

The Island at the Edge of Night

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In memory of my dear dad

Also by Lucy Strange

The Secret of Nightingale Wood

Our Castle by the Sea

The Ghost of Gosswater

Sisters of the Lost March

Prologue

The house was all in darkness, and the storm was still raging outside – just as it had been when I’d gone to bed a few hours before. But I wasn’t in my bed now. I was standing at the top of the stairs, with no memory of how I had got there. Had I been sleepwalking? I was in my nightdress, and the floorboards were cold as glass beneath my bare feet.

‘Aunt Christina? Father?’ I called, but there was no reply.

Lightning flashed, sudden and blinding white. I gripped the banister to steady myself, to steady my heart. Thunder crashed above the city and rain hammered on the roof and windows, pounding a pulse in my brain – frightened and furious.

Was it the storm that had woken me? Or was it

something else?

I made my way down the stairs and out of the kitchen door, into the walled garden. I remember the wind and rain striking hard, making me gasp. Fallen leaves slimed wet between my toes and my nightdress clung heavy and cold.

I remember going past Father's collection of plants, all battered and cowering. I remember crawling through the hole in the broken fence, into the graveyard. I remember seeing the old yew tree – a ragged silhouette against the storm-lit sky.

And then?

And then the memory shatters like a mirror.

All I have are a handful of splinters – flashes of that night that come and go like lightning: a metal blade, gleaming wet; a hacking, splitting sound that makes me go cold inside; a scream so piercing it still buzzes deep in my bones . . .

After that night there was nothing. Just weeks of stifling dark, the city rain relentless on my bedroom window. Day-long dreams left me shaking with terror: those dark shards of memory, and the faintest echo of a voice, murmuring in horror:

What have you done, Faye? Oh, what have you done, you wicked child?



PART 1

*And so, dear reader, I beg you to
ask yourself, 'What if...'*

*What if trees could talk to one another?
What if they could warn each other of
danger? What if our ancient forests –
peaceful Edens of moss and fern and
birdsong – were alive with secret
whispers? Just imagine!*

Dr Ezra Gault-Firth,
Mysteries of Our Ancient Forest, 1926



I

Aunt Christina called me to her room to say
goodbye.

‘It’s for the best,’ she sniffed, her eyes glossy with tears. ‘They will know how to look after you at this new school. It’s on an island. I’m sure it will be quite beautiful there. And peaceful. You need to be somewhere safe, Faye darling. It will be so much better for you – better for all of us. And it won’t be like the other schools. Trust me.’

Father was sitting in the armchair by the fire. He gazed into the flames and said nothing. Was he upset? Why wouldn’t he look at me? His shoulders were hunched, his eyes were dull with sleep and confusion. Looking at him, I struggled to remember the loving father I used to know – the messy-haired, twinkly-eyed

man whose big hand folded around mine as we walked together through the twilight forest . . .

‘Father?’ I whispered.

His shoulders hunched tighter. His hands twisted in his lap.

‘Do you need your pills, Arthur?’ Aunt Christina asked gently.

He shook his head.

The fire crackled. It was too warm here in Aunt Christina’s room. The air was thick with her expensive perfume.

She watched Father a moment longer, toying with the diamond pendant that hung around her neck. Then she turned to me with a little sigh. ‘I’m afraid it’s time for you to go, Faye,’ she said. She shifted herself up the huge bed, wincing with pain. I adjusted the pillows behind her. She smiled, and tilted up a powdered cheek. ‘Kiss your adoring aunt goodbye,’ she said. ‘The cab is waiting to take you to the train station.’

It was almost dark outside. City smog swirled in the glow of the street lamp outside the window – a yellow serpent of smoke.

I was ready to go. Suitcase packed. Coat and boots on. But I couldn’t bear to leave. I was being sent to another boarding school – further from Father than ever before. It was too cruel – to be torn away, uprooted once more. I felt as if I were trying to fight my way out of yet another clawing nightmare.

Why was Aunt Christina in bed? Was she ill? Why was I being sent away like this?

I shook my head. 'What did I do, Aunt Christina?' I whispered. 'What happened that night?'

I tried once more to remember – pushing through the layers of darkness that fell like curtains around the memory. 'I remember the storm. Going out in the rain – to the graveyard . . .'

'Please stop, my darling,' Aunt Christina said quickly. 'I don't want you getting upset – about any of it.' A tear nudged its way down her cheek and she blotted it away, sniffing. 'You mustn't worry, about me or your poor father.'

We both looked at the hunched figure by the fire.

I went over to him. 'Goodbye,' I said softly. He flinched as my hand touched his shoulder. I felt tears welling up. A sob ached in my throat.

'He'll be all right,' Aunt Christina said. 'The doctor is coming to see him tomorrow.' She smiled again, wrapping the gold chain of her necklace tight around her fingers. The diamond pendant glinted in the firelight.

'Time to go, Faye darling,' Aunt Christina said once more. 'You must get some rest on the journey. Sleep if you can. And really – it's best not to think about what happened.'

The train juddered north through the night, the miles of track doubling behind us. The city was gone, and the

houses had petered out. Where were we?

Far-away, the pistons hissed. *Far-away, far-away*. The whistle screamed as we flew in and out of tunnels.

I was alone in the cold, jolting carriage. The world was black beyond the dirty window.

I didn't think I could sleep, but my head slumped at last. Dark dreams bled like ink-blots.

I grasped at the vague shapes of memories as they drifted by – but I couldn't catch hold.

Another cab met me from the train. It took me to a harbour, where a small ferry boat was waiting in the murky dawn light. To the south, grey mountains stood like sentries, separating me from everything I had left behind. Gulls shrieked in the sky above, wheeling beneath clouds that were washed red by the rising sun. The blustery air was rank with seaweed and diesel smoke. It was all too cold, too real, for my foggy brain.

I stared at the sea – an expanse of lead-grey waves that seemed to go on for ever. I had never seen it before. The only places I knew were the forest where my life had begun, Aunt Christina's house in the smoke-shrouded city, and the gloomy rooms of half a dozen boarding schools. The sea was fathomless. Monstrous. If it chose to, it could swallow up this small boat so very easily . . .

There were two other people waiting to board the boat: a girl, and a man wearing long robes, like a

priest. The girl was bigger than me, much taller too. Her skin was darker than mine, and her gleaming black hair was twisted into a knot at the nape of her neck. She stood alone on the jetty, her chin held high, her arms folded across her chest.

The priest's robes beat like wings in the wind. He was wearing pointed leather shoes that shone jewel-black. He had hooded eyes and sagging jowls, and he was pale as old bones. I looked away quickly as he turned towards me – I didn't want to be seen staring at him – but he didn't seem to be the least bit interested in me or the other girl. His shiny toe tapped as he waited for the skipper to load all the things into the ferry boat: our suitcases, a sack of post and a few boxes that were packed full of food, paraffin and candles.

The boat's engine churned, belching black smoke.

I gazed inland again, and shivered. How far away was the city? How far beyond those towering mountains? *Hundreds of miles. Hundreds . . .*

'Goodbye,' I whispered. 'Goodbye, Father. Goodbye, Aunt Christina.'

The chill wind ripped the words from my mouth. And then we were boarding the boat and I was trying to ignore the tearing in my heart, the burning in my throat. No one called back to me, no one waved me off.

I staggered to sit down as the boat rocked beneath me. The floor was slippery, the wooden bench was split

and sticky with salt water. The whole world was suddenly swaying and strange.

The skipper scowled up at the crimson clouds. 'Red sky at morn, sailor be warned,' he muttered to himself. Then he kicked away the gangplank and untied the ropes.

Soon the gap between boat and jetty became too broad to step across.

Too broad to jump.

Too broad to swim.

At last, the land melted into the sea . . . And there was no way back.