

Poppies

By L. C. Wells

Randi Wallace pulled tighter the leather jacket she wore over her cotton blouse and jeans. The air was cold and wet with a late morning mist still covering the marshy landscape. She knew that this was considered warm for November in England, but Randi was from Southern California and she thought it was miserable. "Ian? What are we doing in Little Farthing? This is not exactly close to London."

Ian Matheson, professor of literature and the occult, and her unofficial boyfriend, smiled sheepishly as he helped her down off the train. "Someone told Mrs. Stern about my book and she was quite insistent that I come down here to meet her."

"You got asked because of *The Face of Fear*?" Randi asked, her tone subtly skeptical. Ian's book had had very little circulation. Randi wondered how anyone in this little town had ever heard of it.

As they walked through the old brick train station, she noticed that the building showed signs of time, decay and mold. Some faded posters sat behind speckled glass frames, and rusty wire mesh covered the tall Victorian stained glass windows. It looked like time had stopped in Nineteen Twenty.

"It's a book of great depth and scholarship," Ian said with dignity. "Mrs. Stern quoted parts of it to me so she knows what kind of scholar I am, Randi."

As they carried their overnight bags, the mist became a slow drizzle. The latter part of the twentieth century had bypassed Little Farthing. Sometime in the last fifty years, the main street had been widened and surfaced with tar, making the sidewalk only a foot wide, but horse posts were still set in front of several buildings.

The old post office was straight out of a Dickens novel except that it had cracked and peeling paint and stood right next to a modern drug store. Posters, dimmed by years of the sun's light, hung in windows. Outside was an old-fashioned telephone box next to a wood pole strung with telephone and power lines. Crammed next to this was a Victorian street lamp that Randi could almost imagine being lit by hand. Other stores lined the narrow, twisted street: a bookstore, dimly lit behind its cluttered windows, a butcher's sitting next to a sweets shop, a linen draper's with a neatly printed faded note saying the owners also tailored military uniforms. The girl looked closely. The curvy calligraphy was very dim and the date of the note was almost gone. Nineteen ... oh ... what?

She wondered if there was a good restaurant somewhere nearby. Her stomach growled at the

thought. To distract it, she asked, "But what does she really want from you, Ian?"

"She says she's being haunted. She's asked me to exorcise the ghost," Ian said with dignity.

"You aren't an exorcist!"

"No. But she wouldn't take that for an answer." Ian turned and looked back at the young woman.

"Randi, think of it as a day in the country."

"Ian, it's going to rain soon. It's not like it's high summer when the famed English roses are in bloom!" she grumbled, hitching her bag higher on her arm. An old man tipped his hat to her and she smiled back and nodded. From the people around them, Little Farthing was mostly inhabited by the elderly.

"Mrs. Stern did pay for the tickets down here. Randi, we'll have our talk, then have our tea at one of the restaurants with mountains of clotted cream and scones," he bribed her. "And think of your dissertation. The house has been in her family for generations and is probably haunted by many ghosts. Might make an interesting chapter."

"I'd rather be in London," Randi muttered. "Besides we both know my dissertation's going to be on the werewolf curse and how to cure it."

He winced. "It's Saturday and the full moon isn't till Monday night. By then we'll be in London again and I can chain you up in the basement."

Beyond the main cluster of buildings, the sidewalk widened. On the left was a crumbling four foot stone wall, topped irregularly with flat paving stones. Other stones lay in broken shards on the sidewalk.

"Geeze!" Randi jumped back, the knapsack hitting her back.

A gargoyle head peered out of the mist, taking her by surprise. A fraction of a second later, she realized it was just stone. The statue had been perched on the wall, after probably tumbling from its lofty perch on the old stone church. The Church had probably been on the outskirts of Little Farthing once, but as the town grew, it spread beyond the old graveyard. Some of the gravestones leaned drunkenly while a few were tumbled facedown in the wet sod. Near the entrance to the churchyard, a massive thorn tree had spread over the wall to snare Ian's Fair Isles sweater as he strolled by.

She shivered as she looked at the thick leaves. They would have to cut that tree back soon or it

would cover the entire graveyard. I'll bet if the sun's out, the tree's shadow would reach the church steps, she thought absently. There was grassy mold on the gravestones shaded by the tree.

With a start she noticed a man standing by a grave on the far side, but half-hidden in the mist. Randi wondered if he was a gardener or a grave digger. Don't they generally bury people on Sundays? She felt vaguely uncomfortable for no understandable reason. Had the man been watching her and Ian? Why? Were strangers so rare in Little Farthing that they were stared at?

She glanced at the church. A small man, dressed in clerical black with a white collar, had come out of the woods behind the stone building carrying a bundle of cut greens. He climbed the uneven stone stairs to the church. He looked very different from the figure by the tree.

"Ian, is there something special going on?" she asked. "Look, he's decorating."

Ian glanced over disinterestedly. "I don't remember really. Haven't been to church in years and you know the last graveyard we went into had that Juggler ghost! It's only been a couple of days since then. You can't want —"

"Oh, Ian, not every graveyard is haunted!" she disagreed.

"That's true," he conceded. "We've got a few minutes, Randi. Want to go inside?"

"Yes. Why not?"

They walked up the stone path leading to the paint-worn, heavily-carved wooden door.

It was dim inside; faint light filtered through the wire netting hung over the inside of the stained-glass windows. The oak pews were nicked and gouged from centuries of use and the seat covers were worn and shabby. In contrast, gleaming bronze modern sconces were mounted on the whitewashed plaster walls. The lighting must at least be new.

Randi walked up to the altar facing the door. The wooden crucifix was plainly carved and the altar had an arrangement of autumn blossoms in a chipped basin decorated with flowers and set on patched white linen. The greens were spread out on the stone paving below the altar with a pile of paper flowers next to them.

Actually, Randi mused, it's rather a nice old church. The interior gave a feeling of wholesomeness despite the wear-and-tear of ages. Herbs had to be part of the floral arrangement since their faint scent still permeated the area. The stained glass windows were dimmed by age and pollution. She looked up at one which portrayed a soldier, a flag, and choirs of angels blowing trumpets. Names

were written on the glass in small cramped cursive. A War Memorial window most likely, she guessed.

"May I help you?" a voice hailed them as the man she'd seen outside came around the altar. "I'm Anthony Potter, the vicar."

The round face and dark brown eyes of the man were reassuringly commonplace as was the white collar encircling his throat.

"It's a lovely church," Ian commented as he came up beside Randi. "It looks almost Norman."

"Parts are," the man said cheerfully coming down the aisle. "It incorporates part of a chapel from the old castle ruins, but the church itself has been constantly rebuilt for centuries. Outside we have a few graves that are at least a thousand years old and one archeologist swore she unearthed a gravestone with Ogham on it."

"Really?" Ian's face lit up. "That's almost unbelievable. I thought most of the ancient burial sites were mapped."

"I believe we also have the oldest black thorn tree in England," the man added proudly. "It's been in Little Farthing's chronicles for as long as records have been kept."

Ian held out his hand. "I'm Ian Matheson, a professor of mythology. This is one of my graduate students, Randi Wallace,"

The vicar shook his hand and smiled at Randi who returned it. From the small darn in his cuff, the man's garb was as worn as his church. This wasn't a well-paying parish.

"A mythology professor?" Potter laughed. "You're here about my Great-Aunt Camilla?"

Ian blinked in surprise. "I beg your pardon?"

"Camilla Potter-Stern. This is a small town, Professor and when she said she was calling in a professor ..." Potter shook his head. "I'm afraid Graunty has finally gone round the bend."

"Why do you say that?" Randi asked curiously. "We're going to lunch with her."

The man looked at her nonplussed for a second. "Well, a ghost, after all ... Now there have been legends about Little Farthing's church for centuries but a ghost around here is a new thing."

"Really? What kind of legends?" Ian pursued in a professorial tone.

"Oh, devil worship, Druids and that kind of rot. Apparently they used to sacrifice children to the local tree deities but that was before the Christians arrived. Now we sacrifice peat instead."

"You seem to have been renovating," Ian commented looking around. "Aren't those new lights around the altar?"

The vicar beamed. "You noticed! Yes, we used the money built up by the Danvers' bequest to put electricity in. You couldn't use this building most evenings because of the cold and damp. I had to use candles or mobile lamps. Ridiculous!"

"Bequest?" Randi asked.

The vicar shrugged. "The Danvers family have been local gentry for generations. Their castle's chapel stood here until the Reformation when it was torn down. When Charles II returned, this church was built incorporating the walls of the chapel." The man gestured toward a small window in the left side of the church. Randi had noticed it since it was only accessible to a person on a ladder and was off-centered in the wall. In fact, the stones around it were a different size and shape than most of the church. "It's said that the town will prosper and all its people be healthy, if a candle is left burning in that window. Of course, it's just a myth. The family were the ones who started the candle-in-the-window business. We had to snuff it for the First World War and after that ... well, with blackout regulations in the second War, and then someone broke the antique glass, so we haven't lit a candle for years. We restored the glass — cost a fortune, and tomorrow morning we're going to reinstate the candle custom. It will be a memorable moment for Little Farthing."

"I beg your pardon?" Ian asked puzzled.

"We've installed one of those electric candle lights in the window and I'll turn it on as one of the elements in the ceremony."

Ian looked around, understanding finally dawning on his face. "Ah. The ceremony. Of course."

"Ian ..." Randi quizzed. "What ceremony?"

The vicar took pity on her. "It's Armistice Day, Miss Wallace. What you Americans call Veterans Day, I believe. That's why all the cut greens."

"And the poppies," Ian said glancing at the red paper flowers. "You decorate the altar for

Armistice Day."

"Yes." Potter's face grew stern for a second. "We lost so many men of the village at the Somme and Dunkirk. Their names are on that window." He waved towards the window Randi had been studying.

Randi nodded, glad her assumption had been right. It was a memorial window.

"Well, we'll leave you to your work," Ian announced heartily. "Thank you for the information, Vicar."

"It's the seventy-first anniversary of the end of World War I, and the seventieth anniversary of our village's Armistice Day celebration, remember, so it's a special occasion. We'll be rehearsing the ceremony's music tonight. Come in tomorrow," the young man urged them as he ushered them towards the door. "I'll make sure you get good seats. We're seldom full up anymore."

"Sure," Randi replied, hefting her knapsack. "That sounds like fun."

As they stepped onto the sidewalk, Randi looked back at the graveyard. The man was not standing by the gravestone but was now leaning against the bark of the tree, the dark wood blending eerily with his clothing. He raised his hand slightly as if in greeting and Randi flinched though she couldn't say why. She blinked. The man was gone and there was nothing but mist beneath the tree.

* * *

The town was gay with bunting and flags waved in the slight breeze. The local paper screamed that England had declared war on Germany on August Fourth Nineteen Fourteen, and a list of local blackout regulations.

"Go away! Go to the sweets shop, Camilla!"

"Don't want to," the girl said stubbornly, her red mouth tightening. She clung to the skirt of the young woman.

"Oh, don't be a silly," the young woman complained, pushing her off with a slight shove. "I didn't want you along anyway 'cause I'm meeting Martin! Now go away, you little pest!"

Camilla knew that if Mother knew what Paula was doing, she'd be locked in her room until her wedding. Of course, her fiancée, Martin Danvers was headed for the War trenches in a week and the wedding had been postponed, but Paula used his imminent departure as an excuse to go out

each night to say farewell, completely ignoring the important fact that Camilla wanted to say goodbye to Martin as well.

She saw one of her mother's friends was waving at her from across the street. Looking carefully both ways, she crossed, a trim ten-year old in her neatly smocked pinafore frock and small straw hat and shiny patent leather shoes. Her thick ash-blond hair hung down her back.

Before the child reached her, the woman disappeared into the crowd of men standing in front of the Post Office. Camilla stopped, disappointed, beside the recently repaired stone wall that bordered the graveyard.

Most of the men wore lounge suits except for two soldiers bantering with their cronies. She watched avidly as one soldier broke from the crowd, making for Paula, who was smiling and waving. He slid his arm around her sister's waist, and with one intimate gesture, placed a kiss on her lips.

Camilla was filled with a wave of sheer hatred for her sister. It was a passion she'd never felt before, jealousy laced with envy and the bitterness that Martin Danvers wasn't going to wait for her to grow up after all.

"Do you want him, little girl?" a soft male voice said behind her.

She looked over, her eyes wide and alarmed. The man leaning over the stone graveyard wall had sallow skin tightly drawn over his sharp cheekbones, and deep-set eyes beneath hairless brows. The brushed back dark brown hair reached the collar of his worn black suit. He looks one of those church stone statues that spit water after a rain, Camilla thought unexpectedly. The longer she looked at him, the more normal he looked.

"Who is that?" the man asked, his gaze going back to Martin.

"Martin Danvers. He's going off to France tomorrow. To the trenches," she replied miserably.

"And you'll never have him," the man said mockingly. His voice dropped to a seductive whisper. "What would you give me, little girl, if I can get him for you?"

She stared at him for a terrified instant, then Camilla bolted for her sister, almost under the feet of a dray horse pulling a cart. The carter cursed and hauled on the reins as she fled. She was crying by the time she reached Paula's side.

"There you are," her sister scolded, reaching down to take Camilla's hand. "Martin and I are going to high tea at the Arms, so you go home with Mrs. Clawdy. Here she comes now."

"You told Mother you would take care of me," Camilla reminded her sullenly.

"Oh, let her come," Martin said kindly. "I'll buy you some ice, Camilla."

Paula smacked her on the shoulder reprovngly. "Don't argue with me, Camilla. I'll see you back at the Manor and, if you tell Mother, I'll whip you!"

Camilla wiped her nose with the back of her hand. "I'll go home by myself and I won't tell Mother but I wish you were dead!" With a stamp of her foot, she fled into the crowd.

* * *

Ian led the way up the stone walkway to a rundown Tudor-style house. Two stories high, it had mullioned windows and a crumbling thatch roof. Masses of bushes and tall trees encircled the house. Birds darted out of the decaying trellis propped against the front wall and a flock of crows cawed from the hedges.

Following Ian's knock, the wooden door was opened by an old woman. Randi corrected herself quickly. Not only an old but very old woman who stood with the help of a rubber-tipped silver cane. She held herself imperiously straight though the silver hair was pulled back untidily in a bun, and the dress hid a heavy body.

"Mrs. Stern?" Ian asked hesitantly.

"Professor Matheson?" she replied in a raspy tone that Randi instantly set down to too many cigarettes for too many years. "Please come in."

"This is my assistant, Randi Wallace," Ian introduced smoothly as he followed the old lady into the house.

Randi shut the door behind her. The narrow hallway was dark and claustrophobic, with a slightly sour smell that Randi identified as over-aged meat with a covering odor of stale cigarette smoke. She followed Ian and Mrs. Stern into a parlor, pausing to survey the room.

Probably eighty years ago it had been fashionably elegant. Now the threadbare sofa sagged and worn spots showed through the carpeting. The room was cluttered with small tables on which were small porcelain dishes, magazines, embroidery floss and needles stuck into half-completed pictures and a number of ancient photographs in pewter frames. Above the smoke-stained fireplace, where a log burned sullenly, was a painting of a woman in the high-fashion style of nearly a century ago and two girls, one in a pinafore and the other in a coming-out gown. Beside the

painting was an old hunting gun and a smaller modern revolver, both gleaming with recent care and mounted carefully on prongs.

The old woman waved for them to sit on the couch as she sat in a large chair beside the fireplace.

Through the age-sagged flesh, Randi could see the remnant of an amazing beauty. Her gaze went to the pictures on the wall. The younger girl or the older girl?

"Mrs. Stern," Ian prompted gently as the woman stared at them. "You asked me to come down here about the ghost?"

Mrs. Stern smiled unexpectedly. Her teeth were yellowed with age and tobacco stains. "First we must have sandwiches and tea, Professor. The maid will be here in a second."

"Is that you, ma'am?" Randi asked glancing upward.

Mrs. Stern nodded after a reserved second. "With my mother and my sister, Paula. Our family has lived in this house for nearly five generations. That's over two hundred years, young lady." She fumbled for the small box at her side and picked out a cigarette.

Ian shook his head fractionally at Randi, who was about to protest. "May I help you?" he asked delicately, picking up a tubular silver lighter from the table between them, and flicking the switch. A small flame came up.

"You don't approve?" Mrs. Stern barked at Randi as she leaned forward. "Well, it's too late to change me, little girl. Ah, here is tea."

The maid entered and placed the heavy silver tea set on the table between the old woman and her guests, then left.

Randi, squelched by Ian's silent disapproval, took one thin sliced cucumber sandwich and the cup of tea which Mrs. Stern had shakily poured. She sank back into the overstuffed couch.

"Delicious," Ian said, sipping the tea. "Now, Mrs. Stern ..."

"There is another family picture beside you," the old woman cut him off imperiously.

Randi looked around to see the ornate metal frame beside her. It held a faded picture of a young man in an old-fashioned uniform, complete with a pistol that looked very much like the one on the wall, and a young woman from the painting, leaning on his arm and smiling smugly. The man was

almost as tall as Ian from the picture. "Who's the guy?" she asked, picking up the picture and passing it to Ian.

The old woman stiffened at the flippant question and Ian winced.

"Please forgive her," he offered soothingly. "She's an American."

Randi vowed silently to make him regret that comment.

"That 'guy', as you put it," Mrs. Stern announced abruptly, "is the man who is haunting me. And I want you, Professor, to put a stop to it!"

"Who is he?" Ian asked.

"His name was Martin. He was my sister's lover and he went mad in this very room in Nineteen-Nineteen."

* * *

The War was finally over. The world was at peace and the economy was gearing down from its wartime high. The soldiers had come home, leaving too many to count behind in the muddy trenches and graveyards of France, and Paula was finally getting married to Martin.

He had come back six months ago, a shell of the man who had happily gone off to war in Nineteen-Fourteen. Out of his earshot, Paula complained bitterly he had shown little interest in her and that it was like kissing a ghost. Her shrill voice had pierced right through the Manor's thin plaster walls and Camilla knew all the problems by heart.

She walked past the post office remembering how the soldiers had looked as they had assembled there. Only five of the forty men who had left that first year had come back to Little Farthing. Several of her sister's friends wore black.

The girl drifted past the churchyard, her fourteen-year-old mind tangled with mixed emotions. The night was warm and humid, mist from an earlier rain shower rising around her. One of the new motorcars sped past her, its wheels clattering on the cobblestone streets.

She turned and looked at the stone church. A dark presence in the night, she had heard that it might close for good. Too many of the parishioners had died at the Somme and Verdun, and the Church of England was thinking of cutting back.

But in a week, Martin would marry Paula in front of its altar, and life wouldn't be worth living anymore.

"Don't marry her," she whispered softly. "I waited for you to come home, Martin."

In her heart she knew it was impossible that Martin would throw over her sister. Their son, Grenville, conceived on a leave three and half years ago, would prevent the honorable Martin from abandoning Paula. Mother had almost died of mortification when Paula had announced her pregnancy but after Grenville arrived, she'd become reconciled to her daughter and her grandson. Now, she doted on the youngster. Camilla remembered her childhood and knew the bitter sting of injustice. She had never been so indulged.

Camilla found herself beside the graveyard entrance where the long looming branches of the thorn tree reached out. She paused, then stepped off the stone walkway into the street. A motorcar came abruptly out of a bank of fog, its headlights piercing the gray. She gasped and leapt back, feeling the loose flagstones that topped the stone wall grind into her back. Her heart pounded like the guns on Armistice Day.

The automobile disappeared into the night as ghostly as it appeared.

Something touched her neck gently, moving up into her hair, tangling the strands.

She screamed and jumped away.

Then she laughed. One of the long twigs of the thorn tree had snared her blond hair.

Reaching up, she unwove the strand, pushing it back behind her ears.

"'Tis a night for lovers," a voice said softly out of the darkness beneath the tree.

She stepped backward, knowing that the wall at least would shield her for a second from the intruder. "What? Who — are you?"

The man stepped closer, put his hands palm-down on the stone wall, and leaned forward. The street lamp outlined the planes of his long face. "I'm a friend. Such a lady as you shouldn't be alone on a night like this."

Camilla flushed. "I want to be ... alone."

"Do you really want him that much?" the man asked softly. "This man you're grieving for."

She flinched, eyeing him warily. "What did you hear?"

He reached in his jacket pocket and pulled out a flower. "Take this home with you," he offered, holding it out.

She held up her hand warding him off. "I can't accept something from a stranger."

"Not even a special flower?" he wheedled. "Look at it. Just one blossom. It'll give you what you really want, Camilla."

His gaze seemed to go through her. What did she really want? Martin! Would the flower give her Martin? Anything would be worth that. But how could it ... She hesitantly took the flower without looking away from his dark eyes. "What is it?"

"A poppy. Just a pretty posy for a pretty woman. And you are a woman, Camilla, as much as your sister," the man said quietly. "You would be wasted on Martin."

"I won't ever have him," she snapped waspishly, tears flowing from her eyes. "I would give my ..."

"Soul?" he asked softly. "Do you love him that much?"

"It's too late," she said.

"Yes, far too late," he agreed. "Come back when you need me again, Camilla. We'll talk then."

Numb, she barely heard his words. She repeated bitterly, "It's too late for me," as she walked away into the fog.

Ten minutes later she let herself into the hallway of the Manor.

"Camilla!" her mother's stern voice came from the parlor. "Where have you been, girl? Tidy yourself immediately and come in here."

She felt a surge of rebellion and almost hatred. Couldn't she even take a walk without being watched?

Looking down, Camilla saw the single poppy blossom still in her hand. "Coming, Mother."

Martin was there, staring out the window over the back lawn, flicking his silver lighter on and off.

Her mother was by the gramophone selecting music.

"What's that?" Paula asked lazily from the sofa where Grenville was tearing pages out of a book and scattering them around. "Now, you're getting flowers, Camilla?"

The girl tossed back her head defiantly. "This one's for Martin."

The young man turned around with a slight smile and saw the flower. He screamed.

* * *

"I gave him a poppy from the churchyard which sent him insane. He never married Paula," the old woman concluded.

"Why?" Randi asked bluntly. "It's only a flower."

Mrs. Stern stared at her in utter disdain. "The fields of Flanders were strewn with poppies, and Martin was the only survivor of his company. He remembered the blood mixing with the flowers and he dwelled on it endlessly in the sanatorium before he died. Did no one teach you any history, young lady?" she demanded scornfully.

Randi felt a twinge of dislike. "Our schools gave up English history in Seventeen Seventy-six, ma'am."

"Several months later, I went to London," Mrs. Stern continued ignoring Randi's comment.

"What did you do there?" Randi asked wondering if she could sneak another cucumber sandwich.

Mrs. Stern's withered lips curled back in a bitter smile as she reviewed her memories. "Escaping Little Farthing. I met my husband, Phillip Stern, in London."

* * *

Camilla felt heavy and lumpish. Looking in the plate window's reflection she could see her body reflected like a giant whale with all the extra weight gained in Janet's birth.

She hated Phillip Stern with all her soul. This was the third pregnancy in four years and it hadn't been her fault that the children had only survived a month in each case. She and Phillip had quarreled over whether she should try again, Phillip insisting that it had to be done, Camilla pointing out she had nearly died each time.

And now, she was back in the last place she wanted to be as well. Little Farthing had changed little in the five years since she'd fled the afternoon of Martin's funeral. From the train she'd watched the mourners standing beside his open grave, the thorn tree casting a shadow over their dark blacks and gray clothing. She remembered holding up his silver lighter and waving farewell as the coach rumbled past. It had dropped from his hand and rolled under the couch the night he'd gone insane. She retrieved it the next day and kept the lighter for herself. A keepsake of what might have been if only her sister hadn't been around.

Camilla stopped on the steps of the church and took a deep breath, then went inside. Her mother would be waiting in the expensive coffin that she had chosen with Camilla's part of the inheritance. Camilla wouldn't inherit a penny and she hated her mother for that. She needed the money to escape Phillip.

It was dark despite the sunshine coming through the stained glass windows. She ignored the rustling and murmuring as she walked up to the front pew.

Paula and Grenville were already seated. Her older sister glared at Camilla and grudgingly moved down the hard wooden seat to let her in.

Grenville looked at her with the wide eyes of a seven-year-old. His dark hair was slicked back, his brown eyes had lashes like a girl's and Camilla felt sick for a second. He looked so much like Martin!

The service was mercifully brief as the church was freezing in the chill October air, and the vicar led the parade of mourners to the grave site.

Camilla tried to speak with a couple of her old friends but could feel a chill in their attitudes when she approached. Do they still blame me for Martin? It wasn't my fault! Bitterness ate into her. Probably Mother or Paula has told them all about my flight and they think I went to London to become a whore.

"And that's what Phillip has done to me," she realized abruptly. All he wants is a child. What about me?

"What is it you really want?" she heard a vaguely familiar voice in her ear.

She turned and looked.

The same man from the mist stood beside her. He still wore a dark suit, and his hair slicked back

from his long face. Camilla felt for a second as if she was alone in the graveyard, though from the corner of her eye, she could see the other mourners. Didn't they see him?

"Who are you? What do you want with me?" she demanded defiantly.

"You. I want you," he said simply.

"Oh, just another man who wants me," she replied aloud her tone loaded with bitterness. Someone beside her shot her a horrified glance and moved a few steps apart.

"I have watched you for years. We're so much alike. We both want things to go our way, and we can see exactly what we want. No illusions, Camilla. For a price, I can give you exactly what you really want," the man said with a ghost of laughter.

Camilla licked her lips. "What I want is Phillip dead," she said in a whisper. "I will do anything to free myself."

"Tonight." The whisper was a caress on her cheek. "Come back tonight under the tree and we'll discuss payment. Poppies aren't free. But your friar's about to speak."

Camilla turned as the vicar cleared his throat. She looked back a second later. The stranger was gone.

* * *

"Phillip died shortly after my mother, leaving me his only inheritor. Not a big fortune, but I didn't come back to Little Farthing again till after the second World War. One of those Jerry bombs hit my sister when she was in London, leaving Grenville to inherit this house. Then he was called into the Royal Marines and someone had to take care of the house. When he was killed at Dunkirk, his wife didn't want to stay here, and went back to her village. Of course Grenville's son is the Vicar, so I suppose the house belongs to him," Mrs. Stern concluded, stubbing out her cigarette. "I'm getting older, Professor, and I have to look after myself. I want to make my peace with the other side before I leave," she said with a determined thump of her cane.

"And now you say Martin is haunting you? When did you first see him?" Ian asked, folding his hands.

"And what makes you think he is haunting you, Mrs. Stern?" Randi said gently.

Mrs. Stern gave her a frigid stare and turned back to Ian. "I saw him down in the churchyard. His

grave's by that old tree."

Ian cut in hastily. "What exactly do you think I can do, Mrs. Stern? Wouldn't the Vicar be a better choice?"

She brushed aside the suggestion with a sniff. "He's just a boy. He doesn't know anything. He did give me your book, Professor, which is why I selected you for this. I was very impressed with the scholarship shown in *The Face Of Fear*. It was almost as if it had been written in the last century. Very complete."

And dull as parchment at certain points, Randi remembered. Still, if Mrs. Stern had read it, she was ahead of most of the literary community. Why had she chosen Ian, though? The book had no instructions for ghostly exorcisms!

Ian set his cup and saucer down on the fragile wooden table beside him. "Thank you, Ma'am. But I am not a trained exorcist. My training is in old myths and legends. Ghosts are a category all to themselves, Mrs. Stern."

"He's a demon," she said abruptly. "Your book had a chapter on demons. You go look for yourself at that graveyard and find a way to stop him."

Randi stared at her totally at a loss. Martin was a demon? "I thought you said he was a ghost!" she expostulated.

The old woman suddenly looked tired and lost, her skin fading to a parchment white. "I'm very tired of it. He's always near me, always waiting for me and I want to be free. That's why I thought you would do for me, Professor. Help me."

"I'll do my best," Ian replied gently as he stood. "I suppose the graveyard is our next stop. Thank you for tea, Mrs. Stern, we must be going."

"We haven't discussed your fee," she stated flatly reviving for an instant.

"That's all right," he answered soothingly. "We can discuss it later once I prove that I can indeed help you."

"Very well, young man," she agreed with a smile that showed yellowed crooked teeth. Randi almost flinched. "I have been told you are a very clever, clever man. I will see you tomorrow?"

"Yes, ma'am," Ian replied obediently, and led the way out, Randi following on his heels.

Outside, beyond the garden gate, the girl took a deep breath of clean air and let it out with a whoosh. "Ian, what an unhappy, bitter woman!"

"She's had a hard life, Randi," Ian answered abstracted. "What do you think of her story?"

"Why should Martin haunt her?" Randi asked bluntly. "She didn't give him that flower on purpose."

"And why should he come back now? It really doesn't make sense." Ian shrugged. "Let's check out the graveyard again."

* * *

The temperature was dropping further as the skies darkened. Randi shivered and closed her jacket, zipping it up.

The graves were not as badly tended as she had thought. In front of several were plastic flowers while others had small Union Jacks. Randi carefully wove her way over the uneven ground toward the far edge where the thorn tree loomed over several graves. The ground beneath it was dark and shadowy, uncovered roots showing like tentacles.

"Martin ... Danvers," she said standing just to the right of the grave. The incised lettering was barely perceptible in the twilight. "Here he is, Ian."

"Where would you expect him to be? Drinking half-and-half in the local?" her friend commented petulantly as he came up to the grave. He glanced up at the towering thorn tree. It loomed against the cloudy grey skies and the wind blew through it with a wail. "Well, it's a healthy specimen," he commented. "I guess living on all that blood centuries ago and the Vicar's mulch."

"Don't even joke about it," Randi warned, eyeing the tree. Her senses were far more attuned to the supernatural since she'd been cursed and there was something about the tree that made her sick.

She closed her eyes and caught one of the branches. Suddenly, she felt ice pour down her spine and her nose smelled blood and hunger, bitter vengeance and mockery, the distillation of an ancient evil. Something within the trunk stirred and laughed, and Randi whimpered. It reached out a tendril, the smell of dead meat clogging her sensitive nostrils, and she felt something move passed her.

"Randi!" Ian's voice was harsh in her ears. She felt his hands grip her shoulders and shake her. She

opened her eyes.

She was facing the church, cracked twigs in her clenched hands. The last traces of afternoon light glittered on the wire meshing and the glass of the windows.

Suddenly the wind laughed mockingly, and she heard rustling as the branches scraped each other. At the edge of her senses, she could feel that presence, cold, hungry and waiting for someone specific. But it wasn't her. It wanted someone else.

"Ian ... Let's get the hell outta here!" she screamed, running past him.

He scooped up both knapsacks and raced after her over the sodden ground toward the town's bright lights.

In the harsh light of the local pub, Randi put down her empty mug of bitter and took a deep breath. "What happened?" she asked licking the beer off her upper lip.

"You don't remember?" Ian asked. "You went as white as a sheet and stumbled back, then you were staring at that small church window as though God himself was going to appear and save you. That's when I grabbed you."

She shivered again and took a bite of the Cornish pastie on her plate. "It's still there, whatever it is. Waiting."

"Is it Martin?" he asked, taking a bite of his own savoury.

Randi stared at him. "Martin? No, not Martin!," she disagreed. "Not human, it was never human."

"One of those local deities the Vicar mentioned, then?" Ian joked uneasily.

"Nothing so benign, though I'm not sure anything they used to sacrifice children to, could be called benign! Mrs. Stern called it a demon and she's right!" She stared at him, her eyes filled with sudden horror. "Ian, it went right past me! It's after Mrs. Stern. What are you going to do for her?"

"I can't do anything for her," Ian admitted reluctantly. "I'm not a trained exorcist and I didn't feel a thing in front of that tree. Perhaps we can recommend someone in that line of work though most Catholic priests I know won't countenance it ..."

For a few moments they were silent, each eating their meal.

"Ian, I'm still wondering why Mrs. Stern asked you here," Randi finally said slowly chewing around a mouthful of beef and potato.

The man gave her a startled look. "What do you mean, Randi? You think she's not telling us something?"

"Again, why you? You're not a trained exorcist." Randi began to tick off facts on her fingers. "Let's look at the whole picture. She was in love with her sister's lover —"

"Puppy love," he nodded. "Woman always remember their first great love ... or so I'm told," he finished hastily as she gave him a dirty look.

"So she ran away from her home and saw it and her inheritance go to Paula's illegitimate offspring, she had an abusive husband, three dead children and now she's living in a house she grew up in and doesn't even own it! Ian, I've never met a person so full of personal bitterness and anger at life. She hates everything around her." The realization was blinding. "Ian, she's like that thing in the tree!"

"Oh, come now, Randi, Mrs. Stern's no demon and she doesn't have long to live. She must be almost ninety now. Maybe she is trying to make peace with her conscience."

"This manifestation of Martin is probably all in her mind," Randi concluded. "But whatever's out there in that tree might be taking Martin's image to haunt Mrs. Stern."

"Are you sure," Ian said delicately, moving back slightly, "that there was something out in that tree? It wasn't just pangs of hunger or anticipation of supper —" he broke off when she made a face at him.

"Hardly. And I still want to know why she chose you, Ian, to help her get rid of the ghost. Whether it's an illusion or not!"

He shrugged. "Tomorrow we can talk to her maid and find out how long this has been going on. We should talk to the Vicar as well after the ceremony."

"Where're we staying tonight, Ian?" Randi cocked her head hopefully.

He smiled engagingly amused by her transparent hopefulness. He wasn't quite to the point where he'd cross the line and sleep with a student ... but he knew it was just outside the door. "I found a bed-and-breakfast in town. Let's go and check in."

* * *

The night was crystal clear and icy. A slight breeze sneaked through shutters, rustling curtains, and chilling the bedclothes of the single bed. Outside it scattered dead leaves along the cracked streets and shook the barren trees. Somewhere in the bed-and-breakfast a phone rang twice.

Randi looked up at the nearly-full moon. At least the werewolf curse wasn't like my monthly, she consoled herself. She didn't get cramps or feel nauseous but the night she changed it was agony tripled. Well, we'll be back in London by then.

The street lamps took the village back to the beginning of the twentieth century and the church was a dark shape looming on the horizon against the crystal stars. Her imagination supplied the long fingers of the thorn tree and she stepped back from the glass with a feeling of revulsion. She remembered the mist-clad gardener and wondered if he had been the demon or just a man.

Her trained memory supplied other mentions of haunted foliage. There was a hazel tree that was reputed to have a demon down in South Wales, a weeping willow in Devon that was known to be the place where drowned bodies washed up.

Where was Ian? He had gone downstairs to get more towels and another blanket after Randi had complained about the cold but that had been ten minutes ago.

She turned back to her bed, and pulled a notebook out of her knapsack. At least she could write up the case while she was waiting.

Her mind went over the stories again and again. Something was missing. Mrs. Stern hadn't been very forthcoming about a number of things. Was it really Martin Danvers out there beneath the tree trying to exact revenge against the woman who drove him insane?

Randi didn't believe it. Whatever was out there was evil incarnate. So what connection did that thing really have with Mrs. Stern?

An idea struck her. Had that evil thing given Mrs. Stern's the flower? Had she given it to Martin in revenge? They had to know more about Mrs. Stern and the stranger before they could help the woman. Even if the old woman was insane, that thing in the tree needed to be contained. Not that Ian or I know the first thing about containing demons ...

Eager to discuss her insights with Ian, Randi hopped off the bed and headed for the door. Opening it, she could hear the sound of the television in the main room downstairs. She picked up her jacket, pulled it on, and then went down the narrow steps.

The placid landlord looked up from the living room. "Going out dear?"

"Where's Ian?" Randi panted.

"Your young man? He took a phone call and went out about five minutes ago."

Randi frowned. "Do you know who the call was from?"

"Oh, yes, dearie. That crazy Mrs. Stern from the Manor. She said she'd met him by the church."

* * *

As he approached the church, Ian wondered what Mrs. Stern had in mind. The old woman had commanded him to leave Randi behind and meet her by the church door, and he had been intrigued enough to follow her instructions. Besides Mrs. Stern and Randi had gotten along like oil and water, and he wasn't in the mood to be a referee at another fight.

The air was chilly crisp and he pulled up his collar as he came up the walkway. From inside he could hear organ music wheezing through some hymn, stopping randomly when the player hit a wrong key. Probably the vicar practicing for tomorrow's ceremony. It was almost ten in the evening by his watch.

"Professor."

Mrs. Stern's imperious tones were magnified in the cold air.

Ian peered toward the tree. The old woman was standing by the trunk, one hand on the bark, the other hidden at her side. Her cane was propped against the tree. The dark leaves surrounded her like a demonic halo.

"Mrs. Stern?" He approached hesitantly, belatedly realizing that he should have brought Randi. Or maybe gotten some kind of blessing from the vicar. Or holy water? The hairs on his neck rose. There was something in the graveyard besides him and the old woman.

She gazed at him bleakly, her face a hardened mask in the moonlight. "I didn't quite tell you everything, Professor."

"I know," he replied, slowing down until he stood across from her. Between them lay Martin's grave.

"You see, I saw my friend twice, Professor. One was for Martin, the second for Phillip," she explained in a calm reasonable tone. "He told me that all I had to do was give him what he wanted the third time."

"Him?" Ian repeated. "Which 'him' would that be, Mrs. Stern? Phillip? Martin?"

A trace of impatience showed on her face. "No, not Martin. Certainly not Phillip! The man by the wall. He's been here all along. My friend was here long before Little Farthing even existed."

"And what did you give him, Mrs. Stern?" Ian asked his tone suddenly flintlike. "What did you trade for these deaths?"

"What do you think? I was young and greedy. I traded him my soul, Professor. Such a small thing at the time. But I'm a coward and I don't want to go to hell."

For a moment, Ian's academic training made him want to laugh, but then his experiences with Randi made him pause.

"You sold your soul to a demon, Mrs. Stern? I don't think I can save you from him," Ian said quietly, feeling sorry for the old woman.

"You're a very clever man, Professor, and when I told him that you were coming here, he wanted you. He said it was time you met the reality what you were so ludicrously writing about. He wants you. It's my last chance of saving myself, Professor. I'm dying of lung cancer and when I do, he'll take me." She held up her hand. Moonlight glinted off the ancient service revolver in her grip. "So you see, you really can 'save' me."

With dawning horror, Ian took a step back and tripped over a tombstone.

As he struggled to get up, he smelled it. The putrid smell of rotted meat, reminiscent of Mrs. Stern's foyer, floated from the tree. Slowly the darkness began to gather into itself, until the shape of the tree trunk was obscured by the tall form.

The face had been carved on gargoyles that decorated the churchyards of England and the yellow-green eyes spread to twice a human's size as it moved toward the fallen man.

Ian felt a surge of pure horror. He scrambled to his feet and ran, feeling the searing breath of the man behind him.

Ten feet from the church door, he tripped again and sprawled at the feet of a stone Victorian angel.

Ian turned and looked back, smelling the hot putrid scent of the demon growing closer.

Someone screamed. He felt a hand yank him to one side. Looking up he saw Randi crouched over him, her face contorted in a snarl.

"It's not a full moon," he commented dazed. "Not till Monday."

"Get away from him!" Randi growled at the hovering demon who had paused halfway across the graveyard.

Mrs. Stern moved until she was standing beside the demon. She leaned heavily on her cane, but in the light of its eyes, Ian thought, she looked like a woman in her early twenties, the age when she had handed her soul to the demon. "Take them both!" she ordered, waving the revolver.

The eyes looked at her, then back at Randi and Ian. "She is already cursed by my people," it said mildly. The tenor voice was unnervingly calm. "I cannot take her."

Ian heard Randi give a sharp gasp. "Cursed by a demon?" she whispered. "I thought just a werewolf was bad enough."

"Don't get distracted," Ian urged. "We'll deal with that later! Get back!" He shoved her arm, but she didn't move from where she was kneeling.

"You're not going to take either of us," Randi hissed. "Take Mrs. Stern! She made the bargain!"

"You've always preferred younger blood," the old woman said with an unpleasant laugh. "Now I'm the one giving you what you wanted, my friend."

"Go back to the hell you came from," Ian commanded shakily, sitting up against the angel.

The demon laughed. "I have been long before your God came to this land and before your Christian hell was even an idea. My power here is in these people who always give me the blood I need."

"You've always preferred younger blood," the old woman repeated, cajoling the demon. "Take him and drink your fill even if you can't take the woman. I'll deal with her." The gun pointed directly at Ian as her arthritic finger pulled the trigger as the demon moved closer, spreading his black smoky tendrils.

The gun's hammer clicked down but the gun never fired. Mrs. Stern stared at it in disbelief and shook it angrily.

"That's Martin's gun, isn't it?" Ian asked, struggling to his feet. "This is his revenge. You sent him to hell on earth and he's not going to let you sent anyone else to hell!"

The old woman glared at him in fury. "I won't be stopped now! I've worked too hard on this!" She pointed the gun again and tried to fire. Nothing happened.

The demon's stench was overpowering as it moved closer and closer, the thin tendrils of black reaching for Ian. They wrapped around him like black ribbons, avoiding Randi as she tried to get between Ian and the demon. The mist spread to a fine web closing in around him.

"No!" Randi's scream reverberated through the crystal clear air.

The demon's tenor laugh sounded like the scrape of a knife on a meat bone as it thickened around Ian.

"Martin!" Mrs. Stern suddenly cried, stumbling backwards, holding her hands up, the gun still in one. "Don't —"

The music from inside the church stopped abruptly, and with a dazzling burst of light, the electricity went on inside the church.

Just as suddenly, the mist around Ian dissipated, leaving him gasping and shivering. "The light!" Ian cried weakly, looking up at the church. "Randi, the window!"

The small hexagonal glowed with the small candle bulb. The light fell directly on the dark leaves of the thorn tree.

The gun went off, and the woman's body folded into a heap.

The demon wailed louder than Randi's scream. It writhed, the dark mist resolving into a cloud that enveloped Mrs. Stern. A gun went off. She screamed thinly.

The vicar came out the front door running toward them. Seeing the foggy black cloud and the now-dully glowing eyes, he skidded to a stop. "What the devil —?"

The cloud swirled and thinned, the eyes fading last.

The three survivors looked from one to the other, then back at the tree. The vicar hesitantly walked over to the dead woman, as Ian got shakily to his feet. "Professor?" The vicar said in a

hesitant tone.

"Better leave the lights on, vicar," Ian warned, standing up and brushing himself off. "That thing in the tree didn't like it."

The churchman frowned. "That's only a myth told to —"

"That myth has killed at least two people in the last seventy-five years," Randi stated. "And it would have killed us."

"And I would not like to meet it again tonight!" Ian stated flatly. "I'm afraid your great-aunt is dead, Vicar."

As the vicar turned the body upright, Ian grimaced and looked away. Mrs. Stern had died in terror. Even knowing what she had done and what she had planned, this seemed a harsh punishment for her sins.

The vicar crossed himself, then looked up inquiringly. "Two people? Come inside and tell me about it. I must call the police and tell them Graunty's here."

"And, for heaven's sake, vicar, keep the lights on!" Ian urged as they followed the man up the stone walk.

* * *

It dawned cold and clear. Icy dew crusted the windows of the Norman church as the people gathered for Armistice Day services. Most of the people wore small red poppies in their collars or the brim of their dark hats.

Ian, wearing a dark coat with a red paper poppy in the top button sat in the back of the church. Randi sat beside him, her tangle of curls restrained under her black beret and her clothes subdued.

Around them the elderly crowd was being helped into the pews. The altar was decorated with the greens and red poppies that had been lying on the floor the day before.

The vicar came in and went to the pulpit. The night's stress had added lines to the round face. Ian thought he probably looked much like his grandfather, Martin, had after the War.

"This is a day of dedication," the vicar began thoughtfully, "to the brave souls who gave their lives so that we might be free. This day celebrates courage and loyalty and trust. Our valiant men and

women stood as a bulwark against the powers that would have destroyed us, as they would today. The need for their efforts and sacrifice has not lessened."

Randi's gaze shifted to the hexagonal window. Her gaze picked out the letters in gothic script. Danvers. Probably the man who had left the bequest had met the entity, though the family must have known about the thing before the Reformation. The Danvers chapel had had the window set in the exact position to seal the demon in the tree; the family must have known about the demon for centuries. Had the same thing happened in the sixteenth century when the Puritans had torn down the castle? Had the demon basically stopped the town in time like it did in Nineteen Fourteen, feeding off the people until a Danvers came back and lit a candle?

And had Martin come back yesterday to save Ian? There was no reasonable cause for the gun to have jammed when pointed at Ian, and fired when turned on Mrs. Stern. The woman's body lay in the town's funeral home waiting for burial; the vicar planned to bury her next to the church, well away from the thorn tree.

What about Ian? They had spent the night in each other's arms but that was because Ian was in shock after being terrified, and all Randi's words weren't as much use as just holding him. He'd fallen asleep when the first streaks of dawn appeared behind the church. Randi hadn't slept at all but barely felt the lack. The demon's words kept haunting her. The werewolf curse. Did the demon mean she'd never be the way she was before she came to England? Somehow that didn't seem fair. There had to be a cure, a ray of hope to keep her from totally giving up and killing herself before she killed more people. The demon was very convincing when he talked. Maybe that was part of his powers. Maybe if Mrs. Stern hadn't believed in him, she wouldn't have gone into his arms. Randi silently resolved, her gaze on the cross, that she wouldn't believe what the demon said. There had to be a cure. She returned her attention to the vicar.

"We honor the dead of so many wars ... the First World War, the Second World War, Indochina, the Falklands, Kuwait ... Never let them be forgotten."

"And pray that the light stays on for all eternity. For all our sakes," Ian whispered putting his hand over Randi's. She squeezed it and settled back to listen to the church organ swell with a hymn of belief.