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A LORNE TURNER GHOST STORY



JOE TALON



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1

THE LANDLINE YELLED THROUGH THE house and punched its way through the front door while I struggled to open it. Still panting from my run I scooped up the receiver. “Turner.”

“Lorne?”

“Yes.”

“Thank God. I’ve been ringing for ten minutes.”

I frowned. “I’m sorry—who?”

Somerset accent but not heavy, elements of grammar school in there somewhere.

“Oh, sorry. It’s Roger Delany.”

The mist of confusion cleared. “Roger, right. What can I do for you?”

Delany owned a lot of land. Not a farmer. A landowner who inherited a minor title of some kind. My dad’s generation, but being a grammar school boarder, they weren’t really contemporaries. The posh accent carved him a place in the ‘local but other’ category. He and my father had been drinking buddies for years.

“There’s been an accident. A cliff fall. How soon can you be down on the bluff near Combe Martin?”

“Damn, that’s...” I did a quick mental calculation. “At least forty-five minutes.”

“Can you do it in thirty?” he asked.

I heard the panic. For Roger Delany to be releasing any emotion, other than English bonhomie, sent a chill up my spine.

“You going to warn the local Old Bill and pay the speeding fine?” I toed off my trainers.

“Right now I’ll pay you to race the bloody Old Bill if it would get you here faster.” Landowners are not known for throwing their cash about, that’s how they survive.

“What’s happened, Roger?” I asked, keeping my voice even, calm. The one I used with the lads when things went noisy, and not in a fun way.

“There’s been a cliff collapse, which wouldn’t be a problem, but there were kids on the bloody beach and the tide has come in. It’s high, Lorne. Really high. We can’t get the boats in, and the professional cliff climbers are down in bloody Cornwall on a training—”

“I’m on my way. Send the GPS location to my phone. I’ll bring my rig and I’ll be on the bike.”

The air rushed out of the man on the other end. “Thank you. I’ll see you soon.”

I hung up and started to move.

THE WIND RIPPED OVER THE cliff top, almost pulling me off my beloved KTM 790 Adventure. The ride down from the top of the moor to the coast had been terrifying, for every damned moment I’d felt life surging and plunging through my veins. Rarely, these days, did something as simple as existence fill me with the thrill of the chase. The roads, due to the shitty autumn weather, were clear of tourists and the locals didn’t venture out much on a Sunday. Most of them would be home, enjoying a warm fire and family time.

Reaching the GPS location I saw a field of sheep-shorn grass, barren of trees that had more sense than to grow and battle the endless wind. A crowd of people stood at the far end, and I bumped the bike over the rough terrain to join them. Adrenaline coloured the world in vivid shades of grey, green, blue and the wild white of cloud and sea spume. I took a breath of salt-bitter air and tried to settle my energy.

I climbed off the bike, removed the gear I’d stowed on the back, and patted the bike’s sharp angled orange and black tank to say thank you for the ride. Looking around I spotted Roger Delany talking to two uniformed police officers. Their thick coats were stark black against the sky. Delany watched me approach and waved.

“Lorne, thank goodness. This is Marshall and Hennessey, the first officers on the scene. They can tell you what happened. The parents are over there but it’s difficult to get information out of them. I thought you’d appreciate a more succinct report.” Delany wore a thick shooting jacket, heavy cord trousers and practical black Wellington boots. He had ruddy round cheeks and a cap on his head defying the wind. It looked like he’d been born wearing the damned thing. The broken blood vessels under his skin and rotund stature made it clear he was the wrong side of sixty to be drinking port, eating cheese and red meat, but he wasn’t the kind to stop.

I shook the hands of the officers. A woman in her thirties who’d give an Exmoor pony a run for its money in the strong and stocky department, and a man who looked like the wind might rip him from our small gathering any moment. He towered over me, but many men did to be honest.

“Lorne Turner,” I stated.

Roger snorted. “Sergeant Major Turner was in The Regiment. Not that he’ll ever admit it to you.”

I glared at Roger. “My father’s loose tongue, Roger?”

He shrugged with no shame whatsoever for outing me. “Something for a father to be proud of, Lorne. Don’t forget that. Your old man was very proud of you.”

My ‘old man’ had little to no idea what I did beyond fighting for Queen and country. This would not be a battle I could win though, so I kept my mouth shut on the subject and addressed the police officers.

“Why am I here?” I asked. I almost asked for a ‘sitrep’, but realised I’d make them uncomfortable. I worked hard to blend in with the new life of a civilian. It had been almost ten months since I’d become a full-time civilian. Ten months of battling my personal demons...

Focus, Turner, or you’ll lose the damned plot again.

The woman, Hennessey said, “A group of the local teenagers, fifteen, sixteen years old thought it would be fun to climb down to the hidden cove to watch the waves and enjoy a fumble.” She was the sergeant by the stripes on her arm. “Knowing the names of the missing, we are fairly certain a reasonable amount of alcohol and drugs were involved. Though the parents deny it of course. Anyway, no one realised they were there until one of the parents received a phone call. How the hell they managed to get a connection we don’t know, but thank goodness they did. Apparently, they’d been in a cave and hadn’t realised the

storm had grown worse. When they tried to climb up the way they'd come down, the sea cut them off."

"So they're stranded on the beach?" I asked, not really understanding why I'd been called off the moor to help.

She looked at her colleague.

Marshall's voice, sounding as if it came from the bottom of a well, surprised me. "No, the storm is pounding the beach and tore down a chunk of cliff. We don't even know if they are alive. No one can raise them on a mobile. We can't climb down. We can't get the lifeboat close to the shore, and the helicopter can't lift off in this wind and stay close to the cliff. We've no experienced climbers in the area. Exmoor's not really known too well for its climbing." The rich Devon roll and dry understatement summed up the calm delivery.

"You want me to go down there to find out if it's bodies you're dealing with or live people?" I looked into three pairs of eyes. Two mucky brown, Hennessey's vivid blue. They were asking me to risk my life for people who might be dead.

"Yes." Hennessey was the one brave enough to admit to the coming sacrifice. "We'll also need you to check out the cave to see if they are behind the rock fall. If you can get in there without placing yourself in unnecessary danger."

I blinked at her, and she had the good grace to blush. They all knew I'd be facing insane odds getting my arse down there. I took in a breath to explain just that in some detail, when a small woman strode towards us wearing a climber's harness. The wind tore at her dark, cropped hair.

Not a problem to afflict me. What little hair I had left, I shaved off.

"Right, Roger, where's the other climber you've found me?" she asked. Small, somewhere in her early forties maybe and made of vibrating tensile steel. Bright hazel eyes assessed me in turn.

"Um," Roger mumbled.

She rolled her eyes at him and smiled at me. "I'm guessing they haven't mentioned me yet? Ella Morgan." She stuck her hand out.

I grasped and engulfed her hand, but her grip tightened like a pit bull's. With no wish to make her feel like I had something to prove I matched, but did not exceed her grasp. She gave me a small nod, but whether in acknowledgement or gratitude I couldn't tell.

"Lorne Turner."

"You know how to climb?"

I thought back to my many adventures on rock faces all over the world, including K2, which had almost killed me. I'd never done Everest, but I had my reasons for that decision. "Yes," I said keeping it simple.

"Right, I told them I wouldn't do it without a climbing buddy."

I'd have done it without a climbing buddy, but I was a junky idiot for dangerous situations. Her attitude reminded me of my first sergeant when I'd been a regular grunt in the Royal Green Jackets, now the 4th Battalion, The Rifles, twenty years ago, but her voice sounded like that of a stone carved angel from south of the Thames somewhere.

"Wiser heads need to prevail in a situation like this," I said, managing to avoid army jargon.

That's one of the hardest bits to give up when you're under pressure. The desire to slip back into familiar patterns of speech is almost overwhelming in its offer of comfort, but keeping my language that of a civilian helped ground me in the present. I needed all the help I could get in that department.

Ella Morgan looked pleased with me so far. I'd not fallen into a trap of calling her a coward by doing the right thing and waiting for another experienced climber.

"Okay, I've assessed the cliff edge, Mr Turner, but if you'd like to check it, I'd appreciate your thoughts."

"Show me," I said.

We stomped over the soggy grass to the edge of the cliff. This area of Devon was made up of sandstone, limestone and slate—none of which were easy climbing because they crumbled like Wensleydale cheese. However, they did give a climber a lot of hand and foot holds.

"Where exactly is this cave they were supposed to be using?" I asked.

Ms Morgan pointed down, and the wind ripped at her practical climbing jacket, and she hunched in an effort to make a small target. I peered over the crumbly edge. The sea clawed at the land with a level of spite you never wanted to underestimate. As predicted the going would be very, very dangerous.

"Still want to climb, Mr Turner?" she asked, almost shouting against the wind.

To be honest, my gut said no—I did not want to climb down there to look for a bunch of idiot delinquents. I stared into the bright hazel eyes and saw a calm confidence I'd rarely witnessed even among my peers. 22nd Regiment Special Air Service attracted all kinds of men, but never

men afraid of a fight. I did not want to lose my life over a bunch of kids who strayed off more than one path to end up here. Ms Morgan, however, she'd do it, and I had the feeling she'd do it with or without me tagging along. The chances of her surviving without me were cut in half, maybe more.

"You know this is nuts, right?"

She grinned and her eyes flashed green for a moment. "Yeah, but it'll be fun."

I chuckled. "Well, if I'm going to hell, it would be a shame to go alone."

"Oh, don't worry, Mr Turner. We aren't going to go to hell."

"You know that do you?" I asked, climbing into my rig and tightening the straps.

She grinned at me, checking her harness again. "Yep."

I watched her stomp off to find a vehicle we could use to tie our ropes off, rather than trust the soggy ground with stakes. I looked down at the cliff again. Maybe fifty metres to the top of the landslide, another twenty-five to the pounding sea, and the beach somewhere under the tumult of waves. I'd far rather fast rope down the side of a glass building with a M16 strapped to my chest and body armour to protect me, but picking our way down an unstable cliff in high winds with the sea playing 'catcher's mitt' happened to be the day's challenge.

Mind you, looking over to the families now gathering around Ms Morgan, I had to admit that doing something good for my community felt right. I'd done some shitty things for my country, so helping now might weight the scales in my favour a little. It might calm the nightmares.

The monster who screamed...

The desert memories haunting me were distanced by the grey heaving mass of the Bristol Channel. The sea and wind howling at me kept me present. All too often the memories weren't distant. They crowded me, tugging at my scarred flesh with ghostly fingers...

No.

Today would be a good day for making new and positive memories.

Turning back, I watched Ms Morgan and saw her do something I'd not seen since the last funeral I'd attended for the men I'd lost under my command. She made the sign of the cross over her narrow chest and bowed her head in prayer, and the others in the group followed suit.

Roger Delany walked over to me. "Local vicar," he said watching her.

I laughed. "Now I know why I'm not going to hell on this little jaunt."

He grinned at me. "Yeah, she does give you a bit of a head start. Though you don't want to get on the wrong side of her. Scary doesn't quite cover it apparently. She's single as well, Lorne."

I snorted. "Wise decision in my experience, Roger. Very wise decision."

2

IT TOOK A LITTLE TIME, but we managed to arrange two heavy duty 4WDs close together on the bluff, their back ends pointing into the weather. Ella and I secured our ropes to the tow hitches, then checked the other's work, just to be certain we were safe. Next, I checked her harness and she checked mine. The straps were tight around my backside and thighs, triggering a surge of rough joy as my body primed for a jump. We both wore white helmets with lights mounted.

Instincts are strange things. For all my body knew, I might be jumping out of a plane or off the side of a building, it didn't matter, the hormonal cocktail pleased me. After being out of The Regiment for months, I'd been plodding through my days in black and white. The nights, they were full technicolour and not in a way I enjoyed. The nightmares were bad, and the daylight episodes weren't much better. Maybe this adventure would shake something loose and I'd sleep tonight, untroubled and deep.

Yeah, and watch that pig drop over the horizon farting rainbows...

I yanked on the rope, annoyed with myself for ruining the moment. I walked to the edge of the cliff with Ella. We turned our backs on the sea.

"Ready?" she asked.

"Ready."

She stepped into the void. I followed. That stomach dropping moment brought a smile to my ruined face. Muscle memory had me fast-roping down the cliff with ease. When I paused, locking the rope to check my buddy, I laughed. She roped like a pro, tackling the descent with no hesitation.

Halfway down the sheer cliff face, a sense of impending doom made me glance over my shoulder.

A huge wave surged towards us.

“Brace,” I bellowed.

Ella locked herself in place and hugged the cliff wall. I didn’t move fast enough. The wave struck us. A freezing wall of water. The smell of ancient salt shocked me almost as much as the cold. I gasped and sucked in a mouthful of the brine. I tucked my head down, but it wouldn’t be enough. The pull backwards left my fingers scrambling at the crumbling surface of the damned cliff.

A small hand reached out and grabbed my arm. Ella’s hold remained firm on the rock, and she clung to me and the cliff wall, preventing me being bounced into the never-never by the sea. She’d grinned at me and laughed as I’d spluttered a thank you.

When the wave cleared, we continued the downward journey swiftly. Our landing on the slippery cliff fall made us both very aware of the dangers we faced.

The sea spray soaked us, and Ella shivered. I shifted a little to take some of the pressure off her small frame. Though I didn’t dare make a big deal out of it, because I’d watched the ferocity with which she’d tackled the cliff, and it didn’t seem wise to equate small with weak.

“Think you can call me Ella now,” she said. “I can’t wait to see that headline: *LOCAL VICAR SAVES SAS SERGEANT MAJOR.*”

I laughed, the thrill of the ride and the battle with the elements leaving me giddy despite my attempt to control it. “There’s no saving me, Ella. I’m afraid that ship took sail about twenty years ago and never put back onto port.”

We tied off again on a huge boulder, but didn’t release our ropes just yet. If the sea did win, and stole us from the land, at least we had the illusion of safety.

The rockslide consisted of small rubble and large unstable boulders. The entire mess was slick with seawater and rain. Rivulets of mud carved small tracks through the detritus. I cupped my hands around my mouth and yelled down into the shallow hole we’d landed beside.

Nothing human came back, just the scream of the wind and waves. Even the gulls were hiding.

The thought of entering the cave robbed me of any joy I'd found in the climb down the cliff. I did not want to be underground again. Never again. Why hadn't I thought this adventure through?

The flash of an image.

A long low tunnel, sides badly shored up with broken beams from destroyed houses. The air hot, suffocating, full of dust and sand, the grit in my teeth crunching as I clenched my jaw, sensing trouble, but unable to turn my unit back.

"Think you're in charge now, Lorne," Ella said, dragging me back to the present.

I took a deep breath and blinked a few times, shredding the vivid internal image.

We needed to lower ourselves into the dark hole. I switched on my helmet light. "Agreed. Keep close to the surface we'll be on, that way you don't crash down hard when you lose your footing. Walk parallel to me rather than directly behind. When you do slip, you don't push rocks directly onto me." I shouted this over the waves and wind. The scent of the sea was so sharp it made my nose sting.

The two-way radio I carried crackled to life. "Lorne? Any progress?" Roger's voice.

"Negative. No sign of bodies so far and no sign of life either."

"Can you get into the cave?"

"Affirmative. We're going to try for it now. We have to go in together. I can't leave Ella on the rocks, it's too exposed. We're likely to go dark for a while."

"Understood. Good luck."

"Hard copy on that."

I wondered if Ella had any experience with the dead, then realised what a fucking stupid thought it was—she'd probably seen more dead bodies than either of the police officers up on the cliff.

I glanced at my companion, and I saw her eyes were closed, lips moving. I waited for a moment, when she focused, I received a brief nod to let me know we were good to go.

"This cave entrance is usually dry unless it's a heavy sea like now," Ella yelled.

"You don't sound local, how do you know?" I asked.

“I’ve been down this way a while and I like exploring. I’m moving parishes soon.”

“Fair enough.” We both ducked as another wave surged over the rock fall, not quite powerful enough to grab us, but we didn’t want to hang about any longer.

We’d be pushing into the cliff to gain access, the hole barely big enough for us. “Just take it steady getting down, we don’t know if we’re landing in water or on a dry surface. If it’s water, I don’t want you drowning. It’s going to be dark down there making you hard to find.”

“I guess this isn’t the time to mention I hate the dark,” she muttered, barely audible over the elements.

It wasn’t the dark that bothered me, rather, the things that lived in the dark.

Insurgents with IEDs and AK-47s. The heat of the desert night making it impossible to breathe with the body armour, webbing and the damned helmet weighted with NGV goggles. Of course, even night vision needed some kind of light to give you the ghostly green shades necessary, and in those bloody tunnels —

“Lorne?” Ella called, dragging me out of the desert tunnels.

“Ready?” I asked, a sharp command.

She flinched a little, but nodded.

I switched on the light strapped to my builder’s helmet and dug my boots into the shale. I lay on my back and wiggled through the small hole, feet first. The moment my head dropped below the ridge line of the collapse the sound changed. The sea became a distant threat. Our harsh breathing and sliding rocks echoed around the black space.

I soon realised neither of us were going slowly enough for the angle of the rock slide. Ella cursed in a very un-vicarly way as she lost control. She hit the shale on her arse. I reached out and managed to grab her coat as she struggled to remain behind me. Leaning into the mudslide, and Ella, prevented us from falling out of all control. I achieved mission success by stopping us from falling into the void below. The black water reflected our weak headlamp lights. A dull sheen of illumination, reluctant and somehow clammy.

“Fuck, that’s going to be cold,” I growled. My breath silvered in the still air and it smelt of damp rock, but not seaweed.

“Sorry, I lost control,” Ella mumbled, scrambling away from me.

I twisted my head, and the lamplight showed a wide cave entrance that soon narrowed and rose at the back. Stepping into the water would

be like entering a gateway, one wrong move and I'd be in another world. Not a cheery thought considering its grim darkness.

We were quiet. The light from our helmets didn't reach far, the beams a powerful weapon of the modern world, battling the ancient dark that existed before God said, 'Let there be light'.

"It's blacker than sin down here," Ella whispered.

I glanced up and behind us. A narrow fissure led to the outside world, but the grey light of the day could not penetrate far into this dark hole. A crawling feeling rose up my arms and back. My chest and throat were tight. My ears were picking up stray sounds, a *knock-knock-knock*, like gunfire as it reverberates off mountains.

I shook my head. The light wobbling about, sent shards of shadow dancing over the walls and water.

"Christ, don't do that," Ella murmured.

"Sorry."

She felt tense beside me. "I don't like the dark. I'm a climber, not a caver."

"Yeah, I don't do underground either," I found myself whispering as well.

Sod this, I was an elite bloody soldier, nothing scared me. Not some stinking daft old cave on England's tamed south-west peninsula.

There would be no IED traps here. We were not going to be captured and tortured. We were not going to be shot at around every corner. We were safe and looking for some idiot delinquents.

No time to hesitate. I cupped my mouth and yelled for the kids. We waited. Nothing came back but a deadened echo, flattened like a muffled war drum, the walls of the cave absorbing our existence.

"How deep do you think the water is?" Ella asked as I checked the radio. Nothing but squelch.

"One way to find out." I handed her my rope to hold onto, as I slipped into the freezing cold. Action over inaction. I wasn't going to stay on that slope listening to my breathing and wondering what lay in the dark.

My balls shot up into my body and my lungs contracted. The water turned out to be hip deep. "Oh, damn me," I snarled trying to modify my language due to the company of a vicar. "You don't need to get wetter, Ella. You're even shorter than I am. Climb onto my back and we'll leave the ropes here."

"You being a gallant chauvinist?" she asked.

I snorted. “No, I’m being practical. If we get stuck down here I’m going to need your body heat at some point. Women run cold at the best of times, so it’s important you retain your natural reservoir. Move before I change my mind and make you walk on water.”

She laughed. “You’re an odd animal, Lorne Turner.”

I didn’t have a reply to that one, my teeth were chattering already. Ella scrambled towards me, and I turned enough for her to reach out and fit her slim frame to my back. I trapped her legs against my waist and settled her weight. She wasn’t much more than my Bergen and an assault rifle.

With great care, I waded into the black water, testing the ground by keeping my feet just off the sandy surface. Grateful for the easy walk, I didn’t notice as the water level dropped and the incline increased. But once the numbness eased from my thighs, I took my first big breath, and moved more quickly. When we reached the opposite shore, after maybe twelve careful steps, Ella wriggled free and dropped to the sand.

“Thank you, Saint Christopher,” she said.

I didn’t reply. Independence oozed from Ella Morgan and being practical, by allowing me to carry her, caused her discomfort. Rather than ask if she was okay, I crouched and removed my helmet so I could use the light more easily. The weight of the cliff rose above us but pressed down simultaneously. The darkness in that narrow cave oozed around us, touching us each time the torch beams moved to a new spot.

“Don’t move too much,” I said, shining the light close to the ground. I pointed, and air hissed over Ella’s teeth. Boot prints covered the sand around us. They layered over each other in a total muddle so I couldn’t tell how many pairs were there, but they were new and not left over from a previous party. “At least some of them are alive.”

We both spoke with the kind of quiet you hear in a church, but no comfort came from the reverence. We were quiet because this silence did not wish to be disturbed.

“What if the prints were made earlier in the day?” she asked.

I deflated a little. She was right of course, and I wish I could prove what my instincts were telling me. These were recent but without years of experience tracking enemies, and sometimes missing friendlies, in many environments, you just couldn’t know.

I rose and followed the majority of footprints as they marched up the slope to the cave’s rocky floor. “Well, I guess it’s time to find out,” I said.

Where the sea breached the entrance on a regular basis everything had that rolled smooth effect making the rock look soft. The walls of the cave were rough above the waterline. The incline sharpened and the cave narrowed, the sand vanished. We followed the residue from the soles of shoes. It wouldn't take long for that to be impossible. The children had gone into the deeper caves.

My heartbeat kicked up.

Silence wrapped its arms around us. Not a comfortable silence. The air thickened, became weighted, expectant, poised... I'd known this air before. Smelt it. Felt it. Experienced the consequences of it.

Dust and sand. Blood and bone.

My breathing tightened.

A feeling rushed over my scalp, a hard black feather being drawn over my skin. Sweat trickled over my naked scalp and down the back of my neck. As the walls of the cave drew in, we faced the entrance to a tunnel.

"We're going to have to go through there one at a time," Ella said.

I heard the worry, and it didn't release the tension in my chest, but it did help me step up. I needed to be the man who invaded enemy territory. Who took out hostiles to save civilians. It almost worked. Right up until I remembered I wasn't that man any longer, and I'd left the damned army for a reason. I was broken.

Don't think about it.

I turned sideways and lowered my head enough to slip into the crevice. Even with the lamplight from my helmet the dark increased tenfold. The crevice rubbed against the climbing gear I'd worn, the sound sibilant. Up close the smell of the rock became overpowering. An alien scent of crystalline structures so old they'd think we were nothing more than fleas biting the surface of the world.

I shuffled forwards. "I thought caves were supposed to be cold?" I talked to the stone wall because I couldn't turn my head. My fingers were pressing into the crumbling stone; it didn't help me believe the ancient rocks might remain in place long enough for us to escape our living tomb.

"They are," Ella muttered. "Christ, if I didn't know better I'd think I was having a hot flush."

Rather than the damp cold of a sea cave this narrow crevice leaked heat. Almost desert-like heat. The air came thick and hard into my lungs. The weight above pressed down. I shuffled on, through the

narrow fissure, my hands pushing against the rock face, trying to find me more room to breathe. More room to move so I could be free.

A low growl of sound.

“What was that?” I asked.

“Dunno, keep moving,” Ella hissed.

The growl turned into a wrenching sound. A snarl of sound. A wail of sound. Of ancient dark, disturbed by the worst kind of trespassers. A disrespectful invader.

A brief flash of an image in my head. People in furs leaving fish and fruit at the cave entrance to appease their local deity. Maybe I should ask Ella if she had some Kendal Mint Cake on her.

The air in the crevice started to evaporate and my breaths became hot pants. I tried to shuffle forwards, but the darkness ahead pressed back against the weak beam of my torch and held me still.

The sound returned. Louder this time. A crunching, grinding of ancient rocks, combined with the bass call of tortured bones. A brutal, ancient sound.

“What the fuck is that?” I heard my panic as if from a thousand miles away.

It lasted no more than a few seconds, but about a million heartbeats.

The crevice grew narrower...

...and in the distance I heard the ratt-ratt-tatt of the .50cal machine gun. Of my personal weapon growing hot in my hand...

“Lorne? Lorne, you’re not moving. You okay?”

...the wind screaming, howling in agony as the dust swirled, red from the sun, red from the blood of Englishmen dying...

A small hand slipped into mine.

I couldn’t turn my head. The dark pressed against me, the wall of the tunnel pressed against me. Grit filled my mouth, making my tongue thick and heavy. Coating my teeth, nose, eyes, ears.

Dust and sand.

“They all died, Ella.” The words were almost as tortured as the screams I’d heard that dying day.

“Lorne, you need to move forwards. *We* need to move forwards.” Not a metaphor, a reality. Her panic made the pitch of her words higher.

The hand squeezed hard, really hard. A jolt of pain nipped up my arm from nerve damage due to an old knife attack.

The screaming crunch of old bones boomed inside the crevice. Ella yelled. My helmet hit the rocks as I shoved back hard, banging my

head.

“What the fuck was that noise?” I yelled into the dark.

It eased, the noise, passed through us or retreated. I didn't know which, didn't care. Just never wanted to hear it again.

“Don't know. Just keep going, please. I can't be stuck in here much longer.”

I tried to push back against the suffocating heat and desert soil between my unit and freedom. Fighting to keep us on mission in the dark tunnel.

My feet shuffled forwards. Success. I moved and the dark retreated.

Cold and damp rushed into my lungs, the air became salty not desert dust. I moved against the rocks pressing down, and with five more shuffling steps the crevice opened.

I stumbled into the dark, lungs filling. With hands on my knees and head bowed, life rushed back where nothing but ancient death had lived.

Stumbling into the new cave to give Ella room, my torch licked against something that wasn't rock. I turned back, a shadow flitted in the distance, on the edge of the lamplight.

“Who's there?” I called out, louder than intended. The echo bounced and doubled, its ricochet fading.

Ella grunted and came free of the rock.

“I did not enjoy that,” she muttered. “I bloody hate Halloween.”

“It's Halloween?” Days tended to blur together.

“Tonight, I guess the kids were planning to celebrate down here first, then go back into town for a night of chaos.”

“Bloody hell.” The terror of being locked in this tomb forever made Halloween all too real right now.

Checking with my boots that the ground remained firm, I lifted my light higher, trying to track the shadow I'd seen move. Nothing but a darker patch of black than the small grotto we now occupied. I should move, go and find out if we were being hunted, but my feet weren't interested in obey my command. I closed my eyes and took a breath. There wouldn't be some nutter ISIS murderer with an AK-47. Therefore, did I have to fight something that wasn't holding an assault rifle? I could just turn away, ignore the problem. I didn't have to be brave, follow orders, or back-up my unit.

Ella stood beside me, and we examined the black void. The walls were smoother even than the other cave, was this one older? Did it fill

with water more often? The ground remained free of sand and no footprints led the way.

“Did they really all die? Your men?” Ella asked into the gloom. A cautious question this one, because she instinctively knew I wouldn’t want to talk about my stupid revelation.

“No, not all of them, it just felt like it,” I said, voice rough, memories rougher. I stepped into the darkness to escape the next question. “Come on.” My heart ached and the tension made my blood sing incoherently in my ears. I needed to yell again now we’d gone deeper into the cliff face, but I didn’t want to disturb the cold silence.

I didn’t want to provoke the shadows. The old gods.

We followed the wall on our left and found another exit. I paused, aware of how this could go wrong in a thousand different ways.

“Maybe you should remain here. Just in case something happens to me.”

Ella snorted. “Yeah, I’m staying alone in the scary black hole.”

I glanced at her. The light on her pale skin blurred her features until it settled. “Scary?” So, I wasn’t the only one feeling the creeping terror of the unknown dark.

“I’m a vicar, Lorne. I know more about the supernatural than the average bloke. It’s kinda in my job description—believe in the unbelievable. Come to think of it, that should be lesson one, on day one. Believe in the supernatural or you’re not welcome in vicar school.”

She was babbling at me. Fuck. We both felt it. The sucking tension. The rising heat again with no source in the cold of a cave. A trembling of the heart. A shivering of the soul.

“I think it might be time you summoned your bit of the supernatural, Vicar,” I muttered.

“You might be right.”

“Think it might be time to start sayin’ it.”

We walked with great care along the wall of the cave, the light unable to point out much. Ella said, “My dad, he was an army chaplain. Bosnia, then the First Gulf War, those little gems of human hatred. He said, ‘Soldiers, great and practical men, until they are faced with the thought of there being *more* out in the world than they can hunt and kill.’ That how you feel, Lorne?”

I shifted against her, the swish of our respective nylon a comfort. “I try not to think about it, Vicar.”

I'd tried to leave the dead on their battlefields, because taking ghosts into the next fight meant you were a danger to those around you who still breathed.

She grunted. "Maybe you should."

"Trust me. That's the last thing you want me to think about right now. It won't bring either of us any comfort. You just say your prayers." I shifted forwards and entered another tight hole. "I'm going to drown those kids."

"You a believer?" Ella asked, following me once more.

I managed to walk shoulders-square this time, even if I was crouched down to avoid being knocked unconscious. "You asking me if I'm a Christian? That's what was on my file at Credenhill."

An image of my commanding officer's filing cabinet rose in my mind, and the bottle of single malt he kept in there for those soldiers who needed a little TLC. We'd shared half a bottle the day I talked him through the parts of the statement I'd made that couldn't go into my official report for the last mission I'd led in Syria.

Ella huffed out a breath. "Just because it says C of E on a file doesn't make a soldier a believer."

"No, I'm not much of a believer beyond: a bloke made some wise statements about how we should live our lives, and ever since people have been dying for those sentiments."

"Well, try to put the sceptic inside you to one side, and focus on what the bloke said about being kind to each other. And that his Dad is able to smite demons."

"Roger that," I murmured.

The low screaming snarled through the tunnel and the temperature rose again. The rock, hot and dry instead of cold and slick against my fingertips, the heat inside me burning. Ella stopped muttering and spoke more clearly into the darkness, forcing confidence into her demands.

"Thy Kingdom come, on Earth as it is in Heaven..."

The tunnel ran under the outskirts of the Kurdish town we were trying to escape because of ISIS sweeping through the area. Desperate to feel the desert air rather than the foul, stuffy heat, I lifted the hatch to freedom. Only an inch. Before checking for wires. Checking for the enemy. Always checking and re-checking. Trying not to forget the one thing which would get us all killed. My trusted instincts were screaming and jumping up and down, begging me to run. I couldn't. We couldn't. This was our only exfil to the LZ.

While we'd been underground the wind had risen again. A howling desert gale. Like being inside a tumble drier with a quarter tonne of sand sticking to every sweaty surface on your clothes and skin. Dusk had fallen, making the turbulent wind fox-red as the dying sun glinted off the small particles in the air. The men behind pressed forwards, as anxious to leave the tunnels as me. If we could avoid being trapped and picked off down here, it would be a miracle.

I stood on a short wooden ladder and watched the technical stop ahead of me, the headlights of the truck bright even in the dim evening. Two men rose from the back and ignored the mounted heavy machine gun. No more than twenty metres from our location they lifted a long narrow tube—

I flipped the hatch up, surged over the top, already firing to bring them down, screaming for my men to run back up the tunnel...

"Amen," called out Ella shocking me back to the tunnel in the present.

Our helmet lights flickered in time. Shadows danced over the tight rock walls and the weight of the cliff bore down on our shoulders. I felt like Atlas.

Ella's voice shook but she began the prayer again, louder this time. I found my voice, sceptic that I was, joining in with no obvious effort. Were Englishmen like me born with the prayer in their blood?

That sound rose from the dark stone around us, a mountain screaming curses. It tore at our ears and our hearts. Ripping around me in the dark and narrow space. I wanted to scream back in fear, in defiance. No mountain would kill me. I'd conquered K2 and many more besides, a mere hill in Devon wouldn't finish me off. A hill's guts wouldn't kill me or send me mad. I battled demons every damned day of my life and half of every night. Whatever lay in the darkness here wouldn't be feeding on my soul, I already carried enough devils in me.

My companion-at-arms shouted her final Amen, and the sound shrieked back. A hot wind rushed over our faces, stinking of seaweed and gulls, then moved on, drifted off.

The temperature dropped, and I drew in a clean breath of sea air. The helmet lights steadied. I wished the same could be said of my legs and arms. Rarely had they trembled enough to leave me feeling weak.

"You okay?" asked Ella on a breath.

"I think so, what the fuck just happened?"

"Not sure. I think we just went to war, soldier."

"Then I'm glad I was armed with you," I said.

She chuckled. "I'm going to kill Roger fucking Delany when we get out of here."

"I'm happy to oblige, Vicar."

3

TWO MORE SHUFFLING STEPS AND we popped free of the tunnel.

"Hello?" came a deep voice from the dark. We both flinched, colliding with each other.

"Hello?" I asked, pushing Ella back behind me.

"Oh, thank God," came a young woman's high tremolo.

We were now in a wider tunnel, not quite a cave and we followed the wall around a sharp bend. There, in the dark, alone and wary, were six young people. No longer the cocky teenagers they'd been a few hours before. We looked into the faces of children.

They were huddled together on a ledge, the young men sheltering the girls. They blinked as our torches picked out their pale, tear stained faces.

"You all here?" asked Ella, moving past me and approaching the children.

"Yeah, we all made it." The lad who had called out to me. He looked younger than the other two boys but had an air of authority about him that I recognised.

"Anything broken?" I asked.

"No, sir."

"You are?"

"Will Bennet, sir. I managed to get us this far through the cave when we realised we were in danger from the sea filling the front cave."

"You in the Air Cadets, son?" I asked. A local unit were based nearby.

“No, sir. Venture Scouts for now. My father is a Royal Marine, but I want to join the Air Force.”

I nodded, making the light flash around the small cave. “Well done. Let’s get these people out and we’ll call it your first mission success.”

“Yes, sir. But...”

“But?” I asked.

His face crumbled. “Something... I don’t...”

One of the girls took up the batten. “Something is down here with us,” she said with shivery conviction. Tears streaked her cheeks, but her eyes were steady. “All our mobile phones ran out of battery at the same time and we were... The dark... It’s—alive.”

Ella glanced over her shoulder at me, her mouth a grim slash. “Let’s just gather you all up, and we’ll head back to the front cave. It’s not flooded, and we’ll be able to see the sky. It’ll make us all feel more comfortable while we wait for more bodies to help us out of here.”

“If it lets us out,” said one of the smaller girls.

Ella moved into the adult mode we all faked in times of trouble when presented with terrified kids. “There’s nothing down here that can stop us,” Ella said. “I’m a vicar, and he’s a soldier. Between us we’ve a pretty cool skill set.”

Will looked at me. “You’re a soldier?”

“I was. Retired. And now isn’t the time to talk about it.” Not that I’d ever be talking to the lad about it.

Ella gave everyone a quick once over for wounds. “I’ll take point on the way back?” she asked me.

Nodding, I gave the kids instructions. One boy, one girl, everyone to have a hand on the shoulder of the person in front, so no one would be lost in the dark. Who knew what pitfalls we’d missed on the way to find the kids? I certainly didn’t want to lose any of them on the way out. This darkness held secrets they didn’t need to experience.

Retracing our steps I heard Ella ask why they hadn’t heard our shouts or her prayers, and if they’d heard the grinding scream. The smallest of the girls answered her questions.

“We didn’t hear anything. The batteries went on our phones and the dark—well—it plays tricks on your mind, right? We... we didn’t hear anything.”

I heard the request for adult reassurance, but left it up to Ella to make the decision. “Yes, yes, the dark plays tricks on the eye and silence on the ear. Without stimulation the brain will believe it has information from

its most important and used source, the retina. At least that's how I think it works." She paused long enough to funnel us through the second crevice. No heat. No atmosphere this time. "What do you think you saw?" Ella tried to sound casual, but the undercurrent was clear to me.

Another of the girls spoke up. "An orb of light maybe and behind it..."

"Shadows," said Will, the Venture Scout.

"Bollocks," said the biggest lad. He looked like a prop forward for a team of jailbirds. "It was just you lot working yourselves up."

"If it hadn't been for you, dickhead, we wouldn't have been stuck down here," snapped the girl with the most makeup, now smeared down her cheeks. "And if you think we're still a couple after this..."

I tuned them out. With no family, I had little patience for this kind of chatter.

They started to squeeze through the final crevice in the rocks, Ella in the lead as agreed. I watched the first four vanish into the darkness. When number five started to slide through, my highly trained operator instincts kicked in with a surge of adrenaline hard enough to make my body twitch.

I turned and checked my six, the lamplight on my helmet flickering for a moment, the shadows dancing—leering out of the black hole. Wishing us a wise farewell.

I backed into the nearest child. Hands aching for a weapon I didn't possess.

"Hey, watch it."

"Lorne?" called Ella.

I stared into the dark and fought to remain present. To push back the surge of panic.

Dust and sand...

I forced a calming breath into my chest and the rock stilled, the cavity turned solid.

"This is no place for people," I muttered.

We filed into the first cave and Ella placed a calming hand on my back. It helped. I needed someone in my life who could offer a centre of calm among the insanity of my memories.

Once we had the kids settled in the corner of the cave, I waded through the water, now down to my knees and hitched my climbing rope back in place. The sense of safety it gave amazed me, as if my body knew this meant we were no longer in danger. Maybe the shadows

would be pacified now we were leaving. I scrambled up the slope, loose rock splashing into the water below and made it to the weak sunlight. It felt good, way too good.

I held the radio out and picked up a signal. I almost gave my old call sign out of habit, but stopped just in time. "Delany? You there?"

"Turner?"

"Roger that."

"Thank God. You've been gone over an hour."

"Really?" I checked my watch. "Shit. Well, we have everyone. They are all accounted for and other than being scared and cold, they are okay." I peered over the mudslide and down at the sea. It wasn't calm by any means, but it had retreated some considerable distance. Some of the most aggressive tides in the world were found on this coast. "I think it's safe enough to get the kids out of here for a rescue team. ETA on the professionals?"

"They are mobilising now. The wind's dropped enough to get the helicopter up."

"Delay that order, Roger. There's no telling what the heli will disturb if it comes close. I don't think we'll need it. Just some experienced climbers to help get the kids up the cliff."

"Understood."

"We'll get them moving now."

"Thank you."

"Turner out."

We'd been in the dark for only an hour, and every bone in my body told me that we'd been down there a lot longer. An awful lot longer.

"Lorne?" called Ella.

"The world is still turning, Ella."

I heard her chuckle. "Any chance of the rescue we need?"

"I think we can manage at least some of it. Let me get down to you and we'll get them out."

"Sounds like a very good plan."

We tied off the first two kids. The prop-forward and his now ex-girlfriend. They climbed up the shale cliff fall without any problem and the big lad helped the next two. An argument broke out up there and Ella yelled at them to behave.

"You better go next," I told her. "If one of them falls in the sea because they're being idiots it'll be our fault."

So Ella and the smallest of the girls followed.

I tied off Will, the Venture Scout, and clipped my harness in place.

“Ready?” I asked.

He glanced over his shoulder. I watched his eyes widen and he stumbled in the water. “What?”

I turned.

No whisper of sound. No subtle rising of heat.

A scream of grinding earth. A mountainous wave of boiling air. A shadow peeling away from the black. Claws forming from nothing. Reaching, grabbing at us. A face, more carved from the ether of darkness than real, but its hate, its violence, that was real. A dead light in coal black eyes. The hint of quartz white fangs. A slate grey skin, hard, unyielding.

I knew, I knew that if it touched us then leaving this cave would be impossible. A scent of rotting fish, rotting flesh, crawled up my nose and down my throat.

We both wanted to scream. We didn’t have time.

I grabbed the lad by the scruff of his neck and raced through the water, dragging him with me. Throwing him at the cliff, I scrambled up, hauling, pushing, forcing him ahead. His feet and hands dug into the rough rock fall alongside mine. Our breathing hissed in panicked unison.

“Go, go, go,” I yelled.

Rage swarmed over my skin, engulfed my head, fought to drag me back into the dark. The endless dark of the cave, *the tunnel, the dust and sand...*

Fingers closed over my arms and pulled us up, up, out through the narrow hole and into the sunlight.

I turned and the dark rushed surged over my legs even as I scrambled away, smacking into a rock. The dark hissed at the light and retreated, taking its rage back into the black. Washing back. Sucking down, down, in the earth from which it had been born.

Will pressed against me, eyes wide, face a mask of terror.

I grabbed his face and forced him to look directly into my eyes. “Listen to me, son. It’s not real. It’s not real. We’re safe. We’re all safe.”

He nodded. The others were still, silent.

Ella’s voice trembled, “Let’s get everyone onto the beach. The tide is out far enough.”

4

TWO EVENINGS LATER I SAT in The Ship Inn, a pub dating back to the 13th century, with my back to the inglenook fireplace. The heat of the logs was welcome and the darkened corner safe. The Reverend Ella Morgan stood at the bar ordering us two pints of the local IPA beer. She wore her dog collar, but also jeans and a thick knitted jumper at least two sizes too large. The post ‘cave rescue’ chaos had been a bit bonkers, and despite needing the publicity for my new business, I’d been uncomfortable with the press taking such an interest in me. It didn’t do to have too many photos of an ex-Regiment man out in the world. I’d not made many friends while operating overseas.

Fortunately, Ella took the weight of that burden, and proved adept at handling the insanity while giving out my small company’s pitiful website. If I received a few emails about survival courses from people, and corporate team building exercises I’d be a, well not happy maybe, that was too much to hope for these days, but I might make a mortgage payment or two.

She’d rung me earlier to check up on me—pastoral care apparently. Something in my voice must have given away the sleepless nights I’d endured since the rescue, and she invited me to the pub for a pint. The rain sweeping in off the moor kept the place quiet.

Sitting opposite me in a chair so large it made her look like a child, she pushed my pint over the top of the dark wood table. “Food on its way,” she said.

“I didn’t order any.”

A fine dark eyebrow rose. “No. But I’m guessing your stomach is as miserable as those bags under your eyes, so no arguing. Besides, they do a damned fine fish pie in here.”

The stomach growl from under the table made her smile as she sipped the thin head off the beer.

“You might have a point, I’ve not eaten much.”

“Some of the kids are having bad dreams as well,” she said, watching me with her sharp hazel eyes. “I’m going to be doing some pastoral visits down in Combe Martin over the coming days. Young Will’s been having a rough time of it. Something keeps trying to suck him down into the dark.” Those eyes wanted to know about my sleepless nights. I avoided her gaze.

“I’d have thought the parents would call a school counsellor. Isn’t that usually what happens these days?” I asked.

“Pastoral care is a lot about counselling. I’ve done a few courses. Have a few pieces of paper. I know how to listen, which is the most important thing.”

“Woman of many talents.”

She grunted and opened a packet of crisps before pushing them across the table at me. “You know you can talk to me any time, about anything. It’ll be confidential.”

“As a priest or a therapist?”

“Whichever makes you feel comfortable. Thomas Hearn mentioned you live next to the Stoke Pero church I’m taking over.”

“He said he was retiring. Didn’t say a woman was taking over.”

“It’s a nice church.”

I sighed. Almost a year I’d been out in the real world—alone for the first time in decades. No family, both parents dead, no siblings, just memories which weren’t really good at all—not even after a bottle of whiskey. I tried not to resort to that option. I didn’t need an alcohol problem to add to everything else.

Ella waited me out.

My eyes skittered over the dark beams pressing down from overhead. They were covered in bright horse brasses that snuggled against lamps on ancient hooks. The pictures of the old pub and hunting scenes in dark frames were stark against the white of the stone walls. The thick dark wood bar was polished to a shine. Countless generations of fishermen, farmers, and scoundrels, had used this pub. Now it tended towards tourists and those who could afford to buy the quaint cottages in the villages.

I sank half my pint and ate some crisps before surrendering to the silence.

“What the fuck was in that cave?”

“What do you think was in there?” she asked.

I shook my head. “No, you aren’t my priest or my therapist. Give me an answer.”

She studied the table top for a bit, pushing around the beer mat. “I’ll answer as a priest, because there isn’t an explanation as a secular person. It’s why I gave up the rational world for one where you have to believe the dead can rise, demons exist and God is in all things as the Holy Spirit.”

“Alright. I can live with that.”

“Good. Those kids disturbed something, something old and dark. Whatever it is, I don’t believe it was human. I’m not an exorcist, Lorne. I’m not trained for it, but I have taken advice from the bishop. When the weather calms down, I’m going back to do a blessing, because if anyone goes down there again, they need to have some kind of protection.”

“Pouring fucking concrete into it sounds like a plan to me,” I muttered.

A soft chuckle made me look at her. “You’re not wrong. Places can hold *things* and those *things* can change. Maybe some children or sailors ended up down there and died. Their spirits were trapped and twisted by time, turning into an elemental force that defies explanation. It’s my job to believe in this stuff and to help corral it into something benign. It was Halloween, you know much about it?”

“Pumpkins, mostly. It’s pushed Bonfire Night out which I think is a shame. Was never a big deal when I was a kid. Not like I had neighbours to hassle.” All celebrations after Tommy vanished were muted for me. With no friend to enjoy the mischief with, what was the point?

“Halloween is the night when the dead walk close to the living. In Cornish it’s called Kalan Gwav and other Celtic languages have their versions. A ‘hallow’ is a saint, so Halloween is modern melding of several versions of All Hallow’s Eve. It’s a liminal time, the halfway point between the solstice and equinox. Lots of significance in all that energy. It’s followed by All Souls Day, or All Saints Day, depending on your brand of Christianity. That’s the first night when the dead are honoured. Originally, it was the night of the new year for the ancient Britons, when they could talk to their ancestors, who could offer advice and such like. I guess that’s why it was demonised and taken over for the saints to

prevent ancestor worship. Who really knows? It's interesting though. I just don't like all the commercialism around it."

"Okay." I poked at the condensation gathering on my glass. I doubted a few prayers and some holy water would calm the kind of hate I sensed in that cave.

She didn't hesitate to continue. "When we were down there something came out of that dark, and I don't think it was after the kids. I think it wanted us." Now she hesitated. "This isn't your first brush with the supernatural is it, Lorne?"

"Do you think it made a difference to what happened in the cave? It being Halloween?" I asked, not quite meeting Ella's eyes.

"It didn't help." Her voice took on an edge, a brutality I'd not heard before. A confirmation of her supernatural life which wasn't something gentle and friendly. A confirmation of the darkness she fought every day as a warrior of God.

I shook my head, the thoughts too far in the wild for me to feel comfortable.

"And stop avoiding my question. What are your thoughts on the supernatural, Sergeant Major Turner?"

I didn't want to answer because I just wanted to forget. I had spent my entire adult life forgetting, until that day in an overlooked and miserable corner of Syria.

"Talking about it isn't going to help," I muttered.

"You know that's not true."

I glared at her but even my best sergeant major stare didn't cow this woman. Coated in bloody Teflon she was. "Bloody hell. Fine. I live next to a graveyard and sometimes the dead weren't all that quiet when I was a kid. My mum told me to ignore what I heard, the fleeting glimpses. She never said much about it, but I believe my grandfather struggled as much as I did with the noise. It's a strange place Dunkery and the moor. Full of these sanitised little villages and towns but under the surface..." I trailed off. My thoughts strayed to Tommy, my childhood friend who'd vanished during one of our night time hunts for the Beast of Exmoor in our local woodland. They'd never found a body, and although his family never blamed me, I couldn't say the same for myself.

"Thomas Hearn talked to me," she confessed.

I nodded. "Thought he had. You know about Alice Winters then?"

"Yes. You saved the poor child in the church and Alice."

“Maybe.” I shrugged. “It’s been quieter since.”

“Exmoor is a strange place. I come from south London. You’d think, with all those people and their stories seeping into the soil there’d be more of the weird, but it’s not true. It’s these borderlands, hinterlands—the places that feel as if they are between two worlds—they hold more of the weird on the surface for us to experience. The moor brushes the sea, touches the wild and until the last seventy years, was a very isolated place. Still is in a lot of ways despite the incomers.”

I grunted a noise that might have been an agreement and realised I sounded like my dad at his most recalcitrant.

“What happened in Syria?” A quiet question from my companion.

It might as well have been a .50 cal machine gun *ratt-attat-tatting* at me. “Can’t talk about it.”

“You can’t talk about the operation, Lorne. You can talk about what you experienced so don’t even think about pulling ‘I signed the Official Secrets Act’ nonsense.”

“It’s all bollocks you know that,” I snapped.

She tried to repress a smile. “Sure it is.”

I huffed. “I was under enormous pressure. We were all exhausted. ISIS were moving in faster than anyone thought possible, and basically we were caught with our fucking pants down.” I was still angry about that—SIS, *Secret Intelligence Service*, had really failed my team. “We’d gone into a town on the border with Iraq looking for a refugee who had solid intelligence on ISIS and the location of their leaders. We knew the timing would be tight. Turned out to be a complete disaster. A local woman, a good Kurdish woman, showed us a tunnel entrance that would take us outside the town’s precinct and into a wadi. It headed in the same direction as our LZ. The Kurds used it to move around undetected by Saddam, al-Assad and anyone else hunting them. I think someone saw us go down there and reported it to ISIS. We were an eight-man unit, I was the senior officer. I didn’t want to take the tunnel. I begged the Head Shed to find us another way out, but they had no resources in the area and we weren’t supposed to be in Syria.”

I sucked in a breath and felt the press of tears sting my eyes. Ella didn’t move, she just listened, and it felt like I confessed all this to the beer mat I stared at with all the intensity of a dog finding explosives.

“We went down into the tunnel.” *Dust and sand, blood and bone. The darkness and heat made my skin prickle in the cool air of the pub.* “I knew. I always bloody know. I have, had, a reputation. I just know stuff.

IEDs, gunmen, suicide bombers... Not always maybe, but often enough to keep my unit alive. I learned over the years to listen to the voice in my head. I took point when we reached the end of the tunnel. I headed up the wooden ladder. I checked for wires, for a trap. Nothing. Still, I knew there would be a problem. We were out of time. We could hear ISIS. If they had found us..."

"Yeah, I've seen the pictures," Ella whispered.

"I flipped the hatch up and faced a technical, mounted machine gun on the back of a flatbed truck, with two men holding an RPG. I fired. I screamed for my men to run back up the tunnel." I clutched my right side, the burns healed well but left scars. A lot of scars. "The RPG went down just behind our position. The tunnel collapsed on my men. I'd ordered them back..."

"Oh, God, Lorne."

"Yeah. Then... A sandstorm blew up, taking the sand of the explosion, visibility dropped to nothing. They didn't see me to drill me full of holes and something..." I shook my head. I still didn't understand what I'd seen that day in the dying light of a fading sun. The sand red. The flags black. The sky a purpling bruise. "I ripped a grenade from my webbing. Pulled the pin. This face rushed towards me, black eyes, maw of a mouth. I threw the frag, grabbed my personal weapon and fired. I just kept pulling on the trigger until my mag emptied. I heard screams all around me. I didn't know I was on fire. I see it in my nightmares. Sometimes during the day. It's why I had to leave the army or I'd still be there." Christ, when had I ever admitted that to someone?

"Your men?" she asked.

I managed to meet her soft hazel eyes, so full of compassion it made my heart ache. "The Americans turned up. Three of us were saved. I am the only one who eventually walked away, though I don't remember the actual exfil. They managed to get the bodies out, pushed ISIS back for a brief time to allow more civilians to race for the border with Iraq. I don't know what happened to the Kurdish woman who tried to help. I hope she escaped."

The alternative didn't bear thinking about. I saw it all too clearly in my head. I felt the rock under my right hip where I lay. My boots scrambling in the dirt to push me back in panic. The town wall rising to my right. The screams of dying children and mothers, as ISIS tore through the neighbourhood, we were running from—always fucking running from

because we shouldn't have been there. This was not our war apparently. But who would save all those babies?

"I woke up in a hospital in Cyprus, still screaming, days later."

My pint quivered as I lifted it to my lips. Dark, strong, bitter sweet, nothing like ale to ground a man in wet and boggy Somerset.

"What happened in Cyprus?" she asked.

I managed to glance at her for half a second. The hazel eyes were gentle, neutral, she didn't think me mad or evil. "I told them about the face, and they basically handed me a bottle of pills and told me I'd be going to a different hospital when I was well enough. I'd been in a coma and my brain needed time to come back. Then my father died, and I had to come back here to sort it out. I kept telling myself it would be fine. Except it wasn't. I started with the panic attacks the moment I returned to the UK. Every time I reached for a weapon..." Even thinking about it now made me sweat. "I was broken—a broken toy soldier. My time was over."

"You didn't tell them about the face in the dust?" Ella asked.

"Unofficially, my CO knew some of it, but officially? What was the point? They'd made their decision. I'd made mine. I was being booted anyway and no therapist in the world would believe what I was able to see... whatever it is I *still* see."

"Men like you would become warrior monks in times past," she said. "You'd lead armies, able to commune with the other world."

I snorted. "Whatever I saw out there I never want to see again."

"You ever heard of djinn?"

"Sure, rub a lamp and a fat man with pointy shoes appears."

She smiled. "Disney version I'm afraid. Djinn are... I suppose we in the West would call them demons, but in Arabic tradition they are neither good nor evil. However, appearing in the middle of a firefight would not be a positive transition into existence."

"It looked so angry and... I don't know... scared, maybe?"

"Wouldn't you be if you were created out of hate and violence? This is a community who were probably tightly tied to the land until recently, as the rural Arab world evolved out of the peasant culture a little later than we did in northern Europe. They went through the industrial revolution faster, who knows what affect that has on the spirit world? I think that's where the pagan revolution has come from in the UK. It's a need to seek balance so many have lost."

"You believe these things exist?" I asked.

“I believe there’s a distinct possibility considering I also believe Jesus is the son of God and rose again on the third day. That transubstantiation is real, and if we repent of our sins, we go to heaven to live in God’s Grace.”

My eyes widened as she talked, and I watched her give a small shrug. “I know,” she said, “I look so sane on the outside.”

That made me laugh and the tension inside me eased, the boil lanced.

“I see it you know,” I whispered. “All the time in my dreams, in the clouds and mists on the moor.”

“You want a blessing? I might be able to give you minor exorcism without it being a big deal.”

I shook my head. “I think it’s a manifestation of my PTSD.”

“What if you’re wrong? Dangerous territory, Lorne.”

“For my soul?”

“For your mental health as well.”

I looked out of the small, panelled window to the dripping night and the rain shattered light of a street lamp. “Maybe. Let me think about it.”

“Don’t leave it too long, Lorne.”

I shrugged. “Been almost eighteen months already.”

She scowled but didn’t comment. “Maybe you could come to the next service I take at Pero?”

I laughed.

She stared at me. “Just because you don’t go to church doesn’t mean the peace of it can’t help you.”

“I spent most of my childhood hiding from the vicar. It’s not a good thing having a church back onto your house when you see the *weird*.”

“Or a graveyard?”

“Or a graveyard.”

“Will you come to a service?”

“Ella. I don’t believe.”

“You see things you can’t explain, why is God such a stretch?”

“Because it’s a defined creation that’s evolved through the minds of generations of scholars and imbued with the wars of centuries.” Nice sharp answer.

“Wow, brutal.”

I shrugged. “I’ve had a lot of time to get angry having served for twenty years—especially the *last* twenty years. I signed up for the army

as the Twin Towers came down. I couldn't wait to escape Exmoor and see the world. Shame I only seem to have seen the parts full of hate."

"My father felt the same during his time serving in Bosnia and the First Gulf War. Except all the hate somehow strengthened his faith."

"Did you want to follow him into the Church?"

"Not in a million years. Couldn't in those days. Then I had my eyes opened to something beyond the human mind and I couldn't deny the call."

"Never married? Kids?"

"Gay and no."

I opened my mouth to say something then snapped it shut.

Her mouth twisted in a mockery of a smile. "Without us queers the Church of England wouldn't exist, so we have our uses."

I nodded. "Fair enough. As a sergeant major, I must have attended every damned course on equality and human rights the army could send me on over the years. If one of my boys had a problem, I was the one they'd find. I was the agony aunt for the entire bloody regiment. Or that's how it felt. I've dealt with my fair share of broken hearts between blokes who were lonely and scared."

"Good. I was half afraid you'd give me a rough time of it."

"Oh, I still plan on taking the piss, but it's not the night for that right now."

We clinked glasses and started talking about the new housing estate going up near Minehead with all the protestors trying to protect an ancient archaeological site.

While we talked, I realised I'd made a friend in Ella Morgan, and it felt good. I felt good. Like maybe the future wouldn't be quite such an empty place, full of the whispering dead.

AUTHOR THANKS

MANY THANKS FOR READING THE first of Lorne Turner's books. If you have a little time, I would appreciate a review

. I really value my readers' thoughts about a book. It often helps me craft future stories. They are vital for indie authors like me.

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I also have FREE AUDIO files for the novellas if you fancy those instead: <https://soundcloud.com/>

This is where my narrator hangs out.



Your Free Book Is Waiting

Lorne Turner, a broken soldier, arrives home for the first time in twenty years to an empty, lonely farmhouse on Exmoor.

The coming days reveal the despair of a farm drowning in debt.

The coming nights reveal something far worse.

Lorne doesn't know if the noises, the *crack, crack, crack*, are the wind ravaging the moor, memories savaging his mind or the ghosts tearing the veil, begging for help.

This novella is Lorne Turner's first mystery.

If you love spooky stories, then you'll love Joe Talon's Supernatural Mysteries.

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COUNTING CROWS

ON A FOG-BOUND MORNING, LORNE Turner stumbles over a murder of crows feasting on the body of a dead man.

It soon becomes clear it's a ritual sacrifice.

But why? Why here? Why now?

Most importantly, why is Detective Inspector Tony Shaw ignoring the ceremonial element? What do the police have to hide?

Lorne knows the darkness is rising, he feels it scream a warning through his nightmares.

Corruption, greed and the abuse of occult mysteries lead Lorne into a world he never thought existed. Trained to stand firm against terrorists, he must now fight the ghosts of his past, and the darkness of a madman.

An old soldier once more goes into battle. What will break first, his mind, or the bodies of his enemies?

[Counting Crows on Amazon](#)

MONEY FOR OLD BONES

LORNE TURNER NEEDS A BREAK, so when he's offered the job of security guard and handyman at an old rectory in the Lyn Valley he takes it.

He thought he'd gain a little space and perspective. A little quiet from the noise in his head, from his demons, from his beast. Sadly, The Rectory doesn't provide the haven he needs.

As the rain falls, waters rise, and old graves move.

The grave of a witch, who cursed the village. The grave of a soldier, who tried to escape the Hanging Judge after the Monmouth Rebellion. The grave of a priest, broken by love and grief.

When the whispering of Exmoor's dead turns into a scream, Lorne has to act.

The original families of Scob must face their debt.

Lorne, Ella, Willow, and Heather need to find a way to balance the scales before more lives are lost.

Can they survive the haunting misery of the old bones? Can they save each other from the beckoning darkness?

And the rain. Always the rain.

[Money for Old Bones on Amazon](#)

DEAD OF THE WINTER SUN

LORNE IS BEGINNING TO UNDERSTAND that the dead might not stay in the graveyards where they belong. He also knows it's time to start

facing this disconcerting reality in the same way he faced his enemies in battle.

So, when Eddie Rice buys a rundown cottage on Exmoor, and an old graveyard, which should be empty, things become increasingly weird. It isn't empty for a start. Not of bodies, or the whispering dead.

After an elderly woman is murdered nearby, Lorne, Ella and the others begin to uncover a plot that links this quiet corner of the world with Cold War espionage. Soviet secrets unravel and the more Lorne discovers the closer to breaking point he gets.

The Winter Sun burns in his blood, eating his mind. Can his desert hitchhiker save him? Or will his sanity fold under the weight of Cold War madness?

Dead of the Winter Sun on Amazon

SALT FOR THE DEVIL'S EYE

LORNE'S HOME IS TURNING INTO A dream. He's happy and at peace for the first time in his life. The nightmares are releasing their grip on his mind and he's learning to cope with the whispering dead.

Sadly, that's not the case for everyone.

An old friend calls about a missing boy from a traveller's camp on the Quantocks. They've been living on the site of an ancient hillfort, near the burial grounds of long forgotten souls.

These people don't trust the police, but they do put their faith in an old soldier to bring their boy home.

When Lorne discovers this disappearance has a link to his childhood friend vanishing, more than thirty years before, his oldest fears start to rise and take form.

The ancient sites of the Quantocks, the modern world of Hinkley Point's new nuclear reactor, and ex-police officer Tony Shaw, start to weave a tapestry of darkness that threatens all the peace Lorne's worked so hard to find.

Salt for the Devil's Eye on Amazon

BAD WATERS RUN DEEP

LORNE ISN'T CONVINCED HIS NEW psychic detective agency is a good idea but when he receives a call from a boarding school, sat in the shadow of Clatworthy Reservoir he reluctantly agrees to help.

The wisdom of teenagers has caused a problem at the school. The students decided the Ouija board they made in class might be fun to use, but when their call is answered, everything changes.

The results have opened a door Lorne has to close or lives will be lost.

The team discover a dark secret. The rising waters of the reservoir that flooded an ancient village called Syndercombe concealed a twisted, evil mind who took the opportunity to hide his dead.

But his evil didn't surrender when age robbed him of life and he's returned to the school, seeking new victims for his twisted desires.

If Lorne, Heather and Ella can't stop the rising evil in the reservoir then more than just the water will be polluted, the souls of the innocent will be lost to the bad waters of Clatworthy.

Bad Waters Run Deep on Amazon

THE ALCHEMIST'S CORPSE

THE COLD OF WINTER WRAPS sticky fingers around Exmoor as Lorne, Ella and Heather learn of Saint Decuman and his healing well in Watchet.

It seems the old saint is trying to send a warning to those able to listen, the elderly of his ancient parish.

When Lorne and Heather offer to help the spooked pensioners, little do they realise they're walking into a warzone.

The local motorcycle gang, The Devil's Mercenaries, are now peddling designer drugs. While a new cult, The Watchers, is offering a different kind of high.

Lorne, Ella and Heather must untangle the links between an old alchemist, the designer drug and the cult before the hauntings claim more lives.

War is on the horizon for this small seaside town and Lorne is a man who knows how to kill. The question is, can he?

[The Alchemist's Corpse on Amazon](#)

THE SPIRIT GLASS

AS MYSTERIES GO THIS ONE doesn't look too bad. At least on the surface.

Lorne's obligations to a department within military intelligence are called in when Ms Pilar Sanchez turns up with her men-in-black.

She leaves behind a box full of photos and secrets. He's tasked with clearing out any mystical or esoteric objects in the cottage of a dead artist who lived nearby.

The cottage is full of paintings and statues of a figure that is ill defined and yet hauntingly beautiful. A creature of dreams.

Those dreams lead Lorne and Heather to uncover an entrance to an ancient mine working.

Within the darkness they find a woman, they find a cage, and they uncover a terrible secret.

Freeing the suffering creature, Lorne does the one thing he vowed never to do. He unleashes hell on the innocent.

It's not just them that pay the price this time. The question is how high will the final cost be for the team?

The Spirit Glass on Amazon

Here's the first Dale Valentine crime mystery.

FOR WHOM THE WILLOW WEEPS

DALE VALENTINE, TRANSPLANTED FROM SOUTH London to the heartlands of Somerset, often feels like the locals keep their secrets in the sap of the apple trees. It's his job to draw them out.

When he receives a call to his small investigation agency from another transplanted soul, he meets the victim of a disturbing poisoned pen letter campaign.

Only the letters aren't to the people in the house, they are aimed at the house.

With the help of his assistant, Milly Wolfe, he soon uncovers a tragic and unresolved death.

Twenty-five years before, a boy was killed and left under a willow tree, surrounded by meadow flowers. And when a second murder happens in the same location, he has to uncover the terrible secrets hidden in the damp and lonely soil of an old farm.

A new crime series from the best-selling author of the Lorne Turner Supernatural Thrillers.

[For Whom The Willow Weeps on Amazon](#)



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