

## **EXCERPTS from Tales of the Lost**

### **BLOOD MOON**

There are certain moments in a lifetime that we never forget, as if all the forces of the universe have briefly conspired to create for us a perfect world. For Lexden Taylor, sitting at the desk in his study, this was just such a moment. It was a hot summer evening and the French doors that led out onto the terrace stood wide open. Moonlight illuminated the trees outside, creating deep shadows and pools of light that made him feel as if he was seeing everything for the first time. The light crossed the threshold, creeping into his study, penetrating the room and illuminating some of the gold-embossed titles at one end of a bookshelf. Sweet perfume from an unknown flower infused the warm air as it flowed around him and he pushed back his chair to stretch his arms, filling his lungs and relaxing. The stillness was unearthly and the silence so immense that he felt like the only man on the planet. He strained his hearing to catch any random sound. There was nothing. He savoured the moment. It was the moment in which his life would change forever.

He looked over the brief introduction he'd just written for a talk he was due to deliver in London two weeks later ~ a talk he would never give. As he studied the opening lines, a tingling sensation crept over his body. The words blurred before his eyes and a distant sound, like a snapping twig, broke the silence. Something in that magical atmosphere had subtly changed as if the previous stillness had been merely a portent to some mysterious event. The tingling sensation became a chill. The rapture of only seconds before evaporated until, with all his senses sharpened, he found himself so strangely ill at ease. He tilted his head to catch whatever sound it was that suddenly made him feel that someone, or something, was watching him.

### **OUTRAGE**

At 26, Sonia Kasprycz had everything. She was fit and healthy, strikingly beautiful, highly intelligent and happily married to Robert for the past five years. She was also the sole beneficiary of her devoted aunt who had died eighteen months ago, leaving her the luxurious house in which she now stood, and more bonds, stocks, shares and money than she would ever need. But before Sonia stepped outside that room, her world would be shattered.

She looked stunning as she strode about in her stylish black suit, sheer stockings and elegant black heels, exactly right for the last in a line of meetings to tie up the financial ends of her aunt's affairs. Her make-up was subtle and immaculate. She used it adroitly. Just enough to invisibly flatter her. She picked up her car keys from the table and paused for a brief moment to listen to the stillness of the house on that beautiful day in the legendary summer of '76. She had completely refurbished it just as she'd envisaged. In that moment's pause the sun fully lit the large sumptuous lounge, streaming in through the big casement windows which were hung with heavy velvet curtains and pelmets. Every tone of colour seemed vibrant in that moment of perfection. And then the phone rang. Its sudden intrusion broke the spell. Sonia hesitated. Would she bother to answer it? She glanced at her wafer-thin gold wristwatch, then took three steps and lifted the receiver.

"Hello."

"May I speak to Sonia Kasprycz?" asked a woman's voice, hesitantly.

"Speaking."

“I’m sorry to have to tell you this but you really should know, if you don’t already. Your husband is having an affair.”

Sonia was stunned and almost dropped the receiver.

“Who are you? How do you know?”

“I’ll be very frank with you, Sonia. I know because I was having an affair with him until last month. Then he dropped me for someone else.”

## **FLORA’S RETURN**

Prompted by the memory of standing at her brother’s grave that morning, she was eventually aroused from her reverie and slowly turned and walked back towards her bedroom door. Once outside, she took a few steps along the corridor to another door on the opposite side and stood hesitantly before it as if she was concerned not to disturb the occupant of this other room. Then, slowly, she turned the handle and pushed open the door. The room was flooded with moonlight. This was where Miles had slept. Everything was as she remembered it. His bed was where it had always been but was now covered from foot to head with a thick white embroidered counterpane that reminded her of a shroud and seemed only to emphasise his absence. Everything was eerily still. Tentatively, she stepped inside the room and again stood motionless as if trying to absorb its atmosphere and connect in some way with something from the past.

“Miles?” she whispered.

She didn’t expect a response, of course, but it gave her some comfort to believe that he might hear her and know that she was thinking of him. Then out of the silence she heard the door close softly behind her as if someone had just left or entered the room. Startled, she swung round. A moment before, the door had been ajar, now it was shut. She snatched it open and looked out into the corridor. She didn’t know what she expected to see. Mrs Gray passing by, perhaps, having closed the door without realising that Flora was there? But there was no one. Perhaps the door had swung shut naturally but when Flora opened it again, it simply stayed in whatever position she left it. Neither was there a draft or breeze to account for the incident. Then she wondered: Might it possibly have been Miles? Was he really there? Did she honestly believe such a thing? If so, was she saying that she believed in ghosts?

## **THE KISS**

But more images invaded her dreams. X stepped out of the screen but was still a silhouette. The Mother Superior stood looking at her disapprovingly from the doorway of her flat. The crucifix spun endlessly on her cell wall until it was a blur. Her rosary broke, the beads clattering to the floor, sliding beneath her feet until she fell, and kept falling, like Alice down the rabbit hole and Lucifer expelled from Heaven. She glimpsed malevolent faces as she sped past them and the bright light above her receded rapidly to a pinpoint. She landed softly and awoke in her bed, sweating and distraught.

Maybe she should ask to be relieved of her assignment. It was the first thought that came to her as she welcomed the sight of familiar surroundings. She got up to make some tea. What was it about Sophie’s kiss that had so disturbed her? And what was this sense of foreboding that had taken root inside her? As she went to the kitchen, she stopped abruptly. The front door of her flat was wide open. It rekindled her dream. She shivered and called out nervously. No one replied. She crept to the door and peered into the corridor outside. There was no one. Back inside, she pushed the door firmly shut and fastened the security chain. Her breathing

was erratic. Of course she couldn't ask to be relieved of her assignment. It wasn't done. As Sophie said, they simply had to obey orders. She reasoned that she was simply nervous about what seemed like an enormous responsibility. The water boiled and she made the tea.

## **THE ENCOUNTER**

Her former irritation was forgotten as she enjoyed the magical experience of walking barefoot in the moonlight, alone but unafraid, and a sudden sense of complete freedom made her almost want to dance ~ but at that point she checked herself and just imagined dancing instead. As she neared the copse within the forest clearing, a sound caught her attention and she stopped to see what animal it was that had been disturbed. She scanned the ground, expecting to see a fox or a badger sloping off through the undergrowth but there was nothing. Then, when she glanced up again, she froze. Looking out at her from among the shrubs she saw a pair of gleaming eyes fixed on her every move. The eyes startled her but she broke into a sweat when she realised that whatever was watching her was much bigger than she was.

Caught in its gaze, she had no idea how fast it might move and felt distinctly disadvantaged in an unfamiliar terrain without shoes of any kind. For a time she hugged the blanket tightly around her and just watched and waited. Eventually she risked making a movement to glance over her shoulder and see how far away the car was. It was much further than she'd thought and when she returned her gaze towards the copse, the eyes that were watching her had moved closer as the creature had taken a step forward. She told herself that, whatever she did, she must not panic but she could feel her heart beating faster as a tingling rash of fear swept over her body. She continued to stand stock still, thinking that any sudden movement might cause it to pounce.

## **IT'S ONLY A MYTH**

Despite delving into many ancient myths, he'd never encountered anything like this. The figure seemed frozen in the act of trying to flee from something too hideous to contemplate. Steeling himself, Victor took a few paces closer. He was deeply unnerved but he knew that if he wanted to inspect the statue properly he would have to penetrate the foliage itself. Tentatively, he pushed aside some low branches and hesitated again before finally entering the space occupied by the statue. As soon as he did so, his skin crawled and he broke into a sweat. He felt a terrible, unwanted intimacy between the statue and himself and what he saw close up only added to his unease.

The features were crafted so finely that it was as if he were looking at a real person whose face was contorted with fear and dread. He'd never seen anything so lifelike. What kind of sculptor could render horrified emotions in such graphic detail? And what kind of sculptor would want to? It wasn't only the face that was vividly real. The musculature of the limbs in their terrified convulsions was equally precise, as were the folds of the subject's robe. Over and beyond the artistic genius of the work ~ a genius surpassing Leonardo himself ~ was a sinister atmosphere that seemed to ooze from the figure and surround it with an aura of utter despair. Victor was transfixed, hardly daring to move but when he realised how fast the light was fading, he was convulsed with a shiver and darted from the undergrowth as if the statue had suddenly reached out to grab him with a grip of stone.