

Chapter 3: *'All our times have come. Here, but now they're gone. Seasons don't fear the reaper. Nor do the wind, the sun, or the rain.'* Blue Oyster Cult (Donald Roesner, 1976)

She turned over in the bed, the linen knotted and tied in and around her, and she felt hot and sweaty, even though it was cold out. She couldn't always afford to keep the house heated on her pension, and since Stan had passed, well it was only her. Esther sat up, rearranged the bed to be more comfortable, noting it was 2:57. She had not been sleeping at all well, unsurprising since she had not only lost her two grandkids, but also their mother and father, her son, all in the last month! She was numb, feeling totally lost, grief-struck, and angry. Blood disorders. Really? All four of them? She scratched her grey, unkempt, hair and thought she might go down and make some tea, then she heard something. It was like a cat or a dog trying to get in, its claws rasping on the front door downstairs, but she had neither. The rasping continued, a rhythm emerging, one rasp after another, then a pause, and so on. It was almost hypnotic. She shrugged on her housecoat, having gained weight in prior years, lamenting her former sylph-like self.

Pushing her feet, left then right, into her carpet slippers, she toddled from the bed to the open door, still hearing that rhythmic rasping downstairs. It was dark on the landing and down the stairs, so she put the light on. As she put her right foot on the top step, the rasping seemed to stop momentarily, then it increased in urgency, as if whoever or whatever was down there sensed her presence. She held onto the banister as she slowly took one step after another. With her slippers she hardly made a noise, and there were no creaks from the stairs, Stan had been good that way around the house.

Halfway down the stairs, she could see the hall and glass door. There were two indistinct figures, roughly similar heights, but one of them was reaching out to the opaque barrier and making that rasping sound. She hesitated at that, catching her breath, a shiver down her back. She had left the stairs, now standing opposite the barrier between her and the two shadowy figures. She felt hesitant, a bit frightened as any older, lonely woman would be after 3am in their own house being confronted with the odd, the irregular. She could hear her own breath, inhaling and exhaling quicker, her right hand on her cheek in a quizzical pose. That hypnotic rasping continued, a bit more urgency. 'Hello, who's out *there*?', she asked, her voice sounding a little scared and weak.

The rasping stopped. Just her breathing. And those small shadows facing her through the door. 'Who *are* you, what are you doing *here* at this time of the night?', she followed up with, not really expecting any answer. 'Grammy Essy,' came the response, a childlike voice, hanging in the air between them. 'Let us in, Grammy, let us in, we miss you!', implored one of the shadows. She recognised the voice in her subconscious, but it had more of an edge to it, something alien. 'What are you doing, *you're being wicked*, trying to scare a woman in the night!', she retorted with some force, but she felt the early stages of fear. She ought to race up the stairs, switch the light off and climb under the covers, hiding from whoever, *whatever*, was on her front step. But there was something familiar in that voice, however strangely inhuman it had sounded. She took two steps towards it. 'It's cold, Grammy, we want to be inside with you, want a hug from you,' said the same voice, toying with her. It can't be, of course, we buried both her grandkids a couple of weeks ago. So why was she thinking they were there, *outside*? Freddy and Jamie.

'Go away, you're, you're *dead*...', she said more to herself, her voice tailing off. 'Grammy Essy, you're so silly! We're alive, so are Mummy and Daddy. Did you have a bad dream?', again sounding like an innocent Jamie, but toying with her still. She reached for the lock, not realising she had traversed the final distance to it. Hesitating, her breathing and heart loud in her ears. 'Grammy Essy, let us in!', and with that in a double action she unlocked and threw open the door. Freddy and Jamie, still in their funeral attire, golden eyes locked onto her. She drew in a long breath and felt a twinge in her chest. 'Grammy Essy!!!', they exclaimed, and reflexively she bent down, holding out her arms in a scooping manner. They rushed across the threshold, both nuzzling their faces into either side of her neck. They felt so cold, but she didn't mind, her grandkids were visiting again. She cooed and soothed them, while they sucked at her, akin to nursing. Esther felt some pain, warmth trickling down her buxom chest. 'My boys,' she murmured.

The postman dropped the mail in his hand when he came across her in the morning, slumped against her open front door. She had a slight smile on her blue lips, but her glassy eyes, still open and staring, looked terrified.