

Ellie felt a shift beside her and snuggled resolutely down under the quilt fighting a shiver as she clung to sleep. The cold moved with her, icy fingers travelled her spine.

'Will you cut that out'

Ellie begrudgingly opened her eyes even as she groaned the words through her clenched teeth. Hazel eyes stared into hers from scarce inches away. Strands of dark longish hair fell forward, briefly obscuring view before they were brushed aside by an impatient hand and the intense stare continued.

He was gorgeous; any female with a pulse could have seen that. Peeking from her quilted cocoon Ellie succumbed and took in the view. He lay with apparent ease, the six foot odd rangy frame stretched out on the bed beside her hardly denting the sheets beneath. Well-worn leather boots were crossed at the ankles suggesting a sense of rest that belied the scowl that darkened his face. He wore faded jeans that were starting to fray and a black t-shirt that pulled tight over muscular arms in a way that made you want to reach out and stroke. He was a hunk, a dream guy. *Why couldn't he go be someone else's dream?*

'I'm tired' It had been a long day, her pillow was soft under her head, the quilt snug and warm. She wanted her sleep. She'd earned her sleep.

'Ellie' He made the name a command.

'I want to go to sleep' any other girl would swoon over him, to all accounts girls had in fact been swooning over Greg Taylor ever since he left puberty. Ellie was not about to join the fainting hoards.

'I'm tired' it came out plaintive with a hint of a whine, unmoved he gave a scowl to rival Jane Austen's infamous Mr Darcy.

'Ellie, just look out the window'

Ellie pulled the quilt around her with ill-grace and dragging it with her she stomped bare footed over to the window. It took about two steps. Ellie freed a hand to rub sleep from her eyes before she blinked blearily out through the cheap curtains.

'It's dark, it's what..' a glance at the illuminated digits of her radio alarm ' 3AM, it's supposed to be dark at 3AM'

'Ellie'

Ellie jumped, the source of her irritation stood right behind her, his breath touching her neck and causing a shiver.

'Wake up and look will you'

If he kept gritting his teeth like that they would splinter. She gave a weary sigh and looked. It was a typical dark night cold with a hint of rain, a street lamp at the end of the road was flickering on the verge of going out. It was quiet, her neighbours having the sense to be wrapped up in their beds. A light went on across the road, then another at a smaller window, after a short time they both went out in reverse sequence.

'Old Batty just went to the toilet, is that what you wanted me to see? Great, I observed the moment; can I go to sleep now?'

'Ellie'

A man of few words, the few he did utter were too much. Ellie sighed and continued her surveillance of the empty street. Shadows moved and squinting her eyes she saw a shape separate itself from the shade of a tree. There was the flare of a match as the figure lit a cigarette.

'Some poor bugger has been banished outdoors to light up. Smoking is bad for a person. Lesson learnt, I don't smoke, never want to, can I go to sleep now?'

'Ellie'

Ellie was about to make a sharp retort when she saw the man below do something strange. He stepped forward and stood staring up at her window as though he could see her. After countless wait he took something out of his pocket and making a notation gave another glance up before striding purposefully down the road to a parked car.

The curtains were open a bare crack, he couldn't possibly have seen her looking out into the night. It was eerie, and there was something furtive about the watcher below that left her feeling violated. Watching the car pull away with no lights, disappearing around the corner as if it had never been, the sudden sense of malaise shook away the lasting pull of tiredness.

*Why would anyone watch her?* It's not as if she had super-model proportions or a mysterious double life. Ellie Brown, could you think of a plainer, more normal sounding name? Ok, the full title was Elizabeth Brown but that was worse; that sounded like a dried up old spinster!

Her reflection scowled back at her from the window. Dark hair that was currently sticking up at angles thanks to her disturbed sleep. The small pert nose and the mouth with corner raised in an ironic arc. She was no beauty queen but neither was she Quasimodo thank-you very much. Her generous curves were in all the right places, if a little too generous in certain areas for her own satisfaction.

Average, curvy, perish the thought *cuddly* girls; don't get stalkers. The whole concept of someone lurking outside her home was ridiculous. *Why would anyone watch her?* There was nothing worth stealing unless they had sudden hankering after great, great granny Brown's lustre jug. The monstrosity was a family heirloom, the kind nobody wanted but you really

couldn't throw away. If anyone had a lustre jug fetish Ellie would be happy to gift wrap the thing complete with glitzy bow.

It was strange and very unnerving. Ellie was also bone tired and not up to the conjecture. Turning to Greg she forgave him his persistence.

'What the..' but she was speaking to herself her other night time visitor had also vanished, leaving her alone and confused. Cursing the unknown she dropped the quilt haphazardly over the bed and moved to pull on clothes, there would be no sleeping now.

\* \* \* \* \* \*\*\*\*\* \* \* \* \* \*

'Ellie Morgan. Earth to Ellie Morgan, is there anybody home?'

The Cafe was in full swing, the lunch crowd still piling in the door. Ellie fixed a smile on her face and started to manoeuvre through the shopping bags and push-chairs to where her friend stood taunting her.

'Ellie honey you're in a world of your own today'

'Tired is all. Didn't sleep much last night'

'Young girl like you shouldn't be tired, not less there's some dishy man that's keeping you awake!' The smile stiffened and almost cracked though the wink and rib bruising nudge were well meant. Betsy Malroe was on her third or maybe fourth husband and dispensed advice and innuendoes at the drop of the proverbial hat. She was also a known matchmaker.

'Nope, all alone'

'Nice girl like you, somebody'll come along and snap you up, you'll see'

'You've already caught the best one, isn't that right Mr Malroe?'

Mr Malroe a short portly man was seated in a corner with his paper. He looked up from his Danish and blushed a rosy pink.

'Only say the word hon. you and me we'll elope'

'My bags are all packed Mr M'

'I'll give you'

Betsy snatched up a near ketchup bottle and waved it with menace. He gave a quick chortle and with a fond look at his bustling wife returned to his paper.

'Anybody working here? I'm expected to do everything myself? What'm I paying you people for?'

'Don't get your knickers in a twist, me and the girl here are busy enough. Now where's the bacon butty, latte and tea for table twelve you old sour-puss'

Their boss little Roy as opposed to big Roy Everly his father, slapped a tray down on the counter and stamped back into his kitchen lair. Betsy pulled a face that had the regulars laughing and the two went back to their work running to and fro clearing tables and filling orders by rote.

By break time Ellie could swear her feet were screaming their reproach. Perching on the back step she toed off her shoes and propped her feet on her bag. She stared at her socks, plain black ankle length and she'd managed to get an odd pair. Wiggling her brightly coloured orange and blue toes she shrugged and tugged out her notepad. Fifteen minutes into her half hour break and she'd achieved a page full of doodles. Some really cool doodles; a Celtic cross, a caricature of little Roy beer belly flopping over gaudy chef pants and large pointy horns protruding from his receding hair line. No words though. Ellie tore out a page and scrunched it up savouring the crackle of the paper. It vented a little frustration but didn't ease the block. She was too tired to be creative, the characters were stuck in their boring little world and Ellie just didn't care what became of them.

The coffee was growing cold but Ellie dropped her notepad back into her bag to take up nursing the mug. By day, the night's fears seemed melodramatic. *'Please Mr Police officer a strange man looked up at my window then drove off yeah that report would take hours to type up and likely earn her an all expenses paid trip to the loony bin into the bargain.*

Greg had been concerned, he'd seemed so insistent she look out. An image came vividly to mind; she wiped the unbidden smile from her face with a rough hand taking a bracing glug of the coffee. It was her hormones, that's what it was. She was twenty going on a hundred, single and going scatty. She needed a date. Maybe Betsy Malroe's husband's cousin's son would be Mr Right as advertised. There was nothing to say he'd be a high IQ, pimply nerd with the conversational gambits of a potty trained chimp. John Hughes. He could well be a suave sophisticate who'd sweep her off her poor aching feet. Yeah, right and maybe she should give up the mystery novel and start writing romantic fairy-tales.

The persistence was wearing her down, Ellie liked to keep people happy and accepting the date would make Betsy very happy. One short date, it might even be fun. A member of the Malroe clan he'd hardly be a mad axe murderer. Not the type to be found staring up at a young girl's window and then driving away without lights!

Staring morosely at the brick wall opposite her didn't give any answers. Stifling a yawn Ellie pushed her feet back into her flat sensible shoes. They were getting a little tatty; she'd need to go on a shopping jaunt soon.

She'd stowed her belongings, donned her apron and washed her hands before little Roy had the chance to shout. He was subsequently brusque giving her, her next laden tray and grunted out the table number. Betsy batted her eye-lids at him coyly.

'That's me for a cuppa. Roy my lovely, you gonna give an old dear a quick thrill and rub my aching back?'

'There's work to be done here. I'm timing you mind!'

'Sour-puss'

An exaggerated pout and she flounced out. Ellie giggling as she went through the kitchen to rejoin crowds. Little Roy for all his bluster cracked a reluctant smile even as he continued to grouse.

\* \* \* \* \* \*\*\*\* \* \* \* \*

Ellie closed the door of her flat and leaned against the wood panels. It was good to be home. Kicking off her shoes in the hallway she made a bee line for the bathroom to set a bath running.

'Ellie'

She ignored the interruption.

'Ellie'

Humming to herself Ellie poured a generous dollop of bubble bath under the tap. Setting a towel ready over the heater she went to the kitchen and switched the kettle on.

'Ellie'

'I'm still mad at you'

Ellie dug into the biscuit jar for come chocolate coated, biting into it sharply.

'Ellie?'

Ellie chewed up the biscuit with far more energy than needed.

'Well didn't you get out of the wrong side of bed?'

The book left on the kitchen counter went sailing through the air. It went straight through Greg who merely blinked as it hit the wall behind him. The blink was satisfying though, all considered.

'Ellie' amazing really how much pent up frustration you can convey in one little word or name.

'I'm ignoring you'

'Great'

'I'm drinking my coffee then wallowing in a hot bubbly bath. Then I'm going to curl up and watch the Buffy re-runs. Then, I'm going to bed where I'll sleep undisturbed, all night.'

'Ellie'

'No. No, no, no. Ellie, nothing. Ellie is tired. Ellie is aching. Ellie is going to bath. Ellie is going to relax and Ellie is most definitely going to sleep.'

'Ellie?' that was humour. He had the audacity the bare-faced cheek to be amused at her!

'Greg' an impressive snarl; laden with rage. What possible threat she could poise was irrelevant; Ellie glared through the angry red haze, daring him to mock her.

'I could wash your back?' he was propped up against the counter and even her jaded eyes appreciated the view. Eyes lit up at the joke he tilted his head beguilingly to give her a tentative smile. The light from the window shone through him, making him almost translucent. I guess if you have to be haunted then it was nice to have a hunky ghost. If you should get any choice in the matter that is. There could be festering wounds and gore after all. Were clanging chains any worse than the Ellie, Ellie, Ellie though?

What was the point? Ellie laughed and shook her head; she might as well quarrel with herself.

'Why me?'

'Cause you're the one having the bath' he wilfully misunderstood her.

'The haunting, not the back wash' she didn't expect an answer and didn't get one. The kettle came to boil behind her with a sharp toot. Something else occurred to her as she turned to measure out her coffee.

'Aren't ghosts supposed to haunt at night? It's barely seven and still bright out' the accusing look bounced off him, just as the book had sailed through him.

'Damn, must check my manual'

'It's not funny Greg'

'No?' he was surveying the Lustre jug with a critical eye.

'If I come back later will you listen to me?'

'No'

He caught her looking for things to throw.

'Ellie' a warning.

A glare.

'I think I prefer it when you were screaming and jumping every time I appeared'

'You'd rather I scream?'

He loped over to where she was standing and drew a finger down the centre of her face pausing at her lips. In life the gesture might have been sensual but as things stood it was unnerving. Ellie felt his touch as though he had a tangible presence; cold though and somehow filtered. She watched him turn and leave the room. There'd be no point following, she knew he'd have disappeared.

She took her coffee to the bath with her, a simple indulgence. Laying back covered in bubbles she stared at the ceiling. He'd never said why'd he'd come and now it bothered her. The warm water cured her aches but the sense of ease didn't come.

Ellie felt strong hands massaging her back with soapy water and savoured the caress. Resting her head back on a hard shoulder as a mouth dipped to the arch of her neck with the briefest of kisses. Delicious shivers went down her spine; elsewhere there was heat and melting.

The phone rang.

Frustrated Ellie opened her eyes. Of all annoying, useless things. She was fantasizing about a ghost. Could be an important call. A sluice of cold water cured her burning cheeks though little else.

There goes the relaxing evening. Clutching a towel she ran to the hallway phone, answering it on a gasp.

'Ellie?' For a moment she was struck dumb, but then sense reasserted itself as a deep male voice repeated the query.

'Yes'

'This is John, Betsy's nephew? Betsy gave me your number'

'Oh'

'She thought we'd get along, told me to phone you.'

'Yes'

Yes, oh, yes; she'd lost the ability to speak. His voice was smooth, a pleasant deep timbre with the right amount of humour and self-depreciation. He didn't sound like a pimply computer geek. Her last squeak sounded like Minnie Mouse. It might not be bad, who knows maybe he was a fan of all things Disney!

'Ellie?'

'Sorry, I was in the bath. This is.. .'

They laughed together and it broke the ice.

'Is Betsy pushing you into this?'

'Kind of, you?'

'She's very persistent. I'm told you're a wonderful girl and I'd be mad to miss the chance to take you out.'

'I'm told if she was twenty years younger she'd take snap you up herself'

'We'll not hear the end of it if we don't at least meet-up' he seemed to like the idea, what were the odds of that.

'I could be a right ugly witch'

'I doubt it, you sound cute'

Cute. Was that good, sounding cute? Ellie brushed away the image of herself wearing a pinafore dress and bunches but it was too late to pull back her muttered reply.

'Aw shucks'

A warm laugh came down the wire and made her smile herself. The dreaded date was starting to look inviting.

'How about lunch tomorrow? I could pick you up from the café?'

Ok, so getting met for a first date straight from work all sweaty and in uniform was not inviting. She cast her mind about frantically.

'Well, I'd rather wash and change first.' Catching on quick he interrupted.

'You finish at half five right? I could pick you up at eight or meet you somewhere?'

That was considerate. An image of last night's lurker came to mind.

'I could meet you by the cinema, there's that new restaurant opened up next to it?' Nothing fancy it seemed a good safe choice for a first meeting.

'Great, eight ok with you?'

'Fine'

'That's great then' she could hear the smile.

'Um, so how do I recognise you?'

'I'll be the one in the pointy hat'

'With a wart on your nose?'

'It's healing'

More laughter.

'I've got sandy hair and I'll be wearing black jeans and a white shirt' great he'd really stand out from the crowd then, she resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

'So I'll look like every other guy hitting the town for the evening'

'Uh huh, I'll wear..' What in heaven's name was she going wear? Jeans, skirt, little black dress?

'Black rags and spider webbing?' He continued the witch theme as she paused to think.

'Nope I'll come disguised. Denim skirt and flowery blouse'

'Should I carry a red carnation?'

'Make it a rose'

'Deal, I'll see you there?'

'Tomorrow it is'

'Later'

She lowered the phone back to its cradle before the doubt set in.

'You made a date' she didn't jump; the flat enquiry mirrored her own jumbled thoughts.

'He could be anyone'

'He's Betsy's nephew'

'You're going on a blind date'

'It's not like he's a mad axe murderer, just because you're dead doesn't mean the rest of us have to stop living'

She regretted the words as soon as they left her lips. Greg gave her a stony look.

'Ellie'

Perhaps she could change her name. Turning on heel she raised her chin and stomped back to the bathroom. The pink fluffy towel and trailing soap suds rather marred the exit. Not turning round she missed Greg's smile and sigh as he faded from view.

\* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*

The day, had had mixed speeds; either too slow or too fast. Ellie smoothed down her skirt and looked about her. She was early. Being early had been a bad idea. Would it look too desperate? Of course sitting about the flat just caused extra jitters with her occasional visitor offering little help.

There'd been the 'Down' growled to the hair up or down dilemma. After her fourth costume change a voice had grumbled 'You look fine' as though warmed up Cat liver was presenting itself as a bouquet. He'd followed her to the door but the 'Be good' didn't sound friendly.

'What are you doing in town Ellie? Is everything alright?'

'Hi Lena'

Terrific, her sister; Charlene. A surreptitious look at her watch showed it to be ten to the hour. John would be here soon.

'You have something done to your hair?'

'Last month, I'm due a trim again' the dry tone washed straight over Charlene's head as she primed her own sleek bob.

'You'll be going to the Easter party? It's shaping up to quite a classy event?'

'I'd forgotten to be honest, how's the planning going?'

Charlene was on the planning committee she remembered, that probably meant an evening of

gushing reassurances and praise. Another glance at her watch. Get rid of her, get rid of her. Charlene rattled on about her plans and all the niggling problems that someone could take over, someone used to dealing with food...

'Isn't that Mrs Taylor over there?' The interruption wasn't welcomed. One of Charlene's cronies called a greeting out; Ellie wasn't sure which as they all tended to look the same. Non-existent waist in smart low-hung jeans, a fancy top, sleek hair and a lipstick smile.

'Haven't seen Greg about for an age, what's he up to these days?' There casual just-making-conversation tone, she wasn't prying, not her, never.

'Always found him a bit weird'

'Good looking though'

'I suppose so'

'Weird?' Ellie cut in the discussion

'Weird' confirmed one of the gaggle.

'Tended to know stuff' complained Amy. Ellie was sure that one was Amy. Knowing the day of the week was a challenge for Amy. Pretty though.

'He was off to the next county last I heard' Charlene answered the first question.

If it wasn't happening in Bremwick it wasn't worth knowing about. Ellie bit back frustration; she could hardly run over to Mrs Taylor and ask after her eldest.

*'Hi Mrs Taylor, how are you? Yes, it's Ellie from the Café. I was just wondering if you'd heard from Greg lately. You haven't? Are you certain he's still alive? He hasn't been killed horribly in some terrible accident has he? Are you sure? It's just; he keeps appearing in my room you see...!'*

Straightjacket time, and here she was all set for a date. Talking of dates, Ellie looked around nervously. There were the usual faces milling around; talking or cueing for tickets. A man caught her eye. Average height with a scruffy shock of sandy coloured hair. Fit, but not in any obvious way; he filled out his clothes well. Bright sea green eyes caught hers for a moment before his gaze continued on to access the crowd. This could not be John, the guy was yummy. He'd have no need for a blind date. He was clearly looking for someone though; he twiddled a single Rose in his hands, his only sign of nerves.

Ellie took a step forward. His eyes latched on to hers in query.

'Ellie?' He inject her name with pleasure, the others didn't catch on that they'd not yet met.

A smile came unbidden.

'John, you brought a Rose'

'For you, my lady'

He gave a deep bow and presented it to her. Charlene's face was a picture; she stood with her mouth open. Tomorrow there'd be phone calls and interrogations. Tonight was her night. Ellie decided this was going to be fun. Sisters, Spooks and the sinister could wait a night. Linking arms with her date, Ellie entered the restaurant.