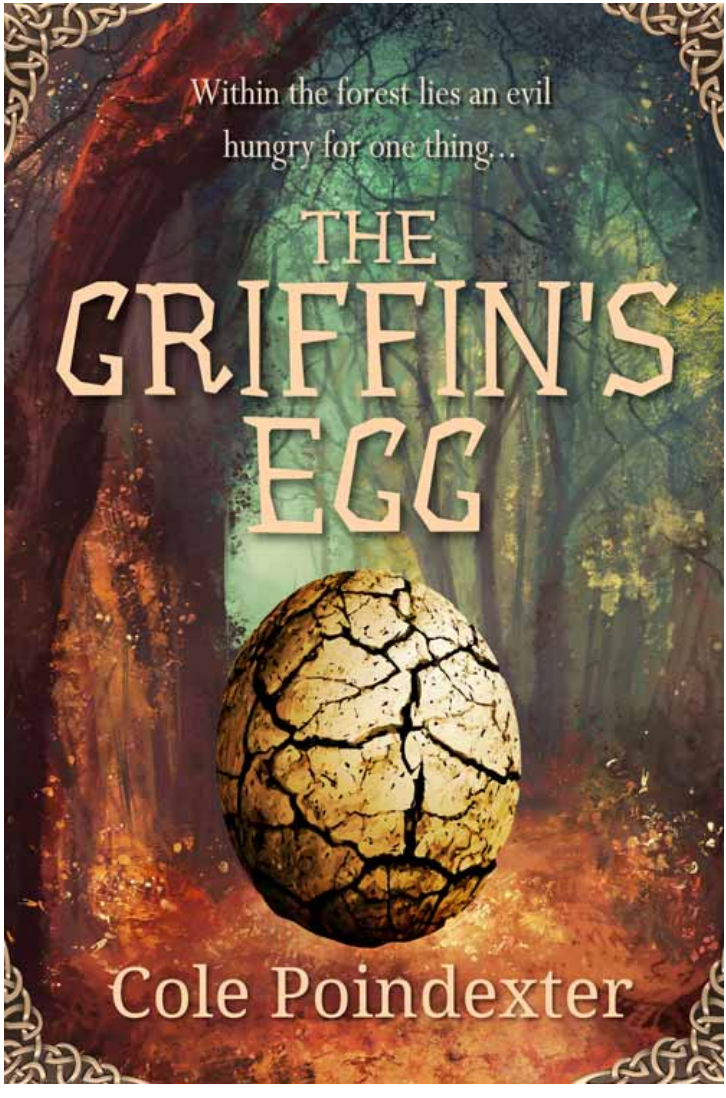

Within the forest lies an evil
hungry for one thing...
THE
GRIFFIN'S
EGG
Cole Poindexter

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The Griffin’s Egg

by

Cole Poindexter

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

The Griffin's Egg

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Contact Information: info@thewildrosepress.com

Cover Art by *Lea Schizas*

The Wild Rose Press, Inc.
PO Box 708
Adams Basin, NY 14410-0708
Visit us at www.thewildrosepress.com

Publishing History
First Edition, 2024
Trade Paperback ISBN 978-1-5092-5349-4
Digital ISBN 978-1-5092-5350-0

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

For my mother, who taught me—and many others—to love books.

Chapter One

Temporarily Misplaced

Phoebe Gray was lost.

Not that she cared. School was out for the summer, and she was more than happy to say goodbye to third grade, and hello to West Virginia.

As you may know, forests are strange places. Like the creatures that reside within them, they are sometimes beautiful, and sometimes frightening, and sometimes fascinating.

For Phoebe, *this* forest was all of those things, and more.

The warm May sun dazzled down on her freckled skin and dark hair as she darted from tree to tree, pretending to ride a pink-spotted unicorn named Lollie.

"Look out for that witch, Lollie!" She gasped and pointed. "And look – her dragon is coming to eat us up."

A dragon is a hungry thing, indeed, but Phoebe was hungrier.

Her stomach grumbled. Suddenly, she was tired, and hot, and grumpy.

And lost.

Well, not really lost, she reminded herself. What did Dad always say to Mom, as he lifted the couch cushions to look for his keys?

"They're not lost…they're temporarily misplaced."

"Walter, your keys are definitely *lost*," Mom would answer. "You are tremendously brilliant and tremendously absent-minded."

It was true. Her parents *were* brilliant. They were wildlife biologists. It was why they'd brought her along to West Virginia this weekend—to release an Eastern Screech owl into the forest. The owl was beautiful, and Phoebe was glad her parents had nursed it back to health–but she was bored. So out she went, taking her cape with her.

She swirled around in a circle, watching the purple cape twirl under the green leaves of a Norway maple. Mom hadn't wanted her to bring it along.

"You'll get it dirty. I know you love to play with it, but it'll be safer here at home."

"Aw, come on, Mom." Phoebe spun in front of her with an energetic flourish. "I promise to be careful with it."

Dad looked up from his book, peering at Mom from over his glasses. "Better let her take it, Laila. You know we'll never hear the end of it. It's a long drive from Springfield to West Virginia."

Phoebe batted big, blue eyes. "Pleeeease."

Mom sighed. "All right. But just be careful–that cape belonged to Grandpa."

She had never met Grandpa Charlie. He had passed away before she was born. Grandma Hazel kept just one photo of him–a big one on the fireplace, next to a folded-up flag. One day, Phoebe asked her what it meant.

Grandma had frowned. "Lost in The War, way before you came along." Then, matter-of-factly, she

pulled her baking sheet from the oven. "Now, let's get you another cookie."

Ah. The War. Grandma Hazel never wanted to talk about that. When Phoebe asked her mother why, she shook her head. "It's not something I like to talk about either, Phoebe. The War is the reason I became a biologist, and then I met Dad. It was a bad thing that happened a long time ago –and that's all you need to know."

Her history teacher had been a little more helpful. "It was devastating, growing up in those times." She sighed. "We're still dealing with the fallout, you know. Those conservationists in Washington have been working for decades to reverse the damage to the environment. Good thing there's people like your parents to help all those poor animals. Bless 'em."

Phoebe let the ends of the cloak slip between her fingers. Mom said Grandma Hazel had kept it locked in an old trunk for years. When Phoebe was old enough, she passed it on.

"This old thing can bring you to many places," she said. "Anywhere you wish."

Right now, Phoebe wished it would bring her back to her parents.

Every direction she turned didn't feel like the way back. Hadn't she passed that white oak before? And the lichen growing up that black willow certainly looked familiar. If only Dad were here. He wasn't just familiar with different trees. He was good with directions– sometimes.

Suddenly, West Virginia felt like an alien world. She was so very far away from home.

Just as Phoebe decided on the way back, she heard

leaves crunching from somewhere behind. She turned. Was that the sound of feet racing over the forest floor?

Her heart pounded. What if it was a bear? What had her father said to do? She held her breath, thinking back on all the bear facts Dad had thrown at her in the car. Was she supposed to stand still? Or make herself really big? But how could she make herself big? She was only ten.

Standing there, frozen with uncertainty, she saw a dark shape race through the trees.

At first, she thought it might be a rabbit, because of its long, pointed ears. Then she thought it could be a turtle, because of its olive skin. Then she realized it was neither. Rabbits didn't walk on two feet. Neither did turtles.

The thing was muttering to itself, so intent on the path ahead that it hadn't noticed Phoebe. As it raced past her, she saw a bag. A brown leather bag strapped across an arm.

The creature was holding onto it with gnarled hands that were too big for its otherwise stubby body. Its clothing was as rough as the bag. Tiny shoes scurried through leaves.

She couldn't make out what it was saying, but the sounds escaping its mouth were unpleasant. It was gnashing its teeth as it moved along. Clearly, *he*–or at least, she believed it might be a *he*–was upset.

She wondered if she should call out to him.

Phoebe debated for only a few seconds. Looking at this creature, she thought of all the characters from her favorite stories–playful fairies, loyal unicorns, and enchanting mermaids. If this little man were real, could they be, too?

"Hey! Hold on a minute."

The creature was so startled by her voice that he tripped over a tree root. He tumbled to the ground and rolled into the shape of a ball. The bag tumbled away.

Something rolled out, the color of a penny. Phoebe hesitated. It wasn't her business, but she wanted to see what it was.

He was still curled into a tight ball, so she crept forward. Leaves crunched beneath the weight of her cloak.

The large orb was poking out from a bed of weeds. Phoebe gasped. *It's an egg*. She reached out and traced its smooth edges with her finger.

How strange. The egg felt warm against her skin. So different from the cool ones she pulled down for Mom at the grocery store.

She wondered what sort of creature could've laid it. A dragon? Phoenix? Pegasus?

"Ehh–get…get away from that."

Phoebe looked up. The little olive creature was talking to her, pointing with one of his claws.

He looked terrified. She felt bad for him.

"Get away, I said." He waved in her direction, grimacing so she could see his yellow teeth. Phoebe wondered if that was supposed to scare her. "And put that down."

Holding the egg carefully, she looked down at him. Suddenly, she was aware of how much taller she was.

"Guess I made you drop this. I'm sorry. Didn't mean to scare you."

He glanced around nervously. "You-you didn't scare me. Now, give that back. That thing you're holding is…very important to me."

Phoebe hesitated. Something in his tone wasn't quite right. "How do I know this egg belongs to you? Did you *steal* this egg?"

His little brown eyes grew wide. "*Steal*? Why, I'm a goblin. I would never steal anything." He raised both hands toward the egg. "I'm only trying to *protect* it."

Phoebe's heart leapt. "A *goblin?* Well, where did you come from? And why were you running away?"

The goblin pulled his dark hair. "Oh, too many questions. You're very curious. You must be what they call a…a child."

She beamed. "Yes. My name is Phoebe. What's yours?"

He paused, muttering under his breath. His thin fingers twisted around one another. Phoebe knew he was trying to avoid answering. He let out a troubled hiss.

"My name is Gnish-Gnash. Most call me Gnish, for short." He stopped himself and threw up his hands. "But that is *none* of your business. Stop with these questions, or I'll be forced to…to…"

"To what?"

Gnish-Gnash stomped his feet. "I'll be forced to use magic on you."

Phoebe knew he meant to scare her, but the thought made her giggle. "You can use magic?"

He looked offended. "Why, of course, I can use magic. Goblins are some of the most powerful people in Lerch Hollow. We've been casting spells for thousands of years."

"Lerch Hollow?" She could hardly believe what she was hearing. Was there another land, another world, right here in the woods of West Virginia? "Is that where

you come from?"

"Oh, great gargoyles." Gnish pulled at his wispy hair. "I'll never learn to shut this mouth of mine. The master was right." He covered his face and frowned.

"The master?" Phoebe stepped forward. She couldn't help but feel sorry for this poor little man. "Are you in trouble in…in Lerch Hollow?"

Gnish walked over to a tree root and plopped down. He looked hopeless. "Oh, mighty griffins, yes. I'm in a heap of trouble, and now it appears I've only created more."

Phoebe knelt next to him. He looked so sad and alone. She had to help him. "I think I'm in trouble, too. I've wandered away from my parents, and I'm not sure how to get back. Maybe we can help each other?"

Gnish's ears suddenly perked up. "A goblin helping a…a *child?*" He pondered on it for a moment. "In all the history of histories, I believe I'd be the first to align with a child. Me, Gnish-Gnash. What the Eternal Grease-Grit would say. How the other goblins would welcome me home. I would have a story to tell, for sure."

Phoebe wasn't sure what an Eternal Grease-Grit was, but she wasn't worried about it right now. She reached out and touched Gnish's arm. "So, you'll help me?"

The goblin looked down at her hand. His lips parted in surprise, as if it had been a long time since anyone had shown him any kindness. Then he jumped up, a wide smile on his face.

"Of course, I'll help you." He pointed with one of his claws. "But you'll need to do something for me in return."

Phoebe stood. Her heart was galloping. “What?”

Gnish gestured to the surrounding trees. “I’m still new to this world you humans call home. I was sent on an important mission, but I’ve already fuddled things up. I’m looking for a place to hide.”

She glanced down. “Somewhere you *and* the egg can hide?”

Gnish nodded vigorously. “Yes. The truth is…returning to Lerch Hollow would be dangerous. I’ve been appointed protector of that egg you’re holding. But it isn’t just any egg. That’s a *griffin’s* egg.”

Phoebe had no clue what a griffin was. She went through bedtime stories in her head. Nope, Mom had never mentioned any griffins.

She shook her head. “What’s a griffin?”

Gnish looked astonished by her ignorance. He sputtered for a few moments and walked in circles. “Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear. What’s a griffin? Why, they’re only the most magnificent, the most beautiful, the most majestic creatures in all of Lerch Hollow.” He paused, reconsidering his words. “Well, at one time they *were*. There is but one griffin left in our land now, and that egg you’re holding–that’s *hers*.”

Phoebe looked down at the egg. The significance of such a small thing suddenly seemed too much. The last of the griffins? The future of an entire magical species–resting right here in her hands? Her fingers trembled.

“Maybe my parents can help you find a place to hide, Gnish.” She pointed in the direction she thought they should go. The two of them headed for the tree line. “Maybe they can help raise the griffin. They study

animals for a living."

Gnish looked uncertain. "I am not so sure, Miss Phoebe." He raised a long finger in contemplation. "We goblins have never worked well with humans. In fact, the only human in Lerch Hollow is a–"

The goblin stopped talking. His ears stood on end. His eyes scanned the trees around them.

"What's wrong, Gnish?"

"Don't you feel that?" He looked troubled. "The vibration? It feels like–"

A deep growl rumbled through the forest, powerful enough to shake leaves from the trees. Phoebe turned to see a dark shadow advancing on them. She gasped. A giant cloud was rushing toward them.

Then she realized it wasn't a cloud.

What she saw was a monster–a giant creature covered in dark gray fur, with arms like boulders, and massive bare feet that shredded the ground beneath him as easily as paper. He must have been twenty feet tall, with yellow, jagged claws, rotting teeth, and eyes as black as craters. His scraggly black hair whipped around as he lumbered toward them. The sash around his shoulder jostled with every thunderous step.

Worst of all was the spiked club locked in his powerful grip–and it was coming right at them.

"Oh, merciful dragons, preserve us. That's a *troll* headed our way," Gnish squeaked. "Quick. Time to hide."

"Hide?" Phoebe hurried behind him. "How can we hide from that thing? He'll find us in a second."

"Quiet." Gnish beckoned with one hand and led her through a thick swath of oak trees. He held a finger to his curled lips. "Trolls have very poor eyesight. If we

keep quiet, perhaps he will lose us, and give up."

Phoebe hid behind a tree trunk. "But where did he come from? I don't think trolls live in West Virginia."

"Oh, curses and crickets." Gnish clapped his forehead with one hand. "I must've left the portal open. Oh, bumbling banshees. The master was right. I'm too clumsy. I'm not suited for this task."

Phoebe had many more questions but was too afraid to ask them. Instead, she studied the troll. He was sweeping his head from side to side, looking for the two small creatures he'd been so certain of catching. After a moment, he spoke in a voice so mighty, it rattled Phoebe's bones.

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