THE GIRL IN WOODEN ARMOUR

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THE GIRL IN WOODEN ARMOUR

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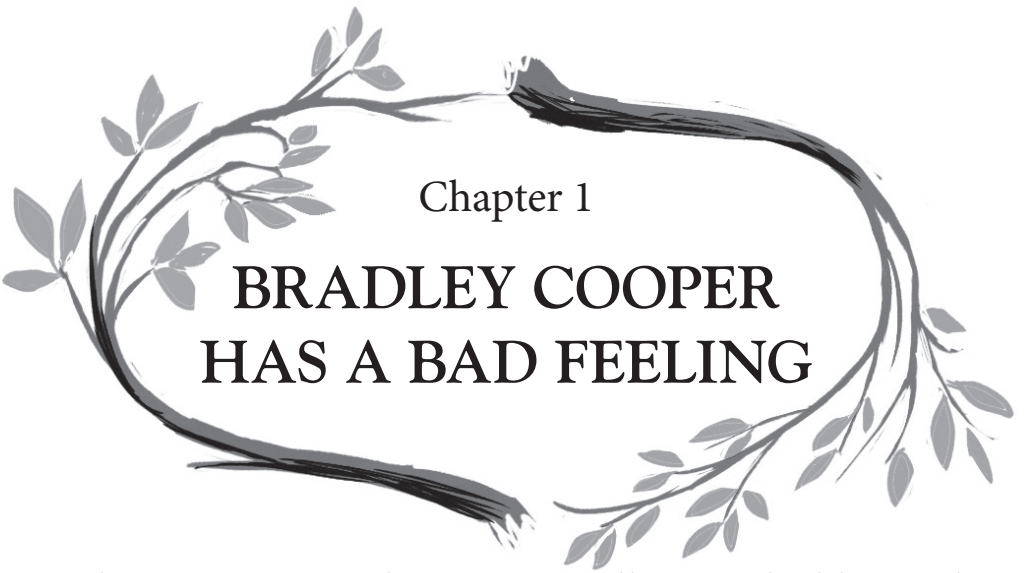
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For Ida and Arthur, with love

PART ONE

THE CURIOUS HISTORY OF BROKEWOOD-ON-TANDLE





Chapter 1

BRADLEY COOPER HAS A BAD FEELING

'Nothing's going to happen, Bradley,' said old Deirdre Gavell to her stuffed squirrel. 'Don't be such a worrywart.'

Bradley Cooper didn't say a word. The clock had already struck seven, but tonight she had the funniest feeling – as though he didn't want her to go.

Which was nonsense. He was just a stuffed squirrel, after all.

'Youngsters,' she tutted. 'Always making a fuss. Well, if it will make you feel better.' She stroked his furry head, then took three twigs from the mantelpiece and slipped them into the pocket of her patchwork coat. She had gathered them a few weeks before, digging in the leaf litter beneath the branches of an ancient beech tree.

Something rustled outside. Her heart lurched, and her fingers tightened around the twigs. But it was only a bird taking flight from the shadowy bushes outside the living room.

Deirdre screwed up her wrinkled face and stuck her

tongue out at the mirror. That made her feel better. Nothing bad ever happened in Brokewood-on-Tandle. Not any more.

She shuffled into the hallway, buttoning her coat. A bowl of peppermint humbugs sat on the dresser, and she unwrapped one and popped it in her mouth. The journey was a mile. She couldn't walk as fast as she used to, but the moon was shining and the rain wasn't due for a few hours yet.

Silence greeted her as she unbolted the front door and stepped out into the night. Not so much as a gust of wind to sway the branches of the weeping willows. Even the River Tandle seemed still, as though the world was frozen, waiting for something to happen.

Hairs prickled at the back of her neck. *Silly old woman. Getting jumpy because of a squirrel.*

And yet . . .

These last few weeks, nothing had felt quite right. The beech leaves had been whispering strangely in Hook Wood. Yesterday, a dead branch had snapped beneath her boot so loudly it had startled her. And when she laid a hand on the trunk of the alder that grew alone by the brook, she had felt a coldness that lingered even after she had removed her fingers.

It was almost as though the trees were trying to tell her something.

Hunching her shoulders, she hurried across the

drive. Tonight, at the meeting, she would talk to her friends. They would tell her that she was going loopy – a mad old woman who spent too much time alone with Bradley and the trees. How long had it been since she had last seen her grandchildren? A year, at least. Nearly two. Hattie and Jonathan didn't know the truth about their granny – poor, dotty Deirdre – and they probably never would.

She sucked hard on her humbug and forced the thought from her mind. She might be old, but there was no need to be sentimental.

Her Doc Martens crunched the gravel with every step. *Nowhere to run, out here in the open.* She didn't know why the thought had occurred to her. *Ridiculous.* Anyway, her running days were long behind her. She stared straight ahead, resisting an urge to peer into the shadows.

As she strode over the humpback bridge, her breathing began to slow. And she was exactly halfway across when someone came stumbling from the bushes up ahead.

It was a slim figure, hooded and dressed in dark, baggy clothes. A girl. She looked older than Deirdre's granddaughter Hattie. One of the teenagers from the high school in Tatton, at a guess. They often came to the woods to smoke cigarettes and drink cider in secret. This one must have got lost and separated from her

friends. It was easy enough in the woods around the Tandle.

Deirdre spat the humbug into her handkerchief and tucked it away for later. She couldn't help feeling relieved to see another person. 'Hello, dear,' she said, smiling. 'Can I help you?'

The girl didn't reply. She was reeling, unsteady on her feet. She staggered into the road and sank to her knees. Deirdre glimpsed a flash of pale skin at the bottom of the torn, filthy jeans. And with a jolt of alarm, she realized that the girl wasn't wearing any shoes.

She sped up, hurrying across the bridge. Alcohol poisoning, surely? With luck the girl would have a phone to call an ambulance.

'Hello?' she called. 'Can you hear me?'

The girl curled slowly into a tight ball, her whole body shuddering.

Deirdre shrugged off her coat and went to drape it over the girl's shoulders. Up close, the poor creature stank. A damp, fishy smell as though she had been swimming in the river.

Her fingers brushed against the worn fabric of the girl's hoodie, and at once a strange sensation stole over her. She felt as though she were in another place entirely. As though she were falling backwards down a well, plunging deeper and deeper. Watching the sky getting further out of reach.

A chill swept across her skin.

She snatched her coat and backed away. Fumbling in its pocket, she found the twigs. Her hand closed tight over them. They were all she'd brought to protect herself – not even a daisy chain, a lump of silver or a handful of salt. *Old fool.* What had she been thinking? She cast around, looking for a clump of snowdrops or a puddle of still, stagnant water. Nothing.

The girl had begun to make a sound – a guttural, barking noise. She wasn't choking, wasn't having a fit, wasn't even cold.

She was shaking with laughter.

Deirdre tugged her hand free from the coat. She channelled her fear, pouring it down the length of her arm, through her fingers and into the wood. The twigs responded, twitching and winding together like vines. *Come on. Faster . . .*

In the darkness they were changing, becoming something new. A spiralling blade, slender and sharp and bristling with magic. Deirdre brandished the wooden dagger in front of her, raising her coat like a shield in her other hand. 'I don't want to hurt you,' she said. But her voice was a whisper.

The girl straightened, her hood slipping back from her head. And now it was plain to see that it wasn't a girl at all.

Its hand lashed out, smacked Deirdre's aside, sent the

wooden blade flying into the shadows. Deirdre gasped in pain at the thin scratches that scored the inside of her wrist. Its fingers were tipped with curving black claws.

The thing in the shape of a girl stepped forward, not stumbling at all this time. Limbs unfolded from its back, creaking, protruding through rips in the fabric of the hoodie. Delicate, bat-like bones fanned out like spreading fingers, with sickly white skin stretched between them. A pair of wings.

'Get away from me,' Deirdre croaked.

The girl-thing said nothing. Strands of lank black hair hung in clumps around a face that was little more than a skull, with gaping black nostrils in place of a nose. Its dark eyes gleamed wetly, too large and too round to be human. Its thin lips split apart to reveal a hundred splintered teeth, like jagged rocks in a dank cavern. It was *grinning*.

Then, with an unearthly shriek, it flew forward.

The cold black claws closed around Deirdre's shoulders as the monster bore her back towards the river. She kicked out desperately, but her feet had already left the mud.

Together they smacked into the surface of the Tandle, and Deirdre gasped at the freezing shock of the water. Her coat swam up around her. She thrashed wildly, but her attacker was too strong by far. It was on top of her, pushing her down.

That awful face, looming, grinning, staring . . .

Then searing pain as the claws dug in deep, plunged her down again.

The black water swallowed them both. Bubbled furiously for a few moments before it stilled.

Silence. Only the wind rustling the trees.

Until at last, it began to rain.

