

Short Story

Grave Bargains

by

Kate Kelsen

Word Count: 5,931

## Grave Bargains

All Rights Reserved © Kate Kelsen 2016

### *Judean Desert, East of Jerusalem, 1974*

The desert wind was dry and hot, the beating sun unrelenting under the pale blue sky. The young Bedouin shepherd cast his gaze searchingly across his herd; amidst the sea of straggly wool his watchful eye knew one of his charges was missing. With his flock grazing contently on the hillside, he left them in search of the stray, venturing in the direction of the rocky caves nestled between the Dead Sea and the Judean Hills.

The mountainous landscape plummeted dramatically twelve hundred meters to the lowest point on Earth. Amid the crumbling limestone cliffs that lined the northwestern rim of the Dead Sea, the boy found his stray. He knelt and picked up the lifeless lamb from the side of the track, cradling it in his arms. After a few moments, he stood up and started the journey back to his flock.

Stepping inside the tent, the boy found his grandfather sitting on a carpet preparing tea. With tears in his eyes, he laid the deceased lamb before the old man.

“He was my favorite, Grandfather,” the boy whimpered. “He was my pet.”

The old man placed his hand gently upon the animal.

“Josef, bring me the scroll from the last clay jar over there.”

A collection of large clay jars was stored in a far corner of the tent. From the last one, Josef pulled out an old scroll, wrapped in linen and blackened with age. He took it to his grandfather. The old man spread a tattered altar cloth across the dirt, arranging four black candles in the corners. Last of all, he positioned a small black urn in the center. He unfurled the scroll, taking a deep breath.

“Master of the Gate, all knowing and eternal. Here I am, your humble servant. Hear my prayer. Accept my humble offering; in death you give life.”

The boy watched on intently as his grandfather set down the scroll and picked up the urn, tipping it on an angle. Dark red liquid dripped onto the lamb and the old man pressed into it with his hand. Before them, the lamb bleated and pulled itself awkwardly to its feet.

As he fondly petted his favorite lamb, Josef looked in delight at the old man.

“How did you do that, Grandfather?”

The old man beamed.

“We are privileged by destiny, Josef.”

*Los Angeles, California, 2013*

“Bye, Dad!” Jessica sang as she passed the living room.

“Have a good day at school, sweetie!” Peter called back.

Taking a swig of his coffee, Peter mindlessly flicked through the television channels. His phone vibrated, and he picked it up.

“Hello?”

*“Peter, it’s me.”*

Peter sat upright.

“Ruby, I told you not to call anymore,” he spat.

*“I’m a person too, Peter! I have feelings too!”*

“Ruby, I lost my job at the college because of all of this!”

*“You can’t just cut me out!”*

“I’m sorry, Ruby. I really, really am. But I’ve been given a second chance, and I just can’t risk it.”

*“But Peter...”*

“Ruby, I have a family with Beth. Please understand, I’m just trying to make things right...”

*“Right for you, Peter! Right for you! You’re cutting me out because it’s too hard! Because I don’t fit in with your ‘plan’! You don’t care what this will do to me!”*

“You can do better than me, Ruby. You’re young. Find someone without all this baggage.”

Peter sighed through the phone. “Bye, Ruby.”

Ruby scoffed, slamming the phone down on the coffee table in disgust. Throwing herself down in the nearest chair, she buried her face in her hands, growling. Suddenly she stood up again, snatched her bag and headed for the door.

Ruby stormed up the path, stomped up the steps, and rapped her fist on the front door.

Peter stood up from the couch and stepped into the hall. The moment he opened the door, Ruby shoved him backwards.

“Ruby, what the hell!”

“You approached *me*, Peter!” she shouted, pointing her finger at herself. “Now *I’m* in the way? You brought this on yourself! You can’t get rid of me that easily!”

“Ruby, stop, this is crazy!”

“*Don’t* call me crazy! I am *not* crazy!”

“Calm *down*!”

Peter grabbed Ruby’s arm, and Ruby yanked it away.

“Do *not* put your hands on me!”

Ruby started to whimper, as if she was going to cry.

“Can we just go somewhere and talk?” Peter begged. “Let’s just...talk, just you and me. Anywhere you like. Please.”

Ruby nodded, her anger subsiding for tenderness. She stepped closer and kissed Peter. He didn’t kiss back, and kept his eyes open throughout. Ignoring his defiance, Ruby pulled away, and turned to the door.

“Let’s go out the back,” Peter suggested.

Ruby rolled her eyes at him.

“Please,” Peter insisted.

Ruby turned and followed the hall through to the back of the house. Stepping out the back door, she turned back to Peter to talk to him. The head of the hatchet met her cheek, and she dropped to the ground. Peter stood over her. She was still moving, so he struck her twice more.

Letting the hatchet drop out of his grasp, Peter placed his hands over his face as he started to wail.

“Oh God,” he wept.

He turned and stumbled back up the steps, and through the house to the kitchen, vomiting into the sink.

Having returned to the back steps, Peter dropped to his knees beside Ruby. He pulled her limp body into his arms, cradling her tenderly. Through his tears, adrenaline produced a moment of clarity, and he nodded to himself.

*I've got to get this cleaned up before Beth and Jessica get home.*

Peter gathered himself enough to stand up. He took hold of Ruby's arms, and dragged her across the yard to the back corner behind the garden shed. He drove the shovel into the ground, casting a cautious eye frequently over his shoulder as sweat beaded on his brow.

When the hole was deep enough, Peter dropped Ruby's body into it. Slowly, her face disappeared as Peter filled the hole back in.

Dusting his hands off against each other, Peter re-entered the house. He headed for the kitchen, and jumped at the sight of Beth and Jessica. Beth redirected her grimace from him to the kitchen sink.

“What the hell, Peter...”

“I'm sorry, Beth. I...I don't feel well.” He wiped the back of his hand across his forehead.

“I'm sweating, I'm burning up.”

“Well, go lie down, then. I'll clean this up before it stinks the whole kitchen out.”

“I'm sorry, Beth.”

Peter turned and climbed the stairs to the bedroom. In the shower, he let the scalding hot water run over him, scrubbing at his skin until it was red raw.

Peter lay motionless in the bed, his body completely drained of energy. His distant gaze was fixed on the wall; his mind was spinning and churning, so out of control he couldn't clarify a single thought. The sound of Beth's voice snapped him back into reality. She was standing in the doorway.

"I'm going to sleep in the guest bedroom," said Beth. "I don't want to catch whatever you've got."

Peter nodded. Without another word, Beth closed the door behind her.

*"The family of Ruby McCallum, who went missing from Central Los Angeles three days ago, has begged for her safe return as the search for the college student drew to a fruitless close on Tuesday. The 19-year-old was last seen when friends visited her at her home on Saturday; a neighbour roaming the streets late on Monday afternoon found her dog, a black Labrador. The dog is normally kept in the yard of the house and police don't know if Ms McCallum took the dog with her when she left home. Police are unsure if she met with foul play - there were no signs of a break-in or scuffle – and her bank accounts have not been touched. Emergency services will resume the search on Wednesday morning, and a family representative of Ms. McCallum said they were all praying for her safe return. Anyone who has information or sees Ms. McCallum is urged to phone 911."*

Dusk had fallen on the City of Angels, but the lights in the roadside motel room had been left off. A cream cloth was spread out over the cigarette-stained carpet, and on top of it Josef had arranged six candles, white and purple in color. The aromas of burning cinnamon, frankincense and sandalwood sweetened the musty air. Josef carefully unfurled the fragile scroll and arranged it on the cloth in front of him. Beside it he placed a piece of paper and a pen. He sat on his legs, resting his hands on top of his thighs, left palm down and right palm up. He closed his eyes.

“I call to the spirit of Ruby McCallum; I wish to speak to you here. Hear my voice. Come to me; I call you now, Ruby McCallum.”

Josef lifted his hands forward and picked up the pen, pressing it to the paper.

“Can I confirm that I am speaking with the spirit of Ruby McCallum?”

Josef opened his eyes to view his writing. On the paper, he had scrawled ‘Yes’. He closed his eyes again.

“Can I confirm that you are no longer here on this earthly plane with us?”

*Yes*

“Can you tell me how you came to pass to the other side?”

The writing was nearly illegible.

*Murder*

“Who caused you to pass to the other side, Ruby?”

*Peter Atkinson*

“And where does your earthly body reside?”

*4789 Herman Way, Los Angeles*

Josef’s clothes were laid out on the floor nearby; he reached for his shirt, and slipped his feet into his socks and shoes. He shrugged on his coat, and put on his felt brimmed hat.

Josef pulled the state car over in the quiet neighborhood street. He was sure to park a few houses back from the address he was looking for. He stepped out of the car and approached the house.

The time was 11.10 p.m. when Jessica finally shut off her laptop. She closed the computer and set it on the floor. As she sat up straight again, she paused, listening. A moment later she pushed herself up off the bed and approached the window.

*“Dad!”*

Peter leapt up from the bed and stumbled through the hall to Jessica’s bedroom. Beth arrived at the same time, half asleep and disoriented.

“What is it, Jessica? What happened?”

“There’s someone out there!”

Peter and Beth joined their daughter at the window, squinting through the glass into the darkness.

“A man! He was standing in the yard! Over there!”

“I’ll call the police,” Beth suggested.

“No,” Peter snapped. “No, I’ll go check it out.”

“Peter, you’re not going out if someone’s out there. Let’s just call the police!”

The patrol car arrived forty minutes after Beth made the call. The officers came through the house to the backyard, and Peter watched on nervously as they scouted the perimeter with their torchlight. His mouth was dry, his heart pounding, and his cheeks cold and clammy. Finally, the officers reconvened with him at the back steps.

“We’ll do a drive around the neighborhood. Will you be all right tonight?”

Peter nodded.

“Yes. We’ll be all right.”

“Double check that your windows and doors are locked.”

“Yes, absolutely.”

Peter saw the officers out, and found Beth in the kitchen, making Jessica a hot chocolate. Eventually, the three felt at ease enough to return to bed, but none slept well that night.

The following evening, Peter watched TV in the living room as Jessica worked on her laptop at the other end of the couch. The program slipped into an ad break, and Peter looked to his daughter.

“What are you working on?” he asked.

Jessica replied without looking up at him.

“My written assessment on the Dead Sea Scrolls.”

“That sounds interesting. What are they?”



Peter noticed a subtle eye roll as Jessica drew her focus away from her work.

“They were discovered in 1940 in caves in the Judean Desert.”

“Sounds fascinating,” Peter commented. “Well, I’m off to bed. Don’t stay up too late.”

Peter checked the front door was locked and then retreated upstairs. Beth was sitting on the edge of the bed, holding a crumpled tissue.

“I can’t do this, Peter,” she sniffled.

Peter came around the bed, and sat down next to his wife, who shifted away.

“Beth, we have a daughter...”

Beth shook her head.

“I can’t live like this, Peter! I can’t pretend!” She dabbed her nose with the tissue. “And anyway, why am I the one who has to make the effort to stay? You’re the one who cheated!”

“Beth, I made a mistake, I know that. But I was in a difficult place!”

“You were in a difficult place, Peter?” Beth exclaimed. “I had *cancer*! It was never going to be easy! It’s no excuse!”

“I know it’s not an excuse. What I did was totally inexcusable. But I *promise* you; I will *never* make that mistake again.” Peter sighed. “*Please* give us a chance. This family has been through enough, don’t you think?”

Peter washed down his toast with the last mouthful of coffee, then stood up and pulled on his jacket. He bent to kiss Beth on the cheek, but she flinched.

“I’ll be back later.”

Peter kissed Jessica on the head and left the house. He drove across town, pulling up across the street from Ruby’s house. He sat in his car for several minutes before opening the door and crossing the street with haste.

Beth held her tears in until breakfast was over. Up in the bedroom, she sobbed quietly to herself. She didn’t want Jessica to see her crying. She stood up, took a deep breath, and took a

suitcase out of the wardrobe. Once it was packed, she came down the stairs and turned to the living room, where Jessica was watching TV.

“Come on, Jessica. We’re going to Auntie Suzie’s.”

“Dad’s home!”

The front door opened, and a black Labrador came bounding into the living room, wagging its tail. Peter was standing in the doorway.

“She’s ours.” He looked at Beth, smiling. “Her name’s Kimba.”

Jessica squealed with delight, patting the dog as she licked her face.

Beth shook her head, and Peter watched her as she carried her suitcase back up the stairs.

Prodding at the pasta, Beth occasionally lifted a forkful to her mouth. Kimba was standing nearby, fixated and ready for the first offering of food.

“Kimba, stop begging,” Peter insisted.

There was a knock at the door, and Kimba took off barking into the hall. Beth snapped out of her miserable daze, throwing a curious glance to Peter. He tensed his brows, stood up and slipped into the hall. Taking a firm hold of Kimba’s collar, he opened the front door. There on the porch stood Ruby, whimpering and drenched head to toe in blood. Kimba retreated, whimpering. Peter slammed the door shut. His breath quivering, he stepped back. He composed himself, quickly returning to the kitchen and sliding back into his chair at the table.

Beth looked alarmed. “Who was it?”

Peter shook his head. “No one. Just some kids playing a prank.”

Beth’s gaze dropped back to her meal, and she continued to prod at her pasta.

After dinner Beth collected the dirty dishes and dumped them in the sink, before disappearing to the guest bedroom. Jessica retreated to her spot on the couch with her laptop. Kimba was lying on the floor beside her. Peter stood by the doorway.

“I think you should head up to your bedroom to do your homework tonight,” he suggested.

Jessica looked at him strangely.

“But Dad, *The Sorbellos* is about to come on...”

“Please, Jessica. After the other night, I just want to be careful.”

Jessica huffed, rolling her eyes and flouncing out of the living room.

Lying in the middle of the bed, Peter stared at the ceiling. Even with his eyes open, the vision of Ruby would not go away. He knew it was her; through the blood there was still no doubt. But *how*? It couldn’t be her; it was impossible. It was someone trying to scare him.

The clouds were pink on the horizon at dusk as Peter hooked Kimba’s leash onto her collar. They set off toward the parkland at the end of the street, jogging down the steps to the concrete path at the bottom.

Kimba criss-crossed over the path in front of Peter, sniffing at the grass.

“Come on, Kimba,” Peter instructed. “Walk straight!”

He looked up just in time to see the man as he crashed into him, falling backwards to the ground. Kimba skittered out of the way.

“Hey!” Peter winced, clutching his elbow. “Watch where you’re...”

Peter looked up at the man. His face was half concealed by a wide brimmed black felt hat, and he wore a heavy overcoat.

“Hello, Peter.”

Peter pushed himself back up to his feet, picking up Kimba’s leash.

“Who are you?”

“You can call me Josef,” said the man, whose accent hinted Jewish heritage.

He looked down at Kimba, letting her sniff his hand.

“Don’t touch my dog!”

“I was just giving her a treat.” Josef withdrew his hand. “I know what you’ve done, Peter.”

Fury flared in Peter’s eyes.

“You were at our house, weren’t you? Last night?” Peter took his phone out. “I’m calling the police. Don’t even think about going anywhere.”

“I wouldn’t do that, Peter,” said Josef. “When I said I know what you’ve done, I wasn’t talking about your affair.”

Peter lowered his phone. His look was uncertain for a moment, before turning angry again.

“I’m warning you, mister, stay away from my family. I’m warning you.”

Peter turned and jogged away.

Kimba was lagging as they made their way up the hill towards home. She was panting heavily, and Peter slowed down to her pace along the last stretch. They reached the house, and Peter let Kimba off the leash. She wandered into the living room and sat down beside the couch next to Beth. Peter went upstairs to take a shower. As he was stepping out, Beth appeared at the doorway to the bathroom.

“Peter, something’s wrong with Kimba. I think she’s having a fit or something.”

Peter quickly pulled on a pair of shorts and followed Beth to the living room. Kimba was trying unsuccessfully to stand up, her feet sliding out from under her. She was still panting heavily, and her distress showed no signs of easing.

Peter crouched next to her. “Easy, Kimba, easy! Relax! Beth, get a wet towel!”

The dog started moving her head from side to side, her eyes wide open and her mouth drawn back to reveal her teeth. Beth returned with a towel soaked in cool water and draped it over Kimba. She also found a pedestal fan and set it up where Kimba lay.

“Come on, girl,” Peter urged. “Relax! Come on, come out of it!”

Kimba’s seizure went on for several minutes, and just as it seemed to be easing, it intensified again. Peter thought she was dying right in front of him. He had never experienced a seizure before in his life. He didn’t know what was happening to her.

Finally, the seizure subsided, and Kimba drank some water. Peter and Beth looked at each other.

“What brought that on?” Beth asked.

Peter shook his head. “I don’t know. She was doing fine. We were almost home and she started lagging behind me. We wouldn’t have walked even a mile.”

Peter and Beth stayed by Kimba’s side and monitored her until they knew she was okay. Kimba rested in the living room on the wet towel for the remainder of the day.

That evening, the family had barely sat down to dinner when there was a knock at the door.

“Again?” Beth moaned. “Peter, who is it this time?”

“I’ll get it,” Peter said.

He stood up and slipped into the hall. He peered through the peephole, and then opened the door, casting his gaze out across the yard. He stepped out onto the porch, closing the door behind him.

“Are you there? Huh?” he hissed. “Where are you?”

He picked up a torch and went down the stairs. The light from the torch was swallowed by the darkness of the yard.

“Come out!” he hissed. “Come out here, you coward!”

The torchlight crossed over a shadowy figure, and Peter jumped. Ruby’s dress was soaked in blood. Peter stumbled backward, tripping up the steps, dropping the torch, looking behind him. She pulled on his jacket, and he thrashed his arms back at her until the jacket came away in her hands. He scrambled across the porch and into the house, slamming the front door closed and fumbling with the lock.

Beth was standing in the hall. “It’s Ruby, isn’t it?”

“No, Beth.”

“I’m taking Jessica to my sister’s.”

Beth turned and hurried upstairs.

“Beth, where are you going? Beth, it’s not safe out there!”

“Just stay out of my way, Peter!”

Wrestling her suitcase into the backseat, Beth straightened up and turned to face Peter once more. She scoffed, and walked around to the driver's side. She slid down into the seat and started the engine, reversing down the driveway and speeding off down the street.

"Mom, I forgot my laptop!" Jessica exclaimed.

"We'll get it later," Beth snapped, wiping tears away from her eyes.

Slouched on the sofa with a bowl of chips in his lap, Peter flicked mindlessly through the TV channels. His detached interest was captured suddenly when his flicking landed on a repeat of a morning talk show. Peter put down the remote and reached into the bowl.

The host smiled into the camera. She was standing next to a man in a suit; his thinning hair neatly combed back, his beaming face complimented by a tidy moustache.

"Well, we're back with medium Josef Babinski, who has had us fascinated all morning with the world of ghosts and the unknown." The host's grin was wide and white for the camera. "And we're going to hand it over to you, Josef, to work with our studio audience now. Take it away and see what you can see!"

"Okay, I'm going to start with this lady right here."

He gestured to a woman in the first row.

"I have a mother figure coming through very strongly around you, sweetheart, with the name of either Mary or Margaret, do you understand the name? I can tell you that before she passes over, there's a hard time to move or walk or get things done. Do you understand that?"

"Well, she was on medication but didn't have any pain," said the woman.

"Okay so medication, I'm feeling this very much, is there arthritis? A bone problem; also something with the back. Can I see she sits with a pillow behind her back?"

The woman shook her head.

"No, doesn't make sense to you? What about trouble with legs?"

The woman shook her head again, smiling awkwardly.

“No.”

“Okay, who has trouble with legs, now?”

“My father’s had two hip replacements.”

“Two hip replacements, so he can’t walk as well as he used to.”

“No, he walks very well.” The woman chuckled.

“Okay, okay.” Josef took a deep breath. “Right. Was your mother buried?”

“Yes.”

“U-huh, because she’s talking about being buried and awake, or a funeral rather. She knows about it, she was very surprised by it all, is it a Kathy or Katherine?”

Josef stumbled over the names. The woman shook her head. An awkward grimace could be seen on the face of the host in the background. An older lady sitting next to the first piped up in recognition of the reference.

“My cousin has just had surgery.”

“Okay, let’s talk about her.”

Josef turned his attention sharply to the new woman.

“I’m hearing about someone Catholic, who’s Catholic?”

“We all are.”

“Okay, so she’s talking about a mass that was held, so she’s talking about an image of Mother Mary.”

“Well, with Catholics there is usually imagery of Mary around.”

The first guest chimed in, gesturing to the second sitting beside her. “Nolah’s mother’s name was Mary and died when Nolah was six.”

“It was 1950,” Nolah added. “Do you go backwards?”

In the background, the host flopped over on the couch and laughed in relief of the connection.

“I want to talk about something different with you,” Josef continued. “Music, do you play music, or did you play music?”

“No,” said Nolah.

“Okay, who did music, who was going to play piano?”

Neither Nolah or the two other guests before her could identify Josef’s suggestion, so he quickly abandoned them and turned his attention swiftly to yet another woman a few rows back.

“I want to talk about this lady,” he stated, gesturing to her. “Your husband’s passed over? Or your father?”

“Yes.” She nodded.

“Something about cars with him? Buying a car?”

The woman’s expression was blank. “No.”

“Okay, who had a heart problem?”

“Um, probably my mother.”

“Okay. She’s passed over as well?”

The woman nodded.

“A heart condition?”

“Yes.”

“Because she tells me she was going to get an operation, something before that, okay? So I don’t know whether you knew that she could get that.”

The woman impatiently closed and opened her eyes. Josef began rubbing his throat.

“Also getting the name Therese or Terry in this area, okay? Was there a divorce with you?”

“I’ve never been married.”

“I’m not surprised, because I want you to love yourself more. Because you don’t.”

The host gasped.

“There’s also something about the car, with your father. I don’t know what that means, but I’m putting it out there.”

The host stood up and approached Josef, reaching to place her hand on his shoulder.

“We’re almost out of time, Josef...”



“Do you have his watch or his ring?”

“Yes, and yes.”

“I’m getting that you had a painting done, or you moved a picture of him, correct? Yes or no?”

Josef’s tone had become short and sharp; he was scrambling to redeem himself.

“Yes.”

“I also wanted to tell you that he’s sitting next to you on the couch, he’s there with you, did he smoke?”

The woman shook her head. “No.”

“Do you smoke?”

“Yes.”

“Could you stop? Okay? I don’t know who Paul is; do you understand that? Who is that, please?”

“A friend.”

“He wants to say hello, because they were there when he died. They were there; they were here; they were around.”

The host interrupted. “Please thank Josef Babinski for answering some very interesting questions!”

Josef awkwardly grinned. “Thank you, thank you. People coming to my show tonight will have a truly great experience.”

“Very intriguing. Thank you for joining us.”

Jessica’s laptop was sitting on the edge of the couch. Peter reached for it and opened it up. Into the Internet browser he typed in the name ‘Josef Babinski’. At the top of the page of results were several videos featuring Josef, the first being the footage from the talk show Peter had just watched. Below it was a list of links to articles blaring headlines of disgrace.

*Talking to the Dead: Josef Babinski Tested*

*Watch Josef Babinski Make Shit Up*

*Talk show exposes Josef Babinski- FRAUDSTER!!!*

*Psychic Josef Babinski Fails at Cold Reading, Fake Psychic!*

*Josef Babinski Exposed as a Fraud*

Past all the slander, at the bottom of the page Peter found a link to an article from an online encyclopedia. He clicked on it.

*Josef Babinski is a prolific purported medium. Born in Israel, Babinski has been widely recognized by the academic community for his work involving the Dead Sea Scrolls. His main claim to fame, however, is the statement that use of his psychic abilities has assisted U.S. law enforcement officials in solving crimes. These law enforcement agencies have since either denied any such co-operation happened or stated that tips provided by Babinski were not helpful.*

“Dead Sea Scrolls,” Peter said to himself.

He closed the Internet browser and opened the shortcut to Jessica’s school assignment on the desktop screen.

*In 1947, a Bedouin shepherd discovered a number of tall clay jars in a cave in Qumran, close to the northwest shore of the Dead Sea. He and his cousin began showing the scrolls to others, looking for a buyer. Eventually, they sold some of the scrolls to a local cobbler who dealt in antiques. As word of the scrolls spread, more buyers became interested. The scrolls, some of the most famous archeological discoveries of all time, sold for small amounts at first, but would later be valued at \$250,000, and over \$2 million today. Following their initial discovery, four of the scrolls were smuggled to America and were advertised for sale there.*

*The Dead Sea Scrolls include different types of documents: the earliest existing copies of books from the Hebrew Bible, and works related to a specific sect that existed among the Jews at the time of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. More scrolls were uncovered in 1952.”*

Peter’s phone vibrated loudly next to him, and he picked it up.

“Hello?”

*“Weren’t expecting to see Ruby last night, were you, Peter? Whatever are you going to tell Beth and Jessica?”*

“You!” Peter pressed his lips together, exhaling angrily through his nose. “You did something to my dog! You poisoned her!”

*“Your dog, Peter?”*

“I know about you, Josef!” Peter hissed. “I know you were a sham psychic for the police! I know you failed! You were ruined, because people found out what you really are! A fraud! You’re just trying to scare me! To *scam* me!”

*“You know what you saw last night, Peter.”*

Peter shook his head. “I didn’t see anything! It was fake!”

*“Yes, you did, Peter. It’s best for you to be honest with yourself. That baby in her belly...”*

“You’re crazy! I didn’t see anything!”

*“You think you had the right to take away Ruby’s life, and that of her baby, to stuff them away at the back of your yard and then go on as if nothing happened?”* Josef clicked his tongue down the phone. *“You thought you had tucked them away in your past where no one would find them.”*

“What do you want from me, huh?” Peter shouted. “What do you want?”

*“You must pay the price for your crime, Peter. Here’s the deal. You have twenty-five thousand dollars cash ready for me by 6 p.m. tomorrow, which I will discreetly collect from your mailbox. Then, Ruby will go quietly back to the shallow grave from whence she came. No one will ever know about what happened to her. You can go on living your life, or what parts of it you haven’t ruined.”*

“That’s crazy! I’m not giving you any money!”

*“Have the money ready by tomorrow night, Peter, or I will make her turn up somewhere you don’t want her to.”*

Snatching his keys and wallet up from the side table in the hall, Peter dialed Beth’s mobile, growling with frustration at her voicemail service.

“Beth, please pick up!” He hung up the phone. “Kimba! Kimba! Come on, girl!”

Kimba trotted fondly after Peter to the front door and down the steps. Once outside, she suddenly stopped, lowering her head and staring at the car.

“Kimba!”

She released a low growl.

“Kimba, for God’s sake, get in the car!”

*Come back for her*, Peter thought.

His heart now pounding, Peter slipped down into the driver’s seat. As he turned the key in the ignition he was grabbed from behind, a hand over his mouth and an arm around his neck.

Slipping in and out of consciousness, Peter was vaguely aware of the fragility of his situation, but the urgency was lost when he slipped out again. He was suddenly woken by a splash of cold water to the face.

Peter’s hands were restrained behind the chair in which he was seated. At his feet lay Ruby’s lifeless, decaying body. He squirmed, groaning loudly from under the tape across his mouth. Four black candles were arranged around her body, and above her head an urn was positioned. Josef was standing at the edge of the room. In his hands, he held a scroll.

“For the hour is here when the dead will leave their grave at the sound of my voice,” he began. “I conjure you, spirit of the grave, who rests in the grave upon the bones of the dead, that you accept this offering from my hand and do my bidding.”

He knelt before Ruby, laying the scroll out in front of him. He picked up the urn and tipped it on an angle, letting dark red liquid drip down onto Ruby’s chest. He pressed his hand into the blood.

“Master of the Gate, all knowing and eternal. Here I am, Josef, your humble servant. Hear my prayer!” He lifted his hand and repositioned it on Ruby’s belly. “Master of the Gate, here lies the bodies of Ruby and her unborn child. Let them cross over. Release them, Master! Release them!”

Ruby's eyes opened, and her body sat bolt upright, screaming and convulsing. Wailing and crying, she looked around in a daze. Blood dripped down her legs from beneath her dress; Ruby clenched her fists, wailing in agony. Between cries and gasps she screamed for mercy. On and on it went, unrelentingly. A high-pitched cry pierced the air, but it was not as Peter remembered it. It was not the breath of life, but painful and disturbing. Josef scooped up the screaming bundle from Ruby's feet. Cradling the newborn in his arms, Josef approached Peter, who looked in horror down at the infant.

"Congratulations, Peter. Shall we go get the money now?"

As the sun crept up over the Earth, Peter dragged himself to his sister-in-law's doorstep and rang the bell several times. Suzie answered, wrapped in a dressing gown.

"What on Earth..."

"Suzie, can I talk to Beth, please?" Peter stammered.

"Peter, you're shaking. Your face is grey..."

"Please, Suzie, it's urgent."

Suzie frowned. "Wait here."

A few moments later Beth appeared at the door.

"Beth..."

Beth revealed a piece of paper, holding it up for him to see.

"Ten thousand dollars, Peter. Gone." Beth shook her head. "You paid her off, didn't you? To disappear?"

Ruby's newborn rested in her arms in the shallow grave. With one last shovel of dirt, their faces disappeared. Back at his car, Josef tossed the shovel in the trunk and pulled out a mobile phone.

"Yes, police, please. My name is Peter Atkinson. I...I want to confess to the murder of Ruby McCallum. My address is 4789 Herman Way, Los Angeles. Please hurry."

Whistling to himself, Josef removed the battery out of the phone and tossed both items into the bushes. With that, he slipped into the driver's seat and sped off down the road.

ENDS