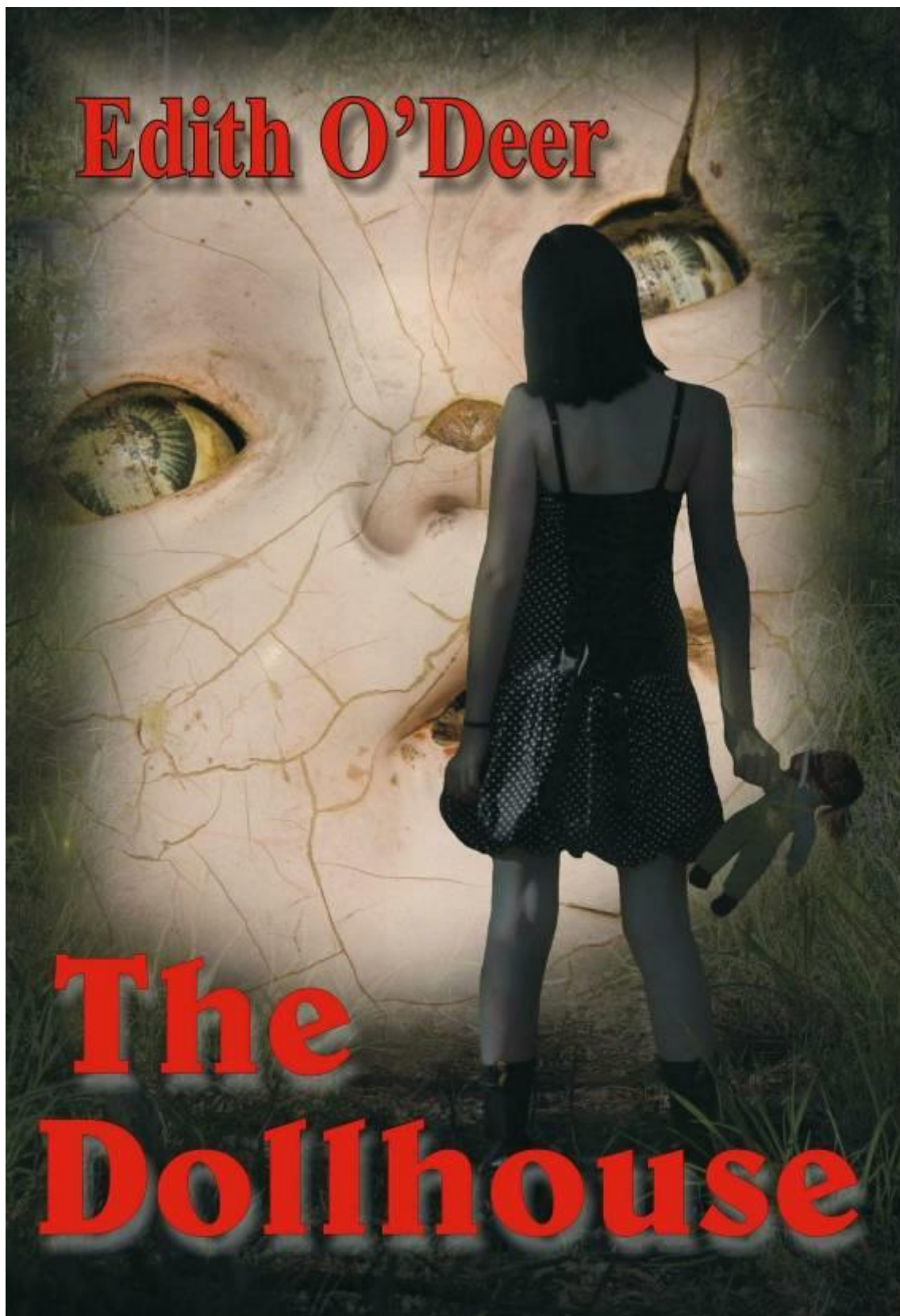


Edith O'Deer

**The
Dollhouse**



The Dollhouse

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The Dollhouse

By
Edith O'Deer

Home is where the heart is...or where the ghosts play.

Anabella felt a chill as she stood next to her husband, Brom, on the sidewalk and looked at the abandoned house for sale. Old and majestic, its rotted boards and crumbling paint told of better days gone by. Virginia creepers wrapped the porch in their clingy, leafy arms, and moss draped from the roof and dangled over a lonely attic window that cried green tears. Even the old tree rooted in the front yard with woody claws bowed in reverence to the hopes and dreams that were lost forever within those decrepit walls.

An ugly start for a new beginning, but a start nonetheless.

“Do you think it’s haunted?” she asked Brom.

He huffed. “There’s no such thing as ghosts.”

She hugged herself and bit her tongue. Better to endure that tiny pain than get into another fight over her belief in the supernatural. Her Mom and Dad were dead, but she had to believe their spirits were still with her, watching over her, or they would seem lost forever.

The realtor, Adam Brocklehurst, stepped out the front door, clipboard in hand, and stood on the porch. “Well?”

“How much?” Brom shouted.

“It’s negotiable.” Adam’s rich baritone voice seemed to float on the breeze. He worked for Divine Real Estate and had called by phone after she’d left her number, hoping to find a proper fixer-upper.

“It looks like a money pit,” Brom mumbled to himself.

Staring at Adam as he leaned his muscular frame on the porch rail, she wanted to tell Brom to lighten up, but instead she said, “It’s something we can do together, Brom. Fix up the

house and give us time—”

“Anabella.” He put his hand on her shoulder. “What are you looking at? Adam? Is that it?”

She winced, “No, of course not,” and brushed Brom’s heavy hand away. “This is what I’ve been talking about.” Her words came out a raspy whisper. “I’m your wife, not a football you can kick around.”

“Then don’t give me a reason.”

“It’s your jealousy that’s the problem.”

“*Do you think it’s haunted?*” he whined. “It’s your stupidity that’s the problem.”

That mocking tone in his voice felt like needles pricking her tender self esteem. “I’m not stupid.”

He inhaled as if trying to take back the word. “I know. I’m sorry.”

“You should be.”

He rubbed her back the way he always did when he wanted her to forgive him. “I’ve been such an ass.”

“I want this house, Brom. It’s the only thing on earth that’s in worse shape than our marriage. If we can fix this house, we can fix us.”

“We will. I promise.” He kissed her forehead then strode toward Adam on the porch. “We’ll take a look at your price.”

Adam smiled. “Splendid.”

She glanced at him and wondered how much work he’d been for his wife, how much heartbreak he was capable of dishing out. That prominent chin and dark hair gave him an air of chivalry the likes of Rhett Butler. Handsome and mysterious.

Her eyes shifted to Brom, his thin form moving toward the house, familiar but cold. He was the man she’d loved all through high school. Her prince charming, he used to treat her like a princess, but after her parents died, the stress of taking over her father’s shoe factory put untold pressures on him. He wasn’t perfect, but he was a good provider.

Brom and Adam conversed on the porch.

Of course, to her, nothing was secondary to having a sound marriage before starting a family. Children deserved two loving parents, not one, and she was determined not to be a single mother, living alone, fighting to survive every day. Job, daycare, diapers, and PTA, no, she

wouldn't do it by herself. A secure and happy relationship with Brom came first. Then children. And this house could be the key to making her future happy family possible.

"I have the papers here," Adam called out to her.

Brom said, "Come on, Anabella, let's get this over with. I have to get back to work."

She hurried down the cracked sidewalk to the porch. Brom held the squeaky screen door, and she followed Adam inside. The floor boards creaked. She inhaled musty air. Earlier, they'd toured the inside, the rooms of weeping wallpaper and dusty windowsills, the kitchen with its sagging cupboards and rusty sink, and the bathroom... she swallowed... that would be the first repair on their to-do list.

Adam handed Brom a paper from the clipboard. "Here is our bottom dollar offer."

Brom skimmed the paper then looked up at Adam. "Okay, what's the catch?"

"No catch."

"The land is worth more than this. What are you trying to pull over on us?"

"Nothing...well...there *is* something you should know." Adam glanced at her. The glint in his dark eyes made her cheeks warm, and she couldn't hold his gaze.

Brom waved the paper impatiently. "You have my attention, Mr. Brocklehurst."

He cleared his throat. "You know, I'm not supposed to say, company policy, but you seem like a sensible couple." Adam lowered his voice and leaned towards Brom like he was about to reveal the greatest secret of all time. "There have been some rumors the townsfolk whisper about this house. Now, I'm not one to spread gossip, and you might hear this nonsense soon enough—"

"Get to the point, will you?"

"All right." He took a breath. "The house is said to be haunted."

"Not you too?" Brom hissed. "Ghosts?"

"Nothing comes from nothing. Like rumors. There's not a pittance of truth to them. This is simply an old house with squeaky doors and branches that scrape the roof in the wind. But townsfolk will tell you different. Ignore their wild imaginations and groundless gossip about the ghost that's supposed to live here."

Brom's eyes darkened with annoyance.

Before he could berate the town for their beliefs, Anabella jumped in. "He doesn't believe in ghosts."

Adam's smile lit up his face. "But the question is, miss, do *you* believe in ghosts?"

Her eyes were drawn to the handsome realtor's leer like moths to a porch light. Her heartbeat fluttered, and by the way his sleek brows arched, she had a hunch he was well aware of his effect on her. "Me? Believe in ghosts?"

Brom turned hard eyes to her as if her answer hung from the rafters by a noose.

Her Mom and Dad were spirits she held dear to her on faith alone, and this old house certainly could be a haunt for a ghost, but she didn't want Brom to call her stupid again and start another fight. "Ghosts?" She relented. "No, of course not."

Adam handed Brom a pen. "Then we don't have a catch, do we?"

He signed the paper with victorious strokes and handed it to Anabella. "Sign on that line right there."

She hovered the pen tip over the line, but curiosity stilled her hand. She looked up at Adam. "Exactly what do they say about the ghost in this house?"

"Just sign the damn thing," Brom said.

"I will. I just want to know. Mr. Brocklehurst, please indulge me."

Adam stiffened. "I can't. If you back out of the deal because I told you a rumor, my boss will fire me for sure."

Anabella signed the paper. "There, the deal is done. Now you can tell me the rumor."

Brom sighed loudly, his dissatisfaction with her as evident as the musty smell in the air. A hot flash of irritation shot through her chest, but she remained firm. "Well, Mr. Brocklehurst?"

He clipped the paper to his clipboard, glanced back and forth between her and Brom as if weighing the consequences of what he might say. Brom's burning glare had done nothing to hide his disdain for ghost stories. Adam may not have wanted to witness a quarrel between them. "I don't know..."

"Go ahead and tell her," Brom said, "or she'll never shut up about it."

"Very well then." Adam tucked the clipboard under his arm. "It's said there's a restless ghost living here, unable to leave the house. In life, he was a failure, and in death he must pay for those failures."

"What failures?" she asked.

"They say his daughter was killed because he failed to protect her."

"How sad."

“It’s just a stupid story,” Brom spat.

She looked at Adam. The sadness in his once sparkling eyes told her that he too believed there was more to this story than rumor alone.

Moving day. Boxes on top of boxes. Boxes in every room. Burly movers had lugged in the furniture from their old apartment in town. Meanwhile, Anabella had mopped and dusted and cleaned dirty walls and windows, which she’d left open to rid the rooms of their musty smells...and maybe a ghost if there was any truth to the old rumors.

She unpacked her clothes and hung them in the closet. In the chest of drawers she stacked her socks, panties, bras, and negligees. Brom helped her put new sheets on the bed and hang her yellow curtains, the ones with the tiny white roses. The potted palm she’d gotten from her father for her sixteenth birthday went in a corner.

Sitting on the bed to catch a breath, she glanced around, a sense of accomplishment blooming in her heart like spring tulips. The place started to look like a home. Smelled like home too. Brom had gone to the kitchen and made the first pot of coffee.

Drawn by the aroma, she rushed down the rickety stairs to join him for a cup. Settled in a chair on the back deck, she looked out over the weed-infested garden and imagined corn stalks and carrot fronds thriving, and flower blossoms growing along the little stream that cut a diagonal path through the backyard. Dragonflies flittered above the water like little helicopters afraid to land.

Brom sat beside her. “This backyard is a mess. I’ll hire a gardener—”

“Please don’t, Brom.” She inhaled the coffee vapors before taking a sip. “We should replant it ourselves. It’ll be fun.”

He slanted a brow in her direction. “Fine for you, but I don’t have time to play in the dirt. I’ve got a factory to run.”

“Suit yourself.” She swallowed coffee and looked back to the garden tangle. He could be so difficult. Why she even bothered—

Something afloat in the stream caught her attention. An odd shape, almost human, seemed stuck in an eddy that swirled the flesh colored object into the reeds then dipped it around to a boulder, and then the little body was sucked under the surface momentarily, only to pop up

again and begin the journey anew.

Terror ripped through her heart at the same instant she realized what it was. A baby... “Brom!” She jumped out of the chair, dropping the coffee cup to shatter on the deck. “Oh my God.”

“Anabella, what the hell?”

She ran through the overgrown lawn, her eyes focused on the spot in the water where she’d last seen the child. Who was it? Whose baby had drowned? What horror had she discovered? She plowed through reeds and threw herself into the water. Her chest tightened from the cold.

The body bobbed up, swirled around.

Her hands hit the creek bottom; the water was shallow enough to walk in. She stumbled forward, her hand reaching for a tiny arm, her fingers grabbing it before it went under. “I’ve got you, baby, I’ve got you.”

As she yanked the child from the water, she turned over to a sitting position and cradled the baby to her chest. The body felt cold and lifeless. She was too late. Tears stung her eyes. “Brom!”

“What the hell are you doing, Ana?” He stood on the bank, hands on his hips, scorn like daggers flying from his eyes.

“Call 911,” she screamed.

He started laughing, not just a belly laugh, but a bend over-at-the-waist kind of laugh. “You should see yourself...” He couldn’t even talk. “Anabella, are you crazy?”

“Brom...the baby...” She held it away from her chest and looked into its dead plastic eyes. Green algae had grown on the lips and nostrils, in its naked navel, and between the fingers and toes. Its skin was cracked like sun-baked mud. The doll had been in the water a long time.

She looked up at Brom. “But it looked so real.”

“And you say you’re not stupid? I rest my case.”

She felt inch-worm small. The deck, the broken cup, the mess she’d made for nothing. God she was such a fool. Head down, she dragged herself from the stream, along with the doll.

Brom snatched it from her hand and popped its plastic head off its plastic body. “Call 911,” he squeaked out, mocking her. Then he dumped the doll upside down. Water poured out its neck. “Call 911.”

“I told you I thought it was real.”

“Well it’s not real, not any more real than that ghost story Adam’s got you all freaked out about.”

“I’m sorry.” What else could she say?

He dropped the naked doll and the severed head in the grass and turned back toward the deck.

She stood there, sopping wet, but relieved in a way. The humiliation she’d suffered on the blade of Brom’s tongue was better than finding a dead child.

After she swept up the broken cup and mopped up the spilled coffee, she retook her seat in the chair, shivering in her wet clothes. Brom stared in his cup, not a look, not a word from him. Silence was the worst criticism. She glanced at the doll lying on the lawn. It looked like the victim of a gruesome murder, but she couldn’t help but wonder where it had come from.

Her gaze followed the stream that flowed down from the neighbor’s house nearly a quarter mile away. Maybe a little girl lived there who had lost her doll. Maybe it fell in the stream and the water carried it to the garden. There was one way to find out. Ask.

“Brom.”

“What?”

“Tomorrow, I’m going to go meet our neighbors.”

That night Anabella went to bed before Brom. In the darkness of her strange new bedroom, she lay between the crisp new sheets and worried over the doll lying outside in the backyard, broken and alone. What stories that doll could tell of its journey from the arms of an admiring little girl to the cold eddy in the stream behind the old house. She decided to take the doll with her tomorrow, to the neighbor’s house upstream, maybe back to the little girl who’d lost it. Head intact, of course. Her heart felt warm for the happy reunion she imagined, until Brom walked in.

She didn’t turn toward him, just listened to him undress, felt him crawl in and turn his back to her. Like he always did. Tired. In a hurry to get to sleep. Without a “good night” or an “I’ve got a busy day tomorrow.” Just more silence. She couldn’t remember the last time he had cuddled her, not to mention made love to her. And the way things had gone since they’d

purchased this house, mending their marriage didn't seem any more possible than her walking on the moon.

She blinked away a tear.

The silence was killing her, crushing her heart, even his shallow breathing seemed to be laughing at her. And the laughing got louder, but not that kind of laugh Brom had laughed earlier, more a joyful laugh. The laughter of children playing.

She shook her head in an effort to make the sound go away. But it didn't. It got louder still, like children on a playground, giggling, squealing, laughing and laughing.

Maybe Brom was right. She was going crazy.

Stop!

She jammed the pillow over her head. And it stopped. If it wasn't coming from inside her brain, then where...? She lifted the pillow. Laughter again. Echoing. From somewhere inside the house. Goosebumps skittered up her arms. "Brom."

"Go to sleep," he muttered.

"Do you hear that?"

He turned onto his back and huffed with annoyance. "Hear what?"

"Children laughing."

"Huh?"

"Listen."

"I don't hear anything. You're dreaming."

"I'm wide awake, Brom. And I know what I hear."

"I swear, Anabella, you're losing it." He rolled over.

He didn't hear it? Just her? There had to be an explanation. He'd left the television on, of course, but...but what children's show would be on at this time of night? She tried to shut out the laughter but couldn't ignore it a second longer. Brom may not have approved, but she had to find out where the sounds were coming from.

She slipped out of bed. A tiny moonbeam seeped in through a chink in the curtains and gave her enough light to see by. That way she didn't have to turn on a lamp and disturb Brom further.

Tiptoeing out the bedroom, she closed the door behind her as softly as she could, but the click of the latch sounded like a clap of thunder. She tensed, expecting Brom to tell her to get

back in bed. He didn't.

The childish laughter rolled up the stairs, tinny and full of joy, so real she could almost touch it.

Taking each rickety step with care, she made her way down to the living room, where the laughter seemed closer. Then following the sounds, she slinked into the kitchen. Louder still. And children sang out a name as they played: *Rosalie, Rosalie, Rosalie*, so faint it could've been the whispering of the wind.

At the closed basement door, she stopped. The children were down there, in the dark, playing? How was that possible? Whose children?

She grasped the cold door handle. Her heart beat frantically, like it was trying to escape her ribcage.

Rosalie, Rosalie, Rosalie.

Holding her breath, she opened the door to the dark maw of the cellar. The laughing stopped. They'd heard her coming, and they knew they weren't supposed to be playing down there in the middle of the night. Now they were busted. She flicked the light switch, but the lights didn't come on.

"I know you're down there," she said in a motherly kind of way, like *I know you snuck a cookie* or *I know you're hiding under that blanket*. She didn't want to appear angry and frighten them.

But she got no response.

"I heard you laughing, so come up here."

Nothing.

"All right. Have it your way. I'm coming down." She flicked the light switch again and again. "Why are you playing in the dark?"

"Because I have to fix the lights," Brom said from behind her.

She damn near fell down the stairs, caught the handrail just in time. Her nerves sputtered on overload. "Damnit, Brom. You scared the bejezes out of me."

"Here, try this." He flicked on a flashlight. "It's a mess down there, so don't trip and break your neck."

She took the flashlight from him, so amazed she could hardly swallow. "You heard them, the children, laughing?"

“No. I heard you shouting. Anabella, you’re beginning to bug the hell out of me, so go, take the flashlight and see for yourself. There’s nobody down there.”

She clutched the flashlight like a lifeline. “Come with me.”

“I’m going back to bed.” He turned away, the floorboards creaking as he left.

She should run after him, hide under the blanket, make him hold her and protect her, but that would be too much like giving in, like admitting she was wrong, that she hadn’t heard anything. That he was right. No. She had to see this thing through to the end.

Stealing her resolve, she aimed the flashlight beam down the dark stairwell. Wooden steps. A few boxes. How scary could it be down there? She descended the stairs. Each step creaked under her weight. Cold air gripped her feet, her ankles then her knees, like the groping fingers of the dead. She should have taken the time to put on her robe and slippers.

At the bottom, she inhaled dank and dusty air. She swept the beam sided to side. All manner of junk darted through the round spot of light, old chairs and mattresses, shovels and axes, rows and rows of clothes hanging from the rafters, and more boxes. It seemed as if the last homeowners had fled, leaving everything they owned behind.

In fact, so much junk had been packed down there that children would have had no room to play: no room to jump rope or skip hopscotch or go ring-around-the-rosy.

But she’d heard them. Now they were playing hide and seek. That was it. She nosed around here and there. No sign of any children. The light beam revealed another door, probably a storage room, yes, that was where they were hiding.

She stalked to the door, confident in her detective abilities, slid the slide lock out of its metal loop, and flung the door open.

“A-ha.”

The light beam stabbed the room and revealed tiny bodies lying every which way on the concrete floor. Dolls she could tell, immediately this time.

“Oh, my God.” Her knees wobbled like they might fail her.

The light danced over dozens of dolls, tossed about as if by a storm, every size and kind imaginable: baby dolls and rag dolls, china dolls and plastic dolls, Chatty Cathy and Shirley Temple, and dolls she’d never seen before, all soiled and badly in need of tender loving care.

“Where did you guys come from?” she whispered.

But surely the laughter hadn’t come from these dolls. Someone had played a joke on her.

She spun around, expecting to see the children gathered in a semicircle behind her, expecting the laughter to start up again, this time the children laughing at her for being so foolish. But the light revealed nothing but junk.

She felt a thump in her ears, like a change in air pressure. With chiseled teeth, dankness ate in through the fabric of her nightgown. She shivered, rotated the light back into the storage room. This time the beam reflected off a haze that floated in the air, like a wisp of smoke that recoiled as if the light had burned it.

In that slip second, the smoke appeared to form a face, the innocent face of a little girl with blond strands of hair hanging in front of her vacant eyes, and then the smoke was gone. Vanished.

Anabella staggered backward. The door slammed shut, as if by a gust of wind. Her heart stopped beating under the weight of a heavy boot trying to crush it. She gasped, turned, stumbled, tripped. The light beam drew ragged zigzags around the cellar as she ran for the steps.

“Brom!”

Clawing her way up, she dropped the flashlight. The higher she went, the warmer the air felt, until finally she burst into the kitchen, swung the basement door closed, and propped her back against it, breathing hard, every breath of air biting its way down her throat.

And the laughter started again. She pressed her hands to her ears, but this time the laughing didn’t stop. It got louder and more mocking.

“Brom.”

She staggered across the kitchen, head in her hands.

Rosalie, Rosalie, Rosalie.

Making the rickety stairs, she plowed up to the bedroom. The door was closed. Hands shaking, she worked the old doorknob and pushed in, the laughter chasing her like a wolf running down a lamb. She clambered onto the bed, clawed over Brom, dug under the sheets, trembling like a child after a bad dream.

But this wasn’t a dream. This was real.

She cuddled up to Brom. “Make it stop. Make it stop.”

He rolled away from her. “Make what stop?”

“The laughing. And *Rosalie, Rosalie, Rosalie*. It’s the dolls. It’s got to be the dolls.”

“That’s it.” He threw himself out of bed. “I’m sleeping on the couch.”

“Don’t leave me.”

“One of us has to work tomorrow.” He slammed the bedroom door.

She curled in a ball and cried. “Goddamnit, Brom,” she muttered through her tears. “Why won’t you believe me?”

She awoke to sunlight beaming in through her yellow curtains, bright and oblivious to the terrors of the previous night. The laughter had stopped sometime before dawn. She’d cried herself to sleep. Now Brom moved around the bedroom, getting dressed. Wrinkles between his eyebrows revealed his bad mood.

“Brom.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

She sat up. “Something happened in this house, and those dolls downstairs have something to do with it.”

“The problem is fixed. I threw the dolls away, in the trashcan out back where they belong. They’re gone, so you don’t have to get all freaked out again.”

“I’m gonna call Adam and ask him about it.”

“About what?” Brom glanced at her while he knotted his tie. “The ghost story? The rumors? I don’t want you talking to him.”

“He might be able to help us.”

“Help us, hell. He’s the one who started you thinking about ghosts in the house.”

“A ghost. A father whose daughter had died.” She swallowed her next words, *the daughter she’d seen in the smoke*. “He didn’t say anything about the dolls.”

He stormed out of the bedroom.

She jumped out of bed and rushed after him. “The dolls—”

Brom waved her off.

She trounced down the steps, trying to catch up. “Adam must know something about them.”

Brom hustled into the kitchen, already pouring a cup of coffee by the time she got there.

“And he should know about the laughter and who is...or who was Rosalie?”

“It’s all in your head, Anabella. There was no laughter.”

“Just because you can’t hear it, doesn’t mean it’s not real.”

Brom rolled his eyes. “You just can’t give it a rest, can you?” He sipped his coffee then sighed. “I’m not in a mood for your ghost stories today, Bella. I hardly got a wink on that couch, and I have a full day of work ahead of me.” He slammed down his cup. “And where’s my lunch?”

“Lunch, right, I’m sorry.” She stepped to the fridge, grabbed mayo and sliced ham, moved to the counter and opened the bread, took out two slices. “We need to know more about this house.”

“You need to know. I’m good with it.”

She assembled the sandwich.

“Where’s the cheese?” he asked. “You know I like cheese on my sandwich.”

“Cheese, okay.” She opened the sandwich and rushed back to the fridge, found the cheese. “I’m still calling Adam.”

“That’s what this is about, isn’t it, an excuse for you to talk to Adam? I saw the way you looked at him.”

She cut a slice of cheese, wishing it was Brom’s throat. “This has nothing to do with him.”

“It doesn’t have anything to do with dolls either.”

“All right.” She slapped the lid on the sandwich. “I won’t call him.”

“That’s my girl.” He dumped the dregs of his coffee in the sink.

She sacked his sandwich, dropped in two cookies and an apple.

He stepped up behind her.

She turned around, sack lunch in hand. “All set.”

With a sly grin on his face, he slipped his arms around her and pulled her into his chest. “Thanks for lunch.” The words came out almost a whisper that shouted *I win*.

He always got moody-sweet right after he got his way. As long as Anabella did as she was told and kept her emotions in check, he was every woman’s dream lover. Well, not to her, but she played along to keep the peace.

“You’re welcome.”

He pecked her cheek. Lately, the man didn’t have a romantic bone in his body. How was this house ever going to fix that?

He took the sack from her dangling hand, and as soon as his back was turned, she wiped her cheek on the sleeve of her nightgown.

“Have a nice day,” he said.

“You too, honey.”

The front door shut.

She rushed to the phone to call Adam. The cordless unit sat on a white doily on a wooden stand in the living room.

“Where is that number?”

Brom hadn’t left Adam’s business card by the phone. She opened the drawer in the stand, found the sales contract from Divine Real Estate, the one they had signed. The company would have his number. She picked up the handset and tapped the dial button, got the tone. A knock at the door stopped her from dialing. Who could it be this early? Of course, Brom had forgotten his keys and locked himself out.

And he had called her stupid.

More knocking.

She hung up, “I’m coming,” and rushed to open the door.

It wasn’t Brom. It was Adam. Her chest filled with hot dread. Brom had to have seen him. She glanced over Adam’s shoulder. Brom’s car drove out of view. How could they have missed each other? And where was Adam’s car?

“Well?” he said, his voice smooth as Beethoven. “Are you going to ask me in?”

“Oh, yes, of course.” She stepped aside. “I was just going to call you.”

He inched past her through the doorway.

She caught his scent, an odd cologne, musky and earthy, almost animalistic, and her senses came alive with tingling sensations up and down her arms. He wore an expensive suit, tie knotted perfectly, polished shoes, like he was on his way to the office. And she wore only her nightgown. She couldn’t have felt more naked.

“I just stopped by to see how you’re getting along.”

“Getting along? Ah, fine. Fine...” She lied, then on second thought, “No, no, not really.” Her tongue seemed to tangle in his presence.

“I like what you’ve done to the place.” He made himself at home on the living room couch. “Come, sit next to me. What seems to be the problem?”

“Mr. Brocklehurst—”

“Adam, please.”

“Adam. I should go in and get properly dressed.”

“You’re fine.” He patted the couch cushion.

She sat, but not next to him, though she wanted to sit in his lap and kiss his neck, his lips, untie his tie... She stopped. What was she doing? Why was she thinking lewd thoughts about him? It seemed as if his aura had taken control of her emotions, her desires, but then again she’d been deprived for so long—

“Earth to Anabella,” he said, his tone playful.

“Oh, sorry. Ah...”

“Why were you going to call me?”

Why? Oh yeah... “You’d mentioned a little girl who died.”

“I did?”

“A man’s daughter.”

“Ah, that story.”

“What do you know about the dolls?”

He smiled. “I’m looking at one.”

Her cheeks flushed warm. How long had it been since anyone had complimented her...?

“No. I’m serious. Did they belong to the little girl? I found them in a storeroom downstairs.”

“Storeroom?”

“You’ve never been down there?”

“Why would I?”

Macho man was probably afraid of the dark. “One doll was floating in the stream.” She stood, “Come see,” and offered him her hand. His touch was solid ice but warmed so quickly she thought she’d been mistaken. He rose from the couch, effortlessly, with the grace of a prince, and she led him through the kitchen to the back window above the sink. “See.” But the beheaded doll wasn’t lying on the lawn where they’d left it. “Oh. Brom must’ve thrown it away too.”

No. There it was, floating in the stream like before, round and round, going under and bobbing back up, the head clearly reattached. Why would Brom throw it back in the water?

She glanced at Adam, hoping he wouldn’t notice the anger tightening her face. “I don’t understand?” Why was Brom messing with her head? “Wait here.” She dashed outside to the

trashcan and ripped off the lid. Fear stomped on her chest. “Empty?” He’d said he’d thrown the dolls away.

“Anabella,” Adam called out from the back door. “What’s wrong?”

Where were the dolls? She ran back inside, past Adam, to the basement door, slung it open, and dashed down the dark steps to the storeroom. Dread spidered up her spine. She stopped, slapped a hand over her thrashing heart. The slide lock was unlocked. “Please don’t be in here.” Grabbing the doorknob, she gritted her teeth and pulled. Even in the dank darkness she saw them, dozens of dolls splayed out in gruesome positions. “The son of a bitch lied.”

“Anabella,” Adam called out from the basement door. “Perhaps I’ve come at a bad time.”

“I’ll kill him.” She stormed up the steps. “I bet he lied about not hearing the laughter too.”

Adam ducked out of her way. “Laughter?”

Brom had a lot of explaining to do. He’d set her up to be the fool. Probably had a recording, a speaker downstairs, a switch somewhere by the bed. What was he trying to prove? That she was stupid? That she was crazy? Did he have a good laugh at her expense? She raced toward the phone, to call him at work, to give the bastard hell—

She stopped cold at the sight of a doll set by the phone, back to the wall, dripping wet, eyes and lips stained green with algae and its skin a maze of cracks. Terror stabbed her chest deep as a knife blade.

“No!”

She spun around to Adam. “You!”

He stood there looking stupid, shoulders hunched up. “What?”

“You put that doll there while I was downstairs.”

“What doll?”

“That one.” She pointed to the phone stand, her sideways glance suddenly frozen to the empty spot where the doll had been sitting, dripping. It was gone.

She staggered backward, lightheaded. This wasn’t happening. Her knees gave out. Strong arms caught her before she hit the floor.

“Adam,” she breathed.

“I’ve got you.” He gathered her in close, hugged her to his chest like a long lost lover. His primal scent soothed her.

“Help me.”

“Over here.” He guided her to the couch. “Sit.” And he sat next to her, real close so she could rest her head on his shoulder. He stroked her hair. “Now what’s going on?”

She snuggled in close and inhaled him. Whether he believed her or not didn’t matter. At least he comforted her, didn’t belittle her but truly seemed to care. “Who was Rosalie?”

She sensed him stiffen.

“You know about Rosalie?” he choked out.

“Last night I heard children laughing. I came down stairs. They were whispering *Rosalie, Rosalie, Rosalie*. I heard them in the basement, but when I opened the door, they stopped, and I thought they hid somewhere. When I looked in the storeroom, there they were.”

“Children?”

“No. Dolls. Who was Rosalie?”

He cleared his throat. “As the story goes, she’s the little girl who died.”

“I knew it.” Anabella sat up, hand on his chest for support. “Rosalie died in this house, didn’t she?”

“Why would you think that?”

“Because...” She hesitated to say the words that even to her sounded unbelievable. If he believed them, the guy was a saint. “Because I saw her.”

“You saw a ghost?”

“A man’s not haunting this house. It’s a little girl and her dolls.”

“You poor woman.” He drew her in and hugged her. Warm. Tender. “You must’ve been terrified.”

She hadn’t been treated so kindly in a long time. “You believe me?” Her eyes met his, and she knew he did. This close to him, butterflies fluttered in her stomach. His lips, just inches from hers, tempted her to kiss him. Taste him. Deep and longing. She couldn’t bring herself to make the first move. But why didn’t he? She would let him kiss her. All he had to do was try.

The phone rang. She flinched, breaking the spell, the promise of what might have happened between them.

Ring.

“Are you going to answer that?” he asked.

“I would if you’d let go of me.”

“Oh. Sorry.” He leaned back, putting some distance between them.

Ring.

She leaned over to grab the phone, but stopped short. The doily was wet, sopping, and a puddle had formed on the table top, and water had dripped on the hardwood floor.

Ring.

She swallowed hard. The doll had been there. Sure as hell. She jumped off the couch like it was on fire. Where had the doll gone? Behind the couch? She looked. No. Under the couch? She dropped to her knees and peered underneath it. No.

Ring.

What the hell was going on?

“Anabella?” Adam got to his feet. “Are you all right?”

“The doll was right here. I didn’t imagine it—”

Ring.

She sprinted to the back window in the kitchen, looked out. There it was, the doll, lying on the lawn, beheaded, exactly the way she had left it last night. She couldn’t have imagined it floating in the stream earlier. But she had, she’d swear to it in court. Her stomach felt strangled with bitter confusion.

The phone stopped ringing.

It was probably Brom calling to check on her. She’d call him back, as soon as she finished staring at the doll, waiting for it to move. Its head lay face down. A foot away, the body lay on its back. Naked. Morbid. Why wouldn’t it move?

“Move, damnit, move.”

“Anabella,” Adam said.

She stepped back from the window, still staring out.

“I answered the phone for you.”

She almost didn’t hear him. Almost didn’t care. Almost. He had answered the phone? She twisted around, fast, as if a ghost had tapped her on the shoulder, the same kind of fear clawing up her throat. “Why did you do that?”

Adam stood in the kitchen doorway, phone in hand. “You seemed a little preoccupied.”

“Who is it?”

“Brom.” He held the handset out to her.

“Oh no!” She ran to take the phone, slammed it to her ear so hard she saw stars. “Brom?”
Heavy breathing. Angry breathing.

“Brom, please.”

“What’s he doing there?” Brom growled.

“He just stopped by. You’ve got to come home.”

“I can’t leave. I’ve got work to do.”

“The dolls, you said you threw them away.”

“I did. In the trashcan out back.”

“No. They’re in the storeroom.”

He made a hissing sound. “Then you put them there.”

“I didn’t.”

“You’re just trying to change the subject. I told you I didn’t want you talking to Adam.”

“This isn’t about him.”

Adam backed away. “I better go.”

“No wait. Don’t go.” She didn’t want to be alone with the dolls.

“He better get the hell out of my house.” Brom hung up.

And she didn’t want to be alone when Brom came home.

Clutching the handset, she glanced out the window. The doll lay on the lawn, still as death. She turned back to Adam. He wasn’t there. “Adam?” She rushed to the living room. He wasn’t there either. “Adam?” A glance out the window told her he wasn’t walking down the sidewalk. He must’ve been running, as if his life depended on a quick getaway. No wonder, the craziness going on in this house, and Brom being all pissed off that he had come around to visit.

She wouldn’t blame Adam if he never came back.

Anabella buttoned her jeans while Adam’s memory played in her mind, how close she’d come to a kiss, how much she wanted him to kiss her... she pulled on a pullover...but like an encroaching storm, the disappearing doll edged into her fantasies of what might have been. Crazy as it would sound to Brom, the haunting in this house had to have an explanation, logical or otherwise—she stabbed her feet into her sandals—and she was more determined than ever to figure out what was behind the ghost story. The neighbor upstream might know. She would walk

the short distance and see if the doll belonged to a child living there.

Surely Brom wouldn't object to her being neighborly.

She hurried outside to where the broken doll lay in the grass. A sad sight, but frightening at the same time. With tentative fingers, she picked up the severed head. Its plastic eyes stared right through her, gave her a chill on the back of her neck. She retrieved the body. It seemed heavy, sloshy. She turned it upside down. Water spilled out the neck.

She dropped both body parts, stagger-stepped backward, her heart flying up to her throat. Yesterday, Brom had dumped the water out. She'd seen him, clear as day. That meant the doll *had* been in the stream again, this morning, like she'd seen it earlier. How...? Who was moving it...?

The little girl's ghost, Rosalie, yes... she was a trickster, all right. Not the doll.

Turning a full circle, Anabella scanned the back deck, the scruffy lawn, the bushes and tangles, looking for any sign of the smoky ghost girl.

"Rosalie. Where are you?"

Nothing. Not a whisper, not a breeze, no sign of her anywhere.

"Why are you haunting me?"

Just the trickle of the stream.

Now she felt odd, even a little stupid, trying to talk to a ghost. If Brom knew, he would have her committed, for sure.

She snatched the doll parts up off the ground and popped the plastic head into the plastic body, aligned everything proper, and then headed for the neighbor's house.

Summer sunlight speckled the dirt path that led up the tree-lined street. She dodged a branch. The area between her house and the neighbor's stood choked with bushes and scrawny trees. She carried the doll by one arm. Swinging it. As she approached the next clearing, the house came into view: fitted stone walls, manicured lawn, flowers blooming below paned windows. It must've been trash day; two lidded trashcans stood out front waiting to be picked up.

She climbed three steps to the concrete porch. No doorbell, so she used the lion-headed knocker. Two times. Creaking boards told her someone was coming to the door. It opened, revealing a middle-aged woman with hard eyes, her graying hair tied back in an old-fashioned bun. "If you're selling something, I don't want any."

Anabella held the doll up in front of her with both hands, wishing she could hide behind

it. "I was just wondering, ma'am, my husband and I, we moved in next door, and we found this doll in our backyard stream."

"You did, did you? Well, I have no use for a doll."

"No, we were hoping it belonged to you, I mean, a child living here, maybe."

"Go away." She slammed the door.

Anabella blinked. That went well. She turned back toward the street, and passing the trashcans, she stopped long enough to lift a lid and toss the doll in, though she had to crush it down to get the lid back on.

"Sorry, Rosalie, but this doll's got to go. It's caused me enough trouble already."

The corner store caught her eye, not much more than a shack plastered with beer posters and a *Fishing Tackle* sign. A soda would be nice. She crossed the street. A little bell tinkled as she entered. The woman behind the counter nodded hello.

Anabella smiled, found the cooler, and grabbed a Coke. At the register, she set down the bottle.

"Two dollars," the woman said. "You're not from around here, are you?" The register dinged open.

"Yes." Anabella pulled two bucks from her jeans pocket. "We bought the old house down the street."

The woman's brows scrunched up. "The old Renett place?" She took the money and slipped it in the cash drawer.

"I guess." They hadn't asked Adam about past owners. "What do you know about the house?"

"Plenty." She closed the drawer. "Found the girl down there, they did."

"Girl?"

"Come up missing one day." The woman produced a bottle opener. "Folks looked everywhere, couldn't find her. Not for two years, not 'til the Renetts bought the place and found her bones and all them dolls in the cellar."

Anabella held her breath. She was right. Rosalie *had* died in that house. Adam must've known and thought they wouldn't buy it if he had told them the whole story—

"Look at me," the woman said and popped the top off the Coke bottle. "I'm scaring the tar out of you."

Anabella hadn't realized her mouth was hanging open. She clamped her teeth together, hard, one question buzzing in her head like a swarm. "How did she die?"

"Starved."

"Oh." How awful.

"But that ain't all. Shortly after the cops removed the body, her brothers, two of them, older than her by a couple a three years, were found drowned in the stream behind the house."

Anabella recalled the cold water, but it wasn't deep enough to drown in. "Couldn't they swim?"

"Good swimmers, athletes too. Daddy's boys. Bullied their little sister to no end. Cops say they found one of her dolls floating in the water besides the boys' bodies, all three facedown."

The doll. Same doll? Suddenly Anabella wasn't thirsty for the Coke, though her mouth dried up like dead flesh. "What were the boys doing back there by the stream? Did they live there...before?"

"Nah, they lived in the house right across the street."

"The crabby lady's house."

"Mrs. Dowell. Tragic woman. They say misery comes in threes, well, her daughter turned up dead, her boys drowned, and her husband disappeared. Some say he offed himself."

"Suicide?"

"To be with his kids, if you believe in that life after death stuff."

"No." She clutched the Coke bottle. "Not that so much, but there's a spiritual existence, like I believe my parents are still with me, angels on my shoulder."

"Then you oughta fit right in that house fine. They say it's haunted, you know, or didn't them realtor folks tell you that part before you bought it?"

They had. Adam anyway, but he hadn't told her the entire story. Why? "I heard it was just a rumor going around about a man haunting the house. The father of a little girl who died."

The woman pinched her lips together, then: "I haven't heard that one."

But Adam had heard it from someone. Townsfolk, he'd said. Had he concocted his own version? She couldn't come right out say she'd seen the ghost of Rosalie, that Rosalie was haunting the house...not unless the woman said it first. That would be confirmation, in a way, so when she told Brom about the ghost girl she'd seen, he wouldn't think she'd made it up on her

own.

“Then what rumor have you heard, ma’am?”

“I told you. It’s a haunted house.”

Anabella started to doubt the woman’s sanity. “So the little girl, the boys, the dad, rumors, right? That’s all they are, characters in a ghost story about the house.”

“It’s what happened. For real.”

All right. Rosalie died in the cellar. How did she get there? And with all her dolls? And if the doll from the stream belonged to Mrs. Dowell’s daughter, why didn’t she say so?

The doll was the key, and she’d just thrown it away. Swigging Coke, she swallowed the fizz. “I’ve got to go.” She set the bottle on the counter, “Thanks,” and turned for the door.

“I hope you’re not gonna move out on account of my big mouth. You seem like a nice girl.”

No, she wouldn’t move. That was her house now, the home of her future family, but she’d have to tell Brom what happened in the cellar. He was going to have a fit, all right, but she’d make him believe her, even if she had to sleep with that damn doll.

She burst out the door just as a trash truck lumbered up to the house across the street. Air brakes hissed. “Wait,” she shouted to the driver. Men hanging on the back looked at her stupidly. She ran around the truck to the trashcan and yanked off the lid.

The doll was gone. Her heart dropped to her stomach. She looked up at the house, the closed door, the closed curtains, and gritted her teeth. Mrs. Dowell must’ve seen her stuff the doll in her trashcan and retrieved it.

“You all right, lady?” the trash man asked from behind her.

She slammed the lid back down. “Peachy.”

That evening, Anabella sat on the couch working a crossword puzzle. She remembered the smell of Adam’s tart cologne, the way she felt in his embrace, and it seemed as if his presence lingered all around her.

Brom’s car drove up in the driveway, killing Adam’s hold on her libido. The door slammed, footsteps thumped on the porch, and then the front door screamed open. He blew in like a hurricane, tossed his keys on the end table. No: *honey, I’m home*. No: *how was your day?*

Just good old Brom, angry as ever; he probably steamed all day over Adam's unannounced visit.

She set her crossword aside and stood, prepared to walk on eggshells all night. "I have to talk to you."

"All I want to hear out of you is supper is ready." He stormed through the kitchen and thundered down the steps to the basement.

The dolls, he probably didn't believe her, that they were still in the storeroom after he said he'd thrown them away. She stirred stew on the stove.

Brom stomped back up the stairs, a rag doll in hand. "How stupid do you think I am?"

She didn't look at him, still stirring. "I'm the stupid one around here, remember?"

"You took those dolls out of the trash and put them back downstairs." He shook the rag doll at her. "I'm going to make you eat this damn thing."

She pivoted to him, "Don't you dare touch me," and held the spoon up like it was a knife.

His face looked wolfish mean. "You just won't let it go, gotta make me think there are ghosts in this house."

"One ghost, Brom."

"You're insane. Certifiably."

"Her name is Rosalie, and she died in our cellar. Those are her dolls, and she still plays with them."

"Is that what Adam told you?"

"No." She knew from firsthand experience.

"I don't want you anywhere around him, you hear me?" He threw the doll across the kitchen, smack into a wall, and then it flopped onto the floor to lay still as a corpse.

She clenched her jaw and dished up a bowl of stew. "He stopped by, and that's my fault?"

"He only wants one thing from you."

"Oh? I should be so lucky." She dropped his stew and the spoon on the table. "Supper is ready."

There, he got what he asked for.

She left him in the kitchen to dine with his anger.

Upstairs in the bedroom, she slammed the door so hard the yellow curtains jumped. Moonlight filtered in, the only light. She pulled her dress over her head and tossed it on the floor by the potted palm in the corner.

Why couldn't Brom be more like Adam?

Panties and bra came off, and she threw herself onto the bed. Fists clenched and jaws tight, she promised herself she wouldn't cry. Instead of this house making things better between them, things had only gotten worse.

She peeled back the covers and burrowed in under the sheets. A tear stung her eye, and she blinked it away. What she wouldn't give for Adam's strong arms around her, the caress of his fingers on her breasts, his lips on her lips, tongues touching, exploring.

A tingle rippled through her body, an awakening of desire that felt warm in her belly.

She closed her eyes and let her hands wander under the sheet, fingertips pinching nipples, palms rubbing hot skin, sliding down lower and lower. The scent of his cologne excited every deep breath she took. Lower and lower, to the sweet spot, then deeper and deeper.

"Adam," she moaned.

"I'm here, Anabella."

"I feel you inside me."

"You're beautiful, Anabella."

"Harder, please, harder."

"I want you."

"Faster, please, faster."

Oh how his cologne summoned up the lust inside her, buried deep in her soul like a long lost treasure, digging and digging to bring it to the surface. She threw her legs around his thighs, thrust her hips into him, and drew him inside her deeper and deeper, harder and harder, faster and faster.

"Adam, oh, Adam."

"I love you, Anabella."

"I love you, Adam."

Every thrust of his hips made her gasp, squeal with delight, and moan with desire. Waves of pleasure surged up from below, crested higher and higher. In and out. Up and down. Wet and warm and wonderful waves now shooting to the heavens and bursting in a spectacular umbrella

of sparkling stars and flashing lights. Every muscle in her body tightened in ecstasy. Her legs cinched him to her, groin to groin, grinding and pushing; each throb in her abdomen matched each pulse from him inside her, now ebbing and flowing in his strong and loving embrace.

“Adam.”

“Anabella.”

“What have we done?” She breathed in.

“You’re going to have my baby.”

She popped open her eyes. Her heart hammered. Each breath was like inhaling molasses. What the hell had just happened?

Sitting up, she jammed her knees together, her thighs cupping a warm sensation between her legs. She caught a slight motion of the potted palm leaves, so tiny and quick she could have imagined it. The sheet had slipped down to her feet exposing her naked body to the moonlight. Embarrassment gripped her like Eve without her fig leaves. She grabbed the sheet and pulled it up to her breasts.

Trembling with fear and shame, she scanned the dark corners, expecting to see Adam step into the light, completely naked, hard, and smiling. His scent seemed to be everywhere, musky and earthy and unforgettable. If what had just happened was a dream, it was too real. If it was a fantasy, then Brom was right. She was going crazy in this house.

Clutching the sheet, she lay back down and stared up at the dark ceiling. And then she heard it again, the joyous laughter of children playing in the basement.

She slapped her hands over her ears. “Rosalie,” she whispered. “What are you trying to tell me?”

The next morning, she awoke to silence. Sunlight sifted in through her yellow curtains, lighting every corner of the room. Her pleasures and fears of the night before melted in the warm glow. Brom’s side of the bed was undisturbed. He must’ve slept on the couch, anger being his lonely bed partner once again. She sat up. Nausea churned in her stomach.

“Oh God.”

Getting out of bed proved difficult, her knees unsteady as she donned her robe and tied it around her naked body. She ruffled her hair and shuffled to the door, sluggish as an old lady. Her

stomach reeled in protest. It couldn't have been from something she'd eaten. She'd gone to bed without supper.

Opening the door, she stepped out of the bedroom to a brand new horror. Dolls, all of them it seemed, were propped up along the walls, side to side, and down the stairs, each facing her, their lifeless eyes staring up at her. She stopped, swallowed bile climbing up the back of her throat.

Either Rosalie had been a busy ghost last night, or Brom had set them up in retaliation for her taking them out of the trash. Or so he'd thought.

Fighting nausea, she gathered up an armful of dirty, dusty dolls, some stiff, some drooping, and negotiated the crowded steps down to the living room where the dolls had been lined up in two rows that formed a pathway to the kitchen. She felt like Dorothy tiptoeing down the yellow brick road, looking down, and forward, and back, each step a frightening foray into an unknown land of terror.

The dolls' path led her to the sink, as if they wanted bathed, but she had other plans for them. Downstairs. In the cellar, behind a closed door where she'd lock them in so they couldn't get out, or so she hoped.

How crazy was that, thinking the dolls could move about on their own? Rosalie had been moving them. As crazy as it sounded, she didn't care. Brom wasn't around to belittle her, to accuse her of staging this haunting phenomenon to make him believe in ghosts.

It took several trips up and down the stairs, but finally she'd rounded up all the errant dolls in the cellar, shut the door, and locked the slider. Her stomach felt filled with rocks, and that salty taste oozed into her mouth. She had only enough time to reach the kitchen before her insides revolted.

Gagging and bent over the rusty sink, she ran the faucet water, swallowed and spit. Why was she so sick?

She straightened and breathed deep. Her hapless gaze out the back window revealed yet another horror. The naked, algae-stained doll lay sprawled on the lawn again, head attached, the way she'd last seen it when she'd stuffed it in Mrs. Dowell's trashcan. The sight wrung her stomach. She wretched in the sink again.

Spitting, she balled her fists. Mrs. Dowell must've thrown the doll back into the yard. Was she also trying to drive her mad? Anabella pounded her fists on the counter. The woman

wasn't going to get away with it.

This time Anabella didn't bother to get dressed. She didn't bother to retrieve the doll. She stormed up the dirt path to Mrs. Dowell's front door and banged the knocker like a crazy person.

"Mrs. Dowell. Open up."

Bang. Bang. Bang.

"Come out and talk to me."

Bang. Bang. Bang.

The door creaked open a crack. A sliver of Mrs. Dowell appeared in her robe and slippers. "Heavens, girl. What's wrong with you?"

"What's wrong with you, throwing that doll back into my yard?"

"Doll?"

"The one I showed you yesterday. I threw it in your trash. You took it out."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Your dead daughter's doll," Anabella shouted.

The door opened fully. Mrs. Dowell stepped aside. "Come in before you disturb the whole neighborhood."

Charging inside, Anabella inhaled chicken soup air and embraced the warm, homey feel of the front room, appointed in rich antique furniture, brown with gold trim and tassels, crystal floor lamps, and lavishly framed portraits on the walls. A rock fireplace stretched across the far end, its thick wooden mantel a clutter of photographs.

The door creaked closed behind her. "Please, sit down, ah...miss...?"

"Anabella." It was hard to be angry in this wonderful setting. She chose an overstuffed chair but sat forward in it, not yet comfortable enough to relax.

Mrs. Dowell sat on the divan across from her. "Now tell me, Anabella, what's all this nonsense about my daughter's doll?"

"You're saying it's not Rosalie's?"

She stiffened as if stabbed in the back. "Rosalie has been dead for twelve years. How do you know about her?"

Anabella clasped her hands together. "Do you believe in ghosts?"

"Why no, of course not."

"You will."

“Really?”

At the risk of sounding totally mad, she added, “I’ve seen her. In my house.”

“Rosalie? Don’t be silly.”

“And she still plays with her dolls.”

Mrs. Dowell rubbed her palms on her robe like they were getting all sweaty. She took a breath, released it, then: “Those dolls were all she had in this world. I bought her as many as she wanted, every kind her little heart desired.”

“Why?”

“Her father favored her brothers, bought balls and bats and bikes, all kinds of sports gear for them, but nothing for Rosalie. I had to do something for her. Dolls seemed most fitting, but the boys bullied her constantly, called her a sissy for playing with dolls.”

“Sibling rivalry.”

“Oh it was worse than that. It was sibling bullying. The abuse finally got the best of her. She ran away, took all her dolls with her, hid in the abandoned house, down in the cellar where she accidentally locked herself in.”

Accidently? The door locked from the outside, Anabella was sure of it; she’d unlocked that door herself. The slide lock...no way could it be locked accidently, not from the inside. A sudden realization filled her chest with concrete. Someone had murdered Rosalie.

“I can’t imagine the horror of her death down there.” Mrs. Dowell’s face drained of color. “If only we had known. We searched everywhere.” Her voice choked. She stood and went to the fireplace mantel, looked over the photographs. “Now my entire family is gone.”

“I know. I heard what happened.”

She selected a picture and turned back to Anabella. “Our last family portrait.” She handed it to her. “Before Rosalie went missing.”

Anabella held the framed picture, her eyes drawn immediately to the little girl hugging a doll. The same doll she’d found in the stream, the same plastic eyes with the blank stare, wearing a pink dress, though, all clean. Rosalie wore a yellow bow in her blond hair. Anabella’s foggy memory of the girl in the smoke triggered a jolt of recognition. “Hello, Rosalie.” Her brothers stood on each side of her, grumpy-faced, and behind them, Mrs. Dowell and her husband—muscular frame, prominent chin, dark hair... “Oh my God. It’s Adam.” Her head spun like all the blood had rushed from her brain.

“You heard what happened to him?”

“I know him.”

“You couldn’t possibly. He’s dead.”

“Not according to the story.” Anabella grabbed a breath. “He disappeared after his sons drowned in the stream. But he’s not dead. He’s alive. I’ve seen him.”

“You’re mistaken.” Mrs. Dowell reseated herself on the divan. “His body was found in the same stream. I begged the police to keep his suicide private. Townsfolk were talking enough as it was.”

“He drowned himself? Who does that?”

Mrs. Dowell sighed. “He was a desperate man. After he’d lost those boys...” She stopped. Tears welled in her eyes. “You have to understand, he wanted another son...he did things to me I didn’t want him to do.”

“He raped you?”

She hung her head. “I don’t like to think of it that way, but yes.”

Anabella couldn’t believe it. Not Adam.

“He wanted to get me pregnant with a son so badly that the word *no* didn’t stop him. Over and over again, day and night. Those were my boys, too. They couldn’t be replaced. But he was crazy. Finally I threatened to call the police. After that, he disappeared.”

Anabella felt hollow inside, like her heart had been plucked out. She stared at the picture of the man who had invaded her fantasies. “The Adam I know is alive and well. He’s the realtor we bought the house from. His name is Adam Brocklehurst.”

Mrs. Dowell gasped, put her hand over her heart. “Oh my.”

“You know him?”

“Brocklehurst is my maiden name.” She jumped up from the divan, grabbed the picture from Anabella’s hands. “He’s using my name. But why?” Terror shadowed her eyes. “Oh, God, no. Has he touched you?”

“No, not really, I mean...”

“He wants a son. Has he touched you?”

Anabella’s stomach turned over. “Well...” How embarrassing was this going to get? “I had a dream that he did.”

“He’s a ghost. It wasn’t a dream.” Mrs. Dowell dropped to her knees in front of Anabella.

“You’re pregnant.”

“I’m not.”

“You are. He’s found a way to have a son.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in ghosts.”

She sat back on her haunches. “I do now.”

Anabella’s insides turned to ice. She touched her stomach, up under the robe, felt the chill and remembered vomiting in the sink. Morning sickness? That soon? No way. Or was that normal when one gets impregnated by a ghost? How was she to know? How was anyone?

She launched her body from the chair. “I’ve got to go.”

“God help you, Anabella.”

She burst into the house, panic a black crow on her shoulder. Dolls were situated everywhere, lounging on the floor, propped against the walls, crowding the kitchen counter. She’d come home to hell. Her first thought was to run, screaming. Her second thought was to call Adam and cuss him up a storm.

Rushing toward the phone stand, she dodged the dolls as if they were land mines on the living room floor. The doll from the stream, the doll in the picture with Rosalie, sat naked on the paper they’d signed from Divine Real Estate. She batted the doll off, and it hit the floor with a squeal. She dialed the number.

A woman answered.

“Adam Brocklehurst,” Anabella demanded.

“Who?”

“Brocklehurst. He works there.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am. We have no one here by that name.”

Terror knifed her between the shoulder blades. No wonder she’d never seen his car. No wonder he always showed up at the most opportune times. He lived in this house. She hung up the phone and balled her fists, her stomach tight with fear and rage. He’d raped her in the middle of the night, disguised as a fantasy. A dream. A nightmare. She’d never be safe here. Ever. She had to get away from him.

She dialed Brom.

He answered.

“I’m leaving,” she shouted. “I’ve got to get out of here.”

“Anabella, that’s crazy.”

“It’s too late, Brom. It’s too late for us. It’s too late for me. I’m done.” She hung up.

In the bedroom, she tore clothes from the closet and threw them on the bed. She dumped panties and bras and negligees from the dresser drawers. Her hands shook as she scrabbled on the closet floor for her shoes. She didn’t know how far she could run, but she would run as fast as she could.

A wind thrashed the yellow curtains and slammed the bedroom door. She flinched. Across the room, Adam materialized out of thin air. “Where do you think you’re going, Anabella?”

Her heart almost stopped, but anger gave it a shot of adrenaline. “You son of bitch.” She bunched the robe up around her throat. “You raped me.”

“I fulfilled your fantasy of me.”

“It was my fantasy. You can’t touch me in my fantasy.”

“I can do anything I want. So be nice to me. You’re going to be the mother of my son.” He glided forward.

She stepped sideways, keeping the bed between them. “Don’t come any closer.” She armed herself with a four-inch spiked high-heel shoe.

He stopped. “What? You don’t love me anymore?”

“You? I don’t know what happened, your cologne must’ve affected me like a date rape drug. I love my husband.”

“But you’re going to have my son. He won’t be too happy about that.”

She hugged the robe around her. Brom probably would leave her over this. “You’d wreck my marriage to have a son?”

“I’d do more than that.”

“You can’t replace your dead boys.”

“No, but I can be with them again.”

“So suicide didn’t work out for you, huh?”

He sat on the bed, casual as could be, his musky, earthy odor an aura about him. “I didn’t commit suicide. I was murdered, same way my boys were murdered. Drowned in that stream...by

a fucking doll.”

“A big man like you?”

“Yeah, that was a humbling experience. Now I’m stuck in this house, forever tormented by Rosalie’s dolls.”

“You can’t leave?”

“Not beyond the front porch. One step out of bounds and it’s a ticket to hell for me. But after you have my son, he’ll take my place in this house and set my soul free to crossover and be with my boys again.”

She bared her front teeth. “In case you hadn’t noticed, I’m leaving. And you can’t follow me.”

“The dolls are trying to frighten you away so my son isn’t born here, so he doesn’t live in this house. They won’t hurt you, Anabella. Their beef is with me.”

She looked over the packing she had to do, but that could wait long enough for her to ask, “What did you do to piss them off?”

“In case you haven’t figured it out, I’m the ghost in this ghost story. I’m the man who didn’t protect his daughter. She came to me crying about her brothers bullying her. How bad could it be? I told her *boys will be boys* and sent her to her room to play with her dolls.”

“And that’s when she ran away.”

“She didn’t run away. Her brothers locked her in that cellar, along with all her sissy dolls.”

She almost choked. “You’re an accomplice to murder?”

“No. I only found out what happened after I died. A man can learn a lot when he’s dead. When everyone was looking for Rosalie, my boys said nothing for fear of being punished for what they’d done to her.”

“They kept quiet for two years?”

“And when her bones were found, the dolls got justice for Rosalie. Twice. They’ll never let me go. Having a son is my only hope to find peace for my soul. You are my only hope of having a son, Anabella. So you see...” He stood as if to block the door. “You’re not going anywhere.”

“Anabella,” Brom called out from downstairs.

She hadn’t heard him drive up.

Adam disappeared.

“Brom!” She ran to the door, flung it open, and scrambled down the steps, kicking dolls out of her way.

“What the hell are you doing?” Brom poked an accusatory finger at all the dolls scattered about.

“Brom.” She flung herself on him, arms around his neck. “Hold me.”

He didn’t. “What’s all this nonsense about you leaving?”

“I was wrong. I can’t go.”

“You mean, false alarm, like you’re being stupid again?”

“I mean I’m pregnant.” There, she said it.

He looked at her like she was dog shit he’d stepped in. “Who’s the father? I’ll kill him.”

“He’s already dead, Brom.”

“That’s it. You *are* nuts. Completely insane.”

Adam appeared at the top of the stairs. “Hello, Brom.”

“You! I knew it. I caught you in the act.” He turned to her, his eyes slits of rage. “I want a divorce.”

“It’s not what you think, Brom. He’s a ghost.”

“I’m not that stupid. Get out of my house.”

“I can’t leave. Adam won’t let me go. His son is going to live in this house.”

“We’ll see about that.” Brom stalked to the door. “I’m coming back with the sheriff and papers to have you committed.”

“Don’t do it, Brom. Adam will stop you.”

He pointed up the stairs to Adam. “And you better watch your back.”

Adam shrugged. “Listen to your wife. She’s telling you the truth.”

“She’s pregnant? By a ghost?”

“By me,” Adam bragged.

“I don’t believe it.”

“I don’t care what you believe.”

“You’re not a ghost. You’re a home wrecker.”

Adam disappeared and reappeared at the bottom of the stairs, stalking toward Brom.

He backed up to the door, his eyes big as saucers. “How did you do that?”

“I’m a ghost, you idiot.”

Brom whipped around, and hands shaking, fumbling, he managed to get the door open, but Adam grabbed him by the neck and threw him across the living room.

“Your wife is going to have my son.”

Brom crashed into the phone stand, splintering it to pieces. He screamed bloody hell.

Adam bulled toward him, stomping on dolls in his path. “Only now, when it’s too late, do you understand.” He kicked Brom across the floor, scattering more dolls. “You’re not as tough as you think you are.”

Brom rolled on his back. “Make him stop, Ana.”

She backed toward the open door, ready to bolt, but her heart wouldn’t let her leave Brom like this. “Adam, please stop.”

“I’m just getting started.” He hoisted Brom above his head and threw him into the staircase banister. Wood and doll bodies crashed to the floor. “He should have believed you.”

“I’m sorry, Ana,” Brom cried out.

How many times had he apologized? How many times had she forgiven him? He had this beat-down coming. But still, she loved him for the good things they’d done together, the good provider he had been, the good intentions they had when they bought this house. And if not for the dolls and what had happened here, they may have succeeded in fixing their marriage.

Adam grabbed Brom’s foot and dragged him out of the pile of banister debris. “I was going to let you live here, raise my son, while I went off to never-never land.” He lifted Brom off the floor. “But you threatened to remove Anabella from this house. I can’t allow that, so now I have to kill you.”

“Adam,” she screamed. “You can’t mean that. Not murder.”

“I’m protecting my unborn son.” He flung Brom into the wall, cracking plaster. “There’s no limit to what I will do.”

Brom bounced off the wall and crumpled to the floor.

Joyous laughter filled the room, the dolls now gathered around, though she hadn’t seen a single one move.

Rosalie. Rosalie. Rosalie.

And Rosalie’s favorite doll, the one in the picture, the one in the stream, the one that had kept showing up, now lay at her feet looking up at her with dead plastic eyes.

A choir of voices rose above the childish laughter. *Anabella, pick up the doll. Pick up the doll.*

Her heart fluttered like angel wings. “Mom? Dad?”

Pick up the doll.

Adam advanced on Brom again, this time with a knife clutched in his fist and murder in his dark eyes.

Pick up the doll.

A force greater than nature itself gripped her. She bent over, grabbed the doll, its algae stained lips not moving but a little girl’s voice saying, *throw me, throw me, throw me.*

Could it have been Rosalie’s voice? “Rosalie? Is that you?”

Throw me at his face.

“Throw it, yes. “ She reared back the doll. “Adam,” she shouted.

Almost on top of Brom again, he shifted his devilish eyes to her. “What?”

She threw the doll into his face. It stuck.

He dropped the knife and grabbed the doll with both hands, but its little plastic fingers hooked on his ears. Its little legs monkey-clung to his neck. He twisted around, left and right, yanking at the doll. It looked like a fake fight, but Adam’s scream verified he was fighting for his life.

“Get it off me.”

Tossing his head back and forth, he staggered forward, tripped on a doll, stumbled out the open front door and onto the porch.

“I can’t see.”

Somehow in the fracas, dolls had tumbled out the door to the porch, and he tripped over those too, off balance and fighting the doll on his face.

She remembered he couldn’t leave the house. He had boundaries. The porch. Something about a quick trip to hell. The dolls wouldn’t be happy about losing him, but Brom’s life depended on what she did in the next split second.

Adam tore the doll from his face and slammed it to the ground. He looked up at her, his cheeks scratched and his eyes bulging with red-veined rage.

She launched herself through the doorway and plowed into him, knocking him off the porch. He landed on the cracked sidewalk, almost kept his feet, but tripped over the doll he’d

thrown down and fell on his back on the scraggly lawn.

Rumbling, the earth moved. Tree roots poked up around him, drizzling dirt. His terrified eyes darted back and forth. The roots rose higher, closed in, “No,” and clamped down on his body. He screamed. The woody claws pulled him under, muffling his cries into silence.

Anabella stifled a scream of her own. He was on his way to hell.

The ground shook the old tree and rattled the old house. Leaves rained down on the lawn, sealing the cracks. Anabella clung to the porch rail, hoping the house wouldn’t be sucked under with him.

Brom lurched up beside her. “I’ll never doubt you again, Ana.” He had to yell over the rumbling.

“See? I’m not stupid after all, am I?”

“No, you were right. There is such a thing as ghosts.”

She let go of the rail, threw her arms around him, and kissed him like she hadn’t kissed him in a long time.

The shaking stopped.

He hugged her. “I know I’ve been angry, all this talk of ghosts, but Adam made me realize that nothing is impossible. In the end, we all pay for our mistakes. He didn’t protect his daughter. I didn’t protect my wife. I’ll never make that mistake again. I promise.”

“I love you, Brom.” She snuggled into him. Everything was going to be all right. She turned to thank the dolls.

They were gone.

Anabella sat on the back deck rocking in the rocker Brom had given her for Christmas. Last summer was but a memory, along with the terrors, winter had come and gone, and spring had brought new life to the old garden. By June it grew tall and green: corn, carrot fronds, tomatoes, and onions. Ever trickling, the stream flowed by on its endless journey. And swaddled in her arms slept their brand new baby girl.

Brom stepped out on the deck, fresh cup of coffee in hand. For her. He’d been the most loving and attentive husband any woman would be proud to call her own. His experience with Adam had humbled him.

“Dinner will be ready soon.” He handed her the cup. “I put a little sugar in it for you.”

“Thanks.”

She took a sip. Sweet. He’d become quite the chef, even made his own sack lunches these days.

He settled in the chair next to her. “How is she?”

“Sleeping.”

“You really think she has my eyes?”

“Maybe. Eye color changes, but her cute little nose is yours.”

He chuckled. “Adam actually convinced us he had the power of ethereal conception.”

“I wonder where he got that notion.” She set the coffee on the table beside her. “He’d said he learned a lot after he died.”

“The devil must’ve fed him a line of crap.”

“Gave him hope for a hopeless cause.”

Brom nodded. “Cruel but effective punishment.”

She sighed. “Thank God ghosts can’t procreate.” But Adam sure had made her sick trying. Or maybe her guilt for mentally cheating on Brom had caused her to vomit in the sink. It certainly wasn’t morning sickness. After a month of worrisome pregnancy tests that always turned up negative, her menstrual period arrived with its usual vengeance. They’d decided to celebrate, take a second honeymoon, and start the family they had always wanted.

She rocked the baby.

Joyous laughter rose up from the basement. It was that time of evening. The children were playing again, or perhaps it was the dolls. Not once over the past year had they ever seen them move. “Do you hear them?” she asked Brom.

“I do.”

“That’s because you’re a believer now.”

Brom had fixed up the storeroom real nice for the dolls. He’d painted the walls white, built false window frames and hung yellow curtains, wired little lights around the ceiling, and put up shelves for the dolls to sit on. They even had new doll furniture, a table and little chairs for tea parties, a dresser for all their new clothes, pillows and blankets on little bunk beds with little ladders.

Everyone got bathed and dusted regularly.

From time to time they'd be in different places, different poses, but that wasn't scary anymore. It simply meant Rosalie had been playing with them.

And there was one other addition to the room, one not so pleasant but satisfying just the same. Screams gave away his presence, Adam's soul, returned by the devil to serve the dolls that hated him so much. Hell took many forms, and hell was different for different people. This ghostly hell was eternal for Adam.

His screams, intermingled with the laughter, told her that everything was as it should be down in the dollhouse.

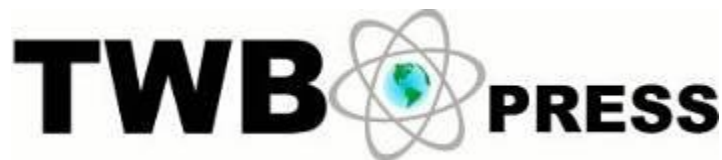
About the Author



Edith O'Deer lived most of her life in a small village by the sea near the big city of Tallinn in Estonia. She moved inland in the summer of 2004, married, and has a daughter who loves to chase the dog and scare the fish in their fish tank.

Edith likes reading, especially short ghost stories, and the lack of them in Estonia inspired her to write some of her own. She also decided to take on the challenge of writing in English, which she learned thanks to all the Hollywood movies she's watched. Her great love is the sea. She misses living on the beach and dreams of moving back someday.

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