



NATALIS OBSCURA

C. A. SALTORIS



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STORIES BLOWN IN THE WIND



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PITCH BLACK HAIR



"Once upon a time there was a little girl..."

She liked to tell stories like that, some were about love, I didn't like them, I thought they were corny. But some were spooky or at least mysterious, I found those exciting.

"Stories from home," she used to say. She wasn't from here. "Where I come from, we don't have Christmas."

She had pitch-black hair, so dark it reflected the moonlight.

Christmas was her favorite time of the year, even though she had never experienced it. Or maybe that was the reason. She baked cookies, made us hot milk with honey, told us about the birth of snow and a prince who defeated monsters, and shivered every time the church bells rang. At that time, many things were still unclear to me.

I spent hours brushing her pitch-black hair, which smelled of dried roses. She never said much, and I never asked enough. All I knew was that she wasn't much older than us girls, and that she had long worked as an adult in our house, with mother in the kitchen or garden and father in his office.

She had a melancholy that I never really understood. I didn't

know why she never wanted to go out with us or why none of us were allowed to visit her in her room. She was there. Always.

The day I arrived at boarding school, she held my hand so tightly it hurt. I was about fourteen. I wrote to her every week, but I never heard from my dark-haired friend. When I came home for the holidays, I missed her silly love stories and her hot milk with honey.

Now I come here every Christmas with my own family to enjoy the quiet sanctity with my father, who has been alone since my mother's sudden death.

We spend days here, in the house of my childhood, which whispers to me memories of a time when I was happy and had for a friend a black-haired girl whose real name I never learned, who cooked for us and had a light in her eyes that none of us could interpret. She, with her stories of wizards and evil. She was always there, and then she was gone. That's all I heard.

Every Christmas I come here, sit across the table from my father, serve my children food and cookies, and try desperately to understand what she is telling me.

Every year I read a new word from the crevices of her sewn lips. Her eyes are empty sockets bathed in darkness. Her skin is pale and greenish, her expression full of terror. Her pitch black hair is dusty and dull. I must find her body. I must free her. I must find a way to make my father pay for his evil.

NO LIGHTS, NO SHADOW



Leandro had hit a choir member with his backpack and was struggling through the crowded and overly brightly lit Christmas market. His natural reaction would have been to apologize, but he couldn't at the moment. He turned to check on Maya, "Come on, Maya, let's go!" She was sweating under her coat, her brown hair stuck to her forehead. Maya had the book pressed to her chest with her arms crossed.

"Leave the stupid book!" he whispered angrily.

"No!"

He reached for it; she pulled it back. People began to stare. Leandro backed away, afraid they would call the police. He couldn't explain to the police what had happened. His eyes fell on the steeple.

"It found us!" he said. "GO!" At the exit, Leandro fell into the snow and looked around for Maya; she was there. They ran into the forest. "No light, no shadow." they kept whispering, as if praying. They stopped when the light went out. Leandro leaned against a tree, he could only make out the outline of Maya.

"Throw it away!" he said.

"It can help us!"

"My God, Maya, that damn book conjured it up!"

"It was a gift from my grandmother! I can't..." she sobbed.

"I hate to say it, but your grandmother was obviously a witch, and not the good kind!"

"She wouldn't have given it to me if it was dangerous.

"Ha!", his laugh was thin, the cynical laugh of a young man who had seen two of his friends die, murdered by something that wasn't even flesh. "Look around you, Maya! We are hiding from the light! From the light! It tricked you, you were a sacrifice or something."

"Shut up!" they argued as the full moon made its way through the clouds.

"FUCK!" they screamed as they saw the light cast shadows. They ran and stumbled. It was quiet among the trees, no animal daring to make itself known.

"Where's the damn house?" asked Maya.

"I'm not sure, but it must be nearby." When they reached the right street, everything was silent and shrouded in darkness. Silence. They hurried and knocked on the first house they found. They exchanged glances and agreed to kick in the door. The house seemed empty. Maya carefully closed the door behind them and they slid to the floor, hand in hand. The crunch of knives on leather sent adrenaline coursing through their veins again. "Sorry, we're with you..."

A female figure stood in the darkness. She pulled out a match; the flame burned in front of her yellow predator eyes, pointing at the walls: they were littered with shapeless, faceless, tentacled creatures. There was light.

And now there were shadows.

DON'T MOVE



Anna felt thick beads of sweat running down her back and soaking her breasts. She was in the spotlight, her muscles began to shake, and the silent tears she could no longer hold back smudged her makeup. Anna had had the option of staying home on Christmas Eve, but she had chosen to perform, and now it was too late to regret it.

From where she stood, Anna couldn't see her. The wooden floor of the stage was covered with the blood of her colleagues. Out of the corner of her left eye, she recognized a woman who had laughed at Anna's line a few minutes ago, but now had neither mouth nor head. Anna closed her eyes and concentrated on not moving. That was the key: don't move. They, whatever they were, felt the movement.

It was quiet, they were listening. She heard their footsteps, heavy, it was something big, for sure. How many were there? She couldn't tell. She only knew that during one scene she was half standing with her back to the audience when it happened; she could see the backstage and some seats in the audience and the curtains, but nothing else.

As people started screaming and running, someone yelled:

"Whatever you do, don't move!"

It sounded like he knew what he was talking about, but there was already panic. One of her fellow actors was attacked on stage, right next to her, trying to hold on to her legs, she saw his pleading eyes before something tore at him and crushed his skull. That's how she imagined what she saw, but she couldn't put her finger on it.

Now there was silence in the theater. Anna didn't know if she was the only one left alive. A glamorous cemetery, she thought bitterly. Her muscles betrayed her, trembling as if in an internal earthquake. Every inch of her body was numb.

Yet she could feel the presence of things, smell the iron in the air, taste the salt of her tears.

"Whatever you do, don't move." She repeated it in her head, in an endless loop, don't move.

Her legs gave out on her, the pain in her raised arm unbearable.

"Don't move." She shivered.

From backstage she heard a scream, then Lena's torso appeared on stage, her bloody hands clawing at the wooden floor. She screamed in horror.

"Anna, help me!"

And Anna moved.

NAUGHTY



"Oh, snow! You are no friend to me!"

He roared into the gray Christmas Eve as his horse crossed the city toward the woods. His heart beat as loud as a hundred men marching into battle.

As he left the decorated houses behind, he thought about what had happened. He was not a man of superstition, did not believe in the supernatural, and yet, before the eyes of frightened and outrageously excited guests - before his own skeptical eyes - his beloved wife had been kidnapped by something she had summoned herself.

"Aye!" - he urged the exhausted animal.

His Annabelle liked to pretend that she summoned occult creatures, or at least he considered all her doings a mere joke, an innocent amusement for rich, fine and bored young women. Divination, necromancy and witchcraft, all these strange shenanigans had fascinated her all her life, and he let her have her way.

There's nothing wrong with that, he used to say when people worried about his wife's particular taste for the macabre. He found it charming. It made her so exciting. And now this!

A sound! A rustling in the trees brought him back to his amazing reality: a wild chase to save his wife.

"RRRhhhhmmmm!"

It was a scream. A terrified scream. One that formed in the throat that lay beneath a mouth buried behind a silk scarf.

"Annabelle," he screamed as she recognized him. She was nothing but an outline.

Hanging like a bundle over the shoulder of this ... this ...

"Stop, demon!" - he shouted, finally, when he found his voice again.

The horse came to a halt on its hind legs and whinnied in fright, ready to flee.

He held on and the world seemed to slow down as he fell to the ground. He saw Annabelle dangling, as if on one of the creature's shoulders, and thought she must be freezing, in her dress, with no coat, no protection at all. Her eyes were wide open, or at least he thought he could make out her eyes in the blackness of the forest.

As he hit the hard ground with a painful thud and heard his horse run away, his eyes rested on the thing. It was much larger than a man, its hairy arms wrapped around his Annabelle, its horns gleaming, its eyes bright. Its blood-red tongue reached to his hooves.

"Krampus?" - He asked, more to himself than to the thing whose presence was so omnipresent and paralyzing.

Annabelle reached out to him as he stood. She pleaded. Then, as he took a step closer, the tree opened like a door behind the thing.

"Naughty," it shouted, amused as it sounded.

And jumped inside. The trunk closed behind him. And it was gone forever.

His oh so beloved, so beautiful ...

Wicked wife.

OCULUS RISE-X7



"No, this is a revolution!" Daniel lifted his brand-new Oculus and interrupted Mario, who had said the game was "cool.

"Dude, this is the first time anyone has ever been so epically immersed in virtual reality. And it's going to be us."

"Okay, stop bragging, Mr. Influencer, show us the miracle!" said Jenny, who knew she would beat him at this game, as she always did.

It smelled of beer and chips. The computer was on, the lights were on. Everything was ready for the livestream.

"We're making history, folks," he said, raising his glasses again. "Okay, Merry Christmas, this is Delirious! As promised, we're going to test the Oculus Rise-X7 and play Night in the Unknown entirely in VR. For the very first time!"

By the time he finished that sentence, they had over a thousand views. Erica was responsible for staying away from the game and managing the community. Some of her VIP followers were given special goggles to watch the game, like holographic spectators in a cyber-coliseum.

Daniel gave the signal and the other four put on theirs. Erica pressed play. The community was quiet as a mouse, the tension too great.

"Holy FUCK!" exclaimed Daniel. "This is unbelievable! Guys, these aren't embarrassing 3D avatars. This shit looks like The Witcher. In REAL LIFE!"

The five of them moved around the room as if exploring the world.

"I can see you up there! I feel like a fucking gladiator, this is the NEW ERA OF GAMING! I can't see much, we're in a field, I think it's dark and it's raining. I can even feel it! The grass is high, and all we can see is a light behind us coming from a truck, I think; it looks like headlights. We're moving now, and-"

"Shut up!" hissed Jenny.

"What?" replied Dani, laughing.

"Don't you hear it? There's something here," he listened.

"Oh, mega! Hey, guys! Looks like we're being followed."

It was pouring rain, the muddy ground was slippery, the smell of grass and dead animals became unpleasantly real. They heard the growl of something moving the grass.

"This is amazing!" he shouted excitedly.

"Shut up, Dani! Look at me!" And when he did, he realized that she and Jenny were the only ones left.

"Fucking cowards!" he laughed out loud, trying to explain the situation to his audience.

"Dani!" Jenny tugged at his arm. "Listen," she hissed.

He heard grunts like he imagined dinosaurs, he couldn't see more than their legs and grass. He stepped on something.

"Shit, it's Mario, Jenny! He's dead."

The grunting got louder.

"Run, Jenny, run."

The rain was cold, the faces in the audience disappeared.

Game Over.

DOLL MAKERS



*M*y mother sent me to pick up a doll she was buying for my youngest sister. She never had such gestures for me; all I got were hand-me-down clothes and one meal a day.

The place seemed strange to me; I am used to houses like this, after all I am a maid in one of them, and people who live in mansions don't sell dolls.

I rang the bell, but there was no answer. So, I looked around to see if I was being watched and pushed the door open. It gave way.

Dear God! What must it be like to lead such a life?

"Hello?" I called. "I'm sorry, I have to go," I said, for the house seemed deserted. As I was about to leave, however, I saw a young girl. She hid in a corner and looked at me with questioning eyes, then showed me the way and ran in that direction.

Wealthy children are really ... odd sometimes.

I followed her.

She ran through the hallways full of paintings and expensive carpets. I was so fascinated that I almost lost sight of my little guide.

She looked at me again and called me over. Silently, like bread.

I followed her into a basement.

The smell of iron and medicine in the air made me sick.

"My God!" I cried, louder than was good for me, when I saw a fine gentleman and his wife bending over a girl and filling her head with a liquid.

Dozens of absolutely silent girls looked at me with eyes that did not blink.

And that one on the corner, didn't she have...? Thoughts that were never finished because I knew exactly where I saw them.

"They look like..."

"Dolls!" the lady replied.

I didn't even realize that I had spoken out loud or that she was approaching me. She wiped her bloody hand and grabbed the paper from my hand.

"This is yours." She said, pointing to the girl who had led me. Silent, like bread. "Life-size, as promised."

"What?" my voice was only a whisper.

"Don't you like her?"

Her husband turned to me, a handsome gentleman with piercing black eyes.

"I have to go now."

"They live," his voice boomed, and I stopped dead in my tracks, rooted to the spot, "in the seedy part of town, and have lots of little blonde sisters. Your hard-earned money is not enough for a nice life."

My breath was audible. His wife continued.

"We make dolls for interesting ... beings and are looking for a recruiter, someone with access to the raw materials. You wouldn't happen to know anyone who wants to bathe in wealth?"

I look around to get a better look at the "dolls. I know these poor things. Most of them end up either starving to death or, if

DOLL MAKERS

they're lucky, becoming prostitutes. And wasn't that exactly what the future held for my little sisters?

"Do you know anyone?" the gentleman asked.

I looked at him.

"Where do I sign?"

WHITE CHRISTMAS



*M*arina crawled down the hospital corridor, determined like a soldier breaking through a barrier, frightened like a wounded animal on the run. The neon lights above her aching head flickered like a disco ball, always in the same rhythm, like Morse code. Her bloodied body left long stains on the white floor.

The windows were open, it was dark outside, snow was falling. She herself had wished for a white Christmas, she smiled when she saw the tall houses and the warm Christmas decorations, she could almost smell the cookies.

Her wound burned, a tear ran down her sweaty cheek, red with fever. The cold made it hard for her to move, but it numbed the pain, and the silence gave her hope. Only the wind howled, bringing back dark memories. Time was running out, she had left so many traces, she was so weak, they would be here soon. Marina's ear began to pound again, but she had to go on.

When Marina reached the door, her fingers were so stiff from the cold that she could barely open it. She pulled herself up, her

WHITE CHRISTMAS

flesh wound so deep she could see her ribs. She had lost so much blood it was a wonder she could stand.

There they were! She sighed in awe, running her dirty fingers along the lab walls as she stumbled to the jars. So many fetuses. She had no idea there were so many!

Marina searched the drawers of the lab for something to use as fuel, dropping medicine bottles, swabs, scalpels, and syringes at her feet. She found the alcohol and frantically spilled it on glasses, tables and bandages; she reached for the matchbox in her bra.

Then she heard a knock, turned to see Luke's black eyes, his mouth with pointed teeth, her own blood dripping from it, now on his chest. He was sweaty, his shirt torn. He was breathing heavily.

This was not how she had imagined it, she had had the childish hope of escaping, but there he was! She took a deep breath, spilled the liquid on her clothes and hair, and pulled out the match.

Luke ran in, but it was too late. She went to him, looked at the snowflakes, and imagined herself hugging him in the living room and giving him his present.

She thought she heard the fetuses screaming like dying birds. It sounded like music. She saw Luke glowing in the firelight and hugged him with the last gulp of life she had left and gave him her flames. He was so beautiful, somehow.

He gave up, maybe he realized that, and cried out in pain.

Marina smiled.

"Merry Christmas, my love."

CHOSEN



I was chosen today.

"YOU'RE A LUCKY GUY," exclaimed an old buddy, half happy for me, half jealous; I smiled.

I can't believe I'm leaving this place; somehow it feels like I was born here, maybe I was. I can't remember a life that wasn't behind bars.

The man who bought me pinched my muscles, checked my teeth and asked about my health; he looked pleased. They drove me in a fancy car; I saw the lights in the streets, everything so beautifully decorated!

WE ARRIVE AT THE HOUSE, the women wash me, shave my head and all my hair, and oil my skin.

I sit in a room with heavy curtains and many candles and wait. The smell of wine fills the air. It is time for supper.

CHOSEN

. . .

I CLOSE my eyes for a moment and breathe in the silence. Everything is happening so fast that I can't really comprehend it. But as the sharp teeth cut into my flesh and I feel the warm, red liquid running down my legs, all I can think as the pain becomes unbearable is how funny life is: all this time I thought I was a slave

...

FREYMORE ABBEY



It was Christmas Eve when Mary-Ann stumbled through the snow in the cemetery behind the convent chapel, her eyes filled with fear.

"Bring her back!" cried the Mother Superior.

Mary-Ann put her hand to her belly, in front of her unborn bastard, who stirred inside her, reassuring her that despite everything, it was still alive.

"I. Will. Save. You." She promised, almost out of breath.

Her father had taken her there to give birth to their dishonest child away from the eyes of the world. But did he know? Could he possibly know what they were doing to the girls and their children?

That's when Mary-Ann heard men chasing after her. Fast, pounding footsteps and the crunch of fresh snow. They were trying to silence her so she wouldn't talk.

"All those little bones... Hundreds!" she sobbed under her breath.

She only wished that Eliza had escaped as well; Mary-Ann owed her everything, even her life.

The moon was high in the sky, bright, round, bathing the graves in the blue light of the late hour.

"This way!" someone hissed, a woman's voice.

Mary-Ann was weak, hungry and afraid.

"Hey!" she heard a man call from behind her.

What would they do to her if she went back to the convent?

One hand pulled her into the mausoleum, the other covered her mouth so she couldn't scream. She recognized Eliza at once. Her heart was filled with warmth and hope. The friend showed her a tunnel and put a torch in her hand.

"Go all the way through this tunnel and don't look back."

"And what about you? Aren't you coming?" and as Mary-Ann asked this, she saw that Eliza's features were different and strange to her.

She was lively and wild, her eyes were red, she had Fangs?

"Sometimes pain changes you instead of killing you. I'll stay until I avenge my boy."

"What about your face?"

Mary-Ann wanted to ask why her so graceful sister looked so lusty and voluptuous now; why her gaze was so full of mischief, yet so irresistibly beautiful.

But she was gone before Mary-Ann had a chance to question or thank her.

Save him. said a voice in her head, and she knew it was Eliza, and she promised her.

Already in the tunnel, Mary-Ann heard a man curse her friend and then scream in horror and pain.

"What in the world are you?!" and his voice was silenced.

Then she also heard women scream as they were attacked by a beautiful beast. They died one by one, in their rooms, over their heads. It sounded like justice.

Mary-Ann took a deep breath and kept walking, all the way, without turning around. She put her hand on her stomach and smiled.

"I will save you."

VALENTINA



*H*er almond eyes, her long fingers. Her soft skin, the sweet smell of her hair. Always with me.
My Valentina.

"MY MOTHER WAS AN ACROBAT," Valentina said suddenly in the car on the way to the circus.

She had asked me to do it.

"It's an unusual Christmas present, I know, but it's important to me," she had said.

I smiled in amazement.

"An acrobat? You never told me that! So you grew up in the circus?" I asked excitedly.

"More or less... I didn't spend much time with my mom."

Valentina tucked her curls behind her right ear. She always did this when she was sad.

"Are you sure you want to go to the circus? Why don't we go back and watch a movie...?"

"I have to go," she interrupted me coldly. "I want to go," she

corrected herself a little sheepishly, but it was more her growing sadness that made me agree.

"Then let's go to the circus!"

I PARKED JUST as the snow began to fall heavily, turning the ground into cotton candy in seconds. I was so busy cursing the weather that I didn't even notice Valentina getting out of the car. I found her standing in front of the tent looking at a poster. I touched her shoulder, but she didn't react.

Then I turned my attention to the picture taped to the tent: the portrait of a magician. His brown hair was carefully combed to one side, his mustache full and trimmed. The black velvet suit from the nineteenth century gave him an elegant look; he smiled from green eyes. In his hand he held a hat from which red smoke rose.

I felt Valentina touch my hand and squeeze it. The curtain at the entrance opened, she let go of me and went straight to the front row.

"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, welcome to CIRCO TRAMONTO!

I have to admit that I enjoyed the show, laughed and was surprised. It wasn't a silly Christmas date. I was happy, surrounded by laughing children and innocence.

Suddenly, the tent filled with red steam and the lights went out.

After endless seconds of complete silence and darkness, the magical figure Cosmos appeared in the arena and the audience went crazy as if he were Pink. I, who had never heard of him, was somewhat perplexed by his fame.

Cosmos' illusions were terrifying: he could read the minds of strangers, float above us, and resurrect a dove.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, your attention, please." The

magician's tenor voice echoed through the tent and the world fell silent. "To perform my most daring trick, I ask for a volunteer."

Dozens of hands went up, but his assistant went straight to Valentina.

I watched as she was introduced to the audience. I saw her being led into a sarcophagus whose face I could have sworn was hers. I saw Cosmo put his cape over her and then a fire went out.

The audience, torn between fear and admiration, fell silent; a guard prevented me from entering the arena.

The flames spread quickly.

THE LAST THING I remember is being thrown to the side of the road, enveloped in flames that did not burn or hurt, but were cold...

As darkness fell, a door opened directly in front of me, large enough to see inside but too small to climb through. A blindfolded woman in a dirty dress of raw cotton whispered to me:

"WE ARE MANY, we are always many. The human mind is easily deceived and sees only what it believes to be true.

If no one remembers us, we never existed.

But if you find us and bring us fresh blood, we will free them."

SHE HELD my fiancée by the hair, her eyes white as a corpse's, and begged me for help.

LATER, at the hospital, they told me I had hit my head in a crowded shopping mall. They didn't know about a woman named Valentina, and after many frantic phone calls, I found out that no one did. Not even her parents.

VALENTINA

So that was the game: she didn't exist.

Dirty, lost and confused, I hobble to the side of the road, a wreck. I drink a gallon of blood I drew with my bare hands at the hospital when they told me there was no Valentina.

Demons accompany me, hoping I fail.

At every corner, the dimensional gate opens and I see her white, lifeless eyes. Thick drops of blood trickle down her face. Her greasy, matted hair no longer shines. Her lips call my name, but I don't hear a word.

As if possessed, I run toward her, but she disappears into the cosmic smoke.

THE SNOWFLAKES BUILD me a bridge from this existence to the circus, to destroy the magician who took her from me. And that is what I will do.

I will keep the memory of you.

And let it cost me my life, Valentina.

WATER



When she woke up in the bathtub, she was still Lenina. She usually changed back to Maria when she left a client's hotel, but today that was not the case.

She picked up her things and slipped out of the room. It had been a good night. Good money. A good customer, the kind she had now and then, as rare as black pearls: good-looking and good lovers. This one was it. All of the above.

She noticed that her lips, her throat, her whole mouth was dry. Maria longed for water, but she had already left the hotel.

It was snowing, people greeted each other with "Merry Christmas", but not her; she was used to snide looks. Maria, who still felt more like her nickname Lenina, as if she had never taken it off or worn another one, got into a taxi and went straight home.

"Do you have any water?" she asked the driver.

"No, sorry. Do you want me to pull over?"

"No, I'm fine," she lied. Her head was foggy. She tried to swallow saliva to make it better, but it wouldn't go away. Her lips were chapped, or it felt that way.

WATER

Her phone rang a few times, but all she could think about was water. Her stomach hurt. She was hungry, too.

Turning the key in the hole took forever; she had to learn to eat more before she worked. It was hard physical work. She took off her shoes and went straight to the kitchen, drank a bottle of pure, cool water until she felt sick, but her palate still burned, her insides yearned for more. But that would have to do.

She undressed, ran the water into her bathtub, and became Mary again. She dreamed about the water.

SUDDENLY MARIA AWOKE in the cold bathtub, still dry as a rose in the desert.

She got out of the tub and fell to the floor. Again the phone rang. Naked and wet, she grabbed a bottle and read the messages.

"I'm coming to get you."

Stalker. She had stalkers everywhere, it came with the job.

Maria opened the fridge, found she still had some food, took out a raw steak she had been saving for Christmas and ... looked at it in her hands, the texture, the smell, picked it up and bit into it with relish. The cold blood filled her body and finally quenched her thirst.

In her hand, the phone glowed ghostly white against her unnaturally pale skin; and she read the message from her most recent seductive client.

"Welcome to the club," it said.

BEAUTIFUL



They accepted me into their gang because I'm "peculiar," I know. Someone like me doesn't hang out with girls like that, it's just not normal. Sometimes stereotypes turn out to be true.

"Okay, guys," Charlie hissed between her teeth as she leaned against the desk, her black hair falling over her porcelain white shoulders, frowning and smiling excitedly like an old storyteller about to tell the big twist in a tale. "Milena here is going to show us how to play Ouija properly today."

"It's not Ouija," I interrupted her and immediately regretted it, because four pairs of completely unnatural made-up eyes stared at me icily. Superior.

They were all heavily made up, wearing over-the-top sexy black dresses and white lipstick, sometimes wigs: pink and gray and turquoise. I wanted to be like them. What must it feel like to look like that?

"Okay, then explain it to me." Charlie said with a devilish grin and pushed me into a chair.

I sighed.

"It's hard to explain, you have to have seen it and it can't be today."

"Of course it has to be today, tomorrow is Christmas Eve and God knows when my family will leave me alone again. Tonight we can have a pajama party."

I wanted to say that Christmas is a bad time for the ritual, there is too much energy in the air, too much confusion, too much sadness. But I couldn't, because they were all smiling at me, with their white teeth, their dramatically arched eyebrows, and the scent of mint on their breath filling my senses. So much beauty!

"Okay." I relented.

They smiled, and I smiled because I was making them happy. The boys began to notice me, as if I wasn't invisible anymore. I belonged.

CHARLIE'S HOUSE looked like a movie set, it was so impressively decorated. I had never seen anything like it. When I looked in the mirror, I hardly recognized myself: red contacts, my dark hair pulled back, black lipstick, my breasts full and desirable. I was beautiful!

"Well, if you're going to summon demons, you need to look like one," Charlie said with a smile.

She had no idea.

"You need to remove the pentagrams from the room."

"What, you've got to be kidding me! What kind of witch are you?" asked Carla.

A real one, I wanted to answer, but didn't.

"This is something else. Just trust me."

"Do what she says," Charlie said.

She was excited because she knew what I was capable of, she had seen me do many things, but not what they wanted to see. They had no idea what it meant.

. . .

THEY STOOD AROUND ME, forming a circle around the candles. I understand why they like it, some girls have a romantic notion of connecting with other worlds.

AS THE ROOM grew darker and colder, the girls began to shift in their seats, feeling uncomfortable. It was not the kind of excitement they had hoped for. The power that was upon them made them feel small.

I spoke my words, book in hand, and the world around us began to melt.

Tentacles grew out of the walls, huge mouths with sharp teeth opened and closed, an eye appeared just above our heads, slimy green, searching, as big as a dog.

The girls screamed.

"I thought you wanted to see demons," I said between prayers. "I said this isn't Ouija."

But then one of them ran and opened the door to show the pentagrams on the floor.

I WAS glad their blood didn't splatter on me. I had to wait for their skulls to be crushed, their blood to be drunk, and their eyes to be gouged out before I could go home. I had said "no pentagrams," hadn't I? People are so stupid.

BEFORE I LEFT, I packed a bag with wigs, makeup, some shoes, and sexy black clothes and walked past the mirror one more time.

"Wow, aren't I beautiful?"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

C. A. Saltoris writes beautiful and dark tales, like her soul.



