



OUR
WICKED
HISTORIES



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INK ROAD



AN HOUR LATER, we all sat down together to eat at the long trestle table in the kitchen. Lottie and I had beavered about making the vast stone room as welcoming as possible, jamming the ancient, yellowed candles and tea lights we'd scavenged from drawers into wine bottles and jars thick with dust. The enormous stove that dominated the room proved a reliable source of heat and once we'd arranged the mosaic-patterned bowls of pasta and salad on the table, it looked almost cozy.

Lottie sat at the head of the table, Seb at the other end, while the rest of us took up the sides. Ollie cracked open a bottle of cold pinot grigio, generously sloshing it into blue-tinged recycled glasses, whether we wanted it or not.

"Well, this is pretty fucking civilized, isn't it?" remarked Charlie, breaking off a hunk of garlic bread. "I'd imagined us all sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of a pile of pizza boxes."

"If only," lamented Seb, picking at his food

He was wrong, though. The food was delicious. The caper-

flecked ragú on the right side of spicy, the pasta silky and perfectly al dente. But I could barely stomach it. My eyes constantly flicking to the door in anticipation of Laure's arrival. Schrödinger's Laure. Both wanting her here, but also not.

"I'm so pleased we're all here," said Lottie warmly. "The old crew back together again."

Ollie drained his glass and followed my gaze to the door. "But we're not all here, though. Not yet."

"Yeah—anyone hear from Laure?" asked Charlie.

Lottie shook her head. "Nope, nada. She didn't pick up when I called earlier. I'm hoping she's just having issues with her phone. I mean, if she's on a plane we won't hear from her until she lands. There's still a couple of flights due in tonight. If I don't hear anything by tomorrow, I'll try and get hold of her mum—find out what's going on."

Ollie cast me a dark glance as he sloshed more wine into his glass.

"Maybe she caught wind of the *guest list* and changed her mind."

"*Ol*," said Charlie, his tone a stern warning. "We're here to patch things up, not drag up the past."

"Oh, cool, so we're supposed to just act as if nothing happened?" Ollie's eyes fixed on me, cold and gray. "No offense, Meg, but after all that shit you pulled at the ball, I didn't expect to ever see you again. I mean, I don't think anyone did. Am I right? Seb?"

Seb said nothing at all, just exhaled loudly, doggedly twirling his fork in the pasta.

I'd have to face it at some point, might as well be now.

“Look, you may as well know, the reason I came, was to attempt to sort this all out. To *apologize* to Laure—to you all. Not to cause any more problems.”

“Ah, got it. So to weasel your way back into Greyscott’s?” said Joss, casually aiming her fork in my direction.

I blinked at her, heat immediately blasting through my veins. Okay, so she wasn’t entirely wrong, but trust her to twist it into something unpleasant and dark.

“The *hell*, Joss?” said Lottie, shocked.

Joss only shrugged. “We all know she isn’t really sorry. Look, Meg, if you want my opinion—”

“Which I don’t,” I interjected.

“—I think you’re better off studying somewhere else anyway. Somewhere you actually fit in. Sorry, but that’s the truth.”

Had to love Joss for voicing the things most people thought but would never dare say. I forced myself to keep my tone cool.

“Somewhere I fit in? Wow. What’s that supposed to mean? Why don’t you enlighten us all on your views of class segregation?”

My heart thumped in my chest at the sound of my acid-coated words.

Joss wasn’t one for backing down, though.

“You know *exactly* what I mean,” she drawled. “Stop being so tedious. Somewhere you’re not desperately trying to be something you’re *not*. I mean, somewhere you can actually *afford*, for starters.”

I could feel the anger already burning in my gut, threatening to spill over like a bucket of liquid fire. I clutched my hands into tight fists in my lap, nails digging into my palms in painful crescents, exhaling thinly.

Cool it. All you're doing is proving her right.

“And what is it you think I’m trying to be? Successful? Because I got a scholarship, Joss. And in actual fact, I think that means I belong at Greyscott’s more than most people.”

Joss gave a cold little laugh and helped herself to more salad.

“Yeah, you keep harping on about that, but we’ve all heard the rumors about how you *really* got it. And frankly that was based more on your mum’s talents than your own.”

Rage frothed, hot and vicious. A spiteful, childish little rumor started by Laure, or so I’d heard. Say whatever you wanted about me; I could take it. But *not* my mum.

“Keep going, Joss,” I snapped, gesturing at her. “At least have the balls to say it. I mean, come on—what talents are you talking about?”

I got up, the chair screeching across the flagstones, adrenaline kicking through my veins. The sight of Joss’s smug, cool composure making my heart thump harder than ever. She snorted. “Uh-oh, here we go. They say you can take the girl out of Catford—”

I felt a placating hand on my shoulder, gently pressuring me back to sit on my chair. Charlie. I cast a grateful look at him.

“*Guys*, let’s keep it light, hey?” he said, his voice uncharacteristically stern. “Whatever happens, we’re all here to get back on track, right? Like things used to be.”

Ollie snorted. “Not much chance of that when Lottie’s decided to invite the most contentious mix of people ever. Who else you got coming, Lots? Stalin? Your racist uncle?”

Lottie rolled her eyes. “Actually the only people *I* see causing an issue are you and Joss.”

“Just wait till Laure gets here, then,” muttered Joss ominously.
“Yeah, I wonder what’s keeping her?” mused Saira.
And then the lights went out.

Nobody said anything for a couple of seconds, the only sounds our combined hastened breathing and the steady patter of the rain against the windows. Then Charlie gave a dramatic little shriek.

“Shit, you never told us this place was *haunted*, Lottie!”

There followed a few halfhearted chuckles.

Other than the soft glow of the fairy lights outside and the candles we’d placed on the table that were valiantly trying to illuminate the vast expanse of the kitchen, it was utterly dark. The familiar glow of streetlights we were all used to back in London was entirely absent here.

Seb was the first to locate the flashlight on his phone, lighting his face from below like a ghoulish kid at a campfire.

“Fuck’s *sake*—this house is a train wreck,” he griped. “We need to start the generator.”

Lottie was already out of her seat. “Yeah, yeah—I’ll get it. Won’t be a minute. Meg, come with?”

Gratefully, I followed her out of the kitchen and into the damp chill of the night, down the side alley that led to the back of the house, the light from our phones bouncing crazily off the hedges. Drizzle welcomingly cooled my still-hot face.

“The electricity in this place is *screwed*. Always has been. Don’t think anyone’s touched the wiring since World War Two. We’ve a backup generator, thankfully. I forgot how often this used to happen.”

Together we huddled into a rickety shed that housed a complicated-looking machine seemingly composed only of rusting wheels. I tried to ignore the monstrous amount of spiderwebs we'd walked through, brushing my skin with their eerie silk, focusing my flashlight solely on the generator.

"This thing's practically an antique. Luckily, Eimer said it was all oiled and checked before we arrived. Right—keep the flashlight on me a sec?"

I watched as Lottie began turning a crank with impressive strength, causing the wheels in the machine to slowly rotate, hissing viciously as they did.

"Good workout, huh?" she said cheerfully. "Give us a shout when you see the lights go back on."

I turned obediently to the house, its windows still blank and black. The absence of light seemed threatening somehow, swallowing us all whole. I couldn't recall ever being someplace where the darkness wasn't mellowed by the warm orange glow of streetlights.

Movement caught my eye. I squinted hard into the night. A shadow was slinking silently toward us across the gravel, long and slim—someone coming out to lend us a hand, by the looks of things. Although I wasn't sure who, their features obscured by the larger shadow cast by the house. I hoped it wasn't Joss, primed for round two.

"You okay? Thought you needed a break from the table," Lottie called over the hissing of the machine, and I twisted around to face her. "Once Laure arrives and you guys make it up, things'll be *much* easier—promise. I am *so* sorry about Joss. But you know what she's like. The girl would start drama with the dead—"

A loud pattering drowned the end of her sentence as a sudden

torrential downpour tumbled from the sky, scattering the gravel outside. Rain streamed down the walls of the shed, sending insects scuttling out of their hiding places. I turned back again to see where the person on the drive had got to, but there was no one there—they must have been forced back to the house.

Lottie stepped away from the generator, breathing hard, wiping her hands on her paint-splattered tee.

“Why haven’t the lights come back on? The outage must have tripped the fuses. . . . Do me a favor, Meg. As you go into the kitchen there’s a door on your immediate left that leads to the basement—so mind the stairs. The fuse box is just on the left as you open the door. Shout at Seb if you can’t find it. I’ll give this a couple more turns and see you back there.”

Er, hell *no*.

Not the basement. You *never* went into the basement of old dark houses. Everyone knew that. But everyone was in the kitchen, it wasn’t like I’d be alone—and if it was right at the top of the stairs . . .

Besides, what was I going to say? Sorry, Lottie, I’m too *scared*.

I *was* scared, though. Something about the house gave me the creeps. I knew it wasn’t a rational fear, only a feeling—a bad vibe, as Laure would say. Funny how knowing all that didn’t stop the creeping dread I had.

Pulling my sweater half over my head, I sprinted back through the downpour to the kitchen. Beyond, the room was now utterly dark.

Flashing my phone’s light around, I started as I saw the dining table had been deserted, the candles all extinguished. Everyone

must have retreated to the lounge where Ollie had laid a rather reckless fire before dinner. With a sigh, I focused my light on the wall beside me.

The door was smaller than average, a low oak beam above it, set directly into the wall. I twisted the handle and it swung inward with a loud crack, revealing a steep set of concrete stairs leading down into an inky pool of darkness. A cold, fetid draft that stank of stagnant water swam up from below. I shivered. However much I liked Lottie, nothing would have compelled me to go all the way down *there* in this darkness. Quickly, I located the fuse box on the wall, only a step or so down as she'd promised.

Opening it, I began flicking all the switches into the up position, hoping it would do the trick. After only a few seconds, I stopped.

There was a sound coming from below. From the depths of the cellar.

It was slow and squelching. That was the only way to describe it. The kind of sound you might make after walking through a deep muddy puddle in the wrong kind of shoes.

I froze, my hand poised on the fuse box, unable to do anything for a few moments other than listen. Was someone *down* there? I considered calling out, but frankly, if someone *was* down there I definitely didn't want to meet them. Not *now*. And not in the dark.

I flicked another switch, pausing again as I realized the sounds were becoming more distinct. Heavier and louder. As if someone was slowly trudging up the stairs. Wildly, I waved my phone in the direction of the noise. But it didn't help, the pale beam of the

flashlight not powerful enough to illuminate the solid darkness at the bottom of the steps.

Were the others playing a joke? Was that where they all were? Trying to scare me?

“Who’s there? Ollie?”

Outside the wind howled, forcing another waft of mildewed air up from the darkness. No, no one was hiding down there, not if they were sane. Swallowing, I focused on the fuses. Three more, then the lights would come on and I could get out of this place and chill by the fire and—

A hissing suddenly exploded in my ear. I gasped and stepped back, dropping my phone and missing my footing on the steep stairs, almost tumbling all the way down them before catching myself just in time. Flattening my back against the wall, I straightened up, heart pounding, my whole body shaking.

What the fuck was that—

My phone had come to rest a few steps below me. Too many steps down. Illuminating the gray concrete of the basement ceiling and several unpleasantly large cobwebs. And what *was* that—

It *looked* as though someone was climbing the bottom step. Their body hunched over like a scrawny spider, not walking but crawling on spindly limbs. Long dark hair trailed to the ground concealing their face: thin, overly long fingers scrabbled at the cement. The hissing was more distant now, emanating from them, I was sure of it. My brain might have been enthusiastically filling in the gaps, but I could just about make out their eyes—dark, *so* dark—glistening moistly like wet onyx.

Gasping, I flicked the final switches on the fuse box and behind

me the kitchen erupted into golden light, pouring welcomingly over the threshold to the basement and revealing nothing but a rusted-looking washing machine and a basket of old sheets spilling over onto the bottom step. Swallowing, I leaped down the steps to retrieve my phone, ran back, and slammed the door behind me.

“The hell were you doing in there?” said Charlie, grinning uneasily from where he sat at the table.

I blinked. Everyone was back, seated in the exact same places they had been before the lights went out, the candles dancing merrily away among the now-demolished bowls of pasta.

“Wait—did you guys just get back?”

“No,” said Ollie with a hint of annoyance. “We’ve been sat here in the dark waiting for you to stop fumbling around in there like a psycho.”

But the table had been empty. I’d *seen* it—hadn’t I? I rubbed my sore eyes.

Behind me, Lottie burst through the kitchen door, making me jump several feet.

“All sorted,” she said. But even she looked out of sorts. Her eyes overly bright; her voice too cheerful. I noticed her hands were shaking. “You all right, Meg? You look as if you’ve seen a ghost.”

Was she deflecting? Was she as afraid as I was?

“Of course,” I replied, embarrassed. “Of course I’m all right.”

My dreams were troubled that night. I drifted in and out of sleep, a soft sibilant sound trickling into my consciousness like smoke.

I was back in the taxi on the way here, jolting over the curb

again, stopping inches away from the wall, my head ricocheting off the seat.

But this time I wasn't alone. Someone sat beside me in the back. Someone I couldn't bring myself to look at. Someone sobbing, their head buried deep in their hands, and I thought how it was a very good thing their face was hidden because I didn't want to look at it—didn't want to see it at *all*—

The car was filled with a strong smell that made me want to gag. A bitter floral perfume. Flowers left to rot in a vase; their petals blackened, stems slimy.

I recalled the principal's words as I sat in her gleaming office, full of hope.

We want to see what you're capable of.

Moist, bony hands pressed something into mine.

Exactly what *was* I capable of?

What's the worst thing you've ever done?

A sodden piece of paper. A postcard.

Come on in—the water's divine!

Breath against my ear, sweet and unpleasant, like wine-dark meat fallen behind a refrigerator and long forgotten. Their voice ragged; the words half formed, mumbled through rotting, flapping lips.

The image changed, flashing to familiar words inked on familiar skin in looping script: an oblique warning from a favorite poem.

Fear death by water.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

AMY GOLDSMITH grew up on the south coast of England, obsessed with obscure '70s horror movies and antiquarian ghost stories. She studied psychology at the University of Sussex and, after gaining her Postgraduate Certificate in Education, moved to inner London to teach. Now she lives back on the south coast, where she still teaches English and spends her weekends trawling antiques shops for haunted mirrors. She is the author of *Those We Drown* and *Our Wicked Histories*.

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