THE BONEHILL CURSE

Also by Jon Mayhew

Mortlock
The Demon Collector

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BLOOMSBURY

LONDON BERLIN NEW YORK SYDNEY

Bloomsbury Publishing, London, Berlin, New York and Sydney

First published in Great Britain in May 2012 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP

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Epigraphs: traditional folk ballads, traditional proverbs,
proverbs from the Old Testament Book of Proverbs,
and based on *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night*

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 4088 0397 4

Typeset by Hewer Text UK Ltd
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc, Bungay, Suffolk



www.bloomsbury.com
www.jonmayhew.co.uk

For Pete and Sue, Liz and Nick, Dave and Sandra
– Brothers and Sisters

He is a djinn, and I am just a man. But God has given me a sharp mind, so I will plot for his destruction with my wit and cunning just as he has plotted mine with his craft and perfidy.

The Fisherman and the Djinn,
The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night

I curse you, Anthony Bonehill. The child that your wife so fervently wished for will kill its father. Your own kin will wish you dead.

Zaakiel

Part the First

Rookery Heights Academy for Young Ladies, 1868

Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.

Proverbs, Old Testament

CHAPTER ONE
THE FIGHTER

Necessity Bonehill grinned and pulled her cap down low on her brow. She raised her fists at the red-faced young man charging towards her like an enraged bull. Stamping her feet on the ground, she widened her stance, enjoying the freedom of the trousers she wore, with so much more room to move than the stupid dresses they forced on her at the Academy.

A weak, dust-filled beam of sunlight sliced through the shadows of the barn. Ness breathed in the mingled scent of summer hay and cattle then, with a gentle exhalation, she sidestepped. The boy staggered past her. He was handsome in a rustic, curly blond hair and suntanned forearms way.

Pity he's such a moron.

She slammed her fist into his ear, making him howl and stumble, crashing into a broken cartwheel that leaned against the barn wall. The small crowd of village

lads that had formed a ring around them murmured and shuffled their feet.

'C'mon, Tom,' a thin, pox-faced boy hissed. 'Flatten 'im.'

'Damn tinker,' Tom panted, picking himself up. 'Just you wait till I get 'old of you.'

He charged again. Ness kicked forward, somersaulting over his head and landing behind him just in time to jab her elbow below his kidneys. The watching lads gave an involuntary cheer as their champion fell again, then glanced at each other, shamefaced.

'Get up, Tom. 'E's makin' a fool of yer!' yelled another lad.

With a growl of frustration, Tom stood and swung a huge fist at Ness. He was probably only a year or two older than Ness, fifteen or sixteen, but already a childhood spent working the land had calloused the boy's hands, thickened his sinews. One blow would send Ness sprawling on to the muddy barn floor.

But that wouldn't happen.

Ness snapped her forearms upward, blocking and trapping the oncoming fist. With a pull and a twist, she brought Tom's arm up behind him, bending him double and holding him in a painful armlock. One firm kick from Ness sent him barging out of the ring and straight into the barn door. The satisfying crack echoed around the barn as Tom's skull hit the solid wood. With a grunt, Tom's body went slack and he slumped, unconscious, to the ground.

Ness turned on her heel and faced the gaggle of boys. 'Right,' she panted, fists ready. 'Who's next?'

'Necessity Bonehill! Goodness me! What on *earth* are you doing?' A voice cut through the dusty air and Ness's exhilaration drained away in an instant.

Miss Pinchett.

The head mistress of the Academy stood framed within the side door of the barn. A black silhouette. Shooting Ness a look of disbelief, the boys scurried away, doffing their caps and melting into the shadows of the huge building to search for loose planks in the wall – any means to escape the fierce harpy who strode over to Tom. She looked down her long nose at him, her tight mouth shrinking to a dot.

The boy moaned and sat up as Miss Pinchett jabbed him with the point of her black, polished boot. Looking up, he gave a startled yelp, then jumped to his feet, wincing at the pain.

'You should know better, Tom Roscoe, than to pick on a poor defenceless young lady,' Miss Pinchett said.

'Young lady?' Tom stammered as, grinning, Ness pulled off her cap, spilling thick, black hair over her shoulders. Tom gaped. 'Defenceless?' he whimpered, trying to nurse his bleeding ear and wrenched shoulder at the same time.

'And you can wipe that smug expression from your face this instant, miss,' Pinchett snapped. Her voice stung Ness like whiplash. 'Go immediately to Rookery Heights and wait in my office.'

Gritting her teeth, Ness turned on her heel, stamped out of the barn and across the farm. Her mood darkened

as she marched through the woods, kicking out at stones on the rough path.

Ness heaved a sigh as she approached Rookery Heights Academy for Young Ladies. The square building squatted on a rocky outcrop surrounded by marshlands. Its cold square windows stared out to the line of the sea. A low wall edged the scrubby garden. Above her the heavy sky merged into the flat horizon that in turn melted into the washed-out tones of the marsh. Crows cluttered the roof tiles, cawing and bickering.

A horrible place, Ness thought. *What could be worse than lessons in manners and deportment? All that chatter about who is marrying whom and which bachelor is most eligible! That's all the Academy girls think of – marriage*. Ness shivered at the cold. Girls of the Academy were taught to be doe-eyed and cow-brained. Bovine. Ready for the slaughter when they came of age. Ready for marriage to some halfwit lord or baron. Ness spat into the scrubby grass. *Not me*, she thought, stamping her way towards the building.

I can be anyone I want, Ness thought.

An image of Ness's father invaded her thoughts – towering over her in his study, his bloodstone ring glinting red on his finger. '*Only cowards run away from adversity*,' he said.

Pausing at the front door, Ness sighed. *Father would never speak to me again if I ran away. Maybe if I endure one more year here, he'll let me leave*.

*

Miss Pinchett sat in a high-backed chair, her bony fingers interlaced and white at the knuckles. Ness returned her icy stare, arms folded. Bookcases lined the walls, darkening the room. A meagre fire crackled and spat in the hearth. Behind Miss Pinchett stood a small, furtive-looking man. His eyes bulged like a strangled mouse and his face was red and blotchy.

'What are we going to do with you, Necessity Bonehill?' Miss Pinchett sighed, leaning forward over the desk.

'Not a lot, I should imagine,' muttered Ness, picking at her fingernails. 'You could expel me, I suppose.'

'You'd like that, wouldn't you?' Miss Pinchett hissed. Expulsion from Rookery Heights was highly unlikely. Ness knew that. Her father paid a stupid amount of money to keep her here. The Academy couldn't afford to let her go.

'Now that you come to mention it, yes, I would,' Ness said, giving a tight insincere smile. 'But we both know that's not going to happen.'

'No,' Miss Pinchett said, levelling a stony glare at Ness. 'But be warned, Necessity. There will come a point where no amount of money will keep me from excluding you. I can understand why your father wants rid of such an unnatural girl but we shouldn't have to endure such behaviour here at the Academy.'

Ness ground her teeth, tears stinging her eyes. Miss Pinchett dared not take the rod to Ness – but she didn't need to. Her barbed tongue was sharper than any cane and she knew just how to hurt Ness. The clue was in her name. Necessity. Her parents had only had her because

they needed to. That's what everybody said. No child, no inheritance. The other night Mollie Rogers had even suggested they had adopted her. She'd paid her back for that.

'Anyway,' Miss Pinchett continued, startling Ness out of her thoughts, 'I'll deal with your flagrant disregard for the rules of this establishment, and of decency itself, another time.' She raised a hand towards the nervous-looking man who stood behind her. 'This is Mr Hardgrave. He's a solicitor. I can hardly see why but he wishes to speak with you.'

Mr Hardgrave scuttled out from behind Miss Pinchett's chair. Under one arm he clutched a small sack. He smoothed back his greasy hair and gave a short bow.

'I have been instructed by my client, Mr Grossford,' he began, glancing around again as if someone might be eavesdropping.

'Uncle Carlos?' Ness gave a smile. *Now there's someone who cares*, she thought. Uncle Carlos sent all kinds of things to her – cake, sweets, books. She hadn't seen him for many years but he used to come to the house when she was a little girl and lived at home. 'Has he sent me a gift?'

'Yes, quite, miss,' coughed Hardgrave, stuffing the sack into Ness's arms. 'I am to hand this sack and the bottle therein –'

'Bottle?' Miss Pinchett frowned. 'I trust there's nothing intoxicating in it?'

'To the best of my knowledge, no,' Hardgrave said, mopping his brow and edging towards the door. 'I

shouldn't think so, ma'am.' He turned to Ness. 'I'm to hand it to you personally and instruct you to *never* open it.'

'Never open it? But why?' Ness murmured. She frowned at the sack. The bottle felt hard and cold through the material.

'Haven't the first idea, miss. Now, if you'll excuse me, I must return to London. Good day to you both . . . and good luck!' Hardgrave gave a slight bow and scurried away, slamming the door behind him.

Ness stared down at the sack again.

Miss Pinchett peered at it too. 'Aren't you going to look at it?'

Ness narrowed her eyes at the headmistress. 'Not just yet,' she sniffed. *Not in front of you, you miserable old trout.* With a short smile, Ness hugged the sack to her chest and swept out of the room.

A SOUND HEART IS THE LIFE OF THE FLESH BUT ENVY THE ROTTENNESS OF THE BONES.

PROVERBS, OLD TESTAMENT