

A NOVEL

DREAMS
AND
SHADOWS

C. ROBERT CARGILL

**D R E A M S A N D
S H A D O W S**

C. Robert Cargill

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DEDICATION

FOR JESSICA,
SHE IS EVERYTHING

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BOOK ONE



CHAPTER ONE

THE BEAST THAT ABSCONDS IN THE NIGHT

Once upon a time, there were two people who fell very much in love. They met in a high school library, peeking over tenth-grade French books, his eyes sneaking up from a rather dense untranslated passage, hers waiting perched behind a pair of horn-rimmed glasses. He was a sucker for horn-rimmed glasses. Hearts thundered. Breaths shortened. Stomachs swarmed with butterflies. She smiled and the world stopped.

He stammered, he sputtered, trying to smile back, failing in a train wreck of lips sneering back over teeth. And when his head slumped forward into his book, she giggled, for she knew that he was hers.

From the first words they spoke, they rarely spent a silent moment together. Each shared a passion for conversation—one that drove most around them mad—and it was never hard for them to find something to talk about. Their first date led from a movie theater to the Dairy Queen, on to a slow walk home, talking at length about every aspect of the film—from Ewan the dreamy Scottish actor to the scene in which someone dove into a toilet. He reached down, took her by the hand, each finger tingling as they brushed against her milky white teenage skin. Their gazes locked, tingles spreading from their fingertips, across their hands, up the backs of their necks, down their spines, ending at a curl in their toes.

That's when he felt it. His fingers intertwined with hers; he could feel her trembling like a scared kitten. While he'd noticed it earlier, he hadn't really thought much of it, thinking that she was just cold, a frail leaf shaking in the breeze of the ICE-COLD AIR-CONDITIONING advertised in block letters on the outside wall of the single-screen theater. No. She was nervous; she was scared of screwing this up. And he smiled, for he knew that she was his.

It was a perfect first kiss. He pulled her tight, kissing her as deeply and passionately as he knew how. Years later they would both laugh at the two stupid kids trying their first hand at necking, but in that moment—in each other's arms—it was bliss. Over time they'd get it. And years later on a hot

humid day in April, they stood before a courtyard full of their family and friends, formally announcing to the world, “Till death do us part.” And they meant it. Every word.

And with that he took her into his arms, kissing her as deeply and as passionately as he knew how. This time he got it right. Then the preacher announced them to the world. Jared and Tiffany Thatcher.

While they had never lived very far out in the sticks, neither expected to end up downtown in a condominium high-rise built for aspiring yuppies and college kids with rich parents—on the seventeenth floor, with a view that looked out over the lake, onto the southern, hipper part of town. It was expensive, especially with a baby on the way, but worth it. They were buying into the cliché of becoming a bedtime story for little girls, proof that dreams do, in fact, come true, that someday your *prince will come*, and everything else that goes with that.

They didn’t mind being a cliché or a bedtime story. Not one bit.

It was a Sunday on which their first and only child was born. He was strong, healthy, and had all the right numbers of fingers and toes. “A perfect specimen of the Thatcher genes,” as Jared put it. They had excelled at making a perfect baby; his name, on the other hand, had proved to be a bit of a hang-up. They’d beaten themselves silly trying to think of something clever, something charming, something that perfectly expressed the love they shared. But nothing came. And as the nurse approached them with the birth certificate, they sat huddled together with their beautiful, swaddled baby boy, Jared waving her off, asking for a few minutes more.

“Can you believe it?” he asked his wife. “How did we get here?”

They gazed in wonder at their son, lost in memories of that first kiss. That night. That movie. And it hit them. “Ewan,” they both said at once. Their eyes locked, Jared taking his wife into his arms, kissing her as deeply and passionately as he knew how. It was perfect. It said everything. *Ewan*. The boy who would change their lives forever.

Ewan Thatcher never cried, he never wailed, he only cooed. And depending on the tone, pitch, and warble, Tiffany knew whether he was hungry, needed changing, or just wanted to be held. He loved to be held, and Tiffany never wanted to put him down. “You’re gonna spoil that kid,” Jared would say, trying to hide his beaming smile. “No one gets to spend more time in your arms than me.”

“You’re the spoiled one,” Tiffany snarked back playfully. “You had your time. It’s his turn now.”

It was an uncommonly beautiful evening the night that Tiffany would last set eyes upon her son. All the windows in the house were open, a slight breeze brushing in past the curtains, tickling the skin with butterfly kisses. She thought nothing of the open windows; they were on the seventeenth floor and Ewan could barely roll over by himself.

Tiffany had just put Ewan back down after a late feeding, humming an off-key tune to coax him back to sleep.

And if she were listening, rather than humming, she would have heard the faint, distant sound of skittering claws across polished concrete.

Just outside her window, clinging to the underside of the balcony, was a writhing mass of brown

bulbous flesh—a silently snarling beast with a misshapen head and an uncommonly large brow resting above tiny, jaundiced, bloodshot eyes. Its balding head gripped slight patches of graying hair, wisps desperately combed over concealing the wrinkled flesh beneath. Muscles bulged out in odd places beset by dripping flab.

Its giant monkey-like arms gripped the edge of the balcony as it writhed in agony at the tuneless sound escaping betwixt Tiffany's lips.

For Dithers, a Bendith Y Mamau, Tiffany's song was the last screeching wail of a strangler animal; the dismal, shrill sound of a pack of harpies swooping down upon their prey. She meant well, but that didn't stop him wincing painfully at each misstruck note. Dithers flailed against the wall, praying the veil wouldn't fail him and leave him exposed so high up. He held firm, thankful that he was dangling above another balcony and wouldn't have far to fall were she to begin slaughtering. The song he actually knew.

He'd heard bad singers in his life, but this mother hadn't a chord in her throat that could strike so much as a single note, let alone string together a melody. She deserved what she had coming to her, she deserved it for what she was doing to music. Reaching back, Dithers checked the squirming leather sack dangling from a strap slung over his shoulder. All he needed was for that suckling beast to return to her bed so he could perform the single most important task of his life.

In his cradle, Ewan drifted into an infant's slumber, the notes of his mother's tune drifting in and out of his formless dreams. Tiffany smiled, knowing she had a good two or three hours more before he would gurgle and coo again. She lingered for a moment, marveling at the wonder in the crib. Her hand stroked the top of his head and he fussed—just a little—before settling back. Her song ended, and she retreated swiftly back to bed, stepping lightly so her footsteps wouldn't wake him.

Dithers breathed deep, squinched tight his eyes, saying a silent prayer. In one fluid motion, he swung back, kicking off the bottom of the balcony, slinging himself around—up and over the bars—before landing graceful as a cat. He glanced around—no one to see him, not so much as a pigeon or a cat, an angel this high up tonight. He'd have liked to smile, but the job wasn't over, too much still to get done, too much wrong.

Focus. Eyes on the crib.

He darted in through the open door, brushing past the gossamer curtains, giving a cursory glance to ensure he wasn't seen. *No one must know. No one.* But the building was new, its otherworldly inhabitants yet to properly stake their claim to the nooks and crannies of every dark corner. All the better. He didn't want a fight. He just wanted to grab the kid and go. With the kick of his foot, he was perched upon the crib's railing. He took a brief moment—nothing more than an instant—to think about what he was doing, running over the checklist one more time.

Then he reached into his sack with one hand, scooping up baby Ewan with the other.

In one rehearsed motion, he swapped the contents of his bag for the child in the crib. Then he was off, vaulting over the balcony, soaring blindly out into the night below without pausing to admire his

own handiwork.

Dithers sailed seventeen stories down, his outstretched arm catching the trunk of a tree, swinging him, spiraling around, leaving a candy-cane scratch in the bark. His feet had barely touched the ground before he tore off into a full run, making his way behind a building, out into the darkness. In the sack behind him, enjoying the bumpy ride in a cushioned bag, a groggy Ewan smiled and cooed.

He would never see his mother again.

Seventeen stories up, the curtains still rustled. Beyond them, in the crib, a child looking remarkably like Ewan lay in identical pajamas. Spattered with vomit and feces, reeking of the thick smell of swamp rot, the child fussed, uncomfortable on the cozy mattress. There wasn't the slightest hint of glamour in the air, not a bit of mountain laurel on the breeze. It was about as awful and antiseptic a place as he'd ever been. And so he began to scream.

Tiffany shot up out of bed as if it were on fire, tearing away the covers, running full speed toward the baby's room. *Something was wrong. Very wrong.* For a baby who never made a noise louder than a cough to wail like that, it had to be a matter of life and death. She careened around the corner, stockinged feet slipping on the hardwood floor, arms flailing like a windmill to keep her balance, and she slid to a stop next to Ewan's crib. The changeling shrieked and it cried and it screamed its little head off, the sound pushing in on her inner ear as if she were twenty feet underwater.

Reaching in to pick up her child, she stopped, her hands hovering above the baby. *This isn't right*, she thought. "What's wrong, sweetie?" she asked. "Tell Mommy what you need." But the changeling continued its hellish squeal. Tiffany peered closer, her eyes trying to make out its features in the dark as she reached in, once again attempting to pick up her child.

Then the smell hit her, a rotting, fetid stench like week-old garbage littered with animal corpses left to sweat in the humid Texas heat. She shuddered, covering her nose with the back of her hand to keep from gagging.

Looking again, she caught a glimpse of a single, sharp tooth. *Is he teething? Already?* Cautiously she stuck a finger in his mouth, running it along bleeding gums. The little fiend bit down, sinking a single, jagged, cavity-ridden tooth into his new mother's flesh.

She yanked back her hand, yelping, sticking the bloody finger in her mouth. The screaming stopped and the changeling opened his eyes, gazing upon Tiffany for the first time.

She could see the creature's yellow, catlike eyes—black slits where the pupils should be—glowing in the dark of his crib. And she screamed, terrified of the monster staring back at her. The changeling smiled and—hearing the nourishing fright in his mother's voice—let out a soothed coo.

Tiffany couldn't explain it; she couldn't find the words. Every time she opened her mouth, the story falling out seemed implausible, unbelievable even to her. With the baby wailing in the other room, Jared stared at his wife with a look she'd never seen before. He'd been in the room, examining Ewan a dozen times himself. The baby was fine. Clearly upset, but fine. There were no jagged teeth. No glowing yellow eyes. There was no monster in that crib. But something *was* wrong.

“It wasn’t a dream,” she said bitterly. “I know what I saw.”

He reassured her, putting a sympathetic, worried hand on her arm. “I know you do, baby. I believe you.” But he didn’t.

“I want to take him to the doctor,” she demanded.

“We’ll take him. But . . .”

“But don’t tell him what I told you?”

“I didn’t say that,” said Jared.

“You didn’t have to.”

THE PEDIATRICIAN HAD kind eyes when she burst into tears in front of him. Of course, having only met her a few times before, he had no idea how out of character her hysterics were. And when she finally felt at ease enough to let her secret out, he remained unflappable, even smiling a little. He’d heard a lot of this before; it was never good and rarely ended well.

“Ewan is fine, Mrs. Thatcher. He’s a perfectly healthy baby boy.” He looked over at the changeling who lay perfectly still, smiling, growing evermore content with his mother’s rapidly mounting anxiety.

“I don’t understand,” she said, trembling. “When I brought him in he was screaming his head off. He’d been screaming for eight hours straight. He’s not all right.”

“Ma’am, look at him. Whatever was wrong seems to have passed. What’s happening is completely normal. It happens all the time. The stress of a new child . . .”

“I know what I saw,” she snapped. The doctor didn’t flinch.

“I know. I believe you. Which is why I’d like to prescribe something.”

Tiffany relaxed for a moment, allowing herself to believe that someone finally understood—but that confidence was eroded when the doctor called Jared into the office to join them. *Postpartum*. That wasn’t the scary word. *Postpartum* was fine. *Psychosis* was the word that almost broke her.

The first day was by far the easiest. Tiffany took her medication, spent the day cradling the baby sitting in the handcrafted rocking chair bought for her by her proud in-laws. The gentle creak of the chair on the floor was a kind reassurance of better times.

Creak. Creak.

The baby was quiet all day. Not a peep. Jared wanted to say something, but he thought better of it. At least Tiffany was at peace, and completely bombed out of her mind on some lithium derivative that cost nearly a day’s pay.

Every so often she would examine the baby. No fangs. Blue eyes. Tiny, adorable fingers with a faultless collection of diminutive fingernails. Perfect.

But as dusk set in, the baby *changed*. His brow bent out of shape, bulging a little to one side. A lingering smell wafted in on the breeze. And as the sun crept below the horizon, the baby squinted his yellow eyes.

Tiffany jumped, dropping the changeling square on its head, and the wailing returned. Jared ran into the room, saw his son crying on the floor, his wife standing contemptuously over their child. He froze. Tiffany looked up at him, pointing a crooked finger at the abomination on the floor. “That’s not my baby!” she cried. “That’s *not* my baby!”

Each day became progressively worse. Soon she couldn’t go anywhere near the baby, not to feed him, not to touch him, not to so much as look at him. The crying only worsened, so bad Tiffany eventually retreated into her bedroom, spending hours at a time with a pillow clutched over her head, though it never entirely drowned out the sound. The howls became whispers and soon the whispers carried instructions.

She couldn’t talk to Jared anymore. *What was she going to say?* She couldn’t tell him what the baby wanted her to do; the creature was becoming something far worse than a mere imposter. There was only one thing that would satisfy it, one thing that would stop its wailing.

She wanted to beat it with a brick, to crush its tiny skull to pieces, wringing the life out of its monstrous little neck, to toss it off her seventeenth-story balcony and watch it sail down into the street below. Oh, she dreamed of many dark and devious things in the dead of her sleepless nights—such foul atrocities she dare not speak them aloud lest she lose Jared along with her remaining sanity. The drugs helped a little—kept her fuzzy, unable to hurt her baby—but they couldn’t keep out the whispers.

After a week and a half without taking so much as a few steps out the door, the fridge was bare, the cupboards gathering dust. They needed groceries. Jared sat beside his wife, put a hand on her shoulder and asked her if she would be okay. Surprisingly, she sat up, threw her arms around him, kissing him square on the mouth. And for the first time in over a week she smiled. Then she kissed him again, as deeply and passionately as she knew how.

“I’m feeling much better, actually,” she assured him. “Really. Go. Just don’t be long.”

Jared felt as if a fifty-pound weight had been lifted from his life and he strode happily off to the store. And as he returned home and unlocked the door, he heard the familiar creaking of Tiffany in her rocking chair. Normalcy at last. The door swung open, and inside, on the couch, sat the baby, cooing and smiling, happy as ever.

Creak. Creak. Creak. An overturned chair. *Creak.* Horn-rimmed glasses upturned and cracked on the floor. *Creak.* A trickle of blood at the side of her mouth. *Creak.* Images. Flashes. Not enough time to process. There she swung, the most beautiful woman in the world, a rough, blister-dealing rope wrapped around her delicate neck, and tied to a beam above her. *Creak.* Slender toes three feet off the ground. *Creak.* Lifeless eyes still open, begging for respite.

Creak. Jared fell to the ground beneath his wife. Reaching up, tears already streaming down his cheeks, he gently stroked her foot. *Creak.* He grabbed hold, steadying her, and as he looked over at his son, wondering what he was going to do without her, he caught a glimpse of a wicked smile and tapering eyes. The changeling giggled mischievously. With that, the sun buried its head behind the

hills and there was the unmistakable sight of yellow and the shadow of a single jagged tooth.

At once Jared knew what his son had done. He knew what Tiffany had done. Most important, he knew what he had to do.

He rose to his feet, walked over, scooping the changeling into his arms, then methodically made his way down sixteen flights of stairs—the shrieking creature howling the whole way down. Both of them knew how this was going to play out. Jared lived but a block from the lake and he took his time thinking only of Tiffany—not of the way he'd left her, swinging from the rafters, but the way she had looked when he first saw her over that French book. He remembered her the way she had looked on that walk. The way she looked at their wedding. The way she looked when they first held Baby Edward in their arms.

He remembered all the ways he saw her, including the time he saw her last, as he performed his slow and dastardly procession.

The block was quieter than usual, with no one so much as jogging or walking their dog. As he approached the darkening water, he paused, looking down at the child in his arms, but the creature's howls reassured him of his decision. He leaned down to the water's edge, right along a concrete slab that led to a steep, immediate drop-off into the lake, and plunged the changeling underwater. The shrieking stopped, a still quiet filling the coming night. Jared looked down, catching a glimpse of something lurking beneath the surface of the water. A shadow drifting slowly toward him.

He peered closer. *Tiffany*. She looked up, slowly rising to the surface, her arms outstretched, hair drifting in the current. But as she approached, her hair darkened, her skin grew pale, her eyes became black orbs swimming lifeless in their sockets. Before he knew what he was looking at, two water arms took him by the lapels, pulling him headlong into its depths. He struggled, fighting, but could not reach the surface.

Two arms grappled him tightly, a woman holding firm upon his back, swimming them both even deeper.

Jared was in the cold grip of the depths, his lungs swollen with mossy, alkaline lake water, gasping for a single breath.

The changeling floated helplessly a few feet beneath the surface. A second woman appeared, kicking like a dolphin, flinging herself out of the gloom toward the child above her. She grabbed the changeling, swimming him back to the surface, out into the night air.

"He's ours now," the woman whispered into Jared's ear, her voice audible, without so much as a gurgle. Then came the blackness, hollow, crashing, choking. And with that, Jared Thatcher drowned, sinking slowly to the bottom of the lake.

Above, the pale woman emerged from the water, the changeling still shrieking in her arms, its tormented yowl shattering the stillness. "There, there," she soothed, stroking his grotesque head while her eyes scanned the shoreline for any sign of witnesses. She smiled. "You're home, child. You're home." The screaming stopped and the changeling cooed, smiling up at his new mother. He was home.

Home for good. And he hungered no more.

CHAPTER TWO

ON THE BENDITH Y MAMAU AND THE CHANGELINGS THEY LEAVE BEHIND

An excerpt by Dr. Thaddeus Ray, Ph.D., from his book *A Chronicle of the Dreamfolk*

The Bendith Y Mamau can smell love, as if it were a tangible thing. They also detest it, for they do not understand it. While they are known to feel familial attachment, the Bendith Y Mamau cannot reproduce, thus they do not mate and never have the need for anything resembling love. It doesn't help that they are amongst God's ugliest creatures. However, that is not to say that they do not possess beauty of some sort.

The Bendith Y Mamau are the world's greatest musicians. They cannot sing a note, their baritone voices more akin to a walrus's bellow than anything else, but with an instrument in their hands they can weave some of the most sensuous, melodic music ever heard. It is music so complex, with such extraordinarily complicated structures, that it transcends normal composition and plays at notes as yet unknown to mortal men outside of the Aboriginal songlines of Australia. Each note contains the very essence of magic and weaves powerful spells that hold sway over emotion and memory. It is this music that fairy communities often use to hold captives, without need of chain or tether, which of course leads to the Bendith Y Mamau's primary function in any fairy community.

Pronounced "ben-dith uh mo-may," a Welsh phrase meaning "mother's blessing," they are the chief child thieves of any fairy court, and the first to whom a community will turn when they desire fresh infants. Each community has its own differing needs, but a thriving, healthy court will often call upon their Bendith Y Mamau to tend to the acquisition of living mortals. Their strength, speed, and agility make them incredible hunters, while their oafish nature gives them a single-minded purpose and focus not found among the more thoughtful races of the fae.

Many myths persist that the Bendith Y Mamau leave behind their own misshapen children, but this simply isn't the case. Each Bendith Y Mamau is born sterile, the result of the unholy mating of fairy and goblin. What brings fairies and goblins together in such a manner is still a secret known only to the fairies and goblins who have participated in such a distasteful procreation, but it is thus far the only known way to produce one.

The children they leave behind during abductions are changelings, the stillborn infant children of unsuccessful fairy unions. When the conditions are not adequate for proper reproduction, whether it be that the child is born out of season or the mother finds herself in a corrupt place ill-suited for childbirth, it is possible for the pregnancy to self-terminate. In such a case, the stillborn child has a chance of becoming a changeling. If the mother feels a sufficient amount of grief or sheds too many tears upon the corpse, the baby may simply come alive, its energies beginning to feed upon the pain and agony of its mother. Changelings are quite dangerous to anyone responsible for birthing one and must be disposed of as quickly as

possible.

~~However, no fairy mothers, no matter how unseelie, will abandon the product of their wombs to the wilderness. Instead these mothers turn to the Bendith Y Mamau, tasking them with disposing of the changeling and returning with a child that they may raise as their own. Fairies, of course, prefer infant children, but Bendith have been known from time to time to dimwittedly return with a child old enough to speak.~~

A changeling need only glimpse its predecessor for but a fleeting second as they are being switched to take on its likeness. At that point, imprinting ties the changeling developmentally to the original child. To all but its new mother, the changeling will appear in vision, sound, and action as if it were the child it replaced. Something may seem off or weird about it, but rarely will anyone suspect that this is a doppelganger of any kind. A mother, on the other hand, always knows the difference. By the light of day she has only a feeling, but once the sun has fallen and night overtakes the earth, the changeling's true nature is revealed. It is that sudden revelation, and the fear it brings, that allows the creature to feed so easily.

A changeling exists solely by feeding off the physical, mental, and emotional pain of its mother. As long as there is agony, torment, or anguish it will be able to nourish itself. But if a mother remains calm, the child begins to starve and then to wail. It will scream, fuss, and throw fits in hopes of driving its mother half to madness. A mother worried about her true birth child or one already suffering from some bout of depression is best suited to feed such a creature, but any suffering mother will do. Unable to digest real food, a changeling may bite at its mother's breasts or vomit up anything force-fed to it, adding further confusion and worry. Most changelings left in the charge of human parents find themselves smothered, drowned, or exorcised, on the rare occasions when they aren't just abandoned to die alone.

Adult changelings are incredibly rare, as they are very tricky beings to raise; their need for nourishment is only indefinitely sated by the sacrifice of its new mother to a sudden, violent death. The amount of energy released by such a death, especially one at the behest of the changeling, seems to be the only thing capable of keeping such a child alive until it is old enough to consciously torment other victims.

Changelings possess the ability to change their appearance at will, shrouding themselves in glamour to masquerade as someone they've met at least once before, or revealing their true selves to someone other than their mothers. Their natural state appears to be one of twisted mockery of the person they originally replaced. A fully grown changeling will look like an uglier, physically inferior version of their initial counterpart at the same age. Their personalities remain their own, however, and changelings grow up as maladjusted, unusually cruel, hateful creatures who long for nothing more than to make others suffer.

Finally, changelings appear to have some form of eidetic or photographic memory. From the moment they awaken in the body of a stillborn infant, every memory is theirs to keep. It is not uncommon for adult changelings to speak at length about their childhood mothers and lament the fairy mother who first cast them away. Most scholars believe this to be the primary source of the changelings hate and taste for suffering, the psyche's embodiment of a child who so loved its mother that it returned from death, only to be turned away and replaced by another, better child.

CHAPTER THREE

THE BOY COLBY'S CHANCE ENCOUNTER

Colby Stevens was nothing special. Neither unattractive nor unlikable, he lived a life that had gone relatively unnoticed by even his closest relations. He lacked neither talent nor intelligence—simple opportunity—and it seemed, even at his young age, as if he were destined to live out a life of mediocrity amid the tract-home sprawl into which he was born.

But at the age of eight years and three months, Colby Stevens would make the single most important decision of his life, a choice that would not only forever change *his* life, but alter the destinies of countless others for years to come. He was the most dangerous sort of creature, a wily and precocious child, clever beyond his years, happened upon by the wrong sort of man. But on the eighth year, second month, and twenty-ninth day of that life, he was still a relatively unnoticed burden seemingly destined for nothing—something which made him a particularly strong candidate for what this stranger had in mind.

Colby had no friends and no prospects to speak of. He was a carrot-topped little boy, a mess of shaggy tresses and freckles, who wanted nothing more than to venture out into the woods—a undeveloped plot of land no more than half a mile wide that, to an eight-year-old, gave off the distinct impression of being a forest. Clumps of tangled brush, fallen logs, and the occasional abandoned tire lingered around a copse of trees where Colby imagined all manner of fairy, dragon, and unnamed adventure—rather than the pale stone strip mall everyone else saw waiting in its future.

But today it was a magical forest and Colby couldn't wait to explore its wonders yet again. So he tore down the stairs from his bedroom, his feet slamming the steps. *Thudthudthudthudthudthudthud*. His hand caught the end of the banister and he swung around, sliding across the hardwood floor in his socks. For a moment he felt as if he were flying.

“What in the happy hell are you doing?!” his mother yelled from the couch. “Can't you see Mommy has a headache?” Colby's head sank low, his ears almost meeting his shoulders. He whispered.

“Sorry, Mommy.”

His mother glared at him as he shuffled warily into the living room. She was lying facedown on the couch, her bathrobe tied loosely around her. Sylvia Stevens wasn't an old woman, but she carried herself that way, always ill in the morning, groaning as she moved. At twenty-seven she felt as if she'd seen it all. Married early, kid soon after. She hated every minute of it, and it showed in the premature crow's-feet growing around her young eyes. She reached over for her glass and pulled it to her lips without looking. Dry as a bone. She sighed deeply, frustrated by this latest tragedy, reaching for the orange juice she had at the ready.

“And where are you tearing off to this morning?” she asked, barely paying attention.

“Mommy, it's two o'clock.”

“That may be,” she said, pouring half a glass of juice, “but where are you going?”

“Out to play in the woods.”

“All right. Do you have your watch?”

Colby smiled proudly, as if he'd just handed his mother a report card lined with straight A's. He stuck his arm all the way out, showing her his watch—a gaudy piece of molded plastic crap made in Taiwan, painted to look like a cartoon character from a long-since-canceled television show. He'd gotten it by way of a fast-food kid's meal and considered it his proudest possession. After all, Mommy always looked to see if he had it on. That meant it *must* be special. She smiled, nodded, and put down the orange juice.

“Okay, now I don't want you home till after five, you hear me? Mommy needs her quiet time alone.” Sylvia picked up the bottle of vodka next to the juice, filling the other half of the glass with it. Colby nodded. “Now you be careful out there. I don't want you coming home early bleeding from your head, okay? Be safe.”

“I know, Mommy. I'll be good.”

“You run along now. Mommy needs her shower.”

Colby spun on his heel and took off running for the front door. “Bye, Mommy,” he yelled without looking back. The door opened, slammed behind him, and that was it; he was tearing off toward the woods, making his way fleetly down the street. He passed the large wooden ROAD CLOSED sign that kept cars from turning onto the dirt road, bisecting the woods into two distinctly different patches, and stopped.

Colby looked back at his house just in time to see a car pulling into the driveway. A well-dressed man in a finely tailored suit stepped out, slowly loosening his tie. There was a spring in his step—a sense of urgency in the way that he walked—as if he couldn't wait for what was behind that door. He knocked on the door, looking both ways as he did. The door opened immediately. Sylvia leaned out, also looking both ways, then pulled him inside by his jacket, the door slamming behind them. Without so much as a thought, Colby turned back to the woods.

There is no place in the universe quite like the mind of an eight-year-old boy. Describing a boy

play to someone who has never been a little boy at play is nigh impossible. One can detail each motion and encounter, but it doesn't make a lick of sense to anyone but the boy. It's as if some bored etheric being is fiddling with the remote control to his imagination, clicking channel after channel without finding anything to capture his interest for very long. One moment he's aboard a pirate ship, firing cannons at a dragon off the starboard bow before being boarded by Darth Vader and his team of ninj-trained Jedi assassins. And only the boy, Spider-Man, and a trireme full of Vikings will be able to hold them off long enough for Billy the Kid to disarm the bomb that's going to blow up his school. A while Darth Vader is holding the prettiest girl in class hostage. And just in case things get a bit out of hand, there are do-overs.

It's kind of like that, only breathless and without spaces between each word. At one hundred miles per hour.

And that was exactly the sort of play Colby was engaged in as he made his way from tree to tree, stick in hand, fighting off a pack of ravaging elves and wicked old men, led by a one-handed, shape-changing monster. Colby pointed to the sky, commanding a flight of hawkmen to descend upon the elves to buy them enough time for the cavalry to arrive. He swung his sword and cast spells, fighting off all manner of creatures.

Colby spun, a whirling dervish in jeans shorts and a polo shirt, and struck a deathblow to whatever creature was in his head at the time. Instead of whistling through empty air, the stick stopped midstroke, striking with a dull thud across the very real silk-sash-covered belly of a large, ominous figure—one who had not been standing there a moment before. Colby's eyes shot wide. He was in trouble.

The stranger looked down, his hands resting on his hips, unsure of what to make of the unintentional strike.

He was tall. Not grown-up tall. Abnormally tall. Seven feet of solid muscle upon which rested a jaw carved from concrete, chiseled with scars. His hair, long, black, and as silken as the robes he wore, was pulled back into a ponytail high atop the back of his head. A brightly colored sash looped around his waist, a number of ornamental baubles, bells, and buttons completing the garish, almost cartoonish outfit. The man looked down at the stick still resting on his stomach—which Colby was too frightened to even consider removing—growling softly.

"Hmmm," he murmured.

Colby froze in place. "Um . . . uh . . . I'm sorry. I'm real sorry. I . . . uh."

The man smiled, shifting to good humor in the blink of an eye. "No need to apologize," he said, bowing. "There was no harm done. In truth, I should be the one apologizing to you. A thousand pardons to you, sir, for I should not have appeared so unexpectedly." He spoke boldly, with the loft confidence of an actor on the stage, his voice large and resonant, almost echoing off the neighboring trees without seeming to carry very far at all. He possessed an eloquence to which Colby was unaccustomed, one where even the smallest, simplest words and gestures carried weight.

“I’m sorry,” said Colby, the man’s reply sounding more to him like his mother’s sarcasm than a honest apology.

“No,” boomed the man, shaking his head. “I am the one who is sorry. I am Yashar. What is your wish?”

Colby had no idea what to make of the strange man, but found him intriguing. At first he thought he might be some sort of pirate, but now that he’d said the word *wish* he was beginning to reevaluate him. “My mommy says I shouldn’t talk to strangers,” he said. “She says that bad men like little boys with red hair and blue eyes, but I told her that my hair wasn’t very red and she said it didn’t matter how red it was, just that it was red. Is that true?”

“There are men that like many things. I am not one of them.”

“You don’t like small redheaded boys?”

The man bellowed a laugh, honestly amused. “No, I am not a man.”

“Well, you’re still a stranger and I can’t talk to you.”

“But I told you my name. I am Yashar.”

Colby crossed his arms. “It doesn’t work that way.”

“Well, how do I become anything but a stranger if you won’t talk to me?” asked Yashar.

“I guess Mommy or Daddy would have to introduce us.”

“What if I told you I wasn’t a man, but a djinn?”

“Like the card game?” asked Colby.

Yashar leaned in close, as if to whisper a carefully guarded secret. “No, like a genie.” He smiled big and broad with all the reassuring boldness he could muster.

Colby eyed him skeptically, folding his arms. “If you’re a genie, where’s your lamp?”

Yashar cocked an eyebrow at Colby, displeased but not altogether surprised. He dropped every last bit of pretense. “Look, kid, if I had a nickel for every time I was asked that—”

“You’d be rich,” Colby said, interrupting. “My daddy says that. Well, if you’re really a genie, prove it. Don’t I get three wishes?”

Yashar turned his head, playing coy for the moment. “Not exactly.”

“I knew you weren’t really a genie.”

“You watch too much television,” said Yashar. “That three wishes and lamp garbage, well, it doesn’t work that way. It never worked that way.”

“Well, how does it work then?” asked Colby with wide, inquisitive eyes.

“Oh, I see: one minute I’m a stranger and you can’t talk to me, but when you find out that you might get something out of it you’re all ears. I don’t know if you’re the right child after all.” Yashar turned as if he was about to walk away. *One, two, thr—*

“Right child for what?” asked Colby.

“For remembering me.”

“I’ll remember you! Promise!”

Yashar nodded. “Well, we’ll need a little test. Meet me back here at the same time tomorrow. I’ll be there. You remember, you just might be the right child.”

Colby lifted the plastic face on his watch, checking the time. It read 3:45. “What’ll I get?”

“Whatever you want, my boy,” Yashar said with a laugh. “Whatever you want.” He spun around, his robes a kaleidoscopic torrent becoming a colorful smear, before vanishing altogether, his sash fluttering alone on the wind, finally folding into nothing. Where he’d been, he was no longer, and left no trace behind to prove otherwise. But his voice whispered into Colby’s left ear, gently carried by a breeze over his shoulder. “Tell no one. Not a soul.”

Colby stared, dumbstruck, at the empty spot where Yashar once stood. He couldn’t believe it, he could have anything he wanted. *Anything at all.* Yashar had said so. This was all so exciting. He turned, forgetting about everything else, and sprinted back home. He ducked, dove and wove about trees, thinking about all the treasures he might ask for. *Would he get only one wish? Is that what he meant? Or could he have anything and everything?* Oh, he hoped he meant anything. Anything at all. Anything and everything. There was just so much to ask for.

Arriving at the ROAD CLOSED sign, Colby stopped dead in his tracks. The man’s car was still in the driveway. Colby’s watch read 3:47. *Crap.* He wished that the man would hurry up, finish helping Mommy with her headache and leave so he could go home. But he wouldn’t get his wish until tomorrow, and the more he thought about it, the more he realized that this would be a rather silly and wasted wish. He would wait, no matter how long an eternity that hour and thirteen minutes might be.

He would wait, because when Mommy said five o’clock, she meant it.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE TEN THOUSAND BOTTLES OF THE FISHMONGER'S DAUGHTER

Translated from fragments unearthed midway through the twentieth century, “The Ten Thousand Bottles of the Fishmonger’s Daughter” appears to have, at one time, been collected as one of Scheherazade’s many tales presented in Burton’s *The Book of a Thousand Nights and a Night*. However, at some point it fell into disuse and doesn’t appear in any complete subsequent copies. Some scholars argue that this is simply a local tale added by an unscrupulous scribe meaning to include his own work in such a respected manuscript, a common practice of the time and one of the problems Gutenberg sought to eradicate with the invention of his printing press. Others argue that it is a lost folktale that became unfashionable, failing to espouse the beliefs of Islam, as many *Nights* tales do. Perhaps the best argument against its inclusion as a true *Nights* story is that it does not portray the sultan in a good light, something contrary to Scheherazade’s ultimate goal—that of appeasing her murderous sultan husband. It is included here for the sake of completeness and should not be considered in actuality to belong directly in *Nights*.

Excerpt from *Timm’s Lost Tales: The Arabian Fables* by Stephen Timm

Once upon a time there lived a very selfish djinn. While he was one of the most powerful and clever of his kind, he had become infatuated with the lifestyle of man. He would seek out men of this world and grant them wishes, be it great wealth, power, or a multitude of women, and in return he would ask them one simple favor: to make a wish that in no way benefited them directly. These men would often think of wondrous, selfless ideals—feeding the poor, sheltering the homeless, curing the sick. But all the while the djinn had been seeding them with notions that he was in some way trapped or poor or suffering. To each man he told a different tale and often each man—hoping to further gain his favor—would grant the djinn some creature comfort with his spare wish. In this way the djinn amassed such wealth that it began to rival the sultan’s own. This estate afforded him a great many wives, all of whom he loved very much, each spoiled and pleased in a way no other harem was ever spoiled. This djinn had a good life, one he felt he had earned many times over.

But in this very same kingdom, at this very same time, lived a very selfish sultan. Though the most powerful and respected man of his day, he had grown comfortable with his status and with all of his worldly things. And when he heard about the growing wealth of the djinn, the sultan grew nervous. Soon this djinn’s wealth would eclipse his own and he might

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