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Opening extract from

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Prologue

Even as a small child Tanya had known her grandmother's manor to be home to many secrets. Like everyone, she had heard of the disused escape tunnels rumoured to run beneath the house. And like most children, she spent many a rainy afternoon hunting for their concealed entrances, only to meet with disappointment. By the time she had turned thirteen Tanya had long given up hope of stumbling upon one of these secret passages and had begun to question whether they existed at all.

So when the bookcase had revolved in the wall before her to reveal a narrow stone staircase leading down into musty darkness, it hadn't altogether come as a shock. Nor, though, did it bring the delicious thrill she had so long anticipated, for the circumstances leading to its discovery were quite different from what she had imagined.

Had anyone at the manor been paying proper attention, it might have been apparent that the tunnels were being used – and had been for some time now – to access the house by somebody who had no business in doing so. But all the clues, from the radio news bulletin following the

abduction to the strange slithering heard in the old servants' staircase in the dead of the night, had been overlooked. For in isolation, none of the signs had meant much.

Now, as Tanya stood face to face with the wild-eyed intruder in the dingy cavern far beneath the house, the warnings had returned and slotted into place like a key in a lock. She did not know what she had been expecting to find – but it wasn't this.

The girl was not much older than herself: fifteen at the most. Her green eyes belied a hardness and maturity far beyond her years. The knife strapped to her thigh held other possibilities that Tanya could not bring herself to consider, and so she forced herself to train her eyes on the tiny baby in the girl's arms.

The child stared back at her, unblinking. What happened next turned her stomach with fear. As the baby watched her its features warped and then morphed. The tips of the ears elongated and pointed and the skin took on a greenish hue. The eyes in their entirety flooded black, as if with ink, sparkling eerily. All this in the briefest of moments before the ghoulish vision was gone – but Tanya knew what she had seen.

And so did the red-headed intruder.

'You saw.' Her voice was a throaty whisper.

Tanya lowered her eyes to the thing in the girl's arms and swallowed a scream.

'I don't believe it,' the girl murmured. 'You *saw*. You can see them too.'

A moment of clarity and quiet understanding passed between them as the girl whispered something softly.

'You have the second sight.'

Tanya recoiled. 'What are you doing with that baby?'

'Good question,' the girl replied. 'Sit. I'll tell you my story. I'm sure it's one you'll find interesting.'

PART ONE

1



HE WAS AWARE OF THEIR PRESENCE IN the room before she even awoke.

An ominous twitching had begun in Tanya's eyelids, a sure sign that trouble was on its way. It was this incessant twitching which woke her. Her eyes opened groggily. As usual, she had reverted to her childhood habit of sleeping with her head under the covers. She was uncomfortable, yet reluctant to shift position. If she did it would alert them to the fact that she was awake.

Beneath the stifling covers, Tanya longed to kick the sheets back and allow the soft summer breeze drifting in through the window to wash over her. She tried to tell herself she had dreamed it; maybe they were not really there after all. Still she lay unmoving. For deep down she knew they *were* there, as surely as she knew she was the only one who could see them.

Her eyelids twitched again. Through the covers she could sense them, could feel the air in the room charged with a strange energy. She could even smell the earthy dampness of leaves, fungi, and ripened berries. It was *their* smell.

A quiet voice cut through the darkness.

'She sleeps. Should I rouse her?'

Tanya stiffened beneath her sanctuary of sheets. She still had the bruises from the last time. They had pinched her black and blue. A sharp prod in the ribs made her gasp.

'She is not asleep.' The second voice was cold, controlled. 'She is pretending. No matter. I do so enjoy these little . . . *games*.'

The last traces of drowsiness left her then. There was no mistaking the underlying threat in those words. Tanya prepared to throw back the sheets – but they were strangely heavy all of a sudden, weighing down on her . . . and they were growing steadily heavier.

'What's happening . . . what are you doing?'

She clawed at the sheets, frantically trying to push them away. They seemed to be wrapping themselves around her like a cocoon. For one terrifying moment she struggled for breath before managing to free her head and suck in a lungful of cool night air. In her relief it was several seconds before she noticed the glass star lantern covering the bedroom light bulb was directly in front of her face.

Suddenly, Tanya realised why the bedclothes were so heavy. She was floating in mid-air, five feet above her bed – supporting the full weight of them.

'Put me *down*!'

Slowly, through no control of her own, she began turning sideways in the air. The bedclothes promptly slid off and fell to the carpet, leaving Tanya hovering face down above her

bed in her pyjamas. Without the shelter of the covers she felt horribly vulnerable. She pulled her hair back from her face and scanned the room. The only living thing she saw in the darkness was the cat; a ridiculous fluffy grey Persian curled in a ball on the windowsill. It got up, giving her a haughty look before turning its back to her and settling down once more.

'Where are you?' she said, her voice shaking. 'Show yourselves!'

An unpleasant laugh sounded from somewhere near the bed. Tanya felt herself being propelled forwards and before she knew what was happening she had turned a full somersault in the air, followed by another . . . and another.

'Just stop it!'

She heard the desperation in her voice and hated it.

The somersaulting stopped and, finally, she landed on her feet – upside down on the ceiling. The curtains billowed weirdly in the breeze. She averted her eyes, trying to steady herself. It was like gravity had reversed for her only. The blood was not rushing to her head, her pyjamas were not falling upwards, and her hair was now tumbling down her back.

She sat down on the ceiling, defeated. This was the reason they came in the middle of the night. She had figured that much out a long time ago. At night she was completely at their mercy, whereas in the day, if she happened to be caught in any strange situation she had a far better chance of passing it off as a game or trick of some

kind. Just one of many 'games' and 'tricks' over the years.

She couldn't remember the first time she had seen them exactly. They had always been there. She had grown up chattering away to herself as her parents looked on, in amusement at first, then, later, with concern.

As the years passed she had learned to lie convincingly. Talk of fairies did not wash well with adults once you were past a certain age. There were no more of the knowing looks and fond smiles that came with infancy. Tanya did not take it too personally. People didn't believe in what they couldn't see.

The incidents had become more vindictive of late. It was one thing having to cut out a few tangles after an encounter with an enchanted hairbrush, or finding the answers to homework had been mysteriously tampered with overnight. But this was serious. For months now, Tanya had harboured a nagging worry that eventually something bad was going to happen, something she couldn't explain her way out of. Her worst fear was that her increasingly weird behaviour would land her on the couch of a psychiatrist.

Floating around in the air was not a good predicament. If her mother awoke to find her walking about on the ceiling it wouldn't be a doctor she called – it would be a vicar.

She was in trouble of the worst kind.

There was a waft of cool air on her face and Tanya felt the brush of feathered wings skim her cheek. A large, black bird swooped at her shoulder, its glittering eyes blinking once before the bird morphed as quickly as a shadow would

vanish in the sun. Silken black hair and the pinkish tips of two pointed ears replaced the cruel, curved beak, as a woman not much larger than the bird shifted into its place. She wore a gown of black feathers; it was stark against her ivory skin.

'Raven,' Tanya whispered. She watched as a feather fell from the fairy's dress and floated lightly to the carpet. 'Why are you here?'

Raven did not answer. She alighted at the foot of the bed, next to two small figures, one plump and ruddy-nosed, the other dark-skinned, wiry and skittish-looking. Both were watching her intently. The smaller of the two was the first to speak.

'You've been writing about us again.'

Tanya felt her face burn. 'I haven't, Gredin . . . I didn't.'

Gredin's yellow eyes glittered, shockingly bright in contrast to his nut-brown face. 'But that's what you said last time. And the time before.'

Outside, a dark, rectangular object was drifting towards the open window as though carried on the breeze. It soared gracefully through the curtains and into the room and halted before Tanya's dismayed face. It was a journal, fairly new and in good condition – but covered in soil. She had buried it beneath the apple tree in the garden that afternoon. How foolish she had been.

'Yours I believe?' said Gredin.

'I've never seen it before.'

The plump little fellow next to Gredin snorted.

'Oh . . . come now,' he said. 'You wouldn't want to be up there all night, would you?' He reached up and gave the peacock feather in his cap a light stroke, then twisted his ratty moustache around his forefinger. The feather shimmered at his touch, rich with enchantment. The fat little man removed the quill from his cap and gave it a deft flick.

The diary opened, releasing a clod of earth which fell to the floor and broke over one of Tanya's slippers. A muffled sneeze came from inside the slipper, and then a fourth and final fairy emerged from inside it, hog-like and ugly. The creature beat its ragged brown wings with some effort and landed in a clumsy heap on the bed. After regaining its balance it began scratching vigorously, showering the bedclothes with moulting fur and fleas, then gave a cavernous yawn, rubbing its snout with tiny brown paws.

Once, when she was smaller, and before her parents' divorce, Tanya had been sulking ungraciously after a telling off. After a few minutes her mother had snapped, 'Don't be such a little Mizhog.'

'What's a Mizhog?' Tanya asked, curious despite herself.

'It's a horrible hoggy creature that's always miserable,' her mother had replied. 'And with that face you're pulling, you look just like one.'

This was something Tanya remembered every time she saw the flea-bitten brown fairy. Its hangdog expression fit the description of her mother's invented creature so perfectly that, in her own mind, Tanya would forever think of it as a Mizhog. As the creature – unlike the other fairies –

had never put forth a name for itself, the name Tanya had selected stuck. Aside from its fleas and the smell, which reminded her of a wet dog, the Mizhog was fairly unobtrusive. It never spoke – at least, not in any language Tanya could understand – was always hungry, and had a habit of scratching its belly. Other than that, it seemed happy to observe its surroundings with its soulful brown eyes – the only of its features that could be described as beautiful. It stared up at her now, wide-eyed and unblinking, making strange little snuffling noises in its throat.

The diary bobbed in front of Tanya's face. Hastily, she returned her attention to it.

'Read it,' said Gredin.

'I can't,' said Tanya. 'It's too dark.'

Gredin's eyes were as hard as flint. The pages of the diary began turning frenziedly, this way and that, as if trying to decide on an entry to settle upon. Eventually they rested on a particularly rushed-looking passage towards the end. Tanya recognised the date immediately – it was less than a fortnight ago. The writing was barely legible; her eyes had been so blurred with tears she had hardly been able to see her own hand. Then the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end as her own voice echoed softly from the pages, not quite loud enough to wake anyone, but certainly loud enough for her to hear. It sounded distant, as though its journey through time had weakened it.

'They came again tonight. Why me? I hate them. HATE them . . .'

The excruciating passage went on and on, and Tanya could only listen in horror as her voice spilled from the diary, recounting one page after another, angry, frustrated, and hopeless.

The fairies watched her all the while; Raven subdued, Feathercap and Gredin stony-faced, and the Mizhog scratching its flea-infested belly, disinterested.

'Enough,' said Gredin, after what seemed like an age.

Tanya's voice broke off immediately, leaving only the sound of the pages flicking back and forth, as if by some invisible hand. Before her eyes, every word she had written slowly faded and vanished like ink drawn into blotting paper.

The diary fell to the bed, disintegrating on impact.

'There is nothing to be gained from this,' said Raven, gesturing to what was left of it. 'You will bring only misery to yourself.'

'Not if someone had read it one day,' Tanya said bitterly. 'And believed me.'

'The rules are simple,' said Feathercap. 'You speak of us to no one. If you continue to try then we will continue to punish you.'

The remnants of the diary stirred on the bed, lifting from the covers like fine sand, before flying through the open window out into the night.

'Gone. As if it never was,' said Gredin. 'To a place where rosemary grows by a stream that flows uphill. The domain of the piskies.'

'I don't believe in any stream that flows uphill,' said Tanya, still smarting from having her innermost thoughts broadcast for all to hear.

'Heathen creatures, piskies,' Gredin continued. 'Unpredictable. Dangerous, some say. Whatever they touch becomes twisted and warped. And the rosemary – otherwise renowned for its aid to memory – grows tainted. The properties are reversed.'

He paused for effect. Tanya, wisely sensing this, did not interrupt again.

'Now, there are some folk, known to the fairies as the cunning folk, who are familiar with the qualities of herbs and plants such as rosemary. For even piskie-tainted rosemary has its uses. In the correct quantities it has the power to extract a memory from a mortal head forever, such as the memory of an old sweetheart. Very helpful in some circumstances. But the fairies – much as it pains them to have dealings of any kind with the filthy little piskies – also have their own uses for this magical herb. It comes in particularly useful when humans stumble upon the fairy realm unexpectedly and witness things they have no business to. Usually, a small dose sets the situation right and the human is none the worse for it, seemingly waking from a pleasant dream – albeit with no recollection of what the dream was about. However, it has been known for the wrong quantity to be administered. Entire memories have been wiped, just like that.' Gredin snapped his fingers, and Tanya flinched.

'Of course, this is mostly accidental and rare, but sometimes . . . just sometimes, it is used as a last resort to silence those who otherwise refuse to be silenced. A highly unpleasant fate, most would agree. The poor souls can't even remember their own names afterwards. Unfortunate, but necessary. After all . . . one cannot speak of what one cannot remember.'

Tanya suddenly tasted fear in her mouth.

'I won't write about you again.'

'Good,' said Feathercap. 'For you would be a fool to attempt it.'

'Just answer me one thing,' said Tanya, as brazenly as she dared. 'I can't be the only one. I *know* I'm not the only one—'

Gredin silenced her with a look.

Her descent was sudden and unexpected. Feeling herself begin to fall, Tanya instinctively grabbed the only thing to hand – the star lantern covering the light bulb. There was a terrible cracking noise as the wire strained under her weight, and the plaster of the ceiling around the fixture came down in plate-sized chunks, cracking further as it hit the floor. Then the lantern came away in Tanya's hands. The light bulb smashed as she fell to the floor and the lantern went flying out of her grasp and hit the wardrobe, shattering.

As Tanya lay winded, she heard the landing creaking with anxious footsteps. She did not need to look up to know that the fairies would be gone, vanishing as they always did

like a scattering of leaves on the breeze. Then her mother was in the room, pulling her up by the shoulder, causing her to cry out. Tanya caught her exclamation of disgust as she surveyed the mess.

'Mum . . .' she croaked. 'I-it was a nightmare . . . I'm sorry . . .'

Even in the moonlight Tanya could see the resigned expression on her mother's face. She released her grip on Tanya's arm and slowly sank down on the bed, her hands clenched into balls which she pressed into her eye sockets.

'Mum?' Tanya whispered. She reached over and touched her mother's arm.

'I'm tired,' her mother said quietly. 'I'm worn out. I don't know what to do any more. I can't cope with this . . . this *attention* seeking of yours. I can't cope with *you*.'

'Don't say that. I'll be better, I promise I'll try.'

Her mother gave a wry smile. 'That's what you always say. And I want to believe you . . . to help you, but I can't. Not if you won't talk to me – or to a doctor—'

'I don't need a doctor. And you wouldn't understand!'

'No. You're right, love, I don't. The only thing I do understand is that I'm at the end of my tether.' She paused to look around at the mess. 'Well, you're going to clean it all up in the morning. Every last bit of it. And the damage comes out of your pocket money, however long it might take. I'm not having this any more. I'm sick of it.'

Tanya stared at the floor. A shard of glass glinted in her mother's bare foot. She knelt down and gently pulled it out,

watching as a dark bead of blood formed in its place. Her mother did not react. Instead she got up and shuffled to the door, her shoulders drooping, her feet crunching over the fragments of glass, uncaring.

'Mum?'

The bedroom door closed, leaving her in darkness. Tanya lay back on her bed, too shocked even to cry. The look on her mother's face had said it all. How many times had she been warned, how many times had she been told about the so-called last straw? Because now, as she listened to the muffled sobbing from the room across the landing, she knew that tonight really had been the last straw for her mother.