

Full Moon Cleaners: by Fair Means or Foul

By Kelly Jameson

Excerpt

Prologue

Göttingen University, Germany, 1831

The Tallman was not surprised the Brothers Grimm did not believe him.

Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm had turned out to be even-tempered librarians, storytellers, recorders of fanciful myths and fairy tales, many of them told by women. The Brothers Grimm treated him with dignity in their household, but something about their forced jaunty movements and jolly smiles gave away what they truly thought of him, this tall, unkempt man who'd come to the Göttingen University to tell them an incredible tale.

Tallman knew the brothers collected stories told by peasants and villagers and Wilhelm then put them into written form and gave them a childlike style, though they were violent. This made Tallman smile.

The brothers had moved to the University of Göttingen only a year ago, when Jakob, the elder of the two by a year, was named professor and head librarian and Wilhelm was appointed assistant librarian. As professor, Jakob held lectures about Linguistics and cultural history. But the Brothers Grimm, despite having published fairy tales about big bad wolves in 1812, still did not believe in creatures that were half man and half wolf.

Tallman had come to set the record straight.

Tallman thought of the tale *Little Red Cap*.

“I’ll do everything just right,” said Little Red Cap, shaking her mother’s hand. The grandmother lived out in the woods, a half hour from the village. When Little Red Cap entered the woods a wolf came up to her. She did not know what a wicked animal he was, and was not afraid of him.

It was close to midnight as Jakob sat in a hard chair at a long table, quill scribbling across parchment while Tallman talked, occasionally slanting a glance at his less sturdy looking brother Wilhelm through the candlelight, or subtly raising a brow. Wilhelm puffed away on a pipe and offered the Tallman brandy, which he accepted. Tallman told them of a lost grimoire, a book that contained the ancient magic and history of werewolves, of “becoming.”

Of course Jakob and Wilhelm had not understood the term “becoming” and thus they let him talk at length of how a man might become a creature such as a werewolf, at one point, Wilhelm getting up to refill their goblets and to stoke the fire in the hearth. Tallman noticed that the firelight cast long, flickering shadows that stretched and mutated in the dark, so you could not tell where one brother began and the other ended.

Tallman understood this might well be the last warmth he enjoyed by a fireplace in a university inhabited by civil men with mostly civil thoughts. He finished the brandy, which was excellent, and began again, in a raised and breathless voice, telling all he could about what he knew. There was nothing childlike about his chilling tale.

They gave him a bowl of meat stew and he ate like a starving creature that could never be sated. The candle dripped into a misshapen stub as they continued to listen. He thought of telling them about drinking water from a werewolf’s footprint—how it would extend the drinker’s life if the drinker’s heart and mind were pure in the search for the grimoire; how it could help the drinker to shape-shift into a man-wolf, a beastly creature all hair, sharp teeth, feral scent and pin-point hunger. How he had found such a footprint many years ago, cupped the freezing water to his lips,

and swallowed. He'd been a soldier at the time, with an unnatural bent toward killing—he enjoyed it immensely—but he did not tell them about any of those things. He told them instead about full moons. About black moons. About eyes that were not really eyes and dreams that were not really dreams.

Wilhelm tapped his foot as he listened, puffing on his pipe and releasing clouds of smoke from his mouth that drifted toward the ceiling. Did Wilhelm believe him? Wilhelm seemed bored. It brought to mind one of *Aesop's Fables*, about a young boy herding sheep who became bored. *The boy who cried wolf*. During the night, the boy thought it would be funny if he pretended to be in danger, so he started to shout, “wolf, wolf!” People nearby heard his cries for help and came running, only to learn it was a silly ruse. The boy did it a few more times, and the people came running a few more times. They finally wized up and no longer responded to the boy's deceitful cries. Later on, when a real wolf showed up, and the boy cried for help again, it was too late—nobody would listen.

If Wilhem was truly bored, there were many things Tallman could tell him that would surely rivet his attention. Indeed, Tallman thought about telling the brothers he was one hundred and four years old. That he'd lived through many battles and wars. That he would always look the age he'd been when he drank the water from the werewolf's footprint—an ugly, scarred man of forty-nine who was too thin. He wanted to tell them how the Redcoats had tasted once they were torn into bloody pieces and eaten. He wanted to tell them too that during one of the biggest battles of the Napoleonic Wars in 1813 he had turned during a full moon and feasted on members of the rear French guard who'd become trapped when a river bridge at Leipzig was destroyed. He wanted to see the expressions on their academic faces when he told them that Redcoats tasted a hell of a lot better than the French. But he did not tell them any of these things. He kept his tale as simple as he could.

Jakob continued to scratch his quill, his brows drawn together in concentration over his elegant strokes. Both brothers possessed keen, alert eyes, straight patrician noses, and high cheek bones. But Jakob was obviously the thinker, the more serious of the two.

When Tallman finished talking, he got up from his chair and stretched. He was so tall his head nearly scraped the ceiling and the brothers looked up at him in awe.

The wind howled outside, mournful susurrations that scraped the corners of the household with the creak and threat of snow and unforgiving ice.

“You are welcome to stay in one of the empty rooms,” Jakob said, placing his quill in its container.

“No.”

“Surely you do not wish to venture out again into this numbing cold when a storm is nigh upon us?”

“Thank you gentlemen, but I must be away. The cold does not bother me. I thank you for your hospitality.”

At the door he turned to look at them. “Make sure you tell people how to recognize these creatures and how to kill them.”

“How to recognize and how to...kill them?” Jakob said.

“Werewolves are deceptively human. But there are telltale signs. The palms of their hands may be rather hairy, for example.” The Brothers Grimm looked at his hands. He’d worn gloves and had not removed them once during his visit. He would not remove them now.

“Also, a werewolf’s eyebrows often grow together.” Tallman almost laughed as both brothers immediately studied his heavy brow. “Most importantly, if you look closely enough at the face, it will not lie about death. You would be wise to remember this especially.” He opened the

creaking door. A gust of wind scuttled Jakob's papers and he and Wilhelm got up to retrieve them, hopping about like mad rabbits from one of their fairy tales.

"The Brothers Grimm, from this day forward, it would be wise to always carry something silver on your persons. Silver is a pure metal, and can weaken or injure a werewolf, even in minute forms. It need not be a silver bullet. It could be a coin, a necklace, even a lady's delicate earring. And gentlemen, in future, *never* invite a werewolf into your den and offer him meat stew and a warm bed for the night. Now I must go. I've no more time for stories."

Tallman slipped into the swirling black night and driving snow, one of the brothers quickly slamming the door shut behind him. Tallman heard the scraping of a chair they leaned against the door, barring his entrance in case he decided to come back.

He reflected now on those stooped years long ago in the German university town and forests, how he'd boarded a ship sailing to America after talking to the Brothers Grimm. He knew through his research and talking to villagers and merchants that the grimoire had sailed to America with an antiques dealer who did not know or appreciate its true value.

Five weeks out, a horrible illness killed the ship's doctor and some crew members and then spread to passengers. Tallman watched as in their fear, remaining crew members threw screaming passengers overboard, whether or not they were infected with the illness. They didn't want to take any chances.

Pale limbs were gulped up by dark, thirsty sea, the hem of a dress or a worn boot swallowed as if it had never existed. One of the women, feverish, with eyes the color of rust, put some sort of spell on the ship just before she was tossed overboard. This would be discovered one day in the captain's notes. Three days later there was a full moon. A bloated moon. A *hungry, swollen* moon.

When the ship finally listed into port in America under a heavy fog, its timber creaking and moaning, the only living thing left on it was a large, mangy dog with intelligent eyes that had

survived by eating the last of the crew. Tallman, in his dog form, darted off the ship and into the woods to avoid being killed by fearful locals who thought, correctly, the dog was some sort of demon or something unnatural.

Tallman could shape shift but he wasn't full werewolf yet and he yearned for more power. He needed the lost grimoire to turn to a full wolf master—the most powerful werewolf that would ever roam the earth. A wolf master able to summon other canine demons. And still, all these years, he searched for the book. His wolf blood demanded it. His wolf blood was never satisfied. Here, in Bucks County, many, many years later, was the closest he'd come to the grimoire and his destiny in many moons. So close he could taste it.

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Present Day
Bucks County, Pennsylvania

My name is Faith Jordan. When I was twelve, my mother died during an exorcism gone wrong. If you're thinking Linda Blair, levitating beds, projectile vomit, and spontaneous flesh wounds, don't. It was worse. Because it was real. No Hollywood special effects. Just a charismatic priest that my mother shouldn't have trusted.

Before my mother "got religion" she used to tap her temple and say, "Faith, she's a funny little corker. Lives in a whole other world nobody else can see." My mother was Irish Catholic. My biological father was an atheist. I'm somewhere in between. My bio dad didn't stick around after I was born, and that's when my mother's interest in the church grew. Not that I begrudge anyone their faith. People believe what they believe and do what they need to do.

My mother's rosary beads were antique and deeply worn. She got them at a garage sale. Never had to set a new bead. "A well-made rosary doesn't fall apart," she said. "It's the poorly made

ones that break." She'd stroke the beads and say, "Holding this rosary in your hands gives you a powerful sense of compassion and love, doesn't it Faith? If only it could talk of its owner's life and prayers." But whenever the sun caught and shone on the beads, it reminded me of drops of blood.

Religion was a delicious sort of agony for my mother Sarah.

A priest named Jorge was performing the exorcism that went wrong. Believing he saw the devil in my mother's eyes, Jorge tried to scratch him out with his thick, pale fingers. He also syringed holy water into her eyes and her mouth, then got his hands around her throat. Ash Shannon, a former priest who impetuously left the priesthood when he fell in love with my mother, burst into the church and tried to stop him. There was a lot of confusion. Ash was too late. Ash thought a demon was involved. I didn't. But I was only twelve at the time. And who was going to believe a scrawny, mouthy kid who hadn't even been in the church during the exorcism?

My mother was taken to a hospital, in shock and close to death. She wore eye patches during the last three horrible days of her life. She died in darkness and fear. As a result, I made it a point to learn about exorcism rites. And biohazard bags. And other things that go bump in the night. I still have my mother's garage-sale rosary. But I don't wear it.

When shadows come creeping, I don't reach for it. I don't pray to the Saints. I don't have much faith in things I can't see. Or in things I can. In the world. In people. In the cold, wormy fingers of destiny. Call me practical, but I've always been more concerned with temporal issues than eternal ones. That doesn't mean I don't believe in monsters. They exist in fairy tales and they exist in each and every one of us, too.

When I grew up, I started a crime cleanup company in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. It's called *Full Moon Cleaners*. I clean up crime scenes after the police, forensic specialists, and the dead have gone home. And then there are the paranormal crime scenes, places where the dead sometimes *don't* go home, because they don't know how or they're super stubborn. I clean those up, too.

Sometimes the dead hang on, for whatever reasons. Maybe because they died violently and don't know they're dead. Maybe they hang around for other, more malevolent reasons. Or maybe it's simply because they can't let go.

My main responsibility is to thoroughly and discreetly mop up after someone dies violently, to restore a scene to what it looked like *before* the violent death. Until recently, there were few cleaning companies that would go near a job like that, so the family members ended up having to do it themselves. Imagine. Police and EMS teams don't want to clean it up after they've done their thing. They don't want any part of *that*. So what are the families of victims supposed to do?

My business partner, Eddy, a nearly seven-foot tall Blackfoot Indian and Shaman with a scarred face and a big heart, helps me clean up the scenes of homicides, suicides, and accidental deaths. Sometimes we also have the joy of cleaning up blown-up clandestine meth labs. Or decomp. That's when a body's been dead for weeks and no one seemed to notice and there are piles of pizza boxes and crunching maggots and crap everywhere. Some jobs you even get to scrape and blast feces off a toilet that hasn't been used in years. Those are always lots of fun. Plus, I get to wear a hot Hazmat suit, double-filter respirators, and chemical-spill boots. Sometimes I even use welding gloves when I have to pluck splintered bone that's sharp as razor from walls. I mean, what girl doesn't dream of being able to do *that* when she grows up?

When I'm working, I drive a white van with small, orange biohazard stickers and sigils, or magic seals and symbols, on the back of it. The *Full Moon Cleaners* logo is on it too. I use the van to transport stuff like heavy duty bags and hard-plastic containers; mops, buckets, spray bottles, and sponges; ozone machines and foggers; and hospital-grade disinfectants, industrial-strength deodorizers, putty knives for scraping up brain matter, and a steam-injection machine, in case I need to melt dried brain matter that can't be scraped off with putty knives.

On the job, I am daily exposed to nasty human blood-borne diseases that may carry viruses such as HIV, HBV, HCV, and TB. Not to mention the nasty *inhuman* viruses like vampire, zombie, and the rarer werewolf virus. There are bodily fluids that are colorless and odorless that will infect you, kill you, or *change* you as quickly as something that can be seen by the human eye. Then there are demons and golems.

It's not surprising I spend a lot of time showering and scrubbing with aromatic gels and shampoos. You can see why. Today I stood in the shower, hoping to have a quiet day without having to suit up in my fashion-challenged plastic gear and respirator mask. Hoping, rather selfishly, that no one had murdered anyone or taken a shotgun to their own skull and I'd have to clean it up.

I luxuriated in the feel of the water, as hot as I could make it, stinging my skin and streaming against my aching muscles. It always feels so *good* to be clean. Especially when you do what I do for a living.

I finally toweled off, brushed my teeth, and stared at myself in the mirror. I'm late twenty-something. Five-feet-seven. Look like my mother. Good skin, wide-set green eyes. I look more like her every day, even down to the streak of gray in my shoulder-length chestnut hair. She'd gone prematurely gray, too.

The last time I saw her, she'd been dressed in smoky nylons, a dark blue dress, pearls, and low heels, and frosted salmon-pink lipstick glistened on her lips. She was one of the most glamorous women I knew, without even trying. She'd swept her hair up elegantly, the streak of gray attractive on her. She had her rosary. She looked happy. She bent down, planted a kiss on my cheek. "Be a good girl for the sitter," she said, "and don't be sassy." Then she'd walked out the door forever. She'd been going to meet Ash Shannon, or so I believed. Ash was a priest she'd met, and though they hadn't taken their relationship beyond a few weeks of dating, he claimed he loved her and was going to quit the priesthood for her.

I was "sassy" with her that day because I didn't think I needed a babysitter at my ripe, old age of twelve-almost-thirteen.

I applied the same color lipstick now—frosted salmon pink—and brushed my hair. I would never be as glamorous as my mother had been, but I think she'd be proud of the woman I'd become. I was busy clipping up my hair when my cell phone rang. I keep it close at all times. The claim on my company's Web site is that all calls are answered by a real person, not a machine. I looked at the number. *Ash Shannon?* I couldn't believe it. After my mother died, I asked him to teach me how to perform exorcisms and clean up paranormal crime scenes. He did. For three years. Because he'd gone from priest to demon profiler.

"This is the deal, Faith. I'll give you three years." I didn't think he'd walk out of my life afterward, right before my sixteenth birthday, with no explanation. No goodbye. Nothing. Nada. Zip. After that he never answered any of my letters or phone calls. His phone number popping up on my cell *now* stirred conflicting emotions. I recognized the number because I'd dialed it so many times in the past, left rambling messages, and never got a call back. For all I knew, he was dead.

I'd fantasized about this moment, about getting his call after all this time. About asking him questions about that awful night in the sweltering church. I thought I would be ready for it. Could he even have the same phone number now? It didn't seem likely. My heart hammered in my chest and I gripped the edge of the sink, the world tilting a bit.

Then I took a deep breath and finished fixing my hair. Screw it. I let it ring. I broke the promise on my Web site. If it really was Ash, and I doubted it was, he could leave *me* a message and *maybe* I'd get back to him. My job's made me good at numbing my emotions. Shoving them down into some deep, dark crevice of my soul. Easier that way.

My cell phone rang again. The number that popped up this time was the number of my business partner, Eddy. Eddy the Shaman. Eddy the Black. He called himself that because he was part Blackfoot Indian, a big part.

I answered. "What's up, Eddy?"

"We got a call for this *job*. A suicide. A freaky one from the sounds of it. I thought I could handle it myself but I need your help. There are some dead dogs, too, apparently."

He gave me a few details. Eddy has a real reverence and a real fear of dogs. I said, "I'll pick you up in ten," and hung up. Eddy knew we always made sure to have at least two people on every job. I guessed none of the other cleanup techs was available. So much for a day of relaxing on my sun porch, reading a good book, maybe taking a nap, or binge-watching *Shameless*. A girl's gotta make a living somehow.

The crime-scene cleanup business has been good to me. There aren't many people who want to do what I do or who are driven to do it for the same reasons I am. I have a stone farmhouse in Upper Black Eddy in the middle of twelve acres of woods. Even though I live alone, the house has four bedrooms, a new kitchen, wide-plank flooring, deep windowsills, a screened porch, and a greenhouse-style room. The barn has its own well and stalls, though I don't have any horses.

There's a long driveway. To the left, pine trees cast soft shadows across the drive. To the right, a pasture is bordered by thick forest. The large, screened porch overlooks the forest, and on the other side, the greenhouse-style room provides a view of a wide field where fireflies blink softly in the night.

I got in my smoke-colored convertible Mustang, put the top down, and headed to Eddy's house, which is on the way to my office. It was a beautiful morning. Shell-pink clouds danced in a sky that was so bright and blue it almost hurt to look at it. I drove the snaking River Road, which

runs along the Delaware River, the sun glinting off the ruffled water. Surrounded by all this beauty, it didn't seem right that I was going to clean brains off of some guy's ceiling and walls.

The river flows from New York State to the Delaware Bay, marking the border of Pennsylvania and New Jersey. In some places the water seems far from any human activity. In others, boat docks and private cottages snuggle up to quiet riverbanks.

When I got to Eddy's two-story house he was sitting beneath a tree on his front lawn, legs crossed, to use a cliché, "Indian-style", large coffee thermos in hand. He wore his typical jeans, dark T-shirt, and sneakers. He stood up, stretched, and got into the Mustang.

"Morning'," he said.

"Mornin'." Neither one of us is really a morning person. In fact, we have a rule for morning commutes—unless a job demands it, no talking. This one demanded it. As we drove to the office, Eddy slurped his coffee and filled me in on the nasty job ahead of us.