

Ruby and the Traditional Christmas

A seasonal ghost short story set on the Amalfi Coast, during Christmas 2018. Based around the characters in the 'Ruby' books, but as a standalone tale.

Word count about 10,930

A traditional Christmas dinner, with Baba Yaga turning up in time for dessert.....

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~ Friday 16th November ~

Like so many other important events in people's lives, their Christmas was organised at the last moment, after too much wine had been drunk. Chaos is probably too strong a word to describe the atmosphere around their table in the restaurant, though it was approaching that certain stage.... The point where blame and recriminations begin to be voiced.

"Every year we talk about getting together for a traditional Christmas." Said Sarah. "It never happens, because Ruby just has to invite everyone and no one ever agrees on where to go."

Sarah Simmons was one of Ruby's oldest friends, though Ruby sometimes wondered why. It had something to do with Sarah always being there for her when it mattered.

"It took us three months to organise this meal." Said Spider. "It was supposed to be a Halloween meal and it's now mid-November. Let's face it, we suck at organising these things."

"We only ended up here by accident." Said George. "The food is excellent though."

George Polandrous, head of the Polandrous Foundation and her boss, most of the time. It hurt that he was right, it wasn't really a late Halloween meal. George had come to her flat in Hackney to discuss some work issues. The other two had just turned up and rejected the idea of another Pizza and beer night.

"I'll turn into a pizza soon. Isn't there a decent Italian place around the corner?" Spider had asked.

Spider, real name Rupert Bailey, though few people knew that. After a troubled career in the army. Spider had used his transferable skills in a new career, featuring extortion and collecting debts for a few local money lenders. She was happy to call him a friend because he'd travelled to some very dangerous places with her, saving her arse more than once.

"Even this isn't our late Halloween do." Said Ruby. "This is an impromptu meal because we're all sick of pizza."

"I like this place, the Trattoria.... Something or other." Said Sarah.

"Trattoria Amalfi." Said Ruby. "I come in here a lot."

"I have a villa on the Amalfi coast." Said George. "Not far from Positano. If you're looking for somewhere to go for Christmas, you can come and join me. Bring everyone if you like, it's a huge place."

There it was, that chance mention of a restaurant name, causing an offer which would have such an effect. If it was true that a butterfly's flapping wing in Brazil, could lead to a Tornado in Texas. Ruby had just had her butterfly's wing moment.

"Do you have a tree at Christmas?" Asked Sarah. "I love all the traditional stuff. A Christmas tree full of lights, lots of decorations and tinsel hanging from everything."

"Usually just a twelve foot tree in the lounge." Said George. "A local couple look after the place for me. I'm sure I can get them to decorate the place for Christmas, lots of tinsel. It's way out in the

middle of nowhere, so no nosy neighbours to notice if one of the wunderkinds decides to levitate out of their bedroom window, rather than using the stairs.”

“It does sound good George.” Said Ruby. “You’re really sure we can invade you for Christmas ?”

“Yes, though we will need to cook our own Christmas dinner. Greta does the odd spaghetti Bolognese for me, but I can’t expect her to give up Christmas with her family.”

“Sounds good to me. I’ll happily have frozen lasagne and oven chips for Christmas lunch.” Said Spider. “Who gets an invite though ? That is what ruins all our planned get togethers.”

“You can’t do the invites Ruby.” Said Sarah. “They all think of you as their mum.”

Sarah was right, it couldn’t be her sending out the invites. The thirteen super kids thought of her as their surrogate mother. Who can refuse an invite to come over for Christmas from their mum, even if they really wanted to be elsewhere ? Sophie had once wanted to bring three of her friends to her birthday party. They all had new friends and partners, human partners. It only took one slip, one of the thirteen to get a little drunk and angry. Charlotte had once incinerated a gang of street thugs in Vladivostok.

“You’re right, it can’t be my Christmas invitation.” She said. “Can you send out the invites George ?”

“I’d be happy to, though..... Well, most of the thirteen probably won’t come.”

“Then we’ll have a nice Christmas with just us.” Said Spider.

Sarah suddenly thumped the table, one of her many annoying ways of being the centre of attention.

“Can I fly there George ? I’m fed up with trains after North Korea and nothing will ever get me onto a small boat again.”

“You can fly to Naples and hire a car there Sarah. I use the villa all the time. It’s warm in the winter, there’s a freezer full of food and a cellar full of wine. It even has a ghost, though I’ve never seen it.”

“A ghost.” Said Ruby. “Who’s ghost ?”

“Villa Locatelli is old, parts date back to the sixteenth century.” Said George. “Doesn’t every really old building have legends about a ghost ? I’ve never seen it, but Greta claims to have seen the face of a sad looking girl.”

“A sad ghost..... Cool!” Said Sarah.

“The cellar full of wine sounds good.” Said Spider. “Send out the invites George.”

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~ Saturday 22nd December ~

Sarah Simmons had enjoyed the flight from London to Naples. For someone who ran a translation business and another which created multilingual websites, she went abroad far less than most people thought. Just about everything could be done online, or by conference calls. She was currently driving a hired BMW, Sophie sat beside her.

“It’s not that warm.” She said. “I was hoping to hire a soft top.”

“Naples in December is much like London in December.” Said Sophie. “Usually less rain though.”

“Have you been here before ?”

“No, I just Googled the area when I received the invitation.”

Sophie, honest as ever. All the thirteen were astonishingly honest for young adults though. There was no pretence with them, no guile. Mind you, Sophie could levitate so well that it looked like flying. Who needs pretence when they have those kinds of powers.

“Who’s coming, do you know ?” Asked Sophie.

Sarah had flown from Heathrow with Sophie, little being said. Perhaps the thirteen realised the invitations from George had been a bit of a ploy. Ruby hadn’t wanted her wunderkinds to feel

obligated to attend, yet it might have been taken the wrong way. Sarah handled it the way she handled most awkward social situations. She ignored it.

"Ruby will be there and Serge. After telling me not to bring a boyfriend, Ruby has Serge."

"Serge knows about us." Said Sophie. "If anything weird happens he'll understand. I think George didn't want strangers at his house. You know.... Muggles."

Sarah hadn't read any Harry Potter books, yet she understood the meaning. All she knew was that Ruby would have Serge in her bed every night, while she'd be alone. There was Spider of course, any port in a storm.

"Who else?"

"Spider of course and I mentioned Serge. Lau will be there, which was a bit of a surprise and of course Kallina will turn up, bound to."

"Oh yes, she'll sense Ruby is on the move and show up, even without an invitation. She'll probably turn up as Baba Yaga, with Constanze in her arms."

They laughed for a while, both understanding Kallina all too well. Sarah was glad that Sophie had accepted the invitation to spend Christmas and New Year at George's place. She was the smallest of all the thirteen, barely five foot tall, though she claimed five foot one. The girl's hair had always been bum length and bright red. Now Sophie had added burgundy coloured streaks.

"I hope I'm not lost." Said Sarah. "The woods look a bit thicker than George mentioned and it's more of a track now, than a road."

"You're going the right way." Said Sophie. "I can feel Ruby, about half a mile away."

"Wow, can you all do that? Feel where she is?"

"Charlotte and I can, but the others aren't so good at it."

Sophie began to say more and then didn't. They all had that reticence about discussing their skills with anyone, apart from Ruby. They all just about worshipped Ruby, which Sarah found quite comforting. Who wanted thirteen super kids out of control and on the rampage. Not that any of them were really kids. Sophie had been born somewhere near Moscow, in the year eighteen eighty seven.

"I'll get out and tell them it's us." Said Sophie.

George obviously took his security seriously. A few turns in the road had brought them to a set of gates, with a solid looking fence on either side. No house name or anything on the gate, just a box to hold mail deliveries.

"I guess we're expected." Said Sarah.

CCTV or a Sophie mind meld with Ruby? However it was done, the gates swung open and Sarah drove on. About five minutes later the road came out of the trees, allowing them to get their first look at Villa Locatelli.

"Wow, when people say it's a villa, I think of those places you book for a summer break. You know, roachy kitchen, tiny bedrooms and a grubby pool if you're lucky." Said Sarah. "This though, this is....."

"Huge is the word Sarah and gorgeous. I think we can probably have a turret room each."

George had talked about his Italian Villa being an old building, but that hadn't prepared her for the building at the end of the driveway. It looked as though someone had picked up one of those old castles you see in the Rhine valley and placed it in a wood, a few miles from Positano.

"And he remembered to make it look Christmassy, if that's even a word."

"If it isn't, it should be." Said Sophie

It was a little over the top, the sort of things some neighbours love complaining about, though George didn't seem to have any neighbours. There was a twenty foot Christmas tree in front of the house, covered in lights. It was still a bright afternoon, yet the lights on the tree competed with the December sunshine.

"It must be amazing at night and he's got reindeer." Said Sophie.

Not the real kind of course, but huge model reindeer, the sort so beloved of high street stores and Disneyworld. Everything was lit up and waiting for night to fall, so it could look its best.

"Where are you going?"

"George said to drive around the back."

There was actually a covered car park at the back of the house. No getting wet or covered in snow, though the forecast for Christmas was mild and dry. Sarah almost helped Sophie with her bags, before remembering the tiny girl had carried a huge Russian made bazooka into North Korea. A weapon taller than she was and almost as heavy.

"I have a good feeling about this Christmas." Said Sarah.

"Something will happen, it always does. Remember your thirtieth birthday party Sarah? Kallina will arrive as Baba Yaga and shit will happen. Always does, always."

A wall of warm air met them as the door opened. It felt like the house giving them a huge friendly hug. Then it was Ruby giving each of them the real thing.

"I'm so glad you're both here." Said Ruby. "Did you see the huge tree full of lights?"

"We couldn't really miss it." Said Sophie. "I love the huge reindeers."

"Is everyone else here?" Asked Sarah.

"Yes, you're the last.... Come into the lounge. I think George did it to impress you Sarah."

George Polandrous trying to impress her was something she had to see. The lounge looked like the inside of medium sized aircraft hangar, the far side ending at a wall of glass. Spider was there, waving to them from a sofa by an open fire.

"George, stop messing with the tree, it's perfect." Said Ruby. "Sarah and Sophie are here."

George stopped adding tinsel to the tree in the centre of the lounge and grinned at her. George Polandrous, financier, hedge fund manager and trader in derivatives, whatever they were. Sarah couldn't quite believe that the millionaire wanted to impress her.

"So Sarah, is there enough Tinsel?" He asked. "Lau doesn't really understand Christmas and thinks I've gone a little crazy."

There was no way the couple who looked after the house could have done it all. There had to be a small army of locals to act as Christmas elves. The decorations were everywhere, even hanging from the ornate carvings on the high ceiling. Tinsel in a mixture of colours was hanging from just about everything. Sarah felt a tear trying to leave her right eye.

"It's wonderful George.... Magical..... Perfect." She said, and meant it.

Ruby hugged her and then George hugged her. Sophie became involved in the hugging, though Spider looked awkward and remained by the fire. Lau burst the bubble, by appearing from the back of the house and saying the tinsel had to be a fire hazard.

"Come on, I'll show you both to the bedrooms upstairs." Said Ruby.

The villa was a maze of old and new. Ruby took them close to the wall of glass, which gave a superb view of well cared for gardens. Along an old wood panelled corridor, before ascending a gorgeous curved staircase.

"Everyone gets lost at some point, so you will too." Said Ruby. "There are plenty of rooms, so you've got a few to choose from."

"I want a room in a turret." Said Sophie. "If there are any ?"

"There is, a suite with a proper lounge, three bedrooms and a small kitchen. You'll be a long way from everyone else Sophie, unless Sarah fancies joining you ?"

"I think it could be fun, if Sophie doesn't mind ?"

"Yes, that sounds cool." Said Sophie.

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~ Sunday 23rd December ~

Spider had enjoyed most of his time in the army and he'd learned quite a few useful skills. He considered the most useful was the ability to make a good fry-up out of just about anything. He was up and awake at about half six and looking for a kitchen. He found three and chose the smallest, which didn't show signs of recent use. He wondered if George knew he had an unused kitchen.

"Maybe he'll discover it one day, like Stanley finding Livingstone." He muttered.

Carrying the ingredients from the main kitchen was a chore, but no one was around to ask him what he was doing. Ruby had always liked his fry-ups, though he wasn't sure about Serge. Sarah could smell fried bread from five miles away, so he was certain she'd show up. Sophie though, wasn't she now a Vegan ?

"I'll make enough for everyone, that's safest."

Ruby was there within ten minutes, Sarah a minute later. By seven all of them had shown up, even George.

"Is it all right George ?" Spider asked. "I love a fry-up, it fills me up for the rest of the day."

"Do what makes you happy Spider, Mi casa es su casa, as they say."

Spider leant against the cooker, taking orders for extra bacon, while the others sat around the kitchen table. Even Sophie had succumbed to the charms of three rashers, one egg and a slice of fried bread.

"Wonderful Spider." Said Serge. "I remember that wonderful phrase of yours, food that sticks to your ribs."

"So, we're all here now George and full of fry-up." Said Sophie. "I'm dying to know more about your sad ghost, tell all ?"

Spider filled everyone's coffee cup, before sitting next to Sarah. They'd had a few flings and she had shredded his feelings on more than one occasion. It was Christmas though and he kept believing the next time would be different.

"It was all a long time ago." Said George. "Chiara Locatelli went missing around eighteen twenty, later presumed to be dead. There was a massive search of the entire area, but her body was never found."

"She was young and in love." Said Greta. "She found out the man she was betrothed to had been unfaithful. The accepted wisdom is that she took her own life in a fit of despair. The nearby cliffs are high, the ocean currents strong. Her body was probably washed out to sea."

Spider had seen the lady who looked after the house only once and she'd said very little. Her English was good, probably better than his.

"Can I get you anything to eat ?" He asked. "Coffee maybe ?"

"Just coffee.... If it's alright to sit with you ?"

"Yes, please do. I'd love to hear more about poor Chiara." Said Ruby.

"Me too." Said Sophie.

"She sounds daft." Said Sarah. "Killing herself over a guy."

"Oh, the young....." Muttered Greta. "You seem born without souls these days."

"Oi !" Snapped Sarah.

Spider held Sarah's hand and was pleased to feel her fingers curl around his.

"Easy Sarah, we're all friends here." He said.

"The story I heard when I bought the place is different." Said George. "The local surveyor told me the family suspected foul play of some kind, murder no less."

"Now I'm interested." Said Lau. "Murder by who ?"

"Unsurprisingly the girl's parent accused the unfaithful lover, Alessandro Ricci. His family were well thought of in the area though, with powerful connections." Said George. "The boy was never arrested, or so I was told."

"My family have lived near Positano for a dozen generations." Said Greta. "I heard a different story when I was growing up, a far darker version of her death."

"I love a mystery Greta." Said Sophie. "Please tell us ?"

"It might be nonsense, the general view is still suicide. I heard that Chiara was expecting a child. Not a problem if she'd married, but a disgrace once she'd rejected the unfaithful Alessandro. Much better for everyone if she went away forever. Some think her family bricked her up somewhere, maybe even in this building.... Or simply dumped her body into the sea."

"Oh poor Chiara..... We must do something." Said Sophie.

"Do what ? Dig around in the cellar or something ?" Asked Lau.

"It happened nearly two hundred years ago Sophie." Said Ruby.

Sophie was a super being, Spider knew that. Yet all he could see was a tiny upset girl, with big eyes, which looked far too sad.

"Can't we hold a séance or something ?" He asked.

"Or we could make a homemade Ouija board." Said Serge.

"Not in my house." Said George. "I'm up for most things, but not that. I don't think calling up the dead is a suitable thing for parlour games. We could go to the cellar and tap the walls, but people have been doing that for years."

"I know what I'm going to do." Said Ruby. "I'm going to help Spider wash up the breakfast things. Spider, you can wash, while I wipe."

That cleared out the kitchen. Everyone left, with Sophie still trying to persuade George to knock down a few walls in his cellar. Spider washed, handing the plates to Ruby to wipe. He waited a while before mentioning a secret, something she'd told him after a night of Pizza and too much pinot grigio, something about her dead lover, Jurgis.

"There was something you told me once, about feeling Jurgis was near you for a while. Can you feel others who aren't.....Alive ?"

"I felt Kurt out there, among the thoughts of the living. I sometimes still do feel him.... They feel different to the living, the thoughts of the dead. If you're hinting I could feel for Chiara and cheer up Sophie, I'm not doing it."

He waited, knowing he had to wait for her to explain. They'd been friends since he'd tried to burgle her flat, he understood her very well. She could have read his mind of course, though he now trusted her to stay out of his thoughts.

"It's not that I'm a heartless bitch Spider."

"I know that."

So tempting to ask her if it was a good idea for him to sleep with Sarah again, but that was certain to kill the moment.

"It's just that we've lost so many friends..... And I've caused far too much death myself. I'm not sure if I could cope with it Spider... Hearing the thoughts of all those people. Do you understand that?" He leant over and kissed her on the cheek.

"Course I do princess.... Not another word from me on that subject, I promise."

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~ Monday 24th December ~

Christmas Eve was a time for last minute gift wrapping, tidying up the tinsel and of course, drinking far too much. George had a satellite dish somewhere on the roof, but eventually everyone was bored with old movies and too tipsy to go to bed. It was past midnight, but like over excited children, no one wanted to go to sleep. Ruby hadn't intended to play any parlour games, yet she found it hard to say no. Later she blamed it on drinking the best part of a bottle of Muscadet, but deep down, she knew she'd wanted to reach out..... To something.

"Do your thing Ruby; see who's awake and not far away." Said Sophie.

"Yes, that was fun when you did it in China." Said Sarah.

"It wasn't a game, I was looking for someone."

"I've never seen you do that." Said George. "It might be fun to know what my nearest neighbours are doing tonight."

"I'm likely to pick up drunken adults and excited kids." Said Ruby. "I'll give it a try though."

Actually conditions were just about perfect. Villa Locatelli was fairly isolated, with the nearest house at least a mile away. The air outside was cold and it was dark outside. Like radio waves, thoughts seemed to travel furthest when the sun had gone down. Ruby quietened her own thoughts and felt for anyone in the area, anyone broadcasting strong emotions.

"There is a man to the north who seems agitated about something."

Ruby felt herself blush, as she realised the man wasn't alone. It wasn't agitation, but good old fashioned sexual intercourse, which was causing him to broadcast his thoughts so loudly.

"Ahhhh I can feel the lady with him..... I think we'll leave them to their fun and move on."

General laughter and George asking for a name and description of the neighbour enjoying a little Christmas Eve lust.

"No names George, it wouldn't be fair. It tends not to work like that way anyway. I get just emotions when scanning like this, working at a distance."

"Look towards Positano, that should be interesting." Said Serge.

"Too many excited people, especially with midnight mass underway." She said. "It all becomes a meaningless mush of noise if there are too many people."

Ruby felt south towards the ocean and found two children, chattering about what they might get for Christmas.

"There are two children not far away." She said. "So clear that I can almost pick up every word. The boy is hoping for a bicycle for Christmas, but the girl is worried that he'll fall off it and hurt himself."

"I know them, twins about seven years old." Said George. "Anyone else out there?"

"I'll look further south George, right out to the coast."

Ruby felt her way south, moving quickly over sleeping minds and those too inebriated to make any sense. Two more couples involved in sexual activity and then the shape of a girl filled her entire mind. Just a dark shape with no face or features, almost like seeing a figure hidden in fog.

"Oh, this one is strong."

"What do you feel Ruby?" Asked Sophie.

“Sadness, such deep sadness. No words in her thoughts, just sorrow and.... The feeling of water in her mouth, now in my mouth. Water, sea water covering her, covering everything.”

Ruby opened her eyes and looked straight at George.

“I’m feeling someone or something which isn’t alive George.”

“Is it her, Chiara ?”

“Maybe, I can’t be certain. I can stop now, if you want ?”

“No, carry on.”

Ruby closed her eyes and hung her head forward slightly. For some reason her gift worked better if she sat in that position. The shape of a girl was still there, still broadcasting sorrow and despair. Ruby used the broadcast ability of her gift, which could be unreliable.

“Were you..... Are you Chiara Locatelli ?”

Silly really, the girl would only have ever spoken Italian. Ruby felt a burst of words in her head, most spoken too quickly and in a language she barely understood. It was her though, the name Chiara had been said several times.

“Slow down, my head can’t.....”

It was no good, the torrent of words continued, all mixed with a strong feeling of deep sadness. Ruby felt sea water in her own mouth again and her clothes felt damp. She opened her eyes and saw the carpet covered in a few inches of dirty sea water. It was coming out of her mouth, gallon upon gallon of salty water.

“No, it’s not real.” She shouted. “I will not be drawn into this.”

Ruby shook her head and dug her nails into the back of her own hand. The water stopped coming out of her mouth, the carpet was dry again. Everyone was looking scared, even George.

“Are you alright ?” Asked Serge.

“I am now, but she was trying to pull me into her thoughts.”

“Was it her ?” Asked Sophie.

“Yes, it was Chiara. I don’t think she meant to hurt me, but it felt as though I was drowning. It seems the poor girl really did fall into the ocean.”

“Was it..... Did she kill herself ?” Asked Sarah.

“I have no idea and I’m not looking for her again to ask. I’m tired, very tired and I’m going to bed.”

“A good idea, I’m off to bed myself.” Said George.

Everyone went off to their bedrooms and despite her tiredness, she enjoyed sex with Serge. Nothing too gymnastic, but sometimes it was nice that way. It was a strange relationship, Serge was over twice her age. It worked though and he wasn’t the sort to get clingy, or want to get married. Ruby was still thinking about whether she loved Serge, when the shape appeared near the door.

“Do you see that Serge ?”

No use, he was already into a deep sleep. Serge could sleep through anything, even thunder storms. Ruby ignored her own nakedness and got out of bed. The shape by the door was the ghost of Chiara, she was certain of it. Ruby walked slowly towards the apparition.

“Are you Chiara ?”

Damn, she kept forgetting that Chiara had probably never spoken a single word in English. If only the girl had chosen to haunt Sarah, who spoke lots of languages, probably all of them. The thoughts of drowning began again and still the form was just a dark outline of a girl. Ruby tried to remember the Italian she’d learned for a school trip to Rome, when she’d been fourteen.

“Cosa vuoi ?” She asked, what do you want.

Another burst of rapid Italian, too fast to take in, much less understand. The ghost of Chiara vanished, as quickly as she'd appeared. Ruby was about to get back into bed, when she felt the screams in her head. It was Sarah, terrified of something. It didn't take much of a leap to realise she wasn't the only person being visited by the ghost of Chiara Locatelli.

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~ Tuesday 25th December – Christmas Day ~

Despite the visitation in the early hours of the morning, everyone seemed happy by the time Christmas lunch was ready. Serge had slept through it all and he was a muggle, not blessed with any special skills. Even he could feel it, the tension in the villa that Christmas day.

"Luckily Sarah speaks fluent everything, so we know it's definitely Chiara." Ruby had told him.

The ghost had visited Sarah and Sophie after leaving their room. Chiara had been busy that night, upsetting Lau and leaving it until four in the morning before haunting Spider.

"I was up and having a pee..... Has Chiara no idea about good manners ? I was naked."

There had been noises too and the sound of wailing. The sounds and sightings hadn't stopped until the sun rose, at just after seven. By then everyone was up and about. Serge was almost relieved, when Spider had asked him to help prepare what he called;

"The biggest blow out of the year Serge. George has bought just about everything you could ask for in a Christmas lunch. Give me a hand to cut stuff, stir things and rub butter into the turkey."

Everyone helped and it stopped the constant talk about the haunting. There was a genuine festive feeling, by the time they were all sat around George's antique mahogany dining table.

"Sit down Spider, you've done enough today." Said George. "I'll make sure everyone's glass is full."

Not just George, Sophie helped him to make sure everyone had a full glass of champagne. The table looked like something out of a glossy brochure for a luxury hotel. Serge had never seen anything like it.

"A toast." Bellowed George. "To Spider, who cooked this excellent meal."

"We all helped." Said Sophie.

There were sprouts which didn't taste that bad the way Spider cooked them. A nice moist turkey filled the centre of the table, which didn't seem any smaller by the time they'd all had second and third helpings. Everyone agreed that it was the best turkey they'd ever eaten.

"I rubbed the butter into the breast." Said Serge.

It had sounded better in his head and he instantly regretted having said it. Every kind of vegetable was there, even some he didn't recognise.

"Spider, did you really learn to cook like this in the army ?"

"Yes, sort of..... And from an old fifties cook book someone left in a flat I once rented."

Everyone laughed, but Spider had said it with a straight face. There was the obligatory Christmas pudding of course, which everyone was too full to eat.

"We might fancy some later." Said Ruby.

"Maybe later next week, I'm completely full up." Said Serge.

Kallina did her thing, of letting Constanze appear first, like some sort of advance warning. Serge saw the elderly cat clamber up onto Ruby's lap, before being fed on turkey meat. The cat was huge, its fur a sort of blue flecked with grey. Kallina always claimed her pet was named after Mozart's wife.

The big question though, was it the same original cat ? If it was, it had be a feline of immense age.

"Kallina, so good you could make it." Said George. "There's plenty of room and still enough food to feed an army."

“And some champagne I hope ?”

“Of course, if Spider will be so kind as to fetch another bottle from the cellar... Actually make that three bottles Spider.”

Serge helped to make sure Kallina was comfortable and feeling she was among friends. She was family to Sophie and Lau of course, their surrogate mother before Ruby took over the role. They all owed so much to Kallina.

“I knew you’d come..... I was certain of it.” Said Sophie.

“Constanze forgot, but I reminded her.... Now did I hear someone mention a ghost ?”

No one had as far as he could remember. It was just Kallina being herself and everyone seemed keen to tell her the story of Chiara. All the various rumours and versions of events. Serge was just grateful Kallina had arrived in her late twenties, blonde female persona. Baba Yaga was always on their side and had saved his life a few times, yet she still made him feel nervous.

“Something has to be done about it.” George said at one point. “I can’t have a wailing girl haunting my villa forever.”

Serge tended to agree, though he did wonder if it was wise mentioning it to Kallina. She was definitely a lady who got things done, but her methods were often strange and bizarre.

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George hadn’t wanted to hold a séance in his home, but Kallina had assured him it was the only way to give Chiara Locatelli peace and allow her to move on.

“Unless you want to hear the sound of wailing every night ? Ghosts can be persistent George. I know, I’ve had to deal with quite a few.”

Kallina claimed to have been born on the Russian Steppes in about seventeen hundred, but she often talked of experiences from long before then. Had she pretended to be Baba Yaga for so long that even she believed she was the real thing, or was she the original ? George was fairly certain she was the original witch from the east. Ruby had once explained to him why a Russian special forces soldier had become paralysed with fear, simply by seeing Kallina as Baba Yaga.

“Throughout the east the children are taught about Baba Yaga. In Serbia they called her Baba Korizma. In Croatia mothers used Baba Roga as a threat to make unruly children behave. The Romanian mothers frightened their badly behaved children with stories of Baba Pehtra. Of course once the children grew up they became too sensible to believe such nonsense. The man in front of Baba Yaga was Russian and at that moment he believed, he was once again a frightened child wanting his mother to save him from the wicked old woman of the woods.”

Now he was about to hold a séance because that wicked old woman of the woods wanted him to. At least she hadn’t wanted to use a Ouija board.

“A séance George, just as midnight passes and it is no longer Christmas day.”

They were all there as his ornate mantle clock struck midnight, all sat around the dining table. Ruby was going to lead the séance, with Kallina observing and offering support. George knew his clock was fast and wasn’t surprised when Ruby carried on waiting. There were no religious objects on the dining table, or being worn. Everyone had their own beliefs, as Sophie had explained to him the previous afternoon.

“None of us, the thirteen, remember where we were born George, so we have no memories of religious festivals or rites of passage. Lau and I are chimera, a mix of human and the people who walked the earth before the dinosaurs, the terrible lizards. Ruby calls them Das Geheimnis, which is as good a name as any. They too believed in a creative being, several actually a whole array of

deities. It doesn't matter what you believe in George. When you die, your soul moves on. Sometimes though for some reason, it gets stuck here."

There was no worry about looking foolish with Sophie. George could ask her questions he'd never have asked anyone else.

"Where do you think our souls go Sophie?"

"Somewhere nice I think, or maybe we keep getting reborn... There is no way of knowing."

Ruby moved and lit three candles, which had been placed on the table.

"Less light would be nice George." She said. "Not darkness, but less bright."

Spider helped him to turn off lights, leaving just a glow from the hallway and the three candles.

There was no command to hold hands or anything. George sat down and waited, as Ruby closed her eyes and gripped the edge of the table.

"I feel you Chiara." She said. "Join us, tell us what you want."

Sarah repeated the words in text book Italian.

"There is nothing to fear, you'll find only friends here."

Again Sarah said the words in Italian, before they waited in complete silence. There was a rush of wind and the candles went out. George waited for a scream or something dreadful, which never happened.

"I feel she's close, command her to appear." Said Kallina.

"Chiara Locatelli." Ruby shouted. "Tell us now why you're tied to this place, or leave here forever."

It sounded so much more serious when Sarah repeated it in flawless Italian.

"I see her, by the fireplace." Said Sophie.

A dark shape again, the outline of a girl hidden in the mist. A little detail formed in the face, the mouth opened. The ghost screamed, a dreadful lingering wail, before the apparition vanished.

"She's gone." Said Ruby. "I don't feel her anywhere. I'll try calling her again."

"It won't do any good." Said Kallina. "So much has changed since she lived here. The villa has been altered, new parts added, old parts demolished. There might be a few ancient trees in the garden, but they can't anchor her here. We need something from when she was alive, something of her day to anchor her soul for a while."

"What can we use as an anchor?" Asked Ruby.

Kallina had transformed from pretty blonde to Baba Yaga, the hideous witch of the east. George didn't find her that hideous, but he did now know she wasn't an enemy, or at least he hoped she wasn't. Her face was ancient and lined, some would have called her a hag in less politically correct times. There was a definite odour too, which he'd noticed before. Baba Yaga had a definite musty smell about her. As in many ancient narratives, her eyes did glow red. There was also a blue glow around her hands, like a supernatural bio-luminescence. He understood why the Russian soldier had been terrified of her. Her voice was deep and sonorous.

"I can prepare a charm, something to hold Chiara's soul to this place." Said Baba Yaga. "I will need something from her past, something very personal. It can be found not far away, but you won't like what needs to be done."

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~ Wednesday 26th December – Boxing Day ~

Luckily it was dark by five in the afternoon and full night by six, which made their dreadful task a lot easier. They'd all fitted into two cars, the picks and shovels going in the Range Rover George was driving. Lau was quite enjoying the excitement and looking forward to seeing Baba Yaga in action. He

preferred Kallina in the persona of the ancient witch. There was no messing around with Baba Yaga. If something needed doing, she got on with it. There was a need for urgency, as the ghost of Chiara had woken the whole house again in the early hours of the morning. Everyone was tired, irritable and not looking forward to the gruesome task ahead.

“You’re sure no one will see us ?” Asked Spider. “It feels a bit early for this sort of thing.”

Lau respected Spider, as did all of the thirteen. They’d all done their rotation, staying with people who could teach them essential skills to survive and thrive in the twenty first century. Lau had helped Spider collect money from uncooperative debtors and carry out a few odd jobs for West London mobsters. If Spider thought it was too early, it made him nervous too.

“We could wait when we get there.” Said Lau. “Give everyone a chance to be in front of their TV, with a glass of wine.”

“Trust me I know the area and I’ve spent quite a few Christmases here.” Said George. “No one goes out on Boxing night, no one. The church is a good distance away from the nearest house and the Locatelli family plot is rarely visited. Whether there is any truth in it we may soon find out, but the family were blamed for Chiara’s death. They eventually sold the villa and moved away. No one even tends their graves anymore, the weeds have overgrown most of them. We’ll be fine.”

Sarah was behind them, driving a large BMW she’d hired for the trip. He saw her headlights bobbing about as she drove along the rough local backroad.

“Here’s the church.” Said George. “It’s almost made for this kind of thing; the car park is hidden away behind the church.”

“I still think we’re doing this a little early.” Said Spider.

“If someone does come to see the grave of a loved one, Ruby can use her gifts on them. They’ll forget all about ever seeing us.” Said Lau.

“True, I’d forgotten Ruby can put the whammy on people.” Said Spider.

“Charlotte is better at it.” Said George. “Ruby can be a little.... Brutal. I’m sure there will be no one visiting the graves tonight.”

Kallina was in Sarah’s car and she waited for them to get the picks and shovels out of the back of the Range Rover. They’d also brought two hand held electric lamps, which George kept charged up and ready in case of power failures.

“They used to call people doing this sort of thing resurrectionists.” Said Serge.

“We don’t need the whole body.” Said Ruby. “Just a part of it.”

“Bones, it’ll be just bare bones after two hundred years.” Said Kallina. “I just need a few of those bones to make a charm, something to anchor the poor girl’s soul.”

George knew the way and everyone followed him through the main graveyard. If they hadn’t been following someone with local knowledge, Lau would have assumed they were lost. They walked quite a distance, across what looked like a wild meadow.

“Not far, wealth brought distance from the common rabble in their day.” Said George. “The Locatelli private cemetery is just the other side of the trees.”

The graves the other side of the trees had been badly neglected. The weeds had been allowed to flourish, trees left to take seed where they pleased. Very few gravestones were still standing.

“This is worse than I thought.” Said Kallina. “Finding a suitable female will be hard work.”

“At least the trees will hide what we’re here to do.” Said Sophie.

There was nothing else they could do, while Kallina carefully picked her way through the trees, bushes and banks of weeds. Everyone found somewhere to sit and wait. Kallina became Baba Yaga

in front of his eyes, the transformation almost instantaneous. He watched as she placed her hand on one of the few standing gravestones.

"Useless, a male." She muttered. "It has to be a woman, a close relation."

Baba Yaga hovered, her feet about a foot above the ground. She moved on, stopping at what looked like just a patch of weeds. She placed her glowing hand flat on the ground.

"A female, but too far removed.... Where is the girl's mother?"

Sophie later claimed to have seen the ghost of Chiara, weeping somewhere in amongst the trees. No one else saw her though. Baba Yaga moved on, muttering about every wrong corpse in every wrong grave.

"Another useless male."

"Damn, a child."

"Not even a relation... This one must be a dead servant."

Eventually Baba Yaga went to the far edge of the overgrown plot, right up to a collapsed stone wall. Lau knew she'd found a body she could use, as her hand began to glow a bright shade of electric blue.

"It's her, the mother." She shouted. "Bring the shovels."

Baba Yaga became Kallina again, who sat on the tumbled down wall and complained about being tired.

"That sort of searching always leaves me fatigued. Someone else will need to dig down to the remains."

"I'll do it, what bit of her do you need?" Asked Spider.

"A foot will do nicely."

"I'll help." Said Lau.

The ground was hard and every stone on the Amalfi coast seemed to have been buried above the coffin. They took it in turns to use the pick, before shovelling out the loose soil and debris. Lau found himself sweating, even though it was a cool night.

"Filling it up again will be easier." Said Sophie, obviously trying to be helpful.

They never did hear the sound of pick against wood, the coffin must have rotted away to nothing. Spider was wielding the pick, when he pulled up a length of broken leg bone.

"We're there, I can see her foot bones." He yelled. "Can someone aim the light down here? I need much more light."

"I brought a flashlight." Said Ruby.

Lau had to move around and lean on the side of the hole, to help Spider unearth the body's left foot.

"Did anyone bring a bag?" Lau asked.

"I brought a few bin bags." Said George.

Good old George, everyone else might have forgotten an essential part of the plan, but George had remembered to bring something to hold the bones. There did seem to be a lot of earth going into the bag with the bits of foot, but that could be dealt with later.

"It's all busted up, do you need every bit of foot and toe bone?" Asked Spider.

"No, I just need a good handful of bones." Said Kallina. "Put the broken bit of leg bone in the bag too."

It was all much harder work than the others seemed to realise, separating bones from the general crap in the grave. After about half an hour, Spider handed the tied up bin bag to Kallina and everyone cheered.

"I'll fill the hole in, you guys must be shattered." Said Serge.

“Pass me a shovel.” Said George. “My doctor is always saying I need more exercise.”

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~ Thursday 27th December ~

The ghost of Chiara Locatelli had been far more thorough with her haunting and wailing the night before. There had been door banging at four in the morning, the first interaction with physical objects by the unhappy spirit. Ruby would have found it exciting, if it hadn't all been happening in George's villa.

“This is my weekend retreat, my home away from home.” He moaned. “And Greta and her husband are in the villa today....I really don't want them to find another employer.”

“Kallina is working on the bones right now.” Said Ruby. “Hopefully we can hold a séance tonight and persuade Chiara to move on, or at least stop waking everyone up.”

“She's worse since we dug her mother up Ruby, far worse.”

Seven am in the kitchen and everyone was up and looking fed up and tired. All of them nodding at George, the noises had been worse the night before. Ruby thought Greta would take the haunting in her stride, but her husband Lorenzo was a different matter. If they left it wouldn't be just them leaving, George would lose their connections, all the local people who kept his villa clean, tidy and comfortable.

“I'll make sure the haunting ends George, I promise.”

“Just get her to be quiet Ruby, like she used to be.”

The awful smell began about an hour later, beginning as the merest suggestion of something unpleasant. Ruby put it down to a local farmer muck spreading, before remembering there were no nearby farms.

“Oh, that smell is getting worse.” Said Sophie.

“I think it's coming from outside.”

“It's definitely worse indoors Ruby. I'm going to find out what's causing the stink.”

“I'll come with you.” Said Sarah.

All three of them went looking for the source of the gradually worsening stench. Ruby just hoped it wasn't the next step in Chiara's haunting of George's home away from home. They tried the main kitchen first, before finding Spider opening the windows in the small kitchen at the back of the house.

“Did you burn something Spider ?” Asked Ruby.

“Like maybe a pair of old socks ?” Asked Sarah.

“It's not me, I'm pretty sure Kallina is causing the stink. She came in while I was making breakfast and took away the biggest saucepan she could find.”

“Where did she go ?” Asked Sophie.

“No idea, I'll help you find her.”

It took a while to find Kallina. She was sat crossed legged in the utility room, using the space between two washing machines and an industrial sized drier. Ruby had always thought cats had sensitive noses, but Constanze was happily curled up next to Kallina. The stench was coming out of a huge saucepan, which was being used as a witch's cauldron. A pale green smoke was rising out of the giant pan.

“You could have warned us about the stench.” Said Ruby.

“It's just a few herbs and the bones Ruby.”

“But that stink Kallina, it's filling the house.” Said Sarah.

Kallina did at least have the decency to look embarrassed.

"It's the bones, the well-rotted marrow." She said. "It can sometimes be a little...Pungent."

"Pungent.... Jeez, it smells like something died." Said Spider.

"It is pretty bad Kallina." Said Ruby. "How long until you're finished?"

"It will take as long as it takes Ruby Mason. Longer if you stand there asking a lot of foolish questions. Leave me in peace now.... Go on..... Go."

They went and they didn't go alone. Constanze had obviously decided enough was enough and rubbed up against Ruby's legs.

"Oh, you poor thing."

Ruby picked up the elderly cat, kissing the top of her head. Spider closed the door to the utility room, just as George arrived, accompanied by Greta.

"Have you found anything?" Asked George. "The stink is filling the house."

"It's Kallina George, making something to help with the Chiara business." Said Ruby.

"I wouldn't go in there." Said Sophie. "She might well bite the next person through that door."

"Ahh, I see..... Will this stink last much longer?"

"No way of knowing, but what she's doing is important. Think of it as war work George." Said Ruby.

Greta was actually smiling, which wasn't the reaction she'd been expecting.

"We live in the converted stables, far enough away to avoid the stink." She said. "We've enough space for everyone..... How about tea and biscuits at our house?"

"That would be perfect." Said Sophie.

"Thank you." Said Ruby.

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There was still a slight smell in all the rooms that night, despite most of the windows being open all day. The villa was chilly and everyone was nervous. The séance was going to be far more intense than the last. Ruby felt guilty for making the haunting worse rather than better. Everyone who was sat around the table as the clock struck midnight, realised there was a need for something to be done.

"We don't know what may happen." Said Ruby. "It's important that you all remain calm."

"What is that smell?" Asked Serge. "No one did get round to telling me."

"Old bones." Said Kallina. "Made into a very special charm."

Kallina placed a bag in the centre of the table, a small pouch tied up with string.

"Once Ruby calls Chiara to this room, the bones of the girl's mother will hold her here."

"Are you using dark magic Kallina?" Asked Sarah.

Kallina actually laughed before answering.

"There is no such thing as dark or light magic, just magic Sarah. I don't even like the word magic. The world contains power which can be called upon. Whether that power is used for good or bad outcomes is up to the person using it. Fear not for your soul Sarah Simmons, tonight we're on the side of the angels."

"I didn't like to ask, but that is good to know." Said George.

"It is time." Said Ruby. "Remain seated and at the table, no matter what you see or hear."

Kallina became Baba Yaga, her red eyes looking around the table, as if daring anyone to stand up and leave.

"Chiara Locatelli, please come to us." Said Ruby.

Again Sarah repeated the words in her flawless Italian.

"I am sorry we defiled your mother's grave. We only did it to help you."

Sophie pointed, but Ruby had already seen the shape, the darkness hiding in the shadows. Near the fireplaces and so well hidden that most would have missed her.

“Come closer, you’ll find only friends at this table.”

There was a rapid tumult of words, far too fast for Ruby to recognise anything. The ghost of Chiara hadn’t left though, the dark shape was still there, hiding in the shadows.

“Did you get any of that Sarah ?”

“Not much, just enough to know she’s pissed off about us digging up her mum.”

It wasn’t surprising and telling Chiara her mother had been dead for the best part of two hundred years and was now beyond any physical harm, wasn’t likely to calm her down.

“Please Chiara, come closer, talk to me. I want to help you move on.”

Another flow of Italian, but slower, far slower. Ruby even understood a few of the words.

“She doesn’t deserve to move on, or so she thinks.” Said Sarah. “Something about forgiving Alessandro and everything being her fault.”

It was an impossible situation. The ghost wasn’t moving close enough for a proper conversation, yet she was probably already held there by her mother’s bones. Baba Yaga knew what to do though, it obviously wasn’t her first difficult séance.

“Ruby, I can help you..... Be me, just for a while.”

Nothing moved between them as far as Ruby could tell, no beam of power being transferred, no spell was cast. Yet she felt different and her friends sat round the table looked different. They were now bright yellow auras against a background of darkness.

“Ruby your eyes.....They’re glowing red.” Muttered Sophie.

“I can see everything now..... So clearly.”

Nowhere for the ghost to hide now, her outline was as clear as day. Ruby could even see the features of a pretty face, her hair done up into a tight bun.

“Come here Chiara, we need to talk.” Said Ruby.

“Don’t ask her, command her to move closer.” Said Baba Yaga.

“Chiara ! Enough of this nonsense..... Come here !”

It was strange to see the ghost walk past Spider, before walking through the heavy mahogany table, as though it wasn’t there. Chiara stopped with her nebulous hand resting on the bag containing the charm made out of her mother’s bones.

“Explain to me Chiara, why is it all your fault ?” Asked Ruby.

“I should have forgiven him. Alessandro was a good man, but like all men he was weak when it came to that need, the lust, the sex. The things I’ve seen going on in this house, men and women committing so much adultery. Alessandro lying with another before we were married was terrible, but not unforgivable. I was so young though, so innocent about the ways of the world.”

“How did you die Chiara ?”

“I was so angry, so upset..... I was with child, another sin to add to my pride and lust. I really had some fanciful notion that throwing myself into the sea would put things right. It didn’t of course, everything became far worse. Taking my own life was another sin, far more serious than the others. There is no hell Ruby, but you probably know that. I believe this place is my hell, walking the hallways and rooms forever is my punishment.”

“Men are weak, but so are we.” Said Ruby. “Blame the one who took Alessandro into her bed, more than you blame yourself. You’re accepting too much blame on yourself and him. You were both young, almost still children. Where is your body Chiara, what became of it ?”

“My head hit a rock, my body died quite quickly.... The sea washed my body into a cave below the water. After a while the entrance collapsed, sealing in what was left of my remains. I haven’t been there in a very long time, but a few bones are probably still in that cave.”

“If we give your bones a proper burial, will you be able to move on ?”

As Ruby watched, the outline of the ghost became flecked with flashes of green, then purple, before a steady red glow set in. The apparition which had once been Chiara Locatelli was having some kind of crisis, but at least she was still anchored there by the charm.

“Move on ! I can never move on. I need to hear Alessandro forgive me in person, hear his voice talk of me kindly again. He will have passed on though, many years ago. My beloved can’t forgive me as he has passed out of this world. I am cursed to remain here forever, with just my sorrow to keep me company.”

Chiara did seem to be wallowing in self-pity, though Ruby could understand that. Given two hundred years of solitude and sadness, she’d probably behave the same way.

“Alessandro can never forgive you Chiara, he’s passed on, so you must forgive yourself.”

“No, never ! Leave this bag somewhere in the house and I will be quiet in my solitude and grief. It calms me in some way, this pouch of bones..... It comforts me.”

Poor Chiara, though she could see George smiling at the other side of the table. At least he’d have a tranquil home, but it would have been nice to help the ghost ease into the next world. It surprised her when Baba Yaga spoke.

“There is a way, though bringing the soul of a loved one back has its risks. Alessandro has had a long time to brood on the wrongs done to him, real and imagined. Worse still he may have met someone he loved, had children and forgotten all about you.... Are you willing to take that risk Chiara ?”

It was all astonishing to Ruby and Kallina hadn’t mentioned even the merest likelihood of making such an offer. The ghost now had a pure white edge to her aura... It was obvious she was going to agree to seeing her dead lover.

“You can really do that, bring him here ? I would risk anything to hear his voice again. I’d risk eternal damnation to feel his arms around me one last time..... Do it, call him from wherever he is.”

Ruby hoped it wasn’t some kind of trick, Chiara didn’t deserve that.

“I can find him and ask, but I can’t guarantee he will come.” Said Baba Yaga. “The choice is his and he may arrive full of hate, or indifference. Bringing people back can be disappointing, they’re never quite the person we knew. Do you still wish me to find him ?”

“Yes, yes, I wish it with all my heart.”

Ruby felt the power of Baba Yaga leave her and she was sat looking at shadows in the dark again. She could still see the outline of the ghost, her hand hovering over the pouch full of bones. Baba Yaga was silent, her red eyes closed. No one moved, or said a word, as the seconds became minutes. Kallina had once told her it was impossible to pull a soul from the beyond, so she hoped it wasn’t just a trick to rid the villa of a troublesome ghost. After fifteen minutes of silence, Baba Yaga spoke again.

“I have found him and he has agreed to come here.” She said. “Though I can’t know what he may say or do.”

It was strange, but occasionally Ruby felt the minds of others without intending to. Perhaps it was the intensity of his anxiety ? She was picking up fear from George, a real worry that his villa might end up being haunted by two sad ghosts. Ruby might have laughed, if Alessandro hadn’t chosen that moment to arrive. Another outline appearing out of the shadows, though one more visible than Chiara had ever been.

"Oh, I can see him.... So handsome." Said Sarah.

"Shush." Snapped Baba Yaga.

Handsome had to be all in the mind. All Ruby saw was the rough features of a man, who could have been any age between seventeen and seventy. He moved towards Chiara, stopping close enough to touch her, but he didn't.

"I wanted to see you so much Alessandro , but now you're here... I don't know what to say. Can you forgive me my love ?"

Baba Yaga had warned that there could be consequences from bothering the long dead. Ruby hoped that Chiara wasn't about to hear abuse from a bitter, twisted and vengeful soul.

"You have nothing to apologise for Chiara. I was the one who was tempted and gave in to that temptation. I should be asking for your forgiveness."

He reached towards her and their fingers touched. Even without the sight of Baba Yaga, Ruby saw yellow sparks coming off the tips of their spectral fingers.

"Oh, that is so.....I'm going to cry." Said Sophie.

"Kiss her you idiot." Said Spider.

"Shush.... This is their time, give them peace." Said Baba Yaga.

No kiss, but the two long dead lovers moved closer to one another, creating more yellow sparks.

"But..... I killed myself and in doing so killed our child...Please, you need to forgive me."

"Once I might have hated you, but not now. That was all so long ago Chiara and what is done can never be undone. Of course I forgive you..... Will you forgive me ?"

"Of course Alessandro, of course I will."

They hugged and the room lit up for a few seconds, a wonderful bright white glow from the two sad souls. After the glow faded, Ruby knew they'd gone, to wherever souls went.

"Is that it, did it work ?" Asked George.

"Yes George, it worked far better than I thought it might." Said Baba Yaga.

"I felt them go." Said Ruby. "Our poor sad ghost has found peace and moved on."

"I think this makes it my best ever Christmas." Said Sarah.

"Mine too." Added Lau.

Poor Sophie was crying too much to speak.

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~ Sunday 30th December ~

There had been a few nights of peace and quiet in Villa Locatelli, everyone had caught up on lost sleep. George had put a silver rose bowl on his dining room table, placing the bone pouch inside it, before filling the bowl with potpourri, as the pouch still smelt rather unpleasant. Ruby had asked him why, even though she'd already guessed the reason.

"Insurance Ruby, just in case our sad ghost ever feels homesick."

Baba Yaga had found the cave, though she returned with just a handful of small bones. The sea had battered the cave for a century or more, before a landslide had sealed the entrance. Most of Chiara's remains had been claimed by the sea. Ruby found herself holding an urn containing just six fragments of bone, all that remained of Chiara Locatelli. They'd agreed to do the deed in full daylight on a Sunday afternoon, even Greta and her husband had joined them.

"Someone should say a few words." Said George.

"I know the Latin prayer for the dead." Said Kallina. "Unless that's a bit over the top ?"

"That would be perfect." Said Greta.

Spider had already dug a small hole in the already disturbed soil of the grave. They were going to inter Chiara with her mother, it seemed the right thing to do. Ruby pushed the small urn deep into the hole, while Kallina spoke the words of the ancient Latin prayer. It really did feel the perfect way to bury the sad girl, who wasn't sad anymore.

"I bet you never invite us for Christmas again George." Said Serge.

"On the contrary, I was hoping we might create a tradition, make it a regular thing."

"I'd like that said Ruby..... A nice tradition for Christmas."

"I'm in, for every year." Said Sophie.

"Just keep the cellar full of booze George." Added Spider.

They were leaving, almost back at the cars. Quite by chance, Ruby found herself with Kallina, the others too far away to overhear their conversation.

"That was all real wasn't it Kallina.... Chiara finding peace I mean."

"I'll admit I did consider a few tricks, but what you saw was real."

"You once told me it was impossible to call a soul back from the beyond."

"Not impossible Ruby, just inadvisable. People's loved ones are rarely how they remember them. I was surprised how well that went."

"Do you think she's happy now Kallina, our poor sad ghost?"

"I believe so..... It is Christmas Ruby and strange things can happen at Christmas, strange and wonderful things."

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~ The End ~

© Ed Cowling – Christmas 2018

There will be another Ruby book at some point in the future and quite a few short stories.

~ Wishing you all a Happy Christmas ~