

Black Dog - Chapter 31

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Published on Stories Space on 04 Jun 2018

<https://www.storiesspace.com/stories/supernatural/black-dog-chapter-31.aspx>

It had taken Imogen about half an hour to make up her mind to tell Eli what she'd heard, longer to find him, and even longer to wait while he went to confirm for himself what she already knew. Typical man, couldn't take a woman's word for anything. Rather than argue with him, she occupied herself indoors. Since she couldn't imagine herself on speaking terms with Verity any time in the foreseeable future, she ought to spend more time practising moving objects and win back her independence. She scowled as she concentrated, and the book (too heavy, too ambitious) wobbled tediously across the drawing room at eye level. A beginner, with enthusiasm by the bucketload but lacking finesse, tended to send things crashing around and make a mess. Precision was the trick.

The French windows flew open, banging against the wall, and the book dropped like a stone.

"Oh! You made me jump!" Imogen cried, as the yellow pages of the book fluttered across the floor like autumn leaves. She looked round, pursing her lips at the trail of mud across the drawing room carpet, but she forgot that in a moment when she saw Eli's bloodstained shirt. "Oh, no... what's happened now?" Imogen hated the elderly tremor of her own voice, the sound of her fear.

"Checked the grave."

"And?" More than once she'd glanced out of a window towards the yew tree, unable to gauge the depth of the hole he'd dug. "Was she in it?"

"She is now." Eli threw his wet coat over the back of the armchair.

Imogen froze. "What? You killed her?"

"What did you want me to do?"

"Not that!" At a thought from Imogen, a large vase launched from the mantelpiece and hit Eli hard in the shoulder.

He stared at her with that familiar frustrating look of a cat who doesn't understand why an antique chair leg isn't for scratching, or why his mistress isn't thrilled with the gift of a fluttering mutilated blackbird. "Did it for you. Might have to go away for a bit."

Imogen flung a dozen paperbacks that crashed against the wall and slithered down behind the armchair. "How dare you! How dare you do something like that in my name and leave me again! The baby..." She collapsed into the sofa, sobbing heavily into her hands. She knew she'd never been destined to lead a blameless Christian life - she'd dishonoured her father and mother, she'd tarnished her soul with a thousand sins of envy and pride, and now she'd killed another child through her own thoughtlessness; through wicked gossip.

Worse than that, Verity must have a family, who would come looking for her and perhaps trace her footsteps to this very house, with its new bloodstains. Eli might hide for a while, and Imogen herself was beyond reproach as far as the living were concerned, but what about Olivia? Even if they could clean up all the mud and blood before Olivia came home, Verity's sudden disappearance at such a time would look far too suspicious. The truth would come out. Olivia would go to the police with a vivid description of Verity's killer.

Imogen stood up, choking back her tears, and cast around as she tried to picture a way to restore shattered normality. "Take that wet coat off the back of the chair!" she snapped. "Are you trying to ruin the upholstery? We have to do something about this before Olivia gets home." It was late already, dark outside, and Olivia might walk in through the front door any minute. Imogen had an idea of what needed to be done, but she was afraid to voice it. She paced up and down the drawing room, aware of Eli watching her. He wouldn't like what she was about to suggest. "Bring her back," she said, getting the words out sharply. "Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about. We both know you can do it." Of course, even though she knew he could, he'd never done it when she'd asked before, and she was afraid she might have to educate him on the important differences between a dead cat a dead girl. "Come along, now," she said, mustering her sternest tone. "The trouble with Verity was that she was alive and that's very clearly all in the past. Bring her back."

Eli glanced at the clock. "Better to wait 'til midni-"

" Now. "

He grumbled something she didn't quite catch, but she let it go, since he was putting his coat back on and heading for the door. "Works better at midnight, that's all."

Shivering with nervous energy, she followed him out into the rain. They had no time. Olivia almost never stayed out as late as midnight. She'd be home soon and there was no chance of putting things

back exactly as they'd been in the morning, but if they could get Verity back on her feet, it would be a start.

"Not Verity," said Eli, and Imogen realised she'd been thinking aloud. "Said she's called Penelope."

"It doesn't matter." The baby - oh, the baby. She pulled closed the wound in her heart and tried to imagine it didn't hurt. "Hurry up."

He stopped at the familiar plot, the disturbed grave, carelessly refilled. Had he thought nobody would notice? Had he cared? He'd been planning to run.

Imogen pulled herself together. "Well? Is there anything you need? Candles? Holy water?" That could be an obstacle.

"Just blood," he said, scanning the deserted churchyard. "Aha."

She followed his line of sight, chasing after him as he stalked off through the grass in the direction of a lone dogwalker. "No! No!" she whispered, despite the fact that the unlucky passerby wouldn't have seen or heard her. "Anybody would think you were trying to make things worse!" She herded him back into the tree's shadow, where they could both be invisible from prying eyes. "There has to be some other way. What about those bottles she kept bringing to the house and refusing to share?"

"Wine. I checked." He pushed back his sleeve, studying his own pale wrist, and opened the pocketknife. Imogen squeezed her eyes tight shut. She'd had no blood of her own to offer, and she didn't imagine she could easily have done so even if she'd still been alive. When she dared open her eyes and look, Eli was crouching over the grave, watching his blood ooze slowly from the long cut in his arm, to soak into the disturbed soil. It was thick and sluggish, black as tar, although perhaps that was just the effect of the moonlight.

"Oh," said Imogen faintly. "Doesn't that hurt?"

He ignored her to speak words she didn't understand into the dirt, and when he judged he'd bled enough, he stood up, holding the wound closed with his other hand.

"Is it done?" Imogen asked. "What happens now?"

"Could be hours yet. Might not take at all. I'm still bleeding," he added, seeming rather surprised about that.

"Of course, of course," Imogen hurried back towards the house, beckoning him to follow. "We'll sort that out. Those dirty clothes had better go straight in the wash. What you're going to wear in the meantime I don't know, but we'll find something to fit you, or close enough. Oh! And then we must do something about the drawing room carpet, or those stains will never come out..."