

IMELDA'S CURSE



BY
DR. DOUGLAS COURTNEY

CHAPTER 1

Halloween. Ghosts, goblins, demons and devils. A time of trickery and treachery. Not your moment of sunshine nor a second of romantic effusions. Soft gauze of fine light falling on the morning dew perched on the perfect flower is not the stuff of Halloween dreams. A witch's hat, fat orange pumpkin or dancing skeleton are the decorations lining the thoughts of Halloween. A naughty laugh, a desperate giggle, even a shrieking scream of terror fill the sounds of Halloween. And Halloween night? The stuff of goosebumps, dread and fright. My time of year.

But what brings these terrors to the night? Halloween doesn't exist in a vacuum. A congress of goblins passing in the night is of no consequence if all are goblins. A witch's spell carries no worries as a common occurrence endured by all. It is the argument of good against evil which boils the cauldron of the season. The never-ending battle of black versus white gains a balance toward the black on this blasphemous of days. It is here in the roiling power of evil that Halloween thrives and casts shadows that may live long past the toiling of the midnight bell. Even past the evil of the powerful witch's hour.

I enjoy Halloween. Not the terrible, horrible, blood-soaked stain that it can become. But I like the naughtiness of it. The masks that hide the identity of the proper, the straight laced, and the honorable. The masks which permit the hidden vamps, tramps and beasts to come forth and release the pent-up frustrations of everyday life. We are of which we are made. If we don't relieve the pressure now and again, we like the cooker, will explode. Plus watching good people trying to be bad can be kind of funny.

But evil does take advantage of the good, especially on Halloween. So one must be wary. Never more so than when the good is the heart, given freely to love, against the wishes of evil. The curse of Imelda is evidence of the consequences of forbidden love.

The curse is well known in these parts. Young women shy from it. At least those with a care and sense. Others have been known to challenge the mystical. Skeptical and dismissive of powers that are unseen and undefined having influence on their lives. Only to be left saddened and empty in their hearts. Tears the only comfort until such time as a flower, freely given in their name, is laid in the pool of sorrow. It is a terror not to be forgotten that that which you cannot see has such power over your life. It is also a lesson in love.

I had witnessed the effects of Imelda's curse. I also had known the story before the tragic event. Imelda was a witch in the late 1600's. She was young and beautiful with dark raven hair, fair skin, deep dark eyes, full lips and a figure afforded the nubile and sweet. Her age placed her in her late teens, early twenties. Like most women of her age she enjoyed the flirt, the dance of love and the tease of young men's attentions. Her laugh was gentle and free. It bounced off the flowers, trees, and hollows around her home. She had fallen in and out of love many times since she turned of age. She was no stranger to heart ache or heat of desire.

She was however, still a witch. She had known she was a witch since her second year. She was raised by her mother, aunts and grandmother. All witches. No males, nor warlocks were present in her formative years. None were wanted. Each of those that raised her had known deep love in their lives and the anguish of terrible heartache and a lover's betrayal. Each had been scorched in those relationships by deceitful men who had held their hearts. They had drawn in on themselves

and lived apart hating all men indiscriminately. Men had become nothing more than playthings to fill momentary desires or temporary needs. Love had become a terror to be avoided at all costs. The woman had become warped and ugly in their souls because of this hatred.

But, unlike the stories passed in campfires, none of her family were plain, ugly or wart infested. They remained, without incantation or craft, beautiful embodiments of womanhood throughout their lives. This was their blessing and curse as few women in the nearby village that had observed the passage of years could look upon them without envy and even anger. Like the mythical sirens more than one of their men had been tempted and succumbed to a visit to their home. Their desire to lay in the bosom of the witch's beauty and relive a faded youth, if even for a moment, proved too overwhelming. The results of such visits inevitably leading to deep pain, heartache and sorrow. The respites expected overwhelmed by the witch's hatred and distrust of the male sex.

Over the years not one of Imelda's clan ever took a man for more than their own use. Their own twisted souls refused every advance, fraudulent or sincere. Family heirlooms, cash, and cattle were often bartered for the want of a favor. Promises, pledges and vows were spoken but no favor was ever given to any man save to advance the witch's desires. The deep hurt from the earlier lost loves proved too profound for healing or forgiving. Eventually their hearts had hardened in the cure, losing all sense of love. They became cold, distant, and never trusted again.

It was in this hatred of the opposite sex that Imelda grew to the beautiful woman she had become. Her heart had not broken despite lost first loves and agonizing unrequited love. She had kept her love of life and men intact despite the anger of her family. That was when she met Jeremy.

Jeremy had found himself in a tree deep in the woods. It had been a long day walking the old dirt roads. Still there was two more days to travel before he was home. A single man, blonde hair with deep blue eyes that stole your soul when he looked at you. He was solid from hard work in the fields. His shoulders were broad and his hands strong. But he could hold a butterfly in their palms and never make it quiver. Hard lessons had taught him when sleeping in the woods to find a tall branch to lay your head. Strange beasts and nasty predators had less to bother in the arms of the woods.

It was in this position, half asleep, half awake when he first saw the flicker of light. His eyes focused. A forest fire was no place for a single man in the woods. His alarm fell and his interest peaked when he saw it was nothing more than a bonfire set for a small gathering. He wondered who would be out this late at night. Not sure of their strength and less sure of their intent he chose to remain silent and keep his own counsel. He waited and watched.

The combination of the full moon and roaring fire gave him a clear view of those in attendance. It was evident early on this would be a gathering of women. Only women. No men were evident. None seemed invited. The whole thing began eerily enough. The women formed a silent ring around the fire. Dressed in loose robes that hid their faces they neither quivered or shook. Their stillness reminded him of silent statues. Then a murmur could be heard. Slowly building it came to his ears as a chant. Still no woman moved.

An owl hooted. Birds took flight. A small wind began to feather the robes of the gathering turning the silent statues into visions of haunting ghosts. Still naught but the chanting emanated from the circle of women. It grew in intensity and seemed to encompass the wood in which they stood. A force, a powerful force grew around them and the fire. It at once seemed to protect and repel. The force grew as a circle expanding further and further into the surrounding wood until it

had encompassed Jeremy himself. Inside its embrace Jeremy felt protected. He neither worried nor fretted. He just waited and watched.

Suddenly, as if on cue the fire roared into a greater life. Its flame whooshed against the night sky turning night into day for those gathered around the fire. Then on a signal no one but they heard or understood each woman dropped her robes. To Jeremy's total surprise underneath these haunting robes the women were naked. Completely, utterly naked. Not a stitch of clothing touched their bodies. That which they wore lay at their feet and they nonchalantly kicked that away as well.

Jeremy's focus turned in intensity. Naked women were no small matter for a man. Let alone one living in the late 1600's. He held his breath as he watched them sway in place. Arms raised in supplication to some unknown entity. They stood and swayed and chanted. Then they began to dance. A dance that circled the fire and built in intensity. Their hair swept back and forth across their faces or across their backs at each new step. Their eyes, when he could see them, appeared glazed over as if in the grasp of some unseen power.

Jeremy marveled at their forms. Everyone, from the most advanced to the neophyte, seemed perfection. Having seen little of the female form but his own sister and mother on occasion cooling in their undergarments at a nearby stream this vision was extraordinary. Jeremy's longing burned as he watched. He barely could contain himself. But he remained still. He knew this was a rare event he would not likely visit again. He wanted to remember it all. His eyes danced over each and every form before him until he found and focused on Imelda. She was to him perfection.

He watched and watched and did not notice the fire fail and the chanting stop. The dancing ended as the fire faded and the women walked the circle where they had danced. They gathered their wits and then their robes. It was as she kneeled down to get her robes that Imelda looked up and stared at the tree where Jeremy rested. Her eyes snapped to his and she smiled. Jeremy's mind went blank.

Imelda was smiling over Jeremy as his eyes opened. She had a light giggle as he awoke. It was morning and he was on the forest floor. Jeremy had no idea how he had gotten there. But the images of the night were fresh and burned into his memory. Jeremy was also naked. He sat upright and covered himself with his errant clothing. Imelda just laughed.

"What happened." Jeremy stuttered his embarrassment. He had never been naked with a woman since his birth.

"Well. As I recall. You spent a good portion of last evening watching me dance nude. So, I felt turnabout was fair play. I watched you sleep naked on the forest floor." Imelda's sparkling laughter filled the forest taking Jeremy's embarrassment with it.

To Imelda's surprise Jeremy stood up. His solid, muscular body and large endowment on full view for her pleasure. A wickedly naughty smile stretched across his lips as he reached down to help her stand.

"Fair is fair, milady. I apologize for my intrusion last night. It was not intentional. Please forgive me. But the vision was magnificent. I could not look away." Jeremy held her close and his blue eyes burned into her dark ones. She returned the look and with little effort dropped her gown on the dirt at her feet. The desire was deep, strong, and powerful. They fell in love on the forest floor. Deeply in love. A pure love that is reserved for only a few.

Jeremy confessed his need to return home and invited her to join him. Imelda refused. She was concerned for his safety. Her mother, aunts, and grandmother would forbid this love. They would hex him, harm him, and banish him. She told Jeremy she would wait for his return. He vowed

to return in five days on Halloween night itself. He held her, gave her a kiss, and hurried on his way to complete his promise.

Imelda counted the minutes, hours, and days until Jeremy was to return. Her smile belied her love. Her actions belied her anxiousness. The stories of her mother's and aunts' betrayals haunted her visions and her dreams. She trusted Jeremy would return. She worried he wouldn't. The day finally arrived, and evening fell. Imelda walked cautiously toward the wood where they consummated their love. Tears were on the edge of each eye as she feared he wouldn't be there and evenly afraid he would.

Imelda turned the corner on the dirt path to the tree that would forever be theirs. Jeremy stood strong underneath. The sun's evening rays bathing him in a glow of light. His chest was bare and his smile for his Imelda large. Imelda ran to him. She reached to gather him in her arms. But she was barred. Vines had dropped from the tree and grabbed her arms. Jeremy ran to help but was thrown to the ground. It felt as if a large hand had grabbed him and forced him down. He tried to rise. But was again thwarted.

Imelda looked around and saw her coven emerge from the forest. She screamed her frustrations. She pleaded with them. She begged them. But their hearts were too hardened. To teach her a lesson. To harden her heart. The coven cast a spell. Imelda watched in horror as her Jeremy was turned into a boulder. A stone to reside forever alone in the forest. A monument to the hard, uncaring hearts of men.

It was too much. Imelda exploded. Her powers enhanced by her youth, her purity of soul, and her love. The forest retreated in fear and she found her arms free. In a flash of anger and fire she cursed her coven into the very thing with which they burdened her love. Small stone obelisks standing in a circle around her beloved Jeremy. Forever witness to their wickedness and hate.

In her final act of love Imelda cursed herself as well. She placed herself as a tree in the forest. A weeping willow hanging its loving branches in protection over her beloved Jeremy. And she cursed any woman that would come to her Jeremy on Halloween with naught but love in their hearts. Charlatans, spinsters, liars, and deceivers would be cursed to live in their misery without love until a flower freely given was placed in the pool of sorrow.

CHAPTER 2

It was a powerful curse. A few had challenged its effectiveness. Some challenged the truth of it. Working their way through the woods to the solitary stone on dark Halloween nights. There they sat on it. Defying it and the tree. Hate and anger filling the void where their hearts should have been. All left in tears. Friends shunned them. Ventures failed. Each was left mired in misery, filth and shame. No woman, man, or animal wished to be near them. Even their cows dried up.

Most wasted away. Many sought the pool of sorrow for redemption. Hoping in the search to find someone to care enough to give it a flower in their name. But the pool of sorrows proved a futile search. Less effective was the search for anyone to lay a flower. Eventually the seekers and doubters faded. The tree and stone, well hidden in the hills, became nothing more than legend or myth.

Occasionally a young maiden and her friends, giddy in adventure, would seek the tree and stone. Often they would find it. They would search the surrounding fields to for evidence of the coven. They would only find worn stone pillars rich in moss and dirt. Thirteen in all. The colors of which resembled old granite with dark swaths of black. If they looked close enough many would swear they saw eyes wide in fear. But even those expressions had worn over time.

But once found by the maids the curse had to be challenged. One by one they would set on the stone under the willow tree, frightened, filled with goosebumps. But giddy maids bear no hatred and fill their hearts with love on a daily basis. Even the most sour and sorrowful maid still hold love in their hearts. Their challenges to each other on Halloween night never gained more than a whispered giggle or an anxious worry.

The story should have ended there. But a coven frozen in time by a witch in love is a strong source of magic. It is as if a large battery had been storing energy for centuries. Even the most latent witch was drawn to its source.

Three hundred years after Imelda's curse the Warlock Samuel bought the property on which the willow sat. He surrounded the willow and all within by a split rail fence and restricted entry to the worshipers of darkness. Once again bonfires and dances to the full moon filled Halloween night. But none dared sit on the stone. Offerings were given to each of the stone coven. The willows fallen leaves were sought for potions and spells. But none, warlock or witch, dared the wrath of Imelda or Jeremy.

The Warlock Samuel eventually died after a long and successful life. Long before his death interest in the occult had waned. Eventually no more bonfires or incantations were held in the field under the willow. As he aged the field once again became a challenge for giddy maidens and their beaus. After his death Halloween night parties began to appear with teens dressed in cat suits, sheets, and carrying plastic pitchforks. The dregs of cheap whiskey stolen from Dad's bar being the only serious threat to any soul.

After years and decades of neglect the property eventually came to me. Surprisingly so. The Warlock Samuel died without a known heir. He was prolific in his liaisons, but records of known descendants were kept hidden in family records. Diligence on the part of a city clerk produced

enough evidence and genetic match to prove my lineage. With no other coming forth to lay claim the local magistrate made me heir, taxes and all.

The inheritance was substantial, but after long past due bills, taxes and fees, not so much as to make one independent. Mostly the inheritance was the house and grounds complete with a substantial library on the dark arts. The house was creepy, cold and contained a surprising amount of spider webs. The field with the willow tree, replete with the split rail fence, stood a few hundred yards up the hill. All in all the property resembled everyone's current manifestation of a haunted house.

Eventually I found myself home on Halloween. A knock on the door just before nightfall opened onto a teenage girl, three friends and an equal number of boys. They were dressed in various costumes of cats, witches, ghouls and goblins. A quick but excited brief history of Halloween nights under the willow tree ended with a breathless asking of permission to continue the tradition. Considering their honesty to ask permission and a sincere promise to clean up the next morning resulted in an approval of their request. As I said I enjoyed a good Halloween and wasn't averse to a naughty time. Even if it was as an enabler.

The party commenced without trouble or interruption until the stroke of eleven. A hard knock was heard at my door. I rose from my reading and went to answer. There in front of me stood a hard woman. She looked at me with disdain and hatred. She proceeded to chastise me about unsupervised teenage parties, lewd young men, and the evils of the worshipers of darkness. She threatened me with suit and arrest. Then she promptly turned and headed for the willow tree field and party.

Once there she screamed at the gathered crowd and searched out the simple girl that had first asked permission. She grabbed her arm and tried to drag her away. The girl pulled free and hid behind one of the stone pillars. Quietly, forcefully the winds started to rise. A force began to fill the area. It was strong, powerful and warmed the surrounding field. The woman seemed not to care. She shouted and cursed and shoved any person that kept her from her prey. In final desperation she climbed atop the stone under the tree.

Thunder cracked on a clear night. The small fire burst into a heated bonfire. The birds ceased to fly, and the grounds shook. Smoke rose up from the fire and encompassed the woman. Then with the strong breath of the wind. It all disappeared. All that was left was a small campfire, a few lanterns, and a miserable woman sitting, crying on top of the stone. No one wanted to be near her. In a few moments all had turned and hurriedly left the field. Even the small girl that had hidden from her behind the silent pillar of stone. She was alone, bereft of all friends and family. Even I didn't want to help and closed my blinds and the door against her.

The next day a small knock rapped at my door. I opened the door to a small squadron of teenagers. They carried racks, buckets and various implements for outdoor cleaning. The smallest of the group looked up at me with worried eyes.

"Is my mom gone? Has she left the field?" It was a plaintive request, fearful and worried.

I nodded in the affirmative. I had looked out frequently during the night to see if she had left. I didn't want her misery anywhere near me or my property. When she had finally wandered off I was greatly relieved and able to go to bed. Her presence had been such an unpleasant experience. Unexpectedly though, my affirmation at her absence cheered her daughter and her friends. Giggles and nervous laughter replaced anxiety as they skipped off to complete their promise to clean the

field. That odd juxtaposition of her own daughter rattled my consciousness and I began to remember the curse.

Could I have witnessed a curse? Could I have actually seen its actions and results? The woman was hateful when I greeted her at the door. But I wouldn't have called her miserable. I had no desire to be in her original company, but after the smoke cleared she honestly repulsed me. My curiosity begged me to do a little research and I found myself in Warlock Samuel's library.

I had remembered a book on prominent curses and spells cast in our region of the country. I had found it interesting as a historic reference and study on human nature. It along with a few other tomes had become light reading for evening distractions. I never once thought they may have been serious references on actual events.

I reached for the book and quickly flipped to a few well-worn pages on this very house. There inscribed in early print on what seemed old parchment were the events and description of the curse that consumed my property. I re-read the entry with renewed interest searching for any clues that would confirm my suspicions.

In the midst of my study a strong knock at my front door echoed in the rooms and halls of the old house. I looked up and out the window and saw the teenagers were still hard at work in the field. This had to be a new visitor, so I relinquished my time and made for the front entrance. I opened the door to a formidable gentleman. I say gentleman because he was well dressed in outer garments suitable for this climate, a well pressed suit and a hat. The hat was quite distinguishable if for no other reason than few men wore them these days. But its darkness impressed me. I first thought it to be black, but then a deep navy blue. I could never determine the exact color other than it was dark.

"Dr. Jeffrey Palmer, I presume." He greeted me with my full name. I was impressed he took the time to learn it.

"Yes. How may I help you?" I reached out my hand in greeting.

The gentleman took my hand and introduced himself. He was Dobson Green from a small village down the road. As he spoke a lady approached the front door as well. She was just as finely dressed as Mr. Green. She was dressed in black from head to toe. Most of her finery was draped in exquisite lace. She also sported a fine hat just as dark as Mr. Green's. We waited by the front door for her to approach. As she did so Mr. Green offered introductions to Ms. Walker from another village close by. It appeared they were both here on a similar mission. I invited them inside and directed them to the library.

It soon became clear that Mr. Green and Ms. Walker were interested in the same event I was currently researching. Their demeanor, their knowledge and quite frankly their appearance compelled me to ask how they were aware that something had happened. After a few furtive glances and more than a bit of unease Mr. Green asked if I knew of or had heard the history of the Warlock Samuel.

I briefly relayed what little I knew and of his obsessions with dark magic and mysticism. Ms. Walker nodded in interest then took up the conversation.

"Dr. Palmer, as the Warlock Samuel, we ourselves are practitioners of various elements of what you refer to as the dark arts or mysticism. Witches, warlocks, goblins, ghouls, wiccans, Satanists whatever suits your field of reference we, as well as many of the so-called enlightened religions, do believe in and practice our various faiths. As practitioners we became aware of a profound disturbance in our environment last night. Some small checking confirmed there was a gathering last

night in your field. It also confirmed something happened. Something that cannot be explained.” Ms. Walker reached for the tea I had offered earlier.

Mr. Green took up the narrative. “You see, Dr. Palmer, over the years adherents to our faiths has waned as had adherents in all faiths. Our numbers are much fewer than they were decades ago and our rituals are often limited. The decline has led to a loss in the knowledge of ancient power cores and centers of faith. Including the whereabouts of the Imelda curse.”

“The events last night suggest strongly, that what we have believed is true. The Imelda curse is in your field. What we would like to do is look over the area. Maybe recover some of our lost history.” Ms. Walker finished.

I sat back and finished my tea. I looked strongly at both Ms. Walker and Mr. Green and smiled. “What you are saying is you Mr. Green are a warlock and Ms. Walker is a witch. What you would like to do is check out my field and find out if the Imelda curse is real.”

A small silence followed by a bit of fidgeting finally allowed both to confirm my suspicions. While a bit amused, I was sympathetic. I had never been face to face with a witch or warlock in my life. At least not that I knew. Plus, as they pointed out, who was I to judge religions. My scholarly life had shown you are what you are. There were more mysteries in the world than I would ever know. Besides as a scholar I wanted to know more, much more about them, Imelda and the Warlock Samuel. I invited them to join me in the field.

It seemed every bit of the field was burned into the witch Walker’s mind. She practically fainted as she saw the split rail fence. The weeping willow stood magnificently in the center. Underneath sat a boulder. I saw nothing in it that looked more than just a boulder, but Ms. Walker was convinced. Mr. Green insisted on searching for all 13 pillars. One of the few teenagers remaining from the cleanup offered a bucket, brush and shears and the search was on.

We found one, then another, and another. As Mr. Green cleared the brush, Ms. Walker washed the pillars. I remarked that if they were women at one time they seemed rather small. Ms. Walker smiled. I walked up to one pillar and gazed in what would have been a face. I saw faintly, ever so faintly a set of eyes, nose and a mouth. I stood stunned. I rubbed my eyes and looked again. They remained, impassive, immovable and faint. It unnerved me.

Then I felt it. An unmistakable feeling of misery and shame. I looked up trying to locate the feeling. There at the edge of the field, behind the fence stood the lady that had knocked on my door last night. I was repulsed. I wanted nothing to do with this hideous creature. I didn’t care that she looked pale, lost and abandoned. I didn’t want her near me. I turned to yell at her when a soft hand held my arm.

“Is this the lady from last night?” Ms. Walker was more than curious.

I confirmed it with a nod. “How can you stand to look at her? She’s repulsive even to herself.”

“It’s hard. By the demon it is hard. But she is also evidence. There has to be a pool of sorrows nearby.” Ms. Walker’s revulsion was overtaken by her curiosity.

The pool of sorrows. The water that could reverse the curse with a flower. It had never been found in all the years of the curse. I remembered and my curiosity burned as well. I started to search and as I searched I started to pity. Who was this woman that hated men so that she could activate the curse with a touch? What sour act held her heart so cold?

The feeling of misery began to fade. I looked up and she was making her way into the woods behind the field. My thoughts cleared for a moment and then I realized I was in a field with a witch

and a warlock on All Hollows Day looking for a pool of sorrows. Had I gone daft? Was this real. Academia and scholarly work taught me to investigate and study. But witches, warlocks, and curses? Still the woman did reek of misery. I couldn't stand her. It wasn't just the unpleasantness at the door. I stopped my rummaging and set upon the fence contemplating. Mr. Green and Ms. Walker eventually steadied their labors and joined me.

"It is a bit confusing for scientifically trained minds, I suppose." Ms. Walker sighed as she smiled upon the field before her.

"We don't ask you to believe, Dr. Palmer. But would you mind if we held some services here. We'd pay of course. Keep the place clean and all that." Mr. Green added as he brushed off some errant dirt.

I sat up and looked at the field. I had never given a care about someone's religion. It was there's and they had every right to believe in it. It was only important to me that they never imposed their beliefs upon mine whatever they were. I knew this might cause some issues with parts of the community, but many others felt as I did. Live and let live. Besides the added income wouldn't hurt me nor would the added tourism dollars hurt the village. I reached out my hand and agreed.

"There is a caveat though. Halloween night. The local kids from the high school. Apparently there is a tradition?"

"Our services wouldn't start until the witching hour. Quite late for many and the few that remain would be welcome. If their parents approved." Ms. Walker agreed.

CHAPTER 3

So the weirdness began. The next day a fine-looking gentleman showed up on my doorstep with a quite substantial check for use of the field for the next month. That afternoon what I could only consider were four warlocks and seven witches descended on the field with lawnmowers, picks, shovels, and rakes. In no short order the field was cleared, garbage bins set outside the fence and a small area for parking defined. If nothing else the group was efficient.

I really didn't expect much feedback from the local community. As much as the home and land had been consumed by the neighboring town it was still very much secluded on 100 acres. The field itself was quite a distance from the highway and behind my home. One wouldn't see what was going on unless they took the effort in as much it was quite private. Which proved a strong benefit once I witnessed my first gathering.

Like the journals in Warlock Samuel's library and described in many books, the ritual was done in the nude. A surprise to be sure. Unlike Jeremy's experience though, not all in attendance carried the look of fine young women. I chose from there on to close the blinds.

But the miserable woman from Halloween night remained as well. She stayed in my forests. I assumed she had a small encampment, but I didn't want to look for it. She still repulsed me no matter how hard I tried to ignore it. But I did worry. She was a human being. So I set up a small area and placed supplies inside it for her to use. Nothing great, some clothes, blankets, small tent, food, and the occasional chocolate. I brought things all winter, into spring and summer. She even wrote a note or two back thanking me. I appreciated it, but still could not find it in me to spend any time with her.

I will say the pool of sorrows stayed with me. If for no other reason than to remove that misery from my home. It also was a good mystery. That mystery drove me to hold my stomach and wait for the woman one late summer afternoon. She appeared as expected, but when she saw me she turned to run.

"Wait! I need to talk with you." I half shouted. She stopped as I had hoped and turned around. She was a mess. Living in the woods did not set well with her. She still reeked of misery as well. I decided to keep it simple.

"Why did you jump on the boulder? Why were you so mad?" It was all I could squeak out.

She looked confused at the questions. Then in sad eyes and a halting voice told me she was looking for her daughter. It was the only way she could see over the crowd. She had to find her. I asked her why.

"I didn't want her to go home. He took everything from me. My house, my money, and my heart. He kicked me out. I wasn't going to let him have her. But I lost and now he has everything." With that she wept, turned and walked back to the woods. In that moment I remembered there was another side to every story. I resolved to find it.

It turned out to be true. That small little imp of a teenager that had knocked on my door Halloween night, then turned up to clean up the next day was her daughter. She was named Sandy. Her mother, the miserable woman in my woods was Sarah. The father, the cad of this story, was

Tom. Tom had found another woman, froze their joint accounts and kicked Sarah out on Halloween. He was an ass by all accounts.

I didn't know how I could fix this. I didn't even know if I should. But it didn't seem right. So I went and talked with Sarah again. Then I talked with her again. In time I was able to hold my stomach and speak with her for more than an hour. But no more. The misery was way too much. But I did do it and began to feel something more than pity.

On a cold morning a few weeks before Halloween I was sitting on the fence. I could feel her come of course and knew she was there. Without thinking I reached out and took her hand. She placed the hand against her cheek then froze. It must have been too much because she shuddered hard and ran. It was the briefest of moments. But I knew we had felt hope. For the first time there was hope.

As I placed my hand back down on the rail I looked down and felt where she had held it. Then I saw the smallest tear on the back of the hand. The tear actually burned my flesh in its misery. But it also gave me a revelation. I went into the library and called Ms. Walker.

After a year of witches and warlocks, gatherings and services the field behind my home had become a focal point for Halloween. The students had been informed they were welcome to have a party which heightened the atmosphere. My home had become a center of pumpkins, candy, Halloween decorations and spooky lights. All donated of course which I found odd but accepted. I even had services for the local non wiccan community on Sunday's and All Hallows day. A détente that seemed to appease almost everyone. The local chamber of commerce was quite pleased with the additional tourism.

As agreed and accepted by all, the students came first on Halloween, adults and children not invited. Actually had the local sheriff's office sitting out front of the long lane ensuring all students and adults complied. I had a sneaking suspicion Mr. Green had something to do with that but had no evidence.

We had covered the boulder this year with a steel cage. No one but the witches, warlocks, and I believed the curse, but we weren't taking any chances. The students partied hard. A small bonfire next to the cage. A decent sound system with prerequisite loud music, dancing and a few suspect beverages rounded out the evening. Looking out my window occasionally I could see the occasional kiss behind one of the pillars. Discrete and hidden chaperones made sure the fun was just fun. I wasn't that trusting.

As the witching hour approached the party thinned down to the one or two that didn't know when to do home. On que I walked out with Mr. Green and a sheriff's officer and moved them along until the field was empty. Ms. Walker walked up behind me as I was picking up some errant trash.

"Are you ready, Dr. Palmer?" She was outfitted in a completely black hooded robe. If past was any indicator I was aware she wore nothing else.

I turned, a bit startled to the voice. "As best I can be. Will you be able to make the call?"

"Able, yes. But we have never tried it before. So it will be exciting to see it work." Ms. Walker turned to greet incoming witches. I was thinking as I stood in the center of the field that this was one of the strangest things I would ever do. But I was committed.

As the witching hour approached only 13 witches and I stayed within the field. Everyone else took positions outside the fence. I positioned myself next to the boulder and under the willow

tree. A bonfire was set atop the small campfire of the students. It burned bright and smoke began to billow from the embers.

Each witch stood before a pillar. They stood quietly not moving an arm or finger. A quiet chant began to rise along with an earnestness in their voices. I don't believe this coven had ever committed this much to their faith. It began to show in the fire. The smoke began to encompass the group even though a small breeze blew. The smoke neither choked or irritated it only seemed to cloak those in its presence. Then I felt it. What Jeremy felt on that night long ago. A power, a force seemed to engulf the field. Inside its embrace we were calm, secure.

The witches began to sway and reach for the goddess. Their chant became intense. In the shadows and smoke each witch began to look as no more than ghosts or the silent pillars that stood behind them. As the sound rose, what I expected, but nonetheless was unprepared for, happened. The robes dropped. But unlike my vision before, each and every one of the witches bore a fullness of the most spectacular womanhood. They were striking in every way. I could almost not take my eyes from them.

Then my eyes met Ms. Walker's. They questioned and I nodded in the affirmative. The chant changed subtly, evenly. It was demanding. The witches began to dance. They were light as ballerinas as they twirled around the campfire. I felt it before I saw it. So did the witches. They concentrated on the dance and worked to ignore the feeling. But she was here. Sarah had been called from the woods. She was compelled to come to the circle and the fire.

She came to me. I looked at her. "I need you to cry. I need you to cry hard. I need you to fill your hands with tears."

And the flood came. All that had been bottled up. All the pain, all the hurt came flooding out in a pool of tears into her hands. A pool of sorrow she held as she sobbed deeply. I reached from my inner coat pocket and produced a small rose. I placed the small rose in Sarah's pool of sorrow and called her name.

The thunder clapped first, loud and deep. It frightened the dancers, but they kept their time and continued the dance. Then the smoke rose deep and black from the campfire. Wind picked up and beat the leaves and branches of the weeping willow. I looked up at a sound and I swear the pillars moved. They swayed in place and soft sighs and moans came out. Suddenly a loud ear-splitting shriek as if a thousand agonies were shouting their demise. Then quiet. Just quiet. Everyone inside the field stilled. Nothing moved, no bird flew, no insect rambled. It became still as death. The crack of a burning ember from the fire rang as a gunshot. The spell broke. The smoke dissipated. The fire burnt down, and a small wind tickled what remained of leaves on barren limbs.

What wasn't there anymore, was misery. Sarah stood before me with a smile. The rose still in her hand. Her misery had lifted. I had found the pool of sorrows. I even found Sarah. A gaggle of shrieks rose from the field as every witch ran forward. Sarah and I were soon enmeshed in a large hug of clothed and unclothed women. Even the warlocks on the fence gave a great cheer. Their faith, at least as they believed it, was proven. I could not disagree. But I was too busy hugging Sarah.

Much dancing and drinking followed on the heels of the lifting of the curse. Sarah and I indulged as well. I took Sarah back to my home in the early morning. She insisted on spending the night in my bed. I didn't object.

The next morning as promised the field was readied for the All Hallows Day events. As I understand it there was a larger than usual crowd. But I was deep in slumber for most of it. By that

afternoon the kids from the school had shown up and began cleaning the field and taking down my decorations. It was their contribution to the events, and I appreciated the efforts.

A knock on the door after the cleanup found Sandy standing on the steps. She was confused, close to tears, and worried. She asked if her mom was there. I knew she hadn't seen her for a year. She didn't want to, but she didn't know why. I led her in and took her to Sarah in the library. An hour later she came out with Sarah with red eyes, a tissue and a smile. Within a week she had totally taken over the bedroom down the hall.

Sarah stayed for a month before she proposed to me. I was quite stunned. First I was a committed bachelor and had every bachelor quirk know to women. Second, while I was sure I loved her, I didn't want to harden her heart once more. But she gave me a rose with a ring. I smiled and accepted.

We married under the weeping willow in spring right next to the boulder. We used a justice of the peace even though wiccan and non-wiccans offered their services. We invited everyone in town except Tom.

From then on we kept Halloween as our holiday. We celebrate it like few ever do. Witches, Warlocks, ghosts and goblins doing naughty and nasty things in the night. We laugh. We shriek. We even giggle. We let off steam. But we don't do wicked. And we do it all under the watchful eyes of Imelda, Jeremy, the thirteen pillars and the witches dance. Well at least until they drop their robes. Sarah always closed the drapes right before then and takes me to bed. I love Halloween.