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Opening extract from

Wickedness

Written by

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Wickedness



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Deborah White

A TEMPLAR BOOK

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For Al and Nik, with love

The Prophecy

He who loves wickedness
Cloaks himself in the odour of sanctity.
At his coming will be great plagues.

He seeks the one who holds the key to life,
The true daughter and the red-haired maiden.

When she is found, then all will hear
Thoth's mighty voice
And the wicked shall be made small as dust
Before the storm.

Chapter 1

It was the funeral that afternoon. People would be coming back to the house after the burial. A few old friends. A couple of distant cousins. No religious service though. Grandma hadn't believed in any of that.

"If there is a God, Claire," she'd said, "then he isn't in the churches. He doesn't speak through them. No, when you find wickedness in this world, don't look to anyone else to save you from it. You have only yourself."

Now she was dead and Claire was sent running upstairs to fetch chairs. People would need somewhere to sit as they sipped their drinks and ate their sandwiches. As they laughed too loudly, saying what a shame it always took a death to bring them together like this.

She found a bentwood chair on the landing. It was light as a feather, so she took that down first.

"Any more?" said Claire's mum, sounding fussed and distracted. Looking tired, and puffy-eyed. "Try Grandma's bedroom."

She didn't hear Claire's sharp intake of breath. Had no time anyway for a daughter who might not want to go into the room where Grandma had died just a week before.

"Hurry!"

So there she was, standing outside Grandma's bedroom door, feeling unsteady and afraid. She had to take a deep breath before she could turn the brass knob and push open the door into the wide silence of the room.

Heavy lace curtains filtered only a very little light through the bay of the window, but Claire could still see, just.

There was the big bed, so high off the ground that Grandma had needed a stool to climb in. A chest of drawers to one side, at the right height for a mirror. A small clock, still ticking. A hairbrush, strands of Grandma's long dark hair caught in it. A pillbox. A jewellery case, already lightly covered with a talcum of dust. And on the other side of the bed, a heavy looking carved oak chair with Grandma's silk dressing gown still tumbled over it.

"Claire! What are you doing? I need those chairs now, not next week!"

"Coming! I'm coming!" She hurried to pick up the dressing gown, breathing in as she did, an echo of the sharp smell that was Grandma. And it was then that she uncovered it. An emerald-green box, resting on the seat of the chair and shimmering softly in the half light.

She dropped the dressing gown onto the bed, then hunkered down on her heels so she could get a better look. It wasn't very big. As long as her hand, and a hand's length deep. And when she plucked up the courage to touch it, it was as smooth as glass under her fingers.

It was unexpectedly light. It almost seemed to float in her hands. She turned it this way and that, looking to see if there was any clue as to what it might be. There was nothing. It wasn't decorated at all, except for a faint line marking the edge of the lid. She looked closer. There was an oval etched deep in black, just at the place you'd expect a keyhole to be. And etched inside the oval, a crocodile's head resting on the palm of an outstretched hand. She knew at once that it was some sort of hieroglyph. She'd seen writing just like it at the museum.

"Claire! Hurry up will you?"

Giving the box one last look and quite forgetting about taking the chair, she tumbled down the stairs, breathless, thinking, *I'll ask Mum about it later. When everyone's gone. Maybe she'll know what it is.*

But maybe she wouldn't ask, because Claire's dad had come to the funeral. Uninvited. Looking like a stranger in his charcoal-grey suit and black tie. And her mum had got very emotional when he'd said, "Let me take them back home, Jill. Give you some space."

Them being Claire and her little sister Michaela. Micky for short.

"Space," she'd shouted at him, loud enough for everyone to hear. A split-second's uncomfortable silence, then a crescendo of embarrassed chatter. "I thought you were the one who needed that… to, what was it… find out who you really are?" Her face was drained of colour. Her hands clenched so tight her knuckles showed white. "Well I know *what* you are. You're weak and selfish. No, you can't have them. Their home's here, in their grandmother's house. It's my house now and they're staying."

Manuscript 1

My name is Margrat Jennet. I live in the house of Nicholas Robert Benedict, physician. For my mother and father are both dead and I fear, now, for my own life. But I do not think he means to harm me – yet. For I make him think there is still hope of a daughter, a precious girl child.

When he presses close. When I feel the warmth of his breath sweet on my cheek. When I feel the heat of his body, and see the tremor of pulse in his neck, I do not move away. My heart beats very fast. I feel a prickle of fear raise the hairs on the nape of my neck.

"Ah, Margrat," he says. "You smell of the sweet meadow hay."

And I tremble like the harvest mouse in hiding, as the swish, swish, swish of the scythe draws near.

He said that my mother made him my guardian. Certainly I did see a will, made after my father's death.

It was in my mother's hand, and bore her true signature. It may have been that she was forced to sign. But I think she did so in good faith. For who would not trust such a man? He is known everywhere. In high, and in low places. And he is fine and handsome. Tall, and smooth-skinned. He has dark eyes burning like coals. The hot, restless smell of him when he is close makes me afraid, yet draws me in. Like a moth to the candle's flame.

These thoughts shame me. I am tested every minute of every day, and may fail to hold out against him. So I have vowed to write down everything I know and place it somewhere safe, so that, God willing, any who come after me will be forewarned and may be saved.

Chapter 2

Later, in the bedroom Claire was having to share with Micky – when it was dark, and the only sounds were the sharp cracks and creaks of an old house settling, the soft shallow whispering sound of Micky breathing – Claire thought about what her mother had said. My house. They're staying. Typical. Everything always revolved around what her mum wanted.

Claire's own breathing quickened. She wanted her mum and dad to sort out their lives, so that she could get on with hers. She wanted to be lying in her own bed, in her own room, in her old house. She wanted to be kept awake at night worrying about those things that her mum and dad would think were trivial and unimportant. Friendships: Katrin and Jade. Jade, who had three tattoos and her nose, eyebrow and belly button pierced. Katrin who didn't and never would. Because Katrin was going places

and already knew that, where she wanted to go, appearances mattered. That most people don't take the time or trouble to see what's swimming below the surface. That acting the part is, most of the time, all that you need to do.

And Claire. Not knowing how she fitted in. Anywhere. Being afraid she would be the sort of person who had the tattoo and piercing, but only where it didn't show. Being afraid because she hadn't felt anything when Grandma had died. Nothing at all. And that wasn't right was it? Only to feel relief, because she hadn't liked her. Had been scared of her even. Had found her fierce intelligence, dark moods and oppressive silences unsettling.

Claire sat up. Threw back the covers. The cold chill of the room hit her like a wave. She swung her legs over the side of the bed. Felt panic closing her throat and beads of sweat forming at her hairline. And all the while dispassionately observing her own terror.

"Micky?"

But Micky didn't wake.

Claire crawled into Micky's bed. Rolled Micky

onto her side to make room. Folded her body round Micky's, needing to breathe in, just this once, the soft, sour, familiar smell of her skin, her hair. Felt the brittle, chicken-winged boniness of her and clung tight.