

Fantastic Tales: Dark & Weird

Fantastic Tales, Volume 1

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FANTASTIC TALES: DARK & WEIRD

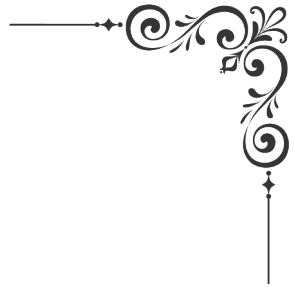
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Written by Morgan Tonkin.

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The Mist

‘Sit down and eat your dinner,’ Esmée ordered her younger son. ‘But what about Dad?’ Ricky said, pouting as he sat back down on his chair.

Esmée wrinkled her nose as she watched Mathew pace outside, deep in quiet conversation on his phone. Another late call from work. He was getting those a lot lately, sometimes well into the night, increasingly on weekends, beyond reason. When she asked what exactly they were about, he dismissed it as some big project. Esmée snorted to herself. Did he think her a fool? She seethed as he gave a great, booming laugh. He hadn’t laughed that way with her for years.

There was a creak and a scrape as Ricky stood up on the chair again, the chair wobbling beneath him. ‘Dad!’ he called.

‘I said get down!’ Esmée snarled, yanking down on his arm.

His arse hit the seat hard, and he jerked his arm away with a start, knocking his glass with his elbow and sending milk flying across the room. There was a crash as the glass shattered on the tiles.

‘Goddamnit, Ricky!’ Esmée cried. ‘What is the matter with you? Why don’t you ever listen!’ The boy’s blue eyes shone as he clutched at his arm. Esmée had pulled it too hard, she knew, and regretted it. ‘Go to your room, I don’t want to look at you.’

He slid off his seat, bursting into tears as he fled. The door slammed shut behind him. Her ten-year-old, Joshua, watched it all mutely and without expression, his face pale against his black hair as he poked his

potato with his fork. Esmée dropped her head into her hands. Joshua was getting used to all the fighting now, and he shouldn't be.

'What the hell's going on?' Mathew demanded, closing the door behind him. He was finally off the phone, roused by all the noise.

Esmée looked up, and rage like she'd never felt before coursed through her body. How dare *he* demand anything. She rose slowly from her seat.

It was the worst fight they had ever had. They shouted and cursed and screamed like they didn't have children or neighbours who might be listening. Accusations flew like the dishes and glasses and cutlery she threw across the room. By the end, bits of glass and ceramic littered the floor, Joshua had disappeared, white as a ghost, into his room, and there was the crash of the door slamming shut as Mathew left, no doubt to join his mistress.

Esmée's anger drained away, leaving a chasm of emptiness. Her ears rang in a silence too deep. Her angry tears dried into a crust on her cheeks. Was this it? Thirty-two and it was already over? They were supposed to grow old together.

Numbly, she took up her broom and began to sweep up the mess, then remembered her children. She put the broom aside and quietly opened Ricky's door. Her boy was a quivering ball under his blankets. When she approached, he rolled away with a sob and tucked himself against the wall. As for Joshua, he was apparently asleep, though he was far too still and breathing too quietly.

Esmée's shoulders sagged as she closed the door. She looked around her house, a home no longer, and fresh tears poured down her cheeks.

The next morning, Esmée dropped her sons off to school. Nobody spoke, nobody looked at each other and when she tried to say goodbye, they hurried away before she could make a sound, looking unbearably vulnerable in their uniforms.

Upon her return home, she stripped off and stood naked in front of the bathroom mirror, gazing at herself. She touched the bags under her

eyes, the lines around her mouth, the stretchmarks over her drooping breasts. Her mousy brown hair sat tangled and limp on her shoulders. Her brown eyes were dim. Not unattractive, but still far from beautiful. *A disgrace, a shell of a woman; that's what I am.* She spat at her reflection.

Deep into the night, Mathew still hadn't rung, and she wondered if he would even bother. She rolled over in bed but sleep evaded her, her mind tangled with thousands of stray thoughts and emotions and memories she couldn't make sense of.

She sat up with a sigh. She checked on her sons, found them sleeping, then stepped outside.

Their house might have been small, but they had a large backyard that backed onto bushland. Her neighbours' homes were dark. She was alone in her pain, and she'd better get used to it.

There was a swing-set, sandpit, toys and bikes and scooters lying all over the ground—evidence they were happy once. The tyre swing Mathew had hung from the eucalypt only six months ago beckoned to her.

It was a misty night. Strange for summer. She had never seen anything like it. The mist was thick and swirled around her as she swung, the ropes creaking in the quiet. Smoky tendrils tugged at her nightie, brushed through her hair, filled her lungs. It grew hot, to the point of sweating. Soon the moon vanished, then the trees, the house, and then she was truly alone. She stopped swinging.

She looked around fearfully. Except for a frog croaking somewhere nearby, she might have been the only living thing in the world. She stood up, about to rush back to the house, but stopped herself. *Don't be silly. It's just mist.*

She sat back down.

'Esmée,' rose a deep, creeping whisper, as creeping as the mist itself.

Esmée gasped and leapt back to her feet, spinning around. 'Who's there?'

No response. Her hair blew back as a strong wind whipped around her. She struggled to pull down her nightie as it flung up over her waist. Esmée stared ahead as a form took shape—a man. Of sorts, at least. He walked towards her, slowly, purposefully, almost gliding across the ground. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up, her heart began to pound, she clutched at her chest, but it wasn't all from fear.

'Who—who are you?' she said.

The strange wind stilled as he stopped, head cocked, a smile on his face. At least she thought it was a smile. It was hard to tell. He was so insubstantial, so wispy, as though he were a ghost or made of the mist itself.

'Esmée,' he said again, and it seemed to echo all around her, throughout the smoky air. He held out his hand.

She stared at it. 'I can't.'

He didn't say a word but simply gazed at her, and there was something in his swirling eyes she hadn't seen in a long time—desire, need. He wanted her, and she hadn't been wanted in so long.

Her eyes drifted to his groin. He was naked, but she couldn't see much more than an outline of his manhood. His smile broadened. She swallowed and smoothed her nightie down her thighs. *What does it matter? I'm clearly dreaming anyway. Who would it hurt? I need to be loved just like every other woman, even if it is only in my mind.*

She stepped towards him and slipped her hand into his.

She gasped as he suddenly dissolved and rushed up her arm in a blast of wind that made her stumble backwards. He blew down the neck of her nightie, out through the bottom before coiling around her in a tight embrace. She was enveloped in warmth, in softness, like she was smothered in a cloud of feathers. The mist's embrace tightened. She almost sobbed at the feel of lips on her neck, a nose against her cheek, hands against her waist. She desperately wanted to kiss him, to know what he felt like in her mouth, but she couldn't see him properly, his features little more than blurry outlines, his flowing hair merging

with the mist. Only his eyes could she catch glimpses of. He held her, smoothed his hands down her sides, following her curves, or what was left of them. There was a moist brush of air against her lips, and Esmée's heart thundered as she opened her mouth.

His tongue was smooth as silk, and he was so gentle, unlike Mathew who always liked to take control. She cried out and tried to grasp onto something, a lurch in her guts, as she was lowered to the ground. She spread open her thighs, her vagina throbbing so hard tears swelled. He had no need to remove her knickers, but simply entered her in a gust of air that rushed beneath the elastic.

'Oh, God!' she cried out. He was so hard! How could air be so hard?

Esmée clutched onto the grass, neck arched, as he rammed her arse into the ground. Briefly she wondered how she must look until a surge of ecstasy wiped everything but the pleasure from her mind. He pushed into her deeper than she had ever experienced before, then held. He hovered above her, within her, around her, a swirling smoky mist, as she came. She moaned as she clenched hard around a hardness that couldn't be there.

She lay sprawled on the ground, panting, breast heaving, throbbing all over. It had been far too long. The mist eased its coiling but remained as thick as ever. He was watching her, waiting for something.

'Esmée,' he said and began to drift away.

'Wait!' she cried as he blew into the bushland.

She started to rush after him, then stopped, something tugging at the back of her mind. She looked behind her. There was a house. A surge of emotions flooded her heart: happiness, love, pain, sadness. It looked strangely familiar, but she didn't know why. All she knew was that it hurt to look at in so many ways. She grabbed at her head, dizzy and light-headed, as she tried to think.

'Esmée.'

She shook her head. No. It was nothing. She was mixed up. There had only ever been the mist.

‘Wait!’ she cried again, charging after him.



MATHEW OPENED HIS EYES to pitch black, the curtains drawn against the moonlight. His mobile rang again, and he sat up and stumbled out of bed. He groped at the clothes strewn all over the floor, searching for his pants.

‘What’s going on?’ Elizabeth murmured, stirring beneath the sheet.

He found them and slipped the mobile out of his pocket. ‘Hello?’ he croaked, sitting on the edge of the bed and running his fingers through his hair.

He pulled the mobile away from his ear with a start as a high, panicked voice screeched, ‘Dad! You have to come home.’

‘Josh? What are you—?’

‘Mum’s missing. Ricky went to ask for some water, but she wasn’t in bed.’

Mathew stood. ‘What? Have you checked the house?’

‘Everywhere. She’s gone. The backdoor was open, but she’s not outside either.’

Mathew winced as Ricky wailed somewhere in the background.

Joshua burst into tears. ‘Hurry!’

‘All right. Calm down. I’ll be there fifteen minutes. Comfort your brother. *Fifteen minutes* and I’ll be there.’

He hung up and switched on the lamp.

‘Hey,’ Elizabeth slurred, throwing an arm over her face.

He quickly dialled Esmée’s number. ‘Come on, *answer*.’ But the phone rang out. He hung up and began pulling on his pants.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Going home.’

She sat up with a start, eyes narrowed, blinking rapidly against the light. Her breasts sat full and round over the sheet. ‘Why?’

‘Esmée’s disappeared and the kids are alone.’

She fell back into bed with a groan. ‘That fucking woman.’

‘That *fucking* woman is the mother of my children.’ He tried to button up his shirt, but his fingers were trembling.

Elizabeth lifted an eyebrow, lips pursed, annoyed. Mathew surprised himself. He knew he wasn’t in love with Esmée anymore, but he hadn’t realised how much he still cared about her.

Giving up on the buttons, he picked up his car keys and shut the door behind him.

He was there within twelve minutes. Joshua was waiting at the door, his face red and wet with sobbing. Ricky rushed over with a squeal, as red-faced as his brother. Mathew picked him up and kissed him on the cheek.

‘I checked everywhere,’ Josh said guiltily, following Mathew as he switched on all the lights and checked the rooms. Ricky tightened his arms around Mathew’s neck.

‘It’s all right, Josh. We’ll find her,’ Mathew said, patting him on the shoulder. ‘You’ve done a good job.’

Everything seemed in order. There was no sign of a break-in, no sign of violence.

‘Did you hear anything?’ Mathew asked as he checked the garage. Her car was still there.

Joshua shook his head.

Mathew pulled out his mobile and rang her number again. They all looked up at the sound of her ringtone. Her phone was on the kitchen bench alongside her purse.

‘You said the backdoor was open?’ Mathew said.

They went outside. All was quiet and still. The moon was full. A frog croaked. Nothing untoward. He studied the yard: the toys on the ground, the tyre swing, the fence, the bush beyond. He stared into the

trees, suddenly feeling sick. She had done this once before just after she gave birth to Joshua when she was suffering from postnatal depression. He swallowed, wiped the sweat from his forehead.

'I'm going to take you both to Jackie and Bob next door,' he said, hoisting Ricky higher in his arm and guiding Josh back through the house. 'You can stay with them until I find out what's going on.'

'No!' Joshua cried. 'I'm coming too.'

'Don't argue with me, Josh. I know you want to help, but you're only going to slow me down, and I don't want to have to worry about you *and* your mother.'

'But, *Dad*.'

'*Joshua*,' he warned with a hard gaze.

Joshua folded his arms and dropped his head.

Once Mathew had left them with the neighbours, he rushed back home, picking up a torch as he hurried through the house and into the backyard. He vaulted over the fence.

His shoes crunched loudly through the thick groundcover. He had no need of his torch yet, guided by the moonlight.

'Esmée!' he called.

No answer. He ran faster, hoping to God he wasn't too late.



ESMÉE LOOKED BACK AT the distant sound of her name. The voice sounded familiar, but she couldn't place it. She squinted but could see nothing, the mist so thick she could barely see her hand in front of her face.

'*Esmée. Come to me.*'

He held out his arms, a smile on his face, ribbons of grey cloud swirling all around him. He was only steps away, waiting for her, hungry for her. The darkness of his eyes had deepened, taking on more solid form, and they penetrated the mist like arrows, beckoning her.

She took a step towards him, smiling, her heart beating madly, her body throbbing at the thought of being in his arms again.

‘Esmée!’ She stopped. That voice again. She looked over her shoulder. A flash of light illuminated the mist. It swung around in circles, up and down, left and right. ‘What the hell is this?’ said the voice. Then the light locked onto her. ‘Esmée?’

She lifted her hand against the glare as a figure stepped towards her, torch in hand, and he was as solid as the ground beneath her feet.

‘Esmée,’ the figure said in relief.

‘Do I know you?’ she said, squinting.

He paused. ‘What do you mean, “do I know you?”? I’m your husband.’

She shook her head. ‘I don’t know you and I don’t like your voice. It makes me feel bad.’

She turned away.

‘Esmée, stop! What about your children?’

She hesitated. ‘Children?’

‘Yes! Your children. Joshua and Ricky.’

Something fluttered in her heart. She shook her head, confused and dizzy.

‘Esmée. Come to me.’

She looked at her misty lover again, and his eyes were blacker and deeper than ever. The wind picked up, churning the smoky air. Her hair blew about, her nightie flapped. She took another step.

‘Esmée!’ the man cried.

‘Mum!’

She spun around. A small figure came racing towards her, the mist coiling around him. Her heart lurched.

‘Josh, no!’ The man caught the figure and hoisted him into his arms.

‘Joshua,’ she whispered, reaching out a hand, puzzled.

‘Mummy,’ came his little sob.

Something twisted in her heart. ‘Joshua.’ She repeated his name quietly to herself, trying to hear it, to taste it, to remember. Warmth filled her heart, flooded her body. And she knew. *Joshua. Joshua! Ricky! My babies.*

Ice chilled her veins. What had happened? She spun back around. The misty being glared at her, eyes now the blackest black she had ever known, and filled with cruelty.

There was a *whoosh*, a blast of wind, and the mist crashed to the ground like a wave. Thigh-deep, it tugged at the hem of her nightie as it flowed like water over a cliffside she hadn’t known was there.

Esmée gasped and stumbled back. She had been standing right by the edge. One more step, and she would have plummeted to her death.

‘Mum!’ Josh cried, squirming in his father’s arms.

Esmée burst into tears and rushed over to them, snatching her son from Mathew’s arms and crushing him against her.

‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry,’ she said as she kissed him all over the face. ‘I love you, I love you, I love you.’

She looked up at Mathew, who was standing to the side, watching her warily. Then she looked around her, recognising the place. She had been here before, once before, a long time ago, during a time of darkness and pain she never wanted to know again. She turned back to Mathew, understanding how he’d found her and what he must be thinking.

She didn’t care to explain herself. She could see in his eyes he hadn’t seen the misty creature, and she wasn’t foolish enough to try to convince him of the truth. He had saved her life and that was all that mattered. She took his hand and squeezed it. ‘Thank you.’

He managed a thin smile, pulled his hand out of her grasp and wrapped his arms around her.



‘SO, DID YOU HAVE FUN at school today?’ Mathew asked Ricky.

‘Yes. I drew pictures.’ He swivelled in his seat and jumped down.

‘Wait till after din—’ Esmée began, but he had already disappeared into his room.

Esmée and Mathew smiled at each other. Three weeks had passed since the incident at the cliff and things were beginning to mend. Mathew had broken off the affair and moved back in, and Esmée was seeing a counsellor for what Mathew thought was her ‘depressive disorder’. Esmée didn’t mind. After all that happened, she needed it.

They were kind to each other, gentle, but they weren’t in love—not yet. That was going to take time, a rebuilding of trust and affection. But Esmée had hope things would work out, even if it meant they couldn’t be together.

She glanced outside. It was another cloudless night, the moon’s silvery light shining into the backyard. She still could not explain what had happened that night, what that thing was, no matter how hard she searched for answers. But at least it hadn’t returned, and she knew it never would. She would not be fooled again.

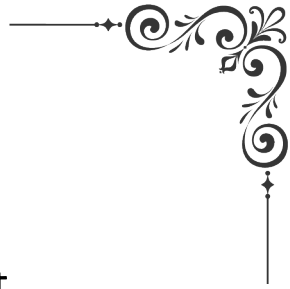
Esmée grinned and ruffled Joshua’s hair as he gazed at them across the table, pink-faced and smiling, munching on peas. He had no understanding of what happened at the cliff, not the truth, nor the truth as Mathew saw it, and Esmée was glad. They were issues no ten-year-old should have to deal with.

Ricky rushed back into the room, waving a slip of paper. ‘Here’s my favourite,’ he said, scrambling back onto his chair and handing it over to his father.

They gazed down at it. It was a classic stick figure drawing: the family prominent, all smiling and holding hands, house at the back, sun in the sky. She shook her head. Some things never changed, even between generations.

She felt Mathew brush his fingers against her hand beneath the table. She gripped his hand and squeezed. He squeezed back.

Yes, she had hope for the future.



The Land of Enchantment

‘**W**hat are you painting?’
Wayne’s big sister, Sandra, looked up from her canvas.
‘The Land of Enchantment.’

‘What’s that?’

‘A place where the faery folk live.’

Wayne dragged over a stool and sat chin in hand as he watched her paint in a man’s face. ‘Who’s that?’

‘He’s the faery king.’ She added a blush of red to his cheek. ‘He rules the land and all fear and love him.’

‘But he doesn’t have wings.’

‘*Faery*—F-A-E-R-Y, not fairy. They’re magical beings from a magical place. They don’t necessarily have wings.’

She stepped back, considered a moment, then picked up another brush, dipped it in some black and began on his hair.

‘Don’t make it too long,’ Wayne said. ‘You’ll make him a woman.’

Sandra smiled. ‘Trust me. It’s how he looks.’

He watched as she put down her brush and stretched. His sister was old—almost twenty-one, nine years older than he was. She was tall and thin with blue eyes and long blonde hair. His best friend Mark thought she was hot. Wayne grimaced—*gross*.

‘I think that’s enough for today,’ she said. ‘What do you think of it?’

Wayne stared at the painting. ‘I don’t like it.’

‘What do you mean?’ she said anxiously. ‘Is there something wrong?’

His sister was an awesome painter. Next year, she was going to the city to study and become a famous artist. At least, that’s what their parents said. He usually loved his sister’s paintings, but this one was different.

‘It’s scary.’

Nine people were sitting along one side of a big table piled with dishes of food. Half of them were hideous—fangs and horns, tails and claws, pointed noses and long ears and wrinkled, ugly faces. The other half were beautiful, but he liked them even less, particularly the faery king who sat tall and black-haired at the centre. Wayne gazed into his dark eyes, and the faery king stared straight back.

Wayne shivered.

‘Oh, you mean the ugly ones,’ she said. ‘That’s good. They’re supposed to be scary. You see, faeries can be hideous and beautiful, good and evil, just like regular people.’

‘They aren’t regular people.’ He shook his head. ‘I don’t like it.’

Sandra laughed and hugged him. ‘Don’t worry, Wayne. You have nothing to fear. As long as you don’t eat their food or drink anything, they have no power over you. But what do you think of the painting itself? Is it real enough?’

Wayne dared another glance at the faery king. ‘Yes.’

Too real.



SANDRA STOOD IN FRONT of the canvas, brush in hand. It was late in the evening and a storm was raging: thunder boomed, lightning flashed, wind and rain lashed her window. Usually Sandra didn’t paint at night, finding it too difficult to see, but she couldn’t get the faery king right and she just had to fix him now. He lacked something—life.

‘Come on,’ she said. ‘What is it?’

She picked up her smallest paintbrush and dipped the very tip into some white. She considered the painting again, leant in and carefully flicked it over his left eye. He almost seemed to blink, and she stepped back with a start. She laughed and threw her hands up in the air.

‘Finally. Let there be life.’

A flash of lightning, a ground-shaking crack, and the lights went out. Sandra put down her paintbrush and groped her way to her cupboard. More lightning flashed, more thunder grumbled. She opened the door and was about to grab her torch when she froze, catching movement in the corner of her eye. She blinked. She was imagining things, had to be. It was just a trick of the lightning.

More movement, and she grabbed her torch and spun around. ‘Who’s there?’ She clicked it on.

No-one.

Lightning flashed against her painting, drawing her gaze. Something was wrong. Squinting, she went over. Yes. One of her characters was different. The one on the end. She had painted him face-on but now he was in profile, turned to the woman beside him, a grin on his hideous face. He was holding a goblet, as though in a toast. She had never painted that.

She looked at the faery king, heart thundering so hard she could barely breathe. She stepped up close, nose to the canvas. There was something different about him too. Something so subtle she was surprised she’d noticed in the torch’s dull glow. There was a slight quirk to his lips, an almost sneer.

‘Impossible,’ she whispered.

The faery king stared back at her, eyes dark and shining and very much alive.

Taking a breath, she reached out to touch him.

Sandra tumbled into blazing daylight and rolling hills, soft grass beneath her knees. She scrambled to her feet and looked behind her, but

there were only more fields, more blue sky, a distant horizon. Her painting, her room, her home—all were gone.

‘Come join us, why don’t you?’

She spun back around. Faeries. *Her* faeries. They had appeared out of nowhere and looked just as she had painted them. They were sitting at the same table, one side empty, the other occupied by nine figures: four ugly, four beautiful, with the faery king tall and perfect in the middle.

‘Please,’ the faery king said again, gesturing across the table. A chair appeared directly opposite him.

She sat. They were all staring at her, some sneering, some frowning, but she only had eyes for one person and he was smiling.

‘You’re—you’re real,’ she said.

His smile broadened, lighting his beautiful face—and oh, was he beautiful. His hair was sleek and long, so dark and flawless it was blue. And his eyes—deep purple with rings of indigo. She knew those eyes so well. After all, she had painted them. He wore a simple cotton shirt, white and to the elbows, the top three buttons undone. She didn’t realise she was staring until a woman two seats over sniggered to the monster beside her.

Still smiling, he placed his chin on his long-fingered hands and considered her. ‘You have a wonderful talent, Sandra.’ He had a musical voice that made her head hum. To hear him say her name made her tremble and sweat. ‘It borders on the magical.’

‘Th—thank you.’

He pushed forward a bowl. ‘Please, eat.’

It was the bowl of apricots she had painted, her favourite food and the most succulent she’d ever seen—plump and shining and swollen with juice. Her mouth watered.

‘Thank you, I’m not hungry.’ She pushed it back. To taste even a drop of faery meant an eternity in their world. And though it looked lovely on the outside, with its blue sky, beautiful king and rolling hills,

she knew better. She had read the legends—betrayal, pain, loss, even murder. She only had to see the monsters at the table to know the truth.

Horned and fanged, tail swishing behind him, the monster at the end of the table grinned at her and drank from his goblet.

She turned back to the faery king and saw a flicker of displeasure.

‘Why did you bring me here?’ she asked.

‘To sup with us, to talk, to be merry, to enjoy life’s simple pleasures. Please,’ he gestured at the goblet, ‘drink.’

‘No. It will doom me.’

This time there was anger, quickly gone. ‘You think this doom?’ He stood gracefully, revealing skin-tight pants. Sandra blushed at the sight of his bulge. The table shook as everyone laughed—screeching, cackling, roaring—everyone but the faery king who gazed into her eyes, so handsome, so powerful. She sagged beneath the force of his stare.

‘Will you not come with me?’ he said with a dazzling smile.

A hot flush rushed through her body, making her flustered and dizzy. She couldn’t speak, her brain fogged. He laughed, and it was like the chime of hundreds of bells tolling in perfect harmony. He turned and walked away, dark hair streaming behind him.

The rest of the table ignored her as they feasted and chatted and laughed. Sandra got to her feet.

He was waiting for her in a copse of trees, sitting with his back against a giant oak.

‘Sit,’ he said.

She did, curling her legs under her, close enough she could see the indigo in his eyes.

‘So, tell me, Sandra. What do the legends tell about making love to a faery?’

Sandra coughed and spluttered as she choked on her own saliva. She dropped her face into her hands.

He chuckled. His skin was warm and smooth as he eased apart her hands. Sandra stared into his eyes, unable to look away. Her whole body tingled as he traced circles into her palms with his thumbs.

‘Is it safe?’ he whispered. ‘Or is there doom in that too?’

‘There is—nothing, I’ve read,’ she panted.

He smiled. ‘Touch me.’

She shook her head.

‘Come now. I know you want to. I know you’ve been dreaming about me, fantasising about this moment. Why else would you paint me? Don’t deny yourself. Touch me.’

She raised a hand, hesitated, then brushed his cheek. There was the slightest hint of stubble.

His eyes sparkled. ‘Not there.’ Sandra swallowed. He took her hand and lowered it. He smiled as she rubbed him. ‘See how you affect me? Don’t fear me. In the end, I’m still a man.’

Sandra stopped touching him and brushed her fingers through his hair. It was so soft, like black silk. He caught her hand and kissed it, then rested it against his cheek. She traced her thumb over his lips, and he opened his mouth and took her inside, sucking. She pulled it out with a gasp.

He chuckled, his eyes flashed and the rings of indigo almost seemed to spin, like little wheels of light. He leant in and kissed her, and a rush of heat chased away her fear. He tasted sweet, his tongue was wet, his breath warm. He gripped onto her arms, too tight, his fingers digging in as he kissed her neck, her collarbone. Then he found the buttons on her shirt and ripped them open. Braless, Sandra instinctively put her hands over her breasts, nipples hard against her palms. He smiled, gently pushed them aside and kissed each breast, tongue curling around her nipples, before lowering her to the ground.

As he turned to her pants, Sandra lay in a daze. The faery king. *She was making love to the faery king.* She must be dreaming. This couldn’t be real. She pinched her arm and yelped.

She lifted her hips as he slid down her pants, her knickers. Then he spread her thighs wide, and she gasped as he entered her with his tongue. He sucked and gnawed, his tongue darting in and out, until Sandra's whole body tingled and burned. She thrust her hips at each penetration, her body throbbing to the point of pain. She cried out as she orgasmed, her voice lifting beyond the treetops.

The faery king sat back on his knees and licked his lips. Sandra gazed at him between her thighs, panting. Then he stood, and she saw the shape of his hardness against his skin-tight pants. He didn't seem affected at all by the effort of their lovemaking: tall and cool, not a hair out of place, his locks midnight black against his pale cheeks, reminding her how truly inhuman he was.

He watched her as his long fingers undid his pants and shimmied them down to his thighs. Sandra stared at his penis. She hadn't had much experience with men, but as penises went, his surely must have been perfect—not too big, not too small, the right thickness for his length, hairless and smooth.

'What are you waiting for? Don't you want my love?' he said, running his hand over it. Something in his voice, in his look, disturbed her. There was something wrong. This wasn't love. She could see it in his eyes—a darkness, a coldness, a cunning.

It had been over two years since Sandra dated Michael, and she was lonely. To have someone hold her again, to be inside her and fill her up, particularly someone as beautiful and wondrous as the faery king, made her tremble and ache.

He waited, hair whispering in the breeze, the rings of indigo spinning like little galaxies. She could feel his power, his impatience. Everything in her mind screamed no. All her good sense willed her to resist. But her body was throbbing, her heart was pounding and she salivated at the thought of the taste of him.

She got to her knees and crawled over. He grabbed her head, fingers coiling through her hair, as she took him in her mouth. Sandra's lips ran

up and down his length as he thrust into her. Her tongue curled around him but there was no taste. Neither did he smell. It wasn't natural. It wasn't right. But Sandra kept going, knowing he was up to something, knowing somehow she was doomed.

He didn't shudder or groan or gasp to announce his pleasure but simply ejaculated in a hot gush, taking Sandra by surprise. She pulled away, gagged, then swallowed. She wiped her mouth, looked at him and shivered.

He was smiling, but it was a cold smile, pleased and arrogant. It was a smile of triumph. Sandra clapped a hand to her mouth in horror. To taste even a drop of faery meant an eternity in their world, and she just swallowed its very essence.

The faery king's smile became a sneer, then he tilted his back and laughed and laughed and laughed.



WAYNE STOOD AT THE threshold of his sister's room, suitcase in hand. He hadn't been inside since her disappearance, almost ten years before, his parents keeping it locked tight. Cobwebs spanned the corners of the ceiling, a thick coating of dust lay on every surface and there was a stuffiness that made it hard to breathe. His old room was a games room now: pool table, jukebox, arcade games, and his father was loath to give it up. After a brief, fiery argument, his parents had decided it was time to open Sandra's room.

Wayne put his suitcase on the bed and opened the window, then turned back and sighed. It was a hard thing coming back to his parents after years living on his own. Well, not on his own, with his boyfriend Jeremy. And that was the whole point of his return. They had broken up, and he couldn't afford to live by himself. So now he was stuck with his parents, in his sister's dusty, depressing room filled with ghosts.

He sat on the bed's flowery duvet and stared at her empty easel. Her disappearance had almost destroyed their family: his father had turned

to drink and lost his job; his mother was an angry griever and had taken out her rages on his father and himself until Wayne couldn't take any more and left to make his own way at sixteen. It was surprising his parents managed to stay together. Things were better now but the tension, the sadness, had never left.

It was a bizarre case and had been all over the news for weeks. An ordinary, seemingly happy girl with a great future ahead of her goes to bed one night only to vanish by morning: bed not slept in, wallet and phone and car left behind, room locked up tight. The police were baffled.

He went to the chest of drawers, emptied out his sister's clothes and put in his own. Next, he went to the cupboard and began unloading the rack. He had just lifted away half a dozen long dresses when he stopped. There were several canvases stacked against the wall behind them. He put down her clothes and removed them one by one.

He sat on the bed and studied them. His sister really had been a great artist. He brushed his hand over a little girl's pink cheeks as she dipped her hand in a cookie jar, grinning mischievously. He put it aside and studied the next and the next one. When he came upon the last picture, he stopped. He remembered this one. It was the very last she had painted.

'The Land of Enchantment,' he whispered.

He stared at it, pulse beating in his neck. He got up, put it on the easel and stood back. It was Sandra. It seemed she had painted herself into the picture but in the strangest way. She was sitting beside the faery king, hands in her lap as she stared at the table, long blonde hair trailing down one shoulder, looking sad and miserable. Wayne touched her face. She was so much older—a woman. Why would she paint herself like that? He looked at the faery king who stared back at him, one hand clutching a goblet, the other gripping his sister's arm.

He shook his head, picked up the picture and put it back in the cupboard. The other canvases followed, and he pushed the door shut. He had never liked that painting.

Later that night as he lay thinking about Jeremy, his thoughts suddenly turned to the picture. He sat up, hesitated, then got to his feet and opened the cupboard. He pulled it out and stared.

‘What the hell?’

He put it on the easel and switched on the light. It had changed. His sister wasn’t sitting with the faery king anymore. She was sitting one seat from the end between one of her monsters and a beautiful, laughing woman with long bronze hair. This time she was terrified. The monster was laughing too, a long muscular arm curled around Sandra’s waist, claws digging into her side.

‘No,’ he said.

A click, and the light went out. He lifted his arm against the glare as the painting blazed with light. A man’s laughter filled the room, and there was a small voice—his sister’s: ‘Wayne. Stay away.’

He stared into the painting, right into the faery king’s eyes. ‘Not a chance.’

He thrust an arm into the painting and was yanked forwards, tumbling head over feet, landing in soft grass. He leapt up and spun to look behind, but the room was gone.

‘Wayne, no! I told you to stay away.’

He turned back. ‘Sandra.’

Everything was just as it was in the picture except all eyes were now on him, monster and beauty alike.

‘Have a seat,’ the faery king said, gesturing across the table. A chair suddenly appeared.

Wayne stood beside it and folded his arms. ‘Let my sister go.’

The corner of the faery king’s mouth twitched. The rest of the table roared and shrieked with laughter.

'I'm afraid that's not possible,' the faery king said. He pushed over a plate—roast dinner, Wayne's favourite. 'Please, sit.'

'Way—' Sandra began before the monster slapped a paw over her mouth.

'Don't worry, Sandra. I remember.' He considered the plate, then looked at the faery king. He was a beautiful man: strong yet slim, powerful yet graceful, face as striking as man's yet as lovely as a woman's. He was designed to be adored, and despite his anger, Wayne felt himself go hard. Little wonder Sandra had fallen for him. He took a breath and steeled himself. 'I'll join you if you like—in my sister's place.'

The table stopped laughing. Sandra struggled furiously against the monster. The faery king smirked. 'Like I said—not possible. She has tasted faery. She cannot leave.'

'But you are the faery king. Don't you rule over this land? Or are you just a sham? Does the land, in fact, rule over you?'

The faery king narrowed his eyes. 'I am the king. What I want, what I say, goes.'

'Then release my sister and take me.'

The faery king relaxed back into his chair and smiled as he considered him. 'And what more can you offer me that your sister cannot?'

'My youth, my looks, my love.'

He raised a perfect dark eyebrow. 'That's all?'

Wayne nodded at his sister. 'Look at her. She's over thirty and looks much older than that. You've snuffed the life out of her. Pretty soon you won't be able to stand the sight of her. I, on the other hand, am much younger, much more vital, stronger.'

The faery king rubbed at his chin, dark eyes glinting, then looked over at Sandra still wrapped tightly in the monster's arms.

He turned back. 'Done.' Sandra's muffled screams were lost behind the shouts and hoots and laughter of the other faeries. The faery king pushed over a goblet, smiling. 'Now eat, drink and be merry. We have an eternity together.'

‘Not until I know my sister’s safe.’

The faery king glared at him, then looked across his shoulder at the monster holding Sandra. He spoke something in a guttural language that lifted the hairs on the back of Wayne’s neck. The monster stood and carried Sandra over to where Wayne had first appeared. Sandra struggled and kicked and bit. Managing to wriggle free of his paw around her mouth, she screamed, ‘Wayne!’

‘It’s all right, Sandra. Go home. Live your life. This is my choice.’

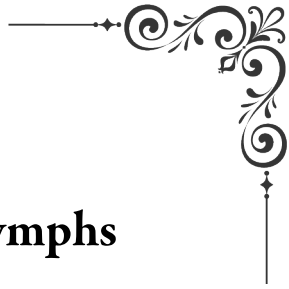
She was still fighting and screaming and calling his name as the monster tossed her in the air. There was a flash, and she was gone.



SANDRA HIT THE FLOOR with a cry. She twisted over, blinking in the darkness. The old smells, the softness of carpet beneath her hands—her room, her home, *her life*. She scrambled to her feet and switched on the light.

She sank onto the bed as she gazed at the picture. Wayne was sitting alongside the faeries, a goblet in one hand, a fork in the other, the faery king’s long graceful arm encircling his shoulders.

‘Oh, Wayne. What have you done?’



The Lord of the Nymphs

‘I’m coming with you.’

‘No, you’re not.’ Her brother sat on the edge of his bed, took up his whetstone and rag and began to sharpen his sword with clean, deft movements. It was once their father’s sword, old and rusty and notched. The hilt was cracked, the grip falling apart, but Jaslyn eyed it enviously.

Sitting on her bed opposite, she dropped her head onto her fist.

‘Why not?’

‘You know why.’

‘If I were a man—’

‘But you’re not a man. You’re a maiden, destined to marry and have children. Not to fight.’

The sharp zing of the sword against the whetstone filled her ears. ‘I’m older than you,’ she said.

‘By one minute. And what does that matter? Chief Druston wants the oldest, able *man* of each household to accompany him. What use does he have of a woman?’

‘Barely a man,’ she pointed out.

He paused in his sharpening. ‘But I am a man nonetheless. With Father dead, I am all there is.’

She sat up straight and clasped her knees. ‘I am useful. I am skilled with the arrow. I can throw a dagger and pierce an apple over thirty feet away. You’ve seen me.’ She jabbed a finger at him. ‘Let’s see the men in the village do that.’

He looked at her with his mossy green eyes, the same as hers. They were twins: the same dark, wavy hair, the same olive skin, the same full lips. But that was where the similarities ended. When they were children it was hard to tell them apart. Jaslyn had worn her hair short like Aidan's, and she had been fast and strong, faster and stronger than her little brother. But recently—

Aidan was over a head taller than her now. His shoulders strained against his tunic. His hands were big and strong. It was six months since they had raced each other up the Schofield Steps when Aidan had beaten her for the first time.

She looked down at herself, at her long flowing locks her mother never let her cut anymore, at the swell of her breasts against her tunic. She wrapped her arms around herself, hating them. They had grown rapidly over the past year, ever since her first blood. Almost as rapidly as Aidan had grown tall. She winced and hugged herself more tightly. The village men were looking at her now, whispering, winking. It wouldn't be long before one of them asked to court her.

Aidan put aside the whetstone and got to his feet. 'Here,' he said, holding out the sword hilt first.

She gazed at him in confusion, then hope. Would he let her go after all? She stood and grasped it. Her father had never allowed her to touch it. She smiled at him. Then her brother released his grip, and she tripped and stumbled, the full weight of the heavy iron blade yanking her forward. She lost her grip and the sword clattered to the floor.

'See,' her brother said.

Jaslyn clutched at her strained wrist, tears filling her eyes, not from sadness but from rage. 'It doesn't prove anything!'

'It proves everything!' He picked up the sword with a sigh and went back to his whetting. 'I know you want to protect me, sister. And I love you for it. But the swamps are no place for a woman.'

'I used to walk them with Father every day.'

‘As did I, but things have changed. Something terrible inhabits them now. If you can’t even lift a sword how do you intend to defeat what’s out there?’

‘An arrow in the eye.’

‘But what if our enemy doesn’t have eyes? Rumour tells it’s a monster, made of the swamp itself.’

She lifted her chin. ‘If that is true, then what of its heart? How can your mighty sword kill it if it hasn’t one?’

He paused in his whetting, his eyes shining with anger. He might be stronger than her now, but she had always outsmarted him. ‘Leave, sister. This discussion is over.’



THE NEXT MORNING AIDAN sat astride Iago, the family horse, and left the village behind, one man in a long ribbon of men coiling along the trail that led into the woods. It was a cold, dreary morning. The fog was thick and low, his breath came out in a mist and the ice in the air caught in his hair and crept beneath his gloves, making them wet. He drew his cloak tighter and looked back over his shoulder to see the women of the village gathered and watching. His mother was crying. His sister stood by her side, red-faced, arms folded, looking askance. He turned back and nudged at his mount. The trees loomed overhead. A turn in the path, and the village was lost behind him.

The trail was the surest, quickest route to Daingean, a neighbouring village, and beyond. It had once been used every day, but that was before the mysterious disappearances, before the rumours. For the past three weeks, those who went in didn’t return home.

It was a three-day journey through the woods, the beaten dirt track slippery with ice, threatening to break a horse’s ankle. At each passing hour the path grew grimmer, the trees thicker as they arched overhead and blocked out much of the sunlight. They were halfway through

when the stench of the swamps assailed them, lying thick and heavy on the air.

Aidan shivered and tightened his grip on the reins. They had stopped moving, and he wasn't sure why. The horses stomped their hooves and whickered nervously. The men's eyes darted between each other and the trees. Whispers filled their ears, sweet whispers speaking of soft hands, smooth hair, supple skin. Aidan shifted in his saddle, feeling himself go hard. He pulled reflexively at the reins, making Iago nicker.

'Steady men,' Chief Druston said, a crack in his voice.

They all froze, letting the whisperings brush over their skin like the stroke of a lover's touch.

Chief Druston was the first to climb from his mount. He stood at the edge of the trail, gazing into the trees as though in a trance.

'Chief?' spoke one of the men.

Chief Druston looked over his shoulder, his eyes strangely dark, his hair and beard silver against a spill of sunlight trickling through the leaves. He turned back. He hesitated, took a step, then left the trail, following the whisperings.

There were grunts and scraping and whickering as the rest of them did the same, Aidan too, his heart pounding so hard it thundered in his ears. Hand on the hilt of his sword, he left Iago and his supplies behind and followed Chief Druston and the rest of the men into the woods.

A short distance from the trail, and his feet sank into something warm and wet—the swamps. He yanked out his leg and shook it. He was never meant to leave the trail. The swamps were treacherous, thick and sucking and rancid, and could drag a man under within minutes. And yet—

He peered closer, squinting against the gloom. Beneath the swirl of leaves and woody debris, the water was clear and blue. It looked almost drinkable. And it was so warm. He sighed, heat rising like a wave from

his wet feet to the top of his head, chasing away the bitter cold from his bones.

He hurried ahead, splashing alongside the others, weaving through the trees. His legs tangled in brambles. Sharp branches scratched and poked.

The whisperings were becoming louder, the water deeper, his heart pounded harder. Then he broke into a clearing and stopped at the wondrous sight before him. Gone were the swamps. In their place was a little paradise: sparkling blue water, waterfalls, waterlilies, sunlight cascading onto flawless white skin and shining hair. There were women. And not just ordinary women, but beautiful women—slim and pale and perfect, with long flowing locks that coursed over their shoulders and breasts or sometimes looped around their thighs. They were swimming in the water, giggling, splashing each other, bathing, or lying across exposed rocks or small, muddy islands in all their glorious, beckoning perfection.

Aidan released the hilt of his sword.

Chief Druston was in the water, submerged to the waist, embracing one of them. She giggled and squirmed in his arms as he planted kisses all over her face, his laughter echoing hers.

Aidan unbelted his father's sword, letting it drop into the water. It sank and disappeared. The men around him were doing the same—unbelting, unbuttoning, unbuckling, until their bare skin glowed against the light. Laughing and shouting, they splashed deep into the water.

Aidan found himself in the arms of the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, breasts supple and perfect beneath his hands, lips soft and sweet against his. She had bright green eyes, like the rolling hills on a spring day. She wrapped her arms and legs around him and buried her face into his chest. She didn't speak, only smiled and giggled. Aidan didn't care, his interest far from conversation. He looked around, found a soft spot to lay her down and slid into her with a cry.

Her hair streamed around her, shining in the sunlight like polished bronze. Vaguely, he heard the laughter, groans and shouts of the others as they took their pleasure. The pressure in his hips and groin built, and he plunged harder until he thought he must have caused her pain, but she only giggled and thrust her hips against him, pulling him deeper inside.

Then the screams came, the shouting, the crying. He looked up. The men were thrashing in the water, drowning, dying. A red blush floated along the surface around him. Something awful was happening. He had to do something, fight, run away, anything. And yet, he kept thrusting, harder and faster, driven by a mad urge he couldn't control or understand. He knew his death was coming and there was nothing he could do about it. He didn't even feel fear, only dull resignation.

Then he ruptured into her, and the spell broke. The woman was gone, as were the rest of them. There was only the swamp, thick and sucking and rank, just as it was supposed to be. He fought against its grip, head to foot in filth, numb with the freezing cold. But he hadn't the strength, and he was already up to his chest.

The others' shouts and screams filled his ears. There was a terrible gurgling as someone was pulled under. He tried to swim, tried to thrust himself desperately to the surface, hands clawing at the muck, at the empty air, but it was to no avail. He was up to his chin now. He craned his neck, looking blindly into the overarching branches above, as he gasped his last breaths.



IT WAS LATE INTO THE night, and Jaslyn was standing at her bedroom window gazing towards the woods. It had been four days since her brother and the rest of the village men left to confront whatever horror was lurking within. They should have been back by now.

She sat on her brother's bed. Tears filled her eyes at the sound of her mother's sobbing coming through the thin walls. She gripped her

knees, her nails digging into her skin. She would be brave. She would search the woods, fight the monster and win. Wiping her face, she got to her feet and stood once more at the window. She felt no fear, only determination and resolve.

She would bring her brother back or die trying.

After writing her mother a note, Jaslyn left before first light, before her mother should wake and try to stop her. With the family's only horse vanished along with her brother, she would go on foot, a pack full of provisions at her back, quiver and bow over her shoulder, dagger at her hip. It was a warmer morning than when her brother left. Nevertheless, her nerves had set in, and she trembled.

It was a long walk, and lonely. There had been no rain to wash away the hoofprints of Chief Drustons's party, and her throat swelled at the sight of them. Which ones were from Aidan?

There had been no surprises all day until late afternoon when there came the sound of something large moving through the woods: branches snapped, bushes ruffled, something snuffled. Jaslyn froze and reached for her bow.

She braced herself, arrow at the ready, string pulled taut. Then the 'monster' revealed itself, and she lowered her bow, laughing in relief. It was a horse, doubtless from Chief Drustons's party, bridled and saddled and unscathed, if a little jittery.

Jaslyn put aside her bow and opened her pack.

'Here,' she said, holding out an apple. It was a young chestnut mare, and she snatched the apple from Jaslyn's fingers. Jaslyn patted her on the nose. 'Good girl.'

From then, Jaslyn's journey was swift, the mare tired but strong as she carried her the rest of the way.

The trees grew thick and tall the further she travelled. The darkness grew. She clutched at the mare's reins, shivers rushing down her spine. She didn't like this, and for the first time she began to doubt herself.

Just like Aidan said, what was she going to do with just a bow and a dagger against a monster?

She gasped at a sudden whispering in the air. It seemed to come from everywhere. She spun the mare in circles, trying to determine the source.

‘Who’s there?’ she called.

They were masculine voices, deep and resonating, and dare she think it—desirable. The whisperers were somewhere close, waiting for her, ready to sweep her in their arms and protect her from the unknown. She got down from her horse.

As she left the trail, she hissed and yanked out her left foot when it sank ankle deep in warm water. Her father had told her never to stray from the path, but the whisperers beckoned, and she splashed ahead.

She stopped with a gasp. So much beauty: the gleaming water, the bright sunlight, the flowers and waterlilies strewn across the surface. And the water was so warm she could have laid down and floated away.

Her heart fluttered at the sight of a man standing tall and broad and beautiful in the middle of it all. He had long brown hair cascading down his back, a beard neatly clipped. He had a strong jaw, a kind face and shining eyes that bore deep into hers.

‘Who are you?’ she asked.

He didn’t respond.

She readied her bow and nocked an arrow, aiming at his left eye. ‘I said, who are you?’

He held out his hands and stepped towards her, barely making a ripple in the water, as though he were a part of it. She drew back her arrow, and he stopped.

He was naked, and Jaslyn blushed at the sight of his manhood, standing as tall and broad as the rest of him. He wanted her, and it made her heart thunder madly. She gasped as a sudden heat coursed through her body. Her grip on the bow weakened, shook. She became

sticky between the legs. He was still holding out his arms and they looked warm and strong and comforting.

She took a breath and tried to harden her grip, but the bow slipped from her trembling fingers. It dropped into the water with a soft plunk. She couldn't do it. She couldn't resist him. Horror washed through her at the thought of what she was about to do. After all her promises to her mother, her brother, herself, after all her *arrogance*, she was going to fail.

'What is this ungodly power?' she trembled.

He didn't answer.

She took a step towards him, then another and another. A myriad of sensual thoughts invaded her mind: what she wanted to do to him, what she wanted him to do with her. Something strange was happening. She had never thought this way before. Her mind was not her own.

She looked down at herself. Why was she covered? What was the use of clothing out here? She shrugged off her coat and swept off her tunic. She gazed down at her breasts, and for the first time saw they were beautiful. She cupped them, touched them, massaged them. Her nipples were tingling. They were so soft and filled her hands perfectly. How could she have once despised them so much? She ran her hands down her waist, her hips. She had a lovely figure, feminine, womanly. She unbuckled her belt and let it drop into the water, dagger and all.

Next came the britches. And then she was naked. She should have been cold, but that strange warmth burned like a fire within. She undid her braid and let her hair flow over her shoulders and breasts, thankful her mother had stopped her from cutting it. She ran her fingers through its lengths. Never in her life had she felt so beautiful.

She went deeper into the water until she stood before him, submerged to the hips. She touched him, brushed her fingers across his nipples. Smiling, he took her into his embrace. Jaslyn sighed, pressed her head into his chest and held him back. His penis throbbed against

her navel. Wet heat trickled down the inside of her thigh at the feel of it, and she moaned. Then he tilted her chin and lowered his lips.

She reeled back. 'No!' He looked at her, a hurt look on his face. 'No,' she said more feebly, sagging in his arms.

He smiled and met her mouth. He was soft and warm and insistent, his tongue gentle. There was a mild shot of surprise as she realised it was her very first kiss.

She moaned, then squirmed, then thrashed in his arms. Shoving him away, she wiped at her mouth and spat. 'No.'

Again, that hurt look, and it almost destroyed her. All she wanted to do was wrap him in her arms, but she closed her eyes and shut him out.

She took a deep breath. 'I will come with you, willingly, openly, if you release my brother and everyone else you've taken.'

'No,' he said, and his voice was the sound of trickling water, the pater of rain against the leaves, the rush of the tide along the sand.

'Release my brother then.'

'No.'

With an effort almost beyond endurance, beyond agony, she unstuck her foot and stepped back. Tears streamed down her cheeks. She clutched at herself as a terrific pain ripped across her chest. She couldn't breathe. It reminded her of when her father died. It was as though her heart was breaking.

She took another step. A sob and a cry, and she took another.

'Wait,' he said. She stopped but didn't dare open her eyes. 'Your brother then, for you.'

She tilted her head back with a gasp, letting the tears fall away. 'Release him and I am yours.'

Her eyes flung open, and she clung to him with a cry as he picked her up in his arms and lay her down on a soft island of wet grass that seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. He traced his fingers down her face, along her body, then spread her legs.

‘Wait,’ she said. He paused. ‘I—I’ve never done this before.’

His smile broadened, and he crawled on top. Panting, she braced herself. She winced at a sharp pinch as he pushed through her maidenhead, winced some more as he thrust again. Tears pricked her eyes, and she gasped, but then he kissed her, and it somehow eased the worst of the sting. They rocked together, Jaslyn biting her lip at the pain, her lover silent and rhythmic as he plunged into her. His biceps clenched and smoothed at each thrust. His hair cascaded around her. His eyes gleamed like shining stars into hers. She grasped onto his waist with a cry, pleasure mixing with pain as her vagina tightened around him. She wanted it to end and yet never wanted it to stop. Then he came, and he did so with a grunt and a shudder, and it was like he poured himself into her, some kind of magic that rushed up her torso, her shoulders, her neck, down her thighs and legs, until she was completely enveloped.

She lay sprawled beneath him, heaving for breath. Smiling, he grasped her breast and sucked at her nipple.

‘What have you done to me?’ she gasped, but he merely smiled some more and brushed his fingers through her hair. She looked at him. ‘Your oath. My brother.’

He straddled her, his penis lying wet and swollen against her belly. He took her hand and kissed it, then stood, guiding her to her feet.

He pointed his finger at the swamp. The water swirled and bubbled. She grasped onto him when the grassy island shifted beneath her feet. A sudden gusting wind tossed and whipped the nearest branches. Then it all stopped: the wind stilled, the water calmed, the branches silenced. Moments later, there came splashing. Something thrashed in the water. There was a lung-rattling gasp, a hideous choking.

‘Aidan!’ she cried.

Coughing and spluttering, more gasps. Kneeling in the water several feet away, her brother was almost unrecognisable: dripping wet, eyes bloodshot, hair matted, face sunken and looking terribly old, chest

heaving like the dying. But then he looked up, and his face caught alight.

‘Sister?’ He coughed, spluttered, gagged.

She smiled but didn’t go to him; the Lord of the Nymphs was waiting.

‘Jaslyn?’ Aidan said, stronger this time, eyes wide at the sight of them together.

‘Tell Mother I love her.’

‘No!’ He thrashed and splashed, coughed and spluttered, but he hadn’t the strength to save her and slumped back into the water, gasping for air.

Ignoring him, she took her lord’s hand, and he pulled her against him and wrapped her in his powerful embrace. Something dragged at her feet. The water bubbled and hissed around them as they and the island began to sink. She clutched onto him.

‘Have no fear,’ he said in her ear.

She tried to steady her heart, but as the water rose past her breasts, up to her neck, terror overwhelmed her. She struggled against him, tried to throw him off, but he was far too strong and pinned her to his chest.

‘Aidan!’ she screamed.

A jolt of energy exploded through her spine, and she flung back her head. It blinded her, burned through her mind, until all memories of Aidan, her mother, her home and everything she had once known were gone.



THE LADY OF THE NYMPHS lay on a shallow island just above the surface of the swamp, combing her fingers through her long, bronze locks, watching as her sister nymphs played and gambolled in the water.

‘Come, milady. Come and join us,’ they giggled, splashing one another.

She smiled but kept brushing her hair. They asked her all the time, but she would never join them. She would only love one man, and the Lord of the Nymphs had no equal.

At the sound of clumsy splashing, they all looked up. Two men from the village approached, pushing a boat through the trees. That was strange. Where were the rest of them? And nobody had possessed the sense to bring a boat before.

Her sisters looked troubled but still tried to coax them over. They exposed their breasts, flicked back their hair, arched their graceful necks. They were all so beautiful, and she was proud of them. The men, however, didn't seem to notice. They paddled between them, purposefully avoiding them, and beached onto her island.

One of them leant over and seized her wrist.

'Let go! I am not for you.' She tried to pull away, but he wouldn't release her.

'Jaslyn,' he said. 'Stop it. I've come to rescue you.'

She frowned. The name sounded oddly familiar. He looked familiar too, *very* familiar.

'Come on, you must remember,' he said.

She looked at him more closely, and something unlocked in her mind. 'Aidan?'



The Dark Witch

Suzannah woke at the sound of a soft squeal. Half-asleep, she yawned, turned over and closed her eyes. At a second squeal, she sat up. There was a wail, high-pitched and terrible, raising the hairs on her arms and filling her heart with dread.

She leapt from her bed and raced over. ‘Shara!’

It was deep into the night, moonlight creeping through the broken shutters in a thin stream. A shadow shifted over her baby daughter, squawked, batted its wings. There was a flash of eyes, of sharp teeth.

‘Get off my baby!’ She lashed out at the terror and threw herself over her daughter.

The creature hissed and shrieked, flapping its black wings as it took to the air and shot through the window, shrieking into the distance. Suzannah cradled her baby, shaking her gently. ‘Shara. Shara.’

But her baby didn’t squirm, didn’t cry, didn’t even whimper. Something wet and warm soaked her wrapping.

Suzannah lifted away her hand. It was covered in something sticky, black in the moonlight. She stared at it, and it was several heartbeats before she realised it was blood.

She screamed.



CHIEF JEFFREY PULLED himself onto his horse with a grunt. There were at least forty men, almost all in the village, except the boys and elders. All mounted and armed, most with axes or clubs or cleavers,

a few with swords, some with only a knife in their boot, but all harbouring the same rage, the same hatred of the Dark Witch.

After the death of Suzannah's baby, they had united. Gone were their petty annoyances, their disagreements over land and dowries and who cheated whom. There were more important things to fight for. The witch had taken her last sacrifice. She would die today.

The baby's father, Ashwarth, glared into the woods, eyes puffy and red-rimmed, shoulders bunched against his neck. His beard was knotted and matted with dried snot.

Jeffrey pulled up beside him, sharing his anger. His own son had been attacked two weeks before, his tiny body almost sucked dry of blood. He remembered the horror of seeing that *thing* hovering over him, fangs bared, its demonic wings blacker than night. But his son had survived, and he had flung the bat into the flames.

Jeffrey tightened his grip on the reins. 'We will succeed.'

Ashwarth clenched his mouth and kicked his mount into a trot.

The Dark Woods was no place for any God-fearing man to tread. It stood like a black shadow over their village, instilling uncertainty in the bravest men and nightmares into their children.

The trees were ancient, seeded in a time before man's ken, so tall they disappeared into the heights, blocking out much of the sun, their trunks so thick four big men could barely encircle them with their fingertips touching. Thorny, ropey vines coiled along branches and hung over the witch's winding trail. Jeffrey flung one aside with a start when it brushed against his shoulder.

Snakes and lizards and slimy things slithered through the ground-cover, hissing and croaking. Things flapped and squealed amidst the branches, and the men stiffened, gazing above, grips tightening on their weapons.

And there was poison, everywhere, Jeffrey knew. In some way or another every tree, every beast, every flower, every crawling thing, was out

to kill. This was not God's creation, and anybody who would choose to live out here was no Godly person.

Someone behind him began to sing. It was a hymn, deep and sonorous. Quickly, the rest of the men took it up. Jeffrey's heart lifted. God may not be in the branches, but they carried Him along with them, in their hearts and minds and spirits. The woods would not defeat them, and neither would the Dark Witch, not while they had faith.

It was less than an hour before the path widened, and they reached a large clearing. A trickling creek cut a swathe through the trees and just beyond was the most enormous tree Jeffrey had ever seen, its canopy so large it cast a shadow fifty men deep if they were to lie on the ground outstretched, toe to finger. Its trunk was as large as a house, twisted and arched, and bulbous in the middle like a pregnant woman. Tangling vines looped along the branches and hung, swaying. Roots snaked and coiled through the knee-deep cover of leaves, all as thick as a man's body.

But the most disturbing thing was the noise. While the rest of the woods were silent, except for the calls and slithers of beasts and the rustling of wind through the leaves, there was the crack and creak of wood, as though the tree was growing or moving at a rapid pace, for a tree at least, imperceptible to man's eye but not to his ear.

The men muttered fearfully to each other. A few turned their horses and fled back the way they came, branches snapping into the distance. Ashwarth and his nephews sat astride their mounts, stalwart. Belial, his oldest nephew, lifted his axe. The rest of the village men held their nerve; many of them had watched their children suffer. Nevertheless, their mounts sensed their fear, nickering, ears twitching, stomping the ground.

Chief Jeffrey dismounted. Ashwarth followed, rusty double-headed axe in hand.

Jeffrey's voice rang loud and clear. 'Come out, witch, and meet your justice.'

Silence, except for the creaking of the branches. Ashwarth hefted his axe and chopped deep through a root with a dull thud. He yanked it free and lifted it again.

‘Wait,’ rose a voice, high and smooth, yet somehow hoarse at the same time, like two voices speaking as one. A shiver ran down Jeffrey’s spine—a demonic voice.

A woman approached through the vines—or what was once a woman. Men cried out. Horses whinnied and stomped. Swords pulled from sheaths.

‘Keep back, vile thing, or I’ll have your head,’ Jeffrey said, pointing his sword at her. His beard might be turning grey, but he still had plenty of strength left to fight.

She stopped, blinking, her left eye long-lashed and round, her right wrinkled and empty. Half the creature was young and beautiful, with auburn curls so long they almost touched the ground by her left foot. Her breast was round and firm, her skin smooth and golden, and in her eye was a shine that could have brought them all to their knees, spell-bound—if not for the horror that was her other half. Wrinkled and drooping and so pale she was almost blue, she watched them through a black eye socket, snarling her lipless mouth. She was balding with strands of grey hair shedding into the air even as they watched. And where her left breast sat high and perfect, the other hung stretched and blue-veined, resting flatly against her navel

Over both halves leafy vines looped and coiled. Small green and blue flowers grew through her hair and over her scalp like a crown. On the hideous side, the greenery was taking over: roots had buried themselves beneath the skin of her leg and ran upwards like an obscene imitation of veins before disappearing into her groin where a thick covering of moss intertwined with her auburn thatch; spotted mushrooms grew under her arm and in the folds of her wrinkled skin, and there was the stench of dirt and rot. On the other side, slithering amidst the vines along her supple left arm and around her neck, was a great yellow snake

with eyes the same fiery colour as her hair. It watched them, its black tongue flicking in the air.

‘What devil is this?’ somebody cried.

Her eye flicked to the man who called out. He stepped back, dropping his scythe.

Aswarth stepped forward, gripping his axe. ‘You don’t frighten me, demon,’ he spat. ‘I’ll have your blood for what you did.’

What we did? What we did? What we did? The men looked around the trees as the question whispered through the branches in a haunting echo, as though the forest itself were talking. A bird took to the sky with a squawk. They all looked up at the sound of squealing and screeching.

‘There!’ one of the men cried. ‘Those monsters.’

The creature looked up too, auburn hair falling back in a sweep. She held out a wrinkled arm, and the men yelled and hissed and raised their weapons as a black shadow glided down. It landed lightly, digging its claws into her shrivelled forearm, folding its dreadful black wings as it screeched again.

‘Our children,’ said the creature’s two voices as she brushed a tender finger along its face. It gnawed at her fingertip, drawing blood.

‘There you have it!’ Aswarth roared. ‘She’s leagued with them. That bitch-demon murdered our children!’

He hefted his axe, prepared to charge, but Jeffrey slammed a hand against his chest. ‘Wait. Let her explain herself.’

Antwarth’s eyes were wide with madness as he glared at Jeffrey. ‘I want my vengeance.’

Jeffrey gripped his arm. ‘You will. I promise you. But you’re not the only one who’s suffered.’ He looked at the rest of the men.

Antwarth glanced at the others, then pulled back with an ugly grunt.

Jeffrey turned to the creature. ‘Tell us why. Why do you seek to hurt us? What have we done to you?’

Why? Why? Why? Why? rippled through the leaves.

‘She needs no excuse,’ Belial cried out. ‘She’s a demon, prepared to wreak evil for no reason.’

Her eye flicked his way, and he tightened his grip on his axe, lips white.

‘We wreak no evil,’ the creature said. ‘We seek no hurt.’

‘Answer the question!’ Antwarth roared. ‘Or I’ll chop you right down the middle.’

The creature stared at him. The bat flapped its wings and screeched. The snake stretched out in front of her, holding itself in the air, hissing. The tree’s creaking seemed to become louder. There was a crack, followed by snapping as a branch broke and crashed through the branches below, hitting the ground with a thud.

‘We are what we are,’ she said. ‘We are the Mother. We grow tall and bathe in light. Nothing more.’

Nothing more. Nothing more. Nothing more.

‘Enough of this!’ Antwarth lifted his axe and took a step towards her.

The creature lifted her smooth arm and pointed at him, or more specifically the axe. He paused. She blinked, eyelashes fluttering, her eye dark with sorrow as she gazed at the rusty iron blades. ‘Chop us down. Burn us. Fuse us into lifeless shapes. You wake our children, and they fly where there is food. To you, now.’

The men looked at each other. Antwarth glared at her. Jeffrey shifted his weight awkwardly from one foot to the other. They were a relatively new village, and he remembered how thick and sprawling the forest had been when they first arrived. After only ten years they had cleared half, replacing it with rolling fields of wheat and barley and potatoes.

‘We must. Or we starve and die,’ Jeffrey said.

‘And it is our right,’ Antwarth added, glaring at her. ‘Ordained by God: “Fill the earth and subdue it.” As I shall subdue you, witch.’

He charged, axe raised high. The creature didn't move, didn't even blink, watching as Antwarth chopped through her head. Black blood spurted, her eye rolled up, then Antwarth yanked out the axe and she collapsed to the ground. The bat screeched and flapped back into the branches. The snake slithered away, disappearing into the ground cover. The tree stopped its creaking, the forest stilled, as the men looked on quietly.

'Let's go,' Chief Jeffrey said after several moments of silence, staring at the creature's body. She was sitting face down, slumped over her lap in a twisted heap, blood soaking into the forest floor. Antwarth nodded at Jeffrey as he cleaned off his axe with some leaves.

The return home was quick and uneventful, but Jeffrey looked around him with renewed fear. It was far too quiet: nothing moved between the branches, nothing rustled through the leaves. He never felt more in danger. It was as though he was being watched.

It was with relief when he left the forest behind and rejoined his family. He kissed his children, hugged his young wife and tried his best to forget about the Dark Witch.

They would be safe now. They *had* to be.



THE CREATURE'S DEATH proved futile; the very evening of her slaughter, the black devils returned, and every day after that. A month later, they were worse than ever. One night they arrived in a swarm, screeching and squawking, the loud beating of their wings sending his children into fits of terror. Jeffrey closed the shutters and kept the lights low, but the beasts still worried at their windows and doors, chewing on brick and timber, scratching for a way in.

It was sunrise before they flew away. The men watched them go, a black cloud disappearing into the forest.

'Could it have been a mistake killing the witch?' Belial said.

‘Clamp your lips,’ Aswarth said. ‘She had to die, but maybe I made a mistake letting her body rot. Should have burnt it.’

‘Too late now,’ Jeffrey said, though he doubted it had anything to do with her body. They had cleared another chunk of forest. They had built another farmhouse, planted another field. Jeffrey rubbed at the hair on his neck. Had the witch spoken the truth? Had they laid the blame falsely?

It didn’t matter in the end; the deed was done. And the following morning, the first man was dead.

It was Dillon. A good man. A brave man. Father of six children. A skilled farmer. And only thirty years old and in the prime of health. Jeffrey could hear his wife wailing in the next room as they stood over his bed, looking down on his still form.

‘It’s not natural for a young, strong man to die like this,’ Belial said.

He died peacefully by the looks of it, eyes half-shuttered, not a mark on his body. An old man’s death.

‘But it happened,’ Antwarth said.

‘What do you think, Chief?’ Belial asked.

Jeffrey suddenly felt old and very tired—and guilty. They stood in the newly built farmhouse, the newly planted field spread before them. He had thought he was giving Dillon a real gift, a choice piece of land, but had he merely gifted him his death?

‘I think we need to prepare ourselves for a dark road.’ He looked at the two men, feeling every minute of his fifty-five years. ‘This was no coincidence. The witch is out to seek revenge.’

He was not mistaken. By the end of the week, three more good men were dead.

‘All men from the forest,’ Aswarth said as they stood over Clyde’s body. He hadn’t been as fortunate as Dillon, eyes wide, neck arched, mouth hanging open like he’d been screaming or gasping for breath. His abdomen was purple with blood and a deep welt encircled him from front to back. Squeezed to death. By a snake—or a root.

Jeffrey pressed his lips together. 'Gather everyone together, arm every man and boy. We look out for each other.'

But no matter they slept in the same houses or kept watch through the darkest hours or prayed until their knees ached, somehow men continued to die, found dead in their sleep by morning. Some had clearly suffered agonising deaths, others peaceful ones, but always quietly and unwitnessed.

The morning Aswarth was found shrivelled up in a pool of blood, Jeffrey decided they needed to leave. They packed their wagons, harnessed their horses and trotted into the gloom, leaving everything behind. Women wept, children sobbed, men frowned. It wouldn't be easy. The nights were freezing, the roads difficult and it would be many days before they reached the next village. Still, anything was better than the evil behind them.

They stopped for the night beside a chain of grassy knolls. It cut out the icy breeze but did nothing for the villagers' dread. They were miles away from home, but would it be far enough from the witch?

Jeffrey tossed and turned, trying to get some sleep, only to doze in short, useless bursts, waking each time with a fright, hand on his sword. In the early hours of the morning, Belial roused him, Jeffrey's turn to take watch.

Belial gave him a sharp nod before lying down to bed, close to Aswarth's wife and children so he could keep an eye on them. He hadn't said much to Jeffrey since they discovered his uncle's body, and Jeffrey wondered if Belial resented him. If they had left a day earlier, Aswarth would still be alive.

Yawning, Jeffrey collected some kindling from around the perimeter of the camp and tossed it on the two small fires. He stoked them until they blazed. Not only for warmth but to keep the worst of the shadows at bay. It was black outside their camp, the moon shrouded in heavy clouds.

He sat on a rock, gazing into nothing. There were trees here too, but they were spindly and weak, nothing like the Dark Woods. Nevertheless, they were too close, standing in a crowd around them. He wrapped himself in his cloak. At least there were no bats.

Soon, he began to nod off, but his doze didn't last. His eyes sprang open at the rustle of leaves, the crunch of debris underfoot, a crack. Jeffrey leapt to his feet, hand on hilt, looking around wildly. Nothing. The camp was safe, the trees empty.

He whipped around at a flash of movement to his left. He heard giggling, a rush of footsteps. He swept his eyes around the sleeping camp. Nobody was supposed to leave without telling the man on watch.

He followed the sound of more giggling. Whoever it was, they were just around the nearest knoll.

'What do you—?' he stopped. 'Emma?'

His wife was sitting in a small nook in the knoll, bare bum on a slab of rock. The flickering light of the fires was a dim gleam behind him but enough to reveal her breasts, the tangle of dark hair between her legs, the shine in her eyes.

'What are you doing?' He looked around anxiously, making sure they were alone. Her breasts lifted as she held out her arms, the nipples brown and soft.

He shook his head. 'We should go back to camp. And it's freezing. Aren't you cold?'

He took off his cloak and wrapped it around her shoulders, but she shrugged it off with a seductive smile. 'Jeffrey,' she whispered, holding out her arms again.

Jeffrey stared at her. It had been weeks since they had last been together. He looked around him again, then unfastened his pants. 'All right. But we need to be quick.'

Jeffrey took the slab while she straddled him, his arse freezing against the cold stone. He gasped as he entered her, grabbing her hips

as she rocked. She arched her neck, hair tumbling down her back. Jeffrey pulled her against him, pushing his face into her breasts.

‘Uh, uh, uh, uh, oh, oh, *oh, Em.*’

He grimaced, gasped, ready to come, gripping her arse so hard it must have hurt. Then she suddenly stopped rocking. He looked up at her, panting, sweat trickling down his back, his cock throbbing to bursting. ‘Em?’

She was clinging onto him, fingers digging into his shoulders, her neck craned back painfully far, hair falling in a curtain. ‘Em?’ Jeffrey swallowed, a tingle of dread rushing down his spine.

In the quiet he could hear how ragged her breathing was, the hoarseness of the air in her throat. Something oozed beneath his hands. He raised his left hand, smoothing the liquid between his fingers. He sniffed it—sap.

He suddenly couldn’t breathe, couldn’t speak, couldn’t move, struck with terror. Her fingers dug hard into his shoulders as she slowly straightened her neck, and it sounded like the tree in the woods, creaking and cracking.

Then she was staring at him, left eye whole, the right wrinkled and empty. Her head had been almost split in two from Aswarth’s axe. Black blood had congealed inside and patches of pale brain shone wetly in the light.

‘A man of God, of stone and brick,’ she spoke in her two voices, smooth and innocent, hoarse and cruel. ‘So shall you be.’

She lunged and Jeffrey screamed.



‘WOW!’ STACY SAID, TAKING several pictures. ‘Can you believe this?’

‘Incredible isn’t it? The way nature can take over like that,’ Danielle agreed.

‘See how the trees have buried themselves into the rock?’ their tour guide said, brushing aside her ponytail as she indicated a particularly astonishing tree sitting atop one of the crumbling stone buildings. It was enormous, stretching high into the sky, its tentacular roots, far bigger than a man, penetrating deep between the stone bricks. ‘There is no way to separate them. To do so would destroy the buildings. The trees are essentially holding them together.’

‘It’s more tree than building now,’ Stacy said, gazing above, hand shielded against the sun.

‘Look at that,’ Danielle said, pointing.

Stacey looked over. ‘Oh, *cool*,’ and took another dozen pictures. A tangle of enormous roots snaked and weaved through a hillock of mossy bricks, and at its centre was a large, bronze cross, the roots coiled tightly around it, almost as though they were strangling it.

‘That was the chapel, and as you can see, completely destroyed. The cross is all that’s left,’ the guide explained.

‘What happened to the people who used to live here?’ a woman with a thick accent asked, peering at the sight beneath a broad-brimmed hat.

‘Nobody really knows. It’s thought they simply left. Probably chased away by war. They might have been starving.’ The guide shrugged. ‘Some think disease. The plague was raging during that time. But nobody can know for sure. Come on,’ she continued, waving them over, ‘if you’re impressed by this, wait to you see what’s next.’

They all scrambled into the bus. Danielle and Stacy sat in the back-seat, gazing through the windows as the countryside rolled by, all grassy fields dotted with sheep. Danielle looked back through the rear window, watching as the ancient village with its clump of towering trees grew small.

‘Amazing to think it was once a jungle here,’ Danielle said, turning back to the front.

Three hours later, after much hopping on and off the bus viewing the sights, they finally reached their last destination. Their guide took them over to a chain of small, green hills. On top sheep were grazing.

‘You’re going to love this,’ the guide said, smoothing her hair as a strong wind blew. Danielle zipped up her jumper, shivering in the afternoon cold.

The group followed her over to the little hill at the centre. They stopped and peered into a small rocky nook. There were resounding gasps, followed by Stacey’s, ‘So cool!’

The guide grinned at them all. ‘We call him the Screaming Man.’

Danielle stared. A man’s face peered at them through the rock, mouth and eyes wide, hands raised up in defence, fingers bent into claws. He was so detailed—and so terrified.

‘An odd place for a carving,’ a man said.

The guide’s grin broadened. ‘You might be surprised, but, uh, modern excavation tells us that our Screaming Man here is not a carving at all.’

Danielle looked at her. ‘What?’

Her eyes shone with excitement. ‘That’s right. He is, in fact, a real man—bone and tissue and hair embedded in stone.’

‘But, how?’

‘Nobody knows. Nobody can explain it. A little scary, isn’t it?’ She stepped away to let them have a closer look. ‘To think: What happened to him? And why was he screaming?’

Silence fell. Danielle shivered.

There was a flash as Stacey took a photo. ‘So awesome!’



Dragon Treasure

Princess Alandra sat chin in hand as she gazed through her tower window. It was a beautiful night. The moon's bright light made the rolling hills shine. A cool fresh breeze blew through her fringe. The distant Pontine Mountains were a dark, mysterious shadow against the twinkling horizon.

'Come, your highness,' Lily, her handmaiden, said. 'You must hurry. You mustn't keep you lord husband waiting.'

Princess Alandra snorted. 'I doubt my dear husband will mind.'

But she rose to her feet and let Lily finish dressing her.

It should have been a simple process, making love to her husband. A silken shift, long golden hair brushed and flowing down the back, a touch of rouge on the cheeks, should have been all that was needed. But nothing was simple when one had a face like Princess Alandra's.

Born with a long, hooked nose, eyes too close together, a broad jaw which jutted to one side and bearing the ravages of the pox, Alandra was more than plain—she was ugly.

She was dressed in a long, silken shift but beneath it was a pair of ankle-length, crotchless pantaloons so her husband could do what he had to do without having to touch her diseased thighs.

Lily applied yet another layer of powder against her cheeks, then stopped and stepped back to take a look. She frowned, and was about to apply more when Alandra said, 'That will do.'

'Yes, your highness,' she said, with a bow.

A pair of diamond earrings and a green, velvet gown finished her outfit. Alandra lay against the pillows on her bed and smoothed out her golden hair so it flowed over her breast. Her hair was the only beautiful thing about her. ‘Tell him I’m ready.’

Lily left and Lord Berrick entered, closing the door behind him. ‘Why are the candles still lit?’

Running her fingers down her velvet gown, Alandra didn’t answer.

He circled the room, blowing out the candles one by one and drawing the drapes until only a sliver of moonlight entered.

Alandra had been fifteen when she had accepted Lord Berrick’s hand in marriage. As fifth in line to the throne, she had had her pick of eligible men: lords, barons, dukes and all sorts of noblemen. Some were ugly or crippled, many were too old for her with white whiskers and potbellies, others were drunks and obscene. She had thought herself lucky when her father had chosen Lord Berrick. Only seven years older than herself, he was tall and strong, a fearsome knight, admired by his men and adored by the ladies.

She knew better now. Maybe if her father had chosen one of the old, ugly ones, she might have known, if not a great passionate love, at least a little tenderness.

His tall figure approached the bed. A strip of moonlight glittered over his handsome face and glistened upon his long, dark hair.

‘Stop looking at me,’ he said.

As she turned her face away, she heard him drop his pants. She desperately wanted to look, to see him, but it was always dark with Berrick, and she always had to look away.

The bed groaned and creaked. The mattress sank beneath his weight. He smelt of horse and steel. His heat seemed to burn right through her velvet gown, making her sweat. She gasped. Her heart pounded. They had been together a year, and her love for him hadn’t faded.

‘Spread your legs,’ he commanded.

She did and was glad. He would be on top tonight. Often, he did it from behind, and she never got to truly feel him.

He pushed up her shift, crawled over her and thrust into her. Alandra gasped. She was only slightly moistened and his hardness grated inside her. Berrick didn't care or notice, plunging into her until she was forced to become slick.

'Don't touch me,' he snapped.

She released his hips, and he pushed her face into the pillow. He was quick and efficient, like always. He needed an heir and would get one with the least amount of discomfort as possible. Even so, Alandra closed her eyes and enjoyed it as much as she could. He came with a growl and a shiver.

He pulled out with a grunt, his seed trickling out of her. He didn't say a word as he pulled his pants back on.

'Berrick? Should I expect you tomorrow night too?'

'Doubtful,' he said and left, the door slamming shut behind him.

The next morning Alandra took Starlight, her beautiful white mare, and rode across the fields and farms, away from the town, away from Castle Anton. Her two loyal knights followed at a respectful distance. They were her father's men, duty-bound to protect her, but they too couldn't bear to look her in the face for long.

She missed Castle Deakin, her home. She missed her loving father. She missed her little spaniel, Rufus. *They* had never turned away from her. Her father had loved her, kissed her, held her without hesitation. Rufus used to curl up at her side, even lick her face. Rufus had been hers, but she had to leave him behind because Berrick didn't like dogs. She missed him so much.

With a kick and a flick of the reins, Alandra pushed Starlight into a daring canter, jumped a high hedge, skirted a brook. She laughed, her tears drying on her cheeks as she forgot Berrick's disgust, her ugliness, all her troubles. All there was now was Starlight, the glorious blue sky and leagues of rolling hills to explore.

At the sound of shouting she slowed her horse and looked back. Her knights were galloping towards her, Sir Ganton gesturing desperately towards the sky. She looked up and the breath caught in her throat. There was a monstrous figure, dark against the sun, enormous wings outstretched, claws sharp and savage and at the ready.

A dragon.

She spun her horse around and kicked it into a gallop, hair and skirts streaming behind her. Her knights raced up to her, kicking up billows of grass. She met them halfway, and together they galloped back towards the castle, Sir Ganton's hand on the pommel of her saddle, Sir Desmond's sword unsheathed and upraised. Alandra could have cried. The castle was so far away, and what was a sword against a dragon?

She heard its great flapping wings, the air whooshing and clapping around them. Then its long, cool shadow fell across her, and at that moment, she knew all was lost. Her strength left her, and the reins slipped from her hands.

'Princess!' Sir Ganton cried.

She gripped onto the pommel, but now Starlight was out of her control. Sir Ganton made a desperate grab for her bridle but missed, and her horse turned off course, away from the castle. Her loyal knights kept to her side, their mounts bumping into either side of Starlight as they tried to guide her back towards the castle. Starlight screamed as the dragon approached. The knights' mounts were little better, frothing at the mouths, lathered with sweat, tossing their heads. They were losing speed.

There was a loud whoosh as the dragon plunged for the kill. Alandra screamed. Sir Ganton shouted. Sir Desmond waved his sword. Something collided with her back, and then she was soaring high into the air. Sunlight blazed below her feet, green hills rolled above her head, clouds and horses and green, leathery skin whirled around her, as the dragon carried her far away from Starlight, from Castle Anton, from Lord Berrick. In a daze, she could see Sir Ganton and Sir

Desmond watching from below, still mounted, heads tilted up, hands shielded against the bright sun, growing more and more distant until they were nothing but black dots against the green.

Then Alandra fainted, and everything was lost to darkness



PRINCESS ALANDRA ROLLED over and sat up with a gasp, then gave a small shriek at the sight of the dragon resting beside her. It grunted, snorted in its sleep, and Alandra clapped a hand to her mouth. She looked at it in horror. It was huge and hideous, covered in green, leathery skin that stank of the Mantric Swamps. Its thick, lizard tail was curled around them both, long savage spikes along the top. Its massive bat-like wings were now tucked against its back, and she would never forget the horrible sound they had made as it chased her down. Then there were its teeth and its claws.

She stifled a yelp. She was sitting in its foot, its black claws surrounding her like terrible bedposts. She scuttled away.

She glanced around. She was in a huge cavern. Her eyes widened. Sunlight poured through a giant hole in the ceiling where the dragon must have entered and shone upon mountains of gold. There were enough riches to run an entire city for years. But there wasn't only gold: jewels, glittering armour, mirrors and silverware, anything that gleamed.

Slide.

Alandra shivered at the sound of the dragon's tail sliding across the floor. The dragon huffed, snorted, and plumes of black smoke coiled from its nostrils.

She backed away, then turned and ran. There wasn't anywhere to escape to, but there were plenty of places to hide. She tripped over a goblet. It rolled away with a metallic ring. There was a grunt. A gleaming eye opened. Alandra leapt behind a jagged stalagmite of rock and held her breath, skirts clenched in her fists.

Slide. Thump. Slide.

A terrible growl boomed around the cavern. She gasped. It could speak!

‘Come out, little princess,’ it said, its massive tail sliding against the floor as it searched the cavern. ‘You can’t hide from me in my own lair.’

There was a roar of heat and wind as it blew its fiery breath somewhere behind her. Alandra clapped her hands to her ears with a squeal, then coughed and spluttered as black smoke fell around her in a thick blanket.

The dragon fell silent.

Slide. Thump. Growl.

Alandra pressed her hands to her eyes, shaking. Its monstrous breaths rumbled around the cavern. Loose rubble fell from the ceiling. In a burst of wild courage, Alandra glanced over her shoulder to meet a big orange eye glaring at her.

She screamed and ran. She raced around the perimeter of the cavern, the dragon at its centre. It was standing at the foot of its mountains of riches, following her with its orange gaze. The sunlight streaming into the cave made the dragon’s plunder glitter.

She searched for a crack in the cavern wall, fingertips cutting against the jagged rock, skirts catching and tearing. With a gasp, she found an opening, tried to squeeze through, only to be torn away, ensnared by one of the dragon’s clawed feet.

Screaming and struggling, kicking and squirming, she was hauled high into the air. The floor fell away, the ceiling rushed to meet her. Partway up, she stopped with a jolt that flung back her head. She hung flaccid in the dragon’s grip, weeping, gazing through the hole to the blue sky above.

‘Look at me,’ it said.

Alandra didn’t move. It shook her, and she squealed. She forced her head forward, long golden hair hanging in front of her face. She glimpsed its long snout, its sharp teeth, its spiked tail, its enormous

wings, and shut her eyes. Her arms rested along a massive forefinger, her elbow pressing against its savage claw. She pulled her arm away with a start.

Slide. Thump. Purr.

Alandra whirled through the air, whimpering, as the dragon turned around. It stopped, and she jerked backwards with a cry when it gently brushed back her hair.

‘So beautiful. You will be the crowning jewel of my collection, my little golden princess.’

She opened her eyes with a start. ‘You—you think I’m beautiful?’

Slide.

She whooshed through the air again, her stomach knotting with sickness, and was sat atop the dragon’s tallest mountain of gold. She was eye to eye with it now, and this time she didn’t look away.

It snorted and huffed, sending more plumes of smoke coiling into the hole above.

‘What—what are you going to do with me?’ she said.

Slide.

‘Nothing,’ it said. ‘I only want to keep you.’

‘For what?’

‘As part of my treasure.’

‘That’s all? You’re not going to eat me?’

The dragon huffed. ‘There is better food to eat.’

It sat on the floor. Alandra’s lip twitched. It sat like her Rufus used to when he wanted something. Even its tail swished like a dog’s.

She looked around the cavern, at the piles of treasure, the jagged rock walls, the hard, cold floor. ‘Where am I going to sleep?’

‘With me. You’ll find me very comfortable.’

Slide.

‘What am I going to eat, to drink, to comb my hair with?’

A snort, and black smoke wafted in her face. She winced and coughed and waved it away.

‘You’ll eat what I eat, drink what I drink, and *I’ll* comb your golden hair.’

She looked at its sharp, black claws. ‘You’d tear my head off.’

Slide. Thump. Groan.

The dragon lay down, dropped its head onto its feet and looked up at her, tail sliding along the floor. ‘I can be gentle.’

Alandra couldn’t help but smile. She bit her lip. ‘Do you really think I’m beautiful?’

‘More beautiful than my gleaming treasure, more glorious than the glowing moon, more astonishing than the blazing sun.’

Tears pricked Alandra’s eyes. Nobody but her father spoke to her like that.

Coins slid and skittered across the floor as its voice rumbled through the walls. ‘I saw you with your golden hair, your shining skin, that glow on your face, and knew you had to be mine.’

Her throat swelled, and she gasped. Looking up to the sky above, she wiped at her streaming face.

‘And now there are diamonds on your cheeks.’

‘They’re not diamonds,’ she chuckled. ‘They’re tears.’

‘Diamonds, tears—’ the dragon huffed—‘all the same to me.’

She looked at the dragon. It was gazing at her, like nobody but her father gazed at her. Or Rufus. She smiled at it, then looked down at the steep slide of gold beneath her feet.

‘How do I get down from here?’

Slide. Thump.

‘Here.’ It held out a foot.

She climbed into it, and it lowered her gently to the floor. It dropped its head back onto its feet so its eyes were at her level. She was close to it now. Close enough that it must see her scars, her ugliness, but it didn’t turn away.

‘My name’s Alandra.’

‘I’m Gor.’

‘Are you going to keep me forever?’

‘Yes.’

Alandra coiled her hand through her golden lengths as she gazed at the dragon. The thought didn’t distress her. She smiled.



‘SIR GANTON, TAKE THREE knights and search that mound of rock,’ Lord Berrick ordered.

Sir Ganton looked up. The mound of rock Lord Berrick referred to was high above at the top of a steep, treacherous climb.

‘Yes, my lord,’ he said. Sir Desmond promptly joined him, gripping onto the nearest handhold. Sir Ganton turned to Lord Berrick’s group of watching knights, ‘Sir Laurel, Sir Montmount—’

Sir Ganton, Sir Desmond and Lord Berrick, along with twenty other knights, had been trekking through the Pontine Mountains for over a month in search of Princess Alandra. It had been gruelling, the days hot, the nights freezing, the way difficult and perilous. But they would not give in. Not until she was found.

They began to climb. It was mid-afternoon. Their chainmail reflected the burning sun. Wind gusted against them, throwing leaves and wet earth into their faces. It had rained recently, and the rock face was slippery and tricky.

He looked down at a shout. Sir Montmount had slipped. He was clinging to the rock face, legs dangling in the air. With a heave, the knight found a sturdier foothold and regained his balance. Taking a moment to steel himself, he then grabbed the next handhold and resumed his climb. Sir Ganton gave a grunt of respect. Sir Berrick’s knights were well trained.

Sir Ganton met Sir Desmond at the top. Shortly, Sir Montmount and Sir Laurel joined them. Below, Lord Berrick and the rest of his knights had dispersed to continue with the search.

‘What do you think?’ Sir Desmond said, studying the mound of rock.

It was huge and round, and from what Sir Ganton could see, impenetrable.

‘It’s worth a look,’ he answered. ‘You take the west face,’ he told Sir Desmond. ‘Sir Montmount, you take the east, and Sir Laurel you take the rear. I’ll take the north.’

They parted ways. The north face was the most perilous of the four. It faced outwards, a steep drop below, Castle Anton little more than a black dot in the distance. After giving his gloves a good wipe, he clung to the rock face and sidled along it, chin and chainmail scraping against the surface. The wind was fierce here, plucking at his pants, tangling in his hair. But Sir Ganton was brave and strong, and soon he was halfway along, stopped in front of a vertical body length crack. His ears pricked at the sound of giggling coming from somewhere within—Princess Alandra.

He entered, the crack wide enough for him to slip into side-on. He stepped into a great cavern. It was filled with light: a giant hole in the ceiling, piles of gold and jewels. He ducked and scrambled out of sight. The dragon!

Unsheathing his sword, he peered over the slab of rock he was hiding behind.

It was monstrous, at least sixty feet long from snout to tail, and twenty feet high from the floor to the top of its out-jutting wings, and that was while laying down. Black spikes, taller than a man, ran along the top of its tail. There were smaller horns along its brow and snout too. Its eyes were orange with vertical slits for pupils.

It was the epitome of evil, a terrible beast, destined to die at the end of a sword. And that’s why it was so shocking to see Princess Alandra with its tongue in her lap, giggling and shrieking. She was naked, her long golden hair trailing down her back, a jewel-encrusted crown on her head. A large golden necklace with a giant emerald dangled be-

tween her breasts. At a distance he couldn't see the scars and deformities. At a distance she was smooth, young and innocent and undeniably beautiful.

His grip tightened on the hilt of his sword. He must save her. It was obscene, disgusting. What else had the dragon done to her?

He watched in horror as the dragon lapped at her breasts, between her legs. She laughed, and it laughed too, a dreadful cackle that boomed around the cavern. Sir Ganton shook his head as dust and bits of rock dislodged from the ceiling and fell into his hair.

Princess Alandra lay down and spread open her thighs, hands on her breasts, groaning and squirming, as the dragon licked at her golden thatch.

The blood drained from Sir Ganton's head, and without thinking, he charged towards them. Neither the princess nor the dragon noticed his advance until he was upon them, sword upraised. With a cry, he cut down on the dragon's foul tongue. Blood spurted. The princess screamed. The dragon roared and pulled away its head. Its tongue was thick and tough, the sword only nicking into it, but it was distraction enough for Sir Ganton to grab the princess and haul her away.

'No!' she screamed, thrashing against him.

He heaved her over his shoulder and ran for the crack. She was slippery with the dragon's saliva, but he held her tightly, sword dripping red, as the princess screamed and punched at his backside.

He didn't make it, skidding to a halt with a shout when the dragon's tail slid across his escape route, barring his way like a tall, leathery wall.

He spun around. 'Release us—*oomph*.'

Pain shot through his body as the princess kicked him hard in the groin. He let her go with a grunt. Breathless and gasping, he made a grab for her, but she scampered back to the dragon.

With a terrific roar, the dragon lifted an enormous foot, about to squish him. He ducked, and the princess cried, 'No!'

The dragon stopped, glowing orange eyes filled with rage, foot hanging above Sir Ganton's head. It pulled back with a growl and stood over the princess protectively.

'Leave with your life, Sir Ganton,' she said. 'I'm not going back to Lord Berrick.'

'I cannot, Princess. You cannot stay here with this demon.'

'Gor is not a demon,' she said, resting a tender hand against its leg. 'We love each other.'

'You do not.'

'We do!' Sir Ganton shook his head and gripped his sword with both hands. 'Leave, Sir Ganton. Know that I'm grateful for all you've done for me. You are a fine knight, but I have no need of you now.'

'I cannot. I have sworn to the king to protect you.'

'And you have. Now go. Gor's patience is wearing out.'

The dragon lifted its tail, and with a growl, smashed the slab of rock Sir Ganton had been hiding behind.

Sir Ganton backed away. 'I will come back for you, Princess. I will take you home. I swore an oath, and I intend to keep it.'

The dragon lifted its tail again, and Sir Ganton scrambled for the exit. He slipped through the crack and stepped outside, the wind blasting against his face. He sheathed his sword and quickly sidled along the rock face. When he reached safe ground, he sped over to Sir Desmond and the others.

'You must find Lord Berrick now.'

'Why?' said Sir Desmond. 'Did you find her?'

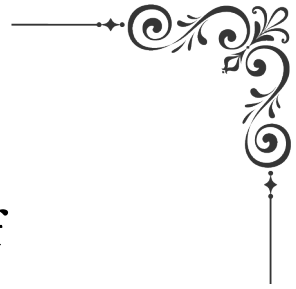
'Yes. The dragon is holding her prisoner inside.' He grabbed Sir Desmond's shoulder. 'We will need all our strength to defeat it. We must—'

They all turned, unsheathing their swords at the sound of a sharp crack. Dirt and rock exploded out the top of the cavern. Amongst the pall of dust was the dragon, wings beating against the air, clawed feet

gouging at the cavern until the whole thing collapsed with a boom and a shudder, burying the riches within.

It took to the sky, treasure spilling from one of its clawed front feet, a small golden figure clasped in the other. Helpless, Sir Ganton could only watch as the dragon flew away, first a monstrous beast, then a smudge in the sky, then a dot in the distance.

Princess Alandra was gone.



Copper Cliff

Andrew looked up at the sound of giggling. ‘Can you believe it?’ he heard his sister tell her friend through his door. ‘He told me he *likes* me. I feel like I could fly.’ Renee’s bedroom door banged shut behind them.

Andrew snorted and switched on his iPhone. *Girls*. They had no idea. Guys wanted one thing and one thing only. He should know, he was seventeen and had already fucked ten girls. In fact, he could go for one right now.

He rested back into his pillows, turned his music up and pulled his cock out. ‘Bring me the Horizon’ pounded in his ears as he masturbated.

He groaned, thinking of his next target—*Julie*: tall and slim, blond, with tits so perky they could have pierced holes in her school shirt. Rumour said she was still a virgin. Not that it mattered. A wet cunt was a wet cunt no matter if it had been already poked or not.

He froze at a pounding at his door. The door jumped in its frame. The knob twisted. ‘Andrew!’

‘Jesus.’ He shoved his erection back in his pants, popped out his earphones and stumbled to his feet as he struggled with his fly. ‘What do you want?’

‘You said you were going to mow the lawn,’ she shouted through the door.

‘For fuck’s sake.’ He unlocked the door and yanked it open, but only partway so it concealed the bulge in his pants. ‘I said I’d do it, and I *will*.’

It was midday and yet his mother was still dressed in her robe, looking every bit her forty-five years. She had a cigarette pinched between her fingers and her lank blonde hair spilled in an oil mess over her shoulders, the dark roots showing. He really wished she would see a hairdresser. It annoyed him. Maybe if she took better care of herself Dad would still be home. Then again, the years of alcohol abuse and smoking had shrivelled her into something a simple cut-and-dye job couldn’t fix.

‘Oh, yes,’ she snarled. ‘Just like you said you would the weekend before and the weekend before that and the weekend before that.’

‘I *said* I will do it.’

‘Do it, *now*.’

‘Oh, get out of my face you ugly cunt.’ And he slammed the door.

He dropped onto his bed with an angry grunt, shoved his earphones back in and turned up the volume some more before unzipping his fly again.

Abhhh, Julie.



‘COME ON, ANDREW,’ JULIE giggled. ‘Class is in.’

‘Then accept.’

She tried to open her locker, but he pressed his full weight against it. Andrew was so cute: six-foot, sandy hair, blue eyes, with a smile that made her heart flutter. He was smiling now, deep dimples in his cheeks.

‘Mr Dooben hates tardiness,’ he said. ‘Do you really want to get into trouble just because you won’t go out with me?’

Biting her lip, she curled her fingers through the end of her braid. ‘Okay.’ *I can’t believe I’m doing this. And with Andrew Beatman!* She smiled up at him, and it took all her effort not to burst into giggles.

‘Good.’ He pulled away from her locker and opened it for her. ‘Saturday, then? Five o’clock? I’ll pick you up from your place.’

‘No,’ she said quickly. ‘Why don’t you pick me up at Bennington Park?’ There was no way she was going to let her father know about this.

He shrugged. ‘Okay. Bennington Park it is. Five o’clock. Don’t be late.’

He winked, and heat flooded Julie’s cheeks.

Julie couldn’t stop smiling for the rest of the week. Classes sped by in a whirl, her time at home was a blur. It was as though she was floating. When she saw him, she would flush and quiver, and her friends would notice and tease her about it, and all she could do was blush deeper. At night she barely slept, staring at the ceiling as she imagined what it would be like holding Andrew’s hand, hugging him, kissing him—and more. To have his arms wrapped around her—*oh*.

Then Saturday arrived, and she was dressed in the little pink dress she bought earlier: mid-thigh, tight around the waist, strapless. It was sexy but cute. Something which said ‘I want to give myself to you but not straightaway.’

She tugged at her bra, adjusting it, as she sat waiting on the bench. The sun was setting, a pink glow splashed across the horizon. Her father thought she was out with Kelly tonight. As long as she was back by eight, he would think nothing amiss.

Julie’s heart leapt as a car pulled up at the curb. She stood, recognising Andrew’s sandy hair through the window.

He opened the door and stepped out his tall taut body, grinned his sexy smile as he met her at the bench. ‘You look beautiful.’ He held out his arm. He was smartly dressed—and staggeringly handsome.

‘Thank you,’ she smiled, hooking her arm in his.

It was the date of her dreams. He was funny, kind, patient—perfect. He paid for dinner, held her hand, looked at her with eyes she could melt into. By the end, she knew he was the one.

Over the next three weeks they spent as much time as they could together. At school everyone knew they were a couple and it pleased Julie to stir such jealousy in the other girls. When she knew they were looking, she would bunch up close to him and squeeze his hand tightly. Andrew was her first real boyfriend, and she never would have thought she would be so lucky.

They even spent time together after school. Her parents didn't know. It was easy to fool them into thinking she was out shopping with her girlfriends. Julie had always been a good girl and had never caused any trouble.

Once, they went and saw a movie where they shared a popcorn and drink together and held each other's hands at the scary parts. Another time he drove her to the beach and they swam in the water together. She had loved that day, seeing him bare chested with the water rushing over his biceps and rippled abdomen. That's where he had held her properly for the first time, his strong arms wrapped around her waist, sending shivers down her spine as they leapt over the waves.

But it was their time at the park which she remembered the most. The sun was about to set, and they were strolling through the gardens when he pulled her over into the trees and kissed her. Her very first kiss. And it was wonderful. His tongue was slippery and sweet, his grip gentle as he pressed his soft wet lips against hers. And when he was done he pulled her against him and kissed the top of her head like she was the most precious thing in the world.

Julie was lost after that. By the end of the three weeks, how could she refuse him?

She stood in the hotel room at the foot of the bed, dressed in only her underwear, hands folded in front of her, so nervous she could barely hear anything but the blood thumping in her ears. It was a standard room: beige carpet, simple furniture, king-sized bed, en-suite. But she had never been in one without her family and certainly never with a boy. The lights were off, the room dark, but moonlight filtered in

through the curtains, illuminating him. He was lying sprawled on the mattress, naked. She stared at his penis, afraid, disgusted and aching for it, all at the same time.

He patted the bed beside him. ‘Come on, Jules. You don’t need to be scared of me.’

It had never been her plan to make love to him so soon, but Andrew was insistent and after all his love and patience, it was only fair.

She eased in beside him, her shoulder against his. Glancing at him, she smiled, then looked away, pretending to be fascinated by the curtains. A cool wind blew, making them flutter.

Andrew slipped his hand into hers. He squeezed and she squeezed back. Then he leant in and kissed her. He was tender at first, lips soft, tongue sweet, but grew more passionate, kissing along her collarbone, sucking at her neck, as he undid her bra. Then his mouth was on her nipples, licking, sucking, teasing until she was sopping between the legs.

Julie arched her back, lifting her bottom, as he dragged down her knickers. Then they were both naked, and Julie stiffened as he opened her thighs and slid his body between them.

‘Oh, Julie,’ he groaned.

The feel of his penis pressing against her navel turned her stomach. Bile swelled in her throat. Something switched in her brain, and suddenly she didn’t feel excitement anymore—only terror.

‘No,’ she gasped, as he dragged his fingers along her opening. He didn’t seem to hear her, eyes closed, breaths wet against her throat.

‘No,’ she said again, louder.

His eyelids flickered but he didn’t stop; she gasped as he pushed his finger inside her. His finger was hard and deep, and it stung.

‘No, *Andrew.*’

She tried to slide out from under him, but he pinned her wrists to the bed, his fingers wet with her come. He kissed her hard on the lips, silencing her protests, as he positioned his groin above hers. She tried

to relax but his thrust stung so bad she cried out. Andrew didn't even notice—or more likely ignored her. He wasn't kissing her now, panting into her ear as he flexed and plunged.

Julie turned her head and screwed her eyes shut, unable to do anything but brace herself against the pain. She had always known it would hurt, but she always imagined that whomever her first was would be gentle and understanding, even a little regretful that he'd hurt her.

She never imagined it would be like this.

With a groan and a shudder, he was finally done. The moment he released her wrists, Julie scrambled out from beneath him.

Andrew rolled onto his back and folded his hands under his head, looking pleased with himself. 'What's wrong? Didn't you like it?'

Julie pushed her back against the wall, panting. Then the tears began to flow. She felt something warm trickle down the inside of her thigh. With a sob, she raced into the bathroom and slammed the door shut.

She sat on the toilet, knees together, her head in her hands. From outside her door the room was quiet. What was Andrew doing? When would he *leave*? She couldn't face him again, couldn't look at him. The very thought of him made her want to curl in a ball and scream.

Julie wiped at her face and tore off several slips of toilet paper, then cleaned herself. She looked at the paper in dismay, fresh tears swelling in her eyes. Blood, the sheen of Andrew's come—was this what their great love amounted to?

She looked up at the sound of the outer door slamming shut. Julie finished wiping herself, then gently eased the bathroom door open. Her clothes were strewn all over the floor but Andrew's were gone. She could hear a woman laughing somewhere out in the carpark, the distant sounds of traffic. A horn blasted. Clutching at herself, she glanced at the bed, then quickly began gathering up her clothes.

Feeling numb, shaking all over, she pulled on her knickers then picked up her dress. She gazed at it a moment. It was the little pink

number she had worn on their first date. She recalled the thrill of picking it out, her excitement. Shame squirmed in her stomach at the memory. She had been such an idiot.

With nothing else to wear, she pulled it on, hating the feel of it against her skin. Then she fetched her shoes. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she tried to get them on, but it was impossible; she was trembling too hard and everything was a blur behind the wetness in her eyes. Releasing a shuddering breath, she gave up on them. *I won't cry, I won't cry, I won't cry.* But she dropped her head into her hands and burst into tears.

She called a taxi home. Pausing at the front door, she straightened herself out and checked herself in her compact mirror. There was still some redness around her eyes but not enough to cause suspicion.

Taking a breath, she opened the door. 'Hi, Mum, Dad, I'm back!'

Her mother twisted on the couch and smiled. 'Did you and Kelly have fun?'

'Yeah, lots!' She feigned a yawn. 'I'm really tired though. We were shopping all night. I think I'm going to turn in early.'

Her mother looked her up and down, frowning. 'But you haven't bought anything.'

Julie hesitated. 'You don't have to buy anything to go shopping.'

'I suppose,' she said doubtfully.

'Good night!'

The moment she closed her bedroom door, Julie crashed onto the bed and wept herself to sleep.

She spent most of the weekend locked in her room, tucked under the covers and holding herself as she relived the night over and over. A hard knot tightened in her belly and it was all she could do not to vomit.

She tried her best not to leave her room but whenever she had to, she would do so quickly and would force a sickeningly happy pretence that fooled no one.

‘What’s wrong? Are you sick?’ her mother asked, feeling her forehead as she caught her on the way to the toilet. ‘You’ve been stuck in your room almost all day and you’re really red in the face.’

Julie let her face fall into an expression of misery. ‘I think I might be. I don’t know if I’ll be able to go to school tomorrow.’ *Please don’t let me go to school tomorrow.*

Her mother gave a faint smile and kissed her on the forehead. ‘Of course, honey. Take all the time you need. We know how hard you’ve been working at your studies. Perhaps it’s now finally caught up with you.’

Julie gave her a quivering smile in return, holding back a wave of tears. It hurt to think her parents had such trust in her. *And now I’ve betrayed that trust.*

But she couldn’t keep up the lie for long. Sooner or later she had to go back to school.

It was Thursday when she finally picked up her bag and headed out the door.

Her heart pounded, her stomach churned, as she walked up to the front gates. She looked around in confusion. Everyone was looking at her: students she knew, students she didn’t, friends and strangers alike, juniors and seniors. Some were shaking their heads, some were sneering, others were whispering behind their hands:

‘That’s Julie Charters.’

‘Really?’

‘She had sex with Andrew—’

‘Wasn’t even good, I heard—’

‘Slut.’

‘Whore.’

‘Skank.’

She rushed to her friends, but there it only got worse.

‘Kelly?’ Julie called. Her friend looked up and Julie paused, something foul gnawing at her insides. *The look on her face.* That look of dis-

appointment, even disgust, like Julie was something wet and slimy Kelly had scraped off from the bottom of her shoe. The rest of them stared at her with varying degrees of the same look, then one by one turned their backs and walked away. 'Kelly?' Julie called again, but her best friend just shook her head and followed.

The rumours spread so quickly, and they were disgusting. The kind of things Andrew said she did—

At lunchtime, Julie rushed into the girls' toilets and locked herself in a cubicle, her classmates' sniggering chasing her inside. Letting her books slip to the wet floor, she sat on the toilet and dropped her head into her hands, weeping quietly, much like she did that awful night at the hotel. She tangled her fingers into her fringe and pulled. How could she have gotten everything so wrong? Clutching at herself, she rocked back and forth. Her world was crashing down around her and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

The teasing, the snide remarks, the isolation didn't stop for the next two weeks. And each day she dragged herself to school: head down, books crushed to her chest, hair draped over her face so she wouldn't see anyone. But what made it so much worse was Andrew's presence. She tried her best to avoid him, but it was only a small school and it was inevitable they'd see each other. And when she did, he'd always have that smirk on his face, that satisfied glint in his eye. It made her feel so dirty all she wanted to do was crawl up into a ball and die.

And yet, though her days at school were agony, the nights were by far the worst. Out of all the sneering comments, bullying and harassment, nothing bit so deep compared with what she thought of herself, particularly while alone in the darkness. Burying her face in her pillow so her parents wouldn't hear her tears, she relived that night: the way he felt inside her, the agony, how he grunted in her ear at every thrust, the pain of his grip as he pinned her down, the feel of his come trickling down her thigh, the bloody toilet paper...

Every little detail was like a knife in her guts: humiliating, disgusting. The word rape hid in the shadows at the back of her mind and it gnawed at her. *I should tell someone. If I told the truth maybe everyone would see me differently.* But she couldn't. She shoved the thought away. All it did was make her feel dirtier than ever. And she would have to talk about it with the police, her parents, her friends ... She grimaced. *No!* And besides, would anyone believe her? After all, she had willingly joined him at the hotel, knowing exactly what they were going to do. *Nobody will believe me and I will just humiliate myself more.* She tried to be angry at Andrew for what he did, and she was, but it came nowhere close to how angry she felt at herself. She had fallen for his charms like a slut, like an idiot. She should have known better and deserved what she got.

Her parents could see something was wrong but whenever they asked about it, Julie would mumble she was fine and shut the door in their faces. She hated that look on her mother's face, that concern—the fear. It took all her might not to simply burst into tears where she stood and tell her everything. Julie never used to have secrets and they had always gotten on so well. *Not anymore. I ruined that. I ruined everything.*

One night the pain got too much. She carefully eased her car out of the driveway, her lights on low beam so she wouldn't wake her parents. Once she reached the road, she accelerated. She was still only on her Learners but what did it matter? She was beyond caring about anything anymore.

Copper Cliff was as beautiful in the dark as it was in the day. She used to come here a lot with her parents for picnics when she was little. There was a pang of guilt at the thought of them, but it was swiftly gone. *They'd be better off without me.* The waves crashed like thunder, the grass beneath her feet rippled in the wind, the surface of the big smooth rocks shone in the moonlight as she approached the edge.

Dressed in only her nightie, barefoot, she shivered and clutched onto herself, hair whipping and twisting around her in the wind. Far

below, the waves smashed against the rocks, sending mists of spray into the air.

Julie glanced at the moon, took a deep breath and closed her eyes.



JULIE'S DEATH SHOCKED everyone, including Andrew, but he didn't let it get to him. It was not like *he* had killed her. Though you wouldn't think it by the way everyone was treating him—like he had just stepped out of radioactive waste. They all watched him as he strode past, keeping their distance, even his so-called friends. He scowled at a couple of girls as they stared and whispered. The school was going to hold a memorial service in a couple of weeks. He would not attend.

Back home, his mother was talking quietly on the phone. She looked up at him, then away again as he walked past her to his bedroom. The whole community was talking about it, about Julie and Andrew both. It had been three days since the news of her suicide got out, and the police had already questioned him. He had told them the truth, or at least the truth as he saw it. Julie might have said no, but he hadn't forced her to do anything. He hadn't forced her through the door, hadn't ripped her clothes off her or thrown her on the bed. *I didn't rape her*, he told himself. *A girl can't say yes then take it back*. Though they didn't say it to his face, he could see the police despised him.

Fuck 'em. Who are they to judge? And Mum—fuck her too.

Andrew always went to sleep well after his mother and sister: lights out, dressed in his singlet and boxers as he lay his six feet diagonally across the bedspread. Often he would be listening to music and playing on his phone, the little rectangle of bright light burning into his corneas. On a weekday, it was usually around one-thirty when his eyes drifted shut and he would sleep the night away.

But that Wednesday night was different.

He woke with a start and sat up, his phone slipping into his lap. Something had startled him, but he didn't know what. He blinked in surprise, squinting against the light.

'What the—?' He looked around; his lamp was on. He flicked its switch off. Nothing. He flicked it on and off, but it only seemed to make the light glow brighter.

He gave an annoyed grunt, chucked aside his phone and swung his head over the edge of his bed, peering beneath. His mouth went dry as he stared at the electric cord hanging loosely on the floor, far away from the power point.

He sat up. 'What the fuck?'

He tried to unscrew the lightbulb, but it was too hot to touch. He tried the switch again. Still, nothing. Heart pounding, he slid to the other side of his bed, staring at it wide-eyed like it was about to grow legs and bite him.

There was a faint ding, and the light went out.

Panting, pulse hammering in his ears, he groped for his phone amidst the folds of his bedspread but couldn't find it. He looked up at the sound of a creak and froze. There was a figure, a silhouette in the darkness standing beside the lamp. He stared at it and it stared right back. He could hear it breathing, and the sound of it filled him with icy terror.

He dropped to the floor with a cry, lurched to his window and ripped open his curtains. Moonlight poured into his room, glancing against silvery hair and eyes and a face as pale as the moon itself. A face he knew.

'Julie,' he breathed.

She wore a long nightie, hair tumbling down her back. His heart thundered against his ribs. He broke out into a cold sweat. He could see straight through her, to his cupboard behind.

'You're a—you're a—'

He swallowed, shook his head. *Impossible. There is no such thing as ghosts.*

A strange iciness filled the room. His breath started to mist, and he shivered. She simply looked at him with that silvery gaze. Then she moved, a slow drift through his bed, her bottom half dissolving into the bedspread. His phone lit up as she passed through it, then darkened again.

Andrew pushed back against the window as she approached. She was too close, a wall of air against his face. He could smell her—a light, flowery perfume that tickled his nose.

‘Andrew,’ she whispered. She lifted a transparent hand, and Andrew banged the back of his head against the window as she brushed his cheek. A shiver ran down his spine. She dragged her fingers down his throat, his chest. Then she stopped—right at the level of his heart.

He shook his head. ‘No.’

She looked into his eyes. ‘Know me.’

And she plunged her hand into his chest, into his heart. He instinctively grabbed at her arms, only to seize empty air. He dropped hard to his knees, squirming and weeping and gasping at the pain as she twisted. It wasn’t a physical pain. Guilt, sadness, misery—he knew them, though he hadn’t felt them since he was a child, not since before his father left, before he had learnt to keep them way down deep and locked away. Then there was the love, a hot flood of feeling that made his heart ache, and he hated that most of all.

Tears flowed down his cheeks. ‘Let go!’ And she did. He dropped to all fours, panting, clutching at his chest. ‘What have you done to me?’

She didn’t answer.

He sat on his knees, wincing as a fresh flood of tears coursed down his cheeks. It was as though her hand was still plunged in his heart, twisting and twisting and twisting some more. He groaned and craned

his head back as he tried to stem the tears. It didn't work. The problem was in his chest, not his eyes.

He dropped his chin, intending to beg her forgiveness, to beg her to leave him alone, but she was gone.

Andrew stayed home the next day. There was no way he could go to school, not with the way he was: a wreck, weeping like a girl. He tried to smoke and drink the pain away, but it only dulled it to a throb. He rubbed at his chest, clutched at his stomach. He was so nauseated; he couldn't eat, even the whisky he could barely stomach. Was this really the way she had felt? How could anyone feel so much? Because he knew, he knew what she had done to him. *Know me*. She seemed to whisper it in his ear at every nasty throb, at every painful twist. *Know me before. Know me after. Know me*.

Why couldn't she have just killed him instead and be done with it?

He waited for her that night, in the darkness. At every creak, every whisper, he would stare into the night, terrified, hopeful. But she didn't return.

She didn't show the next night either, nor the next. To keep himself occupied, he mowed the lawn his mother kept pestering him about, cleaned the house, washed the dishes, anything to help keep his mind off the pain. But the days were nothing to the nights. He kept his lights off, hoping to see her again, but it only festered his thinking, making his guilt, his sadness, his misery, his need to see her again, so bad he curled up in a ball and wept himself to sleep.

It was a week before she finally reappeared. The light pinged on, then off again, and Andrew sat up. She was there, a silvery silhouette, just like before, and for the first time in days something other than pain filled his heart.

'You're back.'

She didn't respond. He slipped off his bed and dropped to his knees. 'I'm sorry. I'm really sorry, Jules. I didn't know you'd do that. I didn't mean for—' he took a breath—'please make me me again.'

She gazed down at him with her transparent eyes, and he almost lost hope. Then she gestured him to rise. He scrambled to his feet. She put her hands against his chest.

‘Thank you,’ he said, his breath misty, shivering in the sudden cold.

He sighed in relief as the pressure in his chest eased. Thoughts that had been eating at his mind vanished. He collapsed onto the bed. Smiling, he smoothed his hand down his chest, enjoying the feeling of nothing—well, *almost* nothing.

The burning sensation was still there deep in his heart, and now that he was free of despair, it was hotter than ever. He held out his arms to her. Her image wavered, as though she was considering. Andrew gasped as she fell into him. It was the most erotic, the most sensual, the most incredible feeling in the world. It was far beyond the physical. Their hearts touched, their minds were one. He could hear her thoughts, smell her all around him. More than that—he could almost taste her, feel her in his pores. He wrapped his arms around himself, as though he was embracing her. He shivered as hot come jetted into his pants.

He lay in a daze, eyes closed, panting, a wildfire burning a hole in his chest.

‘Julie?’ He opened his eyes and sat up.

She was gone.



EVERYBODY STARED, WHISPERING to each other, as Andrew made his way into the auditorium. Pictures of Julie, some framed, some tacked to the walls, some dangling from the ceiling, watched him pass, each one driving a pin into his heart. There were flowers everywhere, mostly red and pink, in vases or pots. They should have chosen daffodils or sunflowers; yellow was her favourite colour. Petals were strewn over the floor. Music played quietly in the background, and it was the

wrong music. Julie hated Casey Maree. She loved Mariah Carey. Didn't they know her at all?

He chose a spot at the back, well away from everyone. Andrew's old gang of friends looked back at him, then turned quickly to the front again. Andrew ignored them.

The memorial didn't even reach an hour; the teachers looked bored; kids were talking, even giggling. A waste of time.

At the end of the service Andrew stood in front of the stage, gazing at her pictures. He hadn't seen her for over a week, not since that night. Every night he sat waiting for her, hours ticking by, staring at his lamp in the darkness. He knew he was wasting his time. Somehow he knew she wasn't going to return, and yet it didn't stop him from hoping.

'Andrew, what are you still doing here? Class was in forty minutes ago.'

Andrew looked up. Mr Dooben: short, fat, bald patch, white fuzz above his ears, pale as a sheet. Andrew smiled, recalling how Julie liked to tease him: 'He reminds me of a giant marshmallow.' Mr Dooben frowned at him.

After three more nights of waiting, Andrew decided to act; if she wasn't going to come to him, then he would go to her.

It was a Thursday night when he kissed his mother on the cheek. 'Good night,' he said. 'Love you.'

She touched her cheek in surprise. 'Love you too.'

By midnight Renee finally went to bed and Andrew could sneak out the house without detection. He left dressed in only his thongs, boxers and singlet, swinging his keys around his finger. It was a new moon, and he used his phone to light his way, Julie's picture smiling up at him.

He switched on the engine of his Holden V8, put it in reverse and eased out of the drive. Twenty minutes later he arrived at Copper Cliff, though it felt like only a few minutes had passed.

Andrew stood at the cliff edge, hair and clothes whipping about in the wind. It was only fitting he should go the way Julie did. He briefly wondered how she must have felt standing here all alone, desolate and despairing. As for himself, he felt almost happy. *I'm going to see her again.*

He could barely see, so dark it was almost black. The waves thundered like a storm far below. There was the hiss of spray. A strong wind gusted, carrying the scent of the sea, and it reminded him of their time together playing in the waves. She had been so happy then.

He closed his eyes and took a breath.



In the Hall of the Mountain King

‘**Y**ou give those back, Peer!’ his aunt cried, waving her wooden spoon after him. ‘Or you’ll get it.’

Peer stuffed a muffin in his mouth as he fled into the woods. His aunt had been planning to put him on a diet for months, and for the last few days she had finally taken action. While his cousins and uncle ate pie and rabbit stew and soft cheese and all manner of sweets, all he’d been left with was cabbage soup with the occasional soggy green, and he was starving. What did she expect? Leaving a basket of muffins within his reach was asking for trouble.

When the house was at a distance, he plonked his fat arse amidst the leaves and snatched another muffin from the top of the pile. He missed home, but his mother and father were poor now and couldn’t afford to feed him. He sighed and took another bite.

He looked up as he ate. The mountain stretched into the darkening sky, clouds gathering around its heights like burnt marshmallows. The woods were filled with the sounds of crickets and frogs and the pounding of a nearby waterfall, while an eager owl hooted at the setting sun.

It wasn’t long before he scraped the bottom of the basket, his fingernails gathering the last crumbs. His shoulders slumped. He was eighteen in a year, and he couldn’t wait. Once he was an adult, he would move away, find himself an equally fat girlfriend who liked to cook and they would eat all the muffins they damn well pleased.

Peer sniffed and licked his lips, then looked up and sniffed again—somebody was cooking. He stood, closed his eyes, letting the scent gather in his nostrils—stew. It smelt like *stew*. Like Auntie's rabbit stew. What he wouldn't give for a bite. He glanced back towards the house, but the smell was coming from the opposite direction—from the mountain.

He hurried ahead, pushing through the brush, nose lifted. He picked up his pace. Night was approaching, and he didn't want to get caught out in the cold or lose his way in the darkness. He burst into a clearing and stopped. His mouth watered. The smell was thick now, and yet he was alone. There were only the trees and the mountain above. He looked around, confused. Where was it coming from? He searched the branches, the bushes, high and low. Then he came across a curtain of hanging vines. He pushed it aside, and *Eureka!*—an opening.

Wiping his mouth, Peer glanced over his shoulder, then crept inside. It was warm and bright. Flaming torches flickered in their sconces every few metres, illuminating his way and making him sweat more heavily than ever. It was a surprisingly large corridor, the walls so far apart he could hold out both his arms with only his fingertips touching either side. The ceiling was so high he had to crane his neck to see it. The path underfoot was worn smooth. He passed a couple of openings, one on his left, one on his right, but he ignored them; they were dark, and the smell was thickest ahead.

His ears pricked at the sound of a mad cackle. He paused, uncertain. Maybe he should go back. More laughter followed—many voices. His stomach growled, and he kept on. It sounded like they were having fun, maybe even celebrating. Maybe they would enjoy having someone extra for dinner.

Shortly, the corridor widened into an enormous cavern. He stifled a gasp and quickly hid behind a pinnacle of jagged rock. *Goblins*. Hundreds of them. And they were celebrating, just as he suspected. They

were lounging and chatting and laughing around a large vat. Billows of steam coiled towards the ceiling. Peer's appetite shrivelled to the size of a walnut. He swallowed a swell of muffin-tasting vomit. It wasn't rabbit he was smelling. He gazed in horror. There were bones with flapping tissue; disembodied heads with jagged stumps for necks; piles of arms and legs. There was even a backbone with the ribcage still attached dangling from a rock like a windchime. He swallowed and gasped. The goblins crunched and gnawed, sucked and chewed, tore at gristle and joints. He could hear their grunts and grumbles of pleasure even above the laughter, and it made his stomach turn.

A party of men had gone out camping about a week ago. They weren't due back for days—weren't due back at all by the looks of it now. Barely daring to breathe, he carefully backed away, trying to keep to the shadows.

He shrieked when a heavy hand thumped down on his shoulder, making his knees buckle. A goblin stood behind him, so enormous Peer was little bigger than a toddler against him. He was hideous, with great yellow eyes and leathery skin which sprouted long wiry hairs. There were tusks coming out of his mouth between broken yellow teeth, and they were grinning down at him eagerly. He wore only a disgusting loincloth to conceal his nakedness, and he stank like he had just stepped out of a sewer. Peer swallowed his muffins again.

The goblin's grin broadened, then he grabbed Peer by the scruff of the neck and hauled him into the centre of the cavern, bellowing his excitement.

'Looky what I 'ave.'

Hundreds of yellow eyes turned his way, and the chatter and laughter ceased. Peer quivered in his grasp. Something warm ran down his leg, and he realised he had just pissed himself.

What must have been the biggest, ugliest goblin of all rose from his seat. He wore a crown and clutched a golden sceptre. He was clearly the leader. Unlike the goblin holding Peer, he didn't have tusks but enor-

mous flapping ears that trailed down his barrel chest. He was covered in sores and blisters, and there seemed to be something growing out the side of his hip. Peer dared to look closer at it, and finally vomited, spattering chunks of muffin all over the cavern floor. *It had eyes.*

‘What is this?’ spoke the leader. ‘Did some food escape?’

‘No, my king.’ The goblin shook him so hard Peer blacked out a little. ‘Methinks it wandered in all its own.’

‘Did it now?’ The goblin king licked his swollen lips. ‘A fat one. Lucky us. Add it to the vat.’

Frozen with terror, Peer didn’t resist as the goblin dragged him to the simmering cauldron. Another goblin added more kindling, sending more smoke coiling into the ceiling and such a gruesome stench of cooking flesh into Peer’s face that it stuck in his nose and made his eyes water.

The goblin lifted him up, and Peer gazed down helplessly at the boiling, pink slop with its bones and blood and floating bits of hair and teeth. His bowels loosened.

‘Wait, Father, he’s mine!’ cried a voice. He felt himself lowered, and he breathed again. ‘You promised I could keep the next one.’

Peer looked over to see another goblin, female by the looks of her, tugging at the arm of the goblin king. She was no fair thing to look upon with her great drooping breasts, rolls of fat and hideous face, but at least she didn’t have anything growing out of her. She had long, straggly greyish hair but was bald at the top, and her smooth green crown shone in the firelight.

‘That I did,’ her father agreed. He sighed and smiled at his daughter, a grisly grin. ‘What I do for love. Fine. Take it. Schlen, give it to her.’

She snatched Peer from Schlen’s grasp and hugged him, crushing him into her enormous breasts. Peer coughed and gasped and spluttered. *Oh God, the smell.*

‘Thank you, Father,’ she shrieked. ‘I’ll take good care of him.’

‘You’d better because if it tries to escape, into the vat it goes.’

She was still hugging him as she skipped away.

‘We’re going to have lots of fun together,’ she said, her deep voice rumbling in her chest. At every step, his face rubbed up and down against her hard, leathery nipple. ‘My last human didn’t last long. He was naughty. But you won’t be naughty, will you?’

She stopped skipping and finally held him away. He gasped and choked, sucking in the air. Grinning, she gazed down at him with her yellow eyes and sat him atop a shelf which seemed to have been carved into the wall.

‘I’m going to call you TimTin,’ she said. ‘And you’re going to be mine forever.’

His head spun. It was clearly her room: stone bed with a filthy pink quilt, a rotting torn rug on the floor, a blazing fire in a stone hearth, and dolls, dolls everywhere. He turned to the doll on his right and almost shouted. It wasn’t a doll, it was a man. It might have been wearing a dress cut to size from a filthy loincloth, but it was a man nonetheless. Peer slowly reached out a trembling hand and touched him. He was as hard as stone—petrified, a look of utter terror on his face. It was the same on his left. He swallowed. It was the same with all of them.

Peer could still hear the other goblins continuing with their celebrations in the distance as she combed out her hair, great sheets of it falling to the floor. Then she applied what looked like lipstick. It was a bloody red. She smacked her lips and grinned.

‘Am I pretty?’ she said.

Peer nodded quickly.

Giggling, she picked him up, and together they spun around the room. Then she kissed him on the head and lay down on her bed, Peer on top of her.

‘Now,’ she said, putting her hands behind her head and arching her back. There was flesh everywhere: sagging breasts in front, a mound of fat behind, wobbling thighs. ‘Suck my nipple.’

‘Wh—what?’

‘I said suck my nipple.’

‘I—I—’

‘Suck me, or I’ll send you to my father.’

Her breasts were sagging over the sides, pooling in puddles of flesh. Her nipples were dark and the size of dinner plates and sprouted more of those long, wiry hairs. Trying not to cry, he gathered over her left breast and took it in his mouth.

‘Deeper,’ she moaned.

He closed his eyes with a whimper. She tasted like sick and her nipple grated against his tongue. She began to purr.

‘Good. That’s enough,’ she breathed. ‘Now—’ she spread her legs and lifted her loincloth—‘pleasure me.’

Peer stared. He had never been with a girl before, but he had learnt about the female body at school. There was supposed to be a clitoris, but he wasn’t sure what it looked like and whether she even had one. He looked away, wincing, as he pushed aside the flesh on her thighs. He felt around for a moment, found her labia, gagged at the wetness. *There*, he thought—engorged and hard and twice the size of his thumb.

She moaned as he masturbated her.

‘Harder,’ she said.

There is no God, he thought as he rubbed harder and harder, his hand now clamped between her thighs as she squirmed in ecstasy. He pressed his other hand to his mouth, trying not to be sick. Her breathing turned heavy. She started to growl. She thrust against him, hands clenching the pink quilt, thighs and belly and breasts wobbling. Then he felt her spasm, and it was over. She sagged into her bed, panting. Peer was panting too as he pulled away a hand covered in goop. He broke out in a cold sweat and shivered.

‘You shall sleep with me tonight,’ she said. ‘And we shall sleep like lovers.’

She rolled onto her side and squashed his face into her breasts.

Peer didn't move, listening as her snores turned long and even and the din outside lessened to babble, then murmuring, then silence. The fire in the hearth crackled and snapped as it steadily died. It grew cold, even when pressed up against the goblin's hot flesh.

Very slowly, carefully, he eased out of her grasp. He slid to the floor. She hadn't moved. He backed out of her room and had almost reached the doorway when he tripped and stumbled. He gripped onto the shelf to steady himself. One of her damn dolls. Its eyes were wide, its mouth agape in a silent scream. He froze as she murmured something and rolled over. His shoulders sagged in relief. She was still asleep, eyes closed, her arms clasped around herself, hugging a body that wasn't there.

He snuck out the door, keeping to the shadows as best he could. His feet scuffed against the smooth stone, sending rocks skittering about. The torches along the corridor were low now, some burnt out, others wavering in the breeze as he passed. Several corridors split off from his, and he could only hope she hadn't taken any turns.

It was with terror and relief and exhaustion that he reached the immense cavern. There were goblins everywhere, splayed out along the floor, snoring and grunting and snorting, concealing his gasping breaths. The king was slumped in his stone throne, crown askew, head in his hand, snoring the loudest.

The corridor leading home was ahead. But it would be no easy feat to get to. He grimaced; there was no clear path, goblins strewed everywhere. He would have to creep between them. He swallowed, took a breath and started ahead.

The goblins were restless sleepers: rolling over, kicking out, hollering. Once, a goblin grabbed his ankle, and Peer almost wet himself again, but the goblin's eyes were closed, and he released him moments later before turning over with a grumble. Several times he had to step over a sleeping goblin because they were pressed so close together there was no way to go around.

By the time he reached the centre of the cavern, he was dizzy and sweating. His eyes strained so hard against the flickering fires that tears fell onto goblin backs and hands and faces. A goblin snuffled and wrinkled his hideous brow when one dropped onto his nose.

Peer ducked to the floor at the sound of a great bellow. ‘TimTin!’

He curled into a ball as the goblins around him stirred from sleep.

‘TimTin,’ came another bellow.

The cavern seemed to shake around him as they hefted their great bodies from the floor. Rocks and debris clattered from the ceiling. He peered up fearfully between his arms, keeping himself in a tight ball; none of them had noticed him yet.

The female goblin came wailing into the cavern. ‘Father!’

‘What is the meaning of this, Kezna?’ the king snapped.

‘My human—he’s disappeared.’

‘What! Search the mountain,’ the goblin king roared. ‘*It must not escape.*’

Pandemonium ensued as goblins charged around the cavern, howling their outrage, their great feet pounding against the floor. It was like rolling thunder, and it made Peer’s whole body vibrate. An enormous rock dislodged from the ceiling and crushed two of them with an ear-splitting crack. Blood and debris and bits of bone flew in all directions. More rock rained down as the cavern shook. A large, hairy foot slapped down right beside his head. Peer scrambled to a crouch. He had to get out or be crushed himself.

He weaved and wound his way through waddling, fat legs. Loincloths brushed at his head, feet thudded around him. He was accidentally kicked and sent skidding across the floor.

‘There!’ roared the goblin who kicked him. ‘I found it.’

‘CATCH IT.’

‘SEIZE IT.’

‘KILL IT.’

A goblin made a snatch for him, but Peer dodged him, keeping low. The cavern groaned, more rock smashed, dust billowed, as the goblins chased him down. Peer was screaming as he dodged snatching fingers, swerved around kicking legs. One swung a metal-studded club directly at his face. He dropped and rolled, tripping over a goblin who knocked over several of his comrades like bowling pins. They crashed to the floor, their successive heavy thuds making the cavern groan again.

‘BREAK ITS BONES.’

‘SPLIT ITS SKULL.’

The floor began to shake. More rocks fell. Peer coughed and spluttered as a haze of dust fell around him. He locked eyes on his goal. The tunnel leading out was just ahead. *He was almost free.*

‘SKIN IT.’

‘BITE IT.’

‘SHRED IT.’

He reached the tunnel, and with every ounce of strength he had left in him charged for the exit—and freedom. He could hear the goblins thundering after him. He glanced behind. They were making chase in a mad crush. Their shoulders crashed through the walls. They swung their clubs, threw their fists, sending more rock flying. Two fell and were trampled beneath. Another smaller goblin was tossed in the air and sailed back over their heads.

Peer’s heart was pounding so hard he thought it would burst from his chest. Tears streamed down his cheeks. His throat ached, his lungs were on fire and his legs were beyond pain. The tunnel shuddered, and he almost crashed into the wall to his left as he overbalanced. He glanced up in horror as the ceiling slumped. Dust and bits of rock fell in a shower. *The cave was about to collapse.*

The goblins bellowed in fear as they too realised the danger. They kept running, but now they were running for survival.

Then leaves brushed around him, sunlight glared and Peer’s shoes hit soft ground. He was outside. He hadn’t taken a few steps when the

earth shuddered, and he was knocked off his feet. Squinting, he looked up in horror as the side of the mountain slumped, then slipped. He leapt to his feet and ran again as an avalanche of earth and uprooted trees and rock came tumbling down. A goblin made it outside. He belled in triumph, but his relief was short-lived when he looked up and realised his fate moments before he was crushed beneath a flood of debris. Rocks and branches flew, more debris came raining down. Peer took cover amidst the trees, dropped to the ground and covered his head. Branches snapped, there were several heavy thuds, a roar as more earth shifted, a hiss of dust, then silence.

Peer's ears rang in the quiet. Everything was so still he could have believed he was dead. It was several minutes before he dared look up, and much longer still before he got the courage to return to the cave entrance. He slumped against a tree, legs buckling. Buried beneath a wall of earth and shattered rock, the Hall of the Mountain King was no more. His nightmare was over.

He was in a daze on his journey home. He stumbled and lurched, his legs like wooden pegs, so parched he couldn't swallow. Then the trees peeled away, and the house came into view, and he saw his uncle and auntie and cousins standing outside, their hands lifted against the glare as they viewed the spectacle. He looked behind him. The haze of dust was still settling, but he could see that a chunk of the mountain was gone.

'Peer!' Anya, his youngest cousin suddenly squealed, pointing at him.

'Peer!'

'Peer, where have you been?'

And they all rushed over.

He was peppered with questions, hugged and kissed by his auntie, tugged at by his younger cousins, frowned at by his uncle.

'Please,' Peer said, tripping on his feet. 'I'm exhausted.'

'And you stink,' his older cousin said. 'You smell like sh—'

‘Lucas,’ his auntie warned. Wrinkling her nose, she smiled at Peer. ‘Of course sweetie, but I suggest you bathe first.’

Peer did, and when he was done, he slept all day, not waking until after darkness.

They were all sitting at the dining table, waiting for him. The table was set, and his auntie was busy in the kitchen—dinner was coming. Peer pressed a hand to his belly. He couldn’t wait. He hadn’t eaten in almost a day.

They all stared at him.

‘So,’ Lucas said finally, ‘are you going to tell us what happened?’

At the sight of his younger cousins watching him eagerly, Peer pursed his lips. ‘Maybe later. It’s not a tale for kids.’

Howls of protest followed.

‘That’s not fair!’

‘I’m almost seven!’

Anya gazed at him, tears in her eyes.

‘That’s enough,’ his uncle said. ‘Leave him be.’

‘All right, everyone,’ his auntie called, carrying a steaming pot into the room. Her hair was in a frizz, her apron covered in stains, but she was smiling. ‘Dinner is ready.’

Peer rubbed his hands together. It looked considerably more than his usual soup and greens.

His auntie grinned at him as she lifted the lid. ‘Your favourite.’

Rabbit stew.

Peer swallowed a surge of vomit. He began to shake. Sweat prickled his brow. *That smell.* The smell of cooking flesh, of petrified men and sagging breasts, of swinging clubs and collapsing mountains—of death and fear.

He watched in a daze as his auntie ladled several spoonfuls into his bowl. It was pink too, just like the vat.

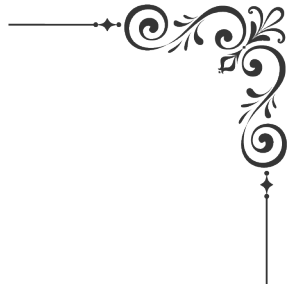
Peer wiped his forehead, took a deep breath and exhaled as his auntie ladled out bowls around the rest of the table.

When she was done, she sat and looked at his dish with a frown. ‘You’re not eating. Something wrong?’

‘I’m really sorry, Auntie.’ He gave her a quivering smile and gently pushed the dish away. ‘It looks delicious, but I—I guess I’m not as hungry as I thought.’



NOTE TO THE READER. This story is based very loosely on Henrik Ibsen’s scene six, act 2 of his 1867 play, Peer Gynt, and was inspired by Edvard Grieg’s classic song, In the Hall of the Mountain King, both of which are public domain.



The Diablon

Carmella hurried up the rocky slope, scratched and bleeding and gasping for breath. Her coat snagged on a bush, and she whipped it free with a grunt. She stumbled and collapsed to her knees. The earth spun beneath her, the sky whirled. She had been on the run for over a day, had barely drunk, hadn't eaten and sleep was a distant memory. She was so exhausted, she almost contemplated giving up.

There came a distant shout, and she scrambled to her feet and clawed ahead. No, they could not catch her. If they did, they would take what they wanted then murder her. Humans were like that—violent, insatiable, completely without conscience.

The slope became steeper the further she climbed the mountain. She looked behind her. The humans were very close now, following in a trail of shining chainmail and glinting swords, gaining on her bit by bit.

'I can see her!' one of them shouted, waving his arm. 'Just there. Up ahead.'

Carmella had told herself she wouldn't cry at the end, but against her will the tears began to flow—tears of frustration and rage and sadness. They had murdered her alpha—her mate and best friend. She winced—and her child.

She sagged to the ground, face in the dirt. What did she have to live for?

A gust of wind blew through her hair. She looked up in surprise, nose lifted to the air. Hope flared in her heart. She couldn't believe

it. There was another Diablon—an alpha, and he was close. She could smell it.

It wasn't over yet.

She looked behind her again. They were so close now she could smell their sweat, hear them grunt and curse as they struggled. She locked eyes with the man in front and saw his determination, his hate, his greed.

Carmella drove herself to her feet and pounded the earth. Up ahead was a rock face composed of dips and cracks and bulges—plenty of handholds. She jumped, gripped onto an outjutting rock and heaved herself up with a grunt.

She was an excellent climber, but it proved useless when an arrow whizzed close to her ear and chipped into the rock beside her. She froze, heart thundering in her chest.

'Come down from there,' a voice said smugly. 'We have you in our sights.'

'You need me alive,' she gasped. 'My tail is worthless dead.'

'True, but we can wack an arrow in your arse, and it wouldn't make a difference.'

Carmella gritted her teeth and spat into the rock, 'Come and get me then.'

'Sir Cheston, her arse is at your disposal.'

'All right!' She inched back down.

She dropped to her feet. There were six knights with several more still climbing the slope, all kitted up in their chainmail. Four grasped swords, two held bows, their arrows notched and pointed at her face. She glared at each in turn. Which one had murdered her mate, slaughtered her baby?

The leader stood at the forefront. He wore an iron helm with an eagle carved into its nose, its wings outspread across his brow. 'On your knees, and if you try anything, I'll slide my sword right through your devil's heart.'

She obeyed.

He nodded at his men. 'Sir Wensley, Sir Dutton, take her.'

Hands tied at her back, Carmella stumbled down the slope in the middle of a trail of men, five at the front, six at the rear. They had tied a rope around her waist and coat, binding her tail securely to her back. And yet, the man directly behind her kept his distance, sword at the ready. For a female Diablon, her tail was her best defence. It was deadly, its tip so sharp it could spill a man's guts.

It was evening by the time they reached the camp.

Carmella slumped to the ground. 'Water.'

'Water?' Sir Dal, the head knight, sneered. 'I thought you only drank the blood of innocent children.'

'Fine,' she said. 'I'll have your oldest then like you took mine.'

He narrowed his eyes. 'Yours was not innocent.' He looked to his men. 'Someone give her water.'

She drank, and afterwards they tied her to a tree, her hands still tied at her back. She watched as the men gathered around the fire. Sir Dal had removed his helm, revealing a mane of black hair. A long, jagged scar tracked from his right eye, across his nose, to the left corner of his mouth. She hoped it had hurt and that whichever alpha did it had got away.

She glanced across the landscape. Darkness had fully descended, and she would have seen clearly if not for the flickering fire burning at her night vision. It was a mostly barren landscape, composed of bushes, squat hardy trees, dried creek beds and a great expanse of waving grass. There was nowhere for the alpha to hide, except within the darkness. Luckily it was a moonless night, the clouds thick above.

'What are you looking at?' one of the older knights spat at her. 'Thinking of escape?'

The others watched on quietly as he got to his feet. They were eating dinner: gnawing on gristle, sucking at the bone marrow of the boar they had killed. Someone had sawed off its head and sat it on a rock,

blood oozing in a puddle around it. Its dark eyes gazed at her through the flames, tusks glinting in the light. Away from the fire, the night was black. Where was that alpha?

The older knight approached her. He was tall and heavily muscled; thick grey stubble speckled his chin.

‘Careful,’ Sir Dal said.

He crouched in front of her, picked up a trail of her long red hair and ran it through his fingers. ‘A beautiful one, this one—for a monster.’ He took her chin and looked into her eyes. ‘Green—pretty.’

‘Sir Clinton,’ Sir Dal warned.

Sir Clinton looked at him. ‘Haven’t you ever?’

‘Haven’t I ever what?’

‘You know,’ he thrust his hips, ‘fucked one.’ He looked at Carmella and licked his lips. ‘I think it would be *unforgettable*.’

‘Don’t even think of it,’ Sir Dal said. ‘I have seen a man lose his manhood to one of them.’

Sir Clinton laughed. ‘Clearly, he was doing it wrong.’

‘No,’ Sir Dal commanded, eyes flashing against the flames. ‘You might have been in charge in your own province, but this is Lord Merek’s land, and I am in command so you will follow my orders.’

The older man gritted his teeth. He stood, glared at Sir Dal and the circle of watching knights, then stalked away.

Diablons usually didn’t sleep at night. They were nocturnal, but Carmella hadn’t slept for over twenty-four hours, and she was sleeping now, so deeply she didn’t notice Sir Clinton tugging at her britches until they were at her ankles. She opened her eyes, but before she could make a sound, he stuffed some disgusting linen in her mouth and bound it with cord. She thrashed and grunted, kicked her legs at the ground, at him, until he slapped her hard in the face. Stars burst in her eyes.

He looked around, but the other knights hadn’t stirred. He went to the back of the tree, untied the rope and dragged her into the dark-

ness where the sputtering firelight couldn't reach her. Straddling her, he reached under her tunic and rubbed her breasts. He grunted, then grinned as he pinched her nipples. Carmella thrashed against him, screamed against her gag. She squirmed and wriggled as she tried to free her hands, but they were bound tightly behind her back.

He leant over and sucked at her breast, tongue fondling her nipple, then reached between her legs, dragging his fingertips along her cleft.

He grunted in surprise and delight. 'Eager for it, are we?'

Carmella rolled her eyes as she scanned her surroundings. Where was that alpha? His musk was so thick it made her dizzy, and her body was responding. Pinning her between his legs, Sir Clinton turned to his britches. He untied them and took out his cock. It was hard and red as he smoothed it between his hands. Carmella pushed her mouth against her gag. If she could expose her teeth, she could rip out his throat. If not that, then at least she could scream and get the attention of the others. She'd still die, but at least she wouldn't be raped.

'Ready?' he said in a husky voice.

He lowered himself on top of her, greasy hair falling around her, his breath hot against her cheek. Carmella pushed her tongue against her gag, felt it shift, felt it shift a little more. He thrust into her.

Fool.

'Clinton,' she said.

He was pounding into her as he looked up without thinking, eyes glazed over. She lunged and sank her teeth into his neck. He screamed as she tore a chunk out of him. Blood gushed all over her cloak and tunic, down his front as he clutched at his throat uselessly, gasping and choking. She swallowed, licked her lips. It had been so long since she had eaten and it tasted so good. She kicked him away and struggled to her feet, her hands still bound, but before she could take more than a few steps, the others caught up with her, tackling her to the ground.

'Is her tail still bound!' called Sir Dal.

Someone yanked at the rope at her waist. 'Yes.'

‘Take her back to camp. Let’s get this done now.’

Carmella screamed into the night, hopeful the alpha would hear as they dragged her between them, her face and tunic and the ends of her hair wet with blood. Sir Clinton was spasming on the ground, eyes wide, the blood that was once gushing from his throat, now weeping. Sir Dal’s sword thudded into the earth, parting Sir Clinton’s head from his body.

They threw her onto the stump they had used to carve up the boar and crushed her into it until her cheek stuck against the grain. Someone lifted up her coat, exposing her rump to the cool air.

‘All right, hand me the hatchet,’ Sir Dal said. ‘Will somebody shut her screaming up?’

Another gag was shoved into her mouth.

‘I forbid it, Sir Dal,’ somebody said. ‘You cut it off now, and it’ll dry out and be half worthless. We’ll go home poor men.’

‘Don’t you think I know that?’ Sir Dal snarled. ‘But she’s proven herself too dangerous. It’ll be days before we get back to Barthum. I won’t risk it.’

‘But she’s just a female.’

‘Wherever there’s a female, there’s an alpha.’

‘We’ve killed her alpha.’

As if to prove them wrong, an enormous bellow echoed from somewhere in the distance. Carmella thrashed in the men’s grip, screaming against her gag. *Yes!* The weight eased off her and Carmella seized her chance, thrusting her back up and throwing her captor to the ground. She spat out the gag.

‘Hold her down!’

More weight flattened her onto the stump until she could barely breathe. There was another enormous bellow, closer this time. Swords unsheathed from all directions.

‘Keep together!’ Sir Dal cried.

They stood around her, a wall of backs.

'We should release her and flee,' somebody cried. 'There's not enough men.'

'We release her, we die.' Sir Dal said.

'And if we keep her we die!'

Footsteps thudded against the ground as someone dashed away. More followed. They were the smart ones.

'Hold together!'

Carmella's heart thundered. It had suddenly turned quiet, but she could smell the alpha's presence like he was right beside her. There was a rustle, a thump, then someone screamed, and one of the backs standing around her vanished. The men cried out. Arrows whizzed in the air. A sword hit the earth with a thud. Another back vanished, followed by another. Then the night filled with cries and pounding footsteps as the rest fled, all but Sir Dal who was still holding her against the stump.

She could feel him tremble against her, heard him suck in a shuddering breath. A low growl vibrated in the air, and the hairs stood on Carmella's arms, not in fear but in anticipation. He finally released her, and she stood beside the—*her* alpha.

Sir Dal gazed up at him, hand on the hilt of his sword, not knowing what to do. There was nothing he could do. Carmella smiled as her alpha charged, and the night exploded with screaming.



Silver Phoenix

Big Cliff's hooves pounded the earth beneath her as she fled. Christine looked over her shoulder, but they were still chasing her. She kicked Big Cliff hard in the flanks. He snorted and shook his beautiful mane but could go no faster. He was a large horse, built for strength not speed.

She looked behind her again. They were closer now, close enough she could identify Prince Randolph amongst his score of men, hair whipped back, sword at his hip, bent low over his horse's neck.

He was determined, Christine couldn't deny him that.

Ahead there was nowhere to hide, all rolling fields and blue sky. There was a copse of trees to the east, but that was no good, not with Big Cliff's size.

They were closing in, the sound of pounding hooves loud in her ears. Then a hand grabbed onto her bridle from the left, another tore the reins out of her grasp from her right, and Christine clutched onto Big Cliff's neck as he reared up with a neigh before his hooves hit the ground again with a heavy thud.

'Lady Christine.' Prince Randolph dropped from his mount, his tunic's golden buttons blazing in the sunlight. He grabbed onto her bridle and smiled up at her. She tried to kick out, but the knight next to him seized onto her ankle so tightly she had to stifle a gasp. 'Why must we play these games?'

'They're no games to me,' she said.

'Come down. Join me. Let's stop this silly fighting.'

When she refused, he seized her around the waist and pulled her into his arms. She struggled against him, but he merely laughed and held her tightly. Her arms pinned to her sides and surrounded by his knights, Christine could do nothing but let him kiss her.

He sniffed at her hair, sighed. 'You have no idea how I ache for our wedding night.'

'You have no idea how much I loathe the thought.'

He laughed again and kissed her on the nose, then turned to his knights. 'Let's be off.'

He hoisted her onto his grey stallion and sat heavily behind her, arms on either side of her as he gripped the reins. He turned the horse around and nudged it into a trot. She could see Castle Greyton, a dark smudge in the distance. She loved and hated the place, home to both her greatest love and her greatest enemy.

Prince Randolph kicked his horse, and they galloped towards it.



PRINCE RANDOLPH WAS no fool. Though he looked the part of a pompous prince, he was also a knight, skilled with the sword and trained to sniff out any danger.

He was sniffing now, and it stank. The church was overflowing with people: the pews, the aisles, the balconies upstairs, the steps outside, the rest spilling out into the courtyard beyond, all waiting to view a royal wedding.

He looked hard at his groomsmen: friends Sir Wentworth and Prince Valden of York. Could it be one of them? Then he looked at his best man, his brother Prince Christian, who smiled at him. Younger by two years, he was next in line to the throne. Prince Randolph loved his brother, and he thought his brother loved him, but was he wrong? Could it be he who was conspiring against him?

He glanced over at the bridesmaids and dismissed them. His ugly, big-jawed sister sat with her husband, Prince Hannagan, in the front

pew below. Beside them were his parents, the king and queen. He dismissed them too. His eyes trailed over the crowd of lords and ladies, princes and princess, barons and dukes and knights. Bright sunlight coursed through the stained-glass windows above, shining on their hair and clothes. It could be anyone. He locked eyes with Sir Henry standing in the shadows below. He too had been scanning the crowd carefully. His best knight dipped his head at him, hand on his sword, ever watchful.

The news that someone had been conspiring to disrupt his wedding was both a shock and unsurprising. If that made any sense. It was not unusual for someone to attempt to unseat him. He wasn't the most liked prince in the world. But for someone to steal his bride—

He shook his head. Who would be stupid or mad enough to risk their head for love? Political gain, yes. Riches and ransom, of course. But for love? Ludicrous. Nevertheless, he kept a wary eye. A crazy foe could be just as dangerous as a sane one.

The procession began. Trumpets sounded, the organ played and the crowd stood as the bride entered. Her arm hooked in her brothers, she glided down the aisle, her long sweeping dress gathering the petals strewn along the carpet. His attention strayed as he focused on Christine. She might not have been of the purest royal stock, but there was no doubting her loveliness.

Her brother gave her away with a bow, and she stood before him, small and quivering. He frowned. She had better not be crying behind her veil. The crowd sat, and the bishop's deep voice lifted to the rooftop.

Prince Randolph listened, repeated the Bishop's words, one eye on his bride, the other on the crowd. But nobody stirred. Perhaps his source had been wrong, or perhaps the traitor had backed out. He smiled. *Coward.*

They exchanged rings and when it was time to kiss, he lifted her veil. She hadn't been crying. In fact, she was cold and stern, her eyes hard. Her lips were like ice, and he began to wonder whether he mis-

judged his little princess. She was only young, and he had thought her innocent, but there was something behind her eyes that hadn't been there before. Perhaps she had finally resolved herself to the inevitable.

The deed was done, and they were wedded. Dancing and dinner and celebrations followed, but Prince Randolph was anxious for only one thing—his bedchambers.

It was late into the night when they finally ascended the stairs, Prince Randolph buzzing with wine, his bride's little hand tight in his grasp. Against tradition, he had dismissed her maids and his manservants, neither needing nor desiring assistance. He could manage quite all right on his own, he was sure. The closest he allowed anyone to witness their lovemaking was outside his doors, where he posted three guards, including Sir Henry.

The three knights stood aside as the couple entered. He closed the doors, and they were finally alone. His chambers were lavish: large fireplace with a crackling fire, glowing candelabras, walls covered in portraits from floor to ceiling of family members long dead. Everything was trimmed in gold. The furniture was only the best—built of mahogany and great oak, crafted by the greatest cabinet maker on the West Side. Then there was his bed—four-poster and fit for a king.

He took her chin, smiled and kissed her. She was looking pale now and trembled in his arms, but she still had that hard look in her eye.

'So, you've come to your senses,' he said when she didn't resist. 'Good. There's no point in fighting. We're wedded now, and you'll commit to your wifely duties.'

Her hair had been tucked into an elegant bun for the wedding. He unpinned it, and long, bronze lengths flowed down her breast. He brushed some aside and kissed her neck. She smelt of lavender and soap, and her skin was so soft. He turned to her gown. It was billowing and puffy, and he fought to open it—all laces and buttons and ties.

'You women are ridiculous.'

Maybe he should have kept a maid after all. She was panting, breaths light against his throat, as he struggled and cursed. Partway down, he'd had enough. He reached into his boot and took out his knife. She gasped as he sliced open her dress. It slid to the ground in a heavy heap, revealing the shift underneath. No loss. It was ugly anyway.

He smiled hungrily. Now he could see her properly: slim hips, full breasts, long graceful neck, flawless smooth skin. She was blushing now and trembling harder. He dropped his knife and brushed the sleeves from her shoulders so the shift slithered to the floor in a shimmering puddle.

He whistled under his breath. His manhood throbbed and swelled. She had perfect, brown nipples which puckered and hardened as he pinched them. His mouth watered. Then he reached between her legs. She sucked in a breath but didn't pull away.

He smoothed her wetness between his fingers. 'I thought you said you'd loathe this night.'

Looking at her feet, she didn't answer, her bronze hair falling over her face in a soft curtain. She was having trouble with her nakedness: folding her arms over breasts, placing her hands over her brown thatch before dropping her arms to her sides again, hands twitching.

'No need to be nervous,' he whispered, taking her chin and forcing her to look at him. For a moment, her big brown eyes were filled with fear, then they iced over. She stiffened as he dragged his finger down her arm. 'I'll be gentle if you don't try me.'

She gasped as he lifted her into his arms. He lowered her onto the bed, then began shedding his clothes. His attire wasn't much better than hers: heavy velvet and voluminous cotton, stiff collars and buttoned cuffs, layers of pointlessness. His sword thudded to the floor, something ripped, buttons popped off, his boots flew across the room. Then he was naked and as hard as iron between his legs. He looked down at her lying on his bed, her hair splayed out, her legs tight together and angled slightly to the side so he could see the curve of her

rump; the light from the candelabra above glistened against her supple breasts. He gripped onto his length with a wince when it gave a hard throb.

He crawled over her. 'Open up.'

She did, slowly and with a whimper. He kissed her, grabbed her breast. Her eyes bulged as he prodded his penis against her opening. He nudged and pushed deep inside. She cried out, he felt something pop inside her, then he tilted his head back as cold steel pressed against his throat.

'Release her.'

He raised his hands in surrender and slowly slipped off her. Christine scrambled to her feet, clutching the sheet to her chest. A hand grabbed his shoulder; the blade pressed hard against his throat until he felt a sting. He raised his hands higher.

'Are you such a coward as to kill a man while his back is turned?' Prince Randolph said. 'Might I not at least see my murderer before I die?'

There was a moment's hesitation, then the blade released, and he turned around. He dropped his hands, stunned. Then he laughed, a great chortle that echoed around his enormous room.

'You're *kidding*.' He glanced at Christine who was glaring at him, then turned back to his sister and laughed some more.

'Stop laughing,' she said, gripping the knife tighter, ugly face blazing red.

She had braided her hair and knotted it at the back of her head. She wore men's clothes: tunic and britches and dusty boots. His eyes flicked to the sword at her hip. He immediately recognised it. Its silver sheath was engraved with a phoenix—their family's insignia, his own sword. He used to practice with it every day as a man almost grown. He could nearly feel the pommel pressing into his palm. Light and sharp, its balance unequalled, it was perfect for a woman—*if* she knew how to use it.

He backed away, still laughing, teasing her until her face became as red as her hair.

‘I said stop laughing!’ she cried.

Christine went to Emily’s side and slipped her hand into hers, sheet wrapped around her. They looked at each other in that way, and he silenced. Blood rushed into his face.

‘This is obscene, a travesty against God,’ he spat. ‘Both of you will go to hell.’

‘I have no fear of hell, brother. I’ve lived it every day, ever since Mother and Father saw fit to hand me over to that pig Hannigan.’ She gave Christine the dagger and unsheathed her—*his* sword. ‘Now you too can see what hell’s like, along with my dear husband.’

They stared at each other. The light from the candelabras flickered against their faces. Then she charged. Randolph dropped to the floor, rolled and seized his sword, still sheathed. Emily slashed at his face, but he blocked her. She slashed again. He rolled away, the sword thudding against the floor behind him, and leapt to his feet. He unsheathed his sword, and they clashed, steel upon steel. For a moment, they held against each other’s might, but he was stronger, and with a shove, sent her stumbling back. Now it was he who was slashing and she who was backing away. She blocked every thrust, every slice, every jab. She was good, but not nearly good enough. He grinned when he saw the panic flash across her face.

She managed a thrust at his belly, but he blocked it hard and swept the sword out of her grasp. It skidded across the floor. She backed into the wall, chin raised as he pressed the tip of his sword to her throat.

‘Dear Sister, how I love you, even now.’ He tightened his jaw as he prepared himself for the kill. ‘But you’ve messed with the wrong brother.’

He dropped his sword with a yelp as a sudden, sharp agony ripped through his right side. He turned around. ‘Christine.’

She was glaring at him, ashen-faced but determined, bloodied dagger poised in the air. He looked down at the gaping wound and pressed his hand against it. It was agonising but not fatal. He looked up, sneered, then charged with a roar. She stabbed at him, but he dodged and seized her wrist, crushing it in his grip until she dropped the knife with a cry.

Fire tore through his back, through his stomach, and he released her with a scream. He grabbed at his belly, the tip of a sword poking out between his fingers. It pulled back, and blood gushed in his hands. He staggered, dropped to his knees. He stared at the blood trickling through his fingers, warm and dark and sticky. He looked up as a shadow fell across him. His sister stood before him, lips pressed together in a hard, white line, his bloodied Silver Phoenix hanging loosely in her grasp.

He tried to say something, but his mind wouldn't obey. Blood filled his mouth. He slumped onto his side, clutching himself as wave upon wave of agony coursed through his body. He choked and spluttered as blood poured from his mouth. Vaguely, he saw the women flee his room, their footsteps thudding against the floor. He curled into a ball, began to shiver, soiled himself. He stared at Christine's dress, his eyes following its ridiculous creases and puffs as the room faded, grew dim, then finally blackened.



CHRISTINE HASTILY PULLED on her shift before exiting the room, gripping tightly onto Emily's hand as they stepped over the guards at the door. Sir Henry stared up at her with vacant eyes, the side of his head bloodied and sunken. She looked away and swallowed a swell of vomit.

'How did you—?'

'One of the few advantages of being a woman—everyone underestimates you. Quickly, we must move.'

Christine followed, tensing at every corner, sure they would run into someone. But having grown up in Castle Greyton, Emily knew every secret corridor, every shortcut, every creaking step, and they fled the castle without detection.

Their mounts were waiting for them. A warm breeze gusted through Christine's shift. Moonlight glanced on the silver sword at Emily's hip.

'You got Big Cliff,' Christine said, tears in her throat as she petted him on the nose. He snuffled against her hand.

'Of course. I know how much you love him.' Christine wiped at her cheeks and pulled Emily into a hug. Emily smiled and kissed her. 'Come. There's no time to lose.'

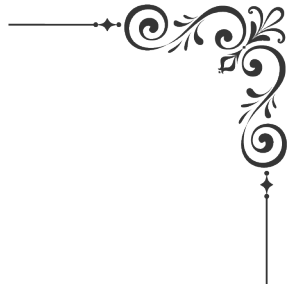
Emily threw Christine a cloak.

Their mounts trotted sedately as they passed beneath the portcullis. Christine tensed and drew her hood but nobody stopped them, and the gate didn't come crashing down. Clearly, Prince Randolph hadn't been discovered yet.

The castle was at a distance when the horns finally sounded. As they kicked their mounts into a gallop, clouds gathered over the horizon. Christine glanced behind her, fear clutching her heart. The odds were against them. They would surely be caught, if not in the following days, then in the weeks or months or years to come. It would become clear who killed Prince Randolph, and the king would be vengeful. He would never let them get away. Not even his own daughter.

She locked eyes with Emily, who smiled. Her heart swelled. Then she glanced at Emily's sword, and her fear turned to determination. If death were to be their fate, then they would be like the phoenix—die and start over as something greater. There were powers in this world she didn't understand, forces beyond comprehension. Nothing would stand in the way of their love. Not the king, not even God. She would find a solution.

She spurred Big Cliff on.



Missy

‘**W**hat the hell do you think you’re staring at?’
John looked up with a start. ‘Uh—no—no—nothing.’

‘Nothing is it?’ Michael sneered, towering over him. He was massive for fifteen: six-foot, broad-shouldered, fingers like sausages. ‘Doesn’t look like nothing. It *looks* like you’re staring at my girl.’

John swallowed. Sweat broke out on his brow. He glanced over at Brook. She was standing at the bubbler, chatting and laughing and flicking her long, blonde hair back over her shoulders.

Michael slapped his hand hard onto the bench. ‘I said, stop staring.’

He grabbed John’s shirt and yanked him up. Everyone was watching now, Brook too, the lunch area deadly silent. Michael dragged him over to the bins by the shirt, John clutching at his big fist as he stumbled over his feet.

‘No, no, no,’ he gasped. Michael hoisted him up with a grunt and slammed him into a bin. ‘Urrgghh.’

He was sitting in something moist. He lifted his hands, brown muck dripping down his arms.

‘Listen close, cheese-dick. Look at her again, and you’ll see the bottom of my shoe smashing into your face. Got it?’

Sniggering, he kicked the bin and left.

Later that day, after school, John walked home. It would take an hour, but he couldn’t face the bus, not after what happened. He tied his sports shirt around his waist. He looked like a fool, but at least it concealed the big, brown shit-like stain on his arse.

It was a hot day. A warm breeze brushed through his brown hair. He took off his prescription glasses, wiped them on his shirt and put them back on again. Cars zoomed by, fumes thick in the air. He picked up his pace, needing to get away: away from the town's stink, away from the arseholes, away from civilisation.

When he reached his house, he eased the door open. All was quiet. His mother was out. His sister was nowhere around. Good. He didn't want to be seen. He hurried to his room, quickly changed and ducked back out the door.

He shouldered his backpack and breathed in the scents. The bush was his real home, his sanctuary. Sticks and dry leaves crunched underfoot as he weaved his way through the trees to his favourite spot.

'Hello again,' he said.

The tree didn't answer, its topmost leaves fluttering in the wind. He had passed right through the bush and was standing at its edge, the trees crowded behind him, open space ahead, houses in the distance.

He dropped his backpack by its roots, took off his glasses and put them in his pocket so he wouldn't scratch the lenses. Wrapping his arms around the tree's trunk, he pressed his head against it with a sigh.

He always came here, to talk, to find comfort, to think. Life was hard when no-one liked you. But out in nature, everything was simple: birds sang, the sun beat down, the trees loomed still and untroubled.

He pulled back and looked at the tree again. 'Missy.'

That was what he called her and it matched her perfectly. She was certainly a Miss, with her long, leafy vines that looked like hair, the dips in her trunk that looked like eyes, the crease that looked like the curve of a lip. And below—

He touched them—the two smooth, shiny burrs that looked like breasts. And they were just at the right height too. He closed his eyes, gripped them, rubbed them, as he grew hard between the legs. He leant in and brushed his lips against hers. She was so sweet-smelling—eucalypt and sap and the woody scent of bark. So fresh.

He licked.

The crunch of leaves, the snap of a branch, and he jerked away and wiped his mouth.

‘John!’ his sister called through the trees. He dropped to his bottom and grabbed his backpack. ‘John?’ she called again, closer this time.

‘Over here.’ He pulled out his sketchpad, poised his pencil upon the paper and squinted into the distance. Sketching—always the best ruse.

‘Thought I’d find you here,’ she said, brushing aside a branch as she stepped into view. ‘Mum’s looking for you.’

Jacquelin was seventeen, long brown hair pulled into a shiny ponytail, tall and slim. She was athletic and smart, pretty and popular, and easy-going with the opposite sex. He loved—and hated her.

‘I’m busy,’ he said.

‘I see that.’ Her eyes drifted to his sketchpad. ‘What are you drawing?’

‘Nothing,’ and he flipped it closed and looked up at her. ‘What does she want?’

‘She needs help with her laptop.’

He sighed. ‘Again?’

She shrugged, then leant her shoulder against Missy. She glanced at her trunk and pulled a face. ‘Hideous tree.’ She looked around the bush and shivered. ‘I don’t know why you come here. It’s so spooky.’

John shoved his book into his bag, stood and swung his bag over his shoulder. ‘Come on then. Let’s go.’

One last glance at Missy, and he left.



JOHN WANDERED THROUGH the bush, arms outstretched, hands brushing against the rough trunks. He lifted his nose and smelt the air. A breeze whispered through his fringe. He was dreaming, and it

was a good dream. The sun had almost set, the last of the sunlight trickling in a haze through the leaves.

When he reached his favourite spot, darkness had completely fallen. Above, the moon was enormous and bright, far too bright for reality.

‘Missy?’ he said.

He studied the hole in the ground where she used to stand so tall and elegant and lovely. He looked around, at the bush, at the hills rolling into the distance, but nothing moved, and there was only silence.

He crouched in front of the hole and dragged his fingers through the dirt. It was moist and recently disturbed. She hadn’t been gone for long.

‘John,’ floated a whisper on the breeze.

He shot to his feet and squinted between the trees. Movement. A shadow. Then a figure stepped into view.

‘Missy?’ he croaked.

He froze. Human. She was *human*. And so beautiful: long bronze hair falling past her hips, smooth pale skin bright against the moonlight, eyes the colour of the earth. He stared at her breasts. They were so soft looking, so lovely, the nipples pink and glorious. His palms tingled, aching to touch them. Then he dropped his eyes to her bronze thatch, and his penis pushed hard against his pants. She smiled, and her lips looked just like they did when she was a tree—plump and perfect and begging to be kissed.

He wiped at his face, his brow slick with sweat. She walked gracefully towards him through the long grass, toes pointing at every step. He started to gasp, wiped at his brow again. His heart was hammering and his penis was so swollen he struggled not to explode right there in his pants.

She stopped in front of him, close enough he could hear her breathing, see the shine in her eyes, smell the eucalypt and sap and bark on her

skin. Then she touched him on the chest, looked up with those shining eyes, and John was lost. He pulled her against him, wrapped his arms around her and sank his face into her hair.

‘Oh, Missy.’

He tilted her chin and kissed her, and her lips were soft, her tongue sweet, her breath warm. So much better than her cold, scratchy trunk.

He lowered her to the ground. He had never had sex before. He should have been more nervous, but this was a dream. Very little was as it should be. He straddled her as she stretched out her beautiful body beneath him, smiling, her breasts upraised and aglow against the moonlight. He took them into his hands with a moan. They were soft and supple and heavenly, better than he had ever imagined. A woman’s breasts—only in his dreams. He rubbed them, tickled her nipples. She laughed and squirmed. He laughed too. She was so wonderful in every way.

He dared to reach between her legs, and she groaned as he ran his fingers along her cleft. She was warm and wet. He took off his shirt and threw it aside. Then he stood and yanked open his pants. His penis burst free. He winced and gripped onto it. It was as hard as rock and throbbing.

He lowered himself on top of her. She spread her legs, and he nestled between them.

‘Oh, Missy,’ he groaned, face in her throat.

He nudged at her opening with his length. She was wet against his tip, hot and soft and wonderful, and he prayed he wouldn’t erupt all over her. This part had always frightened him the most. What if he couldn’t find it before it was too late?

‘John,’ she whispered, and her voice was like the rustle of leaves against the wind.

She gripped onto his hardness, and he jerked, almost coming in her hand. Gazing at him, smiling, she lifted her hips, arched her back and drew him inside.

‘Uhhhhhhh,’ he cried. *God*, she was so warm, so smooth. His penis throbbed against her walls as he thrust. Her breasts rubbed against his chest. Her hair tickled his nose. He couldn’t think, couldn’t see, all he knew was the pain, the pleasure, the pressure building in his balls. Three more thrusts and he erupted, his orgasm shooting down the length of his shaft and exploding inside her.

He collapsed against her, gasping, pulse pounding in his ears, in his throat, between his legs. He looked at her, and she looked back.

He gripped her hand, entwining his fingers with hers. ‘Never leave me.’

Smiling, she looped her arms around him and pulled him against her.

‘Hold me, love me, and you can be mine forever,’ she whispered in his ear.



JOHN WOKE WITH A START and sat up.

‘What the—?’

It was deep into the night, and he was outside in his pyjamas, bare-foot, cradled between Missy’s roots. The moon was full and bright, not as bright as in his dreams, but enough to dim the twinkle of the stars. He stumbled to his feet and looked down, feeling soggy around his crotch.

‘Erk.’

He had come in his pants—like a firehose. He shivered and gripped onto himself. The night air was cool, and his wet pants were icy-cold against his crotch. It wasn’t the first time he had sleepwalked, but it was the first time he had left the house. He blinked, his vision strangely clear. He was wearing his glasses.

‘John,’ came a whisper.

He looked up and stepped back. ‘Missy?’

Her leaves fluttered in the cool breeze. Her wooden eyes gazed empty. She was silent.

Her last words sprang into his mind: *Hold me, love me, and you can be mine forever.* He shivered again. She seemed to whisper it into his ear. He took a step towards her and placed his hand against her trunk, against the crease that was her lips. Her blank eyes stared back. He took off his glasses and tried to put them in his pocket but his pyjamas didn't have any, and they slipped to the ground. He leant in and kissed her, and there was warmth, a softness, that had never been there before. He wrapped his arms around her, felt her breasts press against him. Her leafy hair tickled his cheek.

When he tried to pull away, he found he couldn't move. He was stuck, his arms wrapped tightly around her, chest pressed hard against her trunk. He gasped, struggled, called out for help, but there was only the bush, Missy and the open sky. His heart beat madly as his body stiffened. He could barely breathe. A coldness trickled up his legs, his waist, his chest, his face. His sight went fuzzy. His hearing went dull. Then his heart began to slow. He looked into Missy's eyes—and they were an earthy brown, alive and shining, just like in his dream.

He closed his eyes and let her take him.



JACQUELIN FLASHED HER torch through the trees as she rushed along the trail through the bush. It was seven at night, and the sun had set. An icy chill shivered down her spine, but it wasn't from the cold. They hadn't seen John since he went to bed last night. When he didn't rise for breakfast, they checked his bedroom, to find it empty. Assuming he had already gone to school, she and her mother had left for their day, not thinking something terrible might have happened.

'John!' she cried.

It wasn't unusual for her brother to stay out all afternoon doing whatever he did, so when she had arrived at an empty house, she wasn't

worried. But now it was night time, and he always came home before darkness fell.

‘John!’

She raced to the edge of the bush, chest tight, hopeful he had simply switched his phone off and was listening to his music. But when she reached his favourite spot, her heart dropped.

It was empty.

Tears pricked her eyes. She looked into the distance, across the empty expanse, to the houses far away.

‘Where are you?’

‘Jackie,’ rose a whisper on the wind.

She spun around with a start and stepped back. The ugly tree—it wasn’t alone. She dropped her torch. There was another tree, uglier still, and it was pressed hard against the other, branches twisted and looped around its trunk as though embracing it. There was something familiar about it, about the way it stood, so awkward, almost slouched.

Something gleamed against the torchlight on the ground. She picked it up—John’s glasses, cracked and broken. She looked up at the tree again and ice filled her heart.

Don't miss out!

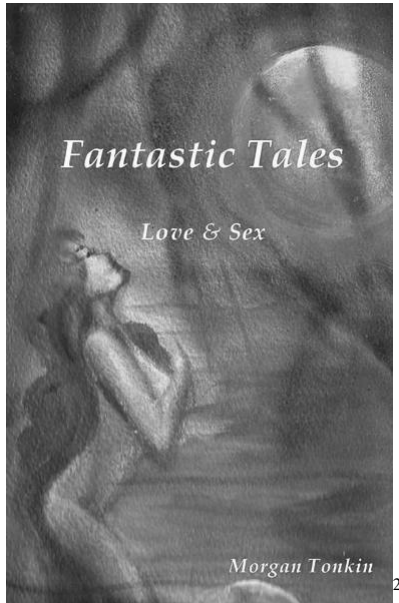
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