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Awakening

S. J. Bolton

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Extract

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‘Look before you leap, for snakes among
sweet flowers do creep.’

Proverb

Prologue

THE DARKEST HOUR I'VE EVER KNOWN BEGAN LAST Thursday, a heartbeat before the sun came up. It was going to be a beautiful morning, I remember thinking, as I left the house; soft and close, bursting with whispered promises, as only a daybreak in early summer can be. The air was still cool but an iridescence on the horizon warned of baking heat to come. Birds were singing as though every note might be their last and even the insects had risen early. Making the most of the early-morning bounty, swallows dived all around me, close enough to make me blink.

As I approached the drive leading to Matt's house the fragrance of wild camomile swirled up from the verge. His favourite scent. I stood there for a moment, staring at the gravel track that disappeared around laurel bushes, kicking my feet to stir up the scent and thinking that camomile smelled of ripe apples and of the first hint of wood-smoke on an autumn breeze. And I couldn't help but wonder what it might be like to walk

up the drive, steal into the house and wake the man by rubbing camomile on his pillow.

I carried on walking.

When I reached the top of Carters Lane I saw the door to Violet's cottage was slightly open; which it shouldn't have been, not at this hour. I drew closer and stood on the threshold, looking at the peeling paintwork, the darkness of the hall beyond. She was probably an early riser, old people usually are; but at the sight of that open doorway, something began to tense inside me.

The doorstep was damp. Someone with wet shoes had stood here minutes earlier. It didn't necessarily mean anything; it could easily be coincidence, but none of the reassurances I could summon up seemed to soothe away a growing sense of disquiet. I pushed at the door. It opened a further six inches and hit an obstacle.

'Violet?' I called. No reply. The silent house waited to see what I would do next. I pushed the door again. It moved a few more inches, revealing a damp trail on the floor. I squeezed round it and stepped into the hall.

The sack behind the door was hessian, with a string-tie pulling the opening tight. It looked like the sandbags the Environment Agency produces when floods are imminent. But I didn't think this sack had sand inside. It wasn't heavy enough, for one thing. Nor did it have the solid, regular shape of a sandbag, especially a damp one. And this one wasn't damp, it was soaking.

'Violet,' I called again. If Violet could hear me she wasn't letting on.

The door at the end of the hallway was open and I

could see the room beyond was empty. There was no sign of Violet's dog, Bennie.

And that's the point at which I stepped from anxiety to fear. Because a dog, even one that's elderly and far from well, won't normally allow someone to enter its house without a response of some sort. Violet could still be asleep; she might not have heard me call. Bennie would have heard.

Knowing it was the last thing in the world I wanted to do, I turned and bent down beside the sack. Wet, solid, but not sand; definitely not sand. I pulled out the small penknife I keep in my pocket, cut through the string and allowed the sack to fall open. Then I took hold of the bottom corners and tipped the damp, dead contents on to the worn linoleum of Violet's hall floor.

Bennie, looking even smaller than he had in life, lay before me. I didn't need to touch him to know that he was dead, but I bent and stroked his coarse fur even so. There were a few shallow wounds around his face and neck where he'd injured himself, scrambling to be free as he'd sunk deeper into whatever pond or river he'd been flung. But the sack still wasn't empty. I moved my fingers and something else fell out. Terribly injured, its body badly mauled and just about torn apart in places, the snake convulsed once before falling still.

For a moment I thought I'd be sick. I sank down on to the cold floor, knowing I had to find Violet, but unable to summon up the courage. And the strangest thought was going through my head.

Because it seemed that something was missing. I was remembering history lessons from school, when we'd

studied Ancient Rome and hung on the teacher's every word as he'd entertained us with stories of Roman justice, torture and executions. One particular mode of death had caught our imagination: the convicted prisoner – who, I think now, must have committed just the worst sort of crime – was tied into a sack with a dog, a snake and something else; was it an ape – or some sort of farmyard animal? And then flung into the river Tiber. Most of the class had laughed. It was all so long ago, after all, and there was a touch of the comic about that particular collection of animals. Even I could see that. But I'd never really thought before what it must be like to be tied up in a sack with an animal – any animal – and flung into water. You would fight – frenziedly, hysterically – there'd be teeth and claws everywhere and water flooding into your lungs. And the pain would be beyond . . .

I had to find Violet.

I made my way along the hall and through the living room. A door at the far end led to the stairs. I found a light-switch and flicked it on. It wasn't a long flight of stairs but climbing it seemed to take for ever.

There were two open doors at the top. To the left, a small room: twin beds, dresser, fireplace, and a window looking out over woodland. I took a deep breath and turned to the right.

Part One

1

Six days earlier

HOW DID IT ALL BEGIN? WELL, I SUPPOSE IT WOULD be the day I rescued a newborn baby from a poisonous snake, heard the news of my mother's death and encountered my first ghost. Thinking about it, I could even pinpoint the time. A few minutes before six on a Friday morning and my quiet, orderly life went into meltdown.

Seven minutes to six. I'd run hard. Panting, dripping with sweat, I found my key and pushed open the back door. The moment I did so my young charges started screeching.

Rubbing a towel across the back of my neck I crossed the kitchen, lifted the lid of the incubator and looked down. There were three of them, hardly more than a handful apiece, hungry, grumpy balls of feathery fluff. Barn-owl chicks: two weeks old and orphaned just days after birth when their mother hit a large truck. A local birdwatcher had seen the dead owl and knew where to

find the nest. He'd brought the chicks to the wildlife hospital where I'm the resident veterinary surgeon. They'd been close to death, cold and starving.

They'd been starving ever since. I took a tray from the fridge, found a pair of tweezers and dangled a tiny, dead mouse into the incubator. It didn't last long. The chicks were thriving but, worryingly, getting far too used to me. Hand-rearing wild birds is tricky. Without some sort of human intervention, orphaned chicks will die; at the same time, they mustn't become dependent on humans. In a couple more weeks I was hoping to introduce them to avian foster-parents who would teach them the skills they needed to hunt and feed themselves. Until then I had to be careful. It was probably time to move them to an enclosed nesting box and start using a barn-owl-shaped glove puppet at mealtimes.

Three minutes to six. I was heading upstairs for a shower when the phone rang, and I braced myself to be called in to deal with yet another roe deer run over on the A35.

'Miss Benning? Is that Miss Benning, the vet?' A young woman's voice. A very distressed young woman's voice.

'Yes, speaking,' I answered, wondering if I was going to get my shower after all.

'It's Lynsey Huston here. I live just up the road from you. Number 2. There's a snake in my baby's cot. I don't know what to do. I don't know what the hell to do.' Her voice was rising with every word; she seemed verging on hysteria.

'Are you sure?' Silly question, I know, but be fair,

a snake in a cot isn't something you see every day.

'Of course I'm sure. I'm looking at it now. What the hell do I do?'

She was too loud.

'Stay quiet and don't make any sudden movements.' I, on the other hand, was moving fast, out of the house, grabbing my car keys as I went, bleeping open the boot, reaching inside. 'Do you think it's bitten her?' I asked. Surprising myself, I remembered that the baby was a girl. I'd seen pink balloons outside the house a few weeks ago.

'I don't know. She looks like she's asleep. Oh God, what if she's not asleep?'

'Is her colour normal? Can you see her breathing?' I grabbed a couple of things from the back of the car and set off up the hill. I could see the Hustons' house, a sweet, whitewashed cottage at the top of the lane. The family was new to the village, had only lived there a few weeks, but I thought I could picture the mother, about my age, tallish, with shoulder-length fair hair. She and I had never spoken before.

'Yes, I think so; yes, she's pink. Can you come? Please say you can come.'

'I'm nearly there. The important thing is not to frighten the snake. Don't do anything to alarm it.' I pushed open the gate and ran up the path to the front door. It was locked. I ran round the back. The phone I was carrying was too far from its base station and began to beep at me. I switched it off and pushed at the back door.

I was inside a brightly coloured, modern kitchen. For

a house with a newborn baby it seemed remarkably tidy and clean. I put the phone down on the table and walked along the hall in the direction of the voice I could hear gabbling upstairs. As I approached the stairs I noticed damp patches and traces of mud on the otherwise spotless tiled floor. A familiar sound caught my attention. Glancing to the right I saw an incubator of newborn chicks in a small utility room. The family kept chickens.

'I'm in the house,' I called out softly. When I reached the top of the stairs I saw a scared, white face peering at me from behind a door at the far end of the corridor. The woman beckoned and I walked towards her. She stepped back and allowed me into the room.

I was in a small, pink and cream bedroom tucked under the eaves. Supporting beams stood out dark against the white plaster of the walls. Pink fabric, printed with fairies and toadstools, lined the small, deep-set window. Stuffed animals, mainly pink, were everywhere I looked. Against the longest wall stood the crib, a baby princess's cradle from a fairy tale: all cream lace and pink flounces. I stepped closer, still nourishing the hope that had sprung up when I answered the phone, that the snake would be a toy one, a practical joke played on the mother by an older child.

The baby, tiny and perfect, panted softly in a white baby-gro embroidered with pink rabbits. Her mouth was slightly open, I could see the perfect raised pores above her upper lip, long dark eyelashes and the faint traces of a milk rash on her cheeks. Her fists were clenched and her arms thrown above her head in the

classic newborn-baby sleeping pose. She looked absolutely fine.

Apart from the fact that she was sharing her bed with a venomous snake that would strike the moment she moved.