

THE SKELETON OF THE WELL

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PROLOGUE

Once upon a time, many, many years ago, in the very last house of the village, there lived a young orphan girl who made her living by tending goats. She was so beautiful that all the men in the village courted her, arousing the envy of their wives.

Because of this, the poor girl was always alone and had no friends. Even the prince from the nearby castle was in love with her, and he asked for her hand in marriage. The young girl refused; she did not want to leave her goats and her fields, where she gathered herbs and flowers for the ointments and balms she prepared, which she then sold at the village market.

The prince, who was furious, set a trap for her; he stole his mother's crown, the queen's, and hid it in the barn where the young girl kept her goats. The girl was accused of theft and sentenced to death. She was innocent, but the women of the village testified against her: "Witch!"

Those very women who had treated their children's wounds and illnesses with the shepherdess's remedies now turned their backs on her.

The girl was hanged, but before she died she cast a curse on the village. From that day on, her spirit roams at night to snatch the souls of unsupervised children, thus taking her revenge on the descendants of those cruel villagers.

The night was warm, but Alice pulled the sheets up to her chin, shivering. The light from the bedside lamp cast green, red and purple reflections onto her grandmother, making her look almost... bewitched. Through the half-open shutters, the silhouettes of the olive trees blurred into a blanket of darkness that swallowed up all light and warmth. There, somewhere, she roamed, ravenous. Muffled by the thick walls of the farmhouse but clearly audible, the whimpering of a child rose up: her brother was fussing in the next room. What if she'd heard him? What if she'd come to take them both? A dark shadow cut across the beam of light from the bedside lamp and settled on the headboard. The pale skull on the back of the death's-head hawk-moth glowed, and those strange reflections made it seem almost... alive, as if it were... spying on her. And Alice was reminded of her grandmother's friends in the village, making the sign of the cross and clutching their rosaries when they encountered them, "messengers of death... creatures of the Devil and witches". Alice disappeared under the sheet, her whole head hidden. "Goodnight, darling," her

grandmother said, closing the door and leaving her there, in the dark, amidst the sounds of a midsummer night, with only the company of a diabolical creature and her heart beating so hard it took her breath away.

CHAPTER 1

"I'm going for a ride, see you later!"

"You haven't even unpacked your bags yet," shouted Mum, but Alice had already jumped on her bike, sending pebbles flying in all directions along the path leading from the farmhouse to the estate's entrance gate.

"I'm coming too," shrieked a high-pitched voice.

"You stay right there, you can't go off into the countryside on your own."

"That's not fair, why can she?"

"Because you're six and your sister's more than twice your age," Mum retorted sharply, whilst Giacomo threw himself on the ground, kicking in a fit of tantrum.

"How about coming with me to the shed to fix the tractor?" his grandmother suggested. And whilst Giacomo, his cheeks still wet with tears, followed his grandmother clutching a spanner, Alice had already disappeared through the gate. By the time she reached the bend leading onto the main road, she was already drenched in sweat; although the afternoon had already slipped into twilight, with the last rays of sun clinging to the ancient trunks of the olive trees, the stifling heat refused to let go of its grip. The leaves were motionless and even the chirping of the cicadas seemed to thicken in the air, so dense was it.

"Couldn't my grandparents have opened a bed and breakfast on the beach, instead of in the middle of nowhere, thirty minutes' drive from the sea?" Alice muttered to herself.

As a child, the holidays she spent with her grandparents at Golden Olive were the time of year when she felt happiest: she would run about among the olive groves and climb the gnarled, sturdy trunks, with the sun turning the leaves silver like so many tiny blades of light, and above, a sky so blue it almost hurt the eyes. And when it got too hot, Alice would take refuge inside the farmhouse: the thick walls retained a little coolness. Alice's favourite spot was behind the large walnut table used to welcome guests to the bed and breakfast, beneath the large fan that turned placidly, marking the passing of time.

Alice would check if any guests had received a message, polish the brass room number plates, and fill little bags with dried lavender – which her grandparents grew in the garden – to place in the clean linen cupboards. She felt a bit like a fairy-tale creature.

But that was before, in a past life. Now she was thirteen, and all she wanted was to go to the seaside to dive off the rocks, and in the evening eat an ice cream on the promenade and maybe have a go on the fairground rides, meet someone who was under... thirty. She would even have been happy with the summer camp at the municipal swimming pool in town, with water so chlorinated it would make you blonder than Taylor Swift.

Instead, her parents had sent her down there because “at least you’ll get some fresh air and avoid melting away in the concrete of the plains in the middle of July”. She was melting away there too, and on top of that she’d die of boredom. In the city, at least, she’d have air conditioning, her books and her Netflix subscription.

“What a bloody summer,” she blurted out loud, though only the cicadas heard her.

A sputtering, noisy pickup truck emerged from the bend in the road coming from the village; it must once have been a fiery red, but the sun and wind had faded it, and now it was a sad, pale orange. It turned onto the dirt track, kicking up a cloud of dust which, mixing with her sweat, covered Alice in an unpleasant film.

The man at the wheel gave an imperceptible nod in her direction: a crew cut of grey hair, and a scar on his sun-thickened cheek. Alice recognised him instantly: Oronzo Musarò, the owner of La Magna Grecia, the farm that bordered her grandparents’ land to the east. Alice had known him all her life, yet she couldn’t recall ever having exchanged a single word with him in all those years. Beside him, in the passenger seat, she spotted another face, much younger: dark skin and equally dark eyes. The boy met Alice’s gaze for a moment, but it was enough for him to flash her a radiant smile. Then the lorry continued, jolting along the dirt track.

Alice cycled into the village, cutting through the olive groves that lined the main road. She knew every single path, low wall and stone, and yet something felt different – but what?

She squinted in the twilight: it seemed as though she were enveloped in flames. “Of course!” she finally exclaimed. All around her, the silvery green of the olive trees had given way to a rusty brown. Wherever Alice looked, it was as if the trees had been burnt; a shiver ran down her spine and she even thought she heard a high-pitched wail, bouncing from one trunk to another. She lost her balance and almost fell off her bike. Her heart was pounding in her chest. “Don’t be ridiculous, what’s got into you?” Alice whispered to herself. She

leaned her back against a large olive tree and focused on her breathing to calm down. It was an ancient specimen; Alice estimated it must be at least fifteen hundred years old. Only one part of its foliage remained, silvery, in a sea of brown. A huge caterpillar, as big as a sausage, green with blue speckles, was wriggling among the roots at Alice's feet: its sinuous movement was almost hypnotic, and she felt her eyelids suddenly grow heavy... Alice sprang to her feet and climbed back onto the saddle: she was letting herself be influenced, though she didn't even know by what. The heat was probably getting to her head.

She emerged into the village from the cemetery car park, which was already almost dark. The streets were deserted; everyone was indoors having dinner, judging by the aromas wafting out of the open windows.

Alice wandered aimlessly through the narrow white-washed streets lined with limestone houses, riding her bike at full speed, enjoying the feel of the wind on her skin, which washed away some of the dust and sweat. Under the streetlights, the strange sensation she'd felt a short while earlier amongst the olive trees had faded. She turned onto the main street, whizzing past the shuttered fronts of the baker's, the chemist's and the small grocery shop, and arrived at Piazza. It certainly had a name, something like Piazza Roma or the like, but everyone in the village called it that, with a capital P.

A tattered Italian flag hung from the town hall; opposite stood the church façade with its Baroque decorations, whilst the pub and the police station flanked the other two sides. A wreath of palm trees in the centre of the square encircled a stone fountain, almost always dry. And there, sitting on the back of a bench, their feet resting on the faded wood, were three boys her age, who turned their heads towards her at the very moment Alice stopped, her bike's brakes screeching.

Her heart skipped a beat, and a wave of heat flushed her cheeks: her usual, damned shyness. The one closest to her was a girl; her curly hair was tied back in a high ponytail, which made her look even more imposing than she already was. The boy in the middle of the trio had blond hair, but his skin was tanned. To his right, his friend was holding a skateboard and stared at Alice with two enormous dark eyes.

Part of Alice wanted to say hello to them, perhaps even get to know them, but at that moment her pale city-girl skin and red hair, which hung limp and stuck to her head from the sweat, made her feel like a clumsy seagull chick. Until finally, unable to bear the embarrassment any longer, she turned her bike and sped off, but she couldn't help hearing the voices behind her:

"What's wrong with her?" it was the girl's voice.

"I know who she is... the De Giorgi's niece, she lives up North, she only comes here on holiday".

"She doesn't seem quite right in the head to me..."

'What a bloody summer,' Alice thought again as, panting from having covered the three kilometres between the village and the farm in record time, she locked her bike in the porch at the back of the Golden Olive, immersed in silence.