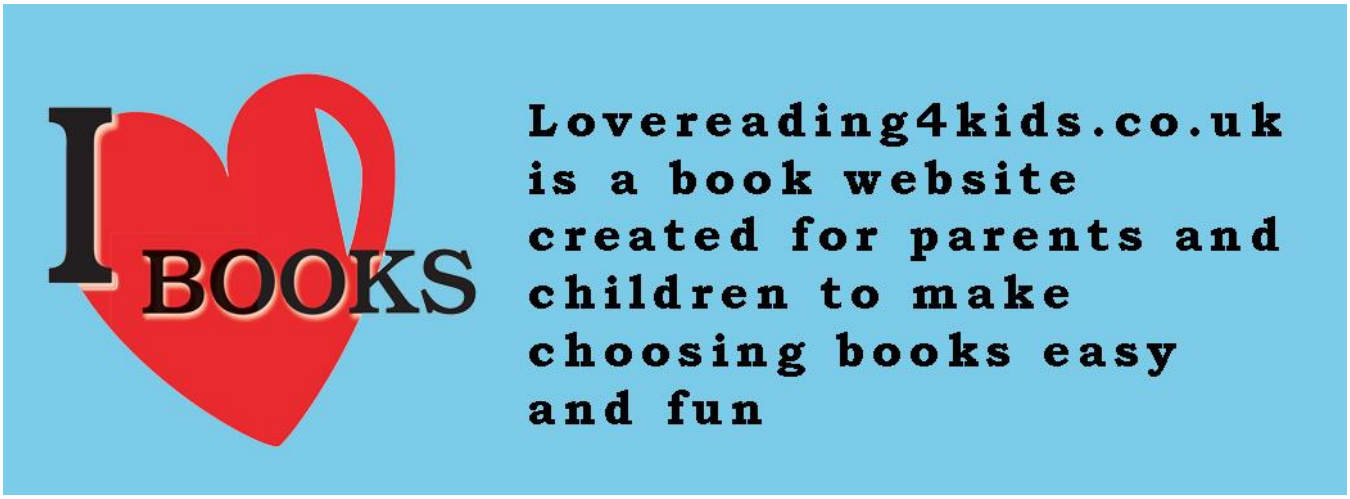


Opening extract from

Strange Star

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Part One

A Tale to Freeze the Blood

Lake Geneva, Switzerland

June 1816



The company of . . .

Mr Percy Shelley,

Mrs Mary Shelley,

Miss Claire Clairmont,

and Dr John Polidori

Is requested by . . .

Lord Byron

At . . .

The Villa Diodati,

Tuesday 18th June, 8 pm

Your challenge for the evening is . . .

to tell a ghost story that will terrify the assembled company.

1

It was Felix's job to deliver the invitation. On such a sparkling, sunny morning after weeks of cold rain he was glad to be outside, stretching his legs. Not that he had far to go – Mr and Mrs Shelley's villa was just a short walk through the apple orchard. He'd be back at Diodati again in less than twenty minutes, the job done.

Yet this wasn't just any job. Or any invitation. And despite knowing it was a servant's responsibility to deliver messages, not read them, Felix couldn't resist glancing at the card in his hand. Lord Byron's words, in still-wet ink, read more like a challenge than an invitation. Felix prickled with excitement.

Tonight was going to be spectacular.

Once through the orchard, Felix raced up the steep steps to the Shelleys' front door. His master, Lord Byron, had known Mr and Mrs Shelley and Miss Clairmont back in London, where he lived most of

the year. Like him, they were writers. Free thinkers – at least the Shelleys were. Mr Shelley, a poet, was tall and sickly thin. Mrs Shelley, smaller, quieter, had the fiercest eyes Felix had ever seen. And Miss Clairmont, stepsister to Mrs Shelley, was a whirlwind of emotions, who cried as much as she laughed. Like Byron, the little group had come here to Switzerland for the summer to take in the mountain air. As individuals, they were interesting enough, but together their sparks became flames.

At the top of the steps, Felix noticed the shutters at the Shelleys' windows were still closed. It was too early for them to be awake. They'd stayed late at Diodati last night when, even then, the talk had been strange. They'd spoken of experiments done on corpses. Of a dead frog made to twitch as if alive. It was all Felix could do to trim the candles slowly and pour coffee drip by drip, just to stay in the parlour and listen.

So when he knocked on the front door with a *rat-tat-tat* he didn't expect anyone to answer; the noise simply echoed down the long, empty hallway. The Shelleys didn't care for rules, Lord Byron said. In which case, Felix hoped they wouldn't mind an invitation slipped under the door instead of being delivered safely into their housemaid's hand.

As Felix turned to go he caught a glint of sun on glass. Not every shutter was closed after all. At a small window near the top of the house, someone was watching him. Felix shielded his eyes to get a better look. The person staring down was a child – a girl of about ten – with curls of white-blonde hair. Someone said – Frau Moritz probably – that the Shelleys had adopted the girl on their travels.

Smiling, Felix raised his hand to wave. 'Hullo!' he mouthed.

The girl stared, her eyes as wide as soup plates. Slowly, tentatively, she waved back, though she didn't return his smile.

*

At the Villa Diodati, Frau Moritz, the housekeeper, was standing on the kitchen steps. The sight of her there, hands on generous hips, made Felix's spirits sink because he knew she was waiting for him. Since Lord Byron's announcement at breakfast of his plans for tonight's gathering, she'd been in a terrible spin. And the person who bore the brunt of it, as ever, was Felix.

'You took your time,' she observed.

Frau Moritz liked her household to run as smoothly

and precisely as a Swiss clock. Everyone had their place, did their proper work. Even on the outside, the Villa Diodati had that same air of routine. It was a big, square, imposing house with shuttered windows and steep gardens lined with cypress trees. If a house could sit sensibly, then Diodati did so in its place on the hillside above the lake named Geneva, after the nearby town. It struck Felix as slightly odd that Lord Byron, with his wild reputation, should spend his summer at such an orderly house. Yet he was a man of many sides, as Felix was quickly learning.

'No more dallying,' Frau Moritz said. 'We need wood brought in for the fires. Quickly now, my boy.'

Nodding, Felix pressed his lips shut. He wasn't *her boy*. Nor was he anyone else's. Those days were disappearing fast, when the colour of a person's skin gave them rights over others – that's what Lord Byron said. It was the fashion in England, so his master told him, for gentlemen to have a black footman. And it was good work too, with smart uniforms and decent pay and a chance to mix with society's finest.

Which wasn't a thing Felix had thought possible before now. Frau Moritz had hired him from the marketplace in Geneva, where she'd found him amongst the salamis and pickled vegetables, looking

dazed. He'd travelled months and many long miles from America to the French coast, and when his ship docked at Calais, he rode the first cart heading south. He'd never meant to end up somewhere so cold. Frau Moritz's offer of work wasn't charity as such. True, he was skinny and filthy and desperate for a job; truer still was her keen eye for a bargain, since no one round here would pay much for a black servant.

Then Lord Byron arrived for the summer months. He brought with him his doctor, John Polidori, and soon afterwards the Shelleys and Miss Clairmont took lease of the villa next door. Felix had never met people like them. They opened his eyes to a world of possibilities. He began to hope for better. Most of all, he dreamed of his master taking him back to London in the autumn as his footman. And so he set himself a mission this summer, to prove himself worthy of the role.

With his log basket now filled, Felix headed back inside. Climbing the kitchen steps, he felt a sudden twinge in the scar just below his left elbow. The scar was shaped like a ragged letter S. Mostly, he kept it hidden under his shirt sleeve in case of questions. Not that he'd run away from America; he'd sailed to Europe a free person and he'd worked hard for that freedom, too.

Yet feeling the twinge stopped him in his tracks.

He blinked up at the sky. Pain like this meant a storm was on its way, though currently the morning was still fine. Even the comet that had hung over them these last months was fading so fast it looked no more than a wisp of smoke. Yet from the west a bank of cloud was blooming. The smell of rain was already in the air. Felix shuddered with delight. With a storm as the backdrop, he could only imagine how incredible tonight's ghost stories would sound!

Inside at the kitchen table Frau Moritz's daughter, Agatha, was peeling potatoes. She pretended to ignore Felix; her bowed head with its thick brown plait of hair pinned from ear to ear was all he saw. Yet still he felt her eyes slide over him.

'Will you tell him, Mama, or shall I?' she called to Frau Moritz, who was at the stove.

'Tell me what?' Felix stopped, resting the log basket on his hip.

Agatha looked up. He glanced between her round, waxy face and Frau Moritz's flushed one.

Wiping her hands on her apron, Frau Moritz joined her daughter at the table. 'This gathering tonight of Lord Byron's. It's meant all manner of extra work for us. There's to be a supper for his lordship and his . . .' she looked disapproving, '. . . *friends*.'

Felix nodded eagerly. 'They're telling ghost stories, yes. I'll do the serving if you like . . .'

'No, Mama,' Agatha cut across. 'You promised *me*!'

Felix sucked in his cheeks. He knew what was coming. Just like him, Agatha was fascinated by Lord Byron's friends. Miss Clairmont laughed like a sailor. Mr Shelley, who looked so deathly pale, was alive with ideas. Even the sullen Dr Polidori had an interesting, quizzical air. Yet it was Mrs Shelley who intrigued him most. She seemed so serious and quiet, but when she *did* speak, was clearly the cleverest of them all. And the way they sat: not upright and polite, but sort of *draped* across the furniture. Felix wanted to breathe these people in, and he sensed Agatha did too.

But Frau Moritz would not choose him to serve over her own flesh and blood. He didn't stand a chance.

Life wasn't fair.

It wasn't fair that in America his mother had worked sugar cane for a white man. Then the white man had branded her newborn baby on the arm with the letter S, and said it meant he owned them both.

Shifting his log basket onto the other hip, Felix went quickly upstairs. Though not quickly enough, for he

heard Frau Moritz say, 'Don't fret, Agatha dear. Of course, you'll be serving the supper. Lord Byron wants his guests scared by ghost stories, *not* by the servants.'

Felix gritted his teeth. It was the type of insult he knew all too well.

*

Late afternoon the storm arrived. And with it, darkness came early, especially for June. By six o'clock, fires blazed in every room. Special attention was paid to the parlour at the front of the villa, for it was here tonight's ghost stories would be told. The room was grand, with an ornate ceiling and a gleaming wood floor, and four huge windows that looked over the lake. There was little to see by way of a view now, though. Rain had turned the glass into a watery blur.

The fire, at least, looked comforting. As Felix pictured the guests huddled around it to share their stories, his excitement felt almost painful. His disappointment did too. Something marvellous was happening tonight in this house. And he wasn't allowed to attend. Instead, he'd spend his evening miserably below stairs.

Yet as he made his way back to the kitchens, a sudden thumping at the front door jolted him from his bleak thoughts.

'Ho! Let us in before we perish!'

'Isn't the door unlocked?' someone said, giggling. 'Can't we let ourselves in?'

Felix's heart skipped. The guests were early – *two hours* early! It was bound to throw Frau Moritz completely out of kilter. As a servant, he should be flustered too. Yet the Shelleys' obvious disregard for clocks and timings made Felix grin. Hastily, he smoothed his breeches and straightened his jacket. Rushing for the door, he opened it to a peal of thunder and rain so hard it almost blinded him.

'Goodness! What weather!' cried Miss Clairmont, pushing past to come inside.

The Shelleys followed, sheltering together under an old cape. Though they'd only walked the short distance from next door, their clothes and hair were dark with rain. Mrs Shelley's boots squelched as she moved.

'I trust you've a good fire for us,' Mr Shelley said, as he handed the dripping cape to Felix.

'Yes, sir.' He'd carted enough logs inside today to keep them warm until winter. Taking the cape and Miss Clairmont's wet shawl, he shut the front door.

The white-haired girl he'd seen earlier at the window wasn't with them, he noticed. But then, ghost stories weren't for children's ears.

'Follow me, if you please,' Felix said.

The guests knew their way to the parlour blindfolded. They didn't need a boy in smart breeches to show them. And yet his lordship, for all the rumours, liked certain things done properly. So Felix led the guests down the hallway. Behind him, he sensed Miss Clairmont fretting to get past. She liked bounding into rooms and surprising Lord Byron, who didn't always share her joy.

Rounding the corner, he ran into Frau Moritz.

'Oh Felix! Whatever's the hurry?' she said.

Then she saw who was behind him. Her frown became a gracious smile.

'Good evening, Herr Shelley, Frau Shelley, Fräulein Clairmont,' she said. 'Lord Byron and Dr Polidori await you in the parlour. Do come with me.' And to Felix, she hissed, 'Tell Agatha she's needed right away.'

In the kitchen he found Agatha, mirror in hand, fussing over her hair.

'You're wanted upstairs,' Felix said, still irked that she'd been chosen when he worked twice as hard as she ever did.