it or anything like that. I mean, I do have a band. Kinda. We haven't played a gig in a while."

"Groovy," Camille said.

"Anyway, I walked off campus two days ago and just...came here."

Camille narrowed her eyes. "Here? Bolton?"

Kimberly nodded. "Yeah. I mean, I didn't know I was coming here. I got on a train and just got off here. I think my ticket was for Baltimore, I can't quite remember."

"Why here?"

"I don't know. I was reading *Jane Eyre* for my 19<sup>th</sup> Century Writers course. You know, between classes? And I suddenly shut the book and left. I was like a zombie. It was as if..."

She trailed off, nudged her food with her fork.

"What?" Camille asked.

"It's embarrassing," Kimberly said.

"No, go on."

Kimberly looked intently at Camille.

"It's as if you were calling me," she said.

Camille blushed and looked down at her food. Mercifully, there were still several scraps there. She ate them, not looking back up.

"I told you it was embarrassing," Kimberly said.

"No," Camille said a little too quickly. "I...I..."

Kimberly kept looking at her.

"I..." Camille said. "I have to go to work."

She got up from the table and headed out through an outside door in the kitchen, grabbing her work apron from a hook on the wall. She stopped, the door halfway open.

"You can stay," she said. "I mean, if you want to."

"I'm sorry," Kimberly said. "God, that's seems to be all I'm saying to you lately. I'm sorry."

"Even though we can't... be together, I still want you near. I want to be with you."

"So do I."

Camille tried out a wave. She thought that it must have looked pathetic to Kimberly. She was so cool. "See you tonight, then. I'll be back around five. Bye."

But Kimberly waved back. "Goodbye."

Camille left, leaving Kimberly alone among the remnants of breakfast.

Camille got home a little after five in the early evening. She entered the house and found Kimberly sitting on the couch, the TV on. Camille saw Peter Cushing and Christopher Lee on screen. They were having an intense conversation and appeared to be aboard a train. She clocked the movie almost at once: *Horror Express*, one of her favorites.

Kimberly looked up from the couch. "Hey."

Camille still felt nervous around her. Still felt like she would wither and collapse into a pile on the floor when the woman looked at her. She looked down at her shoes. "Hey."

Kimberly raised her eyebrows. "Work okay?"

Camille nodded. "Sure. Nothing special."

She retreated to the hall closet and hung up her jacket. She sighed softly to herself and closed her eyes. She had to keep the Beast at bay, had to push it down deep inside herself. Especially around Kimberly.

"Come sit with me," Kimberly said. "You seen this movie?"

Camille turned around. Slowly, she approached the couch. Kimberly saw her trepidation: she was looking over her shoulder, watching Camille approach. A wry smile was on her face. "It's okay. I don't believe that you would hurt me."

Camille finally reached the couch and sat down. She was as far away from Kimberly as she could be on the small piece of furniture. "Yeah. I've seen it. It's great."

Kimberly nodded, looking pointedly at the distance between them. "Pretty fantastic so far. So, is the thing in the box like an alien?"

Camille shrugged. "I think so. Something like that."

Kimberly had a concerned look on her face. "Jesus, you need to calm down."

Camille shot a glance in her direction. "What do you mean?"

"Something's up. Don't know what it is but it's eating you up inside."

Camille shook her head. "I told you last night. I'm afraid of what might happen to you if I get close to you. Everyone I get close to dies. Every last one."

Kimberly shrugged. "Maybe I'll be different." She smiled. "Never know."

Camille found herself smiling, as well, despite herself. But almost at once, the enormity of the situation weighed down on her spirits. She put her head in her hands.

Kimberly scooted across the couch to sidle up next to her, put a hand over her shoulder. "What is it? Tell me."

Camille shook her head, which was still buried in her hands. "It's too much. All too much."

"What is? You mean the killer dead girls?" She chuckled.

Camille raised her face out of her hands. Tears were beginning to form in her eyes. But she laughed, too. "Yeah. The killer dead girls, for sure. But it's all of it. I've been trying to figure out what's going on the whole day. Fucking brain working overtime. How does it all relate to the woman at the coffee house, the one in my dreams? I'm sure it does. But I don't know how."

Kimberly stood up. "Okay, that settles it. We're going out."

Camille frowned. "What?"

"You need a night off. We're going out."

"I don't know."

Kimberly shook her head. "You don't have a choice in the matter. You're taking me out on a date. We'll go eat, see a movie, maybe take in dessert. Take your mind off things for a while. It's gonna be great. You'll see."

Camille was taken aback. "I... Okay. What do you want to eat?"

Kimberly smirked. "This town a good place for fish?"

Camille smiled. "I think we can arrange something."

They ate at a place downtown. The fish was good, the conversation was better. Kimberly was funny. Kimberly was smart. Kimberly seemed wise beyond her years. In other words, Kimberly was everything Camille was looking for but didn't know she wanted.

It was exhilarating. Camille had never felt this way before. It was as if she had been swept up by this woman. Picked up and carried by her, kicking and screaming, into a world she was so unfamiliar with.

It was a blissful dinner. They were only verbally assaulted by one surly-looking young man, who

called them "dykes" and, slightly more imaginatively, "boys". Kimberly had looked at the guy like he was nothing, looking him up and down, sizing him up. Her eyes alone sent the man shuffling away in shame. Camille hadn't had to do anything at all. It was incredible.

They took in a movie: *Amityville II: The Possession*. Camille chuckled through most of it while Kimberly remained silent throughout. She was smiling, however.

After the movie, they got dessert at a little ice cream shop near the theater to discuss the movie. Kimberly had enjoyed herself but had found the film exploitative, especially since it dealt with the sensitive subjects of incest and abuse. Camille could see her point but had enjoyed it finding it to have a dark, sweaty atmosphere that was strangely compelling. And ridiculous enough as to be fairly humorous.

They retired back to Camille's house and ended up back on the couch. This time the TV was off. Kimberly had her drumsticks out again, softly drumming on the little coffee table in front of the couch.

The young woman shot a beautiful glance at Camille, then looked away. Camille could tell that she was blushing. She smiled.

"I envy you, you know," Kimberly said.

Camille made a sour look. "How? Why?"

Kimberly smiled again and leaned back into the comfy confines of the couch, tucking her drumsticks under her arm. "I don't mean the whole werewolf thing. Though I do think that's pretty cool, despite what you say. No, I mean you got to see the sixties."

Camille cocked her head to one side. She narrowed her eyebrows.

Kimberly seemed to be having a hard time explaining herself. "I mean, I was born in the sixties, but I was a kid. You, though. You got to be a teenager in the sixties. That's amazing. Psych, hippies, the whole deal."

Camille shrugged. "I won't lie. It was pretty great. Donovan put out 'Season of the Witch' in '66 and that just about changed my whole life. And I experimented a little, but..." She trailed off and shook her head. "That's about when I was bitten. You know? I was almost seventeen and it changed my life." She pulled down the red sweatband that she wore on her left wrist, revealing what looked like a burn in the shape of a pentagram. "This just popped up overnight, not long after I was bitten." She paused, thinking. "The first time I turned... It was awful. To feel my bones twisting into new positions. Cracking, changing. It still hurts but not like it did that first time."

Kimberly put a hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry. You okay talking about this?"

Camille nodded. "Yeah. I do. It feels good. I don't ever really get to talk about it."

"Then tell me more about it."

Camille leaned back and looked up at the ceiling. "That first night, I killed a deer. A little fawn. Tore it to fucking shreds. God, it was so delicious. Afterwards, I felt so bad about it, but while it was happening..." She shook her head. "Nothing but pure, animal lust and hunger. It felt so freeing. And so horrible. A curse."

Kimberly waited a moment before asking another question. "So was it all animals? At the beginning?"

Camille nodded. "At first. Deer, elk, moose, squirrels." She shook her head. "One dog. That was a bad one. It was a mean dog, if that helps. But it was a dog. Someone's pet. Felt real bad about that one."

Kimberly rubbed her shoulder. She didn't say anything but her presence was enough.

"The first person," Camille continued, "was a guy named Raymond. Raymond 'Tank' Ellis. He was a real piece-of-shit. He was an odd-jobs man that my family had on staff. Fixed things. Fences, pipes, stuff like that. I had started noticing this smell on him. At first, it was just odd. Like he was wearing a really potent cologne, you know? Then I figured out what it was."

Kimberly leaned in, completely transfixed. "What was it?"

Camille opened her eyes, looked at Kimberly. "It was girls. Little girls. I could smell them on him. Every few weeks. I started checking the papers, watching the news and sure-the-fuck-enough, that smell would be on him a day or so before the police found a dead little girl floating in the lake. Not far from my home."

"Jesus," Kimberly said.

"He was killing them," Camille said. "Raping them and killing them. I thought about it for a while. I mean, I had never killed a person before. This was a year or so after it all started. I would get up every morning, look in the mirror and see that I wasn't aging anymore. I would see the Beast. I was cursed." She looked back up at the ceiling again. "Why not put it to good use? So, one night, I followed him. He was hanging around a house in town. Scouting his next red romance, you could say. When he left, I made my move."

She was chuckling now but it was a humorless sound and her eyes were filling up with tears. Kimberly leaned into her, her cheek touching Camille's cheek.

"He was so scared," Camille said, her voice breaking. "I fucking tore him apart. Poked out both of his eyes in a rage. They popped like grapes. Bit his throat and just about tore half of it out of him. There was so much blood. I didn't know people had that much blood in them. Not then. I ate him. By the time I was done with him, I'd say that there was only about a quarter of him left." She rubbed the tears out of her eyes, composed herself. "When I calmed down and became myself again, I carried what was left of

him to the lake and dumped him where he had left all those little girls. I thought it was poetic. But it felt terrible. Taking a life. A human life."

Kimberly took Camille's face in her hands, forcing her to look. "You did nothing wrong. Listen to me. I'm right. He was a monster."

"I'm the monster," Camille said.

Kimberly shook her head. "You're better than him. Maybe that's why you are what you are. Maybe you were made into this... thing to punish monsters like him."

Camille smiled but scoffed. "You don't believe in all that. Destiny and shit. Do you?"

Kimberly shrugged. "I didn't believe in werewolves or the living dead a few days ago. Now? Anything's possible, I'd say."

Camille slowly nodded. "Okay. I'll accept that." She sighed before continuing. "After that first time, it got easier. In those early days, I didn't do it very often. A pedophile here, a serial killer there. Not too many. But when I was on my own, after my family was gone, I kind of dedicated my life to it. Traveling around the country killing bad guys." She laughed. "Sounds like a TV show starring David Carradine."

Kimberly smiled. They were quiet for a moment, just enjoying each other's company. Then Kimberly spoke up. "What happened to your family?"

Camille shook her head. "I'm not ready to talk about that. Not yet."

"I understand."

They continued talking for at least another hour or two. All manner of subjects were on the table: movies, books, television, old stories, school drama and music, music, music. They bonded over music. They discussed and debated about various artists and bands. Both of them were passionate about what they loved and hated. There was much laughter and infinite smiles.

Eventually - as the night deepened - they turned on the TV. After some searching on the UHF bandwidth, they found a movie: *The Hanging Woman*. Neither of them had seen it before and they lapsed into silence as they watched it.

As they got more comfortable, Camille pushed closer to Kimberly. They were now on the opposite side of the couch. Kimberly leaned against the comfy corner while Camille lay against Kimberly.

At some point, when the movie wasn't quite over, they both drifted into the deep, velvety shades of sleep. The date had worked. Camille hadn't thought about the Blind Dead or Papa the entire evening.

At around the same time that Camille and Kimberly were settling down to watch *The Hanging Woman*, Wendy stood by as Manny closed up the diner. Hedda had left some minutes before, home to relieve



the babysitter of her duties, and it was just the two of them now. It was after midnight and the moon was covered by clouds, shrouding the land in darkness.

"I hear it was like a slaughterhouse," Wendy said. "The whole dock covered in blood. One of the officer's faces was crushed. They say the other one shot himself. Some kind of strange murder/suicide? I don't know."

"Well," Manny said, "this is a strange part of the country."

"Totally."

Manny looked about, as if checking for intruders. He leaned into Wendy, conspiratorially. "You ever hear of the Curse?"

Wendy frowned. "Curse?"

"Right, you're not from around here. So you wouldn't know."

"Know what?"

"Story goes," Manny said, finishing locking up and joining Wendy for a cigarette near their cars, "that about a hundred years ago, two women came to town. Back then, Bolton was a fairly thriving fishing port. Certainly more prosperous than it is now. Anyway, these two women came to town. Not at the same time, mind you, but close together. The first woman bought this old colonial house on the outskirts of town. Still there, as a matter of fact, though it's been empty for some time. She was an elegant, though strange woman, always kept these big dogs around her. For protection, most like. Boy, did she have money. Hot damn, she did. Threw that money around like it was end of the world."

Manny looked for his lighter and couldn't find it. Wendy struck a match for him, using the same book that Camille had given her.

"Thank you," Manny said. "So, a little later, the second woman arrived. Now, she was even stranger than the first. Acted like an escaped mental patient. They say she wandered around the docks and the beach, rummaged around in caves. She seemed to know the first woman. And hated her. They had been fighting for some time, I hear tell. They had some kind of power."

"Black magic?" Wendy asked.

"Ayuh. The two women were locked in some kind of long-running war and Bolton became their next battlefield. Now, this didn't exactly sit well with the wolf woman who protected the town."

"Wolf woman?"

Manny gestured in the air, searching for the right word. "Skinwalker, werewolf. You see, even back then, wolves had mostly left this part of the country, hunted near extinction. But this woman ran with a pack of them. She was their leader. And she didn't like what these two women were doing to the town. They drained people of their blood. All of it. So, she cursed them. She had powers, too, you see."

"Totally."

"The Curse was that they could never come closer than three miles to each other. Just couldn't physically do it. The Woman with Money would stay on the outskirts of town in her house and the Strange Woman would stay at the beach, the docks and the lonely roads through the woods near the ocean. This, the Wolf Woman hoped, would keep them from damaging Bolton anymore than they already had."

"Wow. Weird story."

Manny took a long drag on his cigarette. "Yeah. Only problem with the Curse is that there are too many loopholes in it, you see."

Wendy finished her own cigarette and pitched it into the parking lot. She lit up another. "What do you mean?"

"Well, it doesn't say that someone else, possibly controlled by one of the women, couldn't hurt the other one. And, there's another part of the story. Now, this part isn't always spoken of, but it's what the old woman down the street from my house said. You see, the Wolf Woman is long gone now. She supposedly died fighting off a ghost army that came out of the sea. If one of the women gets another wolf woman on their side - right here, in Bolton - then the Curse will be lifted. So, if one of them could get a werewolf on their side, or under their control, then they'd be free to start up their war again. And, you know what, I don't know about you but I've been hearing howls at night lately. Ain't no coyote howls, either. There's a wolf out there."

"Heavy stuff."

Manny nodded, finished his cigarette and threw the butt away. He looked back at Wendy, then looked past her. His eyes widened in shock.

"Jesus Christ," he said, "there's something coming out of the woods. It's right behind you!"

Wendy screamed and whirled around. She saw nothing past the highway at the line of trees. Just the wind. Manny laughed.

"You shit," Wendy said.

"Got you," he said. "Look, it's a just a story. I just thought of it for some reason when I was thinking how strange this town is."

"Bastard."

"That's me. I got to get home to Dana. She'll think I'm having an affair with you or Camille. Have a good night."

"Yeah, right."

Wendy headed to her car and got in. She didn't notice the Toothpick Man until she inserted her key

and revved the engine. She looked in the rear view mirror to back out of the parking spot and saw him. He was sitting in the back seat of her car, just staring at her.

Wendy screamed and went for her door. She tried to open it but couldn't. It wouldn't budge. She looked out the window, saw Manny starting to drive away.

"Manny!" she yelled. "Manny, wait! There's some psycho in my car!"

But he didn't hear her and her heart sank as he turned onto the highway and disappeared into the night. Wendy slowly turned her attention back to the rear view mirror to look at the Toothpick Man.

"What do you want?" she said.

"Don't be afraid," the Toothpick Man said. "Not of me."

"What are you doing in my car? Why can't I open the door?"

"Do you know that certain amphibians can spontaneously change their sex?"

Wendy shuddered. "No, can't say that I knew that."

The Toothpick Man raised both his hands in what Wendy assumed was meant as a soothing gesture. It didn't work. "I'm trying to stimulate your mind. I don't want you to panic in this situation."

"What situation?"

"Now, I want you to stay calm and look out your window."

Wendy slowly turned her gaze back to the window.

"Look towards the forest line past the highway," the Toothpick Man said.

She did.

"Do you see them?" the Toothpick Man said.

"I don't--"

Then she did. There were six of them, all women. They stood amongst the trees, completely still.

"Yes," Wendy said. "What are they?"

"They are her soldiers," the Toothpick Man said.

"Whose soldiers?"

"She calls herself Papa. Her soldiers are here to turn you into one of them and to kill me."

Wendy scoffed. "Big loss, there."

The Toothpick Man continued. Unabated. "They most likely won't find me. They hunt by sound and I can remain very quiet."

"What do we do?"

"Back out. Slowly."

The six women started across the highway towards the parking lot and the car. They were naked, their skin greyish white and covered in some kind of film. And there was something else about them.

Something...

"Jesus, they have no eyes!" Wendy said.

"Back out. Slowly," the Toothpick Man repeated. "If I had not been here, they would have got you. I was able to keep them at bay, at least for a moment."

Wendy backed the car up, out of the parking space. The women were close now, inside the parking lot. They surrounded the car.

"Now," the Toothpick Man said, "put the car into drive and get onto the highway."

"What about them?" Wendy said.

"Drive over them."

Wendy pressed down on the gas and drove over two of the women as she exited onto the highway. She looked in the rear view mirror and saw that the women didn't appear to be following them.

"Now," the Toothpick Man said, "we need you to ask your friend Camille for help but first we need to go somewhere. I will give you directions."

"Camille?" Wendy said. "What does she have to do with this?"

"All in good time. Now..."

He gave her directions and they drove down the highway for a bit before turning down a winding forest road in the North part of town. Wendy didn't like the looks of this path but what choice did she have?

"This woman," she said, "this Papa, she's a bad guy, right?"

"Yes," the Toothpick Man said. "She is a bad guy, as you say."

The road was coming to an end up ahead. A large, old colonial house rose out of the darkness, coming into focus. Wendy realized that this was where they were heading.

"So who are you taking me to?" she asked.

The road came to an end. A footpath led up a hill from the end of the road to the large house. Standing at the top of the path, just down from the house was a woman. A strange but beautiful woman. An elegant woman with long black hair. She held three big, black dogs by a leash. Even from this distance, Wendy could tell that the woman had penetrating eyes.

"Her enemy," the Toothpick Man answered.

To Be Continued...

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