

UNTIL

MURDER

DO US PART

TREG JULANDER

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For Jenny, Maunia, and Sierra,

without sufficient words to express
the depth of my love and admiration

To die, to sleep;

To sleep, perchance, to dream; ay, there's the rub,

For in that sleep of death what dreams may come

When we have shuffled off this mortal coil.

Hamlet, Act III, Scene I

ONE

“MICHAEL,” HELEN SAID, AND JOSTLED HER HUSBAND, WHO WAS tossing and turning in the bed next to her. “You’re talking in your sleep again.”

Mike flailed his arms and legs, flopped onto his side, and drifted restlessly back to sleep.

Mike huddles quivering under a canopy of giant ferns. His shredded Armani suit pants expose a long, straight gash on his calf. Pain throbs to the beat of his pounding heart. Sticky red blood saturates his shoes. His spent body gulps the tropical air and twitches erratically like a wounded animal wary of the predator coming to finish off its prey. He grits his teeth at the intense pain, knowing that the slightest noise will again disclose his hideout to the assailant.

The stench of a rotting corpse burns his nostrils and strikes fear throughout his trembling limbs. The beast is near again. Mike staggers to his feet and swoons from the loss of blood.

He lumbers through the brush, and a soft, shimmering light appears floating above the ground. Mike edges closer, favoring his wounded leg and checking over his shoulder for the dark creature. He parts the branches of a ficus tree and sees an image of his wife. She is suspended in the air and glowing softly like an apparition.

He draws nearer, surprised and apprehensive. “Helen? What’re you doing here?” Mike’s words crack with fear at the approaching danger.

"I could a tale unfold," the radiant figure says, "whose lightest word would harrow up thy soul."

Mike wipes his sweaty face with his bloodstained fingers, painting a red ribbon across his forehead, and wonders if this is an illusion conjured from the jungle heat. The black menace approaching them is real, however, so close now he can feel its stinking breath upon him. In a hushed but urgent voice he insists, "We've got to get out of here."

"Adieu, adieu, adieu. Remember me."

The specter vanishes as mysteriously as it appeared.

A murder of crows scatters from the trees behind him, and Mike freezes in terror.

Ching. The beast's heavy broadsword, like a reaper's scythe, clears the thick boughs at Mike's back.

Adrenaline courses through Mike's body. He dives headlong into the brush, fighting his way through the thicket, pushing and tearing at the vines and limbs that slow his flight. The black creature's heavy footsteps pound the ground in steady pursuit. With a frightened glance over his shoulder, Mike catches a glimpse of the evil pursuing him—its black leathery hide stretched tight over a burly eight-foot mass, narrow eyes glowing amber like molten steel, gnarled bull horns protruding from the sides of its head, and long, razor-sharp fangs blackened with the rotting flesh of recent prey.

In utter horror, Mike tears through the foliage. The behemoth is closing fast. Mike sees a clearing suddenly appear, and he bursts through the last vegetation. It's a cliff. He panics and scrambles to the ground to catch himself, but his momentum carries him over the edge of the steep ravine. He slides slowly into the dark abyss and claws frantically at the rocky ground. With his last ounce of energy he clings in desperation to a stocky root.

Blood streams down his dirt-covered arms. The earth shakes from the approaching beast. And Mike begins to feel his aching fingers being pried from the rhizome. Just when he can't hold

on any longer, his wife's apparition appears again projected on the root.

"Michael!" She screams and claws at his hands that grip the root. "Let go of me. Now!"

"Let go of you?" He stares in horror at his hands clasped tight around Helen's throat. She is crying uncontrollably and gasping for air.

"Michael. Let go!"

His fingers slip from the tree, and he falls backward into the bottomless chasm, his bloodied hands reaching out to his wife.

"Helen." Mike jerked his eyes open. He bolted out of bed, bathed in sweat and breathing heavily. *Another nightmare*, he thought and flipped on the light switch. Helen was sitting up in bed gasping. Her face was red, and she was massaging her throat.

"You choked me," she said, then broke down crying.

Mike looked in horror at his sobbing wife. *That was real. What have I done?* "Helen, I'm sorry, I—"

"You could have killed me."

"Sweetheart, I'm sorry," Mike said, and sat back down on the bed next to his wife. "I was having another nightmare. This monster chased me over a cliff. I thought I was holding on to—"

"What's happened to you lately?" she pleaded through reddened eyes. "You come home late with lipstick on your neck one night and try to strangle me the next?"

"You have to believe me. I was dreaming. And let's not get into the lipstick incident again."

"I don't know what to believe anymore. For all I know you were probably fooling around in my own home while I was at my parents' this summer!"

"How can you even—"

"I think you'd better sleep on the couch tonight," Helen said.

Mike hesitated. "I'm so sorry." He stroked Helen's long, brown hair.

The baby monitor crackled to life with the sound of their daughter wailing.

“Just get out,” Helen ordered, and waved her husband off.

Mike walked down the dark hallway to the baby’s room, his body still shaking from the nightmare.

“Hey, Victoria. Did we wake you?” He lifted the weeping toddler from her crib.

“Hi, Daddy.” She rubbed her moist eyes with her small fists, snuggled her red face into her father’s chest, and immediately calmed down.

“Are you wet?” He felt his daughter’s diaper through her fuzzy, pink sleeper.

“Huh uh.”

“It’s okay now. Go back to sleep.”

“Love you, Daddy.”

“I love you too, princess.” Mike rocked Victoria gently in his arms and shuffled rhythmically around the room as he softly sang “Let It Be” to her. Soon she was fast asleep again curled up in her daddy’s arms and purring like a kitten. He placed her tenderly back in the crib, tucked the covers around her tiny body, and padded toward the door.

Mike brushed past the dresser and, in the dim light from the Mickey Mouse lamp, caught a glimpse in the mirror of his reflection like a ghost staring back at him. He took a deep breath, picked up a small, framed portrait of his wife and daughter, and exhaled slowly. “Oh, Helen. I’d better get some help before I kill you.”