

## GOBLIN MAN

Dana Brooks shook the milk carton over the garbage bin, and the broken eggs slid into the can. *I should have gone to the store myself.* She sighed at twelve-year-old Rudy, the younger of her two sons.

“What had happened was,” Rudy said.

*And so it always begins with those four words. How strange that Rudy’s more like his father, even though he’s the one who’s never seen the man.*

Dana braced herself. Her incredibly creative boy, was about to unfurl another towering tale.

“I was crossing the road,” Rudy said. “By the fruit stall on Ninety-sixth street, and I saw a stranger standing on the corner.”

“A stranger?”

“Yes.” Rudy’s voice was a mixture of bass and the occasional squeaks of a boy teetering on the brink of manhood. “The man was standing on the sidewalk and lit a cigarette with a silver lighter. He gave me the willies.” Rudy shivered.

“I’m sure he did.” The white plastic bag rustled as Dana carefully emptied the rest of its contents. She placed the package of four sticks of butter, one pack of bacon, and a loaf of sliced bread on the metal drain board of the sink. She was relieved, the egg slime didn’t ruin anything else in the bag. Tearing off a few sheets of paper towels from the holder on the grey speckled counter, she rinsed and wiped the foodstuff.

The kitchen was small and always clean. A stainless steel refrigerator stood next to the white stove, and a glass top dinette set was nestled against the far wall of the narrow kitchen. There was one window, over the sink, with curtains depicting red roosters.

*This should have been a simple errand.*

Dana angled her glance out the window. The view was mostly a blank brick wall—the side of the apartment building next door—but she could see a sliver of the front sidewalk and people passing by.

The Brooklyn bodega was only a couple of blocks away, by the subway station, and there was still plenty of sunshine on this early autumn evening. It was a beautiful day for a walk, especially on her day off from her nursing job. She could have gone on the errand herself, but she’d figured it was time to give Rudy the benefit of the doubt. Dana wanted to believe, as he was eager to prove, he could be equally as responsible as his big brother.

Knotting the plastic bag, with the rest of the gunk, she tossed it into the white bin beside the sink. She washed her hands and pulled one of the red kitchen towels off the oven handle. Drying her hands, she turned to face her son. "So, what did this *stranger* look like?"

"He was wearing one of those little black hats, round on top, with a feather stuck in the blue band, and his long tan coat was flapping in the breeze. He lit the cigarette and just stood there puffing." Rudy paused. "Then, he saw me."

Dana placed a hand on her hip, still holding on to the kitchen towel. She wanted to see how far he would take this newest rendition of his twisted tale. "So, what happened after *that*?"

Rudy wrung his hands and shuffled his feet on the white tiled floor. He looked up at his mother, and his eyes grew wide. "Well, by then it was too late for me to escape. The man attacked!"

"Oh, my God, you poor thing," Dana said flatly. "How did you ever get away?"

"I fought for my life, that's how." Rudy nodded and puffed his chest. "It was bad. The man was big. I think he might have been an orc or a goblin. Yes, a goblin. You know, he must have escaped from the underworld. Everyone stopped to see the fight. It's a good thing I learned karate from my video games." Rudy smiled at his mother.

*Of course. This is a campaign to get more time to play his video games.*

"Everyone was cheering me on, and I was able to beat up Goblin Man and get away. But, during the fight, the eggs fell and broke."

"Really? That's what you're going with?"

*How could two children grow up in the same home and be so entirely different from each other?*

Peter, Dana's older son, was shy, but he was a straight-A student. As a high school senior, Peter had already been offered several music scholarships from top colleges. Even now she could hear faint sounds emanating from Peter's room upstairs, as he practiced on his violin.

And then, there was Rudy.

Rudy loved nothing more than his video games. He was a surprise to both Dana and Layne—her ex-husband. The 'ex' was subjective since they were never divorced.

Thirteen years ago, when Dana was three months pregnant with Rudy, Layne had told her he was going to the store and never returned.

After a frantic search by the police, they'd discovered Layne living in London with someone.

Two months after Layne had left, Dana received the first bi-weekly wire transfer into her bank account. The deposits were generous, and over the years, arrived faithfully on time every two weeks, from a Barclay's Bank in London. She'd never received any other communication, but she knew it was from Layne.

Dana's 'ex' was charming, and he had an unusual accent. He was raised in London, but some of his phrases seemed to be laced with French.

Layne had the same compulsive need to tell tales. His favorite family activity was watching spy movies. A two-hour film, with him, would take at least three hours, sometimes more. He'd pause the video, at the most inopportune time—it was annoying as hell—to give his input on how *he* would have done it.

Sometimes, Layne made up similar scenarios as in the films. Whenever he spawned his fables, he would have the same expression that Rudy was wearing right now. Eyes wide, eyebrows scrunched and raised in the middle, with a baffling half smile.

It was uncanny how much Rudy looked like his father. If nothing else, Layne was a handsome brute. He was dark haired with perfect black brows framing golden hazel eyes—stunning against his smooth tan complexion.

Rudy even had his father's mannerisms. Dana saw Layne every time her son laughed, or walked across the room, or even in the way he held his fork. Her heart ached as she wondered what she should do. Her son's stories hadn't started until he'd turned ten. At first, it was fun and funny, and she'd hoped it was nothing but a phase. But, the stories didn't stop, and it was starting to become a problem.

Should she be more worried?

Should she take him to see a shrink?

Would he grow up to be like his father and break the unsuspecting heart of some poor unfortunate girl? She stared at her son, and he stared back. At twelve years old, her little boy stood eye to eye with her. She was five feet and eight inches tall—Rudy would grow to be even taller than Layne. Like opponents at a ruthless game of checkers, he seemed to be anxiously awaiting his mother's next move.

*Ding dong.*

The melodic sound of the doorbell broke Dana's deliberation. She sighed, cast the towel on the counter, and walked out of the kitchen. Rudy followed her, down the narrow corridor, to the front door.

Opening the white, wood-paneled door, Dana gasped, and her heart lurched. A man, wearing a long tan coat, and a black bowler hat with a feather stuck in the blue band. Speechless, she slammed the heavy door and braced her back against it. Her chest heaved, and she struggled to calm her breath.

“That’s him!” Rudy’s harsh whisper was filled with apprehension. “That’s Goblin Man from the corner.”

“Dana?” There was a knock on the door. “Please open the door. I only want to talk.” The unusual British accent from the familiar voice called from outside.

“He knows your name. What are we going to do?” Rudy whispered.

Slowly, Dana closed her eyes. With a deep breath, she dropped her chin to her chest, as if saying a silent prayer. “It’s okay, Rudy.” She raised her head. “Go up to your room for a while. I’ll take care of this.”

“What? No way. I have to protect you.”

Dana’s heart melted, and she smiled at her chivalrous son.

“Oh, by the way,” Rudy said. The new look displayed on her gallant son’s face was familiar. Guilt.

“I didn’t exactly fight Goblin Man. He looked at me funny and creeped me out. I stumbled, and the bag with the eggs slipped out of my hand. Sorry.” Rudy’s shoulders drooped, then he brightened. “But, it was only a little white lie. You said little white lies are okay. Right?”

With squinted eyes, Dana tilted her head and scrutinized her son. “When did I say that?”

“Remember when Peter threw his violin at me and it broke against the wall? You told him to tell his teachers it fell down the stairs. You said, ‘Little white lies are okay if no one gets hurt.’”

Dana opened her mouth and closed it. The revelation punched her in the gut, and she placed a hand over her stomach. The incident with Peter was two years ago. Shortly after that, Rudy had started with the stories.

“Oh, my God. Honey, I’m so sorry. I should never have said that. ‘Tell you what, later, I’ll fix you a nice cup of hot cocoa, just the way you like it, and we’ll talk about it some more.’”

Another knock sounded on the door.

“What about Goblin Man?”

Dana sighed. “I know him. He’s no goblin.” *That might be debatable.* “I’ll be fine. We’ll all be fine, I promise. Now, go up to your room so I can talk to your *Goblin Man.*” She smiled.

Rudy hesitated, then turned and proceeded back through the short corridor, passing the kitchen and living room entrances. Slowly, he climbed the stairs with concerned glances back at his mother.

“God help me,” Dana whispered. Taking a deep breath, she shook her head and turned to open the door.

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