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The Coffin Trail

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Dedicated to Helena

PROLOGUE

Barrie could see the woman stretched out on top of the Sacrifice Stone. Moonlight played upon her pale skin and long fair hair.

She is waiting for me.

He broke into a run. The trail was steep. Usually he counted every pace up to the top of the fell. Safety in numbers. But tonight he wasn't counting, tonight he could do anything. His shirt was damp and the cotton stuck to his chest. In the night sky, an owl's wings flapped. Breathing hard, he halted. The moon dipped behind a cloud. In the distance he could hear the waters of Brack Force slapping the rocks. Straining his eyes in the gloom, he made out the slender motionless form of the woman. She was so patient.

'I kept my word,' he said.

His throat was parched and his voice sounded scratchy. He'd never had much to do with pretty women, but he knew that they liked to be wooed. Petted. They treated it as a game.

Paying compliments didn't come naturally to him. He'd never bought anyone flowers in his life: what was the point? All the same, he'd been rehearsing words of admiration over and over in his mind. If you wanted to win, you had to play by the rules, even if they didn't make sense.

Pebbles crunched under his feet. Even now, she remained perfectly still. Most people baffled him, but young women were the worst. They never behaved as he expected. He whispered her name, then called it aloud. Nothing. The only sound, the only movement, came from a fox that had ventured far from its lair. Perhaps she was testing him, maybe she wanted to see whether his desire would overcome his nerves, but it wasn't what she'd promised.

She should be waving me on.

He caught a whiff of sourness in the air.

This isn't right.

Two strides brought him close to the Sacrifice Stone. Just then, the moon gleamed and he glimpsed bare flesh. At once he saw that something terrible, something beyond words, had been done to her. His stomach was strong, but the sight made him retch.

He reached out – he could not help himself – and his fingertips brushed against her. The skin was chill and sticky and wet. He stepped back hastily, as if bitten by an adder, and wiped his fingers on his sleeve. She was covered with blood and now so was he.

'But you said . . .'

Of course she didn't reply. She was dead and everyone would say that he had done it. That he had killed her. He didn't understand anything, except that he was in danger. Panic began to choke him. Who would believe that she had

begged him to come? A teacher had once said he lacked imagination, but he could see the future unfolding with the vividness of colour pictures in a horror comic strip. He had been a fool. He had been betrayed.

Tears stinging his eyes, he stumbled along the rocky ridge. In blind haste, he clipped a crosswall built to shelter visitors to the summit and cut his knee, but he hurried on. Time was short. The wind smacked his skin as if punishing him for stupidity, but he paid it no heed. He couldn't go home. Home was where people would come to find him. To escape, he must find a safe way down. He was aiming for a dip between the crags and the chance of shelter in the next valley.

His breath came in short gasps. Spots of rain greased his hair. The ground was like glue under his feet. Ahead, a familiar squat cairn loomed out of the darkness and he yelped in frustration. He was exhausted, yet so far he had covered little more than a mile. Not far enough, not nearly far enough. His cheeks were moist and he knew he was crying for himself, not for the dead woman. Soon people would be chasing after him. Whenever something bad happened, he was blamed. What could be worse than this?

No one knew Tarn Fell better, he thought of it as his back yard, and yet in his distress he was unsure which downward track to take. As the ground fell away, his foot slid. For a moment he thought he'd turned his ankle, but it was all right. Facts, he would cling to hard facts. People mocked him for his love of facts, but facts weren't like women. They were safe – and they never let you down.

Four, five, seven, ten. Safety in numbers. He paused. There was so much that he knew by heart and yet the shock of finding the woman's body had emptied his brain. No, it was all

right. Fourteen, seventeen, nineteen, eighteen, fifteen, eleven, seven and six. Those were the average daily temperatures in the Lakes, from January to December inclusive.

He stopped to peer over the precipice. Darkness, punctured only by a light in the lonely farmhouse far below. Thunder rumbled and he counted three seconds until the lightning flashed. The rain began to sheet down, sharp and unforgiving. He was close to the heart of the storm.

Now – the four highest mountains, in order of height. Feet, not metres. Scafell Pike 3210. Scafell 3162. Helvellyn 3118. Skiddaw 3053. The numbers soothed his brain. Lists and figures were a comfort, you always knew where you were with them. As a child, when his mother had shouted at him, he'd taken refuge in his bed and pulled the blankets over his face, reciting to himself the latest data he'd stowed away. He started to pick his way down the narrow path. Wait – he'd blundered on to the Devil's Elbow, a zigzag route winding between two deep fissures carved by frost and rain.

No point in tears. In a downpour so fierce he could see nothing. The fells were safe, Wainwright used to say, as long as you watched where you put your feet. Suddenly the path convulsed over a mass of shattered rock. The rain had made it more dangerous and he found himself slipping. He threw out an arm and grabbed a clump of heather, striving in vain to break his fall.

A phrase his mother used came spinning into his mind. Rolling down the hill, she liked to say, Barrie's always rolling down the hill. It was her way of describing what he was like when he went on and on about trivial things that meant nothing to her. Now he was rolling down the hill for real.

The ravine gaped in front of his eyes, a harsh mouth

waiting to swallow him. He pitched into it, arms and legs smashing against stone as he fell. His forehead caught on a ledge which gouged his flesh. The pain was cruel. He screamed for help, but there was nobody to hear. He didn't pray – he'd never been able to imagine God – but he told himself that he would survive the drop. Even if his body was wrecked beyond repair, he was going to live. People would be searching for him. Safety in numbers. He would be rescued. He could not simply be left until he starved. Or froze to death.