

The Shaman and the Rose

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An Epitaph written in blood

Prologue

“Peggy, honey, could you help me with the tie?” Josh asked, standing before the mirror and fiddling with the knot.

“Here, let me get that,” his wife replied, leaning across the dresser and brushing his hands away. “I’ve had a lot of practice helping you with those knots over the years, haven’t I?” Peggy’s hands trembled touching the black silk material. Josh saw a tear slowly make its way down her cheek and gently took her hand in his. He led her over to the bed and softly placed his arms around her shoulders. Josh leaned over and kissed her as they sat on the edge of the mattress. He cupped her chin and raised her head until their eyes met and then he kissed her once more.

“I know you Peggy, it isn’t just Mark’s death that’s troubling you,” Josh told her. “Tell me what’s wrong, who knows, maybe I can help?” Josh smiled at her in that sly manner that always made her laugh but this time she turned away and stood up. She faced the wall while she spoke.

“It’s Nicole; she talked with me before while you were dressing. She feels she’s responsible for Mark’s death, that if it wasn’t for her, none of this would have happened.”

Josh got up and walked over to the dresser by the far wall. Leaning down, he spread his fingers across its maple surface. His eyes stared out the window to where the rays of the early morning sun spread across the lake. Josh picked the gold-leafed photo collection off the dresser and carried it to Peggy.

“Remember any of these shots?” He asked, handing her the album.

Peggy sat down on the side of the bed and began flipping through the photographs. Her husband sat beside her.

“Josh, you saved my yearbook picture? I always hated that one!” Peggy said.

“You were the prettiest young woman in Claremont’s class of fifty-two, still are.”

“And you were so handsome in your sheriff’s uniform back then.” Josh’s brow furrowed, his chin dropping to his chest. He rose, walked back to the dresser and then slammed his fist down on the surface. Staring into the mirror, he sighed.

“That’s when all of this started, after Mark’s parents were killed and he returned to Claremont and became my deputy.” Josh continued to stare intently at his reflection.

“It wasn’t too long after the murders began. First Doc Richards and then James Franklyn.” Josh paused, tears welling up in his eyes. “I found Jimmy’s body, almost burned beyond recognition.”

Peggy moved by his side and gently brushed his arm with her fingers. She leaned her head against his shoulder.

“Why relive all of those painful memories now? Mark died facing the devil. He died to prevent the Inferno from consuming the earth. It’s over, Josh, Mark sacrificed himself so his wife could live, so all of us could live. Mark loved your niece with all his heart and soul. And Anne loved him as deeply.”

Peggy watched the tall man with the brooding eyes turn toward her. Josh’s gaze remained fixed on his wife as he led her back to their bed. Bending down, he scooped the photo album up from where it had fallen. Drawing her to him, he turned the pages until he was on the last few photos. He nuzzled her ear and whispered lovingly.

“Remember this photograph?” Josh asked, pointing down at the album.

“Of course, it’s Nicole and Will. I took that picture of them shortly after Nicole had recovered from her confrontation with the devil’s jinn. None of us thought she was going to live, much less make a full recovery. Will was good to her. He stood by Nicole the entire time she was in the wheelchair and never complained. She was bitter and angry with the whole world.”

“Who could blame her, the devil used the human form of Michael Orcus to seduce and impregnate her to bring himself into this world. Will never left her side while she carried the demon seed.” Carefully lifting the plastic covering, Josh slipped the last few pictures from the album and handed them to Peggy. “Notice anything strange?”

Peggy studied the photos for a few minutes and then placed them down across the quilt. Josh smiled at his wife's baffled expression.

“The first one is a shot of Will, Nicole, and Steven Abbots standing by the entrance to Abbots' Lodge. There is someone behind them but they are out of focus. The second is Anne sitting by herself on a bench by the gazebo. The third photograph is Anne and her father but why is Mike's arm held up in such an odd way?” Josh drew Peggy tightly to him before answering her question. His eyes shut while he spoke.

“Mark had been in all three photos but his image is gone now. All of his photographs have disappeared except for the ones where Nicole is somehow in the frame and those are all out of focus. I don't understand but there is a connection between Nicole and Mark.” Josh felt Peggy trembling in his arms. He kissed the nape of her neck. Peggy pulled from his embrace and leaped to her feet.

“My God,” Peggy screamed, “that's why Anne's burying an empty coffin.” “You both think that Mark might still be alive.”

Josh sat heavily across the bed, burying his face in his hands. When he glanced up at Peggy, this time the tears streamed from his eyes. “No,” he answered shaking his head. Peggy listened to him speak, each word came haltingly, painfully. They were an epitaph written in blood.

“Sometimes Peggy, at night, I can smell the grass. Feel the ground beneath my feet wet with dew, the way it felt when I knelt by Mark’s body. I watched him die. I saw the devil’s talon slice him to the bone but he would not fall. Mark stood defiantly in front of him trying to protect Anne. He turned toward me, Peggy; Mark turned toward me and just smiled, like he was trying to tell me.... ‘Don’t worry old friend, everything’s going to be all right.’ Then the devil, Mesphisto, raked him across his chest and Mark fell. I heard Anne scream and raced over to Mark’s side. I knelt by him and raised his head in my hand. Mark glanced at me, lifted his arm and touched my collar. Anne knelt beside me, weeping hysterically. Slowly, he managed to tilt his head and face her. ‘I love you. I will always love you.’ he said in a barely audible whisper. I gently lowered Mark’s head, reached over and closed his eyes.”

Peggy leaned against Josh’s shoulder and whispered softly. “After the services for Mark, later, when everything’s quieted down, let’s sell the lodge and move away. We can start over somewhere where nobody knows us. Promise me, Josh.”

Josh picked up the three photographs that Peggy had left across the quilt. Mark’s image was back inside each frame. He slipped all three into his shirt pocket, careful that Peggy had not noticed. Rising, he moved to the window. Early risers and billowing sails filled the lake. “We’ll leave here soon; I promise.”

Josh drew the shade as Peggy was stepping into the bathroom. He leaned across the dresser top and stared at his reflection. The face looking back was that of a man in his early thirties. He grabbed the frame and shook until the glass cracked.

Hearing someone knock, he opened the bedroom door. Nicole walked in, stared at him for moment and then brushed up against the wall. “You can’t go to the service for Mark looking like that. Some of your old friends will be there. People who have known you since way back in the fifties. What will they think?”

“About me and Peggy not having aged? I am tired of the gray wigs and makeup. I am sick of pretending to be old.” Nicole stepped closer; her breath came out in a hiss.

“Then if you won’t do it for you, do it for Anne’s sake, for Mark. Just this one last time.”

Opening the dresser drawer, Josh took out a silver wig and gold rimmed glasses. He put both on, spun and confronted her.

“You don’t know what it’s like,” Josh said, then paused. “Being young isn’t a blessing; it’s a curse. Peggy and I have watched most of our friends grow old and die. Maybe what Thomas Clayton Wolfe wrote is true; maybe you can’t go home again.”

“Maybe not,” Peggy said from the archway. “But Wolfe meant while you can treasure the past, you can’t live in it. Our future is yet to be written. What we do with our lives, Josh, is up to us.” Peggy slung a small black handbag over her shoulder and smiled at Nicole. “How do I look?”

“You look, really old. If I didn’t know better, I’d swear you were Josh’s age.” Both women laughed.

“A hearty ha-ha,” Josh replied. “Remember, Red, you ain’t that far behind me.” Nicole bristled hearing him use her nickname. “Do you recall what I said I’d do to you if you ever called me that again?”

“I’ll go warm up the car. We don’t want to be late.”