

MURDER IN WIZARD'S WOOD

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Delirious
Scribbles Ink

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CHAPTER ONE

Murder in the Woods

The body hung suspended spread eagle between two birch trees. Wide, thin wounds stained its blue flannel shirt, orange vest and further soiled its mud-caked blue jeans. A susurrus hum surrounded it, flies feeding off the now drying blood. Their spawn hadn't hatched yet, but maggots weren't long off in the muggy morning humidity.

Jedediah Shine bent over, picking up the fallen NASCAR number three baseball cap. He swept his own wide-brimmed hat from his shaking head and swished it in a complicated gesture. His crinkled blue eyes glowed a moment over a pronounced frown.

No token.

He spat at the dead man's feet. "Dumb as you're dead, Ronnie Gerald."

"No reason to insult the dead, Da." A silky feminine voice replied.

He turned darkened eyes upon her. Her wild, crimson-silver locks nearly hid the slight point to her ears. The graceful features of her face did as much to reveal her elven blood as her hair did to hide it.

"Ronnie swore he wouldn't hunt my land without my token. How the hell am I going to explain this to Joe Franklin? It isn't even hunting season."

She frowned at Ronnie's corpse. "If he didn't keep his oath then he's trespassing."

Jedediah sighed. "Just so, but I hate saying it. Hate adding shame to his missus's tragedy."

"You'd rather lie?"

He scowled. Clouds shadowed the woods around them. "You know I don't abide lying."

A smirk played across her lips. "I seem to recall something about Santa Claus and a claim that kissing boys might cause my skin to turn plaid."

He stroked trimmed salt and paprika whiskers "A jolly bearded man did bring you presents."

She poked his stomach. "Fat and jolly."

"I ain't fat."

"And kissing boys?"

“It *might* happen, in the right circumstances.”

She folded her arms across her chest and raised an eyebrow.

He laughed, a full boisterous thing.

“What’re you going to do about Ronnie?”

“Someone played ‘to the pain’ with him a long time.” He met the girl’s gaze, tone sober. “I’m going to have a chat with them.”

She tightened her arms around herself.

“Any idea who did this, Lanea?”

“They leave any arrows?” Lanea asked.

“Not so much as a feather.”

“I don’t know, Da. If they didn’t want you figuring out their identity, why coerce the wood into holding him up like that?”

Jedediah put his hat back on, pausing to adjust it while he scrutinized her. *Easy to forget how young she is when she isn’t acting her five decades. She still just an adolescent, dressing up like a grown woman. Guess halfbloods aren’t much different from normals in that.*

“If the woods share any whispers, I’m going to need to know.” He scanned the nearby woods. “Drake!”

A reddish-brown dragon a bit smaller than a Great Dane bounded out of the trees. He paused at Lanea’s side to curl a long, forked tongue around her wrist affectionately. She scratched his leathery head and shooed him toward Jedediah. Drake met Jedediah’s eyes, tongue still hanging out of his mouth.

“Need you to maul that.” Jedediah pointed at the body. “Don’t be eating any, make you sick.”

“No, Da. Desecrating a body’s wrong.”

Drake’s head bobbed back and forth between them.

“I can’t explain those broadleaf wounds to Joe Franklin without lying to him. If Drake tears Ronnie up a little, I can tell him truthfully that some creature had at him.”

“But that’s not what killed him,” Lanea said.

“Never said it was.”

Drake examined the corpse, cocking his head.

“Well, get to it, you lazy lizard,” Jedediah said.

Drake’s wings—wrapped so tightly as to seem part of his sides—unfolded from his body. A feeling of static electricity raised the hair on their skin. Kudzu and tree limbs suspending the body untied themselves.

Drake shot one last glance at Jedediah then Lanea.

Jedediah narrowed his eyes.

Drake pounced on the corpse. His wings mantled the body as his claws ripped into it.

“That’s enough, Drake.” Jedediah pulled a worn handkerchief from his denim overalls and cleaned the blood from Drake’s maw. With a satisfied nod, he shoved it back into the pocket. “Go find somewhere to dig.”

Drake cocked his head.

“Sheriff’s boys won’t question a hound nuzzling a dead body, but we can’t have blood on your talons when they go looking for what killed him.” Jedediah turned to Lanea. “I love you, girl, but why is it you bring problems with you when you visit?”

A mischief lit her silver eyes. “Are you suggesting that I’m trouble, Da?”

Moving faster than normal for a man in his forties, he snatched Lanea into his arms with a massive hug. “Hell yes, you’re trouble, girl. You just ain’t the cause of it—this time.”

Her head shot up, cocked slightly to one side. Her smile faded. “They’re here.”

Jedediah nodded. “Yup. Told them to park over yonder at marker twelve. Go on now, don’t want you involved in this.”

“But I found him, shouldn’t I be here?”

“Ain’t no record you exist and no sense changing that now,” he said. “Drake?”

The dragon bounded up looking as if he’d rolled in a bog. Mud obscured the blood. He fell into step with Jedediah.

“Don’t forget your glamour,” Jedediah said. “And try acting more like a *normal* dog this time.”

A sound which might have been described by the nearly deaf as a bark came from Drake’s throat.

“If that’s the best you can manage, I’m boarding you a week in a kennel to practice.”

Blue lights flashed through the trees. Between the patrol cars and Jedediah, two brown-uniformed sheriff deputies peered around the forest like Japanese tourists.

Jedediah waved. “Over here, boys.”

Both heads turned his direction. The older led the way through, stepping around lingering mud.

“Mr. Shine, that hound dog gets bigger every time I see him,” the older said. “You sure you won’t stud him out?”

Drake’s tail wagged back and forth.

Jedediah laughed. “Ain’t no bitch that’d want this old hound giving her pups.”

Drake whined.

“So how’re you doing, John? How’d a senior deputy and his little brother get sent out here into this heat?” Jedediah asked. “Rile the sheriff again?”

The younger chuckled. “John ticketed the sheriff’s new girlfriend.”

“How was I supposed to know they bumped uglies? Hell, Eddie, she doesn’t look a day over nineteen,” John said. “You got something to show us, Mr. Shine?”

“Now, John, isn’t it about time you started calling me Jedediah. It’s not like you’re still a kid sneaking into my orchard to impress your first girl.”

John watched his feet.

Eddie laughed. “Give it up, Mr. Shine. He probably still has nightmares about that hiding you gave him.”

“He took it like a man, impressed the socks—and I dare say a few other things—off that girl of his.”

John cleared his throat. “So, a body?”

“Yup, this way.”

Jedediah led them through the woods as if on a Sunday stroll. He shared a new joke they’d already heard, then asked after their parents, wives and children. He hadn’t gotten to new gossip before they reached the body.

“Ah, hell,” Eddie said.

John let out a low whistle. “Any idea who it is, sir?”

“I ain’t the type to be going through a dead man’s pockets. Found this though.” Jedediah handed over a ball cap.

“What was he doing out here?” Eddie asked.

Jedediah darkened. “Trespassing.”

“What’s he doing hunting your woods out of season?” John scanned the ground around them. “And where’s his rifle?”

Jedediah shrugged. “No idea. Might’ve dropped it while running from whatever he riled. You’re welcome to look around for it.”

“Appreciate that, sir,” Eddie said. “You found him like this?”

Jedediah pointed at Drake.

The disguised dragon lay in the mud, gnawing a fallen branch.

Eddie examined him. “Did he do anything to the body?”

Drake’s tail thudded the mud.

“Probably would’ve gotten himself a stomach full if I hadn’t been nearby,” Jedediah said.

“What were you doing out here?” John asked.

“I like walking my woods. A morning jaunt keeps a man spry.”

Eddie bent down and searched the body. He scowled. “Better than jogging.”

John pointed a thumb at his brother. “His wife demands he run on a treadmill four days a week.”

“She just wants me in good shape,” Eddie said.

John shook his head. “High maintenance.”

“And worth every mile.” Eddie offered John a lecherous grin. “Beg your pardon, Mr. Shine.”

“I remember being young once,” Jedediah said.

All three shared a nervous laugh.

“Ronnie Gerald.” Eddie held up an open wallet.

Jedediah shook his head. “Doggone shame. Guess that’s why he was out here.”

“What do you mean?” John asked.

“He’s got a missus and three little ones.”

“How’s that explain anything?” John asked.

“Revenuer beating down the door? Man’s got to provide for his family.”

“I thought he had two kids,” Eddie said.

“Wife gave birth to a little girl last month,” John said. “You sure keep up with people.”

Jedediah shrugged. “What’s a farmer got to do once the crops are in the ground but mind other folk’s business? My grand pappy used to say, ‘keep your fingers in the dirt, your ear to the ground, and your eyes wide. Trouble might still call, but it ain’t sneaking up easy.’”

“Good advice all around,” John said. “Look, we’re going to be at it for a while. You don’t have to stay.”

“All right,” Jedediah fished two bronze whistles from his overall pockets. His handkerchief tumbled to the ground. “Take these, one each in case you got to split up. Blow on it and it’ll bring Drake running and me with him.”

“I’m sure we’ll be okay, Mr. Shine,” John said.

“Just the same, make an old man happy,” Jedediah said. “Drop them in my mailbox when you’re done.”

Jedediah strolled away, Drake at his heels.

“Mr. Shine?” John said.

Jedediah faced back around. “Yup?”

John turned Jedediah’s bloody handkerchief over in his hands. Eddie’s eyes shot between Jedediah and the object, face drawn and stance tense.

Caution undercut John’s tone. “You dropped this.”

Jedediah smiled and extended a hand. “Sure enough did. Thank you.”

John didn’t offer it. “Is this Ronnie’s blood?”