

The Banshee of Machrae

One Death in Seven Stories



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Sonja Condit

The Banshee of Machrae: One Death in Seven Stories

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Published by

Southern Fried Karma, LLC

Atlanta, GA

www.sfkpress.com

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ISBN 978-1-7325398-4-6

eISBN 978-1-7325398-5-3

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018952448

Cover design by Olivia M. Croom. Cover art: Watson Mill Covered Bridge and Dam in Northeast Georgia, USA, by Sean Pavone. Interior graphic by Freepik.

Printed in the United States of America.

For Brent, Ethan, and Rebecca.

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Book I

Flashover



1: *An Old Man in a Quiet Room*

“Come and see,” Jessa said. She took my hand and led me into her great-grandfather’s room.

Jessa Machrae was my best friend. She knew things. She ate candy every day. I followed her everywhere. In the first week of October 2006, when we were seven, Jessa’s great-grandfather had been dying for as long as I’d known her, which was three months and felt like my whole life. He was a-hundred and one years old. Mrs. Machrae said, “If you two live to be a hundred and one, you’ll live in three centuries,” because we’d been born in 1999. If he wanted to live in three centuries, Jessa’s brother Kalen would have to live to a hundred and four. He only made it to nineteen.

When we first moved in across Fenchurch Road from the Machraes in July, Jessa came over the road—crossing the road alone, which I was not allowed to do—and introduced herself by saying, “This is my house.”

“It’s ours,” I said, but I wasn’t sure; in my life so far, we’d moved eight times, sometimes unexpectedly in the middle of the night, and my father’s car had been repossessed. I had no way of knowing what was mine, and here was Jessa in the sunlight, with purple lights shimmering in her black hair, staking her claim.

The house was over a century old and had been built in stages, new rooms tacked on to old. There was a window in the brick wall between the kitchen and the dining room, and you couldn’t find a truly flat floor in the whole place. Wherever you set a marble down, it would quiver, then tremble, then wobble, then roll toward one wall or another. If you rolled it back, it would stop as if caught

under someone's thumb, and then after a while it would roll back to you; if you squinted, you could almost make out a small body crouched in the swirl of day-shining dust waiting for you to take another turn. Infinite patience in a simple game. My mother took the marble away, *Emerson, don't summon what you don't understand: anything can happen.* My parents had let me choose which of the two smaller bedrooms I wanted, and I chose the one on the corner because it had two windows. Jessa had been born in that room, she said.

"My house," Jessa said. "Only we're in the new house now. We can throw you out whenever we want."

"No you can't."

"We can get the sheriff to throw you out and dump your stuff on the side of the road, and anybody who drives by can stop and take whatever they want."

"No, no, no—"

"Nothing here is yours," Jessa said. "Show me your toys." She led me into the house and I followed her, hiccupping at the top of every breath and wiping my tears into my hair, as she prowled from room to room until she found mine. "How many Barbies you got?" she asked.

"My mom doesn't believe in Barbies."

"That's stupid."

My toys lived in a cedar trunk hand-carved by a friend of my mother's, an amateur carpenter who never quite mastered the square edge. The whole thing tilted to the left and the lid didn't close. Jessa dumped everything on the floor—the handmade blocks, the unpainted wooden train, the rag dolls made of actual rags—and stirred the mess with a queenly, contemptuous toe. "Pathetic," she said. But she'd come this far; she couldn't leave empty-handed. She took one of the rag dolls and said, "You give me this and I'll let you keep the rest. You can come and look at my toys, but you aren't allowed to touch them."

Three months later, half her Barbies had found their way to my house, and once a week my mother repatriated them, muttering all the while about genital mutilation and footbinding. Jessa's mother fed me Popsicles and Rice Krispies Treats and hot dogs off the grill. Her great-grandfather said *call me Granda* and told me all the Machrae stories, as if I were a new Machrae sprung fully formed from the earth.

He told me about Lilly who drowned with her baby at the bridge, and whose ghost would eat any traveler who was so foolish as to stop for her. He told me about his half-brother who worked in the dye house at Roberts Mill and accidentally cut off his own thumb with a hatchet while chopping firewood . . . and how his thumb-bones were dyed blue, and his flesh was purple at the bone. He told me about wild animals that weren't around much anymore, like panthers and lizardmen and the black owl, which was big enough to carry off a middling dog, and called like a woman wailing in the dark. He showed me the scar on his arm from the time a coyote bit him, and the scar on his ankle from when he stepped into the trap he had set for that very same coyote, which had taken the trap in its teeth and moved it on purpose into Granda's path.

I never knew my real grandparents. Eldred Machrae was the only old person I'd ever met. He smelled strongly of peppermint with an undertone of eucalyptus, a smell so aggressively clean I was always sniffing for something horrible underneath. His hair was thick, black, and coarse, with only a few white strands around his ears. He could stick out his tongue through the gap in his lower teeth, a trick which never failed to make Jessa shriek with laughter, though it scared and revolted me.

"Come and see," Jessa said in October, three months after we moved to Roberts Mill. "Mommy left me alone

with Granda and I think he's dead."

His room was still and dim. The body in the bed seemed to have shriveled. I took a step into the room and the hand of vertigo whirled me up and down and backwards all at once. I caught myself on the doorframe. For a moment, I was my own small self and another self, two feet taller, sixty pounds heavier; it was Granda's room and someone else's room (whose, I could not say); emotions blew through me, moving me though they were not my own. Shame, sadness, grief. Then I slammed back into my body, electric in every pore. The blanket was drawn over the face, above the eyebrows, and the wild black hair sprayed over the pillow. I smelled mint and eucalyptus. I smelled, very clearly, that scent I had searched for all those months, living flesh already rotten, human waste, bleach, lemon. One breath and it was gone.

"Touch him," Jessa said.

"I don't want to."

"Go on. He won't bite."

I took another step toward the bed. "Let's tell my mom. She'll call someone."

Jessa snorted and I flushed. Hadn't I learned yet that *let's tell my mom* was never the answer? I took another step, and now I could see the band of golden skin between the blanket and the black hair. Death had smoothed the deep lines of Granda's face. I touched a lock of hair. It felt no different than anyone's hair. I touched the forehead.

I had just time to think *this is a dead body I'm touching a dead body he's dead* when it happened. A hand snaked from the blanket, the body flung the covers aside, and Jessa's brother Kalen grabbed my shoulders and pulled me toward him. He crossed his eyes and shouted, "Got you now!" and he and Jessa burst out laughing.

This time, I didn't cry. All the blood in my body turned to light and I hummed with power. It sparkled in my

fingertips. “I hope you die,” I said. “I hope you die, I hope you die.” Immediately I was sorry, and I gabbled as quickly as I could, before the power faded, “No, don’t all the way die . . .”

Eldred Machrae died two days after Thanksgiving, but it took ten years for my curse to work its way into the world. I did it. I said those things. It’s my fault: everything.

About the Author

Sonja Condit wrote her first novel, a twenty-page bildungsroman about the life of a trapdoor spider, at the age of seven. Her second novel, about a mummified cat who escaped from a museum at night and went out to have adventures with real cats, was just the beginning of her passion for telling stories that come from inside the hearts of her characters—to Sonja, plot is just an excuse to find out why people do what they do. *The Banshee of Machrae* was inspired by a news story about a couple of young people who went on an arson spree for love. Sonja is a musician and teacher in Greenville, SC, where she lives with her husband, two children, four cats, and a greyhound.



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