

The Hound

By: Melanie Flynn

I'm running. Running through the woods. Running down a wooded path to my house, to safety. I don't look back but I know that he's behind me; I can feel his red hot glare burning into my back as I struggle to breathe, to keep running. I stop to catch my breath, doubled over in pain, my lungs fill up with smoke and I can't breathe! Gasping for air I see fire out of the corner of my eye. Fire? Everything stops.

I turn slowly and our eyes meet. I see him now –the hound –and his bulky black frame; hazy as if he is but smoke itself, hiding the fact that he can outrun a speeding bullet. I hear his heavy breathing, though I know he's not tired. Then, a guttural growl parts his lips and his long sharp, yellowing teeth flash menacingly in the moonlight. He looks like a ghost in the dewy mist that surrounds us, and I start to doubt my fear. Maybe it's my imagination running wild, huh? But, when I look up I see his large round eyes glowing like two blood red moons in the darkness and I know the end is near for me. I feel it.

I freeze. Why did I do this to myself? If I had just stayed away and let things play out I would never be in this situation. Why did I meddle with life and death? No good can come from dealing with demons, of this I am sure.

He blinks, and for a second he is invisible. My heart stops. The hound opens his eyes inches from my face. We are eye to eye now. A mere four inches separates us, him sitting while I am barely able to remain upright. He is so close I can feel his breath on my cheeks, and I can smell the sickening stench of a thousand rotting corpses on his breath. The hound is old; he has wisdom in his eyes. He has collected many indebted souls for old Lucifer, the Prince of Darkness himself.

The hound sits there staring at me, waiting for me to run, scream, or do anything to stop his inevitable advances. But I don't. Out of some crazy whimsical notion, I decide to stare down the nose of an honest to goodness Hell Hound come

to drag my soul to Hell. He tilts his head, and his ears draw back in confusion. I've dumbfounded a Hell Hound. If only I had time to add that to my resumé.

But I know that I can only hold him off for so long. If I escape this hound others will come for me soon after. It makes me wonder if I should even keep fighting? Or should I give up and let him take my soul to Hell? After all I did make a deal with the Devil to save my sister Anna's life.

She was dying from lung cancer; caused by the second hand smoke she inhaled waitressing at a bar off the beaten track. She had just turned 19 that summer and she wanted to be an actress. When she got the news of her illness she had just been handed her breakout role. She was dying much too soon. I couldn't let my sister die so young not if I could help it.

I read medical book after medical book, I even read the Bible but I found nothing that could help her. But then, I discovered a very old book supposedly of "real magic", and I thought maybe, just maybe I could save her from her fate.

The book contained many potions and incantations that many would label as "Black Magic", but I refuse to label it anything but a cure. I found a chapter describing human encounters with demons. After reading for awhile I stumbled upon what was called a crossroads demon. Apparently these demons make deals for the Devil collecting souls for a wish that they grant. It even said they can save a person's life. So I whipped up the container of ritual items described in the book: a photo of myself, graveyard dirt and a bone from a black cat. I buried it at the centre of a crossroads I found after driving around for hours, and then I waited.

After 10 minutes when nothing had happened, I almost gave up. But then I saw it. A portly man dressed in a brown suit and tie walking towards me; his skin was tan but yet it seemed to exude an eerie glow. It was just after midnight and I could barely make out his features but I could see his eyes. His eyes were as black as the night around us but yet they radiated an endless darkness, and I shivered involuntarily. Even the whites of his eyes had gone black. I knew then that I had seen the face of true evil.

"Do you know what you have done, child?" His voice was rough and he seemed to throw his words at me when he talked.

“...yes,” I managed to croak out as my throat had suddenly gone dry.

“Well?” he barked, wanting to get right to the point.

“It’s my sister, Anna, she’s got lung cancer and –” I stopped abruptly when he raised his palm to cut me off.

“You want me to save her life, child?” He asked as if he already knew the answer.

I nodded.

“Well then I will cure her of her cancer, but for a price.” He paused so I nodded. “As I’m feeling awfully generous today I will give you seven years before they come for your soul in exchange for her long life. I do not usually give more than five for a cure of a terminal disease so you’re getting a deal here,” he gave a deep throaty chuckle at that. “Take it or leave it child?”

I took a deep steadying breath, “I’ll take it.” I spoke calmly with a confident air, neither of which I felt.

His slimy toothy grin widened as he stuck out his hand, “It’s a deal then.”

I stuck my hand out to meet his and he grabbed it, yanking me to him so we met nose to nose. Then, just when I thought he would take my soul, he pressed his thumb to my chest directly over my heart and my heart thudded to a halt. I was hit with a blinding pain and I fell to the ground clutching my chest. It felt as if my heart had been ripped from my chest, though I suspected had that actually happened it would be less painful than this. I looked down at my chest to see a black spot singed to my skin, fading as the pain began to dissipate.

When the pain was gone completely I stood up and realized that there was no one around anymore. I felt no different than I had before my meeting with the demon. With the black spot gone I had nothing to prove to myself that it had really happened, so I just went home.

The next morning I went to see Anna to prove to myself that I had saved her. When I got there she was sitting up in bed with no machines hooked up to her, eating a steak as if she had never been ill in her life. The doctors said that it was an

act of God, but I knew different. The Devil himself had saved Anna in exchange for an eternity of servitude from little old me.

The hound barks and I am jolted back to reality, back to standing face to face with Death, nose to nose with the gateway to Hell itself. I knew now that I should not be afraid. I'm giving my life now so that my little sister can live a long and happy life. I know that this is my price to pay, but I will pay it happily in full. I will not fight him. I will go with him tonight, my very own escort to the underworld. Nothing will stop me from saving my sister from being another statistic, and for this I will be remembered.

I didn't say any of it aloud but the hound looks at me with his wise eyes as if he understands me anyway; he must see into the marked souls. As he opens his mouth to call in victory for the Devil himself, he suddenly spoke to me, "You will not be remembered for your sacrifice, young one, as it was not a sacrifice. What you did, you did from the selfishness within your own heart; you could not bear to lose your only sister so you selfishly chose to let her be the one to lose a sister. Death is *death*, and life is *life* but for you, young one, death is now!" With a growl he leapt, sinking his teeth into my heart as I felt my arteries burst and break. Fading away I had just one final thought;

A name

–*Anna*.