
WINTERWOOD
JG FAHERTY
CHILDHOOD FEARS
SAMHAIN

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You'd better watch out!

No one in Anders Bach's family believed his old tales of Winterwood, a place where Krampus and his Wild Hunt rule a frozen land and where bad children don't get coal for Christmas, they get baked into pies or forced into slavery. But now the Yule Lads have kidnapped Anders's grandsons, and he has to rescue them before they're lost forever. Anders and his daughter must cross the divide between worlds and enter Winterwood, where evil holds sway and even the reindeer have a taste for human flesh. By the time the sun rises, they'll learn the awful truth about Winterwood: there is no escape without sacrifice.

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Winterwood
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Winterwood

JG Faherty

Dedication

To my wife, Andrea, my parents, and my friends who continue to have my back through thick and thin in this crazy world.

To my second eyes: Rena Mason, Patrick Freivald, Erinn Kemper, Peter Salomon, and Chantal Noordeloos – as always, you helped shave off the rough edges!

To writers everywhere: you are the ones who are the story tellers, who keep the tales and traditions and legends alive.

And to the editors and artists at Samhain, especially Don D'Auria, who continue to put out exceptional quality for all those readers who enjoy a shiver and a nightmare with their reading.

Winterwood

Dec. 24, 1911

Death pursued Anders Bach and his friends through the freezing night.

"Faster! Faster!"

Anders needed no urging from his companions to hurry. Not when the Yule Cat had them in its sights. They'd thought the tales of the *Jólaköttur* nothing but silly bedtime stories, tales to terrify little children.

They were wrong.

He sped down the street as if swept along by the winter winds that carried the ice and snow from the mountains. Two of his classmates veered to the left. He couldn't tell who, thanks to the tears in his eyes from the wind and cold. The rest of them flew as fast as their legs could carry them down the slick cobbled stones of the empty street. Someone shouted for help—*"Hilfe! Hilfe mir!"*—but to no effect. The words only bounced off the battened shutters and locked doors of the village homes. If anyone inside was awake to hear, they prudently paid no heed. Not during the nights of the Yule when the doors between worlds opened and the monsters roamed the earth.

Behind them, the Yule Cat roared in anticipation of its kill, and warm liquid dampened Anders's pants as his bladder let loose. He didn't let it slow him. Better pants soaked with *pisse* than eaten alive.

Somebody cried out, a high-pitched wail of pain and terror. Anders thought it might be Heinrich but he couldn't be sure, not with his heartbeat pounding in his ears. Anders didn't slow to find out. To slow or look back meant certain death. Or worse.

He saw his street coming up and waited until the last second to make his turn, hoping the cat couldn't stop in time. He twisted his body and cut left, only to have his boots slip on the icy stones. Pain flared in his knees and elbows where they struck the pavement, but he ignored it, pushing himself to his feet and forcing his legs to move again. Another scream, this one cut off midcry.

That's two it's killed. Why won't it stop?

He knew the answer, even in his terror. Once the Yule Cat had the taste of human blood, it wouldn't rest until it got every foolish child who'd dared to tempt fate.

Three houses down, an open window beckoned to him. His bedroom. Once he got

inside, he'd be safe. His *papa* would know what to—

A long, wailing yowl so close he pictured the giant cat a step behind him, a massive paw raised and ready to strike. Anders put on a desperate burst of speed, hunching his body forward to make a smaller target. Something tore his hat away, and he prayed it was only the wind.

Two more strides and he reached his window. He leaped up, grabbing the sill with both hands. He'd made it! He lifted one leg and—

Agony exploded across his side and the world spun around. His head hit the side of the house and the world went dark.

When he opened his eyes again, he lay on his back in the snow.

Staring into the face of hell.

The Yule Cat towered over him, as tall as a horse and twice as wide, its glowing, green eyes narrowed to slits and its ears laid back. A snarl rumbled up from its broad chest, and the stench of decayed meat fell on Anders like a foul sheet. The cat raised a paw, exposing claws as long as a boy's hand. Shreds of bloody cloth hung from two of them.

An explosion echoed through the street and the cat moved back a step, revealing a most welcome sight. His father, nightgown flapping in the wind, standing at the open window with a rifle in his hands.

"Go away!" Josef Bach hollered at the cat and then fired the rifle once more. This time the shot had more of an effect. The giant cat roared and swatted at the window. Josef ducked, narrowly avoiding the lethal claws that shattered glass and carved thick gouges through wood. When he reappeared, he held something different in his hands.

A box wrapped in red ribbon.

"That's enough, Cat," he called out, waving the box. "This is new clothes for the boy."

The cat's eyes narrowed and it looked from the window to Anders, one paw raised to strike again. For a moment, Anders feared the presence of the gift might not be enough to stay the beast's killing blow, that the old tales were wrong and it really could kill a child who'd received a present of clothing from his family for Christmas.

Then, with an angry growl still rumbling in its chest, the cat turned and slunk down the road. Anders remained on the ground as he watched it go, unable to believe he'd been spared. Only when it had disappeared into the night did he attempt to stand.

As soon as he moved, his pain returned a thousand times worse than before. He cried out and grabbed at his wound. Blood, hot against his cold hands, seeped through his fingers. Puddles of it darkened the snow where he'd lain. From far away, his father's voice called to

him, "Anders? Anders!"

Then the night closed in and claimed him.

His last thought was that the Jólaköttur had won after all.

Dec. 23, 1979

"And that is how I came to have these." Anders Bach pulled up his shirt, revealing three twisting, white scars that ran diagonally from his back to the tops of his ribs and down almost to his navel.

His two grandsons let out simultaneous gasps and he nodded. "Ja, I've carried the mark of the cat all my life. A reminder that you must be good all year and earn your Christmas presents or the Yule Cat will come for you and eat you alive."

Anders formed his hands into claws and lunged at the boys, who yelped and jumped back right on cue.

Despite the seriousness of his story, Anders had to fight back a grin at their wide-eyed looks. Twins in more than appearance, the boys reacted the same, moved the same and quite often thought the same. Which sometimes led to trouble since it meant neither of them had an opposite to advise caution when it came to making the kinds of bad decisions mischievous nine-year-olds were prone to.

"What happened next?"

"Did the Yule Cat ever come back for you?"

Anders shook his head. "I never saw it again. But then, I never disobeyed my—"

"What the hell are you telling them now?"

Anders looked up and saw his daughter, Anna, and her husband, Paul, in the opening between the living room and the kitchen, their arms filled with shopping bags. White flakes of snow decorated their hats and shoulders. He'd been so caught up in his story that he'd never heard them come home.

"Grandpa says the Yule Cat is coming tonight, Mom."

"And it eats children who've been bad all year."

"Oh, for… That's enough stories for tonight, I think." Anna handed her bags to her husband and then pointed at the children. "Nick, Jake. Upstairs. Now. Time for bed. I'll be up in ten minutes and you both better be under the covers with your teeth brushed."

"But Mommm…" they whined in unison.

"No buts. March."

Anna waited until the boys were out of the room before turning to Anders.

"How many times have I asked you to stop with all that fairy-tale nonsense? Thanks to your stories about Krampus and the Wild Hunt, they were so afraid of Santa last year they wouldn't even pose for a picture at the mall. I finally had to tell them Santa isn't real. Not that it mattered. Even after I took away that big chunk of their childhood before I wanted to, they still ended up having nightmares for weeks. Now you're filling their heads with more bullshit to keep them up at night."

"The old tales are important." Anders knew too well the futility of his argument but couldn't help himself. "Otherwise, they die out and then people aren't safe. Besides, they do keep children from misbehaving. Look at you. You never got into trouble as a girl. You parents today, you coddle the children. Too much entitlement leads to spoiled brats and bad grades. And this time of year, that's not good."

"Oh, for the love of…" Anna shook her head and sat down on the arm of the couch across from him. "Did you ever think that maybe all these superstitions aren't good, either? Look at you. You grew up afraid of your own shadow and did your best to make me the same way. Of course I was good. I had phobias about everything, thanks to your gruesome stories. You know how many times I woke up in the middle of the night from bad dreams when I was their age?" She motioned toward the stairs.

"Those phobias kept you from harm."

Anna's brows turned down and her lips tightened. She took a deep breath before speaking. "They also made me a laughingstock at school. Other kids got toys at Christmas. I got holiday sweaters and warnings to watch out or the Yule Cat would eat me. Other kids got to trick-or-treat. I had to stay inside so the spirits of the dead wouldn't steal my soul."

Anders opened his mouth but his daughter cut him off, her expression as sharp and cold as the icicles hanging from the gutters outside. "Listen to me. My kids aren't going to grow up that way. And if you can't abide by my rules, then maybe next year you shouldn't come here for Christmas."

With a final glare, Anna stood and left the room, leaving Anders speechless.

Not see the family at Christmas? But they were all he had left, with Willa lost to cancer and Johann, Anna's brother, killed in Vietnam. The very thought of it drove a spike through his chest and made him want to reach for his heart pills. Why couldn't Anna see he only had the best intentions? If only she'd get past her own fears, her anger.

These are different times, Anders. Willa's voice. How often had she said that to him when she was alive? Different times, yes. But the old dangers still existed. He knew it, even if Willa had never believed. Of course, she'd been born in the United States, raised in a city. *My*

family left those things behind us when they came to this country, she'd always say. *You should too. You no longer live in the Black Forest.*

No, he didn't live in the *Schwarzwald* anymore, but that meant nothing. The Holly King and his vile creatures could appear anywhere. Just because the Wild Hunt favored the cold lands of Northern Europe didn't guarantee safety in Pennsylvania, where winters could get mighty cold as well.

But Anna would never consider that possibility. She'd outgrown the old stories despite how he'd tried to raise her. Gone to college, where they'd taught her about science and turned the legends of her people into fairy tales. And her husband, who'd grown up with stories of jolly old Santa and Rudolph and kindly elves, couldn't even imagine a dark side to the holidays. No, they would never believe.

Let's hope they never have to.

Anders pushed himself out of the chair, his old bones creaking and popping, and headed for the guest room. He still had things to do before bed. Anna and Paul might not believe, but he still did. Perhaps he couldn't tell stories to the children anymore.

That didn't mean he couldn't do other things to keep them safe.

"You know, you were kind of hard on him."

Anna Willis sighed and put down her book. She'd been expecting Paul to say something about the argument that had taken place earlier. He wouldn't be the man she loved if he hadn't.

"Yeah, I know. I'll apologize in the morning. But you can't imagine what it was like growing up in that house."

"You're right, I can't. But I've heard his stories. Some of them are pretty dark."

"Dark isn't the word for it. My father ruined every holiday with his stupid superstitions. Every single, goddamned holiday. Christmas in the Bach household wasn't about Santa or parties or presents. Instead, we got tales of the Krampus, who wears red-and-black leather and hunts unwary souls during the nights before Christmas, riding through towns on a giant deer with his wild hounds by his side. And don't forget the Yule Elf, who spied on you to make sure you weren't lazy."

"I'm sure he didn't mean any harm. My grandparents used to tell us all sorts of crazy fairy tales too. Some of them were damn scary. Kept me up all night."

"Did your parents tell you that the Catholic Church made up Santa so people would forget the old ways?"

"That's actually true," Paul said, but Anna ignored him.

"I don't care if it's true. You're not supposed to tell little kids that you grew up in the Black Forest surrounded by spirits and demons."

Paul propped himself on one arm and gave her one of his half smiles. When he spoke, the minty smell of mouthwash filled the space between them.

"Those were different times. Your father did the best he could, especially after coming to a new country. He put a roof over your head and food on the table. That's more than a lot of kids can say."

A pang of guilt dug into Anna's stomach, joining the one already embedded there by her earlier overreaction to her father. He was right, as usual.

"I know I shouldn't complain," she said, placing her hand over his. "But I can't help it. Maybe nightmares and getting teased at school aren't the worst things that can happen, but they sure as hell weren't fun. And I don't want our kids growing up frightened to go to bed at night. There's enough in this world to be afraid of. They don't need sick, twisted holiday stories to make things worse."

"Hey, it's cool. I'm on your side. All I'm saying is maybe banning him from Christmas is overdoing it a bit." He leaned over and kissed her cheek. "Good night, baby."

"Night." Anna turned the light off and snuggled down farther into the covers, the twin daggers of her guilt digging even deeper into her guts. She'd gone overboard. And she would apologize in the morning.

Unless my kids wake up screaming at 3:00 a.m. Then he can deal with them. And me.

Jake Willis came awake in his bed with a gasp. He'd been sure a pair of giant, green eyes hovered over him. The eyes of the Yule Cat. Then the details of the bedroom became clear and he understood it had just been a bad dream, that the giant cat hadn't been chasing him through the streets, ready to tear him apart and swallow the bloody pieces. What he'd imagined were glowing eyes were just the matching Charlie Brown night-lights across the room.

A low moan made him jump, thinking maybe he hadn't been dreaming after all. But it was only Nick, tossing and turning on his bed, caught up in his own dream. A second later, Nick's eyes opened and he sat up. "No!"

Jake watched the terror fade from his brother's face, replaced by relief. "I had a nightmare too," Jake whispered.

Nick looked over at him. "The Yule Cat?"

Jake nodded. "He was gonna eat me."

"Me too."

Neither of them spoke. Then Jake got up and sat on his brother's bed. "I don't think I can go back to sleep."

"Me either."

Another pause. Jake's stomach gurgled.

"I want some cookies."

Nick smiled. "Cookies are good. But I've got a better idea."

"What?"

"You saw all those bags Mom and Dad came home with. I'll bet they had presents in them. Wanna see what they got us?"

"I don't know." Jake frowned. "We're not supposed to. And I really want some cookies."

"We can do both. C'mon." Nick pushed past his brother and stood. Jake hesitated for a second and then joined him.

After quickly donning the sweaters and jeans they'd been wearing earlier, and checking to make sure the lights were off in their parents' room, they tiptoed their way down the hall and then descended the stairs, careful to avoid any spots where the floor had a tendency to squeak. It wasn't the first time they'd made a midnight raid on the kitchen, and they reached the living room faster and quieter than any burglar could have done.

The raspy sounds of snoring coming from the guest room told them their grandfather was fast asleep.

"Cookies," Jake said, pointing at the kitchen.

"Presents first," Nick countered. "We can get the cookies after. If we get caught in the kitchen now, Mom and Dad will make us go back to bed and we'll never get to the presents."

"Okay. Where should we start?"

"The basement."

Their slippers *shushing* on the carpet, the twins crossed the living room, stopping just long enough to pick up and shake the two brightly wrapped boxes under the Christmas tree, boxes that hadn't been there earlier. The gifts bore matching tags, one *To Jake* and the other *To Nick*, both signed with the illegible scrawl they deciphered as *From Opa*.

"Another stupid sweater," Jake whispered.

"Lame. C'mon, the good stuff has to be downstairs."

At the bottom of the basement stairs, Nick flicked the lights on, revealing the long space of the main area, which their father liked to call his hangout. A pool table occupied

the center of the room. To one side sat a cabinet that doubled as a bar, brown and green bottles occupying its shelves. Past the pool table, a dartboard hung on the wall and two couches sat in front of a wooden television cabinet. A green shag rug covered most of the floor and a lava lamp sat atop the TV.

It only took a few minutes of searching to reveal the complete absence of any gifts.

"Nothing," Jake said, peering under the couches.

"Nothing," Nick repeated, his head inside the cabinet under the bar.

"Let's try the laundry room." But a single glance told them that the small, square utility space contained no surprises except for a fat, brown spider that had somehow survived the first half of winter.

"Now what?" Jake asked.

"Now we get some cookies." They returned to the main room, neither of them talking. In the silence, the humming of the fluorescent lights in the ceiling sounded unusually loud. As they neared the stairs, Jake spoke up.

"I don't think Mom likes the stories Grandpa tells us."

Before Nick could answer, a loud roar filled the air and made them both jump. Jake cried out and grabbed his brother.

"The Yule Cat!"

They turned as one, hearts pounding, expecting to see the ferocious man-eating beast coming toward them.

And found only an empty room.

The bellow of the imaginary cat changed into the *whoosh* of rushing air, and they understood how they'd been fooled.

"The furnace," Nick said.

"Maybe we should go back to bed." The safety of his bedroom suddenly seemed a lot more appealing to Jake than even a whole plate of cookies.

"Why? Afraid the Krampus is gonna get you?"

"That's not funny. Grandpa says he's real."

"We used to think Santa was real too. So if Santa's not real, how can any of the other stories be?"

"I guess." Jake looked unconvinced. "But Grandpa said—"

"Grandpa says a lot of stuff because he thinks we're still little kids. It's all just made up. You don't believe in ghosts or closet monsters, do you?"

"No…but that doesn't mean he's always wrong."

"Oh yeah? Well, if the Krampus is real, how come nobody at school ever heard of him?"

"I dunno." Jake wished his brother would just shut up. "But I still think we should go back to bed. If we get caught, we'll be in big trouble."

"You're just being a baby. No one's gonna—"

"Wait. Did you hear that?"

"What?" Nick looked around. "I didn't hear anything."

"Shhhh. Listen."

Both boys held their breath. Except for the deep hum of the furnace, the basement remained empty of sound. Jake began to wonder if his ears had played tricks on him

Then he heard it again.

Bells.

The cheerful tinkling of Christmas bells, like the ones at the bottom of the tree upstairs and in the cheery Christmas songs that played on the radio every ten minutes.

Jake glanced at the stairs, but no one was there.

"It's coming from outside," Nick said, pointing at one of the windows. The boys stood up and tried to see out, but the window was too high and the night too dark.

"Maybe it's Santa!" Belief surged back to life inside Jake. Their parents had been wrong. Santa *did* exist.

"But it's not Christmas."

"So? He came early."

Nick shook his head. "Santa doesn't come early."

"Then what is it?"

Nick shook his head and then stopped. His eyes lit up and he smiled.

"I'll bet it's Mom and Dad putting presents out in the garage. That's where they've been hiding them."

"Why would they do it at night?"

"I don't know. But they'll be back any minute. C'mon. We gotta get upstairs before they see us."

"Why don't we just hide here?"

"You can hide here. And when you get caught, I'll get all your Christmas presents." Nick made a face at him and then went up the stairs.

Jake hesitated then decided he'd rather be grounded with his brother than be alone in the basement, which suddenly seemed very dark and creepy, despite the lights. He tiptoed up the stairs and found Nick standing in the kitchen, frowning in the dim glow from the

Christmas tree in the living room. No other lights were on, and the house was just as quiet as earlier.

"There's nobody here," Nick whispered.

Ring-a-ling-ling.

Nick turned. The bells were louder now, the jingling right outside the back door. He reached for the knob.

"Don't!"

Nick stopped. "Why not?"

"What if it's Krampus?" Saying the word sent a chill down Jake's neck and made him shiver.

Nick rolled his eyes. "Krampus is just another dumb, old story. Besides, how could he sneak up on people if he went around ringing bells?"

Before Jake could object again, Nick opened the door. A gust of freezing wind blew in carrying the last of the night's snowflakes with it. Nick stepped outside, Jake at his heels, arms crossed over his chest to block the cold. Fresh snow crunched under their slippers.

Jingle-ling-ding.

Jake looked to his left just in time to see a large shadow disappear around the corner of the house, leaving him with an empty yard and a fleeting image of an animal with long legs and dark fur and antlers.

"Did you see—?"

"A reindeer!" This time Jake led the way, running across the yard, unmindful of the frigid air biting at his face and neck.

They rounded the corner and came to an abrupt stop at the sight of not a reindeer but a goat, the biggest goat they'd ever seen. Its horns pointed up like twin spikes and its amber eyes glowed in the silver moonlight seeping through the clouds. It shook its head and snorted, and the string of bells around its neck tinkled and chimed.

"Well, well, how lucky are we? Sneaking out to follow our bells when you should be fast asleep? You two lads must not be right in the head."

Nick and Jake turned in unison at the rough, guttural voices. Standing behind them were two figures their own height but heavier. The strangers wore black pants and boots, and green leather coats whose tall, peaked hoods hid their faces.

"Who are you?" Nick asked.

One of the strangers laughed and pulled his hood back, revealing a nightmare face, lumpy and misshapen. Ragged tufts of hair sprouted at odd places on his chin and cheeks.

His eyes shined yellow like the goat's.

"Our names do not matter. But our good fortune does, finding two more fools for the feast."

Jake tried to shout for help but something struck him in the back, knocking him into the snow. Strong hands grabbed him and pulled a heavy sack over his head. A muffled gasp and a *thud* told him the strangers had gotten Nick too. Someone lifted him into the air while he struggled to regain his breath.

No, not someone. They were elves. But not Santa's elves. Something much worse.

He had time for one last thought before a heavy object hit the back of his head.

Grandpa was right.

Anders Bach knew something was wrong the moment he opened his eyes. Despite the heat running full blast—he could hear the roar of the furnace through the grate next to his bed—the air had a nasty chill to it. His first thought was that a window had broken during the night. Over the years, he'd seen it happen more than once, old glass no longer able to take the strain of subzero temperatures. With a groan, he tossed the covers back and sat up, his seventy-seven-year-old bones protesting each movement, the way they did every morning before he took his arthritis medicine.

With his body no longer protected by three layers of blankets, the frosty air roused him to full wakefulness. It struck him that the draft he'd felt was more than chilly. It was downright cold. With the vision of a shattered picture window motivating him to move faster, he donned his robe and slippers and hurried towards the doorway, knowing he'd be the first person to discover the problem. The rest of the family had a tendency to sleep late on the weekends.

Lazy. The whole verdammt generation. In my day—

Anders stopped. From where he stood, he could see the entire living room. A dull-gray dawn struggled to get through the frost and snow covering the outside of the windows, leaving most of the room in shadows. However, it illuminated the glass well enough to show none of the panes were broken.

Yet the air had grown even colder.

Anders turned in a slow circle, his hands out to feel the direction of the draft.

The kitchen.

He paused, wondering if he'd been mistaken about a broken window. Perhaps Anna or Paul had simply gotten up early and stepped outside to get the paper, leaving the back door

open in the process.

"Ah, it's still a waste of heat. Do they think money grows on trees?" More annoyed now than worried, he entered the kitchen. Sure enough, the back door stood wide open, filling the room with chill winter air. *Lazy.* He went to close it, his eyes automatically scanning the driveway to see who'd been such a fool.

He froze before his hand reached the knob.

Clearly visible in the fresh snow were footprints. Footprints too small to be Anna's or Paul's.

The boys. They went outside. Why?

A new fear came to life inside him. Footprints leading out, but none coming in. A cold house, much too cold for the door to have been open for only a few minutes.

How long ago did they leave?

Anders tracked the twin line of prints. They went across the porch, down the stairs and out into the yard, where they curved around the side of the house and disappeared. He turned to grab his boots from the alcove by the door and his heart gave a painful flutter when he saw two pairs of rubber snow boots sitting on the mat. A cold feeling erupted inside him, one that had nothing to do with the winter wind already carving through the thin cotton of his robe.

Even more frightened now, he stuck his feet into his boots and hurried outside, not even bothering to buckle them. Ignoring the way the wind burned his cheeks and gnawed at his aching bones, he clutched his robe tighter and followed the tracks to the corner.

And then stopped when more prints joined them.

At least two other people. And…

No. It can't be.

A third set of tracks, but not from any human foot.

Hoofprints.

Roughly oval in shape. The kind of prints a deer might make.

Or a goat?

Dread bloomed into full-blown panic, which only grew worse when he came to the flattened area of snow that told him there'd been a struggle. A struggle from which only one set of prints led away.

The ones that weren't human.

Anders turned and raced for the house, shouting for Anna and Paul to wake up. Fear lent strength to his legs. Fear for the things to come, the things that would have to be done.

Fear that it might already be too late.

Anders fumed as he watched the minutes tick by. An entire day wasted while Anna and Paul foolishly concentrated their attention on useless efforts to find Jake and Nick. They'd called the police as soon as they double-checked the house and garage to make sure the boys hadn't snuck back in, that they weren't hiding somewhere.

When the police arrived, an officer had conducted the same search over again while his partner asked a series of questions. As Anders expected, the officer had cut him off the moment he brought up the fact that the only footprints leading away from the trampled-down area were those of the animal.

"Wind and snow can fill prints in pretty fast, Mr. Bach. That deer probably just walked by afterwards." The officer, a sleepy-eyed, young man named Billingsley, tapped his notepad with his pen. "Just tell me what you saw and leave the detective work to us, okay?"

After getting a list of the boys' friends and the places they frequented to play, the police departed with assurances to do all they could to locate the missing children, including initiating an Amber alert and assigning several officers to search the neighborhood.

"In the meantime, the best thing you folks can do is sit tight in case the boys come home or call."

Turning to his daughter, Anders again tried to bring up the subject of the hoofprints.

"Don't start with your superstitions," Anna had warned. "A goddamned deer ran across our yard. That doesn't mean magical fucking elves exist. Do me a favor and stay here in case they come back. We're going back out to look for them."

"The police said we should wait," Paul said and then backed away, hands up in surrender, when Anna turned her fury on him.

"Our boys are missing. I'm not sitting on my ass when we could be out there trying to find them."

That left Anders to spend the rest of the day in an empty house, staring at the clock while the nightmares of his childhood circled his thoughts like vultures, reminding him of the terrible fate that awaited the boys if something wasn't done. The right something.

Now, with dusk fast approaching, he knew he couldn't wait any longer. Time was running out. He had to get them back before it was too late.

He'd just begun to make a mental list of the things he'd need when the front door

opened and Anna walked in, stomping snow off her boots. Paul followed a step behind, his boyish face drawn and tired, the dark circles under his eyes a matched set to his wife's.

"Did the police call?" Anna asked.

Anders shook his head. "Anna, we need to talk. There isn't much time. Those prints. It was the *Jólasveinar*, the Yule Lads, I am sure of it. They were here, and the boys must have seen them and gone outside, why I don't know, but—"

"Stop it! Stop with the goddamned fairy tales." Anna threw her hat and scarf on the floor. "My boys—your grandchildren—are missing, and all you can do is talk about fucking make-believe elves and magic animals."

"We can get them back tonight. It's our only chance. When it's dark and the Krampus leaves Winterwood for the Hunt, we can—"

"Jesus, Dad, can't you just shut up?" Tears streaming down her face, Anna ran for the stairs.

Paul stood there for a moment, watching her, then looked at Anders and shook his head, his eyes as cold as the winter night.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Then he crossed the room and followed Anna upstairs. A second later a door slammed.

They've closed me out. His own tears threatened to fall. How could they think he was trying to hurt them, that he didn't care? He would do anything for the boys, for his family. Sacrifice his life.

In that moment, he made his decision.

He would find the boys and bring them back.

Or die trying.

A few minutes before ten, Anders opened the back door and placed a steaming bowl of *haferbrei* on the porch. He'd made the porridge the traditional way, adding cinnamon, sugar and butter to the steaming oatmeal, just as his mother and grandmother used to do. Then he put on his heavy winter coat and sat down at the table, wondering just when the tradition of putting milk and cookies out for Santa had taken the place of leaving a warm dish for the *Julenissen*, the Yule Elf. Who in their right mind would want cold milk and dry cookies after being out for hours on a freezing night?

Five minutes passed, and he sighed. He had no idea how long it would take for the elf to show. Bad enough he'd had to wait until night before he could even try. How many fresh bowls would he need to make before—?

"So, it seems someone still remembers the ways of old. Should it be gratitude or caution I express?"

Anders jumped and his heart kicked against his ribs. The previously empty porch now held a most amazing sight. A short, thin figure, his red hat just reaching the knob of the door, his coat as green as summer grass. Black pants and boots with buckles of shiny silver completed the outfit. Behind him stood a diminutive goat, not much larger than a medium-sized dog. While the elf appeared cautious but friendly, his Yule Goat glared at Anders with suspicious yellow eyes.

"Julenissen."

"Aye. But if you have something to say, best be quick." The ruddy-faced elf picked up the bowl and shoveled oatmeal into his mouth as he spoke, "I've no time for idle chat."

"I've need of your help. A minute of your time in return for filling your belly." Anders rose and scooped more porridge from the pot, placed the second bowl on the table.

The Yule Elf's eyes narrowed. "I've a long night ahead and few minutes to spare." His gaze shifted to the hot porridge. "Perhaps just one. Ask what you wish, but I give no promise of answers."

Fast as a bird, the elf climbed onto a chair and proceeded to dig into the cereal in voracious fashion.

Knowing he had little time, Anders launched into his plea. "My grandsons were taken by the Lads. I need to get them back, and only you can show me the way to Winterwood."

The elf looked up, his eyes wide. The spoon fell from his hand, the *clink* of metal on glass loud in the quiet room.

"Winterwood? You don't strike me as the foolish type."

"Not foolish. Desperate."

"Two and the same." The elf jumped down from his chair. "I'm sorry, I cannot help you. My thanks for the porridge, and now I must go."

"No." Anders slammed the door shut before the elf could reach it. Outside, the goat bleated and kicked at the wood. "Please. Just tell me how to make the crossing. Once there, I'll find them and bring them back."

The elf leaped for the doorknob and Anders grabbed at him. They fell to the floor and rolled back and forth, Anders struggling to keep a grip on the wriggling figure. A chair crashed over and then Anders got his arms wrapped around the elf, pinning him in place.

"I can't let you go before you tell me." Anders gasped out the words. His heart danced a rapid beat, and he prayed it wouldn't give out before he could bring Nick and Jake back from

the other side of winter's curtain.

"What the hell is going— Oh my God!"

Anders looked up, his attention diverted by Anna's shout. The Yule Elf took advantage of his momentary distraction, slipping free and jumping to his feet. Instead of trying to catch him again, Anders wedged himself against the door, preventing the elf from pulling it open. The door rattled each time the Yule Goat's hooves struck it, sending painful vibrations up Anders's back and shoulders, but he kept his weight on it. With a sigh, the elf stepped away.

"What the fuck is that?"

Paul Willis had joined his wife at the kitchen's entrance. Both still wore the same clothes from earlier in the evening. Their faces showed duplicate expressions of shock, wide eyes and open mouths creating dark circles against pale flesh.

"The Julenissen." Anders managed to get the word out between deep, wheezing breaths.

"There's no such thing," Anna whispered, staring at the elf, who glowered back with narrowed eyes. Outside, the goat bleated and stamped its hooves in frustration. "No such thing. I must be dreaming."

The elf turned his angry gaze back at Anders. "Still, this trip you desire to make."

Anders nodded, fighting for breath.

"Then you shall have your door." His mouth twisted into a humorless smile, the Yule Elf raised his tiny, gloved hands and a bitter wind roared through the kitchen.

"But be fair warned, foolish man." The Yule Elf had to shout to be heard over the miniature storm. "The Holly King will eat your flesh and suck the marrow from your bones if he catches you in his land. So be quick with your task or none might return."

The wind increased and the lights went out. Anders heard his daughter call for help and then he was falling backwards, the door behind him gone, everything gone. He cried out, his shouts joining Anna's and Paul's, and closed his eyes against the furious wind.

Which abruptly stopped, replaced by a bitter cold much worse than the winter night he'd just left. He opened his eyes and found he lay on a bed of snow. Evergreen trees, larger than any he'd ever seen, towered over him, painted in silver and black by an enormous moon that seemed close enough to touch. The odors of pine, mountain air and burning wood scented each breath he took and woke an intense homesickness for his childhood. Without even sitting up, he knew he'd reached his goal.

Winterwood.

Anders pushed himself to his knees. Every bone ached, but he ignored the pain. Either

there'd be time to heal and rest later, or it wouldn't matter. The important thing now was to get out of the snow and find his way to the boys.

Someone coughed behind him and he froze, thinking he'd already been caught. Then a muttered curse stole one fear and replaced it with another. He turned, praying to be wrong.

He wasn't.

Anna and Paul lay in the snow, just regaining their senses after their trip through the Veil.

The elf's revenge for what I forced him to do. Or maybe not his fault, Anders amended his thought. *Perhaps the doorway takes everyone within a certain distance.*

Either way, he now had an additional problem. What to do with his daughter and son-in-law while he searched for Jake and Nick. The urgency of it compounded when he saw that neither of them wore coats. In the frigid temperatures of the forest, their clothes wouldn't be enough protection. They'd die from exposure before too long.

At least they're wearing shoes.

"Come, we must get you somewhere warm," he said, helping Anna to her feet.

Although he wobbled a bit, Paul rose on his own and didn't pass out as he took in the unexpected sight of the skyscraper-high trees surrounding them.

"Where are we?" Anna asked, her arms wrapped around her chest.

"Winterwood," Anders said, slapping the snow off her back.

Anna gasped. "That's not possible. How—"

"There's no time for explanations right now."

"What the fuck is Winterwood?" Paul's voice rose with each word, taking on a hysterical note.

"Quiet!" Anders guided them behind a nearby tree. So far, the noise hadn't attracted any attention, but that could change at any moment. "We must find shelter before you both freeze to death." He'd noticed his son-in-law had already started shivering. Unlike Anna, who at least wore a heavy sweater, Paul only had on a cotton turtleneck to protect him from the elements.

Anders glanced around and saw they'd ended up in the middle of a long, wide road that carved through the forest. A few yards to their left, a wide, shimmering square stretched across the path and stood ten feet high. To their right, the path led deeper into the woods.

"This way," Anders said, pointing in the direction away from the Veil. "Hurry. We haven't much time."

Very aware that the clock had begun ticking, Anders headed off, doing his best to kick

up the ankle-deep snow as he walked, not only to make it easier for Anna and Paul to walk in their low-cut shoes, but to create a trail they'd be able to follow when they returned. Behind him, Anna and Paul hurried to keep up, their arms wrapped around each other for warmth.

"Dad, wait. Where are you—?"

Anders turned and let some of his frustration escape. "Hush, for *gottverdammt's* sake. If they find us, they will kill us. And you'll never see your children again." He put his back to them and continued walking. Their questions would have to wait. He still had no idea what they'd find at the end of the road, or how he would rescue the children. He only knew that in less than six hours, the Veil would close for another year.

And that meant certain death for all of them.

Trudging through the snow, with the trees all around and the night silent as a church, Anders could almost imagine he'd been transported to the Black Forest of his childhood, back to a time when it hadn't yet devolved into a tourist destination for the rich and arrogant and when winter meant an endless supply of snow to play in and meat pies, sausage and sweet pastries to feast on.

All good things, but always lurking in the deepest shadows were the dangers to beware of. His hand went automatically to his left side where the scars served as a permanent reminder that what most people called legends or fairy tales were in fact warnings to be heeded.

And now they were heading right into the heart of those legends.

Ahead of them, the path widened and angled down a gradual slope. Sitting at the bottom of the slight hill was the most incredible sight. A village, but one like nothing else in the world.

All the houses and buildings had been carved from living trees whose trunks were wider than a two-car garage. Two stories, three stories tall, the homes had shuttered windows and oval doors and balconies whose intricate woodwork reminded Anders of his childhood home. Towering bonfires placed around the outskirts of the clearing created a mad, flickering glow that illuminated the buildings and made the shadows dance with wild abandon. Similar fires blazed at strategic points throughout the village.

Closer to the village proper, the tree houses grew less frequent and shops of various kinds took their place. Anders made out stables and a blacksmith and a bakery, all tended by tiny figures in peaked hats. More of the elfin men and women hurried through narrow,

muddy streets and alleys between the trees, some laden with sacks or baskets, others herding poorly dressed individuals or dashing from place to place on mysterious errands.

Smoke rose from thick branches tunneled out to form chimneys and from the numerous fire pits, redolent with the odors of burning wood and cooking food. The ripe stink of manure wove its way through the other smells like an unwanted guest.

On its own, the village made for an astounding sight. But it paled in comparison to the edifice that loomed over everything, a structure carved from a single, immense trunk, a tree whose twisting, deformed branches rose hundreds of feet in the air, higher than the fires' glows could reach, and whose width spanned the entire back of the clearing. Lights blazed in dozens of windows and from numerous spires that overlooked balconies and terraces.

A shiver ran down Anders's spine, not from the cold but from the aura of foreboding the village and its giant castle gave off. Despite the old-fashioned style of the architecture, the dark wood, with its knots and gnarled branches and lack of color, exuded a feeling of danger rather than hominess. Even the nostalgic smells of roasting meats, baking dough and burnt pine failed to evoke good feelings. The odors arrived greasy and polluted, despoiled in some odd manner, as if contaminated by the malevolent beings who'd created them.

"What is that place?"

The quavering voice behind him made Anders jump. With a start, he realized he'd been so focused on the village that he'd forgotten Anna and Paul. Worse, he'd forgotten they were intruders in enemy territory, standing right out in the open for all to see.

"Paul, look at me." Anders spoke in a firm voice then waited until he had his son-in-law's attention. The younger man took a deep breath, and although he still looked shaken, he no longer appeared ready to break down. "I'm going to give you the quick version."

"Quick version of what?"

"Everything you know about Christmas is a lie, a watered-down version of the truth. There is no Santa, no bringing of presents, no Rudolph guiding a sleigh. The reality beneath it all is a legend older than time, the legend of the Holly King who rules Winterwood, the land we're in now."

"It's all true? The Yule Elf? Winterwood? The Holly King?" Dark circles stood out under Anna's eyes, giving the appearance she'd gone days without sleep, but Anders knew it was shock. The shock of her boys going missing, and now an added attack on logic as her childhood nightmares came true. It hurt Anders to see her that way; hurt even more to know that in some part, he'd caused it. However, it couldn't be avoided. Not with the clock ticking down on them.

"Yes." Anders wanted to say more, but the fear in his daughter's eyes stopped him. What good to say "I told you so"? It would only add to her pain.

"Goddammit, will somebody tell me what's going on?" Paul looked from his wife to Anders.

"The celebration of Yule, the three longest nights of the year, is much older than the Christmas you know. It's the time when the Holly King's reign over the world comes to its annual end. On each of the three nights of the solstice, Krampus, the Holly King, takes his forces out on the Wild Hunt. He travels the world on an enormous stag, with his hounds and his soldiers by his side. Between the hours of nightfall and dawn, he and his men capture anyone they find and bring them back. At the same time, his sons—the Yule Lads—ride out and kidnap boys and girls who've been bad. The Yule Elf, the creature you met at your house, the one who sent us here, it's his job to make sure good children don't get taken. Parents are supposed to leave presents for their children under a decorated tree or wreath to show the Yule Elf that their children had been good."

"And that's what happened to Nick and Jake?"

Anders nodded. "I believe the Yule Lads took them, and they're being held down there." He gestured at the village.

"Then we have to go get them," Anna said.

"No. We have to find shelter. You're not dressed for this weather."

But where? Simply hiding behind a tree wouldn't be good enough. And they certainly couldn't go down into the village. As he peered out at the forest, Anders noticed several of the tree houses were dark inside.

Does that mean the owners aren't home? The village seemed busy enough. Perhaps everyone was hard at work, preparing for…

The feast. He didn't want to think about it, but he couldn't stop the words from appearing in his head. The following night would be the annual festival of the solstice, when the Holly King and his men celebrated the end of another year and enjoyed the spoils of the Hunt, while Winterwood closed itself off from the world until the following fall.

A festival whose menu included anyone captured during the Wild Hunt or by the Yule Lads.

No. I won't let that happen to my grandchildren.

Anders put a finger to his lips and then motioned for Anna and Paul to follow him. Crouching as low as his age-stiffened back allowed, he moved from the shadows of one tree to the next until they reached the nearest darkened home. He peered into the single

window and saw a small room with a lone candle stub burning on a table, its feeble flame nearly gone.

"Hurry," he whispered, thumbing the iron latch on the rough-hewn door. It opened easily, and they rushed inside, ducking to pass through the arched entrance. Anders shut the door then frowned. No lock, which meant they weren't as safe as he'd have liked.

Anders looked around the small room. The ceiling, although low, allowed them to stand at their full height, with a couple of inches to spare. A fireplace sat cold and dark along one wall, an iron pot hanging over a bed of smoldering embers. A small table occupied the center space, its two chairs the perfect size for children but impossible for an adult to use without risking total collapse. A single pewter mug sat on the table, next to a wooden bowl. The walls were bereft of decorations, save for a few kitchen utensils and animal hides hanging off metal spikes. At the far end, a staircase led up to another level.

The inside of the tree turned out to be warmer than Anders expected, enough so that he found himself able to take off his hat and gloves. Anna and Paul had stopped shivering, and the color was returning to their cheeks and lips.

"You'll be safe here," Anders said, checking his watch. Not even eleven yet. How had so much happened in less than an hour? Their trek through the snow alone had seemed to take half the night. "I've got to get going. I need to find Jake and Nick before the night passes and we end up trapped here forever."

"Wait."

Anders stopped and looked at Paul, alert for any signs the man was going to freak out, as Anna's generation liked to say. But despite the frantic look still lingering in his eyes, when he spoke, his voice was calmer, with just a hint of a tremble in it.

"You said that whoever took our children has them in that village."

Anders nodded. "Yes. And if we don't get them out before dawn, we never will."

Paul rubbed his eyes, reddening them even further. With his hair mussed and wet from wind and snow, he appeared more like an escaped lunatic than a bank manager. Next to him, Anna let out a soft moan and put a fist to her mouth. A few tears ran down her cheeks, but she kept control.

"We're going with you."

Anders shook his head, wishing he could accept the offer. But any potential help would be offset by their having no idea what they were dealing with. He couldn't rescue the children and babysit his daughter and her husband at the same time. "No, you can't. It's too dangerous."

"Too dangerous? Those are our kids, Anders. And it can't be any more dangerous for us than for you."

Anders ignored the not-so-subtle reference to his advanced age. "You don't know what to expect down there. I do."

"So, you'll tell us. Show us. But we're going."

"He's right," Anna said, and Anders started to thank her for agreeing with him. Then he saw she was looking at him, was taking Paul's side.

So stubborn. I wonder where she gets that from? Willa's sarcastic voice, in his head. How many times had she said that to him when she was alive? He took a second to appreciate the irony of the situation, then tried another argument.

"You can't come. You've no coats, no hats. You'll freeze out there."

Paul and Anna went silent. They looked at each other, each hoping the other would have a solution. When neither said anything, Anders knew he'd won.

Until a voice spoke from above them.

"Perhaps I can help with that."

Anders's heart banged into high gear as he swung towards the source of the oddly melodic voice. The rush of terror-fueled adrenaline only increased at the sight of a short, stocky figure clad in a green vest and matching pants, descending the stairs. The dwarf-sized man sported a thick, ragged beard that did nothing to hide the lumpy, misshapen face above it. Bushy eyebrows hovered over deep-set, dark eyes. Pointed ears peeked out from between ropes of wild, stringy hair.

Elf!

Thoughts and emotions collided inside Anders, creating a mental traffic jam that rendered him immobile. Should they run before the elf sounded the alarm? Or charge him, subdue him? What if he'd already given some kind of silent signal and others of his kind were already on the way? Indecision anchored Anders in place. He heard Anna's intake of breath, but he couldn't even turn his head to see what she and Paul were doing.

"Please don't be frightened," the elf said, holding his hands out to the sides. "I have no desire to see you taken captive. In fact, I would like to offer my assistance."

Anders found himself captured by the elf's singsong tones. Each word arrived like a note in a song, a song with no melody yet delivered, with great beauty despite the high pitch of the voice. Only when the elf stopped speaking did Anders's common sense return.

Why wasn't he calling for help? He didn't even seem upset by the appearance of strangers in his house. His gestures were as calm as his words, his body language relaxed.

Why wasn't he alarmed by their presence? And was his composure a good thing or bad?

It took two tries, but Anders found his voice to ask, "Assistance with what?"

"Finding your lost children. I heard you talking from my bed. Indeed, my first thought was to call for help. Strangers in Winterwood? Humans in my home? Never has there been such a thing. Then you spoke of children captive in the village. And I knew I couldn't let you go there on your own."

"Why would you help us?" Anders asked, still prepared to run or fight if the elf showed any sign of turning on them. One shout, that's all it would take, and they'd be as good as dead. Still, a part of him wanted to believe. If the elf really could aid them in some way…

"Because I was once human like you."

For the second time in as many minutes, Anders found himself at a loss for words.

The creature before them had once been human? No. Not possible.

"How?" Anna asked. The elf turned his attention towards her and she stared back, confusion and pity pulling down the lines of her face.

No, Anders's mind shouted while his mouth remained frozen. *Don't listen to him. It's a trick so you'll stay here until help arrives.*

Except Anders had a feeling the elf wasn't playing a game with them.

"'Tis the dark magic of this land," the elf said, his voice now filled with minor chords of sadness. "Years ago, I had the misfortune of being captured by the Hunt. Like many of the humans taken, the King's men put me to work as soon as we arrived in Winterwood. Only they never told me the awful truth until it was too late."

"The awful truth about what?" Anna leaned forward. Despite his misgivings, Anders found himself caught up in the tale as well.

"The closing of the Veil." The elf's tone grew even more somber, and beneath his thick eyebrows his eyes seemed to glisten with the tears of old sorrows. "Any humans in Winterwood when the solstice ends, they are changed by the magic of this land. Into this." He patted his barrel chest.

The impact of the statement hit Anders immediately.

"You mean all of…?"

The elf nodded. "Aye. All those you see like me, the ones in the village, were once human. Taken from our homes and molded against our will. Pressed and twisted like dough, reshaped into the deformed thing standing before you."

No one spoke for a moment, and then a thought came to Anders, one that he was afraid he already knew the answer to but still had to ask.

"You said those who were taken ended up like you. Do you mean just adults, or children too?"

The elf shook his head. "It makes no difference, I am sad to say. The moment the Veil closes, your humanity will be ripped from you and you'll be nothing but an ugly shell of your former self." He squinted at Anders. "But then, I believe you know this isn't the greatest danger Winterwood poses."

Anders shook his head. He knew well what the elf referred to, but he didn't want to accept it.

"Jesus, this is like a bad trip. There's something worse than being turned into a garden gnome?" Paul ran a hand through his already mussed hair. "I don't know if I want to hear it."

"Quiet," Anna said to him. "It has something to do with the children, doesn't it?"

The elf nodded. "I will tell you all you need to know. But linger too long we cannot. If you truly aim to find your missing kin, it must be done before this night ends."

Anders looked at his daughter and Paul, with their red eyes and haggard expressions. While still hesitant to trust the earnest-seeming elf, he owed it to his family to do everything possible to get Jake and Nick back.

"Tell us."

"Lucky you are for choosing my home to hide in." The elf, who'd introduced himself as Ulaf, sat the table. As he spoke, he twisted and rubbed his stubby finger in nervous fashion. "Had it been any other, prisoners by now you would be."

"Thank you for not turning us over to the King's men." Anders had already given him a shortened version of how they'd come to be in Winterwood.

"You must have angered the Julenissen greatly for him to do such a thing," Ulaf said. "He is an honest *jegere*, but his temper is not to be tested. Even the trolls and the other jegere fear him.

"Trolls? Paul frowned. "I thought we were talking about elves. Aren't trolls giants, like ogres?"

Anna squeezed his hand. He shot a glare in her direction and shook his head. "Christ, I can't believe I'm even having this conversation. Maybe I'm not. Maybe this is all a flashback or something."

"It is all real," Anders said.

"What are jegere?" Anna asked.

"Hunters," Anders translated, and Ulaf nodded.

"Here in Winterwood there are three peoples. The jegere, the trolls and the elfin. Jegere and trolls have always been; we elfin are…"

"Not natural." The words left Anders's lips before he could stop them, but Ulaf took no umbrage.

"Aye. The King, his sons, even the Julenissen, they are jegere, despite how different they look from each other. The trolls serve the King. And we elfin, we serve as well, although not always willingly. Some, like me, endure our fate and after many years earn a status of more than just slave, with a pittance of a wage and a place to live outside the castle. The ones who cannot adjust rarely live to see a second Christmas."

Silence filled the room for several seconds as the impact of Ulaf's words sunk in. Then Anna spoke.

"What happens to them?"

Although most of his face remained hidden by his beard, Ulaf's eyes showed his sorrow at having to deliver grim news. "I've told you that some men and women taken by the Hunt become elves when the final night of the Yule meets its end. Those less fortunate will not see the sun rise, as by then they'll be nothing but meat for stew and pies."

Anna put her hands over her face.

"Pies?" Paul frowned. "What does pie have to do—?"

"The solstice" Anna said, her voice muffled by her palms. When she looked up, tears stained her cheeks. "You're talking about the solstice feast, aren't you?"

"What's this feast?" Paul asked.

Anders answered, his growing dread they might already be too late stealing all emotion from his voice, "When the divide between our world closes, there is a great feast. The Feast of Juul. And many of those who've been captured by the Hunt or the Yule Lads…they become part of the meal."

Anders paused, watching while Paul digested this new information. He wasn't sure what to expect. Shouting, perhaps. Or a complete breakdown. Instead, his son-in-law surprised him, putting an arm around Anna and speaking in a calm voice, "Earlier tonight, Anna said something about a Krampus. What—"

"Hush!" Ulaf waved his hands at them. "'Tis bad luck to speak the King's true name."

"The Holly King has many names," Anders said, despite Ulaf's grimace. How much worse could their luck get? "The one you used is his most common, but not his oldest. In different countries he's known as Father Ice, Jack Frost, Frey and even Odin. After Christianity spread across Europe, he became Saint Nick and then Santa. People forgot the

truth, and the legend of the Holly King evolved into just another fairy tale. But some of us, the people who lived in the lands of the North, we remembered. We kept the old stories alive. Even when some refused to believe," he added, staring at Anna, who looked properly contrite.

"Children aren't supposed to be afraid of Santa," she whispered, wiping away tears.

Anders sighed. "You're wrong. They should be afraid. Very afraid."

"So now what?" Paul asked. "If all of this is true, what do we do?"

Ulaf climbed off his chair, a determined look on his face.

"Now we rescue your children and send you all home."

Anders pulled his hood tighter to save his face from the arctic wind. Behind him, Anna and Paul wore jackets made of goat hide, jackets which had magically transformed to the correct size when Ulaf handed them over. Leather boots had performed a similar trick.

"*Winterwood has many magics,*" Ulaf had said, not bothering to explain further. Anders wondered if they should be worried about magic being used against them, and then decided to focus on the problems they knew about, rather than what might be.

At the moment, that meant getting close enough to the village proper without being seen, so they could find out if Jake and Nick were among the elves and children toiling under the watchful eyes of violent-looking ogres or if they were inside the castle.

"There are only two places boys would be put to work," Ulaf told them as they made their way down the edge of the clearing, circling through the forest to avoid the glow from the bonfires. "The stables or chopping wood. Since your lads are small, I'll bet my boots they've been sent to the stables."

"I still can't believe this is possible," Paul whispered. "How can elves and kings and giant reindeer enter our world without being caught on camera? This is the twentieth century, not the Middle Ages."

Anders kept his voice low enough to be swept away by the wind after a few feet. "Despite televisions and telephones, the modern world is good at hiding the truth. Some children are missing? They ran away or got kidnapped. Noises outside at night? Turn up the TV, lock the doors, don't get involved. And with Christmas celebrated around the world, so many houses have trees and gifts the Yule Elf can't tell the good from the bad unless they get caught outside."

"Enough talk." Ulaf pointed ahead, saving Anders from answering any more questions. Behind a barn carved from a fallen pine the size of a small building, a dozen tethered goats

milled about, snorting and huffing in agitated fashion. To Anders's horror, several children, their faces hidden by darkness and distance, tended to the animals, brushing them and putting down food and water while three ogres armed with knives and spears looked on. A foul odor drifted up, the harsh ammonia reek of urine mixed with feces and moldy hay.

Ulaf guided them closer, moving from tree to tree until only a narrow strip of snow and mud separated them from the stable. From their vantage point behind a wide pine, they scanned the faces of the captive children, all of whom wore identical coats and headgear that looked to be of native origin. Anders eyed the figures, cursing distance and shadows for making identification such an impossible chore.

One of the goats let out an angry bleat, whipped its head around and lunged at the boy brushing it. Before the boy could move, the goat bit into his shoulder and tore away a chunk of cloth and flesh. The injured boy cried out and fell to his knees, clutching at his wound, while the goat swallowed the lump of meat and stamped the ground. One of its hooves struck the fallen boy's head with a sickening crunch that reached all the way to the hidden onlookers.

The boy went silent.

The goat bent down and licked at the blood darkening the snow around the body, lifted its head and gave a satisfied snort.

"Take him to the kitchen," one of the ogres ordered. Its two companions, both of them wearing wide grins, grabbed the motionless body by the feet and dragged it away, leaving a dark trail in their wake.

"Get back to work, all of you. Or you'll end up in our bellies tomorrow eve." The ogre gave a wicked laugh and motioned at the slaves with a pointed stick. Doing their best to stay out of biting range, the children returned to their grooming and cleaning.

"Did you see that?" Paul whispered.

"Very few escape stable duty unmarked," Ulaf whispered, pulling up his sleeve to show them a concave, jagged depression on his forearm. The bone-white scar reminded Anders of a shark bite. "In Winterwood, even the animals have a taste for flesh."

"I can't see if the boys are down there. We need to get closer," Anna said, peering past Anders.

"'Tis better to wait and—"

"Look." Paul pointed at two boys who were shoveling manure into buckets.

Anders saw it at the same time. Blue pajama bottoms tucked into ankle-high leather boots.

Pajamas just like the ones Nick and Jake owned.

One of the boys lifted his head and Anders caught a glimpse of a familiar nose and mouth. A thrill ran through him. *Nick. The boys are alive!* Now, if they could somehow get their attention—

"It's them!" Anna's soft exclamation right next to his ear made him jump. Her body slammed against his and then she darted past him, heading across the clearing.

"Verdammt." Anders took off after her, with Paul a step behind. If they could catch her before anyone saw them…

One of the goats lifted its head and gave a loud bleat. The others followed its lead, snorting and kicking as they sounded the alarm while staring at the intruders. The lone ogre guarding the children called out for help.

Too late. No need for stealth anymore.

"Nick! Jake!" Anna's shout echoed off the trees and buildings. The boys looked up, their eyes wide and their mouths open. Then shock turned into broad smiles.

"Mommy!" The boys dropped their shovels and ran to Anna, who grabbed them in her arms.

Anders pulled her up and turned her towards the woods. "Head for the path. We'll be—"

Ulaf stood between them and their freedom, his arms spread.

"I'm sorry." He raised his voice. "Come quickly! Over here. Humans are trying to escape!"

Before Anders could move, shouts erupted from behind them. Several ogres rushed up and surrounded them, weapons at the ready and faces twisted with fury.

"Intruders!" One of the ogres, a fat man with bushy, gray hair and a bulbous nose covered in moles, jabbed at the humans with his spear. "Make no move or I'll have your guts for supper."

"Aye, we'll have them anyways once Mother Gryla gets them," another said, and they all laughed, revealing teeth more deadly than those of the goats.

An ogre glanced at Ulaf, who stood to one side, his hands folded at his belt and his eyes cast down.

"What are you still doing here? Move your arse along before you join them in a cell."

"Yes." Ulaf nodded and hurried away, his short form quickly blending in among the other elves busy at their various tasks.

"Move." A sharp point poked Anders in the back. Another ogre pushed Paul, who

stumbled and landed on his knees in muddy slush. An ogre kicked him in the thigh, forcing a grunt of pain from him, but he managed to regain his feet before further blows came his way. Jake burst into tears. Anna tried to go to him, but an ogre hissed at her and thrust its knife in her direction. Anders kept a firm grip on his daughter's arm as the ogres herded them down a muddy street towards the King's castle.

"Where are you taking us?" Paul asked. An ogre answered by swatting him across the back with a spear. After that, none of the captives said anything. Anders had no desire to speak anyhow. The looming castle held his attention. Up close, it looked even more macabre than it had from the edge of the village.

Deeply creviced bark, easily an arm's length thick, created a black, impenetrable shield. A pair of massive doors, each one ten feet tall and just as wide, made up the front entrance. Higher up, where enormous branches split from the trunk to create spires and turrets and battlements, semicircular openings placed at regular intervals indicated rooms or chambers of some kind at every level. Dark smoke, redolent of burning wood and roasting meat, issued from knotholes that served as vents.

The ogres steered them away from the main doors and down a hill to a smaller side entrance, where a new odor assaulted them: the foul stench of human waste, a thousand times worse than any public restroom. A zone of barren ground circled the base of the castle, bereft of snow and ice. The circle of dark, slushy muck oozed and splattered as the ogres and their captives marched through it.

"Below!" a voice called, and the ogres all looked up. Several of them dodged out of the way just in time to avoid a stream of brown liquid that splashed to the ground in their midst. The vile stink instantly grew worse, to the point where Anders thought he might be sick. Some of the liquid spattered onto an ogre's coat and he cursed, while the others snorted laughter, sounding like pigs rooting for food. Anders searched the turrets overhead and saw a female ogre with a large wooden bowl in her hands, standing at a window and laughing along with her kin.

Chamber pots. His stomach churned at the realization they were walking through decades, maybe centuries, of shit from the castle's inhabitants. Paul gagged and covered his mouth. Next to him, Anna didn't fare as well. She doubled over and vomited, followed by a spell of gagging and dry heaving that left the ogres laughing even harder. Anders took advantage of the diversion to put his arms around Nick and Jake.

"It will be all right," he whispered. The boys looked at him with teary eyes, but neither acknowledged his words. He didn't blame them for not believing. He wasn't sure he believed

himself.

An ogre sidled up to them and waggled a rusty blade attached to a bone handle, causing both boys to duck behind Anders. "Think this is bad, do you? In a few hours, mucking around in the King's shite will seem like heaven compared to what awaits you in Gryla's kitchen."

Anders barely had time to consider those words before they filed through a simple wooden door into the castle, where musty, mildew-saturated air was a grateful change from the stench outside. A low ceiling forced them to walk slightly hunched over, and Anders's back protested the uncomfortable posture.

A few scattered torches provided just enough light to avoid walking into walls as the corridor wound its way downhill, but the ogres navigated the turns without slowing, which told Anders they either knew the way by heart or could see exceptionally well in the dark.

Their descent ended when they took a sharp turn and entered a wide chamber, half of which was blocked by a series of iron bars set so close together a large person wouldn't be able to get an arm between them. A short door sat in the middle. One sputtering torch delivered a feeble glow that threatened to go out at any moment. An ogre took a long key from a peg on the wall and opened the door.

Strong hands pushed Anders forward. Caught off guard, he stumbled and fell into the cage. His family joined him on the floor a second later and the door clanged shut. The ogre turned the lock and then peered in at them.

"Enjoy your accommodations. We'll see you at the feast."

Snuffling, honking laughter filled the corridor, fading as the ogres filed out.

In the resulting silence, Anders heard the rustle of bodies shifting. Damp straw stuck to his face and hands, bringing with it the acrid stink of old urine. He sat up and did his best to brush away the soiled detritus, then made a quick inspection of their cell. Longer and wider than his daughter's living room, with no windows and a ceiling that barely topped six feet. As his eyes adjusted to the near dark, he made out the forms of other people. They lay on the floor, twenty or twenty-five of them. A few looked at him and then put their heads back down.

Paul got to his knees and helped Anna sit up.

"I can't believe Ulaf did that," Anna said, wiping grime and straw from her hands.

"It's my fault. I shouldn't have trusted him." Anders wanted to bang his fists against the bars until his bones broke. He'd fallen for the elf's lies, and now they were paying the price for his stupidity.

Anna sniffed back tears. "No, the fault's all mine. If I'd listened to you, believed you—"

"Mommy, when are we going home?"

Anders watched his daughter open her mouth and then close it again without answering. She pulled her boys into a hug, and they pressed themselves close to her, burying their faces against her chest. Paul moved around behind them and wrapped his arms around all of them.

We can't give up hope. We're alive. All of us. As much as Anders didn't want to admit it, he'd had his doubts of ever seeing his grandchildren again. He scooted over and gave both of them a quick hug and a kiss on the head, and then leaned back. Finding them was wonderful, but they still had a bigger problem to solve.

How to escape and get back home.

Anders tore his eyes away from the tearful reunion and looked around the room, really seeing it for the first time. Many of the other prisoners were sitting up, staring with wide eyes at the unexpected moment of joy occurring amidst the despair and hopelessness of their situation. A terrible cold, worse than the freezing air of the dungeon, crept through Anders's bones as he got his first real look at their faces.

All children.

Every one of them. Children. All of them of a similar age, between seven and ten. Dressed in threadbare coats and pants over pajamas or undergarments. A few only had slippers to protect their feet. All of them looked bruised and scared.

Children. Captured for the feast.

Anders's heart delivered a sharp jolt but he ignored it and turned back to his family. "We have to get out of here. Now."

"No escape," one of the captives whispered. "No escape from the witch."

"We have to find a way." Anders got to his feet, tugging at Paul to get him to stand. "And fast. We can't be here when morning comes."

Somewhere in the depths of the dungeon a door slammed, the sound echoing from one ancient wooden wall to the next until it seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once.

"Too late," a child said, and all of them lay down on the piss-soaked, filthy straw, pulling their hoods over their faces. Several of them whimpered or cried into their sleeves.

Two figures emerged from the darkness, dancing into the chamber with manic glee. Their elongated, misshapen faces peered out from the hoods of their matching green hide coats to show eyes alight with madness.

"Here, Mother! Here! These are the ones we want next." The two jegere pointed into the cage, right at Nick and Jake.

"Don't let them take us again!"

The boys pressed themselves tighter against their mother, hiding their faces, and Anders knew instantly who the newcomers were.

The Yule Lads. The murderous sons of the Holly King.

The ones who took my grandchildren.

He placed himself in front of his family, blocking them from the gesturing fiends, just as a third figure entered the dungeon.

Someone gasped, and more than a few of the captive children moaned at the sight of the old woman. Even Anders backed up a step, despite the bars between them.

Ancient as the tree surrounding them, she exuded evil like a fetid body odor. Hunched and emaciated, she still projected a sense of power stronger than any man ten times her size. A long nose with a sharp hook at the end dominated her craggy face. Beneath it, her lips were two pallid worms and her chin a jagged spike split by a deep cleft from which sprouted several long whiskers. Wild, stringy, white hair fell haphazardly over her ears and down to her shoulders, giving the impression she'd never learned to use a comb or brush. Her eyes, black as a starless night, glared from under a brow too large for her face. When she opened her mouth to speak, she revealed brown, misshapen teeth with several empty places along her gums.

"Gryla." The word escaped Anders lips before he could stop it.

The crone narrowed her eyes at him. "And who have we here? A human who knows my name? Where are you from, old man?"

Anders shook his head. "I'll not speak with you, witch."

The ancient woman made a *tsk-tsk* sound through her crooked teeth. "You don't need to converse for me to know your secrets."

She leaned forward, one hand cupping a pointed ear. She listened for a moment and then lifted her head and took a deep breath through flaring nostrils.

"Ah, I can smell the strength fading in your blood, which thickens and slows with every beat. You fear for your children and your grandchildren, but your worries should be for yourself before your family. They're going to die, 'tis true, but you won't be here to see it. Your clock is ticking, old man, ticking the last of your time away. Can you hear it? Tick… tick…tick…"

The witch raised her staff and pointed it at Anders. "Oh, too bad. No more minutes."

Agony exploded in Anders's chest, radiating out from his heart to his shoulders and arms and down to his belly. His throat tightened, turning a cry of pain into a wheezing gasp. His legs gave out and he fell, one hand pressed against his sternum. Rank straw and dust filled his nose, but the invisible band around his chest wouldn't let him cough. Dim light turned to complete darkness. From far away, he heard Anna shouting at him—"*Father! Father!*"—but he had no strength to respond. Other sounds reached him in his lightless world. The metallic *clank* of the lock being opened. Voices shouting.

"Help!"

"Take them, Mother! We brought them just for you."

"Leave them alone!"

Then the clang of iron striking iron, which grew louder in his head, became a booming thunder reverberating in his skull, drowning everything else out as it beat in time to the tortured pounding behind his ribs.

My heart. Pills. Must reach them. Can't let…

It was no use. He couldn't speak, couldn't move. He'd failed. Failed to keep his family safe, failed to return them home. Hopelessness washed through him, bringing the bitter taste of defeat to his mouth. The roaring in his hears faded, taking the pain in his chest with it, until only a final thought remained.

I'm sorry.

"Dad?"

Anders opened his eyes. A blurry, ghostly face hovered in black sky. He blinked and then wondered why he had to.

I died. Didn't I?

He blinked again, and the face resolved into Anna staring at him from a couple of feet away. Tears carved dark streaks through the dirt on her cheeks.

"Thank God." She leaned down and kissed his cheek.

"What—" Anders stopped. The bitter taste in his mouth. Dry lips. A hint of nausea. All too familiar. "My pill. Who?"

"I knew you had to have them with you. As soon as you collapsed, I searched your pockets. But you didn't wake up right away, and I thought…I thought I was too late."

Anders managed a weak smile. His daughter knew him too well. He never left his bedroom without his nitroglycerin pills stashed in the pocket of his robe or pants, not once in the ten years since he'd developed angina after a mild heart attack.

"No blockages," the cardiologist had told him. *"But try to avoid stress."*

If only he could see me now.

"Help me up." He let Paul and Anna guide him into a sitting position. As always after one of his episodes, his arms and legs felt weak as a newborn's, but that would pass in a few minutes. In the meantime, his mind still worked, so he might as well use it.

"What happened after I…?"

Anna bit her lip and shook her head.

"They took Jake and Nick. I tried to stop them, but that old woman, she did something to me. And to Paul. We couldn't move."

"She's not a woman, she's a witch." Anders took a deep breath, then regretted it when the stink of mildew and piss filled his lungs. He tried not to think about all the diseases floating in the air. "We need to get out of here. We have to find them before…"

"Please don't say it," Anna whispered.

"Say what?" Paul asked.

The feeling of defeat returned, falling on Anders like a sodden blanket. They were alive, yes, but still trapped. How long had he been unconscious? Long enough for…?

"Gryla is the Holly King's wicked bride, the mother of the Yule Lads and the evil sister of Mother Earth. She's a witch with a fondness for children."

"A fondness… Jesus, you don't mean she—"

"No." Anders read the revulsion on Paul's face, knew he was still thinking in modern terms. Except the reality of the situation was far worse than perversion or molestation. "Do you remember the story of Hansel and Gretel? Like so many others, it's based on fact. From July to December, Gryla wanders the darkest woods of the Earth at night, looking for children to lure back to Winterwood with promises of candy and treats. But now, with the feast approaching, she'll be busy in her kitchen, preparing her—"

"Stop it!" Anna turned to her husband. "She's going to turn them into fucking pies, Paul. Our children. Cooked and served for dinner, goddammit."

"No." Paul shook his head. "No. I refuse to believe that will happen. We'll get out of here. We'll find them. There has to be a way—"

A door slammed in the distance and someone in the back of the cell sobbed. "Quiet or she'll take you next," another voice said.

A shadow appeared, short and wide, moving along a wall of the corridor.

"It's the cat!" The children in the cell moved back against the far wall, cowering in a group. Anders's heart gave an abrupt *bang* and his hand went for his pills, but the pain didn't

repeat.

The shadow grew larger and then resolved into a familiar form.

Ulaf.

"Hurry now," said the elf, taking the key from its peg. "We don't have much time." He thrust the key into the lock and pulled the door open.

The sight of the person who'd betrayed them ignited a fury in Anders, but when he tried to stand a ripple of dizziness sent him back to his knees and forced him to watch while Anna strode forward and slapped Ulaf across the face.

"You bastard! You left us to die and now my children are gone."

Ulaf rubbed his face and effected a distressed expression. "I'm truly sorry for my actions. But what choice did I have? Dead to rights they had you. And what good would I be in helping you escape if I sat behind the bars as well?"

"Bullshit." Anna stepped past him and then paused. She glanced in both directions before fixing her gaze on Anders. "We don't need him. You can find them."

Anders took Paul's proffered arm and slowly got to his feet. He shook his head carefully, wary of bringing on another dizzy spell.

"Listen to your father. He knows you'll never find your kin without me," Ulaf said.

"Screw you. I'll find them myself." She took a few steps to her right and stopped again when neither Anders nor Paul followed. "What are you waiting for?"

"We need him." Anders pointed at Ulaf, hating his words but knowing they were true. "Otherwise we could end up wandering the castle until we either get caught again or end up like…"

"Me," Ulaf finished. "And then you, too, will be trapped here for eternity."

"Paul, they're our children." Anna turned her gaze to her husband. The flickering light of the scattered torches turned her into a living corpse. Anders hoped it wasn't a foreboding of things to come.

"What if he's right?" Paul asked.

"I am," Ulaf said.

"Why should we believe you?" Anders felt as torn as his son-in-law looked. The elf had already deceived them once. Or had he? Was he telling the truth?

"Why would I come back, risk my own neck?" When no one answered, Ulaf sighed. He glanced down the corridor and then continued speaking, "Listen then. I've told you a little of how I came to be here. 'Twas the first night of Yule when they caught me. But not just me. They took my brothers as well. Six of us. They put me in the stables and sent the rest to

work tending the fires. I never saw them again. Eaten, they were. Cooked into stew by that damn hag. I never knew, not until 'twas too late."

Ulaf placed a hand on his belly. Anna's eyes went wide and she turned away. The horrified look on Paul's face showed that he, too, understood the ghastly implications of Ulaf's story.

"Aye, they're a part of me forever now. When I found out the truth, I vowed I'd have my vengeance someday. But never did I have an opportunity. Not until now." He held out his hands to Anders. "Alone, neither of us stands a chance. But together…we can make the witch pay for what she's done. To all of us."

Anders took a moment before speaking. Every word the elf spoke made sense. And were they any worse off casting their lot with a possible traitor than bumbling their way through the castle on their own?

"All right. We'll follow you."

"No." Anna shook her head, her eyes pleading with him. Her look cut Anders to the bone. First, he'd let her down by trusting the elf to keep them safe. Now, he was doing it again by siding with Ulaf against her. She might never put her faith in him again, but it didn't matter. Not as long as they got the boys home safe.

"I don't see any other way. We only have until sunup. This is our last chance."

Anna's face hardened but she stayed silent while Ulaf waited for Anders and Paul to exit the cell. He went to shut the door again and Anders put a hand out.

"Wait. What about them?"

Ulaf looked at the children huddled against the back wall.

"'Tis too dangerous. We can't save them and your lads too."

Anders stared at Ulaf until the elf turned away. "Ah, fine then. I hope no one sounds the alarm before our task is done. Hurry yourselves now." Ulaf motioned to the children to come forward. At first none of them moved; then two of them stood up and exited the cage. A few more followed, and finally the rest grew braver and rushed through the door.

"That way lies freedom." Ulaf pointed down the passage in the direction the ogres had taken. "Through the woods to the widest road ye can find, and then look for the Veil. It's the best I can do."

He turned to Anders. "Their escape is in their own hands now."

"How will they get home?"

"The Veil always returns you to where you belong. Come, we've a ways to go."

Anders fell in step behind the elf, who turned in the opposite direction he'd sent the

children. The same direction the witch had come from. As he passed Anna, she turned her head, refusing to meet his eyes.

Please, God, let us find them before it's too late. All I want is for my family to be safe and whole.

If he couldn't have that, then life wouldn't matter.

Only a few minutes into their trek through the castle, Anders was already wondering if he'd made the wrong decision. Ulaf had almost immediately led them out of the main tunnel and down a side branch, explaining he knew a way to the witch's kitchen far less traveled than the main route.

"Can't be seen wandering the castle," he whispered. "Either the cat or the King's guards will have our guts for sure."

It made sense at the time, but now Anders wasn't so sure. Ulaf's back way turned out to be a narrow, tortuous passage through the very roots of the gigantic tree that formed the castle. The only light came from patches of phosphorescent slime whose glow enabled Anders to make out the shadowy form of Ulaf a few steps ahead, but nothing beyond that. The uneven floor threatened to trip a careless foot with every step, and the tiny rootlets sprouting from the walls and ceiling snagged at hair and clothes with evil delight, each unseen touch more frightening than the last while delivering visions of cannibal trolls reaching through the soil to grab unwary intruders.

Hunched over and with his arms stretched out to guide him, walking quickly became an exercise in torture for Anders. At the same time, the tunnel itself played tricks with the senses. The dirt and wood deadened sounds and twisted them around so that the breathing and occasional frightened gasps of Paul and Anna behind him seemed to come from close by at one moment and then far away the next, so much so that every few yards Anders glanced back to make sure they hadn't fallen behind.

A chorus of angry shouts reached them and Ulaf cursed. "Faster," he urged. "They've discovered your escape."

"Will they follow us?" Anders asked.

"'Tis likely they'll search outside first, as any sane man would make for the forest. But best we not wait around to see."

The elf put on more speed, his smaller stature making it easier for him to navigate the narrow space. Anders did his best to follow, but more than once Ulaf turned and motioned at him with an exasperated expression.

Anders's knees soon began to ache worse than his back and it became harder to breathe. A nervous tingle ran through him at the thought that there might be something wrong with the air. Then he noticed the upward slant of the tunnel and the cause of his discomfort became apparent.

We're climbing uphill.

The darkness, together with the twists and turns and obstacles to climb over, made it impossible to determine how far they'd gone, but the increasing pain in his legs told him they were moving up through the tree at a fairly steady rate.

"How much farther?" he asked, his words coming out between panting breaths.

"Two more levels to the kitchen," Ulaf said. "But now the danger grows worse." The elf turned sharply to his left and disappeared. Anders hurried around the corner and almost walked right into the smaller man, who'd come to a stop. Anna and Paul pressed in behind them a moment later.

With their bodies squeezed against each other in the confined space, Anders experienced true claustrophobia for the first time in his life.

If someone discovers us now, we'll be sitting ducks, flapping our wings and quacking while we get taken one by one.

Anna's hand found his and squeezed. He felt her arm trembling, and her fear served to calm his anxiety. He needed to be strong for her. For the boys. He squeezed back, hoping his gesture returned some comfort.

Ulaf put a finger to his lips.

"Hush now. Through this door is the castle proper, and we must make haste to avoid being seen or scented."

"Gryla?" Anders asked.

Ulaf nodded. "Aye, but not just her. Her cat roams these halls, and soon the King will be back. He's a nose for human blood, and it won't be long before he catches a whiff of tasty morsels such as yourselves."

With his warning hanging in the air, Ulaf opened a normal-sized door Anders hadn't been aware of. Light flooded the tunnel, momentarily blinding them. When Anders's vision cleared, he saw no sign of the elf.

Where did he go? Once more, unwelcome thoughts of abandonment and betrayal surged through Anders's head, and he hurried forward through the opening, half expecting to find a line of guards waiting for them.

Instead, he found an empty corridor illuminated by dozens of blazing torches set along

both walls. Unlike the root- and slime-infested warren they'd just traversed or the clammy, putrid dungeon far below, the new hallway was easily twenty feet wide and ten feet high, its wooden floor and walls polished to a gleaming sheen. Intricately carved doorways, none of them marked, were irregularly spaced on both sides. Warmer air, scented heavily with burning pine, produced an almost holiday atmosphere, to the point where Anders felt he could close his eyes and wake up back in his parents' family room, his brothers and sisters gathered around him on the floor while they listened to Oma tell tales of the Black Forest and the dangerous mystical creatures it held.

"Nie in den Wald zu gehen, wird die Hexe erhalten Sie."

Anders stumbled and put a hand against the wall to steady himself. With a start, he realized he'd been lulled into a half slumber, a walking dream, by his exhaustion.

You were right, Oma. We went into the woods, and the witch did get us. Now we have to find a way out.

Cursing himself for letting his guard down, he checked in both directions before motioning for Anna and Paul to join him.

"Where's Ulaf?" Paul asked.

Anders bit his lip, loath to admit he'd been wrong about the damned elf again, that they'd been abandoned, when a nearby door opened and Ulaf peeked out.

"This way. Make haste."

With relief lending new strength to his legs, Anders hurried across the hall and into a dark space filled with shadowy objects. He stepped to one side so Anna and Paul could enter, and then froze when Ulaf shut the door, cutting off the light from the hall.

"Here we'll be out of harm's way while we wait," Ulaf whispered. Anders heard him moving around and wondered how the elf could see in the complete blackness.

"Where is here?" Anna asked. "And why are we waiting? We should be looking for my boys."

"'Tis one of the witch's pantries," Ulaf said. "One level up from the Great Hall. And wait we must, for the King will return shortly from the Hunt. And if we were to be caught in the halls by him or his men, it would be straight into the ovens for us."

More rustling sounds reached Anders, and then a spark of light appeared. Ulaf held up a glass jar filled with some of the phosphorescent slime from the burrows they'd traveled through.

"'Tis too dangerous to risk a torch, but this will stave off the dark just a bit."

"How long?" Anders asked, sitting down next to the elf. Anna and Paul did the same,

the four of them forming a circle around the tiny glow. With the door blocking the warm air from the hallway, the temperature in the room dropped quickly and Anders pulled his coat tighter around his neck.

"Too long to stay on our feet, too short to nap," the elf said. "We can converse, but softly. This room is not used much during the Yule, but better safe than sorry."

"Where is the witch?"

In response to Anders's question, Ulaf pointed up. "Two sets of stairs to the kitchen."

After that, no one spoke for a few minutes; then Paul cleared his throat.

"That story always terrified me as a kid."

Anders frowned. "What story?"

"Hansel and Gretel. You said before it was based on that old bitch, Gryla or whatever. As a boy, it gave me nightmares. All those Grimm fairy tales did. Cannibal witches, giants, fathers selling their daughters to the devil. They were all bad, but Hansel and Gretel kept me up for weeks after I read it. I don't know how other kids enjoyed those stories."

"The Grimm's fables were never meant to entertain," Anders said. "Long before they wrote them down, people throughout the North knew them as cautionary tales, warnings to keep children safe. But over the centuries they became part of folklore. No one believed them anymore, and what once served an important purpose soon became nothing more than bedtime stories."

"Like Santa." Anna's voice held a note of regret.

"Yes. The Catholic Church would not permit tales that didn't promote Christianity in some way. So they changed our fables. Turned demons into jolly elves and Old Man Winter into nothing more than a silly face blowing wind on holiday cards. Easter, Christmas, Halloween—everything has a darker truth if you look deep enough."

"How do you know all this?"

Anna rolled her eyes at her husband's question, and Anders felt a pang of sadness at her reaction. He imagined her thoughts—*oh boy, here goes the old man with another story*—and he knew Willa had been right. He'd been a fool to try and raise his daughter the old-fashioned way in a modern world. Still, Paul had asked, and he deserved to know.

"I come from a small town in the Black Forest of Germany. In those days, everyone believed in the old ways. In the weeks leading up to *Weihnachten*—Christmas to you—the whole village would prepare for the holiday. Wreaths hung on doors to show belief in the Holly King, and a tree stood in the house to represent Winterwood. Boys and girls would be on their best behavior to make sure they had a gift waiting under the tree so the Yule Cat

wouldn't come for them. The whole town would smell of roasting ham and duck and rabbit. And the desserts—oh, the desserts. *Stollen, lebkuchen, plätzchen.* Parents would mull wine, and even the children would get a taste on the coldest nights."

Anders paused, the memories coming alive after so many years, the sounds and smells real again, as vibrant as they'd been in his childhood.

Anna cleared her throat, and Anders took a deep breath. "I digress. When I was ten, my friends and I snuck out of our houses on a dare. It was forbidden to walk the streets at night during Yule, but we were foolish, the way young boys usually are. We didn't believe. We almost made it back, but on an empty street, it came for us."

"What?"

"The Yule Cat. Bigger than a tiger or lion and twice as fast. We had a head start, but it wasn't enough. It killed two of my friends and then caught me as I climbed into my bedroom window. I would have died right there but my father chased it away with a present."

"A cat the size of a lion?" Paul's eyebrows went up. "Are you for real?"

Anders lifted his coat and sweater, exposing the three long scars that twisted across his left side.

"Does this look real? That cat has haunted my dreams all my life. I was lucky. Others were not."

"I always thought you made that up just to scare us," Anna said. "Mom told us you got those scars in the war."

"Your mother came from the city. She wasn't brought up with the same traditions." Anders pulled his clothes back down, covering flesh already growing chill. "She said the old ways should be left in the Old Country."

Paul looked ready to ask another question, but a thunderous trumpeting of horns echoed through the castle, the strident notes amplified and spread by the giant tree's passages and chambers.

"The Hunt!"

Anders caught a glimpse of Ulaf's eyes widening before the elf covered the jar of glowing mold and darkness took charge of the room again.

The absence of light only served to emphasize the menacing sounds of the Wild Hunt returning to the castle. A vibration rumbled to life in the floor and grew stronger, a rhythm felt more than heard, yet somehow perfectly in time with the oddly nasal blasts of the horns. An image came to Anders: a hundred enraged elephants stampeding across a plain, their trunks heralding the inevitable arrival of destruction and Death.

After a few moments, the shuddering of the floor evolved into actual hoofbeats and Anders's vision of a stampede grew stronger. Soon the sounds of voices calling out reached them through the dense wood. Anders imagined elves and ogres running to and fro outside and inside the castle, preparing the way for their malevolent tyrant's return.

The rapid drumming of hooves shook the very air around them, and Anders's heart sped up in response, taking on the same cadence. In his head, the herd of rampaging elephants gave way to the pictures of the Hunt he'd seen in books as a child, the same pictures that had haunted him in his dreams during the cold winter nights of Yule. The King, his moon-white hair flying madly behind him, his pale hands gripping the reins of a giant stag, grinning madly as he led his men through the woods. The great hounds baying as they raced beside the horned mounts, tongues lolling and eyes red as fire, ready to pounce and rend at their master's command. Trumpets raised to announce the coming of Death incarnate, a warning to all, in the form of thunder and wind, a living storm ready to capture any foolish enough to venture outside. A vision from a frozen hell, galloping from town to town until they gathered their quota of bodies for the night.

The discordant song grew to an earsplitting crescendo and then came to an abrupt stop, leaving Anders with a ringing in his ears and an unpleasant tingling in his body, as if the wavelengths of the notes had played the strings of his muscles and nerves like an instrument of flesh, vibrating his cells in unnatural and unhealthy ways.

"Now what?" Anna asked. Her voice caught Anders by surprise and his heart stuttered for a few beats.

"Just a few minutes more," Ulaf said. "Time for the King to return to his throne and his men to bring their captives to the larder, where the witch will be waiting to look them over. We shall need to be quick because she will not be occupied for long. Each year the Hunt returns with fewer victims, as belief dwindles."

"Belief dwindles?"

"Aye." The elf's tone made it seem the answer to Anders's question should be obvious. "The Hunt is guided to places where belief still runs strongest."

"No. That makes no sense. It's not believing that's the danger. Belief keeps you safe. Following the old ways means staying inside during Yule nights, keeping presents under the tree. It's those who don't know the truth who'll be caught outside by the Hunt."

"Those things be true, but 'tis those same convictions that draw the Hunt. The stags and hounds follow the scent of belief, which draws them as a magnet draws iron. Adults who no longer put faith in the tales are hidden from the Hunt. They may hear thunder in the night

or see a ghostly shape in the snow, but to the Hunt they are but air, passed through as a man might walk through smoke or fog."

"Wait. Do you mean that if my father hadn't taught us the old tales, my boys might not have been taken?"

Anna's words stabbed at Anders, each one an acid-dipped blade cutting through flesh and bone to pierce his heart.

No. It can't be. The stories are meant to protect, to—

"'Tis a sad truth. No man is safer than the fool who knows nothing."

"God damn you!" Anna dove at Anders and her hands slapped at him, her nails raking across his hands as he raised them to defend himself. "This is all your fault, not mine! If you'd just kept your mouth shut, lied to us, we wouldn't be here and my boys would be safe."

"Hush! Hush!"

"Your fault, goddammit. I hate you."

"Anna, stop." Her weight fell away in response to Paul's voice, and Anders heard her grappling with her husband as he pulled her away. Her curses changed into sobs and then full-out weeping.

"Quiet, please, or only things we will find are the King's teeth."

Ulaf continued to urge silence, interspersing his pleas with *shush*ing noises, until Anna's crying finally dwindled down to wet snuffles.

Leaving Anders alone with his guilt, a guilt that rose up from his stomach like bitter vomit, to fill him.

All my fault. I thought I was doing the right thing. Since Anna was a child, all I wanted to do was protect her. Instead, I led the danger right to my family.

All because I believed.

But how could he not, when he'd seen the truth with his own eyes, bore the scars of it every day? How could he have known the hazards of passing on the legends?

He couldn't. The logical part of his mind understood that. But logic counted for nothing, not when weighed against the knowledge that his actions had quite possibly led Death to his family's doorstep.

Guilt-driven tears ran down his cheeks and froze, turning the creases in his skin into tiny, ice-filled ravines. He let them stay, each one a burning reminder that all actions have consequences.

Ulaf rose, the rustle of his clothing unnaturally loud in the pitch black of the room.

"It is time."

"Why bother?" The dull, lifeless tone of Anna's voice made Anders want to wrap his arms around her and make everything all right. But he couldn't. Nothing was all right, thanks to him. And it never would be, even if they found the children. She'd never forgive him.

"They might yet live," Ulaf said. "Many pies the witch must bake, many cauldrons of stew she must make. You saw the children the Yule Lads brought. But that is not the only dungeon, so who knows how many others wait their turn."

"You said only those who believe can be taken," came Paul's voice in the darkness. "There can't be many people in our world who still believe in all this."

"Oh, many there are. Especially the children."

"This kind of hell isn't what today's children believe in," Paul said. "For them, it's Christmas and Santa and flying reindeer."

"Different words for the same thing. Believing is believing, no matter the name."

"So it wouldn't matter if our kids believed in Santa or your Holly King, the danger would still be the same?"

The meaning behind Paul's words was blatant, and Anders appreciated his son-in-law for it. A not-so-subtle attempt to let Anna know it wasn't her father's fault. He felt a new respect for Paul, but he also understood something Paul didn't. Anna had inherited the Bach stubborn streak, and she wouldn't let go of her anger easily.

"Children draw the cat and the Lads the way scraps draw crows. Any who venture outside during the nights of the Yule are fair game for them. Now come. Enough talk, if you want to find your boys. The King and his men will be in the throne room, and the witch will be busy looking over the bodies brought to her larder. We may be able to enter the kitchen unseen."

"May?" The tingling in Anders's body settled unpleasantly in his stomach. "You're not sure?"

The elf's voice took on an ominous tone in the dark. "Warned you I have of the dangers. 'Tis likely as not we all end up in the King's stew tonight."

"There's a comforting thought," Paul muttered.

Something brushed against Anders's arm and he jerked away, belatedly realizing it was only Ulaf's leg. Anders pushed himself up, hating the way his knees and back popped, the sounds of his age too loud in the quiet room.

Just hold out a little longer, he told his bones. *Once we're safe at home you can stay in bed for a week.*

Ulaf's boots pattered across the floor and the *click* of a latch being turned warned Anders to avert his eyes just in time to avoid being blinded by a narrow beam of light. He stood next to Anna and Paul and watched while Ulaf peered into the hall.

After a pause that seemed to stretch on forever, Ulaf waved a hand.

"Come. The stairwell is just around the bend."

The door opened wider, illuminating the entire storeroom. As he waited for Anna and Paul to exit the room, Anders glanced back and got his first real look at the frigid space where they'd been hiding.

And gasped.

"What is it?" Anna turned towards him.

"Nothing." Anders stepped in front of her, blocking her view, and put his hands on her shoulders to turn her around. "Come. Let's finish this."

The moment he stepped into the hall he pulled the door closed behind him. Not that it mattered. He already knew that what he'd seen inside would stay with him forever, visit him in his dreams until the day he died.

Jars. Row after row of them on wooden shelves that went from top to bottom along the back wall.

All filled with human organs.

Hearts, eyes, livers, kidneys. Things he couldn't identify.

And on the floor, red sacks stacked atop one another, their bulges suspiciously shaped like human forms.

Never again would he be able to look at a picture of Santa with his magical bag of presents without feeling the urge to vomit.

Following the others down the hall, Anders tried to force the abhorrent image from his mind, but it refused to leave, lingering on like the afterimpression from staring at a bright light. Only when they rounded a sharp curve in the hall and he saw the steep staircase ahead of them did his attention shift.

In his already exhausted state, the stairs represented a monumental task, one he wasn't sure his legs—or heart—were up to.

Anders took his nitro pills from his pocket and slipped one under his tongue. He'd just tucked the plastic container away when Paul turned toward him.

"Do you need help with the stairs?"

He shook his head and gave the younger man the best smile he could, considering the way the bitter aftertaste of the pill made his lips want to pucker. "Keep moving. I'm fine."

I hope. Please, Gott, help me to the top.

Twenty steps up, the pain in his legs devolved into sharp, fiery needles that stabbed at his calves, and his heart felt like a jazz drummer had hijacked it. He'd begun to think he might have to tell the others to go on without him when the medicine finally kicked in and the pressure in his chest disappeared. With the burden gone, his lungs expanded in normal fashion, sending welcome oxygen to his muscles. His heart slowed to a less alarming rate and the burning in his legs subsided to a dull ache.

Thank you.

He completed the rest of the stairs with no further problems and caught up to the others at another door. A new odor reached him, one that sent his stomach rumbling. The aromas of fresh-baked meats, not unlike the holiday roasts he'd grown up with. Marinated and braised, skin crackling and fats rendered down to oils that dripped into pans, waiting to be made into gravy.

Then he remembered the likely source of the smell and his stomach did a nauseated flip.

"We are close." The elf spoke so softly Anders had trouble hearing him over the sound of his own breathing. "Down the hall lies the witch's kitchen." He opened the door a crack, and the grisly aroma intensified. Anna coughed and covered her nose with her shirt.

"'Tis empty." Ulaf motioned for them to follow him into the hall.

They hurried along, the tang of roasted flesh stronger than ever, enticing yet loathsome at the same time. Breathing became an odious chore that fouled Anders's lungs and left an unpleasant sensation in his mouth, as if even his tongue understood the wrongness of it.

The kitchen lay at the end of the hall, waves of heat emanating from its open doors. Relieved to find no one guarding the entrance, they stepped into a gigantic room the size of a banquet hall. An enormous oven took up half a wall. A thick bed of coals glowed red and orange beneath it, and a second pile smoldered under two bathtub-sized kettles hanging inside a stone hearth as long Anders's entire kitchen. Rough-hewn wooden tables ran the length of the room, while along the back wall cages of various sizes had been stacked atop each other. Numerous torches provided more than enough light for Anders to see chickens, ducks and even a few pigs in some of the cages.

But it was the objects on the nearest table that drew his attention.

Six gigantic pies, each one large enough to feed twenty people, sat in a row, cooling in their iron pans. The thick, greasy aroma of roasted meat filled the room, a morbid reminder of the gruesome fillings hiding beneath the golden-brown pastry tops.

"No! We're too late!" Anna tried to run toward the macabre buffet but Paul held her back.

A sudden squawking and squealing from the back of the room drew everyone's attention, just in time to see two figures standing up in one of the cages.

"Mom, Dad! Help!"

"They're alive!" Anders ran, his joy and relief lending new strength to his tired legs. He reached the cage only three steps behind Anna and Paul, just in time to hear them curse when they found the door locked.

"Let me." Ulaf produced a metal pin. He poked and prodded at the lock while Anders kept one eye on the kitchen's entrance and the other on Anna and Paul, who'd reached between the bars to hug their children. The boys were in sorry shape, their faces bruised and their clothing torn, but they had no serious injuries that Anders could see.

"Faster."

"I'm trying," the elf snapped. "This lock is… Got it!"

Anders reached past Ulaf and pulled the door open. "Let's go. Move."

The boys hurried out and into the waiting arms of their parents. A little bit of the pressure in Anders's chest eased up. He'd been so afraid they'd be too late.

Now comes the hard part. Getting them back—

"Well, what have we here? I thought I smelled fresh meat."

Anders turned, fresh terror coursing through him. He already knew what he'd see, remembered that dry, cracked voice all too well.

Gryla.

The witch stood by the door, her wrinkled face twisted in a grin that exposed her irregular jumble of teeth.

"You should have left when you had the chance." Gryla aimed her staff at them. "Now it's the kettle for you."

"Mind the rod," Ulaf called out. "It can stop your heart."

Anders ducked behind a table, having no desire to feel the witch's wrath again. Anna, Paul and the boys crouched next to him, all staring in his direction.

"Run," Anders whispered, pointing to his right. "Head for the door. I'll go the other way."

Something landed on top of the table and Anders looked up to find the witch leering down at them, her white, brittle hair sticking out in all directions, her fingers splayed to show black, jagged nails sharp as claws. She leaped at Anders before he could move, scratching at

his face. He brought his arms up to protect his eyes and then cursed as she sank her teeth into his hand. Punching and kicking at her had no effect. She wrapped her legs around his waist and attacked like a wild animal. In a desperate attempt to break loose, he jabbed his fingers at her eyes. She twisted to one side and ducked, and he saw his chance.

Before she could renew her assault, he grabbed her by the hair and swung her head into one of the cages. She fell to the floor and Anders scuttled back, pushing himself away with his feet and hands. His shoulder hit a wall and he realized he'd trapped himself.

The witch sprang to her feet, much too agile for someone so ancient.

"I'll see you quartered and fried." Her black eyes narrowed in fury. She raised her staff and then let out a yelp as a metal dish struck her arm and spoiled her aim. Inside one of the cages, a chicken exploded, sending feathers and gore in all directions. Anders glanced up and saw Ulaf on the table, his arms filled with utensils and mugs that he proceeded to throw at the witch.

"Make haste, before she— *Aaargh!*"

Ulaf flew off the table, mugs and ladles and dishes falling down around him. With a cackling laugh, she swung her staff back at Anders.

"Tick, tick, old man," Gryla said, and Anders took a deep breath, knowing his heart wouldn't stand another magical jolt.

A shadow rose behind her and swung something at her head that connected with a dull, metallic *clong*. The witch fell over, her staff rolling across the floor until it stopped at Anders' feet.

Anna stood there, an iron skillet in her hands.

"Are you okay?"

Anders exhaled the breath he'd been holding and nodded. He had no idea if he'd suffered any serious injuries—everything hurt so bad that one pain seemed to blend into the next. But his arms and legs still worked, and when he pulled himself to his feet, holding on to the bars of a cage for support, neither his heart nor lungs faltered.

"Then let's get the fuck out of here." Anna headed towards the kitchen's entrance. Anders followed, a slightly wobbly Ulaf joining him along the way. Paul waited by the kettle hearth with the children, a pointed fireplace poker in one hand. He nodded at Anders, who nodded back, acknowledging both the thank-you and the understanding that things weren't over yet.

"How do we get out of here?" Anders asked Ulaf, who shook his head.

"The castle has many exits, but few will be unguarded now that our escape is known.

We need to—"

"Intruders!"

Anders swore. Couldn't anything go right? The two Yule Lads ran at them from the doorway, teeth bared like rabid dogs. He took a step forward but Paul pushed Jake and Nick at him and raised his poker.

Anna swung her pan at one of the Lads, catching him on the shoulder and sending him stumbling into a table. The other one darted past her and grabbed on to Paul's leg, biting into his thigh just above the knee while Paul howled and beat at him with the poker. The Lad let go and Paul kicked him in the stomach. He staggered back and doubled over wheezing. Paul strode forward and kicked him again.

Right into the hearth.

The Yule Lad let out a high-pitched shriek as he hit the kettle and fell on the hot coals. His wailing grew worse when the kettle tipped, spilling boiling stew across his chest and face.

"Run!" Ulaf shouted, and they sprinted for the door, Anders herding the boys along and trying not to vomit from the stench of burning flesh.

"You can't escape!" came Gryla's voice. "I'll eat your hearts for what you've done."

Anders risked a look back and saw the Yule Lad, his body engulfed in fire, staggering through the kitchen while his brother beat at him with a cloth. Sections of the floor and table were already in flames from scattered coals.

Then he focused his attention on Ulaf, who waved his arms at them from a different stairwell than the one they'd used before.

Somewhere deep in the castle, a horn sounded, followed quickly by others. Anders pushed the children faster.

The King had joined the search.

Anders gritted his teeth and forced his legs to keep moving. He had both hands against the walls of the stairwell, using them to push himself forward and keep his balance at the same time. Although the elf said nothing, his desperate eyes and sweating face told Anders all he needed to know.

They were running out of time.

One flight down, Ulaf stopped on a landing much wider than any they'd seen earlier.

"This way leads to the Great Hall," he whispered. Over everyone's combined panting and gasping, Anders had to strain to hear the words. "'Tis our only hope. If we can cross it

to the main doors, a chance there might be of reaching the path that leads out of the village."

"Won't there be guards?" Paul asked. He had his arms around his sons, who both looked as spent as Anders felt.

"Likely, yes. But perhaps not as many." Ulaf shrugged his shoulders to emphasize his uncertainty. "Aiding in the search they might be. Let us hope so, for above us are no exits, and below there will be men in the tunnels for sure."

Paul looked at Anders, who shrugged. "We don't have much choice."

"Daddy, I don't want to," Jake said, clutching at Paul's leg. "The nasty old lady might be out there."

"You have to trust Grandpa." Anna leaned down, put her face in front of Jake's. "If he thinks this is the only way to get back home, then we should do it." She glanced at Anders and gave him a tight-lipped nod that he couldn't decipher.

Accusation or apology? He decided it didn't matter. If by some miracle they made it out of the castle and back to their own reality, they could worry about working things out then.

"Go ahead," he told Ulaf, who responded by opening the door just wide enough to slip through. When no alarms were raised, the elf motioned for them to follow him into the Great Hall.

Anders had no idea what to expect as he stepped into the throne room of the Holly King. As a child, he'd always imagined it would look like the pictures and drawings he'd seen of medieval castles.

As with so much of Winterwood, his imagination paled in comparison to reality.

The Great Hall stretched out in all directions, a colossal monument to Death. The mounted heads of slain animals—elk, reindeer, bear, wolves—decorated the walls. Mixed among the grisly trophies were dozens of human heads, but not like any humans who walked the earth. These faces were more beast than man, with tusks jutting out and noses that looked stolen from wild boar. Violent tapestries hung at intervals, depicting graphic scenes of the Wild Hunt and the Feast of Juul, complete with men, women and children being gutted or eaten.

At one end of the hall, an enormous throne made of leather, bone and antlers perched atop a wide dais. From the width of the throne and the height of stairs leading to it, Anders got the impression the Holly King's stature had nothing in common with the other inhabitants of Winterwood.

In fact, it seemed the King might be something of a giant.

On the opposite side of the room from the throne, a pair of gigantic arched doors made

up the main entrance. In between was open space, with no furniture of any kind. Rows of blazing torches ran along the walls, providing ample light to see by.

"Quickly now." Ulaf headed carefully towards the doors, glancing back and forth with each step. Anders followed a few paces behind, sweating from the surprising warmth in the room. Although he couldn't see it, he assumed there had to be a massive fireplace somewhere, perhaps behind the throne, to heat such a large space. The scent of the burning wood lingered in the air, mingling with the sharp odor of kerosene from the torches.

The idea that someone had carved the entire Great Hall right into the center of the tree stunned him. He leaned back, taking in the domed ceiling at least thirty feet overhead.

Not just this room. All the rooms and hallways, from the dungeons to the topmost spires. All of it carved by slave labor over the centuries. The millennia. How many millions of lives had the Hunt claimed in that time? How many people changed against their will, forced into servitude?

How many consumed at the feasts?

Anders looked back at Anna and Paul, each holding one of their children's hands and pulling the exhausted boys along. Sweat poured down their faces, which had gone red from exertion.

There are four lives this place will never get. Not if I can help it.

They'd covered half the distance to the exit when the brassy croak of a horn sounded outside the castle. Ulaf came to a stop just as the doors swung open and a pack of the largest dogs Anders had ever seen came charging in. Each snarling hound stood as tall as Ulaf at the shoulder, with coats of the purest black. Their eyes whirled yellow and red and orange, like hot coals in a breeze. Steam rose from their mouths and their tongues lolled over teeth that would have sent a wolf cowering in shame.

The hounds formed a circle around the humans and Ulaf, cutting off any hope of escape. Their growls intensified to a rumbling, felt as well as heard. Strings of saliva hung from black lips pulled back to reveal yellowed fangs, and the rotten meat odor of their combined breath filled the circle.

Jake cried out and hid his face against Paul's chest. Nick wrapped his arms around both Paul and Jake, while Paul pulled Anna close.

Ulaf let out a moan, drawing Anders's attention back to the doorway in time to see a figure enter the hall. More trumpeting accompanied him, and several of the hounds whined in anticipation.

"Krampus." The elf's voice sounded faint, swept away by the frigid wind coming through

the doorway. An involuntary shudder ran through Anders as freezing air met damp skin. He stared at the Holly King, and his last hope of escape shriveled and died inside him.

Wide as two men and at least seven feet tall, the King looked more fearsome than any tale described him. Ragged white hair fell down to his shoulders, creating a knotted, tangled mane around a narrow, angular face. A wide forehead lined with numerous creases descended to heavy brows that hung over deep-set eyes ringed with reddened flesh. The eyes themselves weren't human, their yellow color and horizontal pupils reminiscent of a goat's. A hooked nose with flaring nostrils centered the face and slanted down towards a mouth designed for a carnivore. Thin, red lips surrounded pointed teeth. Oversized tusks protruded out from his top and bottom jaws, overlapping his lips. Below the mouth, the face narrowed to a cleft chin decorated with wispy hairs, which only added to a goatlike countenance.

The rest of the King's appearance shouted warrior. Muscular arms and legs, a barrel chest and clothes made of thick hides dyed red and black. Across one shoulder hung a longbow, and in one hand he gripped an immense axe, its iron head permanently stained from centuries of blood.

"No, this, this is all wrong," stammered Ulaf. "The Hunt never goes out twice in a night."

"Oh, a Hunt there shall be." The Holly King's booming voice echoed through the hall. "The stink of human blood has filled my nose since I returned. I thank you for entering my home. I do so enjoy it when my food comes to me."

The King swung his axe around, the heavy blade whistling through the air. Ulaf moaned again. One of the hounds snarled and inched forward, forcing the elf back a step.

"Halt," Krampus said, and the hound stopped. "It wouldn't be sporting to kill them this way." He pointed the axe at the humans. "A count to *hundrað* I shall give you. Then I will come for your lives."

The hounds in front of them licked their chops but stepped to either side, creating an opening in their circle. Anders stared at it.

"Einn, tveir, þrír…"

Was the Krampus really counting them a head start?

Move, you old fool!

Anders turned to Anna and Paul. "Run for the woods. Hide. Climb a tree if you must. But find your way back to the Veil before sunrise. Go!" he shouted when Anna just shook her head and pressed herself tighter against her husband.

Anders raised his hands, ready to give them a shove, scream at them, anything to get

them moving while they still had a chance.

"Fire! The castle is burning!" Everyone turned at the cries coming from the stairwell. Gryla, with one of the Yule Lads behind her, ran into the room, her clothes and hair covered in soot. Thick, black smoke chased them from the doorway.

"Them!" She pointed at the humans. "They did it. Killed one of my Lads and set the kitchen on fire."

"Get them!" the King roared, but in that instant other doors, hidden until then, opened and disgorged dozens of elves and ogres, all of them shouting for help. A deafening crack drowned out their voices and a section of ceiling crashed onto the throne in an explosion of flames. Burning timber tumbled away, creating lines of fire that quickly spread across the floor and set the tapestries alight.

Smoke poured down through the hole and in from the doorways, creating a superheated cloud that rapidly spread through the room. Instead of attacking, the hounds whined and turned in circles, confused by the commotion.

"Now!" Anders slapped at Paul's arm. The stunned look fell away from the man's face and he pushed the boys forward. They ran, following Ulaf.

Anders waited for Paul and Anna to get moving before bringing up the rear. Smoke and heat burned his eyes and made it impossible to see where he was going. Heavy footsteps pounded the floor near him and the King's axe carved through the smoke to thud into the wood inches away. The resulting vibration nearly shook him off his feet. Jagged splinters flew in all directions and Anders gasped as several of the tiny daggers pierced through his clothes to stab at his flesh.

Then the smoke thinned and he saw the doorway ahead, the cold wind from outside creating a zone of clear air. The others had already passed through and Anders ducked his head and ran harder, his lungs fighting for oxygen as he caught up to his family. Together they sprinted across the village square and towards the dirt path beckoning from the other side.

The moment they reached the path, the woods closed in around them and created a tunnel through which they raced, the bellowing of horns behind them a constant reminder of Death on their heels. The thrumming of hoofbeats a moment later only added to the terror fueling their muscles. In another breath, the baying of the hounds added to the din.

"How far?" Paul gasped. Anders shook his head. The walk from the Veil to Ulaf's tree was a blur in his memory. He'd been too intent on finding shelter to pay attention to the distance they'd traveled.

"A shortcut lies ahead." Ulaf pointed forward, where the path split. A narrow trail led to the left, while the wide main trail continued forward.

There was no time to ask questions. Ulaf turned onto the smaller path and they stayed with him, trusting his sense of direction. The snow grew deeper, threatening to drag down their legs. Anders had hoped the narrow trail would slow their pursuers, but the baying only grew louder.

"The Veil."

Anders saw it at the same time. A widening of the trail, and in the center, a shimmering rainbow of color, a diffuse curtain that turned the trees behind it into wavering, distorted shapes.

"Hurry," he urged the others. "Don't stop."

It took less than a minute for them to reach the Veil, but in those seconds Anders feared they wouldn't make it. The pounding of hooves had become a thousand kettledrums, a hundred thunderstorms behind them, the force of it shaking snow from the trees. He refused to turn and look back, his ears telling him all he needed to know. The King was close, the hounds closer.

He watched the people ahead of him disappear into the Veil; Ulaf, Paul, Anna, the boys swallowed by the divide between the worlds.

Two steps later he crossed the boundary and all sound and light ceased to exist. For less than a heartbeat, longer than a lifetime, he existed in absolute nothing, a place bereft of matter and energy.

And then reality returned. His feet came down hard on modern blacktop and he stumbled, his arms windmilling as he fought to regain his balance. Streetlights illuminated a silent, empty Main Street. Up ahead, Ulaf and the others waited for him, relief etched on their faces.

"Keep going," Anders said, forcing his legs back into motion. The Hunt would be there any second.

"Safe we are," Ulaf raised a fist, a smile pulling up the corners of his beard. "The Hunt cannot return twi—"

The elf tumbled over in midword, a three-foot arrow protruding from his chest.

Anders turned. Thirty feet back, the Holly King sat atop a giant reindeer, the points of its antlers sharp as knives and its eyes red as fire. A dozen ogres mounted on smaller deer gathered behind him, all armed with bows or swords. The hounds waited to either side for their master's command to charge.

"Ho!" the King roared, his voice echoing up and down the street. The Hunt leaped forward, the King in the lead, his massive axe in hand.

Anders looked around. They were still blocks away from the house. Darkened stores and restaurants offered no safety. Up ahead, a stoplight swung back and forth in the wind, its green glow—

A memory rose up in Anders's mind. Something his father had told him as a child.

"There are only two ways to defeat the Hunt. Join it or take yourself to a crossroads."

A crossroads. Like a four-way intersection?

"Come on." Anders pushed the others toward the center of the road, directly under the traffic light.

"What are you doing?" Anna tried to break free. "We have to run."

"No time. Kneel down."

"But—"

"Trust me, please." He stared into his daughter's eyes. An arrow struck the ground nearby, the metal head throwing up sparks as it zinged by. *Please, daughter…*

"All right." She knelt, pulling the children down with her. Anders joined them, his knees touching the road just as Paul cried out and grabbed his arm. Blood flowed from between his fingers and he collapsed next to his wife. Anders prayed his father had gotten the old tales right. He put his arms around Anna and Paul and held on tight.

The thunder of the Hunt reached a deafening crescendo and Anders ducked his head, certain he'd made a mistake, that this was the end…

Cold enveloped him, worse than any winter wind, worse than falling into a frozen lake. The cold of deep space. He felt his flesh hardening, his blood turning to ice. Ghostly images flashed by, their phosphorescent shapes passing through clothing and bodies, sucking heat and life as they went. Someone screamed. A tremendous pressure built in Anders's head, like diving too deep in a lake. He cried out and pressed his hands over his ears.

And then it all stopped.

Thunder, screams, bitter cold. All of it gone in an instant.

Anders looked up. A hundred yards down the road, the Holly King glared furiously in their direction, the Hunt lined up behind him. When he made no move to charge again, Anders let out a sigh.

The old tales had been true after all. *Thank you, Vater.* That was twice his father had saved him, once as a child and now again. A debt that could never be paid. At least not until the afterlife.

"Prepare to die, mortals," the King shouted. The ogres cheered and shook their weapons, but none of them moved forward. Even the hounds remained in place.

Nick whimpered and Anders put a hand on the boy's back.

"Not tonight," Anders called out. "We're safe as long as we remain within the crossroads. And we can stay here until morning, while you must return to Winterwood before light strikes the horizon."

The Holly King lowered his axe. His eyes narrowed. One of the hounds howled in frustration and the ogres muttered curses.

"So, you know the old ways. But there will be other Hunts."

Anders nodded. "And we'll be safely inside, with warm drinks and gifts. You'll never have us on your table, Father Ice."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. Who knows what the future holds?" the King kicked his stag, which reared up on its hind legs and let loose an angry shriek. "Ho!"

The Hunt stormed forward and Anders ducked. Once more the supernatural cold swept through him as the riders and their mounts turned into harmless phantoms, spectral hooves drumming the ground but impotent against flesh.

When the last of the riders passed through, Anders turned to watch the flickering Veil fold in on itself behind the Hunt. A brisk wind whistled to life and Anders felt it tugging at him, trying to draw him into the shrinking Veil. Ulaf's body tumbled down the street and vanished into the metaphysical curtain just before it closed with a *pop*.

The wind died away, leaving the five of them alone on the road.

"Is it over?" Paul lifted his head.

Anders let out a heavy sigh. "Yes. The Hunt won't be returning tonight."

"Can we go home now?" Jake asked.

"We sure can." Paul ruffled his son's hair, then winced.

"You're hurt," Anna said, taking his arm and pulling back the torn sections of sleeve to reveal a long, deep gash that still bled heavily. Blood stained his pants as well where the Yule Lad had bitten him.

"Gonna be tough explaining this to a doctor," Paul said. His face didn't mirror the humor in his words. In fact, Anders thought, he looked about ready to faint.

"Keep him steady," he told Anna. "Let's get him home."

Anders took Jake's and Nick's hands and started walking, his mind already on what the morning would bring. The boys—and their parents—would be changed greatly by the events of the night. Would Anna forgive him for everything that happened? Or would she

blame him for all the boys' problems down the road too?

Did he deserve that blame?

I did what I promised. I brought them home alive. Whatever happens—

A long, rumbling growl echoed through the streets. Anders looked back, expecting to find a truck or plow heading toward them.

Instead, he saw a large shadow slide between two houses across the road. A bloodcurdling wail followed a moment later. *No. Not here.*

"Run," he told the boys, letting go of their hands.

"Grandpa?" Nick looked up at him, his eyes wide.

"Run. All of you. Run!"

Anders swatted Jake in the rear and he let out a yelp.

"Now! It's the Jólaköttur."

Anna pushed Paul forward. "Listen to him!"

"What?" He looked around.

"The Yule Cat." As if in response to its name, the angry yowling pierced the night again.

"Take Nick." She grabbed Jake in her arms and started to run. Paul lifted Nick and followed.

"Grandpa," Jake shouted. Anna stopped and glanced back.

"Go on," Anders said, waving for her to keep moving. "I'll lead it a different way and meet you at the house."

Anna appeared ready to argue but then nodded and dashed after her husband.

Anders turned his attention back to where he'd seen the shadow. Where had it gone?

The cat leaped out from behind a garage, larger than the car in the driveway, larger than Anders remembered it. Six feet tall at the shoulder, decked out in the gray and brown of a common tabby, mouth open to show teeth capable of tearing a man in half. It covered the length of the driveway in one bound and hit the road at full speed, heading towards the street Anna and the others had taken.

"Over here, *katze!* Remember me? I'm the one you want." Anders waved his arms. "Come finish what you started."

The cat skidded to a stop and sniffed the air. It turned its head, pinning Anders with eyes that glowed like alien gemstones. It lowered the front half of its body. Anders saw the tail twitching back and forth, the muscles tensing in its forequarter.

Anders took off down the road, his heart already thumping too hard. *Please, not now. Not until they're safe.* The roar of the Yule Cat shook the air and Anders was transported

back in time, no longer running down a Pennsylvania street but a cobblestone road in a German village, a young boy sprinting for his life while the demon cat killed his friends.

For the first time in many years, Anders remembered what it meant to truly be alive, to experience the world with every fiber of his being. The burn of subzero air in his lungs, the crackle of mucous freezing inside his nose. His legs screaming with every stride but nowhere near ready to give up. His pulse pounding in his temples, a liquid drum that drowned out all other sounds except the howling of the beast bearing down on him. He remembered the cat's foul breath, stinking of blood and raw meat and old, rotten flesh. He remembered the way he'd pissed himself that long-ago night and wondered if he'd do it again.

Terror heightened his senses to those of an animal. He smelled snow and chimney smoke and gingerbread and his own sweat. He tasted the winter night on his tongue, a taste so very different from any other season, bitter and almost metallic, like gaseous blood. He experienced exquisite needles of pain in individual teeth as freezing air rushed over old fillings and across receding gums.

Through it all, the diesel-truck growl of the Yule Cat bounding behind him, drawing closer every second. A race he knew he'd never win, but that didn't matter.

They just need to get into the house. We have presents there. Anna will remember what to do with them.

Still, the will to survive remained too strong for him to just stop and let the beast rend him to pieces. Dying was not something he wanted to do, although he'd been prepared for it since the moment he made the decision to summon the Yule Elf and go to Winterwood.

A wave of hot, putrid air washed over him, letting him know his manner of death was about to be decided for him and it wouldn't be pleasant. Despite the inevitability of getting caught, he dodged to his right, turning down a side street in the futile hope of finding a house with lights on or someone with an early morning job getting into a car.

Instead, an icy puddle waited for him.

His feet slipped away from the road and he went airborne. His body twisted around, giving him an unwanted glimpse of the Yule Cat only ten feet behind him. Then he hit the ground hard on his shoulder and thigh. Explosions of pain went off throughout his body and the air *whoosh*ed out of his lungs. Brightly colored stars clouded his vision while he slid across the pavement before coming to a stop against the curb.

By the time his sight cleared, the Yule Cat stood over him, ears pinned back, eyes narrowed, lips drawn back in a snarl. It held one paw up, and again Anders found himself traveling back in time.

The cat raising its paw, exposing claws as long as a boy's hand. Shreds of bloody cloth hanging from them.

The cloth was brown. I didn't notice at the time, but now I remember. Only one person had been wearing a brown jacket that night, Otto Spreckels. Although he hadn't thought of his old friend in more than seven decades, Anders saw him clearly now through the reverse lens of time, a skinny boy with teeth like a horse and hair that refused to stay combed. No one had ever found his body or that of Heinrich Meier. No one had looked for them, either. There'd been no need. Everyone knew what happened.

There'd been no celebrating in Kappelsbad that year.

A massive blow to his ribs sent Anders tumbling across the road. So intense was the pain that it constricted his throat, rendering him unable to scream. He grabbed at his side and felt warm liquid already seeping through the torn cloth.

The Yule Cat lifted its paw again.

So like a verdammt cat, toying with its food.

"Finish it, you *fotze*. I'm not afraid of you, and I'm not afraid to die." Anders wanted to say more, to antagonize the monster into delivering a merciful death blow, but he couldn't capture enough air for the rest of his words. Instead, he lay there, sucking in wheezing breaths befouled with the bestial odors of the cat. The paw lifted higher, and Anders closed his eyes.

Please, Gott, let this be the end.

"It's not often I hear those words spoken." A jingling of bells accompanied the unexpected voice. Anders opened his eyes and found the Yule Elf staring down at him from atop his goat.

"You." Anders fought for more air. "So, you've come to have the last laugh. Go ahead, say it. You warned me."

"Yes, old man, I did, and you didn't heed it. 'Tis suicide to try and rescue folk from Winterwood. Yet here you are, back from that place, your family safe and warm again. Twice you have saved them on this night."

"And now I pay the price." Anders coughed. "So please, let me die in peace."

"I think not," the Yule Elf said, and Anders groaned. *So he's going to hold a grudge after all. How fitting.*

The elf pointed a tiny finger at the cat. "Leave this one alone. My protection he has."

The cat snarled and aimed its paw towards the elf, whose eyes lit up bright red. "Go, or face my wrath."

To Anders's surprise, the cat acquiesced, still growling but slinking back several paces before turning and running down the street, where it disappeared into the dark.

Anders looked at the elf. "Why?"

The Julenissen lifted its shirt and vest, exposing a mass of scars that crossed each other on his ribs and back.

"No love is lost between the King and me. You defeated the Wild Hunt tonight, and so earned your life. Next time, you might not be so lucky."

"There won't be a next time," Anders said. "We won't be venturing outside at night to give them—or any from Winterwood—an opportunity."

The Yule Elf nodded. "Then I hope our paths never need cross again." The elf slapped the goat's neck and it sprang into the air, galloping up into the sky.

Anders watched his savior shrink to a dot, and then vanish among the twinkling stars, before pushing himself to his knees. His wounds ached something fierce, but after prodding at them, he felt confident the cat's claws hadn't even reached bone. He'd have new scars to match those on his other side, but he'd live.

Moaning with each step, Anders began a slow walk home.

Dec. 23, Present Day

"And that's how we defeated the Wild Hunt and saved both your fathers." The old man rolled down his sleeve covering the jagged, white scar that twisted up the loose skin of his upper arm. A matching one still marred his thigh. The three girls sitting on the floor by his feet "oohed" and "ahhed" and covered their mouths, blue eyes wide above their hands.

Across the room, Kristina Willis shook her head and frowned. "I hate those stories your father tells. He turns every holiday into something dark and gloomy."

Tammy Willis nodded her agreement with her sister-in-law's words. "He scares them. They have nightmares. Can't you tell him to stop?"

Nick Willis exchanged a glance with his brother, Jake.

"No, I can't. Sometimes being scared is a good thing."

About the Author

A life-long resident of New York's Hudson Valley, JG Faherty is a Bram Stoker Award® and ITW Thriller Award finalist and the author of five novels, seven novellas, and more than 50 short stories. He writes adult and YA horror/sci-fi/fantasy, and his works range from quiet, dark suspense to over-the-top comic gruesomeness. He enjoys urban exploring, photography, classic B-movies, good wine, and pumpkin beer. As a child, his favorite playground was a 17th-century cemetery, which many people feel explains a lot.

You can follow him at www.twitter.com/jgfaherty, www.facebook.com/jgfaherty, and www.jgfaherty.com.

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The Cure

She was born with the power to cure. Now she's developed the power to kill.

The Cure

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Leah DeGarmo has the power to cure with just a touch. But with her gift comes a dark side: Whatever she takes in she has to pass on, or suffer it herself. Now a sadistic criminal has discovered what she can do and he'll stop at nothing to control her. He makes a mistake, though, when he kills the man she loves, triggering a rage inside her that releases a new power she didn't know she had: the ability to kill. Transformed into a demon of retribution, Leah resurrects her lover and embarks on a mission to destroy her enemies. The only question is, does she control her power or does it control her?

Enjoy the following excerpt for The Cure:

Fifteen minutes before she saved a man's life, committed murder, and started a chain reaction of events she could never have imagined even in her worst nightmares, the only thing on Leah DeGarmo's mind was a hamburger and French fries.

It had been years since she last ventured into a McDonald's—or any other fast food restaurant—and after a particularly bad morning at work, her cravings had reached the point where she couldn't ignore them any longer.

"I'm taking lunch," she said to Chastity Summers, as she hung up her white lab coat and headed for the front door of her veterinary clinic. "I'll be back in an hour."

"Okay, Doctor D." Chastity Summers waved, never looking up from her computer screen. She was busy entering the data on the last patient of the morning, a twenty-year old beagle in remarkably perfect health. At one time Smokey Two had suffered from cataracts and liver disease, but he'd managed to beat them both. His owner, Tanya Weston, always told people Smokey Two was a walking advertisement for Leah's skills as a veterinarian.

Opening the door to her three-year-old Toyota, Leah felt a pang of sadness in her heart. Smokey Two couldn't keep it up much longer. Dogs rarely lived past twenty. She wiped tears from suddenly damp eyes. It would break Tanya's heart when her dog finally passed away.

She glanced in the rearview mirror to make sure she hadn't smudged her makeup. People always said her eyes were like windows to her emotions, changing from hazel to brighter green when she was happy or excited, and to a murky brownish-green when she felt sad or depressed.

Today there was almost no green at all, and the dark color looked odd against the

glowing backdrop of blonde hair flowing down to her shoulders in waves that were always on the verge of turning unmanageable. Even her face looked pale beneath the deep summer tan.

"Get a grip on yourself," she told her reflection. "It's too nice a day to wallow in regrets."

The warm September day helped push her melancholy away, and Leah decided to treat herself to a greasy cheeseburger and fries. A determined smile on her face, she pulled out of the parking lot and headed toward McDonald's.

Leah opened the heavy glass door and entered a different world, one where the air dripped with oil, steam, and fat-laden odors that simultaneously repulsed and excited her.

There's something about a McDonald's that reminds you of being a kid. Not to mention the dopamine spikes triggered by the smell and taste of hot grease and fried meats.

Why is it the foods that are the worst for you are always the ones that taste the best?

The lunch hour crowd filled the space in front of the counter. As she waited her turn in line, Leah struggled to read all the choices on the menu board.

I've never even seen half those meals before. Guess that's what happens when you make an effort to eat healthy. I didn't think McDonald's could change so much in three years!

Luckily, the basics still held their place on the menu, and when her turn came Leah ordered a quarter pounder with cheese, large fries, and large diet coke. While she waited for her food, she went to the condiments bar and grabbed napkins, ketchup, and a straw. Her one task completed, she let her vision roam around the crowded room. She couldn't help noticing the police officer standing a few people behind her in line.

He doesn't look like he eats here any more often than I do. Leah admired his tall, wiry frame and the way his brown hair fell across his forehead. With his dark, intelligent eyes and bright-white smile, he looked more like a politician or maybe a banker than a cop.

Smile? Oh, he's smiling at me! *He saw me staring at him.* Leah turned away, feeling her face grow hot as the blood rushed to it. The counter girl returned with her order and Leah grabbed the tray, nearly spilling the contents onto the floor as she hurried off to a table before the man could say anything to her.

"Christ, I can't believe I did that," she whispered to herself as she sat down. "Get a hold on yourself. You're not fifteen anymore."

She took a long sip of her soda, hoping the cold liquid would drive the heat from her cheeks. Still, she couldn't help thinking about the cute, half-quizzical, half-admiring smile the cop had shown her, and she peeked to the side to watch him pump ketchup into a little

white corrugated cup.

Straw still in her mouth, she tried to push away the particularly graphic thoughts all the pumping and squirting created in her head.

I guess it really has been too long. She followed her rueful thought with a quick duck of her head as the object of her fantasy glanced in her direction.

"Shut up or I start shooting!"

The shouted words made Leah looked up again, just as people started screaming.

A man at the counter had a gun aimed at one of the cashiers, who was crying and holding her trembling hands in the air.

"Hurry up!" The gunman's order acted like a signal for everyone to move. People fell to the ground or ran for the doors, and one of the other cashiers, a man in his thirties, darted back into the kitchen.

The would-be thief grabbed a nearby woman and pulled her tight against his cracked and aging black motorcycle jacket, his crazed eyes darting back and forth. His hostage tried to struggle, but he clamped a hand over her mouth and put the large, evil-looking handgun to her head.

"Gimme the goddamn money now, or you're gonna have brains all over your counter!" he told the two remaining cashiers in a voice as frenzied as his movements. The two teenage girls clung to each other, eyes shut, crying uncontrollably.

Leah dropped her cheeseburger, the sudden, spastic opening of her fingers the only movement she seemed capable of making. *He's going to shoot that woman.* She knew it as surely as she knew he was high on drugs, or that the two girls would never get past their fear and give him the money. *Ohmigod, he's gonna…*

A quick movement interrupted her thought as the police officer threw his tray of food in the direction of the gunman. The tray clattered on the floor and soda sprayed everywhere, distracting the man from his prisoner.

"Police! Drop the gun!" the cop shouted, his face no longer smiling, his dark eyes cold and dangerous as he squinted down the barrel of his service pistol at the heavily-bearded robber.

"I'll kill her, man."

"If you do, you'll die right after her," the young officer said. Sweat stains bloomed in the armpits of his previously immaculate uniform, but neither his gun nor his voice wavered.

"Not if I kill you first." Pushing the woman to the side, the man turned the gun and fired two shots. The twin reports broke the spell that held the remaining patrons captive,

and once more the air filled with screams as the remaining customers rushed for the exits.

The officer let out a cry of pain and fell backwards into the condiment counter. A wet, red smear followed him as he slowly slid down the white plastic to the floor.

"No!" Leah jumped up and ran to the officer, insanely hoping it was just ketchup dripping onto the floor, too familiar with violent wounds to be fooled into thinking it was anything but blood.

"Get away from him!" the shooter said to her, but she ignored him, already placing her hands on either side of the crimson flower blooming in the center of the man's shirt. Amazingly, the officer - *Officer Carrera,* she read on his tag as she ripped open his shirt - opened his eyes and looked at her.

"Get out of here," he tried to say, but the words disappeared in a wet hiss, informing Leah that one of his lungs had collapsed. From the amount of blood pooling around the body, it seemed likely at least one major blood vessel, probably the vena cava, was ruptured as well.

"You're gonna be okay," she told him, pressing her hands against the wound. "Lie still." The familiar warmth surged through her, followed by a sharp pain as if she'd touched a live wire. Even though she was prepared for the shock, it still made her twitch. Under her hands, the officer's body bucked as if jolted by a defibrillator. Leah started to tell him again that he'd be all right, but just then a rough hand grabbed her by the back of her shirt and pulled her away, nearly choking her in the process.

"Are you deaf, bitch? I told you to stay away." She looked up and saw the gunman aiming his pistol at her. "Now you can die alongside your boyfriend."

Without thinking, Leah grabbed the man's leg, sliding her hand up under his pants to touch his skin. Another spark, but this one brought relief, a coolness, as if a poison had been sucked out of her body.

His eyes wide and surprised, the man opened his mouth to yell but it turned into a choking gasp that cut off as his mouth filled with blood. He stumbled away and his finger twitched on the trigger as he collapsed, sending a bullet whining past Leah's head to chip the tile floor before ricocheting away.

He landed hard, his eyes already blank and lifeless, a red stain spreading on the front of his shirt.

Oh, Leah, you've really done it this time. The thought forced her into action.

"Hurry, move him over to the counter," she ordered Officer Carrera, as she grabbed one of the gunman's arms and pulled him towards the small island holding the ketchup and

napkins.

Carrera rose unsteadily to his feet, then put out a hand to stop her. “What the hell happened?”

“We have to make it look like he got shot over here. Now help me!”

Carrera stood there for a moment, fingering the hole in his uniform. Then he grabbed the man’s other arm and helped her slide the body over until it was roughly in the center of the blood and ketchup already staining the floor.

“Lady, will you tell me what’s going on? I was shot, and now I’m fine and we’ve got a dead gunman.”

Sirens sounded outside, reminding Leah they didn’t have time to talk.

“I’ll explain everything later,” she promised him. “Please, just trust me.” She sat down on the floor a few feet away, preparing herself to play the part of the terrified witness.

I won’t have to pretend too hard, but what am I more scared of? Almost being shot or having my secret exposed?


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