

FIVE

THE DOCTOR

There's no possible way I can tell whether you're pregnant or not," the doctor tried explaining to her for the second time.

"No way?"

"Not for at least four weeks. I'm afraid the human body just doesn't work that quickly."

Irene slumped back in her chair and stared at him. She knew he was right, of course, and in hindsight it seemed ridiculous her coming into the village to see him. They'd been trying for a baby for a while, but the previous night's dream had seemed to prove her conception, despite the horrible face it had worn. Here and now in the doctor's surgery she could explain that face rationally; it was psychological, of course it was, the fear of motherhood, it was terrifying really. Had it not been for the house, or rather her sister's visit with the ouija board, she would almost certainly not be this scared.

"Do you want to make an appointment to come back in four weeks time" the doctor asked her.

Irene realised that she'd been staring into space. She smiled apologetically.

"I'm sorry, Dr Walton," she said. "It's just that... I had this dream."

"Of being pregnant?"

Irene nodded again, embarrassed.

"You'd be surprised how common that is."

"Really?"

"Many women dream of their unborn babies before there's any sign. It's like the first test there can be, if you will, the connection between mother and child."

"I'm glad to hear I'm not the only one."

It was Dr Walton's turn to smile now, and he got up to escort Irene to the door. She rose and went with him, her fears only marginally assuaged. She knew the reality of the situation, the jitters, the nerves, and here her new doctor had confirmed her fears as commonplace. She halted at the threshold as he pulled open the door for her.

"Four weeks, you say?"

"Make an appointment with my receptionist," he said with another smile. "Better to be safe than sorry."

"Of course, doctor. Thank you."

And with that she left, her head busy with dizzying thoughts.

Once outside, Irene made her way along the high street towards the post office. She had only walked perhaps thirty or forty yards when she saw an elderly woman on the other side of the otherwise empty street staring at her. It wasn't a wide street and they could see each other plainly, but the old woman's eyes seemed black and unnatural, staring right into her. Irene tried to keep moving, tried to ignore her, but she glanced at her a few paces on and found that she was still staring at her, motionless but for turning her head, her cavernous eyes hypnotic. Irene stopped, her skin crawling with unease. She wanted to call out to her, to ask her if they knew each other, but before she could,

something else snatched her attention.

Off to her left, perched on the limb of a tree, was a crow. It too did not move, but regarded her in much the same way as the old woman. Its eyes were hollow and penetrating, and the hairs on the back of her neck prickled at its attention. She gazed back quickly at the old woman but saw that she was now looking from her to the crow and back again, as if Irene and the crow were somehow inextricably linked. But that was crazy.

Irene shuddered visibly, and her head went as light as it had the previous day, only this time it threatened to take her consciousness. She could feel herself growing weaker, a flurry of sickness sweeping through her belly. Suddenly she didn't want to be in the village any more, and blamed it readily on her nausea.

She turned quicker than she'd intended, ignoring her trip to the post office, and swayed unsteadily, blackness waiting behind her eyelids. Her sight came in blurred snatches, of the road and the shops along its length, but she hurried away regardless, back along the pavement away from both the old woman and the crow, her hands outstretched in front of her like a blind man.

Tears were welling now too, but for what reason she didn't know, and they contorted her vision further as she staggered back the way she'd come, where there were more creatures waiting for her behind that parked car, up in the eaves of the chemist and hanging from the tree out front of the church. How dare that old woman stare at her, as though she was some kind of monster herself, as though all the secrets and the horrors of the world could be pinned upon her.

By the time she'd turned the corner and found her

way back onto the road that led home, the tears of anger and desperation had burst, and skipped freely down her cheeks. Sobs came too, and she was glad that they had stifled themselves so that they wouldn't be seen by the old woman or anyone else on the street.

She'd made her appointment with the doctor for four weeks time, only now she wasn't sure whether she wanted to go back there ever again. Something wasn't right in the village. She'd not noticed it before, but then she hadn't noticed a lot of things before. She suddenly wanted the familiarity of the city, the busy roads, the crowded thoroughfares. This place was too quiet, too unpopulated. The lanes were empty and the creatures had begun to watch her. It wasn't right, wasn't right at all. But how could she explain any of it to Michael? How could she explain that she didn't want to have her family grow up in this place after all?

SIX

THE SECRET HEARTS

All Dorothy Grace could do was stand and stare at the woman on the other side of the street. The spectacle was almost too much to bear, and yet it was right there in front of her, waiting to be witnessed, on the other side of the high street.

A pillar of eager flame licked across the young woman's body as she watched, rising to a flickering cone of brilliant yellow heat a full yard above her head. She seemed not to feel the ferociousness of the inferno, but merely returned her gaze with something close to indignance.

Dorothy had felt her stomach turning, witnessing something so terrible as this human fire, and yet so little of her body seemed to be consumed by its fury.

Her skin remained white and unblemished, her hair silken despite how it danced on end, but most of all her expression renounced all knowledge of the very fire that engulfed her.

Even as she watched the woman turn tail and flee, her consciousness threatened to slip as the flames flailed behind her, contorting and guttering as the bonfire fought to keep its fuel of human flesh.

She watched the inferno rage until the woman turned the corner and disappeared from sight, and then

like a finger snap inside her skull, the spell seemed broken, and Dorothy staggered sideways, clasping the wall of the nearest shop for support as the world became a little darker, a little bit more slippery to hold onto.

Harvey Keits had already returned home from his job at the slaughterhouse, had taken a hot bath and was now sitting at the kitchen table idly flicking through the newspaper. Kitty, lost inside great plumes of steam from the largest of their casserole dishes, was busy serving up two platefuls of sausages in onion gravy. It was one of her husband's favourite dishes, despite the stories that he'd reveal about what went on in the abattoir, and what actually constituted a sausage.

Kitty turned with a plate in each hand, but as she laid eyes upon her husband, or rather what had become of him, both dinners slipped from her numb fingers, smashing across the tiled floor, and splattering thick gravy up the magnolia walls like the brains of the dead.

A fleshless skull grinned back at her, sunken eyes rising from the sports page to look blankly up at her. Why have you ruined my supper, those eyes seemed to say? Do the dead not deserve sausages?

The scream that lodged in her throat grasped the air in her lungs too, throttling her as she staggered away from this monstrosity. The zombie clambered out of his chair, his once black hair now grey and decayed and sagging like rotten string, his skeletal hands reaching up and out to take hold of her. Kitty ran screaming now, her voice found, straight out of the front door and straight under the wheels of the local meat van as it thundered out of control past the house.

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The lamp still burned on the floor beside Len Barrett's mattress, and showed to him again the handiwork of his first day's decorating. It had been a full day too. He had worked deliberately and methodically, getting everything just right in the bedroom. His sight followed the perfectly hung wallpaper from the doorway right across to the curtainless window, the glass like a void of solid blackness, reflecting everything inside the room so deeply that he could not even see the bright stars out in the cloudless night sky.

He lay there gazing contentedly up at the reflection of his perfect room. Everything was right. Everything was his and his alone.

Then he heard the rumble of a van approaching somewhere outside in the night, and as its headlights found the window through which he looked, it illuminated an ugly and cruel face sitting right outside, its gaze returning his as it watched him.

The van passed and went, snatching away its light, and he could see it no more, yet he was certain that it saw him still, its eyes still hollow, its gaze still creeping.

It had been but the briefest of glimpses, too brief to discern anything other than a glimpse of its hideous face, but its features had been burned upon his imagination like deathly black phosphorus.

Len lay stricken, certain in his mind that it was still perched upon his windowsill, returning that glance that they had shared. The chill of fright had caught him. He was suddenly no longer blissful in his new home, but troubled now, and distraught in an old cold house, a shell of a building that suddenly offered no hope for the future.

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Lizabeth Oates trod the steps down to the cellar, pulling on the light cord that illuminated the jars of pickled vegetables. Something seemed to move in the uncertain shadows cast by the single yellow bulb, and for a moment she halted near the bottom of the wooden stairs.

The door suddenly banged shut behind her, even though there was no wind, sealing her in the cellar. Something was down there with her, and just before the bulb blinked out, she saw its face, vast and grotesque, coming at her.

She screamed as she started back for the door, but her heel caught on the unlit stairway, and she tumbled, striking her head on one of the wooden steps, and knocking the horror from her consciousness.

On the roof of the church, a flock of crows descended beneath the wash of moon and stared out across the panicking village. In unison they had landed, and like one they all stared across the rooftops and fields towards the copse of trees that stood on the hill, the same copse of trees that Michael Rider had pruned the day before.

Their feathers were blacker than the night, and glinted coldly beneath the moonlight, shining like burnished coal, as their unblinking eyes regarded this secluded society.

There was death on the wind, bringing with it the smell of carrion. There would be pickings, of flesh and of souls. Something was coming, they knew, and it had no name.