

## **The Shortcut**

By Glenn C. Gabriel

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Chili Pepper Creations LLC Edition

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*Crack!*

Startled, Laura squints into the shadowy branches of a tree, certain she sees something moving within the deeper shadows.

*It's nothing!* she shivers, eyes scanning the shifting fog around her. *Just an old branch is all. It's after midnight, should have been home an hour ago.*

Recalling the earlier fight with her boyfriend, she quickens her pace, cursing at having taken this shortcut through the ancient cemetery's many rolling hills.

*It's just an old cemetery... get a grip!*

It's dark, moonless and the sky heavily overcast.

Laura stumbles, trying to find her way around a fallen headstone in the fog.

Panicked, everything looks the same in the darkness. She doesn't know which way to turn.

"*Lost dearie?*" A high pitched voice sounds from her right.

With a cry, Laura turns to see a dark figure step from behind a large tree. Frightened, Laura can just make out the figure of a thin, pale woman.

"I... I was just taking a shortcut home, and..."

"*Got lost?*" the cloaked woman cackled stepping forward. "Happens here at night."

Forcing a swallow, Laura asks, "Do you know the way out?"

"Oh yes... come," the woman turns and walks into the darkness of the trees, the fog swirling up around her.

As the fog envelopes the old woman, her form fading, Laura hurries forward.

Soon, they're walking down a steep embankment, dense fog rising above their heads.

"Keep up now!" The woman laughs as she vanishes into the fog. "Wouldn't want those of the *night* to take you now, would you?"

Frightened, no longer seeing the woman, Laura hurries forward. "Wait! Where are you? I can't see you!"

Silence.

Stopping, Laura listens... nothing.

It's very cold. Wet from the fog, her hair sticks to her face. Trembling, brushing the hair aside, she calls louder, "Where are you?... Please... *answer me!*"

Silence.

It begins to rain.

Walking quickly, Laura is startled when a large open mausoleum looms in front of her. Thinking the woman slipped inside, Laura enters cautiously.

Flickering light comes from ahead.

Shaking more from fright than the cold and rain, Laura cries, "Hello! Are... are you *in here?*"

“Back here dear,” a faint voice replies.

Afraid to continue, she turns to look behind her. *It’s raining hard and I don’t know where I am. But, she seems to know this place, so...* shaking, Laura continues further in.

Startled as she rounds a bend, Laura sees the woman standing in the center of a room filled with hundreds of candles. Dozens of crypts are set into the dark rock walls.

“What... what *is* this place?” Laura asks, her voice cracking.

“Why, *home* dearie.”

“You live... *here*? Please mam, I just want to go home.”

“Oh, but you *are* home dear,” the woman says pointing to an open crypt. “See... this one’s... *yours*.”

Turning quickly to leave, Laura screams as five men and two women enter, blocking her escape.

With a bone chilling shriek, the old woman flies at Laura, knocking her to the floor.

Teeth sink deep into Laura’s neck as the woman takes a good drink, the sweet young blood revitalizing her. Wiping the blood from her chin, she rises, “Welcome home... *dearie*.”

Patiently, the others take their turn.

Three weeks later, having taken a shortcut, Brenda is lost in the cemetery.

It’s late, dark, and the fog is thick.

Startled, Brenda sees a cloaked figure step from behind a tree.

“*Lost?!*” Laura cries. “Don’t worry, I know the night. Come, let me show you the way... *home*.”

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