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# the LEAST OF ALL EVILS

Helen Arvonen

author of *CIRCLE OF DEATH*,  
*SUMMER OF EVIL* and  
*REMEMBER WITH TEARS*

*"spider" spun a web that  
mean death to the young bride  
enough to get caught in it.*

The cretaceous moonlight that sifted through the window powdered the altar with something so tangible that I felt I had only to breathe it in to suffocate.

I stood there frightened. Was it the room, or something within myself? I approached the altar praying that I would not find that which I was now almost certain I would find . . . another body at Engleford Court.

Ada knew of them. Was she the spider who caught and imprisoned them there, forever entangled in her grave-like shrouds? I knew the truth. I accepted it as though I could see the horrifying, moldering thing within the tomb. I leaned there, appalled—afraid. And then suddenly my head exploded in a cacophony of senseless sounds of crashing, crushing pain, and I was sliding—slipping. . . .

**Also by Helen Arvonen:\***

**REMEMBER WITH TEARS**

**CIRCLE OF DEATH**

**SUMMER OF EVIL**

**\* Available in ACE STAR editions**

the  
**LEAST OF ALL  
EVILS**

Helen Arvonen

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For SBD, who said,  
“Nothing to read? Here’s  
a pencil. Go write your  
own stories.”  
And I did.

An ACE STAR BOOK

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## CHAPTER ONE

I have been here before.

There have been frequent moments of brief familiarity ever since I came to Engleford Court. They are puzzling, and Mark's explanation doesn't really satisfy me, though I let him think it does.

It is the only rational explanation, of course. But I am not always rational in my reasoning. Are women, ever?

I first experienced that feeling of recognition as we approached the house. We had driven up long, winding roadways flanked by oak and cedar trees, looming large and lowering and singularly silent, like an advance bivouac content to observe, only.

And then a dripping willow languished, separate and almost ludicrously hunched and hanging against the onslaught of wind and rain.

"Look," I laughed, pointing, "it's hanging there so de-

spondently, just like a wet and miserable, shaggy sheep-dog! I almost expect the branches to blow apart and expose two mournful round eyes, and then see four muddy big paws stirring to bring it shambling along behind us."

"One of the girls said that once," Mark chuckled. "Said she never saw that willow weeping in the rain but it made her think of a sheep-dog that would love to crawl into some giant hearth, to warm itself and dry. She said it always made her feel guilty, seeing it there exposed to the elements."

One of the girls. Priss, or Ada? Which of his sisters would have such a fey sense of humor? I would be glad when the moment of meeting was over.

"There it is, Tracy. Engleford Court," Mark said proudly.

It mounted the early evening dusk, and, as I looked, it appeared all charcoal chimneys and towers. I gasped, and Mark put his head back and laughed, a satisfied, completely delighted laugh.

"I knew you'd feel like that. I knew you'd love it, as I want you to."

"But—I've been here before," I cried, astonished. "Honestly, Mark, I *know* this place!"

It towered above us, almost medieval with its mulioned and transomed windows and angle buttresses. It was shaped in the form of a capital E, with what seemed to be a hall projecting in the middle, with an arched entrance, and, at either end, a wing. It had been built of red brick, in conjunction with gray stone, with splendid roofs, low-pitched and concealed on the outside by parapets.

I looked, entranced and drawn as though by a magnet that, for some unknown reason, repelled me, too.

"Mark, I have been here before!" I repeated.

He shook his head negatively. "I don't think so, darling. Believe me, if you'd ever been here, I'd have known, and remembered. In fact, once here, I'd never have let you

go again. You'd have been Mrs. Mark Edward Engleford long before this."

I touched my finger to his tender wide mouth, ran the finger up the long cheek to the high forehead, the smoothly brushed hair that fought to release itself in curls and betray the unpredictable boy beneath the quietly reserved maturity of the man.

And then I smoothed his hair. After all, I would be meeting his sisters, Priss and Ada, very soon now, and I didn't want them thinking I had been seducing their brother along the way! I must preserve a certain dignity with two bachelor girls of somewhat indeterminate age. In a spontaneous rush of love, I touched my own lips with the finger that had been on Mark's elastic, humorous mouth.

"You're right. You're always right," I said. "Of course I've never been here, because I've never been in northern Ontario before. But why is it all so familiar, in every way? I'm a muddlehead. Tell me, why did you ever fall in love with me?"

I was twenty-four. Until Mark came into my life, I'd never—not ever, not even once—had a date with anyone.

"It's not that you're unattractive," Lorraine Walsh, my only close friend, said to me once. "You've got a lovely calm face, and those nice neat features. Why, you've even got a goshdarn good figure, if you'd ever wear anything decent, so people would notice.

"It's just—good Lord, Tracy, you're so quiet and withdrawn no one ever gets a chance to know the real you. What's that about a violet, born to blush unseen? You'll never get a man, the way you go!"

"No violet. Just a flower. Gray's *Elegy in a Country Churchyard*. You a librarian, and you never read a thing!"

I laughed, but I'd been hurt by her blunt honesty, despite the nice things she'd added. I couldn't believe them. I knew the truth about myself.

Hadn't Mother told me, often enough? She'd been a big, vibrant woman, forceful and dominating, even up to the end, and how often, during the last years of at-



tending to her, had she pointed out my resemblance to a sister-in-law of hers she'd met once, and disliked instantly.

"Once was enough," she'd said pointedly. "And I made it plain I didn't want to be bothered by her." And then, looking at me reflectively, "Peg looked just like a faded little carrot too. Wonder if she's still around somewhere?" She'd looked thoughtful. "But there—she must be," she'd decided rather sadly, before brightening, to add, "Now I wonder. . . ." After reflection, she'd drummed her fingers on the arm of her chair. "You can take a walk to the library, or do something," she'd offered, to my surprise.

Though I couldn't remember Aunt Peg, she had remembered me, in the early years. Every birthday, every Christmas, I received a card, signed simply, "Your Aunt Peg." Enclosed would be a check. Though Mother resented Father's sister, she didn't resent the checks. "Just don't let her start getting too friendly," she would say.

Then, when I was twelve, Mother sent me away for an entire season to a summer camp (mostly, I realized even then, to get rid of me) and, after a short time, letters started coming from Aunt Peg. Perhaps some neighbor, knowing her whereabouts, and mine, had written to acquaint her with the facts.

I loved the letters, for Aunt Peg talked to me in them as though I were a contemporary, investing me with a pride and self-dignity that I'd never known, or, if I had, had forgotten. I couldn't remember any of the letters now, or their contents. I didn't choose to remember anything of camp, and it was only occasionally that it came to mind, and I hurriedly pushed the thoughts away. One didn't have to remember unpleasant things.

"But what made you wander off into the bush? You've put the whole community into an uproar, as well as having me brought way up here," Mother had raged, when she came to get me. I'd stayed huddled in my camp bed, hiding my grotesquely swollen and discolored face, trying to forget the ordeal behind me. "Two days and three nights in the bush—it's a wonder you

didn't die!" Mother had gone on, while I curled up, her discordant voice reminding me of the night sounds in the forests when I'd been lost and so terribly, frighteningly alone, tortured by blackflies and thirst until I'd stumbled across the clear-running stream, and fallen face down on the bruising stones.

"She's in shock yet. We feel she should be taken to the hospital . . . she'd have been sent back to one, except for your instructions to keep her here until your arrival," the quiet voice of the camp nurse said almost reprovingly. But Mother interrupted.

"I'm taking her home right now. Our own family doctor will take care of her. After all, you people haven't done such a good job of it, have you? Now," Mother looked about, "we'll pack up right away. Did you make these things, Tracy?" She began gathering things in hurried hands.

"This is quite a nice bowl you've made," she said, almost grudgingly. "But why did you waste time on the sewing basket? All this weaving and sewing . . . that's what you wanted the silk for! And you know I have all my sewing done for me . . . this will just make clutter."

She looked at it critically. "You started out with neat little stitches, but look here—" her disdainful finger jabbed scornfully, "you got pretty careless. If you're going to do a thing, do it right."

I turned to face her more directly, avoiding Miss Gorley's eyes. I swallowed painfully. "I just—just helped with that, Mother. It's not really mine." I couldn't bear to see my hours of labor thrown into the garbage at home.

It hurt to lie, and in front of someone who knew I was lying. Yet Mother always made it so much easier, so much simpler to lie to her, than to tell the truth.

I wondered if Father had found it easier, too.

I looked at Miss Gorley, and she nodded slightly, understandingly, and she glanced at the sewing basket. My head pounded, my stomach cramped. I didn't want to see it, or ever to think of it, again.

"I found those letters your Aunt Peg wrote to you

this summer," Mother said on the way home. "She had no business writing to you behind my back, so I destroyed them, of course. I've let you accept those checks at Christmas, and on your birthday—after all, it's only her duty, she *is* your aunt, but a regular correspondence—that's a different thing.

"Were there any more letters? She knows I despise every member of her family!"

I was suddenly afraid that I would throw up, right there in Mother's shining car. She meant this, I knew; she hated Father.

Daringly, deliberately, I shut the present out, and opened the door to the long-gone past. Faintly, ever so faintly, I could remember the thin chest against which I had rested my small head. I could hear the merry chuckle, the teasing laughter, like the merest wisp of sound against the wind.

I rocked there, comforted.

"Did you hear me? Were there any more letters?"

There was nothing but that loving echo from across the years.

"I'm writing Peg immediately, and letting her know just what I think of her sneaky tactics," Mother said venomously. "Your father had a lot of his sister's sly ways," Mother went on viciously. "A little mouse of a man in some ways though. You take after him, Tracy."

Then, to mollify me, perhaps, and perhaps even feeling sorry for the small bundle I made hunched in the corner of the car seat, she added grudgingly, "He could be a bit of a charmer, when he wanted it that way. It rubbed off fast, though."

Or had it been rubbed off?

I could just remember Father, but all the remembers were of a small and slender man who'd tossed me in the air, and sang silly songs. Until, one day, he wasn't there any more.

Sometimes I half remembered him coming to my room the night before he left, to brush my hair back, and to put a butterfly kiss on my forehead.

The only times Mother ever spoke of him after that

was in a derogatory manner. Or was there any real change in that? "Gone back to England—he should never have left there," she said once. Then, when I was older, she surprised me once by divulging the information that she'd given him a divorce long before, and he'd married again.

"Glad to be rid of him," she'd said. "And long past time for that marriage of his anyway. She was welcome to him."

Though the years had passed, I was still remembering how all of a sudden I'd been lonely and hurting with all I'd never had. There wasn't Father any more, in any way. He belonged to someone else. And there wasn't any Aunt Peg, either. "She ought to be ashamed of herself," Mother stormed, when the checks stopped coming. "Taking it out on you!" But I couldn't blame Aunt Peg, knowing the kind of letter she had received.

There was just Mother and Tracy Hickman, if I could be counted. Then, after a longer time, there was just the misfit I had become. I'd never had a chance to learn to fit in anywhere because I resented it, and tried to deny my resentment, out of a sense of guilt. Mother never gave me the chance to fit in anywhere, and I never had the strength to claim my prerogative.

"Here here, you've got a face as droopy and sad as the drenched willow tree," Mark cried now, recalling me to the present. He stopped the car. "Tell me, pet, do you dislike it all as much as that?"

"I'm just so—so lucky!" I breathed.

He pulled me into his arms, and kissed me, and it was as though every kiss in all the world was blended into that touch of his mouth on mine. He drew away, his eyes tracing every line of my face.

"You never fail to surprise me. That honest-to-God humility of yours. Do you know that I had only to see you standing there in the library, your arms full of books, and those immense violet eyes positively gloating above them, to know—"

He hesitated.

"Yes?" I would never tire of the things he found to say to me.

"I remembered that Francis Bacon said, 'There is no excellent beauty, that hath not some strangeness in the proportion' . . . but as I remembered, I thought you gave him the lie, with excellence of face and figure. I know I embarrassed you, the way I stared, so I looked away, but had to turn back, seeing the burnished chestnut hair, with the red lights glowing in it, the alabaster skin, the small straight shoulders, and the—"

He bit his lip, inclined his head teasingly.

"Those lovely curves you were trying to damn out of existence beneath that monstrously old-fashioned dress. It didn't fool me, mind you, but tell me . . . was it your mother's or your grandmother's, by any chance? I've been meaning to ask."

He chuckled, the deep tones resonant, then he sobered.

"You asked me how I could love you. I had only to look at you, to know you are everything I'd hoped for, dreamed of, in a woman. But you . . . how could you agree to marry an old fogey of forty, like me? How come some lucky young pup didn't pick you up long ago?"

Perhaps it had been those "monstrously old-fashioned" dresses. I hadn't been able to sew well, and—yes, they had been made from Mother's old things. I'd hoped for new things as soon as I'd got a job after her death. It had been quite a shock to discover she'd cashed in her insurance policy for the last trip she'd taken before her illness.

I'd found it was easier to plan for a job than to get one when I wasn't trained for anything at all. But, if those old clothes and my own quiet, reserved ways had kept me available for Mark, why, I was the lucky one.

"You reminded me—"

"Yes. I know. Of your father. I don't fancy a father complex. I'm not quite that old yet!"

He did remind me of my father, and my memories

of him. There was no denying that. He didn't look at all like him, but there was the same gentleness, the tender consideration of everything I did and said, the quiet humor. He was Chaucer's ". . . verry, parfit gentil knight."

Not Chaucer's. *Mine*.

I giggled now. "When I looked over my books that day, I thought—why, he's a composite of all the elegant English stars I've seen on the late night movies! *That for your father complex!*"

He laughed, with instant pleasure, and I knew the mild blue eyes were crinkled, the long lashes tangled, the handsome narrow face alight with amusement.

He looked up at Engleford Court now. "It *is* something, isn't it? It never fails to thrill me, when I see it again after a time away from it. I did tell you my ever-so-great had every stick and stone of this place shipped here from England?"

Of course he had, but there was always something new to hear.

"I've heard of it being done like that," I said. "It must have been a rather splendid madness."

"I'd like to say he was a reckless romantic, but when I read his sober, business-like account of the whole venture, he appears more of a stodgy, stubborn country squire, and I suspect that's exactly what he was. He acquired great land holdings here in northern Ontario, and, after seeing it all, he went back to England dissatisfied with the narrow boundaries of country life there. Engleford Court was not a titled establishment, but a comfortably large country house.

"If only you could take it with you," his wife said jokingly, and he looked about and said, "That's exactly what I'll do."

"And he did," I said, awed at the immensity of the endeavor.

"He did. It took the rest of his life, and the rest of his money, but—" Mark waved. "There it is. The talk of the north country, for years."

"No wonder. An authentic Tudor manor here in the backwoods."

"Actually, it's a courtyard house, opened up by the omission of its fourth side—a characteristic plan of the smaller Tudor country houses of that period," he said. "It's been strongly influenced by later Elizabethan and Jacobean developments, with plenty of Italian detail."

"It must have cost a pretty penny to bring it over here, reconstruct, and all."

"That it did," he said rather somberly. "It emptied the family coffers for a long time, but they considered it worth it. The Engleford," he turned, tapped my chin warningly, "are a pretty stubborn bunch. When they want something, they find a way to get it, or do it."

Just knowing an Engleford has wanted me did a lot for my morale. And he seemed to think *he* was lucky!

The entrance was an immense square gatehouse with an octagonal tower at each corner. It was pierced by a depressed archway that led into the great hallway.

I gasped involuntarily, barely noting the wide floorboards, the sparsely utilitarian nature of the ancient furniture. My eyes went up the walls, from the simple paneled dado, about five feet in height, to plain plastered walls penetrated by stone mullioned windows that rose to a magnificent hammerbeam roof, enriched with elaborately scrolled Renaissance detail.

At the end of the hall, leading up to the upper floors, there were two sets of stairs, one on each side. One was a spiral staircase set about a paneled, enclosed well, while the other, was wide and straight, and, obviously, of a later period.

"It's just too much," I cried. "It overwhelms me. And it's so—" I spread my hands helplessly, "so *familiar*."

How could I explain this *déjà vu* sort of feeling I had?

"Tell me, Mark, has anything *awful* ever happened here?"

"Awful?"

"So that it was in the news, and I read about it."

He shook his head regretfully. "Sorry. Nothing even remotely exciting. I've been afraid you'll find us almost too dull." He looked puzzled. "You know, perhaps—" the handsome face brightened. "I know what it is. Once a year the girls and I hold open house. Actually, we don't much like having a troop of strangers coming through, but we were almost pressured into it, by the local district tourist association. The tours are rather rigidly conducted—just have to be. We've got it down to a science. In and out as fast as possible.

"So," he turned to me, cradling my face in his long lean hands, "you've been on tour, no doubt. However could you do it to me . . . to be so close, and yet we missed one another. Truthfully," he added, rather shamefaced, "it would be my fault. I clear out and let Priss take over each year. She makes such an elegant hostess. I stay discreetly out of sight, loathing the whole thing as I do."

I shook my head. "No, I've told you. I've never been up in this part of the country before."

"Then, long ago and far away, you looked into a crystal ball, and saw your fate. Mistress Engleford, of Engleford Court. And also," he added, grinning wickedly, "I happened to look over the armful of books you had that day we met, and in at least one of them there were photographs and detailed descriptions of several structures just like Engleford Court. I was surprised at your interest. Delighted, too, for it showed a similarity of taste. You mentioned things that startled me, for it sounded as though you were talking of, and familiar with, my own house."

He was right. I had dreamed a dream, fashioning it from one of the too many books I had read in my lonely years. And, because of Father—the father who had brushed my hair and kissed my brow, then gone back to England—many of the books had been books of England. Yes, I had dreamed a dream, and was finding it now.

"It's the feeling of being home at last. That's what I



want it to be," Mark whispered, winding a long finger into my hair, so that I pulled away, horrified.

"No no, love. I don't want your sisters finding me with my hair standing every which way. What would they think of me?"

"Priss is too much the lady to notice anything but that you are one, too. And Ada—" he laughed ruefully. "Ada never notices anything, just goes her own sweet way. I told you her eyesight is becoming quite poor? It's a real tragedy, what with her being a deaf-mute for so many years."

"But—you did tell me she talks, now? That she went away for training, as a child?"

"Yes, but she didn't go early enough, I'm afraid. Her voice is—well, rather unpleasant to someone not accustomed to hearing it. Priss and I are used to it, of course, and hardly notice.

"I hope," he looked anxious, "you won't mind the girls being with us. Most of all Ada. She's a bit of a problem." His face flushed unhappily. "I said we were a dull, stodgy bunch. But you may find Ada—once, for a time, her nerves—she got—shall I say, funny . . . fits of hysteria, and . . . we tried to understand, what with her handicaps, it must be hell at times, but it was an eerie feeling. Sometimes I'd be a little bit afraid of her—shrink from her—and I'd pray she wouldn't notice. It was as though she were—well, outside herself."

My hand was in his. I wondered if he found it as cold as it felt to me. My fingers curled, and I was remembering Mother pulling away from me. . . .

"You're going crazy, girl," she'd cried accusingly. "You're beside yourself. Outside yourself. Now pull yourself together, or you'll be lost just as you were once before. Remember, when you were a child? It's almost August, and—"

Despite her words, I had been lost for a time. A second time. My fingers cramped in Mark's warm palm. Sometime I could talk to him about it. But, for both our sakes, not now. Not yet.