

LET THE DANCE BEGIN

by

Terri Pine.

The windscreen wipers beat a restless tattoo and Mark increased the volume on the car stereo to compensate for the racket.

He had turned onto the moorland road two miles back, and there were at least three more mind-numbingly dull and deserted miles to go before he reached anything even approaching civilisation again.

Still, *anything* was preferable to staying at that weird dinner party, he reflected with a twinge. He had made his excuses early and, as soon after dinner as etiquette and his conscience allowed, he had begun the long drive back across the moors.

And what a night for it... he squinted out of the windscreen at the rolling black hills and dense woodlands. Fucking parties – it wasn't even as if he enjoyed them anymore. Since he and Claire had officially become an ex-item he was forever being trotted out as the good cause, as in: "I'd like you to meet Mark Gregory. Poor Mark has just got divorced, *You'll* cheer him up, won't you?"

Stupid.

As if he still cared.

He flicked the wipers onto double speed as the rain, borne on a sudden gust of wind, splattered heavily against the windscreen. The weather seemed to match his mood, and his thoughts turned back to the party he had left half an hour ago. His brother had been persistent in his invitation.

"Please, Mark – you'd be doing me a real favour."

"How?"

“Oh, come on ... *you* know Judith once she gets an idea in her head. She asked me to ask you, we both know she’ll have some woman lined up. Jeez, Mark ... whose balls are going to be in the trifle if you don’t show?”

So Mark had gone for Michael’s sake. Sure enough Judith had produced the inevitable friend and, with resignation, Mark had watched the two of them bearing down on him. He accepted the introductions politely and mechanically, but found his attention distracted almost immediately by a woman standing by the window, alone and pale against the dark curtain.

He hesitated, the flicker of recognition quickly becoming solid memory, one which made his chest tighten with misgiving. She looked different now, which was why it had taken a moment to place her, but without a doubt it was the same woman; Hannah Carver.

They had met months ago after the divorce. She had just been through a painful separation and, so, they had naturally drifted together for a while. And a short while was *all* it was, he remembered, a shudder running through him as he recalled her sudden and frightening collapse into depression. She had seemed fine at first, a little nervous which was only to be expected. But that night, the night she had tried to persuade him ...

He shivered every time he thought about it, how close they had come...

Driving home now, he remembered the inexplicable coldness in her eyes as she swept her gaze over him at the party. Too harsh a judgement from an old and casual lover, surely? Even despite the manner of their parting; that terrible row when, in desperation he had agreed to her hysterical suggestion that they end their misery together.

The Pact.

She had been talking about it for weeks, crying to him that she couldn't go on, and that she knew he felt the same – she was wrong, of course; he had been over Claire by then, at least over the worst of it, but Hannah wore him down. He had no intention of going through with anything crazy just to be chummy. Not with her or with anyone else.

Then but he had given in for old time's sake. Playing along. Pretending to agree - God, *anything* to get her off his back ...

Except he hadn't gone through with it, of course. He'd only been humouring her until she snapped out of it as he had done. She had screamed and wept, swearing that she would still go ahead with it and, at last, run from the house where the stage had been so carefully set for their final and terrible act.

Forgotten now the vodka and pills. The quill pens, ink and parchment. All the dilly-dally drama of a lethal play with no final act.

She looked good tonight despite her haughty demeanour. She seemed to have got her life back on track, and he had been about to cross to her, maybe to ask if she was glad she had changed her mind, he didn't really know, when Michael arrived and clapped an arm across his shoulders.

"Come and have a beer, Markie," then, under his breath: "*Judith's pissed off, says you're ignoring what's-her-name. You've been warned.*"

Mark obediently went with his brother, aware of the cloying stare of the woman by the window. She stood alone, speaking to no one but watching him like some prosecution witness would eye the defendant at a murder trial.

He tried to ignore her and almost succeeded until dinner, when he noticed that she was not at the table. He found himself looking around for her, intrigued and more than a little spooked.

What was she doing here if she wasn't eating with the other guests? Then he saw her.

One of Judith's hired catering had staff left the door connecting the dining room to the lounge open, and Mark glimpsed Hannah, staring fixedly at him and emanating malevolence. He gave a shocked gasp and stared back down at his plate, his heart hammering, his face on fire with ... with ... shame?

When he looked up again, the door had closed.

He remembered now how tight his chest had become, how panicky he had felt; he had never realised how frightening it was to find yourself suddenly barely able to draw air. That tightness in the chest. The chill iron bands contracting around the heart.

Loud laughter down the table had broken the moment and Mark breathed more easily in the echoes of the familiar sound. After dinner he had followed the other guests back into the lounge with trepidation to fumble his excuses to Judith for his early departure.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Hannah again. She was approaching him. To his surprise she did not wait for Judith to finish speaking. Mark had been astonished at her rudeness. He could hardly make sense of what she had said, and it had barely occurred to him how odd it had been that the flow of conversation had continued uninterrupted without anyone else being stunned into silence by her rudeness.

As Hannah moved away, Judith stared at him as if he were some kind of imbecile and he had made stumbling apologies, using tiredness as an excuse both for his confusion and for leaving early.

He had escaped soon afterwards, and now, heading home he tried to remember Hannah's words, something about some kind of dance...?

A moment later the car gave a shudder and a jerk, hard enough to make his seat belt tighten across his chest.

“Oh, no you don’t,” he muttered. “Not out here.”

He switched off the radio and blipped the throttle, swearing as the engine cut out and the car coasted to an eerily quiet stop, the hissing of the tyres on the wet road the only sound. Mark switched off the lights and sat in angry disbelief, staring out at the darkness through the waterfall of his windscreen. He twisted the key again, not expecting anything but feeling a surge of annoyance anyway, when the engine gave an apologetic coughing sound and fell silent once more.

“Shit!” Mark thumped the steering wheel in frustration. He glanced at the luminous face of his wristwatch, then back along the road the way he had come. He knew a couple who had been at the party who lived in this direction, but they would not be leaving for hours yet.

Irrationally, Mark felt his anger directed towards Hannah, who had been his main reason for leaving the party early and, as he recalled her piercing gaze, he felt his skin prickle. A gust of wind seemed to carry her whispered words.

“Dance with me, Mark. It’s time now...”

He gave a muffled cry and stared around wildly. Then he ran his shaking hands through his hair and forced himself to think.

Was it further to go on, or to go back?

He needed a phone and was sure he had passed a call box a few minutes ago. Pushing open the door against the wind, he steeled himself, turning the collar up on his jacket, and began to walk.

Although the back of his head was soaked in seconds and ached with the freezing rain, at least he was not fighting the wind, and he put his head down and shoved his hands deep into his pockets.

He had been walking for no longer than five minutes when he glimpsed it. Or thought he did.

When he turned his head there was nothing. Then it came again. Out of the corner of an eye – a shape moving along the edge of the woodlands to his left.

The road separating Mark from the first few trees suddenly did not seem wide enough. He hurried on, telling himself there was nothing there. He was behaving like a frightened child. He *felt* like a frightened child. Part of him was ten years old, knowing for certain that there really was a Bogey Man.

Mark began to hum softly under his breath, trying not to glance sideways at the dense black woodland on his left. To his right lay open fields, but who knew what potholes and marshlands waited to snatch hold of his ankle and never let go? He walked faster, forcing himself to think rationally.

Nothing there. He even managed to chuckle. Cackle? “You read too much Stephen King, mate...”

But the harsh laughter died in his throat as it occurred to him what he might have seen; something swift, hidden, out in the dark. Shit ... what if he had caught a glimpse of the tabloid fabled Beast of Exmoor?

There had long been tales of a large, cat-like creature that roamed the moors in England’s wild West Country of Devon and Cornwall, some said it was a puma, others a strange hybrid mixture of lion and panther – either way it was dangerous, as many farmers would testify. The stories had been too numerous, and too similar to ignore, however far-fetched they might seem in the rational light of day.

Mark's pace slowed as he struggled with the idea that he might be alone out here with that animal on the loose. If it could overwhelm a heavy creature like a cow, what could it do to him?

He snapped his head sideways - he had seen it again. A low cry escaped him as he saw that whatever was there (and he no longer doubted that he wasn't alone) was no mythical beast.

For the first time, the shadowy image remained when he looked straight at it, and it was human in shape. Mark kept his eyes fixed on the side of the road and walked faster, until he wanted to run. The shape kept pace with him through the forest. Not like a shadow, cowering at his feet, a slave, but scurrying a few feet away. A free shade. Its own being. Shadow was the blackness where no light fell. A negative. This was a living blackness that needed no dearth of light for its existence to be revealed.

This blackness was free and could stalk and be seen in the dark.

He took his hands from his pockets, knowing that at any moment he would break into a run, but fighting the impulse with every fibre. Once he lost control and began to panic he may run anywhere, even out into the marshlands. The wind gusted hard against his back, and he heard the whisper again, even felt the hiss of it against his left ear.

The whisper was black: *"Join me, Mark... to the dance we'll go."*

He screamed, the sound whipped away instantly, and then he *did* run. Arms pumping at his sides, his jacket torn away behind him, the rain whipping his face and plastering his shirt to his body. His mind tumbled and whirled and finally became mercifully blank, taken over by his body's need to get as far as possible from whatever pursued him. The long, straight road turned into a steep hill but he barely

slowed his pace, his heart screaming for rest, his muscles aching, his breath coming in huge, sucking gasps.

Turning to look at the pacing shade, he felt a shrieking pain in his ankle as it twisted under him and brought him down.

Sobbing aloud he hauled himself to his feet once more, dimly aware of fiery pain in his knees and the palms of his hands where the road had ripped the skin from them. He began to run again before he was fully upright, his legs almost buckling under him again.

“Please, God...please, God...please...”

The top of the hill was in view and, at the sight of it, Mark’s exhaustion threatened to take over, but he pushed himself further on, his thrashing legs tangling until he stumbled and almost fell again. His vision blurred and swam.

At the top, the road swung sharply around to the right, the open marshland on that side taken over by the high stone wall marking the edge of some property or other. That meant a house somewhere near, he thought with almost hysterical relief.

Still he kept running and, as he began to round the corner, he heard a sound that made his heart leap in dizzy joy. A car - a car was finally coming and he was safe.

Too late, he realised that he was running up the centre of the road on a blind corner. As the beam from the car’s headlights swept around the bend they illuminated his stark figure, his own shadow seeming massive as he threw his arms up over his face. Just before his own vision was closed off, he saw the looks of frozen horror on the faces of the car’s occupants, and then he was tossed into the air, his body slamming into the solid rock of the high farm wall.

All was quiet on the road. The rain had stopped and the wind fallen to a light breeze which ruffled the dark hair of the man lying by the side of the narrow verge. He stirred. He lifted his head and stared around. There was no pain, but he guessed that he was in shock after his escape from death, not to mention numb with the cold.

Mark sat up, relief coursing through him. The people from the car were coming towards him, moaning and crying in their fear. He wanted to tell them he was alright, but surely they could see that from the fact that he was sitting up and smiling at them?

He climbed to his feet to show them he was unhurt, but they didn't even glance at him. He turned as the horrified couple walked past him, and felt a blast of coldness as he saw them leaning over the body of a man – a man wearing *his* clothes...who lay in a bloodied and battered heap in the full glare of their headlights.

He felt a light hand on his shoulder. Hannah's dark hand. He turned to face the exquisite shade, drawing its form from the skewed light of headlights and dim moon.

"Dance with me, Mark. Now."

And they left the ribbon of road light to blacken the darkness of the forest where the music was, and the dance could begin.

THE END

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