

WITHER

By Savannah Jezowski

First Chapter Sample



CHAPTER

1

Lilybet Haverly – the Merchant's Middle Daughter

I HAD NEVER been fond of roses. But now I had cause to truly hate them.

I sat near the hearth in the kitchen, watching as the embers turned black. Rosamond and Sookie were near me, squashed together on Mama's rocker. Rosamond cried as she played with Sookie's pale curls—even she, ever the optimist, could find nothing hopeful in our sister's plight. I could hear Papa in his room off the kitchen, weeping. The Spook, who found Papa outside the village and brought him home to us, had left long ago.

The rose that caused it all lay on the floor near the plank table, where I'd dropped it the moment Papa finished telling his tale. I had no inclination to retrieve it but left it crushed and wilting on the packed-earth floor. How could I not hate roses after this? How could I not hate *him*? Of course I knew what folks said about Briarstone Abbey, but I had believed the stories to

be simply that—stories. Some people claimed the Abbey was inhabited by thieves and vagabonds, while others described ghosts and grotesque monsters.

It appeared the harshest rumors had been the most correct. There really was a beast in Briarstone Abbey.

I leaned forward, grabbed a poker, and began to viciously stir the embers until they sparked in protest. I shoved two small logs into the coals and watched as tiny flames flickered around them. Who would have thought a simple flower could cause so much trouble? I didn't blame Papa. If anything, Sookie was more at fault for putting him in mind of the roses. Everyone knows my opinion of roses, so when Papa asked what I would like as a gift when he returned from Pandorum, my little sister impishly recommended a rose bush.

I rose and paced to the window, where I eased aside the burlap curtain to peer outside. The moon shone brightly on the roof of the chicken coop. The Beast had allowed us one day. Then he would come to the outskirts of the village at midnight to collect his bounty. If we did not comply, Papa would be taken as forfeit.

I ground my teeth together. I could not let this happen. There had to be a way around it. My stomach roiled unpleasantly, and there was a pain in my chest too, the hollow pain of helplessness.

Behind me, the rocker stopped creaking. "We should try to sleep," Rosamond said, as if sleep were actually a possibility. I felt a thin arm slip around my waist and a head press against my own.

"Come to bed, Bet," Sookie pleaded, her voice muffled in my hair. She was two years younger and already tall as I was.

"You go up," I said. "I'll come soon."

"Come now," she pleaded. I turned, lifting my arm to wrap it around her. I kissed her cheek. She tried to look brave, but her eyes still welled with tears. We had already told her not to worry, that we would never send her away. Of course she said she was willing to go—that was her way—but I knew our father. He would sacrifice himself first.

I could not allow that to happen either. The girls needed him far more than they needed me. They could not endure the loss of another parent. The mere thought made me ache for them, even Rosamond, who often chafed me like the measles.

I would do anything for them, even abandon them.

“Go to bed,” I whispered. “Both of you. I’ll be with you soon.” The lie stuck in my throat. We were unaccustomed to lying to one another, and my poor sisters did not think to question my promise. They trusted me.

As soon as they had gone up to the loft, I spurred myself into action. No one ever went into the Neverway without the Spook for a guide, not unless they wished to lose life and limb. I must be a fool for considering it, but I had no choice. Sookie was far too young to be forced into such a dreadful fate, not when she was already bound by a curse of her own. Even though her curse was not her fault, rather a case of mistaken identity (naked and bald babies do look rather alike), I would die before letting her rush headlong into another one.

It was time for me to do my part, to offer myself in Sookie’s place and pray that I was an acceptable substitute. It was the only way to save both my father and my sister. I was strong, built for hard labor, not winning husbands. In our home I handled most of the physical, outdoor chores—gardening, chopping wood, maintaining our house and outbuildings—leaving the housework and cooking to my sisters.

This was something I could do. I was sure of it.

Still, the logic of my plan did nothing to dull the pain. The silence of the house cut like a knife to the chest.

I left the kitchen and tiptoed to the back of the house, where I pulled a small pack from a storage chest. Inside I put my supplies: a small torch, stone and flint, and a blanket. I returned to the kitchen and gathered enough food for several days. The only weapons I had easy access to were in the knife block on Mama’s baking hutch. I had to move one of Papa’s boxes to get to it. The box was filled with his tools, tiny gears and springs, and clock faces. He had a workshop, but he often grew lonely and preferred to work inside, to be near us.

I selected a butcher knife from the block and forced myself to turn away.

Pausing outside Papa’s door, I tilted my head, listening. No sound met my ear, and I guessed he had finally fallen into an exhausted asleep. I longed to see him one last time, but I did not dare enter his room, not even for the rifle he hung above his dresser. I splayed my palm against his door and mouthed a silent, agonizing goodbye. Then I shouldered my pack and opened the back door.

I halted before I’d taken two steps out of the house.

“Lilybet!” Papa exclaimed. He came to an abrupt standstill only a few yards away, holding an oil lamp above his head. The orange light of the lantern cast harsh shadows across his square face, glinting on his narrow spectacles. It made him look vulnerable and ghastly at the same time. He wore his leather apron, sleeves rolled up over his elbows, as if he’d come from his workshop behind the house. When had he left the house?

“You startled me! What are you about?” he asked.

I had no answer. Behind him, a dark form separated from the shadow of the old oak along our snaking dirt path. I could not discern his face with Papa’s lantern shining in my eyes. Around us, the night was crisp and silent like a forgotten graveyard in late November.

“What are you doing?” Papa demanded and lowered the lantern. He must have noticed my pack.

“I’m sorry, Papa,” I managed. Without another word, I bolted into the darkness. I had already made up my mind. There was no going back.

There were no electric lampposts in the farming sector of the village, but the moon hung full and bright above me, and stars studded the sky. I could see well enough to find my way, even at a run. I knew I could outrun Papa, but I did not know about the fellow with him. Instead of following the gravel road that wound through the village, I cut across our neighbor’s yard, choosing a more direct route. Behind me Papa shouted my name.

I knew exactly where I was going, to a section of the village wall near the southeast corner. This segment of wall was showing wear, developing chinks in the stone mortar that a person might get her fingers and toes into.

I had scaled the wall before, on a dare.

I skidded to a halt at the perimeter of the village, my heartbeat thundering in my ears. The wall loomed over me, about a dozen feet high. My fingers searched for the cracks. I found a handhold and heaved myself up. I could hear shouts behind me as I flung an arm over my head, searching for another chink in the wall. My feet followed one at a time as I tried to jam the squat toes of my boots into cracks much too small for them. My fingers hurt and I scraped my knees as I climbed, but I forced myself to keep moving upward. I grunted as I heaved myself over the wall and straddled it like a horse, and then paused to stare into the night, straining to hear. My skin prickled with awareness. We had walls for a reason.

The trees tossed their branches against the blue-black of the sky. I could hear the wind moaning through narrow canyon corridors, stirring dead leaves along the base of the wall. Safety lay behind me, and certain death out there. The Neverway was riddled with creepers, the living dead who perish without seeking the Ever Father's healing—the living dead who wander in endless torment.

They were not the real problem, however; I worried mostly about the flesh eaters.

Footsteps pounded against the ground, beneath me. "Hold off!" came a voice from below.

It was Victor, the village Spook. I groaned and closed my eyes. The gig was up. I wouldn't stand a chance of eluding him. Beyond the walls of the village, he had the advantage. I would be on foreign ground. In moments he had climbed up beside me, a thin wooden staff tucked across his waist behind the straps of his suspenders. He sat beside me and pulled his staff free, balancing it on his lap.

"Hullo, Bet," he said. The greeting was casual, but his moonlit expression was not. He removed his cloth cap and scratched furiously at his scalp.

"Hullo, Victor," I replied warily. "I won't be dissuaded. You know what's at stake here." I swung my leg over the wall, intending to jump if I had to. I glanced at the shadows beneath me and reconsidered that notion. I could easily break an ankle.

"Don't you do it, girl!" Papa gasped from below. "You get down here. Snappish!"

"Your father is right," the Spook insisted, his voice taut. "You should reconsider. This is not the way."

Perhaps his opinion would have counted for more had he offered me an alternative. I twisted to look down at Papa, who had set the lantern down at his feet. Puffing hard, he braced one hand against his knee and the other against the wall. His head leaned back so that I could see the grimace on his face.

Victor sighed. "I don't believe you've thought this through. Have you a weapon even?"

"Butcher knife," I muttered.

"Ah." That little word carried a world of hidden feeling.

"Eh? What are you saying?" Papa cried. "You bring her down. You hear me?"

I watched Victor, but he was gazing out into the Neverway. "Perhaps I might come with you and have a chat with this . . . this *beast*," he said.

I breathed a sigh of relief. He did not intend to hinder me. He intended to chat with this beast. Perhaps trounce this beast with his staff. And I jolly well couldn't say that I blamed him. I wouldn't mind doing some trouncing of my own.

As far as Spooks went, Victor came very well recommended—all the way from Pandorum. I had often wondered why such a fellow would come to a small village in the middle of nowhere. Whatever his reasons, I could not deny that he was good at his work. He would be a strong ally when facing a monster.

"Thank you," I finally whispered even as I shook my head. "He said Sookie was to come alone. If you were to show up . . . well, he might . . ." My gaze flickered down toward Papa, who was valiantly trying to climb the wall. He lost his grip and thudded back to the ground with a yelp. I winced. "I will be all right," I said with more feeling than I felt.

"Says the girl with a butcher knife."

I flushed, the heat stinging my ears. "Besides," I continued, ignoring him, ignoring Papa's labored grunts below. "If I am very good, this *beast* may let me go after I have paid off Papa's debt." By the Never, it should not take long to pay for a stupid rose. I might even be home in time for Sookie's birthday. *Her sixteenth birthday.*

"He might," Victor agreed quietly. "But it is just as likely he might not."

I swallowed and clenched my fists. "Better me than Papa." I looked down again, on the village side. Papa had climbed barely two feet off the ground. I could see the top of his bald head, shiny in the moonlight. He often claimed that my antics had caused him to lose all his hair so young.

The thought pained me.

"You have to know," Victor began. His tone demanded my attention. "I realize you mean well, but running away is only going to injure your family. And if you die?" His expression remained resolutely blank. "Well, they will never forget it."

I felt a chill sweep through me; he spoke as if he knew. Something moaned nearby, and I stiffened. Papa gasped and thudded to the ground once more while Victor held a finger to his lips and stretched the arm holding the staff out in front of me. But he needn't have worried. I knew enough about creepers not to startle them. They were dangerous only if frightened or angry.

Two hunched figures stumbled into our line of sight. The creepers moaned incessantly, following the perimeter of the wall. We sat in silence until they shuffled off into the darkness, unaware of us. They left something foul behind on the air, like an aftertaste of the afterlife.

“Lilybet, don’t do this!” Papa called, his voice lost and childlike, as if he already knew he had lost me.

I repositioned, preparing for my descent. I hooked my arms over the top of the wall and braced my feet against the side of it. “Victor, please,” I beseeched him. “I must go.”

He turned toward me and leaned down so that Papa would not hear. “I know,” he whispered. “Keep to the north road. It will take you right to the top of the mountain. The moon is full tonight and will be your friend. Stay out of the trees.” He reached for one of my wrists and squeezed. “And go *quietly*.”

“Thank you,” I whispered back as I pulled my arm free. “Look after Sookie, will you? Keep her away from the Spinner.” I did not have to explain why. We all knew about the curse.

“I will try.”

Knowing it was the best I would get from him, I began to lower myself down.

“Betty, don’t do this!” Papa shouted. I heard a thud, as if he had pounded the wall with one hand. “I’ll go instead! I’ll go! By the Never, Bet! Victor, *do* something!” There were tears in his voice.

I ground my teeth and tried to ignore the writhing in my belly. I felt as if I were betraying him.

When I reached the ground, Victor called my name. I looked up in time to catch the staff he dropped for me. I tested the weight of it and nodded my approval. It was not too heavy.

I took a stabilizing breath. “I love you, Papa,” I whispered, and pressed my fingers to the cold stone. I could hear him on the other side, weeping. Now would be an appropriate time for tears, but I never cried.

So I turned and set my feet to the north road. Behind me, Papa sobbed my name.

End of Sample

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