



The Stranger

Another Halloween Tale for Rhonda

CHAPTER 1

It was late. The owls had gone to bed hours before and all that was left was the still of the night waiting for mornings reprieve. I sat in the tavern as the drink sat heavily in my head. My eyes were tired but sleep would not come. I focused as I could on the tale being told. More and more clarity returned to my mind with each sentence the stranger spoke. I leaned in as a pause came to this story. I wanted to be sure to know it all and I did not want the stranger to falter from the tiredness of a burden too heavy.

The stranger looked up and glanced in my eyes, confirming my attention, and then looked away at the surrounding room to determine any additional audience. I followed the gaze and noted the atmosphere. It was a small hall reminiscent of the old boarding houses in early England. A large old oak door stood barrier to a street just outside. An ancient wooden bar sat opposite, knots and carvings a product of its character just as the old drink mugs that sat atop. The barkeep was long abed having drawn a few last tankards for his clientele before locking it down. It was late October and the fire in the fireplace was slowly burning to the last embers. Long shadows crossed the room and the candle light on our table flickered in the puddles of molten wax. The room was stuffy, musty and creaked from the wood that made up its walls, floors, and the long table we sat at in the middle of the room.

The stranger looked back at me to gain my full attention, then leaned in to speak in earnest.

“God had surely abandoned this place, for nothing but evil dwelled in its bowels. The trees have not seen a new life on their limbs for years and the naked branches plead upward for want of it. It is perpetual autumn with death and the dying lying around. Black is the color and the mood. It is a barren land. She has made it so.”

“Why?” I asked in breath hesitant to intervene.

“Death. Death of love and hope. Only that kind of death can bring so much sorrow.”

“She comes here?” I asked with fear.

“Just before morning’s hour, we have but little time.”

“Shouldn’t we go?”

“It is too late. The story has been woven and the players are in place. We must play our part or suffer its vengeance.”

I took a long gulp of mead and considered the tale as I trembled at my fate.

“Her name?” I asked.

“Her given name was Sarah. She was of great beauty, so I have learned. She stood about 1.5 meters and weighed about 7 stone. Her hair was more blonde than brown.” The stranger replied.

“And now?”

“Who knows what evil has done. A black heart contorts the visage and gives its evidence through the mane. Although any that could give confirmation had little time to proffer proof.”

The stranger looked around. Stillness had slipped into the room as if a portal had been created where time and life no longer mattered. The feeling hung heavy and I took a breath for want of fresh air.

“None will come.” Spoke the stranger.

“What did you say?” I asked.

“Breathe in all you want, but no fresh air will grace your lungs. The past has entered and with it the stale air that survived its passing. The moment approaches. There is not but an hour to wait.”

“Why?” I asked.

The stranger knew my meaning and spoke softly while peering closely at the room around us in heightened anticipation.

“Because women cannot share their love. This was a beautiful valley. The Inn in which you drink was a popular place, well attended. Fruit was plentiful and the fields bore great grains. Sarah was a picture of perfection and the apple of her father’s eye. Her father was a well off farmer and merchant. She wanted for nothing in her household as her father provided every comfort.

To say Sarah was beautiful was an understatement. Her mother was of porcelain skin, dark blue eyes, and a voice that made angels cry when she sang. Her father was of sturdy stock almost a full 2 meters high. His hair was of a brownish sort and his eyes, well his eyes smoldered their desires. She was a product of the best of both.”

“A good beginning.”

“It did not last. Her mother died at her fourteenth birthday. Her father could not be consoled and Sarah felt a deep despair. Her father buried himself in his work and the farm to gain whatever relief he could from the memory. He ignored Sarah for his own burden, buying whatever she wanted, but denying her his comfort. Sarah, at a loss for his love, lashed out. She became more and more obsessed with being the center of attention in all things, with all people. She was spoiled before, but now she felt all was hers by right.”

“She was denied.” I spoke.

“The very thing she needed most.”

“How?” I asked.

“A young man named Adam. He had the vitality of youth and was built in the very definition of a god. His hair was darkest black and his eyes had a brilliant glint. The sinews in his arms bulged as his muscles rippled in easy response to any effort. He stood more than 2 meters himself and had a smile that melted the heart of any woman, young or old. Sun kissed his skin from the years working the lands. His hands were large, strong, and bore the temper of a man not afraid to work. But his touch was as tender as a feather on skin.

His parents raised him as a man should be raised. He took no pleasure in injury for injuries sake. The weak were to be helped, not hindered. Yet a good tussle in a fair fight was a cause for great laughter and celebration. He was in every way and manner, a man’s man. Every boy wanted to be him or stand by him.”

The question hovered in the air as the stranger and I looked at each other and felt the burden of times past fill the room. The candles were almost gone and I could only see the darkness around the stranger’s eyes. It looked as though a disembodied skull was speaking. Finally the stranger continued the tale.

“It was the Innkeeper’s daughter. She was slight. Her dirty black hair hung down past her waist and looked as though it always needed a good brushing. If she stretched herself on tiptoe she could barely reach the highest shelf. Her figure was that of a waif. Her clothes were worn and used. She had little need for more as she served as her father’s barmaid since her mother had passed. The locals knew her well as Cassie although Cassandra was her real name. The years in the Inn had done little to relieve her innate shyness, but the regulars knew her and left her alone. Her one desire was to leave the Inn behind and have a life of her own. But she could never leave her father. He cared for her and loved her so much.

As is common in this type of story, told time and again in many villages and towns, Sarah began to hear of fair Adam. She was drawn to the tales of this fine young man and sought to find out for herself. She arranged a chance encounter just outside this door.”

My eyes were drawn to the door as the stranger spoke. A chill ran down my spine.

“Did it go well?” I asked.

A small laugh hissed from the stranger's face.

"As well as can be expected. Sarah saw the women that followed at his feet, the lads that crowded his steps. The men and women of the village, young and old, knew his name and called out as if a good friend. Adam knew each in turn and gave all his best. It was at this moment that Sarah decided to have him, to be the queen of the village, the center of all's attention, even Adams. But it was only a moment later that she became obsessed. For it was in her plan to make sure Adam knew her. To meet this goal she fell daintily into his path as if felled by an errant object.

Adam reached out as she fell, ever the gentleman. He caught her and his strong, muscular arms picked her up and righted her with ever so little effort. His strength and care overwhelmed Sarah. But when he touched her face to clear a speck of dirt, then looked deeply at her with his eyes, Sarah became obsessed. She had never known such a deep passion. His touch was of ecstasy and his look as deep pools of contentment. She wanted, nay needed, to own, control, and have this man. Sarah thanked Adam, assured him she was alright and went home to find a way to make Adam her one and only."

"I take it Adam didn't notice."

"Adam's eye was on the Innkeeper's daughter. He took much ribbing for his choice. He could have any maid in the village, but Adam only knew Cassandra. They had known each other since an early age. Cassandra had found him crying, alone in the field. They were both barely ten and she sat down without a sound or invitation. She reached up and held him until he cried himself out. He told her of his beloved dog that had died so recently. She listened and cared and just held his hand. From then on, every joy, every sorrow, he had shared with Cassie. She never judged. Cassie just cared, and occasionally laughed. Cassie would laugh a laugh that would make the night sparkle and the sun beam. Adam would do anything to hear that laughter."

"It didn't end well." I said.

"Obsession is not love. Sarah plotted and planned. She gave parties and invited all the best people and always invited Adam. But he never came. It mattered not what purpose or reason she gave in need of his attendance. He just never came.

She sent him gifts large and small. All were returned with a gentle rejection. Sarah finally heard of Cassandra and decided to confront this little snip of a girl right in front of Adam. When Adam saw her for what she was, Sarah was sure he would run to her.

On a hot afternoon, at the end of the day Sarah rode down to the tavern. She knew Adam would be arriving for his evening refreshment and the town would be packed with the townspeople returning from their chores. Sarah was sure only through a public humiliation would Adam finally be freed from whatever spell Cassandra had cast over him.

As Adam approached the Inn, a farm hand of Sarah's father, dragged Cassie out into the street from the Inn. Adam froze in his tracks and Sarah moved in. Sarah berated Cassie right before Adam. As she berated she shouted. A crowd formed and her remarks drew more than one round of laughter at Cassie's expense. Cassie tried to run into the Inn to escape her tormentor, but the brute that held her dragged her further into the street. Cassie was mortified and Sarah was in her triumph when the voice of a god erupted from Adam's mouth and filled the streets. He claimed silence. Sarah's caterwauling immediately ceased.

Adam moved forward as quick as a cat and took the ruffian holding Cassie by the arm. Adam's strength caused him to immediately release his grip. With one toss he catapulted the lout through the crowd. He turned to Cassie held her close to his chest so she could hear or see no one. Turning to Sarah he uttered three words."

“What were they?” I asked.

“Be gone witch. That was all he said. And the entire mob turned on her as one. Sarah was run out of town, humiliated, with tears streaming down her cheeks. But the words seared into her memory and became an action.”

CHAPTER 2

“Obsession, humiliation, and rejection can make a heady mix in anyone. But mix it all in with the emotions of a young woman, a young woman who has lost all love and direction, you return simple undiluted hate. Sarah hated Cassie. She blamed Cassie for all her failures. She even began to believe Cassie was behind the death of her mother. It was blind hate that can and did call forth evil, a deep dark evil that brooked no light.”

As I looked toward the stranger the candle light flickered and a brief bit of light struck the stranger’s face illuminating the eyes. In them I recoiled from a look of terror.

“Did the evil have a name?”

“What needs does evil have with a name? Choose one. Lucifer. The horned one. It does not matter. What matters is Sarah began to study, plot, and plan her revenge. In her studies she found the path direct to evil and called him out. As he arose, summoned to her small room, he wailed a fiendish cry and turned to look. Standing firm in the room with the aura of hatred all around her was Sarah.

Evil was impressed and gave her audience. A deal was made, a terrible wicked deal. Sarah would receive the darkest powers of a witch. When her personal revenge was done, Sarah would keep her powers, serve evil, and give evil the valley. And each and every year thereafter she would return to the place of her vengeance and swear her loyalty to evil for as long as time exists.”

I could feel time drawing short. The past was filling the room. Evil was making its presence known. I wanted to run, find a way out, but was frozen to the spot. Worst of all the bottom of the tankard was all that remained of the ale. I was regaining total clarity at the worst time. Fear was beginning to grow in the pit of my body.

“With her new found powers Sarah plotted her revenge, a Saturday night, full moon in the Inn and Adam to watch. It was but a few days away and Sarah cackled at the thought. The cackle brought a smile to her face.”

“They called me witch. Let them hear what they wrought.” Sarah cackled once more.

“With that phrase the transformations began. Sarah bewitched a broom so she could ride with the wind. Sarah found her mourning garments so she would blend in with the night. She was becoming and did become every child’s worst nightmare of a witch.”

“Did she get her revenge?”

“Is not the valley desolate? Her revenge came, but not without a twist, for not even evil can predict the ways of love.

Sarah flew over the treetops on a cloudy night with the moon half full. Her garments whirled behind her as she flew. The feeling of revenge was sweet on her lips and she was gleeful with the prospect. All was set as she hovered over the Inn. Cassie was inside and Adam was coming down the lane. When Adam entered the Inn she gave him but a moment to take his drink. Then with a shriek and laugh Sarah launched herself at the Inn’s door. A flick of her hand made it spring open. As soon as she was inside Sarah sealed all exits.”

“Did they not rise up? Did they defend themselves?”

“They were peasants and evil just flew in the door. They remained as sheep and prayed to their god.” The stranger replied.

“Sarah called out Cassie and demanded her presence in front of her. Cassie tried to hide, but a bolt of blue lightning from Sarah’s hand drew her to her fate. As Cassie stood in before Sarah, Sarah spoke to Adam.”

“You called me witch and chose this little wimp of a girl. This girl! You chose her over me, my beauty, my power, my riches. You ignored me and humiliated me. Well I shall not be denied. If I cannot have you no one will, particularly this little insignificant wench! She shall never have your heart and you shall never have hers.”

The stranger continued the story with more urgency.

“Sarah screamed each and every word getting louder and louder until she climaxed in a fit of uncontrolled vengeance. Sarah turned to reach behind her and the nails on her hands grew six inches in an instant. Cassie was frozen in fright and couldn’t move. Sarah turned back around with great force and plunged her hand into the chest in front of her. Sarah jerked her hand out and held the beating heart before her. It was only then that the evil red hatred in her eyes released enough to see that the heart she had ripped from its owner was Adam’s. He had leapt in front of Cassie at the last minute and sacrificed his life for hers. Sarah faltered at the realization and screamed her loss. Her falter released the spell that bound the Inn and the door slammed open. Cassie saw her chance and ran from the Inn as fast as she could, her eyes bound in tears.

Blood poured from Adam’s chest. Sarah tried to shove his heart back in his chest and then threw her arms around his head and cradled him in her bosom. She had never stopped obsessing over Adam and even in her anger felt she really loved him. But with Adam’s death, Sarah’s hatred for Cassie grew and grew. She cursed Cassie then and there.”

“She didn’t chase her and kill her?” I asked.

“Evil called for his due and Sarah had to obey. Cassie ran and left the valley. Friends carried her safely away. With Evil’s tribute paid, Sarah did cry over Adam and searched for Cassie. But Sarah never found her. Her duties kept her busy and she had little time to thoroughly search.” The stranger said.

“Her duties?” I asked.

“She made a deal with evil. Sarah had to give him the valley and all its souls. She was very diligent in her efforts.” The stranger replied.

“Did anyone stop her?”

“Eventually they found Sarah bloody and curled up in the hay loft of her barn. The people fell upon her, tied her up, and burnt the barn. Her screams were heard for hours. However, the damage was done. Evil now owned the valley. It was noted that when she was found she was wearing the same morning dress she wore when she killed Adam. She never did wash away Adam’s blood from her dress. And she never changed her dress.”

CHAPTER 3

The tale told, I waited with the stranger as the past closed the room. There appeared on the floorboards before us a large pool of blood. The stranger became more silent and the breathing became quickened.

“It is almost time. We have but a moment.”

“You said she cursed Cassie?”

“Yes. Sarah’s curse forbade Cassie and any of her essence to live in love. If any found love, their love would die a savage and violent death.”

“Did the curse hold?” I asked.

“In every way. For over two hundred years, every descendant of Cassie has had their loves shot, stabbed, eaten, or slaughtered in the most violent of ways before they could live in love. A moment is all they are allowed. Enough time given to think they are immune, to create a child. But never enough time to live in love. It is a particularly heart wrenching, despicable curse.”

“Is there a way to end the curse?” I asked.

“That is why you are here.” The stranger replied.

“Me?” I asked.

My heart quickened and I desperately wished for more ale. How was I to end the curse of an evil spirit?

“When the son of Adam witnesses the death of Sarah by the daughter of Cassandra before the witch’s loyalty can be pledged, then will the spell be broken.” The stranger replied.

The stranger stood up and the cloak fell. A woman stood strong in the candlelight. At her side a long knife glinted in the sparse light. She was clothed in jeans and a T-shirt, hardly the look of a killer. She trembled but her resolve held her in place.

“Adam died before he could have a son.” I retorted.

“Cassie was with child when she ran. That was another reason Adam jumped in the way. He wasn’t just trying to protect Cassie, but their unborn child.”

“And I am Adam’s son? How do you know?”

“Besides the research? Because, you are here. Because, you can see the past growing around us. Because, you drink as a man who has lost a love to a violent and terrible death.”

The pain hit hard with the last comment. She was my love. A drunk hit her and her vehicle exploded. It went over the cliff burning, to crash into a raging sea. Onlookers swore they heard her screaming all the way down. I was in pain and if this action could end this suffering then I was in.

“My name is Adam.” I said.

She smiled.

“My name is Cassandra.”

“It comes full circle.” I replied.

“Appears to be. You must be ready. It could happen any moment.”

“Why not bring a gun?” I asked.

“It has to be a knife. I don’t know why. I was told to bring a knife.”

“Why hasn’t anyone done this before?” I asked.

“They have.” She replied.

“And.” I asked again.

“They were viciously killed. This may be in the past but it doesn’t mean it won’t kill you. Be ready.”

“Why you? Why now?”

“Because I love a man and I can’t bear to live without him. I must stop it now or he dies. It is my only hope for another year. And another year will be too late. Wait. It begins.”

I stood silently beside the table as a mist formed before me. Another mist formed and then another. They began to solidify and become human.”

“Don’t interfere or all will be for naught.” Cassie whispered.

In front of me were three people as if in a play. All wore costumes of a period two hundred years past. In an instance the violence began. A woman all in black mourning towered over a small frail girl. She reached back in anger and screamed a blood curdling scream. At that moment a man appeared in front of the girl. The woman reached back around with the longest fingernails I had ever seen and dug them deep into the man’s chest. The rage in her eyes was as red as blood. She pulled her hand from the chest and a beating heart lay in her palm. The man fell to the ground and I almost fainted.

Suddenly the terror faintly shifted and the front door slammed open. It startled and scared me. The small girl raced to the door and out into the night. From the bowels of hell I heard the woman holding the heart hurl the infamous curse. Then, as if time itself shifted, it was quiet. The man was gone and the woman in black, with the beating heart still in her hand, was kneeling on the floor.

The stillness didn’t last. Evil wanted its bounty. The ground beneath us began to shake and the bowels of hell ripped a chasm in the floor and beckoned forth. Angry burning flames licked at the mouth of the abyss. The room turned hot with hues, of orange, red, and black dancing on the walls. At this moment Cassie, my Cassie moved forward. Sarah noticed and let out evil’s own shriek.

“Another come to kill Sarah? And Adam’s son in attendance. You’ll fail like all the rest” Sarah the witch hissed.

Suddenly, propelled by the force of demons, Sarah shot across the room to Cassie. She knocked her off her feet and onto the floor. Sarah straddled Cassie and held her to the ground. She cackled a great cackle as she took her long nails and reached back to tear Cassie’s heart out. Cassie was stunned. Her blade was in the hand that Sarah’s knee had pinned to the ground. It all looked hopeless again. The curse would live. But as Sarah’s last plunge of her hand headed to Cassie, I flung myself between them, the thoughts of my own love dying in a fiery crash coursing through my brain. It would not happen again.

Sarah screamed and held. As I thought she could not knowingly kill Adam or his son. It was all the instance Cassie needed. Her hand was freed as Sarah’s hesitation shifted her form. Cassie took the knife and plunged it into Sarah’s black and abandoned heart. The heart Sarah took from Adam’s chest fell out of Sarah’s hand and Cassie grabbed it. Cassie scrambled to her feet and with one hard push of her boot, Cassie sent Sarah straight to Hell.

With Sarah’s death the violence ended with a resounding crack. We looked around and all was as it began. The past had left and the room was normal. Sunlight was beginning to peak into the window. Cassie looked down and a small hardened heart sat safely in the palm of her hand. No more blood was pulsing through it or the on the floor where it had been taken long before.

“How did you know to interfere when you did?” Asked Cassie.

“Just figured if it was good for great-granddad it had to be good for us.” I replied.

I motioned to the heart.

“That is the offering, the pledge to evil. Without it there is no pledge and no curse. I am going to take it to Adam’s grave and bury it with him. May he, and us, now rest in peace.” Cassie replied.

I followed Cassie to Adam’s grave. It was old and weathered. Little care had been taken to its maintenance. Cassie and I dug with our hands and hollowed out a deep bowl for the hearts resting place. Cassie laid the heart into the ground, just above Adam’s chest. By our own hands we safely buried the heart.

At the final entombment, the sun crept across the headstone. A ray of sunlight fell softly on the freshly buried heart and before our eyes a small flower began to grow. Quietness enveloped us and we

were compelled to look above. A mist reached to the grave and became a form. The form became a small waif of a woman. She gave a smile of gratitude as she outstretched her hand. Another mist rose from the grave and another form rose to take the outstretched hand. Both forms became one, turned into a pale mist, then rose and disappeared. Cassie and I released out breaths together. Unknowingly we had held them through the whole episode. I looked at Cassie in disbelief. Cassie returned the same look.

“Well, cousin. Our work appears done.” I said, breaking the stillness.

I smiled a comforting smile towards her.

“Cousin, I believe it is.” She responded with an equal grin.

We rose together and made our way back to the Inn to gather our things. Life was to begin anew.

It was not too long after that I received an invitation to Cassie’s wedding. It was to be held at the end of a year. I accepted gladly and when I attended I took my new love. The curse had ended and love still conquered all.