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PORTMANTEAU NOVELLA, WEREWOLF NIGHTMARE.**

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Happy Reading

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Prologue: Arrival

Dempsey eased the car into the driveway of the big old country house, gravel crunching under the tyres as he did so, and switched off the engine. For a few seconds he just sat there, appraising the residence as he stared out at it through the windscreen. In the autumnal gloom of the late afternoon, it looked to be quite a well-kept building: typically Victorian in its square and solid construction, red bricked and weathered, three stories high, with sash windows, and surrounded by a garden that looked equally well maintained. To judge by the general appearance of both house and lawn, the owner looked to be quite comfortable financial wise. Dempsey only hoped that the care and effort the tenant had obviously put into his home would extend to the four short stories which he'd invited Dempsey to come and read. A shabbily written story could be as off-putting as a shabbily kept house.

Dempsey stepped from the car, locked the door and strode up the narrow, grey-concreted path to the front door, above which was a gold plaque bearing the name of the property: GREENWOOD. He instantly felt the cold nip in the air waft across his cheeks, hinting at possibly a bad winter to come. He lifted the brass knocker and rapped three times. A few seconds of muffled movement from within, then the door was opened.

"Ah, good afternoon," the thin, grey-haired man said as he greeted his visitor on the doorstep, his face illuminating with an amicable smile. He looked to be in his sixties, and wore a velvet smoking jacket over a white open-necked shirt. "Mr Dempsey, is it?"

Dempsey nodded and reciprocated the smile. "Yes, that's right. And you're Mr Barratt, I presume?"

"I am indeed." Barratt stepped back and opened the door a little wider, waving an inviting hand inwards. "Do come in."

"Thank you."

Barratt gently closed the door behind them and motioned again with his bony hand to a room just to the left of the hallway. "In here, please, Mr Dempsey."

"Cheers."

As Dempsey stepped into the room, his nostrils were immediately assailed by the strong odour of tobacco mingled with what smelt like cleaning polish. Just as he'd been with the exterior of the house, he was similarly impressed by how neat and tidy everything was inside it: from the expensive-looking three-piece suite that dominated the room, to the lush thick carpet that covered the floor.

"Do sit down, Mr Dempsey," Barratt invited, gesturing to an armchair to the right of the grey-tiled fireplace, where the flames of a homely coal fire flickered.

"Thank you," Dempsey smiled, sinking his frame down into the comfortable chair with a sigh.

"Would you like a drink or anything?"

"Er, no, thanks."

"Sure?"

"Positive."

"Okay." He glanced at his watch, then looked back at Dempsey. "Right then, let's get down to business, shall we? I'll just go and get you my stories." He strode briskly out of the living room, calling back over his shoulder, "Won't be long."

"Okay, fine."

The stories to which Barratt referred were four horror stories he'd written, all with a werewolf theme. Dempsey ran a popular horror magazine called SHOCKERS, and he was always on the lookout for new talent for his Fiction section. If a writer could present him with a real, good, gripping horror story that would entertain his ever-growing readership, then that writer was guaranteed a place in the magazine. At the moment, there was a serious shortage of good werewolf stories to fill up future editions of the publication, so when Dempsey had received an email from a Mr John Barratt informing him that he had written four werewolf tales which he, Barratt, thought might be suitable for the magazine, Dempsey was instantly curious to see the stories.

Normally, Dempsey would just ask the writer to submit their work via an email attachment. However, when he received a further email from Barratt cordially inviting him around to his house in the country next Thursday afternoon, where Dempsey would be given the opportunity of reading all four stories in the relaxed, quiet surroundings of Barratt's study, then Dempsey decided that wouldn't be a bad idea at all. Quite often, it did become rather noisy and hectic in the tiny office of his magazine, and so it would be a welcome change to peruse some new stories in a less distracting environment. Besides, as it happened, Barratt didn't live all that far away from where Dempsey's office was situated, so it would be no problem for Dempsey to drop by there after work.

A minute later Barratt returned, holding a large yellow folder in his hands. "Here they are," he said, handing the folder to Dempsey. "All four of them."

"Thank you," Dempsey said, taking the folder. Assessing its weight in his hands, he thought it felt quite bulky, suggesting that one or more of the stories ran to a considerable word length. Well, he had no problem with that. He loved lengthy tales, providing of course they were entertaining, well written and matched the specific requirements of his magazine.

"I think all four of those stories are some of the best I have ever written," Barratt said, leaning an elbow on the mantelpiece and looking down, rather proudly, at the folder, which now rested in Dempsey's lap. Then he walked over to the armchair directly opposite to that of his guest, and sank his scrawny frame down into it with a loud, contented sigh.

"Really?" Dempsey arched an interested eyebrow at Barratt before slipping a hand inside the flap of the folder and carefully extracting the contents. If they really were as good as he said, Dempsey thought, he wouldn't mind seeing further samples of the old bloke's work. But he wasn't going to commit himself on that score just yet, at least not until he'd read all these first.

Each of the four stories was secured by a thick elastic band. Taking a quick preliminary flip through the manuscript with his fingers, Dempsey saw that each story was well typed, in double-line spacing and with wide margins, which was perfectly in accordance with the format required for his magazine.

"Fantastic," he said, smiling and nodding his head approvingly. He slipped the stories back into the folder, closed the flap and slapped his palm flat on it to indicate he was ready. "Right," he said, "I'll get stuck into them then."

"Splendid," Barratt smiled, rising from the chair and crossing the room towards the doorway. He waved a hand for Dempsey to get up and follow. "I'll show you to my study."

Dempsey accompanied his host back out into the hallway. Barratt stopped outside a rather ornate-looking door (it looked as if it had been purchased from an antique shop that specialised in

Victorian furniture) to the right. Barratt opened it, the door creaking harshly on its hinges with the motion, and entered the study. He stepped aside and waved a hand for Dempsey to step inside.

There really wasn't all that much in the study, apart from a well-burnished oak desk in the middle of the room, a leather chair behind it, a closed laptop on the surface, and a large bookcase on the wall which accommodated various hardback and paperback titles.

"You should be fine in here, Mr Dempsey," Barratt said, walking around the desk and pulling out the chair for Dempsey to sit down, which he did with a grateful smile. "Nice and quiet," Barratt went on, walking back round the desk. "No distractions. I have spent many an enjoyable and creative hour in this study over the years, producing my little horror masterpieces." Barratt smiled proudly at the thought, then added: "I hope you enjoy reading these stories, Mr Dempsey, as much as I have enjoyed writing them."

Dempsey smiled as he relaxed back in the leather chair. "I'm sure I will." Simultaneously, he thought: That will remain to be seen, matey. Being very particular, Dempsey didn't just publish anything in his magazine; the story had to be good, REALLY good.

As Barratt left him to it, he said over his shoulder, "If there's anything you should need, Mr Dempsey, please don't hesitate to ask. Just press the intercom button on the desk. I'll only be in the living room watching television.

"Okay, cheers."

"Happy reading."

Barratt left the room, gently closing the door behind him.

Dempsey immediately got down to literary business. He opened the folder, took out the bundle of typed sheets, relaxed back in his seat, and began to read the first story.

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