

# DARK & DARKER FAERIE TALES



TWO SISTERS

Dark & Darker Faerie Tales

By Two Sisters

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We dedicate this book to our family, friends and pets.

Thanks to all our friends who helped proofread and edit our stories.

## **Table of Contents**

[A Dark Faerie Tale](#)

[Oh, Red, Look How Big You've Grown](#)

[The Woodcutter and the Oak Tree](#)

[Something Grim Waits Beyond The Wall](#)

[Strangers In The Woods](#)

[Love Makes The Heart Sing](#)

[The Witch and the Child](#)

[The Perfect Princess](#)

[About The Two Sisters](#)

# A Dark Faerie Tale

In a rather strange forest, in a world unknown to humans, lived a fairly small faerie called Daena. Like most faeries, Daena was kind, considerate and always happy to help.

As you probably already know, faeries possess magical powers. Tales say faeries can create gold from nothing, summon monsters and even change history. I don't know how much of that is actually true but even from exaggeration, you can imagine faeries are powerful creatures despite their lack of height.

However, it's important to note that faeries were not selfish with their magic. They healed sick mothers, gave courage to heroes, led starving folk to food, tricked devious trolls and also helped lost children find their way home.

Faeries were particularly helpful and caring towards children. Not for vindictive reasons but because they have a natural desire to protect the small and innocent. During times of hardship and war, the presence of a magical faerie had life-changing effects on children. The faeries never asked for anything in return, all they wanted was to help, and bring smiles to children's faces.

As you can see, faeries are incredibly kind-hearted. Throughout history, they have been a divine presence. A bright light in a dark world. But times have changed since then. For the last century, faeries have been forbidden from leaving their home. Instead of helping children, faeries were expected to be content with just helping other faeries.

However, Daena was not content. When she was a youngling, barely the size of a bean, she dreamed about venturing out to help humans. She did not see why faeries stayed hidden in their sanctuary, keeping their powers to themselves, when there were people out there in the beyond who would benefit from her gifts.

Every day, after she completed her tasks, Daena would fly up the tallest tree and sit on the tallest branch where she would gaze out into the distance. She would imagine what it'd be like to fly out and assist needy folk.

In the past, as soon as a faerie's wings were strong enough, they were expected to leave their home and travel the world. Daena's precious wings flickered with excitement at the thought of leaving but she knew it was not possible. Faeries were not allowed to leave.

At sunset, Daena began the flight to her family's house. On the way, she came across Mother Faerie who was the wisest and strongest, and perhaps the plumpest of all faeries.

"Daena, why do you look so glum?" Mother Faerie asked. "For a long time now, I've seen you plagued by unhappiness. Tell me what troubles you so I can help."

"Dear Mother," Daena sighed. "I yearn to go out into the human world. My ancestors brought happiness to children and made their greatest wishes come true. I want to do the same, I want to help."

Mother Faerie took Daena's hand, sympathy glittered in her eyes as she said, "I understand the unrest you feel. It's in our nature to act as guardians to those in need but it's not safe to leave."

"Why isn't it safe? I know I'm forbidden to leave but I've never been told the reason why. Please, tell me."

A spell of sadness overcame Mother Faerie as she decided to share the truth with Daena. She hoped the truth would expel the young faerie's desire for the outside world. Mother Faerie floated around Daena as she told her tale.

"The world changed and it became a dangerous place for faeries, and as the world changed, so did the children. They no longer had any need for our magic. We decided it would be safer for all faeries to

remain behind our walls.”

“But that was centuries ago!” Daena said. “Perhaps the world has changed again and there are children waiting for our aid. I could go and…”

“Certainly not! I forbid it,” Mother Faerie tapped her staff on the ground like she was announcing a proclamation. “I won’t risk the life of a faerie just so you can quench your curiosity.”

Daena held back her tears. Mother Faerie held an arm around her,

“I understand. I was like you once. I wondered and yearned for the world outside but you must accept the truth, the world has changed and we have to change too. Use your wonderful wings and your marvellous magic for the good of our kind. Your desires will ease away soon, I promise.”

Mother Faerie smiled and Daena smiled too until Mother Faerie flew away. Daena wished she could forget her dreams and be like other faeries but she was convinced that this dream and desire would never leave her.

That night as Daena watched the fireflies and listened to the songs of the forest, she knew she had to go to the human world. Even if it was only for a day. In one, single day, she could see the world for herself and finally silence her whispering temptations. If she were able to help one child, she knew that one good deed would make her content forever.

So, that’s exactly what Daena did. Before the sun rose, she flew through the land of the faeries and made it to the border. She didn’t even glance back to say farewell. Daena knew she would be back before anyone noticed she was gone.

Spreading her wings, she soared over the walls and through the veil, within an instant she felt the fresh wind breathe upon her face and she flew into a bright blue sky. She did not dare blink; she did not want to miss a thing.

Tears streamed down her cheeks as she gazed at the green fields, the trees, the rivers, the paths and the houses.

She had seen old drawings by faeries, depicting what the human world looked like but those drawings now looked amateur in comparison to the grand world she saw around her. There were some things she did not recognise, such as, strange metal towers and long, ugly lines hanging through the air which seemed to crackle like the beginning of a thunderstorm.

Daena flew for almost three hours before she remembered her purpose. At the next house she found, she glided down and landed on a painted fence.

Playing in the garden, surrounded by wooden toys, was a small boy. Daena watched him. He was certainly different than the pictures she had seen before. His cheeks were round, pinkish in colour, his belly bulged out the sides of his pants and his hair was cleanly combed. From his height, he was probably seven, eight or nine. Daena tried to guess. He grinned as he played with a toy soldier. He held it up in the air like it was flying.

As Daena sat, perched on the fence, she wondered if there was anything more she could do for the boy. He already seemed happy and content. She was about to fly again when she decided to fly over to the boy. She wasn’t sure how far it would be until she found another child. It would be a shame to not at least say hello and see if there was anything she could do to help him.

She landed on top of a tulip, straightened her clothes, tidied her hair and cleared her throat. This was her first meeting with a human, she wanted this moment to be perfect.

“Hi,” Daena said, aloud. “Hello, child.”

The boy did not turn around. Daena guessed he had not heard her. He laughed as he threw the toy soldier up into the air. It hit the ground with a loud thud. The soldier’s arm landed a few feet away. Daena grimaced at the soldier’s scratched and faded face, its smile was almost gone.

Daena looked at the child. This time she spoke louder, making sure she was heard.

“Excuse me? Hello! Hello, there.”

The boy stopped playing and slowly turned his head. He looked around the garden, confused. He failed to see Daena standing on the flower. She giggled, lightly.

“I’m down here.” Daena waved, she smiled as the boy looked down. While the boy stared at her, utterly confused and slightly afraid, Daena’s heart swelled with warmth. She could not believe she was talking to a child. A real, human child.

“What are you?” The boy demanded. Any fear had now disappeared.

“My name is Daena. I’m a faerie,” Daena curtsied, politely.

“A fairy?” The boy scoffed, “Fairies don’t exist. They are made up stories for little kids.”

Daena smiled. She wanted to tell him he was only a little kid too but she thought against it, she didn’t want to upset him. Instead, she said,

“If they are made up, then why am I standing here? I am as real as you are.”

“Really?” The boy crossed his arms as he frowned. “Maybe I’m asleep and this is all a dream.”

Daena did not really know what to say to that. She presumed all children knew faeries were real, she never expected she would have to persuade them otherwise. The boy wiped his nose on his sleeve and mumbled,

“Mum says things are only real if you can touch them. That’s why the monster under my bed isn’t real. If I touch you, I can see if you’re real or not.”

Daena shifted uncomfortably, the boy was so much bigger than her, she did not like the idea of being poked or prodded but if it persuaded the boy, she was real, it would be a temporary discomfort.

“Very well,” Daena nodded.

So, the faerie reached out her hand. The boy stared at her for a moment then lifted his arm and pressed the tip of his chubby finger against her hand. Daena smiled as the boy’s eyes widened and so did his smile. His face was alight with wonder and amazement.

“You really are real!”

“Yes,” Daena laughed. “I really am.”

The boy chuckled, “Wow! This is amazing!”

Before Daena could say another word, the boy snatched her from the tulip. Daena froze with terror, his fat fingers squeezed around her body.

“Please! Let me go, you’re hurting me,” Daena squeaked, tears fell down her cheeks.

The boy suddenly opened his hand and Daena collapsed onto his palm.

“I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to hurt you,” the boy watched her worriedly. “I only wanted to have a closer look.”

“It’s fine,” Daena gasped, her entire body ached but she knew he didn’t mean to cause any harm. She stretched her wings, the boy had bent them accidentally. Her precious wings slowly returned to their natural shape. She stood up and smiled, “See, no harm done.”

“Those are beautiful,” the boy gaped at her wings.

“Thank you.” Daena blushed, she was proud of her wings, they were her constant companion. A faerie’s wings made it possible to soar through the sky and venture to different worlds. Like a bird, a faerie’s life depended on their wings. Without wings, a faerie would just be a tiny speck in a vast, dangerous world.

“Can I touch them?” The boy asked and before Daena could even respond, he reached for her wings. Daena leaped out of the way and pressed her wings against her back.

“No,” Daena said firmly. “You cannot touch my wings. They are fragile and precious to me. A faerie only ever has one pair of wings, if I lose them even my magic cannot bring them back.”

“Okay, fine,” the boy sulked.

While he pulled his hand away, his eyes remained fixed on Daena’s wings. She tried to ignore it. *Remember, he’s only a child,* she said to herself.

Standing on his palm, Daena looked up at the little boy and said,

“I have travelled many miles with a single hope, to make a single child’s wish come true. Is there anything I can do for you?”

“You can make any of my wishes come true?” The boy asked.

“Yes, indeed,” Daena nodded. “If you are hungry, I can summon food. If you want to be smarter, I can improve your intelligence. Anything you wish.”

“Anything?”

Daena nodded.

“So...” the boy pressed his lips together. “If I wanted to have your wings, could I wish for them?”

Daena flinched, she took a step back on the boy’s hand, “Well, no. They are my wings. I need them to go home.”

“But you said, I could wish for anything I wanted,” the boy glared at her.

“You can wish for anything else,” Daena said, nervously. “Look, I can bring you the bestest cake you’ve ever eaten. I can give you the bestest clothes or perhaps I can...”

“I don’t want any of that,” the boy snapped. “I want your wings.”

“No!” Daena was surprised by the anger in her tone. This wasn’t how it was supposed to play out at all. She said, “I’ve already told you, you can’t have them.”

Before Daena could react, the boy grabbed her wings and hauled her body up into the air. Her wings flapped and struggled like a fly caught in a web.

“I said, I want your wings!” The boy yelled as he tore Daena’s wings off her back.

Bones snapped, flesh tore and blood spurted out. Daena did not scream but something inside her did. The boy let her fall down into the cold, harsh grass. She lay still, not moving, barely breathing. The toy soldier, the boy had thrown earlier, seemed to stare into her eyes with a familiar broken emptiness.

The boy ignored Daena as he gazed and prodded at her wings, he murmured,

“They’re so pretty.”

Suddenly the wings cracked and shattered into thousands of glittering pieces. Daena watched as the shards fell into the grass. The wings she had worn since her birth were gone. She would never be able to fly again. She would never be able to soar beside the birds. She would never be able to go back home. The last thought burned her spirit.

“Oh, no!” The boy screeched, “I broke them.”

He stamped his feet and cursed, saying words, inappropriate for any child. As he suffered his tantrum, Daena watched the wind drift through the grass, carrying the tiny shards of her wings away until nothing remained.

Nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

Daena struggled to her knees, her body felt cold but something terrible burned inside her. Something truly terrible, something she had never felt before. It burned her heart. It burned her eyes. It burned everything. She thought the grass would set alight if she were not careful.

“It’s not fair,” the boy spluttered as he kicked the ground.

As Daena slowly rose to her feet, the boy snapped,

“I want another pair of wings!”

“I already told you,” Daena’s voice was soft, surprisingly no anger or frustration was there. “A faerie can only ever have one pair of wings in their lifetime and you broke mine.”

The boy swore and crossed his arms madly. His furious features softened as he realised, “That didn’t count as my wish so I still have one wish to use, right?”

“Of course, child,” Daena said, she lifted her head, her eyes gleamed with an unnatural violet, “Tell me your deepest wish and I’ll give it to you.”

The boy closed his eyes and thought about it, if he only had one wish, he had to think carefully.

"I've got it!" The boy said, triumphantly. "I don't want to be afraid of the dark anymore. At night, I have to sleep with Mum and Dad because I'm so scared. I want to wish my fear away."

"That sounds like a terrible fear," Daena said, she stood straight, wincing in pain. "Do you know that most fears gradually disappear when you have to face them every day?"

"I don't want to face mine every day," the boy piped. "I want it gone now."

"Very well," Daena smiled, "But first, I must tell you one thing."

"What's that?"

"As a faerie, I must make your chosen wish come true. It's the rule. However, I can decide exactly how your wish will play out."

"Yeah, so what?"

Daena chuckled, her body shuddered slightly, "Are you sure, you don't want to be afraid of the dark anymore?"

"Yes! That's my wish. Are you deaf, faerie?"

Daena smirked, she beckoned him closer. "Because you took my wings away, I can't reach you. Please kneel and lean down towards me."

The boy knelt and lowered his head, he asked,

"Like this?"

"That's perfect. I can reach you perfectly from here," Daena grinned. "Now, I'll make your wish come true."

With a flash of magic, a needle appeared in Daena's hand. She stabbed each of the boy's eyes, plucking them out and throwing them into the grass. The boy shrieked, clutching his empty sockets as blood dribbled down his cheeks and chin.

"Why?!" He screamed, hysterically. "Why did you do this?"

"You didn't want to be afraid of the dark anymore," Daena said coolly, she wiped the blood off the needle. "If you live every day in the dark, your fear will eventually dissolve. In time, you will no longer be afraid."

"You took my eyes!" He wailed. "You took my eyes!"

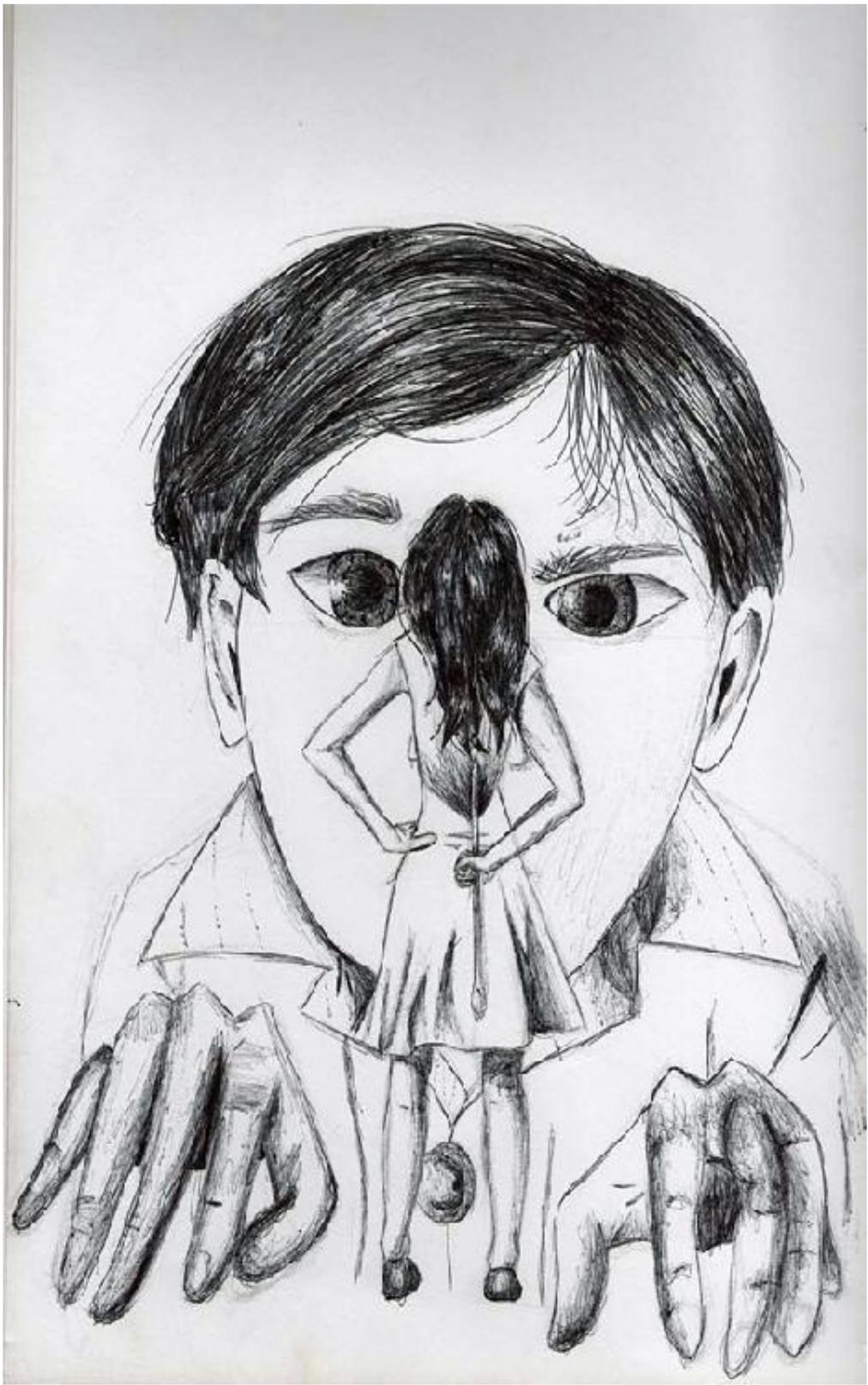
"Yes, I did," Daena scowled. "You should be careful what you wish for, little boy."

By the time the boy's parents ran outside to see what all the fuss was about, Daena had limped to the fence. She passed one of the boy's bloody eyes and nudged it down a hole. She hoped it would make a tasty snack for a pest.

She watched the parents try to comfort the boy whose eyes were lost. Now, Daena understood why faeries never travelled out anymore. In centuries past, children appreciated the appearance of a kind faerie. Faeries could cure their hunger, loneliness or misery. The world had changed and it seemed as though children did not suffer such ailments anymore. Instead they possessed an insatiable greed. A greed that had cost Daena everything.

Without her wings, Daena knew she would never be able to return home. It was doubtful she would ever see another faerie again. She was trapped here.

She closed her eyes and accepted her fate. If she was going to be trapped in the human world forever, she would simply have to remind children that faeries were to be respected, or they would have to be taught a lesson.



# Oh, Red, Look How Big You've Grown

Everyone knows the tale of Little Red Riding Hood. The story about a kind and gentle girl who travelled through the woods to visit her sick grandmother. During her innocent journey, she was stopped by a foul wolf called The Big Bad Wolf.

The wicked wolf could have gobbled her up there and then but he cunningly decided to overtake Little Red and reach her grandmother's house first.

When he arrived, he ate the old woman in one bite and he put on her favourite nightgown, hoping to play a sinister trick on the girl who would shortly follow. When Little Red arrived, she quickly saw through the wolf's disguise but before she could shout for help, the Big Bad Wolf gobbled her up too.

Luckily for Little Red and her grandmother, a huntsman happened to be walking by. The heroic huntsman killed the bad wolf and, miraculously, the little girl and her gran climbed out of the creature's belly unharmed.

Ten years after Little Red Riding Hood was almost eaten by the dreaded wolf, she had grown into a kind, young woman. She still wore a red cloak and people still preferred to call her Red rather than her birth name.

Despite her awful and near-death experience a decade earlier, Red continued to travel through the woods to visit her grandmother. In fact, every day, no matter the weather.

On one particularly cold day, Red entered the cottage, her wet crimson cloak clung to her shivering skin.

"Morning, Grandmother," Red called.

"Good morning, dear," Grandmother smiled warmly as she sat by the fire with her knitting. "Be careful, you're dripping water on the floor."

"I'm sorry! I'll clean it up."

"It doesn't matter, dear. I only mentioned it because I didn't want you to slip and fall. With my bad back, if I tried to help, we'd both fall down." Grandmother chortled cheerfully to herself.

Red smiled, her grandmother hadn't changed at all. She took off her boots and cloak, and put them by the fire to dry. Then she mopped the rain spatter on the floor.

"Did you sleep well?" Red asked.

"Not really," Grandmother tried to make herself comfortable in her chair. The seven cushions did not seem to help. The old woman sighed, "My pains are giving me a lot of bother. Don't worry. I imagine they will pass soon."

Since she was gobbled up by the Big Bad Wolf, Grandmother's health had only declined. Red had faced the same terrible ordeal but people presumed her young heart had helped her to recover quickly.

In the last couple of years, her grandmother had barely been able to rise from her bed without help. Her cottage had become a prison and only Red made the effort to venture into the woods to help her.

As Grandmother continued knitting, Red started the day's chores. She made her grandmother's breakfast, tended to the fire, dusted the house and washed all the dirty laundry. She also baked a meat and vegetable pie for her grandmother's lunch and dinner.

When all the jobs were done, Red attended to her grandmother. She helped her into the bath, dressed her into some fresh clothes and then half-carried her back to the armchair. Red sat on a stool and massaged her grandmother's swollen foot. Along with her other pains and aches, Grandmother also had gout.

Red and Grandmother talked for hours. Red talked about the latest news from home while her grandmother shared some of her old stories. The two were laughing by the time the sun was turning the sky crimson.

“Red, there is something I must speak to you about,” Grandmother said. Her tone was rather serious. “I have been working on my will.”

“Gran, I don’t want to talk about wills,” Red avoided her gaze. “Can we please talk about something less somber?”

“I know it’s not a happy topic but you’re not a little girl anymore,” Grandmother smiled. “I hope you weren’t expecting to be looking after an old hag forever.”

Grandmother put her knitting needles aside and held her granddaughter's hands.

“You have done so much for me over the years. Your kindness has kept this old heart beating far longer than it should have.” Red smiled, tears filled her eyes as Grandmother continued, “In my will, I chose you to inherit my home and everything inside. After everything you’ve done, I thought it was a worthy reward.”

Red could not quite believe what she was hearing. Many people believed Red would be the one to inherit but she had never let herself believe the rumours. She was so touched, honoured, her grandmother had chosen her.

“Oh, Gran...” Red began but Grandmother raised her hand. She had not finished.

“But I’ve decided to change my will. You’ve spent so many years in this house because of me, I would hate for it to be an anchor on your life. You have so much potential. I would not want you to waste your life here. I am going to leave my cottage to the forest. The animals and faeries can use it as they wish.”

Red lost her voice, she stayed quiet for a few seconds before she finally smiled.

“I understand, Grandmother. I am happy with whatever you choose. After all, I would not have spent these years caring for you if I didn’t care.” Red squeezed her grandmother’s wrinkled hands, “I think the forest would be honoured to receive such a splendid gift.”

“Thank you, my dear. I have many other treasures to give you in my will. I’m sure they will help you start a new life anywhere you choose.”

“Thank you, Gran.” Red rose, “I will brew us a new pot of tea but please can we talk about happier things?”

“As you wish,” Grandmother chuckled. She smiled, glowing with pride as she watched her granddaughter prepare the tea. She was so thankful to have Red in her life.

Red stayed a little while longer with her grandmother until the disappearing sun beckoned her to start the trip home. She made sure her grandmother had everything she needed, bade her farewell and then left the cottage.

Red knew the path well. She had walked it thousands of times but this time, something made her uneasy. She could not tell what it was that caused her to feel so on edge.

Perhaps only five hundred steps from her gran’s cottage, Red was sure she heard something. She stopped and listened. Every sound, the tweeting of birds, the rustling leaves, the whistling wind, everything sounded rather sinister.

Suddenly, Red heard it. The sound you never want to hear when standing alone in the middle of the woods.

Heavy footsteps.

She knew these weren’t the heavy footsteps of a heavy man. They belonged to something bigger. Something feral.

Her heart seemed to slow as she looked around. She pulled her red cloak around her like a protective shield.

Suddenly, a large wolf prowled slowly across the path. His thick, dark fur barely concealed the muscles beneath. The wolf seemed to not notice Red at all as he walked by. Red tried to retreat backwards, she did not want to give him a chance to notice her.

A very unhelpful twig snapped beneath her boot.

The wolf's ears flicked in her direction and so did his yellow eyes. He rose onto his hind legs, he stood nearly three meters tall. He reached into a small hard pouch from a belt around his waist, took out a pair of small glasses and put them on his snout. The grey hairs colouring his jaw twitched as he grinned.

"Is that you, Little Red Riding Hood?" The wolf gasped. "My eyes might not be as bright as they once were but I'd recognise your cloak anywhere."

"It cannot be possible." Red's breathing was short. She feared she might faint from fright, she managed to ask, "Are you the Big Bad Wolf?"

"Me? Oh, no." The wolf shook his head, "That was my brother. We do look alike but apart from that we have nothing more in common." He blinked at Red through his spectacles, "Do you not remember me? My name is Henry. We have met before."

Red started to remember the wolf called Henry. After news spread about the Big Bad Wolf and his demise, Henry called on Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother to apologise for his brother's evil deeds.

While the Big Bad Wolf preyed on any poor folk he prowled upon, Henry was a scholar, more interested in putting his snout in a book than a carcass. Even though Red knew Henry was harmless, she could not forget the fact he was a wolf. Everyone knew what wolves were capable of.

"Yes. I remember you, Henry," said Red. She anxiously stepped aside, eager to carry on home. Henry gazed at her with his large wolfish eyes.

"The last time I saw you, you were no larger than a cherub! What do they call you now? Or are you still Little Red Riding Hood?"

"A name like Little Red Riding Hood is hard to forget. Some people think I'm still the same little girl," Red said, slightly irritated. It was true, she was almost eighteen and many people still treated her like an infant.

"It's such an innocent name," the wolf nodded. He looked over her shoulder to the path leading towards her grandmother's. "I hear you visit your grandmother daily. It must be tiresome work."

"Not at all. I love my grandmother's company," Red said.

"Well, if you ever want to take a day off, I would be happy to help," Henry said. Red watched his eyes behind those small spectacles. They remained in the direction of her grandmother's house for far too long.

"I think it would be inappropriate," Red said. "Especially with your brother's history."

"Oh, I'm sorry," the wolf grimaced as he realised how wrong it would be. "But if there is anything I could do to help you, please let me know. It's the least I can do."

"Thank you," Red bowed her head politely.

She watched the wolf drop onto his four paws and prowl towards the darkness of the woods. He gave another fleeting glance towards grandmother's house before finally trotting away.

Red did not move. Even though Henry the Wolf seemed sincere and didn't act particularly wolfish, there was something bothering Red. She wondered whether she should return to her grandmother's house just to make sure the old woman was safe. Red shook her head; she knew she was being paranoid. Her grandmother's door was firmly locked and Red was sure Henry was nothing like his brother.

So, without any further delay, she ran all the way home.

When Henry the Wolf opened his eyes, he could not quite believe where he was. The last he remembered was being in his den. He was sprinkling pepper on his stew and reading a journal about astronomy when soldiers barged through the door and clouted his head.

Now, his body was wrapped in cruel chains. Henry whined in agony as he was dragged along the rough ground towards a clearing in the forest. It was still night, the moon was only beginning its descent. Animals and townsfolk stood around him, glaring at him like he was a despicable monster.

Without his glasses, Henry struggled to see his surroundings clearly but his fantastic sense of smell helped him figure out where he was. He was in the Judge's Circle. Many creatures and folk had died here, after the swift stroke of justice. Henry could see the judges and he knew, without a doubt, he was the one on trial.

An owl wearing a wig and cloak sat as the head judge, he hooted, "Henry the Wolf, you are accused of a terrible crime," he snapped his beak. "Murder."

The crowd murmured between themselves. Henry could not believe it. He had never murdered a man or beast. The owl drawled on,

"You've been accused of the brutal murder of Sera Forrest. Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother."

Henry's jaw fell open, he wanted to retch.

"I'm not guilty!" Henry howled. "Not guilty!"

"The accused claims he's not guilty," the owl ruffled his feathers, he looked to his fellow judges, a badger, a hare, a goose and a field mouse. "May the trial commence."

Henry looked into the heckling crowd, some of the creatures and townsfolk present had once claimed to be his friends but the way they cursed him, he doubted they would admit it. The owl bashed his gavel.

"Order!" He commanded. Once the crowd was silent, he began,

"Yesterday in the late hours, the woman we all know as Grandmother was found dead in her cottage. Her body ripped into pieces. Only the claws of a beast could cause such dreadful harm." The owl pointed his gavel at Henry, "A witness claims they saw you near Grandmother's house before nightfall. Bring forth the witness!"

"I was never there!" Henry cried, "I'm innocent. I have done no crime."

Nobody listened to him. A soldier, holding his chain, bashed Henry's face. The wolf winced, blood filled his nose and his vision fought against the darkness.

The crowd parted and a young woman wearing a red cloak stepped forward. Red's bright cloak burned through Henry's dark vision.

"Little Red Riding Hood," the owl screeched. "Tell us, dear. Tell us what you saw."

Red stood with her hood low over her face, she slowly brought it down. Her skin was ghost white and her eyes red from the tears she had cried. She sniffed, her lips quivered as she glanced at Henry. She avoided his gaze. Henry knew the girl was terrified, she thought he was a murderer.

"I-I-I..." Red paused and wiped away a fallen tear with her cloak, "While I was travelling home after seeing my grandmother, the wolf crossed my path. We spoke a little. I was afraid at first because he looked very much like his brother the Big Bad Wolf."

The crowd whispered among themselves. The fact that the wolves were brothers was not common knowledge. It seemed some of the judges did not know either. Henry did not want to be associated with such a terrible creature. He bit his tongue, he promised himself he would be fine, he was on trial for a crime, not for who his sibling was.

"I thought Henry seemed like a kind wolf," Red continued. "After he left, I set off home, thinking

my gran was tucked up and safe in her cottage but I worried for her safety, so I went back.”

Red covered her mouth with a trembling hand as she wept. A red squirrel scampered forward and gave her a tiny handkerchief, barely big enough to dry a single tear. Red took it politely and patted her cheeks. Owl hooted softly,

“Red, please continue.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” Red murmured. “So, I went back to my grandmother’s house. The front door was wide open. Her comfortable chair had been torn to shreds. When I went to her bedroom, I found... I found...” Red cried, tears fell again. “My dear, old grandmother was dead, in her bed, in pieces!”

The crowd gasped in horror. A pheasant collapsed from fear.

“I think I either fainted or blacked out but when I came to, I found this upon her remains.” Red reached into her cloak and brought out a clump of dark fur. Hair exactly the same colour as Henry’s. Animals from the crowd stepped forward to sniff the hair in her hands.

“Yes, that is indeed wolf fur!” A duck quacked. Other animals nodded in agreement.

Henry couldn’t believe it. Wolf hair could be found anywhere. There must have been another reason why hair was found in the cottage. The blood clogging Henry’s nose made it impossible for him to smell the fur from a distance. As a wolf, his sense of smell was greater than any of the other animals but nobody was interested in hearing his opinion.

The owl and the other judges talked quietly until the owl finally looked at Henry with his sharp tawny eyes.

“The evidence is damning. Only a wolf could cause the damage that we saw and the fur proves you were at the scene of the crime, Henry. It seems you and the Big Bad Wolf have more in common than we thought. Do you have anything to say?”

Henry wheezed, his ribs tightened around his lungs. He was innocent. Innocent! Then Henry remembered, he cried,

“My friend Fox! I saw him after the sun fell. He can support my whereabouts and prove that I wasn’t at Grandmother’s house. He can prove I’m not guilty.”

“A fox!” The goose judge honked.

“How can we trust what a fox has to say?” The badger judge snarled.

“Foxes are the very definition of sly,” the hare judge cried.

The field mouse judge squeaked as mice are obviously incapable of words.

“This is unfair!” Henry howled. Before he could utter another word, a gag was forced into his jaws.

The owl spread his wings, he had come to a decision. He snapped his beak together.

“From the evidence and witness testimony, it is clear to me that a wolf will always be a wolf. It does not matter if he is a scholar or a gentleman, for beneath the mask, a wolf’s nature remains the same.” The owl glared down at Henry, “Oh, how I’m disappointed with you, Henry. I thought you were more.”

Tears filled Henry’s eyes, he wanted to scream his innocence but the gag held him silent.

“The court finds you guilty, Wolf. The only suitable sentence is death.”

Henry cried as the crowd called for his head. Through his tears, Henry saw his executioner. It was the huntsman, the same huntsman who had killed his brother. As the man sharpened his axe, Henry noticed Red approaching the judges.

“Please sirs, may I speak to the wolf? I wish to speak to him before justice takes him.”

“Of course, Little Red,” the owl hooted. “But, be careful.”

The crowd stepped back to give Red some time with the wolf. Henry couldn’t move, the chains were relentless. He could not draw his eyes away from the huntsman’s axe. In a few minutes, he knew it

would be dripping with his blood.

“I am sorry this had to happen to you, Henry,” Red whispered, she wiped away his tears with her hand. “You appear to be a kind and considerate wolf but at the end of the day, you’re still a wolf.”

Henry watched Red as she softly scratched the white hairs around his jaws.

“I didn’t have much choice, you see,” Red said, her gaze did not flicker from his. “The old woman was going to take everything I had worked so hard for.

“Why else would I spend every day tending to her? I knew she intended to give me her most prized possessions in her will. Then suddenly, she decides to take it all away from me. She thought she was being kind.” Red scoffed, “So, I had to do something about it.”

Henry stared at her, he could not believe what he was hearing. Red leaned in closer, her breath made his ears twitch.

“You did say, if there was anything you could do to help me, all I had to do was ask,” Red smiled. “I’m sorry, I didn’t ask beforehand but there was not a lot of time. I thought you would be happy to help.”

At that moment, Henry smelled it.

Blood.

The smell clung to Red’s cloak. The scent of soap tried to hide it but it could not trick Henry’s extraordinary nose. Of course, Red’s red cloak concealed the stains.

“Again, I am sorry, Henry,” Red pulled back. “Just know, your death will be swift. If the huntsman is as skilled as he was killing your brother, I am sure you will feel no pain.”

Against his better nature, Henry lunged for Red. The gag stopped his snarl but everyone heard the growl rattling in his throat. Red cried, she stumbled back as the soldiers leapt upon Henry. They dragged him towards the chopping block.

Henry watched Red hide her smile beneath the collar of her scarlet cloak. His fury died as Henry realised there was no point in fighting. Why? Because to everyone he was nothing better than the Big Bad Wolf. Nobody would believe a wolf over such an innocent and gentle girl like Little Red Riding Hood.

And with that final despairing thought, the wolf lost his head.

# The Woodcutter and the Oak Tree

A long time ago, on an unusual island where only birch trees grew, there lived a strong and good-natured woodcutter. The Woodcutter was a good man, he was kind to everyone he met and he worked hard at his occupation. Every day, he chopped down birch trees and made sure every weak and weary family had wood to warm their homes at night.

The Woodcutter never dreamed about a life beyond the island of birch trees. However, he did have a dream. Along with being a talented woodcutter, he was a talented carpenter and he wished his talents would be recognised and applauded.

He could make and carve countless furnishings, clocks, toys, and trinkets but his talents could only create so much with the resources he had. True, birch trees were beautiful but they did not have the strength and versatility he needed to create strong and lasting creations.

The Woodcutter knew there were stronger trees beyond his small island but the waves were too dangerous to cross, he had to push his dreams aside and make do with birch.

On one quiet day, shortly after dawn, the Woodcutter left his home and set off to work. He was barely a few hundred steps beyond his threshold when he heard a sweet, quiet voice.

“Good morning to you, good sir.”

The Woodcutter paused, he looked around the forest, he could see no one else. He feared that a faerie was trying to play a devilish trick on him but he reminded himself, faeries only played with children. The Woodcutter began to walk again.

“Please, sir, look here,” the voice croaked. “Down here.”

And the Woodcutter did exactly that, he looked down to the ground. He could not believe what he saw. A small, yellowing sapling gazed up at him.

“I’m really sorry for disturbing you but could I trouble you for a cup or even a drop of water?” the sapling asked. “My roots struggle to reach down far in this dry crust of earth and I’m suffering from thirst.”

While it was certainly a strange sight, the Woodcutter poured his entire water bottle onto the ground around the sapling. In seconds, green returned to the sapling’s complexion and he sighed with relief. The poor sapling was convinced he was going to wilt and die but the Woodcutter had certainly saved his life.

It was here where the sapling told the Woodcutter his story. He had been born in a land where many oak trees grew. While he had been a happy acorn, he had heard tales of an unusual island where only birch trees grew and he wanted to see it for himself. He knew as soon as his roots started to grow, he would not be able to travel so he knew he could not delay. If he wanted to fulfil his dream, he had to act. He said farewell to his friends and family, for he knew he would never see them again and asked a sparrow to carry him across the channel.

The little bird carried the acorn above the waves and delivered him to the island of birch trees. However, when the acorn settled into the earth and sprouted into a sapling, the sapling realised the ground was too dry and the countless birch trees made it impossible for him to drink or bask in the sun. As the weeks passed, the oak sapling presumed he would eventually wither away. If the Woodcutter had not saved him, the sapling surely would not have survived another day.

The Woodcutter was saddened by the sapling’s story and he feared what would become of him if something was not done.

“I have an idea,” the Woodcutter began. “You can live with me. There are acres of clear land

beside my home, you can grow your roots and bathe in the sun freely.”

The oak sapling could not believe what he was hearing, he was so touched by the Woodcutter’s offer.

“Thank you, sir,” the sapling gushed. “Thank you so much. I don’t know how I could ever repay you.”

“Please, do not worry about it. I can’t let you suffer and struggle alone in the wilderness.”

The Woodcutter dug into the dirt and carefully lifted the sapling into his arms and carried him home. He fulfilled his promise and planted the sapling in the wide clearing beside his house so the baby oak could bask freely under the sun, away from the shadows of the birch trees.

While the sapling’s roots were still juvenile and could not reach deep into the earth, the Woodcutter sprinkled water on the ground every day for the sapling to drink.

In the evenings, after the Woodcutter had finished work, he would sit beside the sapling and play his flute or they would talk late into the night. The Woodcutter told the sapling all about his life and his dreams. He told him how he dreamed about being a carpenter but he became a woodcutter instead.

When the Woodcutter went to bed, he always kept one window open so the sapling could call to him if he was scared or feeling lonely.

It was not long before the sapling stopped calling the Woodcutter “sir” and instead called him “my friend.”

Over the years that followed, the Woodcutter cared for his friend and the sapling grew into an almighty tree. The oak tree grew tall, taller than all the birch trees. In fact, if you tried to look up at the tree, you’d be sure to say that the branches almost touched the clouds.

When the Woodcutter gazed up at his dear friend, his neck ached but he smiled proudly, pleased to see the tree looking so grand. The oak tree smiled too, for he felt blessed to have a caring and devoted friend. He knew he wouldn’t have survived if the Woodcutter had not walked past him that day many years ago.

As the oak tree became the tallest tree in the land, he started to attract popular attention. At first, the crowds were few but soon enough, the tree attracted a daily gathering of people who came to gaze upon the almighty wonder that was the oak tree.

The oak tree enjoyed seeing so many new faces and hearing so many new stories. As his roots were firmly stuck in the ground, he knew he would never move again. When the crowds started appearing, the Woodcutter was uncomfortable, he was not accustomed to seeing so many people at once but then the oak tree gave him a marvellous idea.

“This is your time, my friend,” the oak tree encouraged. “Yes, I’ve brought the crowds but take this opportunity to show them your incredible talents as a carpenter. Impress them with your skill.”

So, he did. Every day the Woodcutter took out his birch tree furnishings and laid them out for people to see. The oak tree was right. People were impressed by the Woodcutter’s skill. They were surprised to learn a simple woodcutter had a divine talent. The Woodcutter beamed with pride and smiled till his cheeks burned. However, he soon realised that while people admired and acknowledged his skill, nobody wanted to buy his work.

“Aye, this jewellery box is exquisite,” one man agreed. “But all your creations are made from birch. In comparison to the almighty oak tree, birch wood looks dull and cheap.”

The Woodcutter looked at his creations and soon enough they looked dull in his eyes too. He looked up at his friend and for the first time felt the weight of the oak tree’s shadow over him. The oak tree looked down and noticed an unfamiliar expression on the Woodcutter’s face, he asked.

“Are you well, my friend? Are you sick?”

“I’m fine,” said the Woodcutter, quietly.

“Are you sure? Your skin looks almost green.”

“I said, I’m fine,” the Woodcutter repeated, this time rather shortly. “Perhaps my skin is only green because of the light that shines from your leaves. It’s almost blinding. I’m going inside to lie down awhile.”

The oak tree watched his friend return to his home. He hoped the Woodcutter was not sick, he could not imagine a world without his dear friend. He tried to distract his mind with the smiling and enchanted crowds around him. As the oak tree entertained the crowds, he did not notice as the Woodcutter closed every single window and curtain of his house.

That night, while the oak tree slept soundly, the Woodcutter was awake. He drank every drop of alcohol he could find. He thought the drink would soothe his anger but the more he drank, the more he imagined what it would be like to attract the fame the oak tree had. He had cared for the tree since he was a sapling but no one looked at him with wonder or amazement. It was unfair.

The Woodcutter's eyes seemed to burn, his hands twitched as he reached for another bottle, he gripped it tight and was sure the bottle cracked in his hands.

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The next morning, the Woodcutter struggled to open his eyes, for his head pounded like a saw and axe, gnawed and chopped against his skull. He groaned as light seeped into his eyes, making him almost blind.

When the Woodcutter tried to rise, his hands stung terribly. He grimaced as he saw hundreds of splinters in his palms. As a woodcutter, he was often injured by tiny shards of wood but he knew these splinters were different. His hands continued to bleed and his skin was turning yellow from infection.

As he saw the bloody mess of his hands, he realised he was not lying in his bed but was lying on the ground outside with his axe beside him. The axe was blunt and cracked like it had been smashed repeatedly against rock.

The Woodcutter’s heart shuddered as he saw large chunks of broken wood upon the ground. The wood looked as if it had been ripped apart by a raging beast. He turned and could not believe what he was seeing. He shrieked at the battered and fallen remains of the oak tree. The Woodcutter scrambled to his feet and ran to the tree.

“My friend! Please, speak to me!”

The tree did not speak. There was only silence.

“What have I done?” The Woodcutter cried. “Oh, my dear friend! I listened to my jealousy. I did not mean for this to happen. I am sorry, please forgive me.”

The Woodcutter cried but the tree was silent. The Woodcutter knew his friend would never speak again. They would never talk and sing together again. The tree would never give him shade from the summer sun and the Woodcutter would never play his flute to help his friend sleep.

The Woodcutter shrieked, the pain of his loss struck him, like splinters piercing his heart. Eventually, the Woodcutter took his axe, returned to his house and closed the door so he could not see the crime that lay outside.

Later that day, when the crowds started to appear, they gasped at the remains of the fallen tree. They asked the Woodcutter what had happened. He wanted to tell them the truth but he could not utter the words, so he said,

“It was a storm. It raged through and tore the tree down.”

“That’s terrible,” one woman cried. “But it is strange, I did not hear any storm last night.”

“Perhaps the skies grew jealous of the tree and struck him down,” one man pondered. “Maybe they did not like him nearing their heavenly domain.”

The Woodcutter said nothing.

“It’s a shame to leave the tree in such a way,” another man said. “He was a glorious creation. It would be terrible to see him rot into nothing.”

That was when the Woodcutter had an idea. He knew the oak tree would never speak again but he could not bear the thought of his body wasting away.

For months, the Woodcutter chopped and sawed at the tree, he carved tables, chairs, wardrobes and many household furnishings. People were amazed by the Woodcutter’s skilful talents and he did not struggle to sell them. Furniture and objects made from the oak tree filled homes throughout the birch tree forest and were even taken abroad to other lands. In his dreams, the Woodcutter achieved some contentment at the thought his friend was no longer rooted to the ground but was able to see and travel the world.

With the last remaining sections of oak wood, the Woodcutter built himself a house. He thought building a house would bring him closer to his friend and give him some peace but over time, the Woodcutter could not dispel the guilt and sadness he felt. The splinters he had suffered from cutting down the tree remained in his hands, festering and eventually making it impossible for him to hold an axe ever again.

In the first few months of living in his new home, the Woodcutter found himself feeling weaker and suffering from illness. When he saw himself in the mirror, his skin was wrinkled, yellowed and dry. His tongue was constantly parched. No matter how much water he drank, he was always thirsty.

Sometimes, usually during the night, he would hear voices.

“Murderer...” a voice whispered. “Villain...”

The voices followed him everywhere in the house. He wondered if he was going mad. While he wished for the voices to leave him alone, he knew he deserved the torment.

The Woodcutter found it harder and harder to sleep so he would spend his nights wrapped in a blanket, sat in his chair by the embers of the fire. The warmth did not reach him but the voices always did.

“Murderer...”

The Woodcutter pressed his swollen hands against his ears, trying to block out the words.

“Murderer. Liar. Monster.”

“Stop!” The Woodcutter winced, he cried out. “Stop it, foul voices! Get out of my head. Be gone, I beg you, give me some peace.”

“I’m not in your head,” a voice replied.

The Woodcutter opened his eyes, cold sweat glazed his skin as he looked around the house. He could not see anyone but he was unable to see into the darkest corner of the room. He was not sure whether it was the fire and the shadows playing tricks or if there was really a figure dwelling in the dark, staring at him.

“W-who’s there?” The Woodcutter whimpered.

“It’s me, your friend,” the voice said. “Do you not remember, your dear companion, the oak tree?”

“Oak tree?” The Woodcutter stumbled to his feet, his knees shaking. “How are you here? You should be dead.”

“How am I here, you ask?” The oak tree’s voice was undoubtedly familiar but his sweet and friendly tone was gone. “Are you a fool? What did you expect when you chopped me up and made a house out of my corpse? I must admit, you’ve done a very fine job, people must be in awe of your fine work.”

The Woodcutter wept, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I don’t know what happened. I didn’t mean to chop you down. I was overcome with a blind rage.”

“I know. You don’t need to tell me. I wasn’t blind.” The oak tree’s voice echoed around the room. “I was very much awake when you sawed through my bark and tore apart my flesh. I begged you to

stop but you didn't listen. You chose your jealousy over any love you had for me."

"Please, forgive me," the Woodcutter fell to his knees. He held his hands out in a desperate prayer as he cried, "Please, I beg you, please give me your forgiveness."

The oak tree did not speak. The entire house fell into an uneasy silence. The Woodcutter looked around as the house started to creak.

"I came to this land because I heard such wondrous tales about it," said the oak tree, softly. "I thought I would flourish and live a peaceful life alongside the birch trees but that did not happen. I loved you and you chopped me down because you despised my success. If you want my forgiveness, I will not give it to you."

The Woodcutter sobbed.

"I wasn't going to do anything," the oak tree continued. "When I awoke from the darkness and realised I was no longer a tree but a house, *your* house, I was going to drift away into the darkness again but then I watched how you were enjoying the benefits of my fall. That was when I thought, why should you live a life of comfort when my life is bound forever in this unnatural state? I knew I had to do something. In these last few months, I've watched my plans for revenge grow."

"What do you mean?" the Woodcutter gasped. "What are you saying?"

"What causes your sickness?" The oak tree asked. "Why do the splinters in your hands never heal? What ails your body?"

The Woodcutter stared at the infected cuts in his skin. His heart slowed as he began to realise.

"I'm killing you," the oak tree whispered. "The wood in your skin is poisoning your blood. The air you breathe is full of toxic spores of my own making. I'm slowly consuming your energy. Your flesh. Your soul."

The Woodcutter shrieked, he clambered to his feet and ran.

A beautifully carved oak wood chair suddenly flew across the room, knocking the Woodcutter down. He fell and the oak wood floor gnawed on his hands and chin, chewing his flesh, making him bleed. He ran for the door and grabbed the handle but it did not budge. The oak wood door seemed to swell in the doorway, making it impossible to open. The wooden window shutters slammed shut, closing every option of escape.

The Woodcutter fell weakly as he whimpered, his body slowly draining of energy.

"I came here for a new beginning and a long, peaceful life but you stole it from me," the oak tree said. "So, I'm stealing yours. And after you're gone, I will take any life that steps across my threshold."

The Woodcutter closed his eyes and let the darkness in. In the far distance, he saw a faint bright light. As his eyes adjusted, he was sure he could see a small green sapling. The fragile plant waved at him.

The Woodcutter cried, for he knew the sapling, his friend, was truly gone, and all that remained was a terrible horror.

# Something Grim Waits Beyond The Wall

Every time Elise visited her grandmother's house, she knew there would be no happily ever after. Spending time with the old hag was always a gruelling task. Elise's grandmother was unfairly strict and she would scold her granddaughter for any minor fault.

Elise had to do exactly as she was told. For a nine-year-old who wished to explore and play, Elise's grandmother was a difficult person to cope with.

When Elise and her mother stepped across the threshold of her grandmother's house, Elise had to stop herself from covering her nose. Everything inside the crumbling cottage reeked of burnt gingerbread and soft-boiled sweets. The curtains, the cushions, and even the cats stank of overbaked sugar. To escape the overpowering smell, Elise went out into the back garden to play.

As soon as she stepped out onto the back step, her grandmother was behind her. Once again, the old woman sternly reminded Elise she was only allowed to play near the house, she was forbidden to go anywhere near the garden wall.

Elise still had memories of when she was a toddler and her grandmother scolded her for wandering too close to the wall. Elise wondered whether her grandmother was worried the high wall would fall and crush her precious grandchild but despite the wall's old age, the stones were fixed in place and showed no sign of falling down.

It was only when Elise was older, she finally realised it wasn't the wall that unsettled her grandmother but rather the silent woodland that stood behind it. She often saw her grandmother looking through the kitchen window, staring at the forest with a guarded gaze like she was expecting an incredible foe to appear. Apart from the occasional haunting hoot of a night owl, Elise did not know what was so scary about the trees. The only animals she knew that lived in the woods were foxes, badgers and squirrels. Nothing sinister.

When Elise had dared to ask her grandmother about the forest, the woman had coldly replied, "We must respect the old tales. They keep us safe."

Elise did not understand her meaning but she did as she was told anyway and stayed away from the garden wall. She didn't want to endure another scolding.

Whilst her mother and grandmother stayed inside, Elise planted herself at the top of the garden and tried to occupy herself with her grandmother's old porcelain dolls.

Elise hated dolls. Their glass eyes were constantly staring like they were watching her every move. She wanted to play with her phone or listen to her music but she knew what her grandmother would say.

*Such toys are not appropriate for little girls.*

Elise grimaced at the sound of her grandmother's voice and poked the doll in the eye.

Suddenly, in the corner of her own eye, Elise saw something fall into the overgrown grass behind her. Nervous of what it was and not eager to move closer to investigate, she craned her head to look. She hoped it wouldn't move.

Elise sighed with relief as she saw it was only a pinecone.

Confused, she glanced at the wall and then back at the pinecone. The nearest trees were beyond the wall so it was impossible for the cone to have simply fallen from a tree.

"Hello. Hello, there."

Elise followed the sound of the tender voice. A young girl, who appeared only a year or so older than Elise, peered over the top of the wall. With large eyes, pink cheeks and white teeth, the girl was

rather pretty but there was something strange about her that Elise could not point. The girl asked politely,

“Would you be kind enough to retrieve that for me?”

The girl pointed at the pinecone.

“Er, okay,” Elise said, awkwardly.

She picked up the pinecone and shuffled towards the wall. She expected her grandmother to yell from the back door but there was no sign of her. Elise knew if she was quick, her grandmother would never need to know.

It had been many years since Elise had walked so far from the cottage. As she moved closer towards the wall, she noticed the grass was deeper and the ground was uneven. Elise also noticed there were many broken and sharp twigs in the thick grass. They looked like small spears from a battlefield. It was strange how parts of the forest had managed to fall into the garden when there was a tall, stone wall between them. Elise stopped about seven steps from the wall, she looked up at the young girl.

“Thank you for bringing my pinecone back,” the girl smiled sweetly.

“What do you need it for?” Elise asked. With a forest of trees beyond the wall, she could not see why the girl needed this particular pinecone.

“I’m playing a game,” said the girl.

“Are you winning?”

“Almost.” The girl’s smile grew wider, showing all of her pearl white teeth, she chuckled, “Once I get it back, I will be victorious.”

Elise had never heard of a game involving pinecones before.

“My name is Dianthril,” the girl bowed her head politely. “Please, call me Di. What is your name?”

“Elise.”

“Elise...” Di repeated quietly, tasting each syllable, she grinned, “It is lovely to meet you, Elise.”

“Do you live around here?” Elise asked.

“Oh, yes. I live very close. This forest is practically my home,” Di gestured to the woods behind her.

Every time Elise had visited her grandmother, she had never seen any neighbours. She presumed nobody lived nearby.

“I didn’t know children lived here anymore.” Di said, her bright eyes drifted past Elise and towards the cottage and then back to the young girl. “I thought the old woman lived here alone.”

“I’m just visiting. Do you know my grandmother?”

Di nodded, “We don’t get on very well. I tried talking to another young girl, a long time ago and the old hag threw a broom at me.” Di winced, like the memory still pained her, “Since then, I never saw another child.”

Elise wasn’t sure what other little girl Di meant. Elise had no sisters and her grandmother didn’t have any other grandchildren. Elise wondered if Di meant her mother, when she was a little girl but that couldn’t be possible.

“How old are you, Di?” Elise asked.

Di blinked like the question had taken her off guard but her confusion quickly vanished and was replaced with a slow smile.

“Do you believe in faerie tales?”

To be honest, Elise loved fairy tales when she was little. She loved the idea of fairy godmothers, charming princes and brave princesses but when Elise asked her grandmother to tell her a fairy tale, the old woman snapped,

“Faerie tales are not fun stories about living happily ever after. They are lessons, lessons everyone

should learn from.”

On some occasions, her grandmother would tell her faerie tales but these were stories Elise had never heard of before and they were often sad and grim. One such story was about a little girl who ventured too far from home and in the end, she was gobbled up by a devilish creature.

Elise told her mother that her grandmother was telling scary stories but her mother just shrugged and said that’s what Grandmother was like. After that, Elise lost interest in fairy tales and when her grandmother told her stories, she tended not to listen.

“Not really,” said Elise. “My grandmother says fairy tales are lessons for people to learn from but I think they’re just made up stories for little kids.”

“Made up stories?” Di drawled as she leaned forward, “If faerie tales aren’t true, how could I be standing here?”

“What are you saying?” Elise asked, utterly confused.

“What I’m saying is…” Di watched Elise carefully. “I’m a faerie.”

Elise started to frown but as she was about to tell Di to stop being silly, she began to realise Di’s skin was a dull grey, her eyes shined almost violet and her sharp ears cut through her hair. Di was no ordinary girl at all, she was something else.

“You can’t be…” Elise gasped. “You must be joking.”

“I’m not joking,” Di laughed softly. “I truly am a faerie. I have magic. I can make wishes come true. I can make *your* wishes come true.”

“Really?” Elise could not quite believe what she was hearing.

“Of course,” Di tapped her nails on the wall like she was playing a tune. “Come over this wall and I’ll make all your dreams come true. Anything you ask for will be yours.”

Elise stepped forward, the idea of having any dream come true, well, was like a dream come true. However, as Elise looked up at the wall, she remembered her grandmother. Elise murmured, weakly.

“I can’t.”

“Why not?” Di’s smile was gone.

“I can’t go over the wall. My grandmother would kill me. Can you come over here?”

“Ignorant child,” Di snapped. “Don’t you think I would have already if it was possible?”

Elise flinched and stepped back, she felt the words as if they had been slapped across her cheek. Di seemed to realise she had gone too far, she cleared her throat like she was dispelling a small cough.

“I’m sorry, Elise.” Her voice was tender and sweet again. “Please forgive me. I would come over if I could.” Her eyes flicked over to the cottage and then back at Elise, “I understand you’re a good little girl and don’t want to upset your grandmother. Don’t worry. I won’t ask you to come over the wall again. However, can I ask for one small request? If it’s not too much trouble.”

“Sure,” Elise said.

“Can you return my pinecone to me?”

“Okay.” Elise smiled, she took a step back and raised her arm. She was an excellent thrower but before she had the chance to impress.

“Please, don’t!” Di cried. “Don’t throw it. That pinecone is awfully precious to me, it has something I need so desperately.” Elise looked at the pinecone in her hand. It seemed so ordinary. Di patted the top of the wall, “Please, can you come up here and give it to me? I’m not asking you to go over the wall, just climb up. Please, I would be forever grateful.”

Elise glanced back nervously to the cottage. She couldn’t see the haunting shape of her grandmother in the windows. Elise knew she was not going to go over the wall. She was simply climbing up, giving Di the pinecone and climbing back down again. Her grandmother would never have to know she was anywhere near the wall.

Wild ivy and moss seeped through the cracks of the bricks and despite their attempts to unsettle

the brickwork, the wall remained strong. Finding a nook for her foot, Elise started the climb. Di watched her as she climbed up the stones. Elise did not realise how high the wall was until she made it to the top. She had to stop herself from looking down.

“There, I can see you better now,” Di murmured, her purple eyes narrowed as the edge of her lips curled into a wicked smile. Now she was closer, Elise noticed Di’s nails were perfectly sharp and beneath her smile, she was sure she could see many sharp, canine teeth. Eager to climb back down, she reached over the wall and offered the pinecone.

“Here it is.”

Di watched Elise’s hand, her eyes began to smile and her grin sharpened as she said quietly, “It’s been such a long time since I’ve been this close to a child.”

Before Elise could react, a terrible scream wrenched her gaze back to the cottage. Her grandmother was running towards them, her grey hair flailed behind her as she cried something unintelligible.

“Do you know the purpose of faerie tales, little Elise?” Di’s whisper was cold against her ear. Elise turned to the faerie as she felt a hand latch around her wrist. The grip was tight like a trap snatching a rabbit. Elise dropped the pinecone in fear. Di did not care, her purple eyes were maliciously bright as she stared at the girl. “Faerie tales were created to keep little children safe from folk like us.”

Elise did not have time to scream as Di dragged her helpless body over the wall. As soon as she was over the other side, her eyes met thousands of grim eyes staring straight back at her and beneath them, she could see thousands of teeth, razor sharp and happy to meet her.

# Strangers In The Woods

Annabelle was always cautious when she journeyed through the woods. From the moment she could walk and wander the lands beyond her home, her parents warned her about the dangers that could be found in the woods.

“There are many strangers who wander the woods,” her mother said. “It’s important to be wary of who you meet.”

Her father agreed, “Being wary and cautious is good but you need to determine friend from foe. Villains are rather cunning, so you need to be wise, my dear Annabelle.”

Despite the warnings about the woods, many folk travelled through them. Most of the time, people came out unscathed but there were times where some were never seen again.

Annabelle always tried to avoid venturing through the woodland. Even though it took her an extra couple of hours to reach town, she often took the long beaten road around the trees instead so she did not have to go through.

However, on this particular day, Annabelle knew she would have to tread through the woods to make it home before dark. If there was one thing Annabelle feared more than the woods, it was the dark.

As Annabelle stood on the threshold of the dark woods, she reached into her basket and felt the reassuring touch of a wooden baton. When she told her friend Cecily she would be taking the woodland path home, Cecily gave her the baton and said,

“I agree, it’s only a small thing but this blunt club will take any harmful stranger by surprise. Be careful and be wary, my friend.”

At first, Annabelle felt silly for taking the baton but now that she held it in her basket as she watched the woods, it was reassuring.

Annabelle glanced at the setting sun. Knowing she could not waste another minute loitering, she started walking. Within minutes, she lost sight of the town behind her and was surrounded by dark, towering trees. Annabelle walked fast but made sure to tread carefully and quietly. She certainly did not want to attract anyone’s attention.

The woods were quiet. While Annabelle felt her heart thunder in her chest, she tried her best to resist the temptation to run. Running increased the risk of a fall or an injury. Suffering an injury in the woods would make her the perfect prey for a stranger with sinister intentions. She had to remain calm. She knew she would be home soon, warm and safe by the fireplace.

It was not long, barely ten minutes, when Annabelle heard a noise behind her. She did not stop to listen but she was sure they were footsteps. Swift, scratching steps upon the dry earth. Trying to swallow her fear, Annabelle reached a tentative hand inside her basket and gripped the baton. As the steps drew closer, louder, she stopped and turned around.

A few feet away, stood a fox.

The ginger fox wore a patterned cap, simple pair of linen trousers and a pale yellow jacket. A fresh dandelion peeked out of his chest pocket. The hairs around his jaws were trimmed finely and even the hair upon his head had been combed back.

The fox rose onto his hind legs, took off his cap and bowed, swishing his tail as he did.

“How do you do?” The fox said, politely.

Annabelle bowed her head politely too but she did not utter a word. Foxes were supposedly sly creatures devoted entirely to tricking and stealing. The fox gazed at her with amber eyes, his button

nose twitched as he asked,

“Are you lost, miss?”

“No, sir,” Annabelle said.

“Are you sure? It’s rare to find a young woman wandering so deep in the woods, especially at such a late hour. If you wish, I can accompany you and help you safely home.” The fox offered his paw.

“No, thank you.” Annabelle took a step back, her hand tightened on the baton inside her basket. “I’m following the path home, where I live with my mother and father, and my many brothers.”

“Many brothers? How many?”

“Seven. And they are all hunters. Big, strong hunters,” Annabelle lied. She had one brother and he was still an infant, not yet strong enough to lift an axe.

“Oh,” the fox said, startled. All the hairs on his chin seemed to stand on their ends. Stories about foxes and hunters never ended well. The fox stepped back as he said,

“Well, I won’t delay you any further. I’m sorry if I frightened you, miss. I only wanted to help.”

With that, the fox bobbed his head, dropped onto his four paws and scampered away. Annabelle waited until she could no longer see his ginger tail before releasing her hardened grip on the baton and continued along the path.

Minutes after her encounter with the fox, she did feel a little foolish and rude for the way she had treated him. He did not threaten her, in fact he had offered to help her and yet she had threatened him. Perhaps she had been wrong about the fox. However, as she thought about it some more, she remembered the importance of being wary in the woods.

Suddenly, Annabelle stopped. The sound was faint but Annabelle knew she was not imagining it. She could hear scratching. Her mind thought of a hard bristle brush rubbing against stone. The scratching grew louder, faster, closer.

Annabelle did not hesitate, she ran. Clutching a tight hold of her basket, she ran along the path. She did not dare to look back, she feared her heart would burst if she saw what horror chased her. The menacing scratching drew closer. Annabelle was sure she felt sharp hairs scratching against her neck.

She dashed around a tree, screaming with absolute terror as she crashed into someone. The collision forced her and the stranger onto the ground, and her basket fell from her hand. Slightly dazed and holding her head, Annabelle started,

“I’m sorry, I-” Annabelle stopped.

The stranger she had crashed into slowly rose onto his hind legs, his powerful paws crunched on the broken bits of branches and his muscular body towered over her as he stood tall, at almost two meters. His charcoal fur was mostly hidden beneath his dark navy suit but nothing concealed the size and truth of the wolf’s face. Annabelle gazed up at the wolf, unable to think, unable to breathe.

The wolf’s snout wrinkled as he drew a wide smile and bowed smoothly.

“It should be I who must apologise. I wasn’t watching where I was walking.” The wolf chuckled, “To be honest, I was not expecting someone to come running towards me like Terror was chasing them. Are you alright?”

The wolf offered his large paw to help Annabelle up, she glanced at it and scrambled to her feet without aid.

“I am fine,” she said, quietly. She grabbed her basket and stepped back from the wolf, “I am sorry for charging into you but I must be going.”

“What’s the matter?” The wolf asked, concerned. He seemed sincere. “You poor thing, you look absolutely terrified.”

The wolf took a step towards her, Annabelle took four back. She reached a trembling hand into her basket.

“I’m not going to hurt you.” The wolf did not take another step, his tail grazed the forest floor

behind him, scratching against the dead autumn leaves. The same scratching sound Annabelle was sure she had heard minutes ago.

“Were you...” Annabelle stammered, “Were you following me?”

“Excuse me?” The wolf frowned, “What are you suggesting? That I followed and terrorised a young woman through the woods. You insult me, miss!”

The wolf crossed his arms and looked away, clearly insulted. Annabelle took a deep breath and stepped carefully around him, she said,

“I apologise if I offended you but I must be on my way.”

“Wait,” the wolf took her arm, his claws pressed roughly into her skin. Annabelle winced at the foul stench of his breath and his sharp pale teeth. The wolf looked around the forest as he said, “If you thought someone was following you, I will gladly accompany you the rest of the way through the forest. No one would dare threaten you with me by your side.”

“No,” Annabelle said, she pulled away from the wolf. She did not trust him whatsoever. While he did act like a gentleman, she could not forget the stories she had heard about wolves. They prowled in the shadows and tore families apart, figuratively and physically speaking.

The wolf blinked, clearly taken back by Annabelle’s tone but he was not easily dissuaded.

“Please, miss. It’s no trouble on my part to accompany you. I would not want to see any harm befall you in the woods. Cunning and terrible creatures linger in the dark.” He reached for her again. “Please, let me accompany you.”

“I said, no!” Annabelle tore the baton from her basket and raised it over her head. “I want you to leave me alone.”

The wolf raised his paws defensively and staggered back, he gasped,

“Lady, I did not mean to scare you. I was only trying to help.”

“That’s what you say but you’re a stranger. I don’t know you and you don’t know me. How can I trust you? And you’re also a...” Annabelle looked away from the wolf. “I want you to leave me be.”

“I see.” Pain flickered across the wolf’s face as he turned away and fell onto his four paws. He looked back at Annabelle once more as he said, “I understand it’s important to be cautious around strangers but please know that not all wolves are wicked. Some of us are kind gentlemen who would offer a friendly paw to a stranger in need.” The wolf bowed his head and said, “Good day, miss.”

The wolf bounded into the woods and within seconds, Annabelle lost sight of his smart navy suit. She lowered her baton and returned it to her basket. She looked around the forest, fearful the wolf would suddenly reappear and attack but there was no one, no sound, only her, standing alone in the woods.

Annabelle started along the path again, the wolf’s words lingered in her mind. She did feel harsh for the way she had treated the wolf and the fox but she believed it best to be wary of any stranger she met along the way. Even if the wolf and the fox were smartly dressed and acted like gentlemen, they were still strangers.

The forest grew steadily darker. Annabelle could barely see the setting sun through the trees. She increased her pace, hoping she would get home and shut the door behind her by the time the sun had finished for the day.

Annabelle stopped again. She thought she was imagining it but she knew her mind was not playing tricks on her. She could hear scratching, the same sound she had heard earlier. The image of the wolf’s tail brushing against the dry leaves flashed in Annabelle’s mind and she broke into a run.

*That terrible, terrible wolf,* she thought.

Wolves enjoyed the excitement of a chase. She wished she had hit the wolf now. It may have deterred him from coming after her.

The scratching grew louder. Annabelle was sure she could see something moving in the branches.

She kept her focus on the path, only the path.

Her lungs burned, her legs begged her to stop but she did not dare. In the distance, she could see light seeping through the trees. She was almost home. As Annabelle looked away from the path, her foot caught on a root, she fell through the air and tumbled across the ground.

Annabelle cried as a throbbing pain shot down her leg and blood soaked through her sock.

“Oh, my! You, poor dear!”

Annabelle looked up and found a beautiful young lady. Dressed in a white lace gown, the lady’s silver curls flowed beneath her delicate bonnet. She held an intricately webbed parasol over her pale face. Without a doubt, she was the most beautiful woman Annabelle had ever seen. Her skin was like polished ivory, the faintest hint of rose pink bloomed on her cheeks while a vibrant rose red coloured her lips.

The lady almost dropped her parasol as she scurried over to Annabelle.

“Are you hurt? When I saw you fly through the trees I thought something awful had happened! Oh my gosh, you’re bleeding.”

As the lady tried to dab Annabelle’s leg with a very fine handkerchief, Annabelle looked behind her. She could see nothing and hear nothing. Had she imagined a pursuer? Perhaps the woods were playing tricks on her.

“I’m fine, miss,” Annabelle attempted to stand but her ankle shuddered under her weight.

“Come here, let me help you,” the woman said as she wrapped an arm around Annabelle.

“Please, I wouldn’t want to ruin your clothes,” Annabelle tried to pull away. She was covered in dirt. The thought of ruining the lady’s fine clothes felt unforgivable. “I’m almost home. I can make it.”

“I could not possibly leave you out here alone,” the woman smiled warmly. “I don’t live far from here either, it would be no trouble at all.”

“Very well, thank you for your kindness,” Annabelle said, she was so relieved when the lady took her arm over her shoulder. It was so nice to take the weight off her ankle.

The lovely woman half-carried Annabelle along the path. She noticed Annabelle’s basket.

“Here, let me carry it for you.”

Before Annabelle could resist, the lady took the basket under her arm while she supported Annabelle with the other. The lady’s brown eyes were almost ebony and they gleamed as she smiled.

“You looked so terrified when I found you,” said the lady. “What happened?”

Annabelle told the lady about her encounters with the fox and the wolf. The woman listened intently and when Annabelle finished her tale, she murmured,

“Wolves are troublesome beasts. They always put their snouts where it doesn’t belong. I’m glad I’ve never had to face one. You must have been so frightened.”

“I was,” Annabelle admitted. “But, what are you doing out in the woods alone?”

The young woman smiled at her as she said,

“My family’s dinner table looked rather bare so I thought I’d go out and find something more appetising. It’s surprising what you can find in the woods.”

Annabelle was surprised to hear a woman as finely dressed as her was forced to go out and find food. Did she not have servants to do that kind of work for her?

Annabelle started to smile as she saw a familiar shape through the trees. Her family’s house. It was an old stone cottage, the front door needed a fresh coat of paint, the cold wind often blew through the cracks in the stone and the roof had a habit of leaking but she was so relieved to see it all again.

“Thank you, miss,” Annabelle began. “I can travel the rest of the way home by myself, thank you again.”

Annabelle tried to pull her arm but found it stuck. As Annabelle looked, she noticed her arm was caught on the lady’s dress. The white lace had managed to thread itself around her arm. She tried to tug

it free but the strands were strong and did not stretch. The lady spoke softly,

“I could not possibly let you wander through the woods alone, imagine what terrible strangers you may encounter.”

Annabelle looked at the woman’s face and shrieked. Instead of two eyes, there were four. Suddenly, another four dark eyes appeared. All eight eyes blinked as the woman smiled, showing her sharp fangs. She threw Annabelle’s basket on the ground. The baton flew out. The woman gripped Annabelle tightly,

“I was lucky the wolf found you first, otherwise you could have hit me with that foul club of yours. It’s useless to you now, all the way over there.”

Annabelle tried to pull away but the woman’s dress was threading around her, around her waist, her shoulders, making it impossible to pull away. Beneath the lady’s skirts, long pale legs sprouted out, lifting the woman higher until all eight legs dug into the ground.

The lady held Annabelle’s face as she grinned,

“Nobody can help you now. You would have been better off letting the fox or the wolf accompany you. They would have seen you safely home to your family while I am more interested in seeing my family is properly fed.”

Annabelle looked up. The trees swayed as creatures scratched through the trees, staring at her with hungry, dark eyes. She screamed and fought but it did not matter. She was trapped in the lady’s web.

“It’s a pity the strong hunters you call brothers are not here,” the woman laughed. “You really should be wary of the strangers you meet in the woods.”

At that, the spiders leapt down and enjoyed their feast.



# Love Makes The Heart Sing

Violet felt bland.

To be honest, she struggled to find the right words to describe how she felt. If she had to, she'd probably say, she felt like a potato pie without any spice or flavour. Anyone who tried it would simply shrug and say,

“It's fine, nothing offensive, nothing extraordinary, it's just fine.”

That's exactly how Violet felt. Violet felt simple, ordinary, bland. In looks, she had nothing unique about her. She was sure her personality had nothing special about it either. I know it seems harsh to say such things but that's how Violet felt.

She had accepted the fact that her friends attracted attention from respectable gentlemen while she remained in the shadows. She was the goose amongst swans. Her friends had tried to powder her face and style her hair but Violet hated it when people tried to change her. If she was bland, she would be bland. That was fine.

While many of her friends found love and married, Violet remained single. When Violet started her thirties, her mother claimed she still had time to find love but Violet had accepted she may never find it. Rather than forsake her life dwelling about it, she kept herself busy, helping her family and working in a nearby candle shop. She was making a fine living for herself. Violet was content.

On one fine evening, her friend Cora dragged her out to a concert. According to Cora, there was a new talented violinist in town who Violet had to see. Even though Violet tried to dig her heels into the ground, for she had never been keen on musicians, Cora's persistence dragged her all the way to the theatre.

A large crowd had already gathered inside by the time they arrived. This was quite unusual. While plays and concerts were regularly produced, they rarely attracted such attention. Cora found them some space near the back which gave them a good view over the crowd.

Minutes later, the lanterns around the theatre dimmed, all except the candles around the stage. The audience fell silent as a figure stepped out from the darkness and into the light.

The violinist was a tall, slender fellow. His golden hair was loosely tied back with ribbon, all except a short curl which dangled above his eyes. While he wore a smart dark suit, his clothes were creased like he had been asleep only minutes ago. He smiled at the crowd but it wasn't a proud or obnoxious smile but an appreciative one, he was touched such a large crowd had come to watch him.

He lifted his violin. It seemed like an ordinary instrument but as the candlelight shined on the violin, Violet noticed dozens of bright, beautiful scarlet curls traced along the woodwork. The curls weaved together like an ocean of red roses.

The violinist bowed to the crowd and brought the violin to his shoulder. He rested his chin against its body and held the delicate hairs of the bow upon the strings. The entire crowd took a deep breath as they waited in trepidation. Violet had never seen the crowd so entranced by a single musician.

Suddenly, the violinist brought down his bow in one swift stroke. A beautiful song erupted from the violin. Violet snapped her gaze, her attention, at the violinist. The violinist paused for a moment, he gazed around the room, making sure everyone was watching. When he was convinced every eye was on him, he began.

The violinist played, releasing an extraordinary concert of music. The slender fellow barely had any muscle on him and yet he played with such speed and ferocity. He could have been a swordsman fighting his final duel. Without a doubt, the violinist had talent but the violin possessed an ethereal

voice. Violet was sure she had never heard such an incredible sound, no instrument had ever touched her heart before. The entire crowd was silent like they had fallen under a spell. Violet doubted even a call bellowing ‘Fire!’ would be able to tear them away from the musician.

Hours swirled by and the violinist finally played his final song. A tender piece about love. Each string on the violin sang and each note plucked Violet’s heart. She watched the violinist, amazed and mesmerised.

As the violinist played his last note, he smiled to the audience and bowed. The entire crowd woke from their spell and exploded into an applause. The violinist blushed, he smiled shyly.

Violet took a deep breath. She couldn’t recall breathing at all during the entire performance. Cora tugged at her arm and whispered about how incredibly wonderful it all was. As the crowd chatted in excitement, Violet jumped as she realised the violinist was gazing straight at her. She looked away but when she looked again, his gaze was still on her.

Her heart stammered and her cheeks burned. It must be a mistake, she thought. The theatre was so dark it would surely be impossible for someone to see her standing at the back. Rather than think about it any further, Violet made her way outside.

Other theatregoers were leaving as Violet stepped out into the warm night air and started walking home. As Cora gushed and babbled about the violin performance, Violet tried to forget the violinist. She felt foolish for getting so giddy about a young man, especially when nothing had actually happened. He probably wasn’t even looking at her, she was being a hopeless romantic, tangling the truth.

Violet had almost forgotten the violinist’s face when he suddenly ran into her path. There was sweat on his brow and his cheeks were pink from running. Had he ran all the way from the stage to find her?

*Certainly not, don’t be a fool,* Violet thought to herself.

“Hello,” the violinist smiled sheepishly. Violet looked around to check he was definitely talking to her. He blushed, “Forgive me, for addressing you when I’m in such a state.”

The violinist tried to straighten his suit, he explained, “I could not let you go without saying hello and asking for your name.” He gazed at Violet. She did not speak, she did not know what to say. He chuckled awkwardly, “I’ve said hello. Could I possibly have your name?”

Violet stared at him until Cora elbowed her sharply in the ribs, she jumped,

“My name is Violet.”

“Violet,” he smiled. “My name is Reid. Oliver Reid. May I call upon you sometime?”

Violet did not know what to say, she had never been asked before. In all honesty, she could not quite believe this charming fellow was even speaking to her. So, Cora answered for her, she told Reid that Violet worked in the candle shop and he should meet her there tomorrow.

Reid said goodnight and he walked away with a joyful skip in his step. Cora wrapped an arm around Violet and they continued on their way. Violet looked back. She smiled as she saw Reid had stopped to look back at her too.

The next day, Reid arrived at the candle shop just before closing time. All day, Violet had doubted he would show so when the doorbell chimed and he entered the shop, Violet nearly dropped the box of candles she was carrying.

They stayed in the shop, talking mainly about candles. Violet did not know what to say and Reid struggled to get out a sentence without his nerves taking over. As the sun finally began to set, Violet started to light some candles to fend the darkness away. She dared herself to ask.

“Why? Why have you taken an interest in me?”

Reid blinked, surprised, “Why do you ask me such a question?”

“Because I’m...” Bland, she wanted to say. Violet continued, “I don’t see why you would be interested in a girl like me. The way you played yesterday, you’re talented, you could have any girl you

wanted.”

Reid chuckled, he held her hand in his, his skin was so tender and warm against her cold skin.

“I don’t know how I could because the only girl I saw at the concert last night was you.” Reid smiled, his silver eyes gazed into hers. This time there was no quiver or uncertainty in his voice, “I saw your face in the darkness and I could not look away, I feared if I did, I would lose you entirely. You are my light, my flame, and I’m a mere moth drawn to you.”

Hearing those words, all the walls of self-doubt Violet had placed around herself seemed to fall down. She did not shy or turn away when he leaned in and kissed her. With Reid, she did not feel bland at all, she felt much more than an ordinary candle, she felt like a star, shining and bright.

Over the weeks that followed, Violet saw Reid every day, and every day she knew she was steadily falling in love with him. Cora and all her friends said she was a picture of love. Her heart seemed to swell constantly with a boiling heat she could not calm. She watched him at all his concerts and afterwards they sneaked away into the woods where he played for her there.

One night beneath a new full moon, Reid played a sweet, gentle song. A song he had written for her. Violet sat against a tree, watching him in the glow of the moonlight. When he finished, he sat beside her.

“It was beautiful,” Violet whispered.

“Thank you,” Reid smiled, he looked away for a moment. “Shall I tell you my secret?”

He rested his violin on his knees. The red twirls in the wood seemed duller than the last time Violet had seen them. Reid ran his finger tenderly along the paintwork.

“It’s not the years of experience that makes a violinist better than another. It’s the emotion the musician plays with. You can play an instrument perfectly but it’s the emotion that gives it the power to reach others, to touch their hearts.”

“What do you play with?” Violet asked.

Reid gazed at her as he smiled, “Love.”

They kissed under the stars until Reid pulled away to ask her if she would marry him. Violet could not believe it, she said yes and kissed him again.

She finally rose and gazed up at the stars, feeling just as bright. She held a hand over her beating heart. She was sure her heart had swelled three times more. Reid had a gift, he was able to pluck softly on her heartstrings.

“I have never felt so happy,” Violet confessed. “I thought I was living a fine life but falling in love with you has made me realise how bare I was. Now I feel so alive, my heart is so full, so full of love.”

“I’m glad.” Reid wrapped his arms around her in a loving embrace, his warm breath brushed against her neck as he whispered, “After all, love is what makes the heart sing.”

“I feel like it could sing forever. I wish you could hear it.” Violet looked down and watched their reflection in a small pool of water. The water showed a perfect watercolour, she wished she could frame it.

“I’m sure I will,” Reid murmured into her ear. “My dear, lovely Violet. I promise everyone will hear your beautiful song in the end.”

Violet froze as she stared into the pool and saw Reid lift his arm into the air. With a sharp, silver blade in his hand, he struck down without hesitation and then Violet fell into the darkness.

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The crowd begged for him to appear, they were hungry to hear him. Reid finished changing into his suit and ran a hand through his hair. He had to cancel the last three performances after what happened in the woods with Violet.

Reid wished there had been another way but it was a necessary sacrifice.

*Yes, a necessary sacrifice*, he thought to himself as he listened to the cries of the audience beyond his dressing room.

Compared to the other girls, Violet had been kind and sweet. Despite her bland features, Reid had grown rather fond of her. However, he knew the first time he saw her, she was something extraordinary. How she watched him play, how she smiled and her cheeks warmed as he threw glances at her. He knew immediately she had never fallen in love before and a heart like that was certainly a rare jewel indeed.

Reid checked his reflection in the mirror. He wore a black suit. A sign of respect and mourning for his dear love. He was the only one mourning her, nobody knew what awful fate she had suffered and nobody would ever know. Reid had made sure her body would never be discovered.

He moved over to the table and gazed at his violin. The red strokes and swirls along the woodwork were lovely and bright. He tapped his nail on each of the strings, they sang lightly against his touch. Reid smiled in awe, these were the finest strings he had ever found.

The heartstrings of his dear Violet.

Nowadays, Oliver Reid had a reputation as an extraordinary violinist but before then, he was just a simple musician. He could play perfectly but his music failed to touch the hearts and minds of those around him. Most people who heard him thought he was rather bland.

Well, that was until young Reid had an idea.

A terribly, bloody idea.

While Reid struggled to change, he knew he could improve his instrument. He decided to replace the strings of his violin with heartstrings, strings drawn from hearts made ripe by love. During his journey across the world, he found loveless souls, romanced them and then finally plucked their hearts. It was a bloody and messy business, taking the hearts, disposing the bodies and then applying the new strings to his violin but it was always worth it in the end. His audiences loved him.

The only downfall was that heartstrings never lasted very long. He had to hunt down new hearts to replace the old and rotting strings.

However, this time, once Violet's heartstrings tired, Reid decided he would retire too, he had enough money and an impressive reputation. What more did he need? He would live out his life and nobody would discover his sinister secret.

Reid picked up his violin and made his way to the stage. The crowd was covered by darkness and the lanterns glowed around him. He raised his violin and pressed his bow upon the heartstrings, they tingled against the weight. Reid smiled and began.

The crowd were in awe as he played, he glanced around the room at the townsfolk and the nobles that watched him. They did not know the truth that he wasn't the one responsible for the lovely sound, it all belonged to his sweet Violet. Now Reid knew what she was feeling that night beneath the moon, before he...

"Why?"

A voice sang. Reid stopped mid-note, he looked around, he wondered who could be so rude to interrupt his performance. The crowd looked as confused as he was. He lifted his violin and started playing again.

"Why, Reid? Why?"

Reid stopped, almost dropping the violin. He knew the voice. It was Violet's.

He looked around the room but he could not see her, he knew it was impossible. Suddenly, the violin started to tremble.

"Why did you hurt me, Reid?" Violet asked, her voice tingled along the strings.

The crowd murmured, they were not sure whether this was part of the performance. Reid hissed at the violin.

“Be quiet.”

Without wasting a second, Reid started to play again. He played loudly, vivaciously, smothering Violet’s whispers. The crowd gradually forgot the strange occurrence and began to smile and enjoy his music again. Reid closed his eyes, he rocked with each stroke of the bow and moved with the rhythm of the song.

Suddenly, Reid felt a warm, thick liquid wet his fingers. He opened his eyes and could not believe what he was seeing. Blood oozed along the body of the violin soaking his hands and his shirt. While he was stunned, his body managed to continue playing. He was sure he was imagining it all.

“Why did you hurt me, Reid?” Violet’s voice weaved with the music. “I loved you and this is how you treat me. You stole my heart, threw away my body and abused my love!”

The crowd gasped in horror. Reid stopped, he pulled the dripping violin away from him. In the crowd, a young woman pushed to the front.

“That’s my dear friend, Violet! I know her voice,” Cora cried. “She has been missing for days.”

The entire crowd paled, they looked at each other, uttering whether this was a trick or truly a spirit from beyond.

“Do you want to confess or shall I share the truth, my dear Reid?” Violet spoke through the violin, the strings quivered with each word. “Oliver Reid was my lover and also my murderer. For years, he has stolen his lovers’ hearts and used them to craft strings for his violin.”

“Silence!” Reid snapped, he looked around, the crowd’s admiration for him was slowly turning to disgust.

“You hoped the truth would be silent forever or at least until long after you were dead. Laws and justice cannot reach a dead man but I certainly won’t let you flee while I dwell in the dark.” The violin began to shake violently in Reid’s hands, he could feel her anger. Violet said aloud, “The other men and women you killed, never saw your betrayal. They died innocent. While my final memory is witnessing you raise that cold, cruel dagger. I saw you killing me.”

Reid wanted to throw the violin and run but his body seemed to be ignoring him. The bleeding violin was frozen to his hand. The crowd stared at him as if he was holding the bloody dagger and they had caught him in the act. Violet said,

“I don’t know the law and I know I’m not fit to judge you so they will decide your fate but I will at least be sure you will never hurt another loving heart again.”

Suddenly, one of the heartstrings snapped and cut through Reid’s right hand, the hand that had taken Violet’s life. All his fingers and thumb fell to the ground. Reid released a painful cry. Two more heartstrings snapped and they took both of his eyes. Reid tried to shield his bleeding eyes as the final string snapped and tore through his other hand, taking the rest of his little limbs.

Without his eyes or his fingers, he would never play again and he would never harm another life.

As Violet’s spirit ascended, she smiled at Reid’s terrible situation and at the crowd that climbed up the stage to take him away, to whatever punishment they decided.

# The Witch and the Child

Colette skipped joyfully along the woodland path. Wearing her favourite periwinkle slippers, she hummed a sweet song under her breath and carried a basket of fresh pies on her arm. Her delicate dress was void of any dirt, her curls were perfect and her skin was free of blemishes or marks. She truly was a beautiful and innocent young child.

When it came to Colette, there was always a skip in her step. Since she was small, all kind of folk observed how cheerful Colette was. She was always smiling, singing and skipping because she had every reason to, she was a child, she did not have to fear life's worries and troubles. She never cursed, she spoke politely and always respected the people she met. Truly, there was no fault. Colette was a good child.

It was a warm, summer afternoon and Colette made her way home through the woods. She had been told many times to be careful.

Folk claimed witches wandered the woods, hoping to steal children for their supper. Only small children though. Witches were never interested in children older than ten. Apparently, the meat was too mature for their delicate palates. Despite the warnings, Colette followed the sunlight path through the trees and skipped along. Her beautiful curls bounced at her shoulders as she sang loudly,

“Little skylark, lovely little skylark,  
Little skylark, I'll pluck your feathers off.”

Colette leapt over a fallen tree and twirled around with her basket, she sang louder and louder. She wanted everyone in the woods to hear her song.

“I'll pluck the feathers off your head.  
Off your head!  
Little lark! Oh!”

As Colette opened her mouth to begin the next verse, she suddenly caught her foot on a rock and she hit the ground hard. Stones and sharp earth cut into her skin. While she was tempted to scream and curse, she breathed through her clenched teeth and blinked away her tears. Only her knees were bleeding and the cuts were shallow. She tried to smile, she was not far from home, she would be fine.

“Oh, dearie!” An old voice cried, “Are you alright?”

Colette turned around and saw a dishevelled crone standing about six steps away. The crone seemed ancient with her brittle grey hair and dry, flaking, freckled skin. Despite her tall shape, her face and hands revealed hardly any meat on her bones like she was a skeleton beneath her heavy dark robes.

It was the hag's teeth and nails that most captured Colette's attention, they were yellow and, surprisingly, very sharp. They reminded Colette of the rats she sometimes saw scurrying along the floor of her house. She didn't mind rats, she often gave them bits of her supper despite her mother's protests.

“Yes, I'm fine. Thank you,” Colette smiled.

“Dearie, your legs are all cut up and bloody.” The crone shuffled closer. She reached out a bony finger and pointed her sharp nail at the blood trickling from Colette's knees, she asked, “Does it hurt, sweet thing?”

“A little,” Colette admitted. “But it's alright. I'm not far from home, I'm sure my mother will tend to them for me.”

Colette reached for her fallen basket but the hag grabbed it first.

*Gosh, she is fast,* Colette thought.

“Oh, no. I can't let you limp home like an injured lamb,” said the crone, sympathetically. “My

home is not far, I can tend to your cuts with my poultices and bandages there. Come, come.”

The crone started to shuffle away. Colette thought about it, she was touched that a stranger would offer such kindness, however, she shook her head sadly,

“You’re very kind but my mother says I must never go off with strangers, especially strangers in the woods, for they could be witches in disguise.”

“Witches in disguise!” The crone rattled with laughter, “You must see, my dearie. I’m not a witch. Look at me, I am so old and weak, I’m practically harmless. A sharp wind could knock me down.”

The crone released another wicked cackle. Colette smiled. The crone was right, she seemed harmless and her laughter reminded Colette of her grandmother. Her gran tended to cackle loudly whenever she drank too much ale. She was certainly a barrel of laughs.

“Alright,” Colette said. “I will go with you but I cannot be long, my family is expecting me.”

The crone passed Colette her basket and led the way off the path and deeper into the woods. Colette followed. As they walked, she looked around, trying to remember the trees she passed so she could later return to the path safely. The crone noticed.

“Don’t worry, dearie. I will bring you back to the path. For now, focus on your footing, it would be a shame if you tripped again. I doubt I would be able to carry you, especially with this weak and brittle body of mine. I’d have to drag you. Ha!”

Colette did exactly as she was told and watched her footing, following a few steps behind the old hag. The crone easily stepped and navigated through the trees.

When Colette paused to catch her breath, she noticed how the crone managed to walk without disturbing any of the fallen leaves and branches, she moved as silently as a ghost. Colette wished she had such talents, if she did, she could sneak up on her ginger cat, who was called Ginger, and give her a fright.

The crone’s house was at the bottom of a steep hill and nestled between some trees. Colette doubted anyone would be able to find it unless the crone showed them the way.

Inside, the house was as dark as a cave even though there was still daylight outside. It took some time for Colette’s eyes to finally settle to the darkness so she could see what was inside.

Filth covered the place, it was like a fog over the windows, making it almost impossible to see out. Dirty clothes lay everywhere. Colette doubted the house had ever been cleaned, she would have been surprised to find a bar of soap.

Strangely, by the door, there was a pile of shoes, shoes that were too small for the crone’s feet. A pair of blue slippers stuck out from the pile.

Colette saw a small fire burning in the fireplace. Above the fire, there was a dirty cauldron. Colette had a quick peek, the pot was almost empty apart from some small meat remains. The entire house smelled of something rancid and the smell clung to her stomach, unsettling her breakfast. She did not want to upset or insult the crone by covering her nose so she did her best to breathe through her mouth.

“Up, up, up,” the crone patted the kitchen table. “Sit here so I can tend to your wounds.”

Colette did as she was told. She dangled her legs over the edge of the table while the crone collected some bandages. As she waited, Colette looked up and noticed on the shelves there were dozens of dirty jars, all filled with dark liquids. In one jar, Colette saw it was filled with bones.

*Small bones.*

Colette supposed the crone liked to collect and keep things. She was probably a hoarder. It was the only explanation for her strange array of objects around the house.

The crone brought a bowl of water and dabbed Colette’s knees with a wet cloth. Colette winced, she tried to pull away but the crone held her knee still, in a hard, firm grip.

“Be still, dearie. I must clean it or it will become infected. We wouldn’t want you to become sick

now, would we?" The crone grinned. Colette noticed some pink meat stuck between the hag's teeth. Rather than embarrass the old woman, Colette smiled sweetly and said nothing. The crone sighed,

"You were lucky I found you or you would have had to limp all the way home. A fox or a wolf could have caught your scent and gobbled you up."

"I feel very lucky. Some people might have ignored me," said Colette. "You're one of the kindest people I've ever met."

"Oh," the crone tried to resist another sharp grin. "Aren't you a lovely little thing?"

Colette smiled, she looked around the house as the crone patted some ointment onto her knees. It smelled like vinegar and made Colette's eyes water, she tried to distract herself as she asked,

"Do you live out here alone?"

"Yes."

"You must get awfully lonely!" Colette gasped.

"Aw, I don't mind my own company. You know it's surprising how many visitors I get. So many people get lost in the woods. I'm only glad I find them before they suffer an accident." The crone looked through a box to find a clean bandage. She watched Colette in the corner of her eye, "You know, I don't think I've ever seen you walk through these woods before."

"Really?" Colette said, surprised. "I come through quite often. My sister walks through these woods all the time."

"Your sister?" The crone's eyes flashed. "How many sisters do you have?"

"Only one. She is younger than me. She is my most precious friend."

"That's sweet," the crone tapped a finger on Colette's raw knee. Although it was uncomfortable, Colette did not drop her smile. The crone nodded, "I have a sister too. Actually, I have seven. They live in these woods but I rarely see them. They like to keep to themselves."

"Do you miss them?"

"Sometimes," the crone mused.

"Hopefully you will see them all again soon," Colette gasped, excitedly. "You could have a family reunion!"

"Mmm, while it is a nice thought, my sisters and I have a habit of fighting. When we were children, we were like dogs fighting over scrapped meat," the crone chuckled, her eyes seemed to drift off like she was remembering an old memory. She shook her head and started to wrap the bandages around Colette's knees. Her eyes flicked up to the girl, "Anyway, I will certainly have to meet your sister one day."

"I'm sure she would love to meet you," Colette grinned, showing her white teeth.

The crone smirked, her eyes looked over Colette's young and innocent face.

"How old are you, sweet creature?"

"How old do you think I am?" Colette asked, playfully.

"Oh, I have a very good knack at guessing," the crone leaned in closer and stared into the girl's eyes. "With clear skin and such innocent eyes, I imagine you're eight years old."

"Very close." Colette giggled. "It was my ninth birthday three days ago."

The crone grinned. She seemed very happy with Colette's answer. As the crone finished wrapping the bandages around her knees, Colette noticed the crone's fingers were dry with blood, *her* blood, and yet she did not seem to mind. Colette's mother could not stand the sight of blood, it always made her faint.

"You know what? I'm feeling somewhat ravenous," the crone popped her finger in her mouth. Colette grimaced. Had the crone not realised her fingers were filthy? The crone seemed to savour the taste, "I must eat something before I start gnawing my own finger. I can't remember the last time I ate fresh meat."

“Oh,” Colette said, loudly. She reached for her basket and pulled away the cloth, revealing her delicious pies. “I made these pies with my own two hands. They’re meat pies and fresh. Please, have one.”

The crone’s nose wrinkled at the smell of the pastry.

“Oh, dearie,” she sounded like she was going to puke. “It would be unfair of me to take one of your pies, especially when I can see you’ve worked so hard to make them.”

“It’s no trouble at all. I made plenty and you were so kind to help me today,” Colette moved her legs and felt the bandages unwind slightly. She kept still, she did not want the crone to feel ashamed for not bandaging her cuts properly.

Colette held the basket to the crone.

“I want to repay you. Please, just try one, if you don’t like it, I’ll help you make something else to eat. My mother says I can make anything tasty.”

“I’m sure you can,” the crone smiled. Her gaze crawled over Colette before landing on the basket, she grimaced, “Very well! I’ll try one pie.” She took out a pie, the pastry flaked off between her nails, “But, only one, I must watch my figure!”

She cackled and took a small nibble of the pie. Her face flickered with surprise and she took another nibble, then a bite and then gobbled the rest of the pie in barely five bites. Crumbs covered her front and she took another pie without asking. She chewed deeply through the pastry and the meat, her eyes glowed brightly.

“Are they delicious?” Colette asked, holding out the basket for the crone to take two more pies. She ate them simultaneously.

“They are delicious!” The crone exclaimed, “I’ve never eaten a pie this good before. The meat is scrumptious and the juices are like fine wine.”

“I’m glad,” Colette giggled. She watched the crone eat for a moment before she uttered, “I’m glad your sisters taste so good.”

The crone stopped. She blinked, not sure she heard the little girl correctly. She looked at Colette who was smiling at her with the sweetest of smiles.

“What did you say?”

“I said…” Colette’s smile did not move. “I’m glad you like the taste of your sisters. I put them in the pies, especially for you.”

The crone stilled. Her body froze like a winter’s chill had brushed against her skin and her eyes dropped to the pie in her hands. She eyed the large chunks of meat sticking out of the pastry. It could not be possible, she thought to herself, her hands shuddered and the contents of her stomach churned.

Suddenly in the folds of the meat, she could see a shape that looked like bone, she fished it out. Her eyes widened at the sharp tooth in her fingers, the tooth looked exactly like her own. The crone froze, unable to move or breathe.

“I lied to you before,” Colette said, her sweet voice was gone. “I said I have a sister but I don’t. Not anymore. She died a couple of years ago.”

Colette placed a cloth from her basket beside her and brought out each of the pies for the crone to see, one by one.

“My little sister and I used to skip and sing through these woods because that’s what children do. We’re innocent creatures. One day when I was ill in bed, she went out into the woods alone and never came home. My father searched and searched for her but he never found her. He said a witch had eaten her. I said, why would a witch eat my precious little sister? He said, that’s what witches do, they eat little children who venture out alone in the woods. I thought, how cruel and unfair for such mean creatures to prey on innocent children. I must do something about it.”

Colette hopped down from the table. She took an apron out from her basket and tied it around

herself and tied up her lovely curls into a bun. She took a handkerchief and wiped her face, removing powder and revealing spots.

The crone could see without a doubt this girl was not nine. She was older, at least twelve or thirteen. The girl's voice, appearance and persona was a trick, a trap, and the crone had fallen for it. Colette continued,

"So I went out into the woods alone. I sang and skipped until I suddenly tripped and hurt myself. Thankfully, a kind old woman appeared to help me. She was so kind, just like you." Colette's eyes flicked towards the crone. "She tended to my legs and offered to give me a bed for the night. I gladly accepted but when she turned away, I lopped off her head."

The crone was silent.

Colette chuckled, "It sounds cruel when I say it like that, especially when she offered me her bed for the night. But I knew her true intentions. She was a witch. She was going to eat me so I had to kill her first."

Colette straightened the pies on the table, making sure each pie was in line and level.

"The first witch I met was your sister, Grizelle." The crone's eyes widened in horror as Colette said, "I knew she wasn't the one who gobbled my sister but I had the perfect plan for the witch who had. I hacked Grizelle into pieces and I did the same with every witch who crossed my path. I made them all into pies and, in time, my basket became heavier and heavier."

Colette picked out seven pieces of paper and placed them before each pie. Each piece of paper read a name. The crone shuddered and shivered at each name she read.

Colette moved towards the door and looked down at the pile of shoes. She stared hard at the dirty blue slippers she had caught sight of earlier. Beneath the dirt, they were the same periwinkle shoes she wore on her feet. Colette watched the witch in the corner of her eye, she asked without a drop of compassion.

"Tell me. What did you think of your sister Grizelle? Was she delicious?"

Suddenly, the witch vomited, the chewed chunks of pie splattered all over the wooden floor. Colette stepped back, protecting her precious shoes. The girl stared at the witch.

"Hmm, the idea of eating sweet, little children is fine but eating your own sisters makes you sick." Colette reached into her basket and tightened her hand around a handle. "Calm yourself. You still have so many pies to try."

The witch's face turned with disgust and her eyes flew alight with rage.

"You twisted little child!" She shrieked, she clenched her claws and sprung towards Colette, "I'm going to kill y--"

The cleaver hit the witch's throat. Blood spurted out, covering Colette's face and clothes but thankfully not her periwinkle slippers. The witch twitched, her eyes flickered with pain as she looked at the cleaver and at the girl wielding it. The cleaver was stuck in the bone, she did not dare move.

"I'm no child," Colette said, coldly. "Thanks to you, I'm probably more witch than child now. Or maybe I'm something worse."

Colette pressed her foot on the witch's chest and wrenched the cleaver free. She hacked at the witch, again and again, hacking her into pieces. Even long after the witch was surely dead, she continued hacking. Colette wanted to be sure there was nothing left of the cruel old crone.

When Colette finished, she took off her bloodied apron and left it on the table with her pies; she didn't need them anymore.

Before she left, Colette retrieved her sister's periwinkle shoes and held them close. She closed the door and walked all the home, without a single skip in her step.



# The Perfect Princess

Once upon a time, in a kingdom far away, there lived a beautiful princess. You've probably heard many tales about beautiful princesses but Princess Emelia was truly an extraordinary beauty. Seriously.

She was only twelve years old and her beauty was known throughout the land. Her curling ringlets were perfect and her face was so symmetrical, it was a mathematical marvel. Her cheekbones were so soft and beautifully curved, when she smiled, people would shout,

“Oh, my! Her smile is certainly the greatest wonder of the world!”

I agree, her beauty sounds rather exaggerated but this is an honest tale. Emelia was beautiful. She was only a child and people knew her beauty would only continue to grow.

Emelia's mother Queen Adeline felt truly blessed by her daughter's beauty. The Queen believed she must have been blessed by a good faerie, it was the only explanation for her daughter's divine looks. Adeline could watch her daughter for hours which she regularly did, marvelling at her beautiful, perfect child.

Each day Emelia was dressed in the most beautiful dresses and jewellery. In the morning, she had to stand for hours while she was dressed by dressmakers. Even though Emelia smiled, she hated being prodded and pulled. She felt like a doll being constantly changed and perfected.

As she stood on a stool surrounded by dressmakers, she gazed out the window, wishing she could play outside like other children.

All her life, she had been kept inside. Her mother did not want the sun to spoil her lovely skin. The last time Emelia felt the warm breath of wind against her face was when she found an unlocked window in the library. She stood there for a good twenty minutes feeling the wind and the warmth of the sun. When the servants found her, her mother locked her in her room for a week. Being grounded was terrible but those twenty minutes were worth it.

Emelia hoped her mother would one day give her permission to go outside. She believed if she was patient, it would happen.

On one particular day, just before Emelia's birthday, the princess stood patiently while the dressmakers finished her dress. She looked up as she saw Queen Adeline standing in the doorway. The Queen was tall, regal and certainly statuesque. Some people claimed she was beautiful in her youth but now fine cracks appeared on her face.

The Queen sauntered with her arms behind her back, she circled Emelia and gazed at her daughter's dress and hair, making sure everything was perfect. When the Queen nodded with approval, the dressmakers gasped with relief and massaged their necks, thankful they would not be losing them today.

Emelia embraced her mother so enthusiastically, she almost knocked her over. While Queen Adeline was overbearing and protective, Emelia still loved her mother dearly, she was the only family Emelia had left.

Adeline chuckled lightly and pulled Emelia's arms away so she could straighten her daughter's dress. She held Emelia's face in her hands and smiled. Her daughter's beauty was her greatest treasure.

“Mama, can I ask a small request?” Emelia asked.

“Whatever you want, you shall have,” Queen Adeline murmured. She was so enthralled by her daughter's beauty, she did not really comprehend what she was saying.

Emelia took her mother's hand and drew her towards the window, the princess gazed out at the garden. Four servant children were playing around the fountain, unaware they were being watched.

“May I go outside to play?” Emelia asked. “I know you don’t like me going out but I’m older now and I promise I’ll be really, really careful. I’ll wear a hat, I won’t run, I’ll…”

Before Emelia had a chance to finish, Adeline’s expression hardened and she snapped the curtains shut, shutting out all the sunlight.

“I have told you before, Emelia,” the Queen snapped. “I don’t want you going out there. I’m getting tired of repeating myself. Why won’t you listen to me?”

Emelia tried not to cry but the tears came anyway. Adeline’s hard face turned soft as she crouched down beside Emelia.

“Aw, don’t cry, my child. Don’t ruin your beautiful face with tears.” Adeline kissed her daughter’s cheeks and wiped the tears away. “Please, don’t be sad. I don’t do this to be cruel. You’re my only child. I wouldn’t be able to bear it if anything happened to you. Everything I do is to protect you. Do you understand?”

Emelia nodded meekly, “I understand.”

“There, no more tears,” Adeline gazed at her daughter. “Smile for me.”

Emelia did as she was told. Holding her smile, she said,

“I love you, mother.”

“I love you too, my little doll.”

With that Adeline left the room, leaving the princess alone. Emelia moved to the window and peered through the curtains. She smiled as she watched the children play.

Oh, how she wished to join them. Even though an inner voice tempted her to sneak out the castle, Emelia did not move. She loved her mother so much she did not want to disappoint her. Emelia let the curtains fall shut and distracted herself with her porcelain dolls.

A few weeks later, the kingdom was alight with celebration for the princess’ thirteenth birthday. Many nobles and townsfolk brought gifts for Princess Emelia and she received every gift with grace and kindness.

From her throne, the Queen watched her daughter. While everyone else was smiling and enjoying the princess’ birthday, Queen Adeline was disturbed. She had realised a terrible fact.

With each passing birthday, her daughter would grow older and her beauty would eventually wither and fade. That thought plagued the Queen like a disease. She knew she would have to do something to protect her child.

Desperation often leads to desperate actions. It was the Queen’s desperation that led her to believe magic was the only solution so she sent her soldiers out to find a faerie.

In most stories, faeries are good and kind-spirited folk, and in truth, many faeries possess those noble qualities. However, there are some faeries who are truly ill-natured and cruel. That’s why it’s so important to know the difference between the good and the bad.

One cold night, Queen Adeline was sitting by the fire in her study, when her soldiers returned with a faerie. Adeline was surprised, she had expected the faerie to be no larger than a peach but this faerie was as tall as a child, and there were no wings on her back. The faerie’s skin was grey like an eel’s scales while her eyes were as bright as a black moonstone. Chains were wrapped tightly around the faerie, and in the firelight, Adeline could see the faerie had tried to resist her captors.

While Adeline did feel somewhat guilty for the faerie’s predicament, the Queen knew it was necessary and she would ensure the faerie was paid for her services. Nobody could say the Queen was not kind.

“I’m sorry for my soldiers’ cruel treatment of you, faerie. We are in urgent need of your services.”

The faerie looked up, her large eyes burned violet. Adeline could see fury in the faerie’s eyes.

“I understand, your majesty,” the faerie smirked, showing her small and many canine teeth. “We faeries were created for your pleasure after all. You didn’t need to send your guards, you should have

snapped your fingers and I would have appeared in a puff of smoke, panting like a mutt, eager to please you. I am yours to command.”

The faerie gave the Queen a small mocking bow. The Queen’s captain raised his fist to punish the faerie but the Queen raised her hand.

In fact, she told all her soldiers to leave, she wanted to speak to the faerie alone. Before they went, she commanded them to remove the faerie’s chains. Although the soldiers did not want to, they did as they were told. The chains dropped to the floor and the soldiers waited outside the door with their weapons ready.

The faerie massaged the bruises on her skin as her eyes flicked up at the Queen. She wasn’t sure if the Queen was brave or foolish. Before the faerie could decide, Queen Adeline dropped to her knees and clutched the faerie’s small hands.

“Help me, faerie!” Adeline begged, “I’m so desperate. I don’t know what else to do.”

The faerie listened, her interest was definitely piqued. Queen Adeline explained she was in need of a miracle to save her daughter’s beauty. The Queen cried, she offered the faerie gold, jewels, land, anything to save her daughter. The faerie stared at the fire while she thought about Adeline’s request.

“I will help you,” the faerie said. “But I have no desire for wealth or property. I am a faerie, such things mean nothing to me.”

Queen Adeline opened her mouth to offer more gifts of persuasion but the faerie pressed her finger against the Queen’s lips. Adeline stayed still and silent as the faerie leaned in close. Her purple eyes stared into the Queen as she murmured, “I can see this problem truly haunts your soul so I will grant this wish for free.”

Adeline wept, she was so relieved she had found a miracle, she thanked the faerie for her kind heart. The faerie grinned like she was laughing at her own joke, for she didn’t have a single speck of kindness in her heart.

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Emelia was asleep, wrapped tightly in a nest of blankets and pillows when Queen Adeline crept into the room.

“Wake up, Emelia,” the Queen urged. The princess slowly sat up and opened an eye, she saw her room was still dark so she presumed she was just having a strange dream. She rolled over and closed her eyes. Her mother woke her up again, this time shaking her shoulders. “Wake up, my child. You can sleep later. First, you must wake.”

Emelia crawled out of her warm bed, she groaned as the cold night air chewed on her skin. Her mother wrapped a dressing gown around her but all Emelia wanted to do was to go back to bed. She let her mother take her hand and lead her towards the dressing room.

When Adeline brought Emelia to the tall mirror and left her there, the princess thought it was a peculiar time to be trying on new clothes.

Suddenly, the faerie poked her head out from behind the mirror, her purple eyes appeared poisonous in the moonlight and her teeth shimmered like silver knives. Instinct told Emelia to run, she stumbled back but her mother held her still.

“Don’t worry, Emelia.” Her mother spoke softly, “This kind faerie is here to help you.”

“Yes, sweet princess,” the faerie grinned, wickedly. “Do not shy away. I only want to see your pretty face.”

The faerie prowled towards the princess. They were almost the same height, Emelia had only an inch to her advantage but she didn’t think it mattered. She tried not to flinch as the faerie gazed at her face, those purple eyes leered into her own.

Little Emelia suddenly felt like she was made of glass. If the faerie gave her a small shove, she was sure she would fall and shatter into a million pieces.

“I can see why people say she is the most beautiful princess in the world,” the faerie smirked. “And she hasn’t even fully bloomed yet.”

Adeline smiled, proudly. Emelia touched her face. She did not understand why her face could be so special. She wished it wasn’t. Emelia winced as the faerie took her hand. The faerie’s nails pinched her skin and her iron grasp squeezed Emelia’s fingers. Emelia wanted to cry for her mother but the faerie’s eyes kept her obedient. She was the rabbit, her arm caught in the wolf’s jaws, the faerie only had to clench her hand and...

“Are you sure you want this?” The faerie glanced lazily at Adeline. “Is this what you want for your daughter?”

“Yes,” Adeline nodded. “I want my daughter to be a vision of perfection forever.”

“Forever is certainly a long time,” the faerie chuckled. “But your wish is my command.”

The faerie reached into her pocket and brought out an apple. The fruit’s skin was almost black but in the moonlight, it was a dark shade of blue. She brought the apple up towards the princess’ lips.

“Bite into this apple, sweet child,” the faerie instructed. “And your mother’s wish will come true.”

The faerie released Emelia’s hand so the princess could take the apple. The apple was disgustingly soft in her hands. Emelia was sure if she squished it, the fruit would pop and dribble through her fingers. She did not want to bite it, she wanted to run away from this dreadful faerie, she wanted to be in the safety of her mother’s arms. The faerie purred quietly into Emelia’s ear,

“Don’t you love your mother?”

“Yes,” Emelia said, her voice shaking. “With all my heart.”

“Don’t you want her greatest wish to come true?” The faerie asked.

Emelia gazed at her mother. She loved her so much, sometimes it made her heart hurt. All her life, Emelia had ignored her own dreams for the world outside so her mother would be happy. She would live in a cage forever if it meant her mother was smiling.

“Yes, I’d do anything for her,” Emelia whispered.

“Then bite the apple,” the faerie commanded. She lightly brought the princess’ hands up to her lips.

Emelia opened her mouth and her teeth pierced the skin, disgusting and rotten juices filled her mouth. She had to clamp a hand over her lips to stop herself from throwing it back up. She swallowed the bite and suffered a horrible, bitter aftertaste. Her body fell cold and she started to shiver like she was coming down with terrible flu but apart from that, nothing else happened. Emelia wondered if the wish had done its magic and she could go back to bed, she looked to the faerie, then to her mother.

“Mama, I--”

Suddenly, Emelia screamed. She dropped the apple and the rotten remains splattered on the floor. Emelia clutched her stomach and her legs collapsed beneath her. Adeline ran to her daughter, she held Emelia in her arms. The princess shrieked in terrible agony,

“Mama! It hurts!”

Tears fell down her beautiful face. Adeline glared at the faerie, she demanded,

“What have you done to my child?!”

“Your wish is my command,” the faerie smirked and bowed, mockingly.

Before Adeline could charge at the faerie and throttle the little beast, a bright light engulfed Emelia. Dark grey smoke filled the room, making it impossible to see.

Adeline coughed, the smoke burned her throat and her lungs. As quickly as it appeared, the smoke suddenly vanished. Adeline found her daughter lying still on the floor, her face covered by her beautiful curls.

“Emelia!” Adeline cried, she held her daughter in her arms. “My baby, are you alright? Mother is here. Talk to me.”

Emelia moved stiffly and slowly raised her arm.

Adeline froze, her heart forgot how to beat.

Emelia’s arm was thinner, paler, a liquid glaze seemed to shine on her hardened flesh. While her fingers quivered, her face was still, unable to reveal any pain or any emotion. Emelia stared at her mother with perfect glass eyes.

“I’m cold, mother,” Emelia said, desperately. “Everywhere feels so…”

That was when Emelia noticed her hand, she held it before her eyes. She touched her arms, patted her face, she saw her body had changed. It was now made of porcelain. Emelia released a despairing shriek.

Adeline did not move as she stared at her daughter. She was in shock.

The faerie snickered as she skipped towards the door.

“Do not worry, your majesty. I will see myself out. I hope your fears are gone. I must say your daughter is truly perfect. There really is nothing more perfect than a porcelain doll.”

The faerie’s laughter seemed to remain long after she disappeared. Surprisingly, tears fell down Emelia’s face as she tugged on her mother, hoping sense would return.

“Mother, the faerie has cursed me! Please, help me! Mama!”

At that, Adeline started to cry. She embraced her daughter tightly to her chest. Emelia gasped, thankful her mother had returned to her. The Queen spoke softly, without any hint of dread or displeasure.

“My sweet daughter, this is no curse.” Adeline held Emelia’s face in her hands, she exclaimed, “This is a miracle!”

Emelia could not believe what she was hearing. Adeline’s eyes widened and enjoyed her daughter’s new appearance. She cried, “Time will never be able to feast on your looks, no illness or injury will be able to scar you, your beauty will never fade. You are truly perfect.”

Emelia stopped crying. She did not know if she still had a heart but somewhere inside her, something became cold and numb. She gazed up at her mother with her glass eyes.

“Are you happy now, mother?” Emelia asked.

“Oh, yes! I am so happy,” Adeline smiled. “I have the most perfect child.”

Emelia did not move. She knew she would never be let outside, she knew she would be like this forever. The faerie had cursed her and yet her mother smiled with the greatest joy she had ever seen. While Emelia wanted to run away, she wanted to scream, she wanted to curse her mother, she couldn’t do any of those things. To the princess, her mother’s happiness was all that mattered. So, she said nothing as her mother smiled and kissed her porcelain face.

And they all lived happily ever after.

# About The Two Sisters

Two Sisters is a pseudonym used by two sisters, Stephanie Barnes and Emma-Marie Mills. Steph is the author and Emma is the illustrator of this collection. As they're both passionate about their individual crafts, they wanted to collaborate together and create their own fairy tales.

## About Steph

Steph knew she wanted to write her own stories when she was seven, after she finished reading J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone. Since then, she has been writing fantasy stories and film scripts whenever she can. As she's a strong admirer of the Brothers Grimm and Angela Carter's fairy tales, she was inspired to create her own.

Steph was shortlisted in the 2015 Adult Fairy Tale Competition in the Writing Magazine. She was a Second Rounder in the 2016 Austin Film Festival Screenplay Competition and a Quarter Finalist in the 2017 ScreenCraft Screenwriting Fellowship Competition.

## About Emma

Ever since being at primary school, Emma has dedicated much of her time drawing on paper and on her computer. While studying hard towards her GCSEs, she has worked to develop her skills as an artist. Her drawings and style are inspired by horror films and dark stories.

Emma originally did her illustrations for this collection in digital but after she experimented with ink drawing techniques at school, she decided to redo all her images in pen.