

The Curse

By:

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Mother and Father have not been right lately.

These words raced repetitively through Juniper's mind as she fled from her father's study, her long, thick tangles of curly red hair streaming out behind her as she sprinted heedlessly up the grand, spiraling staircase, nearly crashing into her disapproving mother. Quickly turning away before Mrs. Berry saw the tears welling up in Juniper's sapphire-blue eyes, she muttered a barely audible apology under her mother's ferocious glare and continued running up the stairs, her feet pounding furiously against the carpeted steps. She didn't stop running until she reached her bedroom, where, after flinging her door shut, she collapsed into a weeping, sobbing heap on her bed.

Juniper didn't normally cry, but today was an exception. Something was definitely wrong with her parents. After a long and painful lesson with her tutor, she'd decided to see what her father was up to. Peering through the freshly-washed window of Mr. Berry's gigantic study, she'd seen him slumped almost lifelessly at the long wooden table, head tilted back and eyes wide open. His caramel-colored hair was a tangled mess, and his teeth had grown noticeably longer and pointier, like fangs. His eyes were sunken deep in their sockets, and what scared Juniper most of all was that his skin bubbled peculiarly. Frightened into crying, Juniper had ran to her bedroom.

Now she lay sprawled on her bed, trembling with fear as tears streamed rapidly down her face and wet the star-speckled bed sheet. What was wrong with her father? Would the same thing happen to her mother? Who or what had caused her father to change into that strange creature? Millions of nagging, unanswered questions swirled around endlessly inside Juniper's head, and she anxiously twined a strand of flaming red hair around her finger, forcefully squeezing her eyes shut. *Don't think about Mom and Dad, think about—*

Mrs. Berry abruptly barged into the room, a now permanent scowl plastered all over her face. Juniper hastily swept her hand across her eyes, trying to wipe away the tears, and said, "Mom, I thought we had a rule: you have to knock before you come into someone's room."

Mrs. Berry regarded her with a disdainful glance and, without replying, said coldly, "Dinner's ready."

"I already ate," replied Juniper.

Her mother turned and left carelessly, slamming the door loudly behind her. She didn't even glance back.

Juniper listened to her mother's expensive, elegant high-heels thumping jauntily down the staircase, then comfortably nestled her head deep into her spotless white pillow, overwhelmed by all that had happened today. Just before she fell asleep, she assured herself that, no matter what, she *would* fix her parents.

The next morning, Juniper was woken by the shrill, high-pitched shriek of her mother calling her to come downstairs for breakfast. Eyelids fluttering sleepily, Juniper tumbled groggily out of bed and shoved her feet tightly into her slippers, only half awake. After lumbering tiredly down the grand staircase, Juniper entered the kitchen and found both parents slumped limply at the table. When Juniper saw her parents, she stumbled back unsteadily, her white-washed blue eyes wide with terror, and tripped unexpectedly over her skateboard. She scrambled to her feet and stared nervously at her mother and father, filled with utter horror.

Her mother's golden shoulder-length hair was tousled and tangled and cascaded messily down the sides of her head like a wild waterfall. Mr. Berry looked no better. Clumps of his auburn hair lay perched atop his head in matted heaps, with several bald patches. Their usually pearl-white teeth had turned a revolting yellowish color, and their teeth had grown longer and sharper, now looking strangely like bone-crunching fangs. Their dark, penetrating eyes were sunken deep into their head, and their skin bubbled oddly, like a deadly potion inside a witch's cauldron. Then Juniper remembered what had happened yesterday, stumbling upon her distorted father in his lobby. Only now, her mother had turned into that terrible creature, too.

“Mom? Dad?” Juniper said uncertainly, tentatively approaching her parents. “Are you two alright?”

She quickly leaped back when her father viciously snapped at her. “Of course we're alright, you fool. Are you blind?”

“N-no, I—”

“Well, if you aren't blind, then sit down and eat your breakfast!” her mother commanded furiously, roughly shoving a bowl containing a shapeless mound of cold, unappetizing oatmeal across the table.

“Mom, I'm not hungry—”

“Then get out!” her mother ordered ferociously.

Tears pushed threateningly against Juniper's eyelids. She shrank fearfully against the wall, then turned and sprinted out of the kitchen.

That night Juniper found herself unable to sleep. Her tangled curls of flaming red hair tumbled wildly over her pillow, and she tugged on a strand nervously, frightened by the menacing shadows flickering eerily on the creamy white walls. She kept thinking she saw dark images of her distorted parents glowering brutally at her, and she anxiously yanked her thick blanket up to her chin and tightly squeezed her eyes shut.

Suddenly, Juniper heard hushed, muffled voices whispering indistinctly outside in the hallway. Mr. Berry abruptly flung open her door and peered inside cautiously. “She's asleep,” he breathed hoarsely.

Staring curiously through her long eyelashes, Juniper watched her horrific, monstrous mother glance carelessly over Mr. Berry's shoulder, scowling resentfully. Juniper shifted uncomfortably, feeling her mother's eyes glaring coldly at her. "Good," Mrs. Berry muttered approvingly. "Now, come on, let's go."

Casting Juniper another stony, reproachful glance, Mrs. Berry wobbled off unsteadily in her high-heels as she clung firmly to her husband's arm for support, creakily pulling the door closed behind them. Juniper wondered fiercely where her parents were going, and almost instinctively she clambered out of bed and secretly followed them.

Eventually they came to a pair of huge, locked wooden doors. Juniper had noticed these doors before, but she was strictly forbidden to go into the room inside. Mrs. Berry gingerly placed a bony, waxy hand on the brass doorknob and carefully tugged the heavy oak doors open. Inside it was tightly crammed with all sorts of dusty, old-fashioned junk, but in the middle of the room stood a gruesome-looking stone statue. Juniper knew the statue had been given to her parents a few years ago by a strange cloaked man who never revealed his face. The statue was her parents' most prized possession, although Juniper didn't understand why. It had bubbling skin, sightless, sunken eyes, an awkward, twisted smile that showed off its pointed, razor-sharp fangs, and tousled, tangled hair. For some reason, the statue reminded Juniper vaguely of someone—she just didn't know who.

Mrs. Berry clutched her husband's arm tightly, her eyes pinned unblinkingly on the statue. Together they walked slowly to the middle of the room, their lips moving soundlessly. Juniper watched from the doorway, her eyes wide. What in the world were her parents doing? Staring, staring, almost as if in a trance. What was going on? As her mother and father sank steadily to their knees, Juniper, unable to hold herself back, sprinted inside the room and screamed, "What are you doing?"

"Juniper!" Mr. Berry bellowed furiously, whirling around swiftly. "Get out of this room! NOW!"

"You're not allowed in here!" her mother shrieked. "Get back in bed!" She leaped to her feet.

"Mom, Dad, what's going on?" she cried desperately. "Please, tell me!"

"We don't have to tell you anything! Get out!" Mr. Berry ordered scornfully.

Juniper ran inside the room and glared at her parent's anguished faces. "Why were you staring at that statue?"

"Get out!" Mr. Berry took a threatening step towards Juniper, and she stumbled back helplessly, crashing into the statue behind her.

The next thing happened so fast Juniper could barely register it all. The statue crashed noisily to the floor and exploded into a million granite pieces. The

loud, thunderous sound of it shattering mingled with Mrs. Berry's rasping screams, and Juniper huddled fearfully on the polished marble floor, trying to protect herself from the flying chunks of gray stone. By the time it was all over and Juniper had dared to peer around the room with her frightened eyes, she found the broken remains of the statue scattered everywhere and her parents lying in collapsed, lifeless heaps on the floor.

“No!” Juniper wailed, scrambling to her feet and running painfully to her mother and father, the sharp pieces of stone cutting her bleeding, bare feet. “No!” She dropped to her knees and shook her parents vigorously. “Wake up! You can't be dead, you can't be. Oh, what have I done?” Tears squeezed out of her eyes and trickled down her flushed, freckled cheeks.

A gentle, loving hand reached up and caressed her forehead tenderly. Through her tears Juniper saw her mother stroking her face affectionately. “Don't cry, honey.”

Juniper was too relieved to notice that that was the first time in years her mother had called her “honey.” “Mom, you're okay!” she said, joyously throwing her skinny arms around her mother. “Oh, thank god.”

“No, thank *yourself*, Juniper,” Mr. Berry said.

“What do you mean?”

“That statue—” Mrs. Berry carefully snatched up a piece of broken granite and examined it closely, then tossed it away. “—that statue was cursed. It was controlling us and turned us into mean, unloving creatures. Then we started looking like it, too. Thank you, Juniper, for destroying it. Now it can't control us anymore.”

“Oh.” Juniper skeptically eyed the shattered rock surrounding her. So *that* was who the statue reminded her of—her parents.

Mrs. Berry embraced Juniper fiercely, her thick honey-blonde hair falling lusciously over her daughter's face. Mr. Berry joined the hug. “I'm so glad it's all over,” he said. “Everything is alright now.”

And everything was.

Emily Cameron was born in Melbourne, Australia in 2001. She will be in fifth grade in the fall. Her favorite subjects at school are reading, writing, and of course, recess. She lives in Santa Clara, California with her mother, her father, her pesky younger brother, and her guinea pig. She is currently nine years old and will turn ten in September. Her favorite hobbies are reading books, writing stories, and roller skating. Her other stories can be read at <http://emily.webmin.com/>