

Ashlyn Nance, Short Story Third Place, 2021

### Ruby Redd's Cleaning Service

*I was quite good at my job. Quick, precise, clean... No one caught on, at least to my knowledge. As I said, I'm quite good. I was able to spread word of my cleaning service to the women of my town. Women who had been beaten and cheated on by their husbands. Women whose children had been molested and abused. Angry women who wanted revenge in the most definitive way possible.*

*I wasn't ready to go. I didn't expect it. A car crash is hardly what I imagined, and I imagined it many times.*

#### **New Arrival: Ruby Redd**

**Age: 38**

**Reason for Damnation: Gruesome, calculated murders on multiple accounts.**

Ruby sat in a deceptively plush chair that felt like it was filled with needles. She shot up with a yelp. The burly demon that guarded the office door snapped his neck to look at her. He was triple her width and towered over her. He looked like something akin to a gorilla, his fur patchy and thin revealing hideous boils and scars underneath. Two large, curled horns protruded from a sloping forehead. His eyes are black with white irises that bore into her. She swears that his stare is giving her a headache... His lip curls in a snarl around his lower tusks.

"Sit. Down," he ordered, voice deep and wet, as if his throat was full of phlegm. She scoffed.

"I refuse to sit on anything so horrid," she says in an even tone. She remained calm and collected even as he walked towards her, standing so close her nose nearly touched his disgusting, bare flesh.

"Sit." He smelled like rancid meat and stale urine, with a hint of something else. She fought the urge to gag. When she didn't comply, he shoved her in the chair forcefully.

She let out a cry of pain as she felt the needles stab through her skin. The beast gave a sadistically satisfied grin and turned back to the door he was guarding.

She quickly stood back up, rubbing her sore skin. There were no prick marks, no blood. No proof that she had been hurt. Because in Hell, eternal suffering was all you would get; and if the pain left any real physical damage, there would become a point in which your body couldn't handle it anymore. And then you would be nothing.

She tapped the toe of her red high heel into the shag carpet colored a deep maroon and spotted with stains from various bodily fluids. "I'll wait standing up and that's final." The demon was about to retort when the door opened.

A pleasant young man stood in a pen striped suit wearing a charming smile. "Mrs. Redd, please come in," he stepped aside and gestured for her to join him.

"Ms. Redd," she corrected. The faintest hint of a smirk graced her scarlet lips as she walked past the guard, shooting him a pointed glare as she goes by. She gets one last whiff of his stench and is able to place that third awful smell. It was that of a dirty earring, adding a rotten cherry atop a curdled sundae.

She stepped inside the small office and gave a disapproving look around the room. "Please, have a seat," he said as he walked up from behind her. Her nose twitched and she gave a sneer. "They're much more comfortable than the ones in the lobby, I assure you." He takes his seat across from her in a spinning chair that looked more like a throne. She arched a brow and sat on his desk, leaning into his space.

His eyes were a startling shade of cobalt blue. So blue that you could feel yourself getting lost in them, swirling in a riptide as they pull you in deeper. Luckily, she was a strong swimmer. His hair was slicked back with gel; his own smaller horns parting through his hair. He tried too hard to appear friendly, she decided. She had dealt with many men like him in her lifetime, and she knew all the signs. That stupid smile is still plastered on his face, and his teeth are just a little too sharp, creating an uncanny resemblance to a human, but giving the uneasy feeling that something wasn't quite right. His nails were long and pointed, hands folded neatly over his lap. However, the swishing black tail tipped her off that he wasn't as relaxed as he tried to come off as. God, he was unsettling.

"I'm afraid there's been a mistake," she spoke evenly, though her tone edged on harsh. He shook his head, a soft chuckle leaving his lips. With his head tilted down, he raised his eyes to look at her, giving a sinisterly sweet smile.

"No there hasn't."

She snarled and leaned in closer. "*Yes there has.*" She takes a centering breath and straightens herself, brushing off her jeans and fixing the bandana tied over her red curls. "I'm a good woman. For years I did hard, dirty work to ensure my friends and family were safe. As far as I'm concerned, I did the world a favor: slaughtering the scum of the earth."

"Murder is still murder Mrs. Redd," he spoke condescendingly. She cocked her head and glared at him.

"I provided a service Mr.-" she glanced down at the nameplate on his desk.

"Deansworth. I took orders from my clients. Not all of them wished for murder, but most of them did. Women who were incapable, or too scared to do it themselves. I was a hero to them."

"Oh please, get over yourself Ruby. You know as well as I that you became no better than your victims." She grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and lifted him from his seat, surprisingly strong.

"Don't you *dare* say that! I am a noble woman who made the biggest sacrifice of my life to save everyone but myself!" she screamed in his face, eyes wide and glossy. Whether it be from fury or tears remained uncertain. Mr. Deansworth remained unfazed, even as she began to change.

During her outburst, her ears shifted to something more akin to a wolf as a fox tail sprouted at the base of her spine. Her nose was slightly more upturned than it was and antlers began to part their way through her hair. Her own teeth just a little too sharp to be completely human.

"Ah, but it all started with your husband. You did this all for your own selfish gain, don't lie to yourself dear. You'll be sharing your housing with him by the way," he spoke smugly. For the first time since she had arrived in Hell, fear flashed across her face.

"No, you can't do that!"

"I most certainly can! Spouses are shackled up together here. We have a bit of an overcrowding problem. You understand," he offered a tight lipped smile. She shook her head.

"No. No, he beat me nearly every day. And when he turned on my daughter, I had no choice. I did what I had to do, Mr. Deansworth. And I knew I wasn't the only victim. That's why I started my cleaning service."

He rolled his eyes. "Cut the theatrics Ruby, you're not the patron saint you think you are. Yes, I know he was a horrible man, yes I know that *everyone* you killed was a horrible man, and *yes* I know that you saved probably hundreds of women and children from being beaten and raped." He straightened his jacket and wore his usual smug smirk as he leaned in, nearly nose to nose with her.

"But I also know how much you *loved it*," he purred. "Murder for hire sure rakes in the dough. Got that nice two story house in that fancy neighborhood. And that cherry red convertible! You were turning *all* the heads in that sweet ride. Nothing quite grabs the eye like a beautiful woman in an even more beautiful car."

A low, guttural growl pierced the air. Ruby was shocked to have it come from her throat.

"But that's not all," he said shaking a finger as he paced. "You liked doing it. We've been watching you Ruby. We saw that little sparkle in your eye right before you stab them. We know how you stayed up at night thinking of different ways to kill your next victim. One of your favorites was smothering, was it not?" He looked at her and gave a humming chuckle. "It was. But what astounds me is your ability to make things look like an accident. Or when they went too far, you made sure to leave not a single trace. Who knew pigs could be so handy? They'll eat anything that falls in that trough," he met her eyes, sucking on his index finger before pulling it out with a loud pop. "Bone and all."

Ruby glared daggers at him, nostrils flaring and her eyes glowed a bright red. Her lip curled in a sneer. "It's true. Every word of it. But so what if I enjoyed it? I still prayed every night and went to church like everyone else! I was a good, God-fearing Christian! I never thought to ask for forgiveness, because I thought I didn't need it. Thought he would understand and applaud me for sending the demons back to where they belonged." A lump swelled in her throat as she choked back sobs.

Mr. Deansworth showed no sympathy. Only that unwavering, unsettling smile. "And look where it got you." Her head turned ever so slowly to face him. He continued blabbering. "We could really use you, y'know. Hell is a seven ring circus if ya know what I mean," he chuckled. When she didn't join him, he stopped and cleared his throat.

"Look, it takes someone with a certain amount of skill and cunning to be able to run a place like this. Circles seven through three are already cared for. You could be the ruler of the second circle. No one there you'd bump into who might hold a special grudge," he said. "You'd live in luxury. The closest thing to heaven you'll get. So? What d'ya say?" He holds out his hand and for the first time, his smile seemed genuine.

She felt a strange tug in her stomach. It didn't lurch down, like she expected, but up. She tried to ignore it, even as it grew stronger. His offer wasn't ideal, but like he said, it was the closest thing to heaven she'd get.

Ruby was about to shake his hand when she heard it.

*"Mom?"*

Her head snapped up to the ceiling where she'd heard the voice. She'd know that voice anywhere. And she'd do anything to get back to it. "Rachel?" Mr. Deansworth furrowed his brows.

"Mrs. Redd? Is someone calling you?" It wasn't rare for demons to be summoned back to earth, either by a lost soul with no options left or by a loved one.

She felt the tug again, and her feet lifted from the ground.

Up above, Rachel sat in her empty house, a few candles lit in a circle around a Ouija board. "Mom, please come back. I... I can't do this alone," a tear slipped down her cheeks. A noise outside startled her. She slipped out the back door to investigate.

She gasped and jumped back as a large fox... *thing* stood before her. Its legs were abnormally long and slender, the black fur fading to a rusty orange on the rest of its body. It had a long streak of black fur from the top of its head down its spine. Mangled antlers protruded from its head. Rachel wanted to scream, but no sounds could escape as the beast began to shift. She stood awestruck, tears streaming down her face as it turned into her mother.

Ruby walked over to her and embraced her sobbing child in a tender hug. "Shhhh mother's here now."