

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

# The Lover



*A short  
story*

Silvia  
Moreno-Garcia

*New York Times* bestselling author of *Mexican Gothic*

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She'd always known her lover would come from beyond the forest. It was foretold when she cast a divination spell. It was a game she played with the other village girls—quaint superstitions passed from one generation to the next. The spell required a maiden to take off her shift and place it under her pillow during the night of the full moon. The girl would dream of a man's face, and in the morning, she would find an object by her doorstep that would offer a clue about her future husband's identity.

Judith could not remember the face when she awoke. Nevertheless, after she dressed in a hurry, hardly bothering to brush her hair, she saw a twig upon the steps of her home. She knew it stood for the trees, the forest. Which was just as well, since she disliked the village and its people, instead preferring to imagine the vistas of distant lands and the abodes of handsome lords.

A few months later, the prophecy came true. A stranger stumbled into their midst. He was a hunter, wearing a gray woolen coat and black half boots, muttering as he walked into their store. A wide-brimmed hat shadowed his face.

Beginning in the spring and into the fall, a farmers market was set up every other week, but in the cold of winter, her sister's store was one of the few spots where a traveler could buy certain supplies. Alice had married well. When her husband passed away, he'd left her the guesthouse with its plum-colored door and the adjacent shop. There was an inn, but it was shuttered until the thaw. The tavern offered flea-infested beds. Anyone who needed a decent place to lodge during the winter stayed at the guesthouse.

"They tell me you'd know how I can secure a room," the man said as he entered the store and removed his hat.

He had light-brown hair and a handsome, strong face. Judith lowered the old book she was reading and nodded. "My sister runs the guesthouse next door. The rooms are clean, and the food is plentiful. You can peek inside the rooms before you lay down your money if you like."

“I’m sure it will be fine,” he said. “You look trustworthy enough, and if it’s not terribly expensive, I should be satisfied.”

He gave her such a smile that she practically dropped the book.

“Come with me,” she said.

She guided the man. As they walked together, she thought, *It is him, it is him, it is him.*

---

The hunter’s name was Nathaniel, and he stayed that whole winter, exploring the nearby woods and creeks, then returning with hares and foxes that were skinned for their furs. He was the only guest, though Alice and Judith and the children lived in the house too.

Before Alice had married and birthed two children, the sisters had lived with Grandmother in a smaller house. Judith had to help with the washing Grandmother took in, her hands rough since she was a small child. Alice never had to rub a cake of soap against the clothes because Alice was beautiful, and Grandmother expected she’d marry a gentleman. She did. Grandmother and Judith went to live in the guesthouse together with Alice, and while Alice was able to buy velvet dresses and a muff to keep her hands warm, and Grandmother spent the rest of her days in comfort, Judith’s existence had remained the same.

Judith was eighteen now, but she still did the washing; only now she washed for Alice, the twins, and their guests.

The hunter’s name was Nathaniel, and he was even more handsome than at first glance, with beautiful, expressive eyes and a good laugh. He shaved his face with diligence and combed his hair neatly. He told stories at dinner that made the children squeal with joy—the twins were four—and brought a smile to Alice’s face. Judith smiled, too, and she laundered his clothes with the utmost care, scrubbed the floor of his room spotless, and dusted throughout the house to ensure he had no complaint. Nathaniel had the good looks of a gentle-born man, and she wanted to treat him as such.

“Good morning, Judy,” he would say. How lovely his voice sounded—deep and clear.

“Good morning. What are you hoping for today?” she’d ask.

He would tell her whether he hoped for the pelts of foxes or skunks, or something else. He’d talk about cutting stakes or building cubbies, or how he’d gone trapping in his spare time as a youth but now was attempting to become a professional hunter, for there was money to be made in this endeavor if one was wily enough. And money was what he sought. He’d wave her goodbye with a wink and a smile. On a few occasions, he offered compliments. *Pretty Judy, I’ll see you later*, he said, making her blush.

Unfortunately, Nathaniel was not the only one hunting that winter. Judith did not realize it until it was much too late. Alice had worn her widow’s garb for a year, and on the first day of spring, she declared enough was enough. She reclaimed the colorful dresses she’d left in her armoire.

Shortly after this, it became obvious to everyone in town—except perhaps Judith, who was blinded by her exuberant dreams and fantasies—that Alice was thinking of making the guest a permanent fixture of their house. He was young and good looking, and the villagers gossiped: Alice’s first husband had been sickly, ugly, his wealth making up for his physical deficiencies. This time it would be the other way around. The man had clearly won the lady’s favor, thanks to his charm.

Although a few people raised their eyebrows at such a quick match, everyone agreed a widow of twenty-three couldn’t be expected to run a business and a household by herself. The hunter was polite; he could read, write, and do sums. He could conduct business in the town that Alice could not possibly conduct. He would do fine as a second husband.

The hunter’s name was Nathaniel, and he married Alice in the summer. He moved from his room on the ground floor to one of the rooms upstairs. His wife bought him new clothes, a dressing case tooled in fine leather, and a lovely silver-plated pocket watch. Life continued as it had before, only now he

stepped into the store on certain days to go over the sums and order the boy behind the counter around.

The hunter's name was Nathaniel, and, alas, he was not Judith's lover.

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In the fall, Judith sat outside the house, on those same steps where she'd once found a twig and thought it prophesized romance. She looked in the direction of the forest, which stretched close to them, the trees turning from green to gold and red.

"It'll be a bad winter," Nathaniel told her, coming down to stand next to her.

"How do you know?" she asked.

"I can tell. The skies warn us," he said.

But she'd lost her taste for omens, so she shrugged, indifferent to his prediction.

"Yes, it'll be a bitter winter. You should stop with your mushroom gathering. The wolves, they'll be eager for a morsel, and it's growing too cold now, anyway," he said.

Then, for a moment, a prickle of something spread across her body, the faint stirring of dread. She shook her head dismissively.

"Wolves never wander this close to us," she said. "I've lived here longer than you have."

She kept swinging her basket back and forth and creeping into the forest, her head bent as she looked for the chanterelles that sprouted around the ash, the elm, the oak. As the fall progressed, she had to move deeper into the forest, past the creek, until she reached the old apple orchard full of dead trees.

Next to the orchard there stood an abandoned hut. An old woman, a friend of Grandmother, had lived there, and on occasion Judith had carried a parcel for her in exchange for a sweet. But the woman had suffered a fall, and she'd left to live in the care of her son two years before. She still owned the house, but she did not visit. She'd entrusted the upkeep of it to

Judith's sister, but it was Judith who looked after it. Vegetation had grown and spread, battering the withered structure, but the roof remained solid. Judith sometimes went in, lit a fire, and sat on the creaky bed to read, thus escaping the store and the guesthouse.

Grandmother had chided Judith when she caught her reading, saying there were chores to do, but she did not chide Alice when she stood in front of the mirror brushing her hair, or when she sat in the parlor looking at magazines with fashion plates. Grandmother was dead, and now Judith could open a book until its spine cracked, sitting with ferocious delight in the warmth of the hut for a little while.

One day, when she stood outside the hut counting the large yellow mushrooms in her basket, Nathaniel strode by.

"The hour is late," he said. "Your sister said I should fetch you."

She was upset by his intrusion, upset even more at Alice for telling him where he might find her. This had been a spot where the girls had played together when they were younger, before Alice married and gave herself airs, rubbing expensive almond creams on her face and scenting her handkerchiefs with perfume.

"It's market day tomorrow," he said. "Alice wants you to head home and make the beds. There are people who will be arriving to spend the night."

The inn, the guesthouse, and the tavern accommodated travelers who sold their wares at the market, housing the more upstanding and wealthy people. The common farmers and the young laborers standing in bunches, like flowers pressed together, arrived very early in the morning to sell or buy wares instead of journeying the previous evening. A few lodged with friends. Some even slept in the fields, like common vagrants.

"Can't she make the beds herself?" Judith asked. She would not have normally voiced her thoughts, but as the season wore itself thin, Alice did her utmost minimum to help around the house. Her sister had always been like this, but for a little while that summer she had attempted to become an



industrious woman, perhaps in a show of false domesticity for her new husband. The novelty had worn off.

Nathaniel did not reply. Having been told he had to shepherd her home, he would not let her escape. Irritated, she walked with him back to the guesthouse.

In the morning she was up early. It was the last market day of the season. After this the village would cloister itself, but that day, for a few precious hours, it was a riotous hub of activity. There were eggs to be sold, salted fish, and sacks of potatoes, but also finer goods: chests of tea, dried fruit, chocolate, ribbons and lace, scented soaps, tobacco, and tooth powder. Nathaniel sold furs, and Judith was supposed to help him.

How she had loved market day in previous years, but this fall it was unbearable to stand next to Nathaniel as he spoke to customers—to stand so close to him in their little stall as he smiled pleasantly at her when her heart was bursting with discontent and restlessness.

While Nathaniel was busy talking to a man, Judith slipped away. She looked at the other stalls, wishing she had enough money to buy expensive combs or lace, but she received from her sister nothing but a few coins for her work, and those were begrudged her even though Alice had bought herself new shoes, a new shawl, and bolts and bolts of fabric for her trousseau. Needless expenses, since Alice was already outfitted, yet she acted as though she'd been a first-time bride.

Judith kicked a pebble and stopped to look at the bookseller's cart.

“Hello, Miss Judith, looking for a light read? I have a good stock of women's books,” he said, patting a pile to his left. He picked up a book of illustrated fairy tales.

Judith might have normally been satisfied with such fare, with the manuals for embroidering flowers he had on display or the light novels with long-suffering heroines who were always blessed with happiness on the last page. That day, however, she was despondent.

“I’d like to see what you have there,” she said, pointing to a chest the man was leaning on.

“Oh, no, those books are not for you,” the man said, straightening up. “Here is a proper book of fairy tales for young ladies, with the moral of the fable explained on the last page of each story.”

“Why can’t I have the other books?”

“They’re bawdy little volumes for men.”

Judith knew as much, though she’d never gazed upon a “bawdy” book up close. Plenty of village youths paid for those wares and squirreled them away quickly, marching toward the inn or another spot where they might share a drink and laugh together at the content between the covers.

“How much for one of them?”

“I could not.”

“I have the money,” she insisted.

“Your sister would throttle me if she heard I sold you this, Miss Judith,” the man said.

“Let me look at one of those books,” a man said.

A stranger stepped up next to Judith. He was neither a farmer nor a merchant. His clothes seemed to have been rather fine at one point, but now they were dirty and had been mended too many times. His long, black coat was frayed at the bottom. His hair was tied at his nape, and he did not wear a hat, as any decent man should, although he did have gloves, which seemed made of good leather. Perhaps he was a gentleman who had fallen low or a vagrant who had gathered a few decent garments from a charitable Samaritan. Probably the latter.

The bookseller hesitated but opened the chest and handed the man a book. The stranger flipped through it and asked about the price. When the bookseller named it, he gave him a few coins.

Judith began walking away, but the stranger caught up with her in a few quick strides.

“Do you want to read this?” he asked.

“Yes, but you bought it, so what?” she replied.

“I’ll sell it to you.”

“You’ll hike the price.”

“Not at all. Clearly you wanted it and wouldn’t be able to obtain it without intercession. Meet me behind the inn at dusk. You can have it for cheap.”

“Give it to me now.”

“A man is coming for you,” the stranger said, looking behind her, and he smiled.

Judith turned around and saw Nathaniel approaching her. He had his hands in his pockets and a scowl on his face. The stranger scurried away.

“Was that vagabond bothering you?” he asked.

“He was asking if he could lodge in the stable for free. I told him we can’t offer that kind of charity,” Judith said, hoping Nathaniel wouldn’t notice the fib.

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The guesthouse was busy, and it took Judith longer than she expected to slip out. She rushed behind the inn, and when she arrived, she found herself alone under the branches of a crooked tree. Perhaps he had come and left. She cursed under her breath.

“You’re late,” a voice said. She was surprised to see a piece of darkness slip away from the tree. The man had been tucked rather snugly against its trunk; she had not spotted him. When his face was finally visible, she noticed his sharp grin.

Judith tipped her chin up. “I had business to attend to. Do you have it?”

The stranger patted his coat and took out the book. When she attempted to grab it, he pulled it away. “I’ll have my payment, Judith of the Black Hair. That is your name, isn’t it?”

“How much? You said I could have it for cheap, remember that.”

“Very cheap. You can have it for a kiss.”

“That’s not a decent thing to ask. You’re probably a vagrant.”

“I’m no vagrant. Besides, who’s going to see you in the dark?” he asked. “The moon is new tonight.”

There was no moon, but the glow from the inn’s windows gave her pause. Besides, it was immoral to barter kisses for trinkets. She told him so.

He shrugged. “Do you want the book or not?” he asked.

“Fine. A single kiss,” she said.

She had no sweetheart, though she’d kissed a couple of boys from the town. She’d spent too much time conjuring a dream lover to accept a commoner. She thought to allow him the same thing she’d allowed those boys: a quick peck.

The man cupped her face with both hands, and she felt the supple leather against her skin as he bent down to kiss her. Her mouth opened to his, and she let him pull her close to him by the waist, and to nip at her lower lip. But when he tried to touch her bosom, she swatted his hand away.

“You promised. Give me my book.”

“Let me see your breasts and I’ll get a second book for you. Twice the fun.”

“You’re crass,” she said, her voice almost a hiss.

He laughed, extending his arm and offering the book to her. She snatched it and rushed back to the house. But she did not dare read the volume while inside the guesthouse. She lay awake most of the night, and at one point she had a curious sensation that something soft brushed by her side in the dark, though it was only the blanket, which had fallen to the floor.

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When morning broke, Judith grabbed her basket, placed the book in it under a red handkerchief, and went out into the forest.

Snow fell, the first of the season, but it was the lightest caress of white upon the ground. When she reached the hut,

she lit a fire and sat on a battered chair, turning the pages.

The book was indeed bawdy and concerned a young woman who left a convent and went to have many amorous adventures in the world. Detailed illustrations depicted each of her escapades. Judith had only seen the nakedness of men on a page of the Bible showing Adam and Eve holding hands, the serpent curled around their feet. But those figures were crude imitations, while the etchings reproduced in this book were rendered in all their fleshy reality, showing the long members of men and the pubic hair of women, plus dozens and dozens of different amorous configurations.

She was so amused by the book that she did not realize someone was at the door until the cold wind ruffled her hair. She had not bothered locking herself in.

She raised her head and quickly placed the book back in the basket, the handkerchief upon it.

“Did you not hear me?” Nathaniel asked.

Judith shook her head.

“What are you doing? Is he here, with you?”

“Who?”

“Don’t play coy. They saw you behind the inn last night talking with that man,” he said irritably.

“I’m alone,” she assured him.

Nathaniel glanced around the hut, but it was small, and there was no place to hide a lover.

“Well, then let us walk back into town. I saw a great black wolf yesterday, not far from this spot. A mighty beast, that one. I’ll catch it at some point, but I don’t want it biting you.”

He grabbed her basket, probably intended to carry it for her, and in a panic Judith pulled it toward her, managing only to tip it over. The book fell upon the floor, and Nathaniel picked it up. He stared at a page, then at her.

Judith blushed.

“It’s only a story,” she muttered.

“Did he give this to you?” Nathaniel asked.

“Yes.”

“What else did he give you?”

“Nothing.”

“What else?” he demanded.

“It’s a story,” she repeated, and would have begun to make a myriad of excuses, but he pulled her toward him and kissed her, not like the stranger had done, half in jest, with a laugh on his lips, but with all the weight of the world.

He drew her toward the bed, which creaked under their bodies. She heard a wolf howling in the distance as his hand grasped her thigh through the fabric of her dress, the hem discolored from dragging it through too many puddles and the mud of the forest.

Judith ought to have shoved him away. But she’d cried the morning of Alice’s wedding, and she never had anything for herself, only the hand-me-downs her elder sister gave her. Only hands roughened by the soap and the lye. Oddly enough, she found herself thinking that since the stranger wore gloves, she had not been able to feel his hands like she might have wanted to. Were they soft, or coarse like her own?

Then Nathaniel kissed her again, and she forgot about the stranger, about her sister, about the entire world.

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The fire burned low, and the wolf went away. They dressed themselves. Judith had trouble remembering how to tie her laces—her fingers were clumsy—so he helped her into her dress and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek.

“I’ll see you later,” he said, and grabbed his rifle—which was propped by the door—and left.

Judith put out the fire and found her way back to the guesthouse, more by instinct than by using the rational portion of her brain. When she walked in, Alice was fuming, trying to deal with the unruly twins and scolding the maid at the same time.

“Will you hurry and do the washing?” Alice told her sister. They could have taken the laundry to a woman in the village, but Alice had always assigned Judith this task.

Judith did not protest this time. She washed the undergarments she’d been wearing, watched the water grow pink with the blood that had leaked from her body—blood and his seed. She ought to have washed herself before leaving the cabin but had been too stunned to think. The cold and the walk had helped her regain her senses: Judith could not afford to be discovered. She scrubbed hard until all traces of color disappeared. She threw the dirty, bloodied water out, letting it soak the roots of a tree.

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She kneaded bread with lax fingers, her thoughts straying back toward Nathaniel even though her sister was by her side and Judith feared Alice would be able to guess what she was thinking. Alice had always possessed an uncanny ability to know when Judith had committed a misdeed. She’d tattle to Grandmother, and Grandmother would punish Judith for being naughty.

“Watch what you’re doing. That bread will never rise,” Alice said. Her sister would not deign to touch the flour and the butter; instead, she supervised Judith and the maid with the piercing eyes of a general.

“It should be fine.”

“It won’t be. You’re careless. You best learn how to cook, or you’ll never snag a husband. No wonder Elizabeth and Rachel are already wed.”

“I can cook fine, and I don’t care what the others do,” she said, thinking of the girls who’d cast that spell with her many months before. Elizabeth was already pregnant with her first child and looked as big as a sailboat, while Rachel complained endlessly about her spouse whenever she went into the shop.

Judith didn’t want one of the boring village lads that her friends had married. She wanted a handsome man, strong and fit. She wanted Nathaniel. And she’d bedded him.

Judith should repent.

“All you can cook is soup,” Alice said. “Once in a while, a man wants a treat from his wife. A cake or a pie.”

“Or a silver-plated pocket watch,” Judith said curtly.

Her sister blushed in anger, but everyone in town whispered that Alice had bought Nathaniel. Judith felt ashamed of herself then. Not only did she wrong her sister in secret, but she also spoke to her with malice.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Finish with that, you silly twit,” Alice said. “If it were up to you, we’d eat a lump of burnt dough.”

*Perhaps, but I’ve had the man I want,* she thought, and washed her hands, hoping to wash herself of her traitorous thoughts, but they were there, unsought—both the triumph she felt and the quiet shame.

---

The kisses he’d planted on her mouth lingered, deep as cuts upon her flesh, and their memory made her ache. Yet she muffled this pain, tried to erase his touch from her mind. She decided she’d imagined the whole encounter, possessed by a strange, feverish dream. She could be good, she could forget, she must.

Two days passed and then another.

Nathaniel went down the steps, rifle slung over his shoulder.

“Good morning, Judy,” he said.

She nodded at him but kept her eyes on her shoes, hoping she seemed dignified instead of guilty.

“I’m hunting today. Around noon I think I might rest at that abandoned hut you’re so fond of,” he said, his voice light.

Judith raised her eyes, but he was looking at the forest, not at her. She stared at him as he walked off.

Later, after she helped in the store for a bit, Judith slipped into the forest and into the hut. He was not there, and Judith found the book she’d left behind upon the floor. She picked it up and sat on the bed, looking out the window with its tiny



glass panes. She did not know whether to smile or weep, and she rubbed her hands thinking she should do penance, while remembering the weight of Nathaniel's body.

It was a sin to lay with a man who was not her own husband. She ought to have confessed to the priest. She might have run to church, too, if Nathaniel hadn't come in then, shaking his head, snow sliding off his shoulders.

"I'm freezing. You haven't started a fire?" he asked.

She watched as he did just that, then turned toward her and smiled. She protested vaguely—"You must not covet," she whispered—but he smothered her words with his mouth while she helped him out of his clothes with hasty fingers.

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She avoided him for a whole week.

The snow now lay like a blanket over the village, muffling all noises, and the hemlocks were bent by the weight of this whiteness.

*Nathaniel, Nathaniel.* Her heart was aflame, her eyes sought him at the dinner table, and yet she wanted to be virtuous. She'd be destined for Hell if she took him on as her lover.

Twice she'd sinned. Twice this folly. Twice damned.

She hadn't truly intended any evil. Both times she'd been caught by surprise, and their coupling had been a desperate, impulsive affair.

She walked the path to the hut but strayed from it, drifting between the trees, grabbing a twig and snapping it in two. She heard humming and stopped, thinking it was Nathaniel who was following her, but the voice did not sound familiar.

"Who goes there?" she asked. "I have a knife."

"Fine. I have a pistol," the stranger said as he emerged from behind a tree. He carried over his shoulder a bundle and in his left hand an apple, which he bit into with a resolute crunch.

Judith frowned. "That's not a pistol."

“It’s tucked away. Besides, I don’t see the knife.”

Judith placed her hands behind her back. “What are you doing here?”

“Looking for a place to sleep.”

“Go to the tavern.”

“They charge too much.”

“Then you *are* a vagrant.”

“I’m a visitor.” He tossed the apple in the air and caught it. “I heard there’s an abandoned woodsman’s hut somewhere.”

“It’s no woodsman’s hut, and you can’t stay there.”

“Why not?”

“Because you can’t. Head back into town and break into a stable.”

“And be chased by a man with a rifle?” He took another bite. A grin spread across his face. “Take me to the hut. I’ll give you a gift.”

“I don’t want another silly kiss from you.”

“It’s not a kiss. I’m not going to touch you,” he said, and he chewed and swallowed a bit of apple before speaking again. “I have a book.”

“I’m not showing you my breasts for it. Besides, I already have a book.”

“You have a bawdy book. How about a book about terrifying monsters and hideous ghosts?”

Judith thought it was stupid to listen to the ruffian, but on the other hand, their conversation distracted her from the matter of Nathaniel and the damnation of her soul.

“You stay one night, but then you are gone—you understand? That is my place and mine alone,” she said.

He agreed to it. When they walked in, she lit a fire and watched as he sat down in one of the chairs and took off his

coat. A tiny gray cloth bag dangled from a cord around his neck.

He pulled out a book from one of his coat pockets, setting it on the table. Judith bent over it and turned the pages. There were indeed many hideous monsters jumping from behind doors and ghosts shaking their chains in the illustrations of the little book.

“What’s your favorite fiend?” he asked.

“Monsters from the lakes,” Judith said. “The kind that snatch children when they walk by the water.”

“You’re a wicked creature.”

“What’s your favorite one?”

He turned the pages and tapped a gloved finger softly against an illustration. “Lycanthrope. Shape changer.”

Judith looked at the picture. It was a man who was tearing his chest open with both hands as a wolf’s head emerged from under his skin, ready to devour a woman with long, flowing hair who lay in bed screaming.

“Bah. That’s not frightening.”

“Care for a bite?” he asked, offering her the half-eaten apple.

“No. What are you really doing around here? Are you a thief?”

“First I’m a vagrant and then I’m a thief?”

“You’re not a hunter,” she said, thinking of Nathaniel sprawled naked upon the bed in the corner. “Or any decent thing.”

“I’m a nobleman outrunning a dire curse,” he said.

“What sort of curse?”

“A curse of hunger, where one can never be satisfied. You taste the blood of a fresh kill and then you must hunt at nights. It boils through your body, the evil, because you stole a relic from a faraway land.”

“There, you see?” she said. “You *are* a thief.”

“If it pleases you better, I’ve been enchanted by a warlock who dwells in a cave.”

She laughed at that and stood up. She’d been out for too long. Her sister would be wondering where she was, and if not her, then perhaps Nathaniel. She did not want him to find her with the stranger.

“Be gone by the morning, you hear me?”

“I will,” he said. “But I’ll meet you again, some other time, Judith of the Black Hair.”

The stranger had finished eating his apple and threw the core into the fire, leaning back placidly against his chair. She stepped outside.

---

Nathaniel cornered her in the kitchen that night. He looked bitterly unhappy and spoke in a low voice. His handsome face was racked with grief.

“What have I done? What is it?”

“You know what we’ve done,” she said and looked down at her hands, which shook a little.

“You don’t love me, Judy?”

Love! What a simple word that could not encompass her feelings, so deep and turbulent she feared she’d drown just by looking at him. Her every waking hour was yearning; the nights were sleepless sorrow. From the first moment he’d spoken to her, she’d loved him, then had to endure the agony of his loss. Now she knew a new agony, both the pleasure of his embrace and the weight of sin.

Judith could hear her sister coming down the stairs, the boards creaking with a familiar rhythm.

“We cannot speak now,” she said.

“Meet me tomorrow, at the hut.”

---

She agreed to meet him, partially because she was curious to find out if the stranger would still be there. She didn’t wish for

a confrontation between the two men, but she wanted to see if the outsider would keep his promise and exit the hut upon the morning. It seemed that was the case, and he had not left a trace of himself behind. The book on the table was gone, and the fire was out.

No sooner had she walked in than Nathaniel opened the door. He immediately had her on the bed, tugging at her skirts.

“It’s wickedness,” she told him while he kissed her neck. “We should stop. You’re married to my sister.”

“I should not have married Alice. I had not felt like I had a home in such a long time, and you were all so kind, I did not wish to lose that. She made it clear if I didn’t wed her, I must leave. By God, Judith, I made a mistake, but I love you, not her. Alice and I are scarcely together, you know that.”

There was truth to that statement. Nathaniel was polite to his wife, but not particularly affectionate, and they had separate rooms. Alice and her first husband had also kept separate rooms, but it was because he snored. Nathaniel and Alice had not even honeymooned together, even though Alice had grumbled about this: she’d wanted to travel, to buy pretty trinkets at a seaside town.

Oh, Nathaniel was happy enough to sit at Alice’s table and to help in the shop. He seemed to enjoy his higher position in the village, where he was now a merchant instead of a common hunter. But he had never seemed enamored of Alice as Judith would have imagined a new husband would be. The townspeople said Alice had bought him. Perhaps she had.

“If I could pick again, I’d marry you,” he said.

The thought of Judith being preferred over her sister made her feel a little proud, even if she shouldn’t, just as she shouldn’t desire Nathaniel.

“It’s still a misdeed,” she muttered.

“We ought to run away together,” he said. “Alice will find another man, she’s young enough. She’ll do fine and we can begin anew, where no one knows us.”

“You’d do that?”

“Yes,” he said as his fingers skimmed her thighs and she arched her back, even as she tried to mumble about iniquity and depravity. But she’d loved him so much in secret and silence, and now he was there. “We’ll go, in the spring, with the thaw.”

A wolf was howling, braving the bitter cold outside. But it was not cold, not in her heart, her body aflame and her head filled with thoughts of all the places they might venture to. The city, south of the town, where they built great cathedrals and palaces, where the cold did not snap the bones. He slipped into her body, and she thought maybe there really were curses, and her curse was to want him like this, against all reason and decency.

“That’s that big wolf again,” Nathaniel said afterward as he put on his shirt. “When I catch it, I’m going to make a cape for you from its fur.”

“Is a wolf pelt worth anything?”

“It’ll have to be. The winter is bad, there are few foxes around, and everything else is scarce. I’ve hardly caught a thing. Then again, you’re a mighty big distraction.”

“I don’t need a pelt, just you.”

“That you have already,” he said.

“Must you rush out?” she asked. She wished to explore the naked expanse of his back, to whisper secrets in his ear, and to listen to the murmur of his pulse as she fell asleep.

“They’ll be expecting me back at the house,” he said.

Alice would be expecting him. Judith chewed on a nail and watched him as he adjusted his coat.

“I dreamt of you once, before you came to this town,” she said. “It can’t be wrong if I dreamt of you, can it?”

He laughed. “What’s that?”

“Nothing. Kiss me,” Judith said, clutching him with desperate hands, hoping he might remain a few minutes longer, but he smiled and said he must depart before he was missed. When he stepped out, she fell back on the bed, her

hands stretched above her head, her heart still beating madly to the rhythm of their lovemaking.

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Heavy white flakes cloaked the roofs of the village, and the tops of the pine trees leaned a little toward the rising sun. Inside the store, Nathaniel was going through the sums while Judith rearranged preserve jars. The shop boy had stepped out, complaining of a toothache, and promised to be back in an hour, so she was assisting Nathaniel with his chores.

The bell above the door jingled as someone walked in, and she heard the telltale humming of a man as he approached the counter.

“You have tobacco, do you?” he asked.

Judith, her back to the entrance, stood rigidly with a jar in her hands while Nathaniel helped the customer. The man left quickly, and a few minutes later, someone else came looking for soap. Judith stepped out of the shop.

She found the stranger a few paces from the shop’s entrance, leaning against a wall. He was carrying a long string of onions over his shoulder and smiled at her.

“What were you doing in there?” she asked.

“Getting myself a pinch of tobacco. It’ll make these onions go down better if I can smoke a pipe. This is my supper, you see, and rather meager it is.”

“You should have spent your money on meat instead of tobacco, then.”

“One must nurse a few vices,” he said. “You wouldn’t have a crust of bread, would you?”

“Leave town. Go beg in a big village.”

“Beggars are arrested in big villages.”

“In small ones too,” she said.

He looked thinner than when they’d first met, his high cheekbones straining against his skin. She imagined that underneath his clothes he was more bone than flesh.

“Come back after dark,” she said. “I’ll give you your crust of bread then.”

The shop boy returned, and Nathaniel headed back to the guesthouse. Before dusk, Judith told the shop boy that she’d close by herself. The boy was so grateful he practically skipped home. The stranger appeared a little afterward, and she locked the door, guiding him to the storage room, where she grabbed a jar of pickles and another with jam. She tossed them in a burlap sack, along with a loaf of bread she’d pilfered from the kitchen. She supposed he wouldn’t complain about its quality, like her sister did.

“There,” she said. “Count yourself lucky and don’t bother me again.”

“You are the very soul of charity,” he said, and his smile was sardonic and sharp as usual. Sharp as a blade he was, and those eyes of his were a bit like ice, bright and cool.

“Where are you sleeping? Not in the hut, I hope. You’re not allowed back there.”

“I wouldn’t go inside unless you invited me.”

“Good. Because if you break a window and try to wiggle in, you’ll be sorry. Are you sleeping in someone’s stable? Sneaking in at night?”

“Maybe I slide into the bed of a matron with a nightcap on her head and warm her better than a pelt,” he said.

“You’re silly and you must go away. Why should you remain here?”

“The winter is hard everywhere, and the local priest is more generous than the ones at other parishes,” he said. “On occasion he’ll hand a man a bowl of soup in exchange for clearing the snow from his steps. In other places, they’ll beat you with a club and give chase.”

She thought it must be a sorry existence to be wandering from village to village like that, begging for scraps and doing menial work, with the threat of the authorities dragging you to jail.



The stranger sat down and took off his coat and his leather gloves. His hands did not look roughened up, although he had dark, ugly hairs on his knuckles and his nails were long. Then again, he seemed hairy all over, with a full beard and his thick hair gathered at the nape. Nathaniel shaved his cheeks every morning, and she liked that. It made her think he was more dandy than village lad. A prince, not a pauper.

The man began gnawing at his bread, humming as he ate, and she looked at his face and at the gray bag dangling from his neck.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“Is that where you keep your money or a special heirloom?”

“If you let me fill this burlap sack with a few more supplies, I’ll tell you.”

She considered the proposition. It wouldn’t be too hard to conceal the disappearance of a few items, if they were small and unimportant. She nodded. He tossed a jar filled with carrots and one with parsnips into the sack.

He knelt in front of her, lifting the cord over his head. He opened the bag and emptied its contents onto his hand. There was a feather, a tiny bone that must belong to a bird, dirt, pebbles, dried petals, and thread.

“It’s only rubbish,” she said.

“It’s a spell to turn me into a wolf in the moonlight so I can go howling through the woods. I turn back into a man come morning.”

“If you can turn into a wolf, why don’t you hunt for your supper?”

“I do, but nobody wants to be chewing on the bones of a scrawny hare every other day. The winter has been bad for hunting. And one has a fondness for certain commodities.”

“Like tobacco.” She shook her head. “I don’t see how this bag helps you become anything.”

“Shows what you know. You take the petals of the black hellebore and the fat of a wolf, boil it up into an ointment and anoint yourself with it under the moonlight once you turn fifteen, and thereafter you’ll be able to transform into a beast.”

“I see. And this little bone, that does what?” she asked, pointing at his open palm.

“Does magic, that’s what it does.”

He placed the objects back into the pouch and handed it to her. Judith held it between her hands and shook it, hearing the contents rattle.

“Is that why you became a vagrant? You coated yourself with an ointment and turned into a wolf. Then you ate the neighbor’s livestock and were found out.”

“Possibly. Maybe it’s just warmer wearing a pelt in the winter,” he said, and rubbed his hands together.

“Before you said you stole a relic, that a warlock in a cave cursed you, and now that you spread an ointment on your body and cast an impious spell. Which one is the true tale?”

“What do you think, Judith of the Black Hair?” he asked, and his deep-set eyes were full of mischief.

“You’re older than me, but not by much,” she said, carefully dissecting him. “I think you were until recently an apprentice to a tailor or a cobbler, and you ran away with money from your master’s safe.”

“Maybe with his wife, who recklessly took me on as her lover.”

“Not that. You’re not handsome. You have no muscle, no brawn. And your hair looks like a crow’s nest,” she said. She thought that Nathaniel was quite the magnificent specimen in comparison. This man’s eyebrows were too thick; his nose had been broken. Yet she still blushed when he grinned at her with his jagged smile.

“How did you find this village?” she asked, meeting his eyes despite the crimson on her cheeks.

“I followed the river. It sang to me.”

The stranger began humming again as he tossed another jar into the burlap sack.

“What’s that tune?” she asked, pressing a hand against her hair and smoothing it back.

“You haven’t heard it before? It’s popular these days. It’s a ballad about a girl who’s dragged to the bottom of the river by her demon lover. You’d like it,” he said.

“I don’t know. I’d rather have a gentleman than a demon.”

“Better a shop owner in good clothes, then?” He looked at her with those sly eyes of his. “The man in the shop is your lover, isn’t he?”

“You spied on me!”

“Not spied. I was wandering through the forest, saw you and him go into the hut. Don’t worry, I didn’t press my face against the window to see how he slips between your legs.”

She tossed the little pouch back at him and stood up, incensed. “Leave. I need to close the shop.”

He gathered his things and placed the sack over his shoulder, holding it with both hands, while she angrily arranged the jars on a shelf.

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Alice came down early, when Judith was still having her breakfast, her thoughts a tangled, dark mess as she sat at the table. Her sister smelled of an expensive almond cream, and she wore a pretty violet dress. Her thoughts must have also been dark, for she gave Judith an angry glare.

“Well, you’re home for once.”

“Where else would I be?” Judith asked.

“You’ve been lazy lately. Every time I turn around, you’re nowhere to be found in the house, and you don’t help around the shop either,” she said.

“I was helping this week,” Judith said.

“Perhaps, but you’re careless with food and supplies. You use too much soap for the washing. Nathaniel is having little

luck fetching pelts this winter, which means we need to economize.”

They didn't need to economize when Alice wanted new hair combs or a pair of shoes. “Nathaniel will get his great wolf pelt,” Judith said. “Don't you worry.”

“What if he does? That's not the point. You're thoughtless, that's what I'm saying. The shop boy says you broke several preserve jars.”

That was the lie she'd told. She couldn't inform her sister that she'd given them to a vagrant whom she'd allowed into the shop.

“I'm sorry,” Judith muttered.

“Clumsy, as usual,” Alice said. “You let the milk boil over last night. Take care not to do it again.”

She spoke to her like a lady speaks to a lowly maid. But then they'd been estranged for a long time, long before Judith loved Nathaniel. Grandmother had taught Alice the place she must occupy in life, always two steps above Judith.

Alice berated her a little longer but eventually grew tired and left her alone. Soon, Judith rushed between the trees; the path that crossed the forest had been erased by winter, but she knew the way from habit. It was much too cold outside; her breath rose from her lips, and she tasted freedom when a flake touched her brow. Away, away she went, from the guesthouse, from Alice, the screaming children, the memory of Grandmother, who declared that Alice was by far the prettier child, fleeing them all. Into the arms of Nathaniel, who never chided her, who pressed kisses against her face.

“I hate it here,” she told him. “I hate my room and the house and the village. Why can't spring come sooner? I wish for everything to be different and new. I wish to love you without deceit or secrets.”

“Wishing won't make it so. Be patient, my love,” he said.

“I'm afraid.”

She was all emotion and eagerness. Reason had fled Judith's mind. She'd forgotten the meaning of sin or virtue. She knew only the contours of her lover's body. She wished only to please him.

Yet sometimes she worried that Alice knew all about them or that she would soon discover the truth, like the women who glimpse fortunes in the dregs of the tea they drink. Sometimes, like now, Judith also felt a terrible sorrow, and an inexplicable loneliness.

"Don't be silly," Nathaniel said.

His teeth bit along her lobe, drifted to her shoulder. Outside, a wolf howled. He raised his head. "It's that damn beast. I've been trying to catch it for weeks now. A huge wolf, I tell you. The creature taunts me. I've set new traps—I'll get him."

"Are you going to chase after it?" she asked, looking at his rifle by the door.

Nathaniel seemed to consider it for a moment, but the sight of her flesh must have been more enticing than a wolf pelt, because he tugged at her laces instead.

Let the beast utter its lament, then, she thought.

---

The winter traced icicles upon the roofs of houses, turned the land into ivory, lashed the trees with its might. Then it grew silent.

The forest was so quiet the snow crackled under her feet, and when snow fell from a branch, it seemed to echo through the forest. Which was probably why she heard him humming before she reached the hut, long before he was in view, a black shape leaning by the door.

"What are you doing?" she asked. She had a basket in her hand and had tucked a book and a little food in there.

"Trying to see if you were alone so I might share your fire."

"You shouldn't be here," she said.

“You’re worried your lover will stop by and catch us together? I wouldn’t hurt him unless you asked me to.”

“He won’t be here today,” she said. “He’s busy at the shop.”

“Then you’ve escaped for your own pleasure.”

Yes, she had. Lately there was nothing but escape for her, from the confines of the guesthouse, and sometimes even from the desire that chained her to Nathaniel, for at times she wished to simply take his face between her hands and kiss him in the middle of town, for all the world to see.

She opened the door and walked in, looking over her shoulder at the man. He seemed even thinner than the last time, and his eyes were reddish, perhaps from standing around in the cold. His voice sounded ragged.

“Light the fire,” she said. She unwound her scarf from around her neck.

He busied himself with that task, and she placed her basket on the table, peeling off her coat, stomping the snow off her boots, and shaking her hair free. When the fire crackled, she turned to look at him. At once, Judith noticed the dirty bandage around his left hand.

“Whatever happened to you?”

“I was caught in a trap. I thought your lover would shoot me behind the ears, but I managed to escape.”

“You’re a liar,” she said as she unwound the bandage and looked at his hand. There was a gash, but it couldn’t have been made by Nathaniel’s steel traps. He would have lost his hand in one of those. No, probably he’d been injured when he broke into someone’s stable, cut himself with glass or even a nail. “I’ll clean it up.”

She collected snow and placed it in a pot, then hung the pot over the fire until it boiled. She had no proper bandages, but there were plenty of old linens that could be torn and used for this purpose. When she was done cleaning his hand, she wrapped the makeshift bandage neatly around his palm.

“Now I know for certain you’re no lycanthrope,” she said.

“What gave me away?”

“The only method to catch such monsters is to have a virgin ride atop a white horse through town. The horse will approach the dwelling of the creature, and it’ll be quartered and burnt. They don’t just fall into common traps. I also happen to know that a boy becomes a wolf after he drinks rainwater from a wolf’s pawprint on the night of the full moon. I read it in a book, much like the one you showed me. But you never said anything about rainwater.”

“How careless of me.”

“Tell me if it’s too tight,” Judith said as she knotted the cloth.

“It’s fine. Thank you,” he said, flexing his fingers.

“Here,” she said, giving him a piece of bread and a slice of cheese. “Eat something.”

“You’re very sweet to share your meal with a liar,” he said.

They sat in front of the fire. He stretched his legs and pulled out a red ribbon from his pocket.

“For you,” he said.

Judith held it between her fingers and looked at him. “I can’t take stolen goods.”

“I didn’t steal it. Anyway, it’s yours, so it can be like in the song.”

“What song?”

“The one you asked about the other day, about the demon that entices a woman to her doom.”

He began humming his tune again. “The maiden was young and fair, she wore a red ribbon in her black hair,” he sang. “Alas, she was not wise, she drowned in the river, it was her demise. Heed the warning and let this song ward you away from evil and wrong.”

Judith wrapped the ribbon around her wrist. Her eyes were fixed on the fire. She thought of Nathaniel. That choking loneliness that sometimes assailed her began to sprout anew. She shook her head, willing it away.

“I can’t give you anything in exchange for it,” she told the man.

“It’s free because I like you. You have your claws in my heart, Judith of the Black Hair. I’ll go away when winter ends, but I’ll return in the fall to see how you’re faring.”

“I won’t be here next fall,” she said, and she thought of the city with its churches, its grand buildings, and its plazas. She stood up and ran a hand through her hair.

His chair creaked as he leaned back in it. She turned her head to look at him. His thin face was contemplative, and he slid a nail against the chair’s arm.

“Are you going to buy a gown of red silk trimmed with gold, and will you dance in the palace of a noble lord?” he asked. “Like in those books that fellow was trying to hand you, with the moral of the tale explained on the last page?”

“I’m certainly not going to live in one of your stories of bog monsters and lycanthropes.”

“Come here,” he said.

He pulled her closer, onto his lap, and a bitter melancholy swept across her body, despite her attempts to push it aside. She thought about Nathaniel again, and how he must hurry home after they dallied together, how there was never enough time for them.

The stranger held her. It was pleasant to feel the warmth of another and sit in silence, without haste, even as she thought of a different man.

“Kiss me truly,” he said at length.

“As opposed to falsely?” she replied. “I’ve kissed you one time already, which is more than you deserve.”

“That was not a lover’s kiss,” he said, pressing his knuckles against her chin and tilting her head so that she might



look at him.

“You’re a smug man to think you can ask anything of me,” she said, a little breathless. “I don’t even know your name.”

“I don’t have one.”

“Everyone has a name.”

“Everyone, but not *everything*. Would you demand of the tree or the raven its name?” he asked, his hand now carefully clutching her face, the thumb sliding against her lower lip to trace the shape of it. “The name doesn’t matter. You know me. I have no silks or gold, but I’d promise to eat your enemy’s heart and tear their lungs out with my claws in exchange for your kiss, dear Judith, which is more than a prince could say.”

She blushed and lowered her gaze. He’d flustered her, but quickly she composed herself. Judith stood up and leaned over his chair and she pressed a kiss to his cheek. “There,” she said. “You need not make silly promises.”

Then she laughed and stepped back, whirling like a dancer. He smiled and did not attempt to persuade her or coax her back onto his lap.

She brushed her hair from her face and motioned to the door. “Come along, out we go, me to the village and you to wherever you came from.”

“From the forest, obviously. You can’t remain longer?”

“My sister’s birthday party is in a few days. I have many preparations to make before that,” Judith said, sighing as she thought of the mound of chores she must tackle.

She opened the door and they stepped out. It was starting to snow, so she wrapped her shawl above her head.

“Don’t starve to death before then and I’ll save a few sweets for you,” she promised, and patted his arm. Then, feeling the thinness of his lanky body, she whispered, seriously, “Do take care of yourself.”

“Will you wear the red ribbon in your hair during the party?” he asked, catching her hands between his own. The

bandage he wore tickled her skin.

“Yes.”

He lifted her hand and delicately pressed it to his lips, in a mockery of a gentleman’s courtly kiss.

“I’ll think of you the night of the party, Judith, when I rush through the forest and tear open a stag’s throat with a single bite. I’ll remember how the red of the ribbon matches the red of its blood.”

“You’re a madman,” she said, freeing herself of his grasp and adjusting the shawl. “Go, chase the moon, tell it your lies.”

He smiled and began humming again as he walked away from her.

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On a night when the moon was round and surrounded by a frozen halo, Judith’s sister threw herself her birthday party. It was, as usual, a grand happening. Alice wore a new dress, cream colored, while Judith was swathed in gray velvet, the dress she’d worn for three years now during the festivities. Judith had threaded the red ribbon through her black locks, and she stood with a cup of punch between her hands, smiling mildly and mostly staring in the direction of Nathaniel, who was attired in a black suit that she’d carefully pressed that morning.

He hardly glanced at Judith, his smile evading her.

“My darling, how lovely you look, so grown-up,” the baker’s wife told Judith.

“Not nearly that grown-up,” Alice said.

“Nonsense, dear Alice, your sister is soon for marriage—look at her. Peter was remarking on that.”

“I hope not too soon,” Alice replied. “I need Judith’s help around the house for a little while still, especially now that our family will be growing.”

Judith did not quite hear what the baker’s wife said after that, for she was much too busy trying to hold her cup between

her hands. She managed to set it down at some point and raised her eyes, only to find Alice now standing by Nathaniel's side, one hand on his arm.

Alice glanced at her sister with cool, steady eyes.

One of the twins approached Judith and tugged at her skirts, demanding a piece of bread with jam, and Judith shushed the child. Then the boy began to wail.

In the middle of the night, Judith woke up to more wailing. But it was a wolf. A wolf howling in the forest. Judith buried her face in her pillow and wept in unison with the creature.

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She headed to the hut the day after. Where else might she go? Her feet knew this path, and they followed it blindly. She'd threaded the red ribbon in her hair again in a sign of false festivity that morning, and she brushed her fingertips against it as she walked.

High above, a raven cawed, shadowing her through the forest until she reached the old place and walked in, shaking her head, snowflakes cascading down her shoulders onto the floor and quickly melting. He had already stoked the fire and lit the candles.

Nathaniel sat in a chair and smiled at her. "It's a bit late," he said. "Near dark."

"It's always near dark now," she muttered.

The sun set so early; scarce few hours of warmth held back the night. Almost velvet black, it stretched above their heads, the stars like diamonds, the moon a silver disc, and the snow an ivory mantle.

She looked out the window at that pretty sight and considered slipping back into the twilight, into the coming dark. He must have guessed her thoughts. He stood up at once and took hold of her.

"We'll run away together," he assured her.

If she had not been certain before, then his words sealed the truth. Or rather, the lies. She realized he had not meant any

of the things he'd said. They would never be together. In the spring he'd make an excuse, then another.

"I love you," he said.

She slapped him. "Fraud! Liar!" she yelled. "You're not mine, you're hers!"

"Judith, please, listen—"

"Not this time, no."

He explained, he pleaded, threatened, cajoled, tried to reason with her, pleaded again. She wept. In the end, she pressed her mouth against his to silence him. He stroked her hair and said she was beautiful, perfect.

She attempted to lie to herself and to believe his finely spun lies, too, in a desperate act of self-immolation. Yet it did no good, and when they moved toward the bed, she remained lost, alone, bone chilled. It was like trying to revive a fire when water has been poured on it: there was only smoke.

She thought she heard a noise outside, a faint scratching. Perhaps it was the wind battering the shutters.

She found no pleasure in his embrace, not the faintest ember of it.

She eventually curled up on the bed, laughing brokenly at herself and the emptiness inside her chest. He must have taken this for honest contentment because he fell into a happy and peaceful slumber even though she lay mangled at his side.

The windows were frosted a ghostly white, and she approached the glass, tracing different shapes with her fingers. Outside, she could see nothing. Not the stars, not the trees, just the ghastly snow.

Again, there came a sound, a scratching, and she frowned.

A wolf howled right by the window.

Judith turned her head, ready to wake up Nathaniel, but something stilled her. She thought she heard a humming she recognized. Was the stranger outside too?

The sound moved, the howl repeating itself, but now it was a little farther away; it drifted until she thought the wolf was at the door.

She moved toward the entrance, the cold nipping at her body as she pressed her ear against the door.

Judith stood still and listened again.

The howl rose, making the wooden boards beneath the soles of her feet vibrate.

She stared at Nathaniel, who slept still, bewitched or simply exhausted. The rifle was by the entrance, but she did not bother grabbing it. She yanked the door open. The wind battered her skin; flakes fluttered and tangled in her black hair.

In walked a liquid darkness with teeth that gleamed white as the snow—a darkness that possessed quicksilver eyes, resembling the edge of a knife. A few candles bent and sputtered, as if fleeing the enormous creature, whose claws clacked against the floor.

For a second, she thought to raise her voice in a shrill, stupid scream, rousing the hunter.

But the darkness grinned at her, a grin as hard as ice, composed of a multitude of jagged teeth that could snap bones with a single bite.

She recognized him now.

She'd always known her lover would come from beyond the forest.

Gently she closed the door behind him and showed him the bed where a warm meal might be had.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



*Photo © 2020 Martin Dee*

Silvia Moreno-Garcia is the *New York Times* bestselling author of nine novels, including *Silver Nitrate* and the Bram Stoker–nominated *Mexican Gothic*. She is the recipient of the Locus, British Fantasy, and World Fantasy Awards.

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