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Carolyn Walker
Excerpt
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Chapter 1 *The zoo*

‘Today,’ Susie Blackmore thought to herself, ‘is going to be another bad day.’

She was alone in her little flat in West London. It was the end of September 1999, the last quarter of the last year of the century. The millennium, in fact. The sun was coming through the window and outside the trees were moving slowly in the autumn wind. A bus came along the road, stopped outside the house and moved off again. Susie listened for a few moments to the traffic sounds outside her window. Life was going on as usual.

Slowly, Susie stood up and made herself some tea. She took it back to the table by the window and sat holding the cup. This was no good. She didn’t want to do any work. The dream she’d had last night was still with her, following behind her like a ghost.

She’d started having bad dreams several weeks ago, the night after her father died. Sometimes in the dreams she was in a place she didn’t know. She knew that she had to escape from something. She was very afraid of the dark, deathly thing that was chasing her. Often a voice called her name loudly in her dream and she woke up. Although it was a dream, she was sure that the voice was real.

She finished her tea and looked at her watch. It was just after ten o’clock. ‘Come on,’ she told herself. ‘Time to go out, get moving.’ She found her coat and camera and left a message on the telephone answering machine for her

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husband, Charlie: 'I've gone out to do a job. I'll be back around midday. Leave a message and I'll call you back.'

The underground station was fairly quiet at this time in the morning. She bought her ticket and waited for the train. Between stations, the train stopped for a few moments and Susie looked at the other travellers. She studied their faces in the glass in the window opposite. Outside the window, everything was black. She thought of her father again. She tried to see his face in the window glass as well. But his kind eyes and smile didn't come. Had she forgotten his face so soon? She felt a wave of sadness.

She'd felt so terrible when she got the phone call from the hospital. It had all happened very suddenly, they told her. Her father went to hospital very quickly by ambulance, but they couldn't help him. The doctor said he was very sorry. Now Susie felt like a small child again, lost in the big adult world. Well OK, she had Charlie, but that was different. Her mother had died when she was a baby. The only family she had left now were her cousins in Slovenia. But she didn't know her Slovene cousins very well. They phoned her when they heard about her father. It was the first time she had spoken to them since she was a child. His heart just stopped, she told them. No-one could do anything. It was very sudden.

She had dreams about her father, too. In last night's dream he was smiling. 'Don't worry about me,' he said. 'I'm fine.' He was back home in the village in Slovenia where he was born. He was having a great time, seeing old friends and family.

'I'll come and see you as soon as I get home,' he promised. Just as he used to when he was alive, every week.

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In the dream she had thought, 'Ah, he isn't dead after all. It was all a terrible mistake.' And then she'd woken, and remembered.

She got out of the train at Regent's Park and walked towards the zoo. This was one of her favourite parts of the city. It was such a different place from the busy world of shops and business and London traffic. She liked to watch the animals as they played, ate or lay on the ground asleep.

The zoo wanted some photographs of the animals. You had to be very good in the photography business, and Susie knew she was good. But that was not enough. She had to work hard taking photographs. At the same time she had to find new jobs to do. She loved her work but it was a difficult life. She was beginning to feel tired of it. And now her father was gone. Was it time for a change? For the first time in her life, she wanted a child. A child for her father's lost life.

* * *

This morning there were not many visitors. She almost had the place to herself, except for the zoo keepers, who were giving food to the animals. Susie stopped to look at the grey wolves as they walked hungrily up and down. They were like large friendly dogs, really, not at all wild or dangerous. She remembered the stories her father used to tell her about the Volkodlak. It was a terrible thing, a sort of man-wolf-vampire who stole bad children away in the night and drank their blood. When she was little, of course, she thought the stories were true. She smiled as she thought about it.

She lifted up her camera. One of the wolves stopped

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moving and watched her. Susie found herself looking back through the camera. The hair on her skin stood up and she felt suddenly afraid. She couldn't move. She felt sure that the animal wanted to tell her something.

The next thing she knew was that she was lying on the ground. The worried face of one of the zoo keepers was above her.

'Are you all right, love?' he asked. 'I've sent for the doctor.'

'Umm,' was all that she could say.