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The Moonstone Legacy

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DEATH BY MOONLIGHT

Blood dripped from Lizzy's hands into the snow. Her mother's blood.

"Mum!" she cried, pleading, clutching her body close, willing her not to die.

"Lizzy!" her mother whispered. Her eyes wide open in terror, gazing at something ...

Lizzy turned.

But there was nothing. Just the glimmering dome of Shalimar, the frozen moors beyond and, hanging high in the ice-clear sky, the full moon.

THE ANNIVERSARY

IT HAD BEEN TWO YEARS to the day since her mother's death, but the horror of that moment was seared in her memory for ever.

As fourteen-year-old Lizzy stood under the great cedar tree where the accident had happened she laid a bunch of lilies on the ground. Sighing, she brushed a strand of long dark hair from her face as she looked across the sweeping lawns to Shalimar. Its intricate stone arches and pavilions glowed in the last rays of the setting sun. 'The Taj Mahal of the Yorkshire moors!' her mother had called it—and promised to take her to see the famous monument one day. But there would be no trip to India, no Taj Mahal ...

It was almost dark by the time Lizzy made her way back home to Maya Lodge. She was surprised to find her Uncle William's old Bentley parked outside.

What's he doing here? Lizzy wondered. Uncle William hardly ever came to visit. Her father, who was a scientist, rented the lodge from his elder brother, but he and Aunt Lavinia were usually far too busy hosting fancy shoots,

dinners and weekend parties at Shalimar to take much notice of them.

Sitting on the bench under the wooden veranda, Lizzy pulled off her wellies and let herself in. Uncle William's voice was booming from the living room. "... If I were you, Henry, I'd be worried sick about Lizzy," he said. She stopped in her tracks, listening intently. "I don't know how you've coped, I really don't. After Alice's death, I hardly slept, I can tell you. All I could think was that it could be my kids next ..."

"Don't be so melodramatic, William," Lizzy heard her father reply. "You can't honestly expect me to still believe that ridiculous curse story Nanny used to frighten us with!"

What the hell's he talking about? Lizzy tiptoed down the narrow hallway and stood stock-still near the half-open door.

"Come on, Henry!" Uncle William said. "You know full well that ever since that no-good George Abercrombie disappeared off the face of the earth, one in every generation of the family has died in some sort of terrible accident. And when did they all die?"

Her father didn't reply. Lizzy could sense the tension between them.

"On the full moon!" Uncle William said. "And unfortunately your wife was no exception. Is it any wonder they say that the Abercrombie family is cursed!"

O my God! The full moon! Lizzy flashed back to the moment of her mother's death.

The springs of her Uncle William's armchair squeaked as he hauled himself to his feet. "Listen, I'm sorry, I really didn't mean to end up arguing with you like this, not today

of all days. But just take care of Lizzy, that's all. I'd better get going. In any case, Lavinia's got a houseful of guests, and there'll be hell to pay if I'm late back ..."

Lizzy slid unseen into the loo under the stairs as her father accompanied Uncle William down the hall. She leant back against the door, heart pounding.

THE TEMPLE OF THE MOON

SHANKAR PUJARI looked down from the top of a rocky hill on the coast of Gujarat in India. Below lay the familiar white marble walls of the Temple of the Moon, the Arabian Sea beyond glistening in the moonlight. Streams of white-robed pilgrims were converging on the temple from all sides for the opening ceremony of the Soma Mela festival.

He nodded to his driver, who went to the boot of the car and got out a large trunk. Shankar changed from his elegant suit into the ochre robes of a Brahmin priest.

“Wait here!” he said, and set off down the stony pathway leading to the Temple.

Minutes later he joined the heaving crowds of pilgrims flooding into the temple. Drums throbbed incessantly, and the stifling heat reeked of sweat and incense. All eyes were fixed on the head Brahmin priest, who swung a censer in front of the statue of the six-armed Moon God. The pilgrims chanted incantations at the sight of the bronze idol gleaming in the light of guttering oil lamps.

As Shankar pushed his way slowly towards the back of the temple he glanced towards the other Brahmins gathered

around the statue. He'd been cast out of their priestly brotherhood at the age of fifteen. They said he had violated his oath and had become obsessed.

Obsessed! If they only knew!

As he sat in the dim torchlight of the temple archive, Shankar surveyed the old documents spread in front of him. He frowned, shaking his head. He was no closer to finding what he was looking for.

The frenetic drumming of the ceremony was reaching its climax. *Not much time left.*

Quickly gathering all the papers together, he stuffed them in the satchel he had hidden under his robes. Something fell out of a yellowed envelope—a rusty clasp knife, a tarnished inscription on its silver handle. He breathed on the metal, and polished it on his robe—peering at it closely, a smile began to play across his lips ...

“George Abercrombie,” he read. “The Honourable Company Resident, Junagadh, India 1853.”

THE LAST DAY OF TERM

“I’M GOING TO BE LATE for school!” Lizzy shouted to her father, grabbing her rucksack and rushing out of the door of Maya Lodge. “Bye, Dad!”

Slamming it behind her, she ran out into the rain. As she closed the garden gate she spotted Aunt Lavinia’s Range Rover swooshing down the drive from Shalimar.

“Stop!” she shouted, waving her arms.

The window opened, and her aunt glared out. “What is it, Lizzy?” she asked. “I’m in a hurry.”

“Please! I’m late! I’m going to miss the bus!”

“Typical! Your father just lets you get away with this sort of behaviour time after—”

“Time. I know, I haven’t any. Please?”

“Get in the back, then. But be quick about it!”

Lizzy jumped in. “Oh, hello Samuel!” she said, surprised to see her cousin in the passenger seat. He was looking miserable, clutching his jaw. “What’s wrong?”

“I’ve got a rotten toothache,” Samuel complained. “First day of the hols and it kept me up all night. We’re off to the dentist ...”

“Hang on, you two!” her aunt said, putting her foot down. They roared down the long puddled drive and out into the main street of Nethermoorside.

The school bus was just about to leave. Aunt Lavinia cut in front, tooting the horn and flapping her hand imperiously out of the window. “I won’t do this again, I warn you, young lady!” she said.

The last few schoolchildren were scrambling onboard. “Crikey!” said Samuel, staring at them. “Are those really the sort of jobs you have to go to school with?”

“At least they’re not snobs ...” Lizzy muttered to herself, hopping out. “Thanks, Aunt Lavinia!”

She ran over to the bus. “Hi, Josh!” she said, greeting a boy whose parents worked at Shalimar.

“Now then,” Josh replied as they clambered onboard. The Range Rover drew away.

“Ooo! Got a chauffeur now, ’ave you, Lizzy?” a girl shouted from the back of the bus.

“Slummin’ it a bit with the likes of us, aren’t you?” added another girl to rowdy laughter and whistles from a couple of the boys.

“Ignore ’em, Lizzy,” Josh said over his shoulder.

“Don’t worry,” Lizzy told him. “I always do.”

As the bus sloshed down the wet, winding lanes towards Knowlesby, everyone eventually calmed down. Lizzy wiped the mist off the rain-splattered window and stared out across the sodden fields, thinking about the curse that her Uncle William had talked about. He’d seemed so sure ...

Drab tinsel hung limply around the walls of the assembly hall of Knowlesby High School. “And finally, I’d like to wish you all a very Happy Christmas!” Hardly had the headmaster finished his end-of-term speech when there was a clattering

of chairs as the excited pupils fled for the relative warmth of the classrooms.

The last day of term seemed to drag on for ever. Lizzy’s final lesson was Art with the annoying Miss Franklin—she’d been a student of her mother’s at York Art School years before, and had even visited Maya Lodge. Miss Franklin floated around the classroom in her tight-fitting jeans and low-cut hippy blouse, everyone’s best friend. Pausing for a moment, she bent over the table where Lizzy was mixing her paints, and started to recite a poem quietly:

*“Mine eye hath play’d the painter and hath stell’d
Thy beauty’s form in table of my heart ...”*

Lizzy rolled her eyes, really regretting that she’d told Miss Franklin that her father loved Shakespeare’s sonnets. It had turned out that she loved them too, and insisted on quoting them at her all the time.

“How is your father, Lizzy?” Miss Franklin asked.

“Fine,” Lizzy muttered.

“You must both miss your mother terribly. So hard for you, I’m sure.”

When Lizzy didn’t respond, Miss Franklin patted her shoulder, and turned to the class. “Right, I’d like you all to do a painting about what Christmas means to you. Let your imagination be your guide ...”

Concentrating intently, Lizzy took longer over her picture than anyone else. It was only when the bell went and everyone noisily said their goodbyes that she leant back in her chair, finally taking in what she’d painted.

She swallowed hard, and blinking back a tear, scrumpled it up.