



The
Wings of
Azrael
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Alison peered through the dusty windows of the antique shop. The paint on the window and door frames was peeling. A faded card was attached to the blind on the door. The blind had once served as blackout, but had become green with age and was falling from its roller.

For many Sundays, Alison and Mark had been scouting small shops selling trivia from by-gone ages. They were great collectors of china, decorated tins, old lace tablecloths and other bric-a-brac. They enjoyed driving out to villages, looking for charity shops and antique fairs. Sometimes a bargain was forthcoming, but more often than not the dealers were well aware of the value of their goods, however dusty.

“That’s it!” Alison breathed. ‘We’ve found it! At last!’

She turned to her fiancée with starry eyes. Mark grinned, and squeezed her hand. They turned back to gaze at the object her delight. Behind the grimy glass, surrounded by heaps of leather-bound books and boxes of old beads, stood a dressmaker’s stand, wearing an exquisite lace dress with a high Edwardian style collar, a cascade of creamy ruffles falling over its bust.

“Lovely!” sighed Alison. ‘Now everything has come together.’

“Look at the card - I can just about read it. Not open until Thursday morning, at ten.”

Alison sighed again, this time with frustration. Mark hugged her.

“Let’s put a note through the letterbox, saying we want it? You’d better get back on Thursday at ten. You’ll have to come on your own, ‘cos I’m really tied up at work. I can sort the cash tomorrow.”

“We daren’t leave it ‘till Saturday!”

They smiled at each other.

“It hasn’t got a price tag,” he teased.

“It can’t be more than the two hundred we’ve earmarked. You know this one is meant for our wedding! Let’s write that note and get back to tell Mum.”

* * * *

Penelope was knitting by the fire. Although spring had truly arrived and the trees outside her window were laden with blossom, there was still a nip in the air. April was a deceptive month and when Penelope sat down to watch afternoon

television she noticed the cold. In any case, she loved to watch the flames, the flickering reds and golds. Sometimes her attention would wander and she would gaze into the red hot cavern of the fireplace, her needles still in her hands. Her thoughts would drift. Always to the same memories, her mental photo album of her long, happy marriage.

It was less than a year earlier that Penelope had gone to the kitchen one evening and returned to find her husband dead in his armchair. At fifty-six, he had died of a heart attack. Quite painlessly she supposed, as she had heard no cry for help, no shout of alarm. She had been watching the milk in the pan, anxious it should not boil over onto her nice clean hob. So many plans Penelope and Geoff had made for their retirement. They were practical, sensible people, saving for a rosy future when the restrictions of nine-to-five office hours had been lifted. Geoff had been a civil servant and, ever since their only child Alison had started school eighteen years ago, Penelope had worked part-time in the local library.

What a nonsense! Out of the blue, cruel Fate had intervened. Death had invaded their oh-so-well-organised lives, overtaken them, laughed at all their dreams. The doctor had given Penelope valium to ease her aching heart and, after a few months, she gradually picked up the threads of a new, lonely life. Alison had already left home to live with Mark, but she came back home for a short time, to hold her mother's hand while she recovered from the grief and shock. But Penelope had always know Alison would eventually have to create a life for herself.

Happier days were on the horizon, now the wedding was being planned. Alison would drop by after work, and she and Penelope would spend their evening organising dates, choosing flowers and frocks for bridesmaids, and sending out invitations. The same relatives who had wept at the funeral would drink a toast to Alison and Mark. They had chosen the first of May and Penelope was full of new joy. She might even find herself a grandmother, she thought, and was secretly saving knitting patterns.

Something else changed in Penelope's life. She joined the Spiritualist Church. On the night of Geoff's death, when she was organizing cups for their hot chocolate, she had dropped on of her fine porcelain saucers. She gazed in horror when it shattered at her feet. The tea set had been a wedding present and in twenty-six years of marriage she had not lost a single piece.

“Geoff! I can’t believe it!” she cried as she bent to pick up the pieces. He stood over her.

“Dearest,” he said. ‘Don’t fret. It doesn’t matter you know. These small things don’t really matter.’”

She knelt weeping in his shadow, the chips and fragments in her hand. Then she looked up and gathered herself to her feet, but he had gone. Back to his chair, she assumed. She sniffed, dried her eyes and returned to the rapidly boiling milk.

The cocoa was on the tray, the plate with the biscuits nestled on the embroidered napkin. The news was on the television. It was ten o’clock. Geoff sat very still, his eyes closed, as though asleep. She placed the tray on the coffee table. There was a strange stillness in the room. A log fell from the fire. Penelope reached for Geoff’s hand. It was warm. But quite limp.

* * * *

Sometime afterwards, Penelope told her neighbour Mary what happened on the night Geoff died.

“It often happens,” said Mary, holding Penelope’s hand. “People who don’t usually think of themselves as psychic have premonitions just before someone close dies. Why don’t you come to the Spiritualist Church? We meet on Sundays, like ordinary church. I’ve been going for years. Nothing way out, not Eastern or anything. The channels have been opened up for you, that’s really obvious. You should follow this up quickly, while Geoffrey is still close to this plane of existence.”

The Spiritualist circles gave Penelope great solace and helped her feel Geoff was still nearby. Often in the lonely evenings, when she was knitting she would gaze into the fire and hear her husband’s voice comforting her.

Don’t fret, dearest, he would say. Penelope came to know in her heart that he was in a peaceful place. She was sure she would see him again. She didn’t speak of her convictions to Alison and Mark. They were sceptical young people and she knew she couldn’t change their ideas. They had made her very happy by arranging a proper wedding, and she felt life had brought her great blessings, as consolation for her loss.

The only source of anxiety now was the wedding dress. Alison wanted an

antique frock, Edwardian or Victorian, preferably made of lace. She had been hunting for more than two months and Penelope hoped the search would come to nothing.

“I don’t know why you want an old dress,” she complained. “A wedding dress ought to be new, preferably made especially for the event. A new dress for a new marriage. It’s like the old saying about the wine and the bottles. You know. You shouldn’t put new wine in old bottles. Well, it’s the same thing. The psychic dregs from someone else’s wedding could be left in the dress. You wouldn’t ever know if the marriage had been happy, or whether it had ended in tragedy. There’s so much stress and anxiety for a bride, she’s bound to leave her invisible mark on her dress.”

“Something old, something new,” came the riposte. “Those old dresses are divine. We’d never get anything so beautiful nowadays, whatever we could afford. You’ve just collected superstitious ideas from Mary.”

As the day drew nearer and no dress had been found, Penny collected samples of cream lace from fabric shops, hoping she might still win the argument. But Alison was convinced the dress she wanted was hanging in a dusty old shop somewhere, just waiting for her to find it.

It was very wet on Thursday morning. Alison collected her mother in the car and they set off through the unrelenting rain, the windscreen wipers squeaking across the glass. Penny was quiet.

“I’ve got cash with me. These people often agree to lower their price when they see the colour of real notes!” Alison was in high spirits. “I told you mum,” she cried. “I told you! Just you wait and see! It’s a beauty. As far as I could see it was quite perfect – probably only worn once, on someone else’s happy day.”

At ten o’clock exactly they were outside the shop door. The torn blind was still down. It was raining heavily and there was no sign of the proprietor. They gazed through the rivulets of water running down the dirty window-panes. The dress-stand had been taken out of the window, but they could make out the pale shape of the wedding dress in the murky depths of the shop.

“I left a note to say I would be back. I expect that’s why it’s been moved.” Alison seemed nervous and Penny was hoping the dress would not be suitable. They took shelter in the doorway, looking up and down the road for any sign of the owner.

A small black figure under a huge umbrella marched towards them. The newcomer shook the umbrella and collapsed it briskly. Her face was wrinkled and brown.

“You’ll be back for the dress?”

They followed her inside. She removed her headscarf to reveal a head of brilliant white hair, twisted in plaits, peasant style. The whole style of her dress reminded Alison of a Russian costume. She wore a full skirt made of heavy cloth, layered with a lace-edged pinafore. A huge shawl, embroidered with bright flowers and hung with deep fringes, draped around her shoulders. Apart from the flowers, everything was black. Crow-black.

“I’m asking a lot of money for it.” The old woman had sharp, bright eyes.

“I’m sure its very valuable. I’ve been looking for a long time.”

“Three figures.”

Alison was used to haggling, but she drew a deep breath. The opponent seemed formidable.

“A hundred?” she ventured.

“And?” hissed the other.

“Fifty? Cash?”

“One hundred and seventy-five and we have business.”

Alison nodded and the old woman slid away into the shadows. “I brought some tissue paper,” offered the bride-to-be.

The cream lace tumbled over the black-clad arms. “For your wedding?”

Alison handed over the crisp notes. The old woman left the uncounted money on an old desk while she folded the treasure carefully, layering tissue paper between each fold, all the time humming a strange little tune. She found a large carrier bag from under her table and slid the dress inside.

“Come again if you need china, table-cloths, quilts, for your new home. God go with you. My card.”

Mrs. R. Azrael. Antiques and bric-a-brac. Tel: Sevenoaks 7244

Penny took the card and tucked it into her handbag.

When the dress came back from the dry-cleaner, Penny draped it over the settee. She looked at it hard, trying to be sensible about her concerns. She didn't like it. This lovely frock disturbed her and she didn't know why.

"It's just the musty smell," Alison had said. "When it's been cleaned, it'll be like new. You are a silly old mum," as she kissed her.

Now the dress was clean. It certainly didn't smell. Penny still felt uncomfortable.

Mary came to tea. "You're quite right to be concerned, Penny. Like I said, garments hold vibrations like a piece of furniture or a house. Nothing to do with being clean in the usual sense. A wedding dress could be passed down within a family and you would know the history – know whether the marriages had been happy. But to wear a stranger's dress," Mary shuddered. "It's to do with karma. It can be good or bad."

"Karma?"

"The chain of events, one thing leading to another."

"And if the chain of events associated with this dress were unpleasant, we could sense it? Be affected by it? I didn't like the idea even before she found the dress. Now I feel even worse. Why can't she have a new dress? I could make something really special for the same money."

"Well, of course, this chain of events could be quite wonderful. The bride who wore that dress might have had a beautiful day and a joyous marriage." Mary didn't sound convinced.

Penny trembled. That night she dreamed of a wedding. The bride was wearing Alison's dress but when she turned around, Penny saw she was old, brown and wrinkled. Mrs. Azrael was singing her strange little tune and weeping, weeping.

The next day Penny returned, alone, to the shop. A dreadful fear was beginning to consume her. The shop was deserted. She called into the newsagent next door and bought a paper.

"The antique shop?" she began.

The assistant was open to gossip. "Mrs. A.?"

"We bought a dress. The one that was in the window. It's for my daughter, Alison. She insisted on buying an old dress. I really wanted her to have something specially made. Not someone else's cast off."

“The wedding dress? Do you suppose it was *her* dress? You do know about the tragedy?”

Penny stared wide-eyed.

The assistant dropped her voice. “She came out of the church after the service, only to see her husband die before her very eyes. One of the bridesmaids ran into the road, in to the traffic, and he dashed to save her. The little girl was saved but he died of head injuries. You didn’t buy the dress for a wedding, did you?”

“Azrael?” Mary repeated. “Azrael... sounds familiar. I wonder where I’ve heard it... you must get rid of that dress, Penny. She definitely mustn’t wear it.”

Alison and Mark listened patiently to Penny’s story and shook their heads.

“Mum, darling, you’re getting into a flap. Pre-wedding nerves, that’s what,” said Alison. “Here I am as cool as a cucumber, so you’re getting the jitters for me. Why don’t you ask the doctor for some more valium. You know it helped when Dad died.”

The dress went with them for safe-keeping. The next morning Alison phoned from her office.

“It can’t possibly have been Mrs. Azrael’s wedding dress, mum. Even if she’s seventy that would mean it couldn’t be more than fifty years old. The style and the fabric is much older. Probably made at least a hundred years ago. You see! It’s just your imagination working overtime, fretting about nothing. Everything’s going to be perfect, just you see.”

Penny felt reassured. But only briefly. She began to wonder if the dress had already been in Mrs. Azrael’s family. Perhaps the old lady had been wearing a dress passed down to her. An heirloom. Maybe the dress already had bad karma. Which was why Mrs. Azrael’s own wedding turned into a tragedy. She knew she had to keep these thoughts to herself. Alison obviously wasn’t interested in her premonitions.

Mary came back with grim face. “Azrael is the Angel of Death.”

Penny blanched.

“We spiritualists don’t talk so much about angels. They are good, kindly helpers. Even Azrael will be working for the light, as we say. But, if it is someone’s

time to pass over... then maybe he's the angel who will summon a human spirit." Mary realised she had delivered what seemed like dark news. She worked hard to reassure Penny, but by the time she left, Penny was feeling fretful and had to take her valium.

The wedding day dawned and the church was full of flowers and sunshine. Photographs were taken and the cars came and went. The bridesmaids were good as gold. The champagne bubbled. and Penny relaxed. *What will be will be*, she thought. The couple left in a car hung with ribbons, balloons, saucepans and rattling kettles. Penny went home and wept on Mary's shoulder.

"It could still happen," she shivered, "on the honeymoon, the aeroplane, the train home, anywhere, anytime."

Alison dutifully telephoned to announce their safe arrival. Each day of the honeymoon she called again with reassurances. On the following Sunday, she and Mark were back in their flat once more. She promised to call after work the next day.

Penny sighed with relief, but Mary warned, "Karma is a strange process. It may not work as we expect."

On Monday afternoon Penny decided not to build a fire. The sunshine had warmed the room through the glass and she sat with her knitting and a cup of tea. Suddenly she felt very happy, very peaceful. All the worries and pain of the last few months had been lifted.

The room glowed with a golden light and Penny watched the sunbeams playing with the dust. As she watched the light became more intense. She dropped the knitting needles and put her hands up to shield her eyes. The light was a golden flame, drawing itself up into a shining pillar, taking shape into a creature so tall that its face hung where the ceiling had once been. Strands of shining hair turned and twisted about molten features and flaming hands drifted through the air, trailing glitter in their wake. Dainty gleaming feet, glowing like coals, hovered just above the floor. The wings were translucent, white-hot layers of feather that brushed the walls and the carpet.

Penny held her breath. She could hardly think. The eyes burned. She closed

her own eyes and smiled as the light invaded her.

“Yes! Oh, yes! I have been waiting. Take me with you. Don’t leave me behind. Take me. Take me.”

Alison found her mother sitting in the chair by the fireplace. She looked calm and peaceful. The knitting lay on the floor where the carpet was warm, smelling of singed wool. But there was no fire in the grate.