

Holiday *Madness*

*13 Dark Tales for
Halloween, Christmas,
and All Occasions*

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Holiday Madness
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Bad Moon

Jake had been running to keep distance between Sarah and him. He now stopped and rested, panting hard. His ears pricked up. He cocked his head sideways as he listened.

Somewhere, an owl hooted. Horses in the distance neighed, snorted, and stomped their hooves. The hiss and stamping feet of a skunk warning off a predator joined the owl and horses in a bizarre kind of night song.

Jake wondered about what might be stalking the skunk. He worried about whether the predator might be large enough or dangerous enough to cause harm to Sarah or him.

Before his thoughts could darken too much, though, he coughed and gagged on the sudden foul odor that now mixed with the horse manure to choke the cold night air; apparently the skunk's warning hadn't worked, and whatever creature pestering it had gotten sprayed.

Holding his breath against the offensive smell, Jake turned his attention to the sky. An eerie mist drifted through the treetops and blanketed the night. Still, he could see the pale, full moon directly overhead, as if it were a light from heaven shining through a throng of ethereal angels. His gaze riveted to the sight and didn't pull away until he heard the steady clomping of a horse's hooves coming down the path toward him.

He moved to the shrubs at the edge of the path. There, he hid. He held his breath so as not to give away his position and quietly watched as the young girl rode past on her American Paint.

Sarah often came to the horse stables and the surrounding ten acres of wooded area late at night to ride.

Jake, in turn, came to watch over the girl—most nights anyway, like this night when the moon was full—both for Sarah's protection and admittedly because Jake liked seeing the girl atop the big horse. The sight of Sarah's lush, black hair bouncing about her pretty, pale face with each step of the horse and the way the girl's well-rounded curves moved as she posted in the saddle excited Jake to no end.

Secretly, Jake loved Sarah. They both attended Yuka High School and were in the same homeroom. Sarah was in Jake's algebra class too, and they had talked together a bit at school.

But Jake was sure the girl had no idea how he felt. And he was also sure that Sarah wouldn't understand his obsession of watching over her as she rode the trails late at night. Probably, the girl would think him a freak of some sort and be scared he meant her harm.

But he didn't. He only wanted to ensure Sarah's safety; there were dangers in the woods of which the girl had no knowledge, things she couldn't possibly comprehend.

Besides, even though Sarah looked healthy enough—except for maybe a slight pasty complexion—she often missed school due to some sort of illness or another. Obviously, she had neither the strength nor the fortitude to fight off a would-be attacker of any sort. Obviously, she needed Jake to watch over her, to protect her.

Jake moved through shrubs with stealth, following Sarah and the horse the best he could.

"Easy," Sarah called to her horse, "easy, Big Bud."

The horse slowed from a canter to a steady trot.

Jake slowed, as well.

"Walk," Sarah commanded Big Bud.

The horse almost instantly slowed.

Jake stopped, keeping his distance, not wanting to be seen or heard. Besides, Sarah and Big Bud were heading back to the stables, and Jake didn't want the horses that were boarded there to catch his scent and give him away.

Something moved in the brush. Leaves rustled. Twigs cracked.

Big Bud shied at the sound, skipping sideways, snorting, stomping hooves.

"Ho, Bud," Sarah commanded. She came up out of her English saddle, almost losing her seat. But somehow she remained on the horse. She kept the horse in a tight circle with a one-rein stop—the rein pulled to her left hip, the horse's nose at her knee. But Big Bud fought Sarah all the way, snorting and stomping, chomping on the bit.

The thing in the brush quickened its pace, fighting through tangles of vines and shrubs, no longer concerned with noise.

Jake tried to circle around to get closer but couldn't make it in time.

A wolfish howl blasted the night. A large, hairy beast sprang from the brush, onto the path. It landed on all fours, swinging its massive head about, growling and snarling, baring sharp canines.

Sarah gasped at the sudden sight of the hideous beast.

Big Bud snorted as he reared back on his hind legs and kicked at the air with his front hooves.

Miraculously, Sarah remained atop the horse.

But as Big Bud's front end came back to earth, the horse turned his butt, bucking and kicking his back legs at the wolf-like creature.

In the process, Sarah was thrown. She hit the ground with a hard thud. Somehow, though, she remained conscious and had enough sense to roll and barely dodge Big Bud's hooves as the horse now bucked and kicked frantically in all directions.

The wolfish beast was not so lucky. A hoof caught the creature in the ribcage, sending it flying through the air. It landed against a tree with a sickening thump, as if something inside it had broken on impact.

But even that didn't stop the hideous beast. As Big Bud took off running back to the stables in a cloud of dust, the wolf-like creature struggled onto its massive paws. It shook its head as if to clear the cobwebs away and stumbled about, getting its bearings. Although injured, its evil gaze again focused on Sarah. A menacing growl rumbled in warning.

Sarah scooted backwards. Her hands and feet propelled her as fast as they could while she still basically sat on her butt and faced the predator before her.

Meanwhile, the beast rose onto its hind legs, standing erect like a man. It staggered toward its prey. Massive jaws open. Sharp teeth exposed. Globes of thick saliva dripped from its maw.

Sarah didn't scream. Rather, she scooted back more until she blindly hit a tree, stopping her cold. Still, she didn't scream—even as the hungry beast advanced on her.

Maybe she knew the beast was hurt and thought it might drop dead at her feet before eating her. Maybe she was the bravest girl that ever lived.

Jake wasn't sure which. But he wasn't about to wait and see if the beast was going to die or if Sarah's courage would hold. Without thought for himself, he leaped from the bushes, onto the path, and positioned himself between the predator and the girl he secretly loved.

The beast stopped its advance and scrutinized the hero blocking its path. It growled—deep and guttural—not at all pleased at having its meal rudely interrupted.

Jake growled right back. He bared his teeth and rose onto his two hind legs, erect and ready

to do battle.

Despite being injured, the predator now advanced with supernatural speed. It lunged at its challenger. Massive claws swiped the air, slashing into Jake's flesh.

Jake screeched in pain. Deep gashes across his chest oozed thick blood. Still, he counterattacked, ripping his own claws across his attacker's face and rupturing the thing's eyeball.

The beast howled in agony. Thick blood gushed from its empty eye socket. But it didn't stop. Instead, it rushed Jake like an enraged bull.

Both Jake and the beast went down hard. A rumbling chorus of yowls, wails, and shrieks echoed through the woods. Locked in mortal combat, they tore and bit at each other, rolling in a massive tangle of slashing claws and gnashing teeth. Dust kicked up. Fur flew. Chunks of bloody flesh were spat out onto the ground. Blood flowed, staining the dirt.

Luckily, the beast's injuries from Big Bud's kick had weakened it, and Jake found himself on top and at a sudden advantage. Without hesitation and with supernatural speed of his own, Jake lunged at his adversary's throat.

The predator was now the prey.

The beast yelped as Jake bit down hard. Blood gushed forth, into Jake's mouth. The beast made a strange gurgling noise, and its body convulsed in the throes of death. But Jake didn't let go. He held on tight, using his strong jaws and sharp teeth to bear down and finish the thing off.

Jake finally released his death grip when the beast stopped moving and made no further noise. Blood dripped from Jake's open mouth as he stared down at his enemy.

What lay before him, however, was not the wolf-like creature that had attacked Sarah and that he had fought to the death. Instead, the naked body of a young man was sprawled out on the ground. In fact, Jake thought he recognized the young man as maybe a senior at Yuka High School.

Jake felt a slight pang of remorse as he looked down upon the bloody corpse; he had killed one of his own and maybe a classmate in the process, as well.

No matter, this werewolf had meant to eat Sarah and had to be stopped. Jake had had no choice but to intervene. He couldn't allow any harm to come to the girl he secretly loved.

Without further thought of guilt, Jake turned away. He faced Sarah who still sat with her back to the tree.

The girl neither looked frightened nor horrified by the strange turn of events she had just witnessed. Rather, she stared with idle curiosity at both the bloody young man lying dead on the path and the werewolf who had just saved her life.

Jake crept toward the girl on all fours. He didn't stop until he was face to face with his love.

Sarah never flinched. She scrutinized the werewolf and gazed into his eyes with an icy, blue stare.

"Jake?" Sarah whispered in sudden recognition.

It was Jake who flinched as Sarah reached out and touched wiry fur.

"It is you Jake, isn't it?" Sarah asked in wonder, petting the werewolf.

Jake couldn't believe that Sarah recognized him just by his eyes. He moved closer and nuzzled the girl. Maybe Sarah secretly felt the same.

Dare he hope?

"Jake, you shouldn't have," Sarah whispered. "I'm not worth it."

Jake licked Sarah on the cheek as if to say she was wrong; she was everything.

Then the werewolf turned away. He trotted to the bloody body on the path. Grabbing the

dead man's arm, Jake dragged his victim away, disappearing into the dark woods.

(cont.....)

