

The Places Between

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Chapter One

Rebecca Ann Samuels' journey was a maddened, headlong dash along narrow lanes, where endless hedgerows strobed through the cone of her head-lamps. There was no time. Dawn would be too late.

The big BMW she drove was a cocoon of rich, soft engine growl, unlike her own battered little hatchback. The BMW belonged to her husband, to David –

Mustn't think about Dr David Samuels, she had to concentrate on getting to the woods fast and alive.

Something flew over the car. . .

Caught in the upper edge of the light cone, not a bird, too big, man-sized, Dear God, *man-sized!* Its wings were fleshy, gliding wings. A tail snaked out in its wake. It banked abruptly, and hurtled back at the windscreen, jaws wide, teeth - nothing but teeth - bared.

Rebecca screamed and swerved, there was a nightmare of juddering, then she was thrown back across the road and up against the opposite bank. Branches lashed at the glass, scraped paint.

It stopped, a violent, near-instant, transition from motion to stillness that wrenched her against the seat belt and jerked her skull first forwards, then backwards against the headrest.

There was silence. The headlights no longer lit up a stretch of empty road but a tangle of branches and leaves where the stalled BMW's bonnet had dug itself into the hedge. Perhaps she should call a breakdown service, someone with a tow truck. Then she remembered that she could call no one. She was alone. She closed her eyes, waited for her breathing to steady.

Another memory. The flying thing. Panicked, she unclipped her seat belt and leaned forward to peer up and out of the windscreen. She saw mostly hedge, though there were glimpses of a brightly starred sky.

She wouldn't be able to see it if it came back.

Except it wasn't going to come back, it was never there in the first place. It was a hallucination, perhaps an owl, distorted by her stress-wracked mind – But it had looked so...so demonic, like something sent from Hell to take her rotten soul back to where it belonged.

No! She slammed her fist down onto her thigh. The dull, sudden pain cleared her mind. She twisted the key, the engine purred into life and she thanked a God who had no business helping her at all. She crunched the BMW into reverse. The car rocked, the wheels spun, then she was moving, a short, bumpy stagger back onto the road. She straightened the vehicle, pushed the gear into first, and stopped.

There was something wrong here. She didn't recognise the lane. It was wider than most of the roads around here, and straighter, slicing into the darkness far beyond the range of her headlamps. Rebecca received a sense of immense, almost terrifying distance. The vegetation was wrong too, the hedges, leafless tangles of thorn, the trees, stark and grey-white with smooth multiple trunks that twisted about one another in a grotesquely sensuous embrace. Their foliage was littered with vast flowers.

Something moved, slithered, yes *slithered*, out of the leaf canopy of a tree almost directly to her left. She rammed the car into reverse and it lurched drunkenly backwards until it erupted out onto a fork in the road. She didn't remember the fork. There had only been the lane, the hedges, her cargo...She reversed a few more yards until the BMW's headlamps showed her a familiar narrow stretch bent into a sharp bend about twenty yards ahead.

She glanced left as she resumed her journey, but saw no sign of the entrance to the strange road - no, wait, perhaps a small, night-shadowed gap, perhaps not.

There was no time to worry about it, time was wasting and she had to get to the woods.

Something had flown over the car and then she had seen something else slithering out of a tree that may not have been a tree, but an immense clump of flowers on the side of a road that shouldn't exist...

There were lay-bys at regular intervals along the border of Foxhill wood. Rebecca parked in the third one she came to. She was stiff, bruised from her crash, from the exertions of earlier, from the fear and shock that had tightened her joints and shredded her nerves.

Outside, the night air was warm enough to taste. Rebecca stood for a moment and hugged herself, a tall, frail-seeming woman in her early thirties, with long brown hair, and naturally pale skin. She was wearing a summer dress and an over-large woollen v-neck. Her clothes were stained, with her own sweat, and with other things that had once belonged to David.

An owl hooted, and in the distance, a fox yipped. A full moon silvered the world. Rebecca shivered, then dragged her shattered courage together, hurried round to the boot and opened it.

The courtesy light flicked on and there, crammed into a messy foetal-curl, was Dr David Samuels, GP for the Suffolk Village of Abbotsfield, and husband to Rebecca Ann. He was still dressed in the pink, pin-striped Van-Heusen shirt and matching tie he had been wearing when Rebecca had followed him into the garage, but it was all stained now, with the blood and other ichors that had spilled from his ruined head.

His eyes were open.

Rebecca had never seen a dead person before tonight. She had not been prepared for the odd intelligence, and the resentment, that would remain in a corpse's eyes. She had not been prepared for the stillness, the impossible *absence*, the unthinkable reality that whatever she did or said to that human body, it would no longer respond.

It would not wake up. Ever.

So don't wake up now, she pleaded silently.

She glanced upward, an instinctive action. There was darkness, there were stars.

No flying thing, nothing that slithered...

Then it was back to her night's work, which she could *not* complete, because she could not *touch* him again. But she had touched him before, had got him into the car, so she *could* touch him again, couldn't she? She hesitated though, because dead flesh was substance only, like meat. And it was that pure-fleshness that made her stomach cramp and her skin crawl.

Oh for God's sake! She reached in abruptly, and grabbed his legs and yanked them, with much grunting and straining, over the edge of the boot. She grabbed his belt. There was more heaving, a grotesquely ludicrous battle with a life-size, life-less man-thing. Rebecca had used the hoist in David's garage to put him into the boot. There was no hoist out here.

A pause for breath preceded another immense effort; arm, shirt, belt, leg, followed by a teetering that could have gone either way. It went her way and she yelped and jumped back as David flopped against her, hands clawing, head nodding, and crashed to the ground at, and on, her feet.

Dragging came next. She had already done this, but that had been on a smooth concrete floor. This haul was through bracken, over uneven, loamy earth, over fallen boughs and roots. This dragging was slow and stabbed pain into her back and fire into her arms. She kept going, though, stumbling and tripping as she struggled backwards into the wood.

She didn't know where she was headed, but she knew the right spot when she found it; a small patch of bare earth, felt rather than seen in the tree-obscured moonlight. She dropped

David's legs, leaned against the nearest tree for a moment, then set off back to the car to fetch a spade and a torch.

Her footfalls were soft thuds and rustles. The sounds grew around her. Her footsteps, *his* footsteps. Behind her. David. She increased her pace, refusing to look round. David was coming for her, all bloody and angry and wanting revenge.

She spun round, and there was nothing but moon-painted forest.

Returning to the corpse was worse. David would be gone, would have got up and walked away, was, hiding, waiting...

But he was, just as she had left him. In a way that was even more terrible, because it was a confirmation of this new and horrible reality.

Rebecca drove the shovel into the peaty woodland floor. There was a dull thud of steel on springy earth. She worked hard, pausing only occasionally to wipe sweat from her forehead using a woollen sleeve stiffened with blood and dirt.

Sheet lightning illuminated the slivers of horizon visible through the gaps in the trees. Thunder grumbled, God probably. She had never stopped believing in Him or His righteous indignation, which she had learned to fear in the Baptist Chapel she had attended until she had married –

- *this* man, lying here.

Something flew over her.

She snapped her head up, caught a glimpse of...of what? A shadow, a movement, outstretched, gliding wings? She peered into the dark, and saw nothing.

More important than imagined devils, was the question of how deep the grave must be to hide the sac of meat, bones and vitals that had been her husband, and to keep him safe from the nostrils of hungry foxes, crows and dogs.

Lightning, a flicker of blue white that unveiled the patiently waiting shape, sprawled where Rebecca had dumped it. Thunder rumbled. She cried. And thrashed the shovel's blade into the ground, scraped and levered and lifted and poured, back bent, arms beyond aching. A gust of damp, chilled wind forced its way through the wood. Branches hissed, trunks groaned.

She couldn't get away with this. She was doomed. Oh God... no, mustn't take His name in vain, because He was coming, rolling steadily across the sky, closing in, dark and vengeful and so very, very angry –

She glanced round wildly at the imprisoning bars of the conifers, dark against the dark, then, momentarily visible as lightning licked the sky.

In that moment she saw, between the tree trunks, other, different plants; fleshy stemmed, thorny stemmed, huge leaves, titanic and startling blooms. Worse, the vegetation was astir; things crept and slid and scuttled.

That Place again.

Hell perhaps? It was where she belonged wasn't it?

A Place full of things that crept and slithered and scuttled (and flew?), heading in this direction, coming for her...

She threw her shovel to the ground, grabbed her husband's ankles for one last time and dragged him to the hole she had made for him. It was a good fit. Lightning displayed her work in all its awful splendour; the ragged slot carved into the earth, and David's body, on its side, face shoved into the rough wall of his grave.

David...

Grief ripped through her. Poor David, her husband, her lover. This was all her fault. She had misunderstood him, failed him...

She let herself cry, unable to stem the rage of convulsive, gagging sobs until it eased enough for her to return to the task of closing the grave. It began to rain, a widely spaced spatter of heavy, warm drops. She worked on until she had covered her husband in loamy soil, patting it down with the flat of the shovel.

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry...

Then she ran, resolve broken, feeling the entire weight of the demon-glutted darkness rear up behind her. She tripped, scrambled back to her feet, oblivious to the bruising shock of her fall, lurched on, fell again.

Coming, Oh God, they were coming out of that Place...