

I Am the Black Widow

The day the death happened in Thorncreek Valley, I got married to Gunnar from Ms. Thomas's class during recess. He was fifth in the line of my elementary school husbands and shaping up to be the last. Not because I was tired of collecting husband, but because we were nine now and apparently that's *too old* for this game. It wasn't a game to me, though. I took marriage very seriously.

Regardless, they had all begun to fear me. All but Gunnar, which is why I liked him. Perhaps, he should have been afraid though, if he knew about the death.

I spun the new ring around my finger on my mile walk home. Gunnar's ring was the best one yet. Gunnar asked his metal-working brother to make a ring, and he made it twisty and strange, little vines of black metal looping and braiding in a nonsense pattern. Christopher said it was creepy, but that's because he was jealous I liked it better than the plastic one he gave me from his cereal box.

"Dad, guess what!" I yelled when I opened the door to our one level farm house. I slid my school bag off my shoulders and it thumped the floor. No dad called back. I ran his room, where I could see he'd once again failed to make the bed. Mommy would've yelled at him, if she hadn't broken our hearts and moved to the city to be an 'self-empowered socialite' three years ago.

"Dad?" I called again, checking the bathroom, the kitchen, my bedroom, and even the loft, which was cluttered messily with several toys and zero fathers.

The wind rustled my braids as I stepped onto the back porch. It had picked up since I got home, and the sky had turned overcast. The sky knew a death was coming. I did not.

A bang came from the barn. Then a crash.

"Dad!" I ran through the pasture, the tall grass whipping my knees. The barn doors were open, and I skidded to a halt in the dirt. Daisy, our most reliable milk cow, huffed, and shifted aside, revealing my dad. He looked up at me, soft and vacant, as he stooped down to collect a small pile of wayward buckets.

"Welcome back from school, Mary." He smiled.

"What was that noise?" I asked.

"Daisy kicked the shelf. I must've spooked her," Dad said, patting the shelf's metal frame, which wobbled eerily. Dad built it himself, and even he said it was unstable. Mommy said it looked like *dung*.

"Oh." I shrugged. "Dad, look!"

I waggled my fingers, which now held five rings instead of four. Dad glanced, barely taking a moment to count.

"A new one?" he asked. He was the first to tell me I should only wear the most recent ring, but my stubbornness convinced him otherwise.

"Yup!" I smiled.

"He better treat you nice," Dad said, like he always does.

"I'm gonna go meet him at Mr. Ellis's," I said.

Dad reached up, sliding the stacked buckets onto the top shelf. "Don't bother our neighbor."

"But he said I could. He likes meeting my husbands."

Dad laughed, shaking his head. "Alright. Be back before dark."

"I will!" I called, and ran towards the road, having made a promise I wouldn't keep.

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Mr. Ellis lived just up the small slope from our farm, and his plot of land could only otherwise be found in a storybook. The house itself was plain, but it disappeared in his self-planted forest of multi-flowered fruit trees. I loved fall, when I could go picking for oranges, lemons and grapefruits, all on the same tree, then another variety all on the next. Fall was second best only to spring, the season when the death happened, because the trees bloomed in brilliant shades of pink, patches branching out from the trunks like colorful bouquets. It was very romantic, so I'd always bring my husbands.

"You're like Doctor Frankenstein, Mr. Ellis, but for trees," I said, holding my arms out to the side as I balanced along his fence.

"Not the first time I've heard *that*," Mr. Ellis said. He stood on a ladder, tending to a beautiful hybrid citrus. He leaned back, cocking his head. "Tell me, do you find my trees monstrous?"

"No!" I shouted, and he chuckled. I pivoted on the fence, knees wobbling. Holding still to regain balance, I saw Gunnar making his way down the road.

"What's this one's name again? Michael?" Mr. Ellis asked.

"Michael and I divorced after Christmas. This one is Gunnar."

Mr. Ellis sighed. "What a terrible season to divorce."

"We had to." I shrugged. "His Christmas tree caught fire and burned his family home. They had to rebuild and now his dad is in debt. He says it's my fault."

Mr. Ellis paused. "Is it?"

"Maybe. Some of the boys think I'm cursed."

"Cursed," he repeated, taking a deep breath, "how?"

I pivoted again to face Mr. Ellis, this time wobbling a little more than I'd like.

"Christopher caught the flu two months into marriage." I waved my arms, attempting to still the shaking in my knees. "I went to Edmond's house and it got infested—rats in the cupboards." I breathed out, stable once again. "Worst of all was Dawson, the day we got engaged he found out his parents *died* overseas."

Mr. Ellis leaned out of his tree. "Careful, Mary, or you'll make a black widow of yourself."

"A spider?" My brow furrowed, and I looked at my arms. I may have been thin and spindly, but I couldn't see myself transforming into an eight-legged creepy crawler.

"Do you know why they're called black widows?" He asked.

"No. Dad only taught me to step on them before they can bite me or I'll die."

"They are poisonous little creatures. They get their name because the female spiders eat their mates." Mr. Ellis shook his head solemnly. "If all your husbands meet ill fates, and you are the one to blame, you may be a black widow too."

I clenched my fists, nervous.

"Hi Mary."

"Gunnar!" I spun around to meet him with all speed and no caution, and my foot slipped off the fence. Gravity took control. I yelped, noticing a spiked garden rake against the fence. Gunnar ran past the rake towards me, reaching his arms out as if one skinny 9-year-old is equipped to catch another. I crashed into him, squinting my eyes shut as he collapsed beneath me.

A thump and a clatter later, I peeked my eyes open to see Gunnar's head on the ground, scraggly brown locks spilling into the dirt around him, brushing the spokes of the rake mere inches to the left.

"Sorry!" I scrambled off of him, embarrassed. "Did I hurt you?"

"No." He rubbed his head, sitting up.

"You kids alright?" Mr. Ellis called from his tree.

"Yes!" We answered in unison. I helped Gunnar to his feet, and he looked up at Mr. Ellis's trees, dazed.

Gunnar was short and his clothes were too big hand-me-downs from his metal-working older brother. I liked his pinched eyebrows because he always looked insightful even if he was thinking about cowboy comics or pie. He proposed to me on the slide and we married on the swing sets.

"What kind of tree is that?" He asked.

"It's every tree," I answered, which caused Mr. Ellis to laugh. "Come on!"

I pulled Gunnar by the wrist through Mr. Ellis's atypical orchard, explaining as accurately as a child could about tree grafting and fruit growing. I took him to the set of trees that'd been altered during growth with metal bars by Mr. Ellis's grandfather, modeling the trees to weave in and out of each other until they formed a natural wooden cage. We crawled into the center and settled in the dirt, giggling about the goings on of our peers.

In a moment of quiet I thought about Mr. Ellis's words, and my mood turned serious. "Um, Gunnar?"

"Yes, Mary?" He matched my tone.

"Why aren't you afraid that I'm cursed?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Dunno."

I looked down, anxiously tugging on the grass.

"Bad things happen all the time, curse or not," he said.

I smiled at him, because that made me happy somehow, even if I didn't totally believe him. His cheeks flushed red, and then it was his turn to get serious.

"Mary, are your mom and dad okay with us being married?"

"Oh yeah, of course." I waved him off. "Dad doesn't care, so long as you treat me right."

"Okay." He nodded. "What about your mom?"

"No, mommy doesn't know. She's gone."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Mr. Ellis says that people are like his trees. Sometimes you can graft two totally different branches together, and sometimes you just can't. You may try to graft them, but they can still wither. Dad and mommy just weren't meant to graft."

Gunnar nodded again, and my thoughts wandered.

I liked Mr. Ellis explanation, but that day I wondered for the first time if it wasn't just that dairy farmers and fancy ladies don't graft. Maybe mommy was never a fruit branch at all, but a black widow. She and dad married, then she ate his heart and left. Now he's alone, unable to regraft, with only one fruit for company.

What if I wasn't a fruit, though? What if, I too, am a black widow?

Gunnar took my hand, and I glanced up at his gentle smile. I grinned meagerly in return, but suddenly I worried that the perspiration on my palms would burn like venom. Still, I didn't move. Gunnar and I sat there until the sun set--a perfect picture of awkward, 3rd grade, marital bliss. Simple, happy, and unaware of the coming death.



When I came home, smoke was rising from the chimney into the night sky, and I remembered that I promised to be home before dark. I opened the door gently, and saw dad staring pensively into the fire.

“Sorry, dad,” I said. He looked up, and for once I wondered if he would get mad, but he didn’t. He never gets mad.

“It’s okay, sweetheart.” He spoke softly, his voice a little hoarse. “I just worry is all.”

“Yeah.” I looked down at my feet.

“Maybe you can do me a favor.” He sighed, leaning back in his chair.

“Okay.”

“Go check and make sure the water troughs are full.”

“Okay!” I agreed, dashed across the living room and flung out the back door.

Running through the grass to the barn, something slowed my pace. The chimney smoke wafted in my nose, but instead of smelling like fire, it smelled rotten. My eyes flashed back at the house for a moment, but I kept moving forward until the tall grass gave way to flat dirt. With all my strength I pushed the large door open, and moonlight slowly painted it all into view. The shelf, flattened, its contents spilled. Beyond it, Daisy’s hoof, then her legs, her stomach, finally her limp head, her lifeless eyes.

Centered on the large white marking on her chest stood a small black spider, with a tiny red hourglass on its back. I knew, with utter certainty, that this widow was responsible.

The spider ran towards me. I wondered what to do when it got close. Would I crush it under foot like my dad instructed? It was a poisonous little creature, eating hearts and spreading venom. However, if I were the black widow, I wouldn’t mean to hurt those I bite. If I were the black widow, I wouldn’t want to be crushed. If I were the black widow, I would ask politely to leave me be, to let me run, to close your eyes and wait until the sun rises, and the day of the death in Thorncreek Valley is over.