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Opening extract from

Mist

Written by

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MIST

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For Henri and my boys,
OJ and Jordan, and for Mandy

The Curse of the Lost Girls

Listen, my children. Have you heard of the Lost Girls? They go into the woods and never come back.

There was Daisy Gunn who dropped her red mitten, and ran back to find it as the sun went down. She was never seen again!

And Polly Hawk with her fancy ways. She flaunted into the mist beneath the trees and was gone.

Or poor Milly Suggs, who went picking violets. Next evening she came staggering out, hair as white as snow, back bent, the basket of violets turned to dust – a little old lady, her life gone in a night and day.

It's the Elf-King's curse! Beware of it, my daughters. Stay close to Mama.

Old Wives' Warning
By Druscilla Church, British Folklore Society

One

Don't go into the wood after dark. Her mother's warning echoed in her head, but Nell ignored it.

Shadows flickered in the corner of her eye and the trees creaked and groaned in the cold wind, making the hairs on the back of her neck stand up in alarm. The wood was ancient. It spread out for miles behind her house, dark and secretive. If she stared into it, it seemed to stare back. If she ran down the narrow paths, branches grabbed at her like twiggy hands.

She was heading for the darkest part of all, where the ground dropped into a hollow and the path became stepping stones over marshy ground. It used to have an iron fence all the way round, but recently someone had torn it down.

Mist filled the hollow like smoke in a dish and never went away. The dampness caused the trees all around to

be covered with ivy and mosses that hung like hair from the branches. As she walked down the slope into the mist, she began to think she could hear a ghostly music, right on the edge of her hearing, as though someone was playing something old-fashioned, like a harp.

That wasn't all she could hear. Somewhere in the woods something was howling. A thousand years ago it would've been a wolf, now it was probably a Staffie belonging to one of the boys who liked to think they were gangsters. They brought the dogs into the woods to train, making them dangle off branches by their teeth, and then wielding them at people like weapons. Hopefully the warden who patrolled the woods would go after them and not notice her.

She was following someone else. Her mystery boy.

He was somewhere ahead of her, very close. He was the reason she was creeping through the trees, instead of at home, out of school uniform, enjoying tea and a little Princess Zelda.

She jumped on to the first stepping stone, the mist swirling around her and settling on her face like tiny pearls. Then on to the next. There were twenty stones across the bottom of the hollow, the ground either side soggy and covered in brambles. She had a brief vision of falling and breaking her ankle. Would anyone think

to look for her down here? No, because hardly anyone came this far. She would die a lonely, painful death, and Gwen, her sister, would hang a school scarf and a bunch of flowers from a nearby tree, a sad reminder of a young life lost. Although if it happened to Gwen then there'd be a whole bank of flowers and little messages from her sobbing friends saying Rest in Peace Angel, we all miss you.

She reached the last stone and stopped. Mystery boy had disappeared. That was impossible – she'd seen him walk into the mist, skipping oddly from stepping stone to stepping stone as though he'd decided to play a complicated game of hopscotch. So where was he? Unless he was brambleproof or he'd sunk in the mud, he should be ahead of her.

A twig snapped like a gunshot.

'Nell Church?'

She froze. He was behind her and that wasn't in the plan. He wasn't supposed to actually see or speak to her. She prayed for invisibility or the end of the world, whichever was quicker, but it didn't happen. So she turned around and he was there, vivid in the twilit mist. How many fourteen-year-old boys had skin as pale as milk as though they'd never seen the sun, hair so white it looked bleached and eyes as black as charcoal? Add to that the

small silver earring glittering in one ear, and the small tattoo of a wolf's head on the inside of one of his skinny white wrists. Who *was* he?

'If you wanted to ask me out, you could've done it at school,' he said, with his crooked grin, the one that drove her crazy. His accent wasn't local, it was singsong and breathy, maybe a little bit Irish or Scottish, but not really like either. He just sounded like no one else she knew.

He'd started at Woodbridge Community College last week, and it seemed that no one except her noticed that he hardly attended any lessons. Instead he spent his time watching the Woodbridge students as though he was a prince and school was a strange ritual he'd never come across before. And the more no one noticed him, the more he started showing off, rolling out of cupboards during maths lessons or walking across the stage during assembly. His face and name slipped out of everyone's mind, except hers. All she knew was that each morning he came out of the woods and each afternoon he went back in there. Her house backed on to the woods, and she'd watched him from her bedroom window, wandering out in the mornings, yawning and leaning over the fence to pinch an apple from the neighbour's tree. Then in the afternoon he'd go running and leaping

back down the bramble-covered paths as though he couldn't wait for the woods to swallow him again.

'Sorry, I wasn't, I didn't . . .' she began.

'Joking,' he said.

She felt a blush start to storm up her face. 'Oh. Of course.'

A silence fell. Top of the class, yet she couldn't think of one single thing to say to start a conversation. Unlike Gwen, who failed all exams but who'd happily chat away to an alien if one landed and was cute enough.

'Don't you know it's dangerous near the mist?' he said. 'People disappear and are never seen again.'

He was teasing her. Maybe she deserved it for following him so clumsily.

'And don't you know the woods are private?' she said, grasping at straws. 'You'll get done for trespassing.' Stupid, ridiculous thing to say. Did he look like the sort of boy who would care? No.

He jumped a stepping stone closer, gazing at her through his spiky fringe, head angled to one side. 'Woods don't belong to anyone, except Gaia.'

'If that's another name for Woodbridge Council, then yes,' she said.

He laughed, which was something. Usually no one got her jokes. Now he was watching her curiously.

'So why did you follow me?' he said.

She quickly tried to think of a plausible excuse for being here in the wood, with its reputation for being dangerous at night. Not one single idea came to her rescue, so she had to confess the truth.

'If I see something that puzzles me I have to find out about it.'

It was true – not knowing about anything drove her crazy. Maybe she'd inherited a detective gene from her police officer mum, but Gwen claimed it was because she was obsessive. Even as a little girl, if she half saw a street sign or a notice or a poster in the street, she'd *have* to go back and read it all.

'I'm especially attracted to weird or creepy things,' she finished.

The twisty grin appeared again. 'Which am I?'

She concentrated on kicking at one of the white stones. 'Erm. Weird.' She glanced up. He didn't seem bothered she'd just called him a freak. So she carried on. 'I had to find out – who are you?'

He thought about that. 'I'm a boy who doesn't exist,' he said, eventually.

Another silence fell, but it was quickly broken by the sound of someone or something moving through the woods towards them.

'Uh-oh,' said Nell, horrified. 'It's the warden.'

She turned and scrambled up the slope, out of the hollow and its cold damp mist. She wasn't like Gwen; she hated getting told off for breaking the rules. The light was dropping quickly, but she saw a shape moving. It wasn't the warden, though, it was something worse. There was a blur of white, swift and low down, then a Staffordshire terrier, all teeth, scars and ragged ears, crashed towards her through the undergrowth and skittered to a halt in front of her, snarling.

'Stay still, don't look it in the eye,' said the boy's voice behind her.

He'd followed her. Immediately the dog turned its attention to him, its lip curling like a wave. The snarling got louder. The boy didn't seem to care.

'Careful,' she breathed, beginning to shake. 'They're trained to attack.'

'I know,' he said.

He lifted a casual hand, pointed a skinny finger towards the dog and said in a calm voice, 'Shush! I'm the boss here. Lie down!'

The dog obeyed straight away. It went down on its belly, flattening itself to the ground, its eyes looking anywhere but at the pointing finger and the boy's gaze. Its snarl turned to a confused whine.

'Run.'

'It's not alone,' Nell warned. 'Its owner is—'

She got no farther. Two older boys appeared from between the trees. Nell's heart began to hammer. She knew the face looming towards her, she knew how it could laugh at cruelty to others but would take offence at a moment's notice if someone so much as looked at him wrong. Rikstall, they called him, never any first name. For a moment he stopped, shocked to see the dog lying flat.

'Geddup, Sabre!' he bellowed.

The dog didn't move. Rikstall stormed towards them.

'What've you done to my dog?' he demanded.

He went to the school on the next estate. His school and Woodbridge Community College were rivals. Sometimes two big mobs, one from each, would converge and there would be a fight. Rikstall was always in the middle of it. Nobody messed around with him and his dog.

'I said, what did you do to my dog?' he growled.

The mystery boy turned and stared at him. 'Taught it some manners.'

Rikstall's face didn't change. In one quick movement he'd picked up one of the iron railings from the broken fence, and swung it in a great arc at him. It whistled through the air.