



## **“PLAYGROUND FOR THE DEAD”**

**by Debbie Kuhn**

Midnight had come again at last. A bright harvest moon illuminated the abandoned school’s playground and the air was crisp and still. Lily sat down on a chilly wooden bench to wait for them. She listened carefully for some sign of their arrival, hoping to catch a glimpse of their ethereal forms in the pure moonlight.

Wade Elementary was cursed, so thought the citizens of Bluefield. Freak accidents, unexplained deaths – no wonder a new grade school had been built. But Lily felt safe here, safe

and loved. Her children had no memory of their deaths, but they always recognized their mother. She had been able to see all five of their spirits grow older, aging faster month to month.

The fact her dead babies could age at all was proof to Lily that they were otherworldly, and perhaps redeemed. She had killed them all before their first birthdays to save their souls. The narrow copse of trees behind the playground hid their tiny graves. Lily now lived within walking distance of the school so she could visit them every night.

A sudden breeze jostled the swings, causing their rusty chains to creak. The lonesome merry-go-round began to turn.

Their sweet voices finally reached her on the wind. “Mooooommmmyyy.”

Lily stood, her eyes scanning the playground. “Yes, I’m here, darlings. Mommy’s here.”

She spotted Joseph, her oldest child, first. He was climbing the big slide. Sarah, Patrick and Erin made the swings move to and fro. Little Sean sat on Sarah’s lap.

Huddled together on the school’s steps, close to the entrance, were the spirits of three other children – two boys and a girl. They did not belong to Lily. She had first noticed their presence two years before, but she had never been able to coax them out onto the playground. Lily felt sorry for them because they always seemed lost and afraid.

Lost....Lily had been afraid this fate would befall her own babies. She could never escape the evil hidden inside herself. Lily had no idea how she had become pregnant once a year for the last five years. She still suffered from blackouts that would last all night. Always at dawn, she would wake up in her own bed - naked, dirty and alone.

Lily had been raised at St. Joseph’s Orphanage in New Orleans. On her twelfth birthday, Father Samuel O’Halloran had sat her down in his office and had warned her that she had a wicked side that must always be held in check. Lily hadn’t wanted to believe it. She had tried

hard to be a good Catholic and prove the priest wrong. But then the blackouts started to happen not long after she turned sixteen. That spring she discovered she was pregnant, but she had no memory of how it had happened. She still felt like a virgin.

Lily couldn't stand the thought of having the baby aborted. It was against her faith. But she couldn't stay at the orphanage, either, and face humiliation.

She ran away and headed north, hoping to reach New York City. When the money she had saved ran out in West Virginia, she settled in Bluefield. The people at the shelter were sympathetic and helped her find a job at a local supermarket. In her sixth month of pregnancy, Lily took a job as a companion and housekeeper to an elderly rich widow who lived on Bluefield Avenue. Mrs. Warrick was blind and deaf enough not to care what Lily did.

The baby was born a week after she moved into the mansion. There had been very little pain during labor, and the infant had appeared to be full-term instead of premature.

Joseph Samuel had her black hair and olive complexion. He rarely cried. By the time he learned to smile, Lily knew something was wrong. She could see the evil inside him when she looked into his dark eyes. They were her eyes.

It had to be her fault, and she felt compelled to save him. Every night for several weeks, she got down on her knees by his crib and prayed for guidance. She asked for courage to do what needed to be done.

Joseph was nine months old when she drowned him in the bathtub. It had been so hard to do the right thing. She could tell no one. No one would understand how much love and faith it had taken to save her baby's soul.

And her heart would be broken four more times. The birth control pills she had felt guilty about taking were ineffective. The other children were born tainted by her wickedness as

well. They were even younger than Joseph when she took their lives. She smothered each of them with a pillow because she couldn't bear to see the fear on their little faces.

But Lily never wavered in her resolve, never once doubted the righteousness of her actions. Her babies were better off now, and they would always be with her. Their spirits would live on and grow up here on this playground for the dead.

“Mooooommy.”

Lily smiled. “I'm watching you, Joey.”

Joseph whooshed down the slide and floated through the air for several feet before landing on the dilapidated merry-go-round. It began to turn again, slowly, with a faint screeching sound.

Lily noticed that the three lost children were staring at her with forlorn expressions.

“Joey, why won't your friends play?”

Joseph looked over at the trio on the school's front steps. “They don't like us, Mommy. Me and Sarah and Patrick just wanted to be friends – we wanted them to stay here with us. We didn't mean to hurt them.”

“Hurt them? How did you do that?”

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