



Prologue

Cass was little when it happened. So little that afterwards she could never be quite sure if it had just been a dream. And Mary never spoke of it again, either.

They were gathering firewood in the forest near the farm, Cass collecting the smallest twigs for kindling as she always did, stuffing them into the sackcloth bag slung across her stomach and grumbling that they'd be late home for dinner if Mary didn't get a move on.

Mary was examining a thorn in the soft heel of her palm, wincing and making a fuss about pulling it out as usual, until Cass sighed and took her hand, worrying at it with her teeth and rolling her eyes at Mary's whining. They were



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stood like that, Mary's hand pressed to her little sister's mouth, when the woman appeared as suddenly and silently as if she were a spirit conjured out of the air.

Cass dropped Mary's hand and they both stood frozen, remembering the stories about faerie folk that would charm you into their world and never return you above ground, their mother's warnings about bandits and ruffians in the forest, the old stories whispered around the fireside on winter evenings about the wandering druids who followed the old ways and twisted ancient magic to their will.

The woman wore a gold cloak and seemed to shine as if the light came from somewhere within her, brighter than anything else in the gathering dusk. Her face was folded and lined like an old piece of parchment, her mouth sucked in at the corners. Around her neck hung a metal pendant in a distinctive spiral shape, its ends joined so that it continued for ever.

She looked to Mary first, seeing she was the taller and older of the two, asking in a wheedling, lilting voice if she hadn't any charity to spare for a poor woman living wild with nothing to eat tonight. When Mary half turned away, shielding Cass from the woman's sight, she frowned and hissed the air out between her teeth, then swallowed her impatience and returned to the high, whining voice, promising to 'tell a pretty girl her fortune as a fair

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exchange'. But Mary walked quickly away, pulling Cass behind her, and it was only when Cass glanced back at the woman over her shoulder that she saw the luminous yellow eyes in the haggard face widen and the woman gasp as if all the air had been knocked out of her.

'It cannot be,' the woman whispered, her eyes never leaving Cass's face, searching it as if it were a map to some long-lost treasure. And it was as if a golden thread shot out from her and hooked into Cass, holding her fast so that she could not move, could not speak, could not walk away in spite of Mary tugging on her hand. And as if she stood before a queen, the woman fell to her knees, her gaze unwavering, prostrating herself on the ground before Cass until she broke eye contact as her forehead kissed the mossy ground. At once Cass shivered as she felt her body come under her control once again and she tripped as Mary pulled hard, falling and cutting her wrist on a sharp rock. She stumbled to her feet and followed her sister, sucking on the wound as she ran, the metal tang of her own blood in her mouth and her bag of twigs lying abandoned and forgotten in the forest clearing next to the woman's motionless form.

Chapter 1

The leaves smelled of earth and last night's rain. Cass lay on her back, feeling their wet tongues licking at her arms and legs, her precious white dress already damp and soiled. White felt wrong on her, anyhow. She slid off her shoes, releasing her cramped toes from the strange confines of stiff leather, and let her calloused heels dig into the soft soil. Her lungs expanded again. Above her a thousand leaves danced in a symphony of colour; emerald and sea green, acid bright and adder dark. The apples shone like jewels.

You could tell your future husband by the twist of an apple's stalk, Mary always said, counting the letters until it broke and gave his first initial, then stabbing the sharp end

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at the peel until it pierced the flesh to find his second. She'd pilfered dozens as a child, twisting gently or jabbing fiercely to manipulate the outcome, while Cass watched from the tree above, rough bark clasped between bare thighs.

She needn't have bothered. Mary would marry Thomas today, like she'd known she would since before her back teeth had all come in. Ever since Adam the blacksmith knocked at the door of the farm one night to speak with their father and they'd pressed an eye each to the crack in their bedroom door and seen their mother nod briskly and wipe her hands on her apron and say it was a good match for a farmer's daughter and then break the second-best milk jug into shards and bury one deep into her palm in the washing-up bowl. Then their father had put a gentle hand on her shoulder and squeezed it.

So they knew. And they'd gone silently back to bed, Cass's cheek curled into Mary's ribcage the way it always had, so she could fall asleep listening to the steady drumbeat of her sister's blood.

Yes, they'd always known. But it had always been something for another day. Until this morning, in its strangeness with the Sunday tub full of suds and two new dresses in white, an impractical shade they'd never worn before and wouldn't soon again, and the sweet, ripe smell of blossom boughs piled high on the kitchen floor, ready



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to be used as decorations for the ceremony. There was a private, distant smile on Mary's face that Cass had never seen before.

So she'd left the baby clinging to the kitchen table leg with a crust and flown out through the back door before she could be seen. She'd whirled down through the field with the long grass slicing at her bare calves and the crisp air thrilling her lungs and the dew bathing her feet until she vaulted over the orchard fence. She felt the tickle of the warm summer air, her toes in the soil – a return to the wilds of childhood, a childhood that still felt a part of her despite her seventeen years. She was still here, rooted to the soil of the farm, but Mary was leaving her behind.

She closed her eyes and let the sunlight stripe her eyelids black and gold. They'd miss her in a minute. She wasn't supposed to be here, nor to feel this way on a day of celebration. It was a bad omen, Ma would say. Selfish, to taint her sister's wedding so. She let her fingers brush the grass blades until the tips sank into something soft. A pulpy mess of split crimson skin, brown edges peeling back from once white flesh now hollowed to a dark yellow cavity. She sucked the sweetness from under her fingernails.

Tucked inside her underclothes, Cass felt the hard lump of her mother's most precious possession. A thick, round silver locket. She took it out and held it up to the sun, turning it

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over and over between fingertips still grubby in spite of the morning's scrubbing. The little green stone set in the dull grey metal eyed her malevolently, as if mocking her. She knew she should have been proud and grateful when her mother pressed it into her hand this morning. 'It was never really mine, Cass. It is yours,' she had said, uncharacteristic tears in her eyes. But the locket felt heavy and ugly and Cass couldn't help feeling like she was being decorated, ready to be put on display behind her sister.

She dangled the locket from its chain, still holding the softness of the rotten apple in her other hand, probing its pulpy heart with her fingers, waiting for a shout from the kitchen doorway to grab her, jerk her back.

The commotion that came was not the one she expected. Down the stone-pocked road that separated the orchard from the forest a horse came careening, kicking up great clouds of choking dust. She leaped to her feet, necklace still dangling, and everything happened at once. A soot-black horse with its face split by a flash of bright white. A man, face masked, eyes flashing, plump pouch at his belt, straining to look over his shoulder. A moment of sheer terror when time stopped, and the horse reared up in front of her and in the glint of hooves and shriek of its whinny a gloved hand closed around the locket and ripped it from her fingers.

Then time moved again, and she was alone by the side



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of the road with her heart pounding and her empty hand outstretched.

Hooves, again, before she could start breathing. Approaching fast. Another man bent low to urge his chestnut stallion onwards, its rich, ruddy mane rippling, nostrils flaring, their bodies flowing together in complete alignment. The rider halted in front of Cass, twisting around to take in the orchard.

‘Did he pass this way?’ And the voice inside the metal helmet was like honey.

Cass could find no words, staring silently as the rider removed his helmet.

Not a man. A woman, perhaps ten years older than her. A woman with sharp, straight brows tightened together, with hair the colour of the last autumn leaves twisted tight to the nape of her neck. She had a split in her lip that shone bright with cherry fresh blood. A woman, with her legs encased tight in shining leather, boots gripping tight to the horse’s flanks.

‘He . . . my necklace.’

Cass was too shocked even to look away. A heavy heat flooded her cheeks as she stared at the strange woman’s face, at her collarbone quickly rising and falling above the patterned black leather that corseted her chest. The hollow at the base of her throat was damp.

Cass gestured, wordlessly, in the direction the first rider had gone.



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'My mother's necklace,' she said again.

'Well, then.' Her voice was golden honey. 'Are you coming?'

The woman held out a gloved hand and for a split second Cass looked back through the quiet orchard, across the grass turned golden by the morning sun to the door of the farm. Where they'd miss her, any moment. Where another knock might come one night and it would be Cass who would be promised to someone. Given away. So she caught up her sodden, soiled skirts and reached out her hand. And the horse lurched beneath her and jerked her breath out staccato as the apple fell from her fingers into the dust.

