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We know
books

The Folk of the Air series

The Cruel Prince

The Wicked King

The Queen of Nothing

The Stolen Heir

The Prisoner's Throne

How the King of Elfhame Learned to Hate Stories

THE
CRUEL
PRINCE

HOLLY BLACK

HOT
KEY
BOOKS

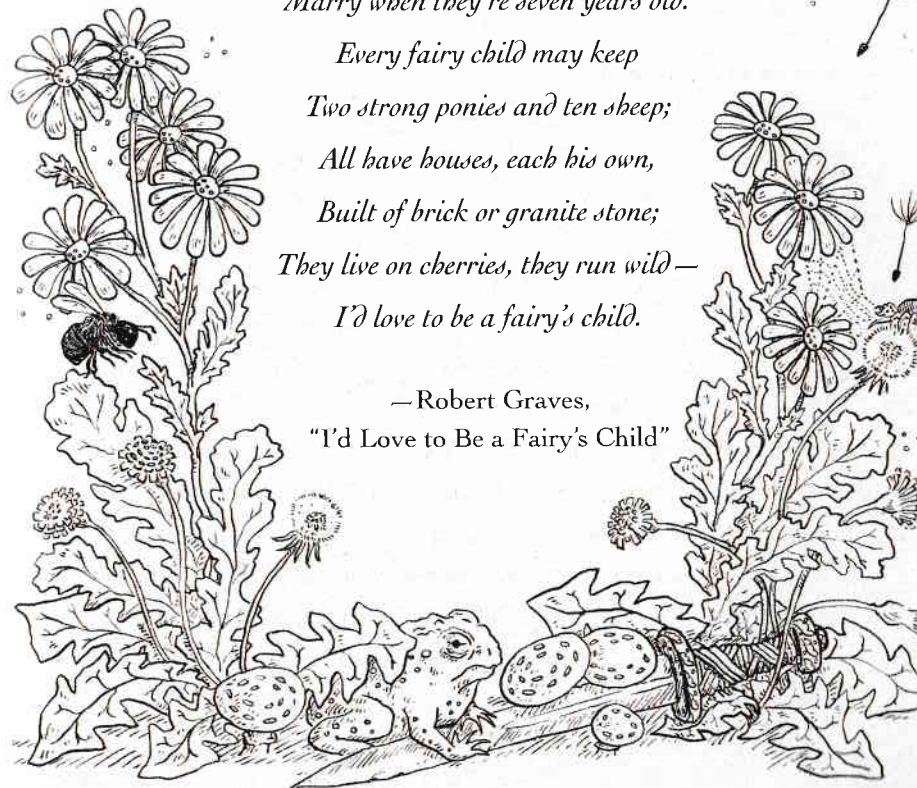
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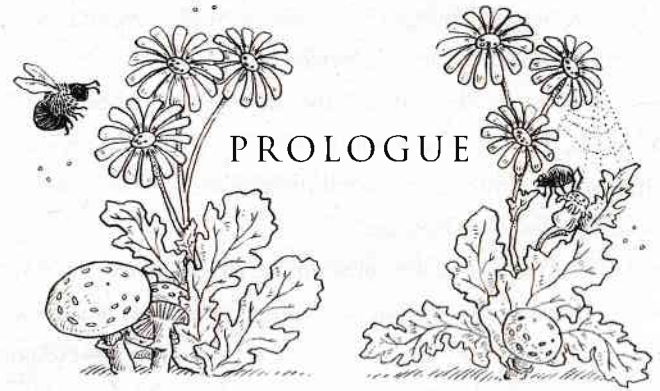
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Book One

*Children born of fairy stock
Never need for shirt or frock,
Never want for food or fire,
Always get their heart's desire:
Jingle pockets full of gold,
Marry when they're seven years old.
Every fairy child may keep
Two strong ponies and ten sheep;
All have houses, each his own,
Built of brick or granite stone;
They live on cherries, they run wild—
I'd love to be a fairy's child.*

—Robert Graves,
"I'd Love to Be a Fairy's Child"





On a drowsy Sunday afternoon, a man in a long dark coat hesitated in front of a house on a tree-lined street. He hadn't parked a car, nor had he come by taxi. No neighbor had seen him strolling along the sidewalk. He simply appeared, as if stepping between one shadow and the next.

The man walked to the door and lifted his fist to knock.

Inside the house, Jude sat on the living room rug and ate fish sticks, soggy from the microwave and dragged through a sludge of ketchup. Her twin sister, Taryn, napped on the couch, curled around a blanket, thumb in her fruit-punch-stained mouth. And on the other end of the sofa, their older sister, Vivienne, stared at the television screen, her eerie, split-pupiled gaze fixed on the cartoon mouse as it ran from the cartoon cat. She laughed when it seemed as if the mouse was about to get eaten.

Vivi was different from other big sisters, but since seven-year-old Jude and Taryn were identical, with the same shaggy brown hair and

heart-shaped faces, they were different, too. Vivi's eyes and the lightly furred points of her ears were, to Jude, not so much more strange than being the mirror version of another person.

And if sometimes she noticed the way the neighborhood kids avoided Vivi or the way their parents talked about her in low, worried voices, Jude didn't think it was anything important. Grown-ups were always worried, always whispering.

Taryn yawned and stretched, pressing her cheek against Vivi's knee.

Outside, the sun was shining, scorching the asphalt of driveways. Lawn mower engines whirred, and children splashed in backyard pools. Dad was in the outbuilding, where he had a forge. Mom was in the kitchen cooking hamburgers. Everything was boring. Everything was fine.

When the knock came, Jude hopped up to answer it. She hoped it might be one of the girls from across the street, wanting to play video games or inviting her for an after-dinner swim.

The tall man stood on their mat, glaring down at her. He wore a brown leather duster despite the heat. His shoes were shod with silver, and they rang hollowly as he stepped over the threshold. Jude looked up into his shadowed face and shivered.

"Mom," she yelled. "Moooooooooom. Someone's here."

Her mother came from the kitchen, wiping wet hands on her jeans. When she saw the man, she went pale. "Go to your room," she told Jude in a scary voice. "*Now!*"

"Whose child is that?" the man asked, pointing at her. His voice was oddly accented. "Yours? His?"

"No one's." Mom didn't even look in Jude's direction. "She's no one's child."

That wasn't right. Jude and Taryn looked just like their dad. Everyone said so. She took a few steps toward the stairs but didn't want to be alone in her room. *Vivi*, Jude thought. *Vivi will know who the tall man is. Vivi will know what to do.*

But Jude couldn't seem to make herself move any farther.

"I've seen many impossible things," the man said. "I have seen the acorn before the oak. I have seen the spark before the flame. But never have I seen such as this: A dead woman living. A child born from nothing."

Mom seemed at a loss for words. Her body was vibrating with tension. Jude wanted to take her hand and squeeze it, but she didn't dare.

"I doubted Balekin when he told me I'd find you here," said the man, his voice softening. "The bones of an earthly woman and her unborn child in the burned remains of my estate were convincing. Do you know what it is to return from battle to find your wife dead, your only heir with her? To find your life reduced to ash?"

Mom shook her head, not as if she was answering him, but as though she was trying to shake off the words.

He took a step toward her, and she took a step back. There was something wrong with the tall man's leg. He moved stiffly, as though it hurt him. The light was different in the entry hall, and Jude could see the odd green tint of his skin and the way his lower teeth seemed too large for his mouth.

She was able to see that his eyes were like Vivi's.

"I was never going to be happy with you," Mom told him. "Your world isn't for people like me."

The tall man regarded her for a long moment. "You made vows," he said finally.

She lifted her chin. "And then I renounced them."

His gaze went to Jude, and his expression hardened. "What is a promise from a mortal wife worth? I suppose I have my answer."

Mom turned. At her mother's look, Jude dashed into the living room.

Taryn was still sleeping. The television was still on. Vivienne looked up with half-lidded cat eyes. "Who's at the door?" she asked. "I heard arguing."

"A scary man," Jude told her, out of breath even though she'd barely run at all. Her heart was pounding. "We're supposed to go upstairs."

She didn't care that Mom had told only *her* to go upstairs. She wasn't going by herself. With a sigh, Vivi unfolded from the couch and shook Taryn awake. Drowsily, Jude's twin followed them into the hallway.

As they started toward the carpet-covered steps, Jude saw her father come in from the back garden. He held an axe in his hand—forged to be a near replica of one he'd studied in a museum in Iceland. It wasn't weird to see Dad with an axe. He and his friends were into old weapons and would spend lots of time talking about "material culture" and sketching ideas for fantastical blades. What was odd was the way he held the weapon, as if he was going to—

Her father swung the axe toward the tall man.

He had never raised a hand to discipline Jude or her sisters, even when they got into big trouble. He wouldn't hurt anyone. He just wouldn't.

And yet. And yet.

The axe went past the tall man, biting into the wood trim of the door.

Taryn made an odd, high keening noise and slapped her palms over her mouth.

The tall man drew a curved blade from beneath his leather coat. A *sword*, like from a storybook. Dad was trying to pull the axe free from the doorframe when the man plunged the sword into Dad's stomach, pushing it upward. There was a sound, like sticks snapping, and an animal cry. Dad fell to the vestibule carpet, the one Mom always yelled about when they tracked mud on it.

The rug that was turning red.

Mom screamed. Jude screamed. Taryn and Vivi screamed. Everyone seemed to be screaming, except the tall man.

"Come here," he said, looking directly at Vivi.

"Y-you monster," their mother shouted, moving toward the kitchen. "He's dead!"

"Do not run from me," the man told her. "Not after what you've done. If you run again, I swear I—"

But she did run. She was almost around the corner when his blade struck her in the back. She crumpled to the linoleum, falling arms knocking magnets off the fridge.

The smell of fresh blood was heavy in the air, like wet, hot metal. Like those scrubbing pads Mom used to clean the frying pan when stuff was really stuck on.

Jude ran at the man, slamming her fists against his chest, kicking at his legs. She wasn't even scared. She wasn't sure she felt anything at all.

The man paid Jude no mind. For a long moment, he just stood there, as though he couldn't quite believe what he'd done. As though he wished he could take back the last five minutes. Then he sank to one

knee and caught hold of Jude's shoulders. He pinned her arms to her sides so she couldn't hit him anymore, but he wasn't even looking at her.

His gaze was on Vivienne.

"You were stolen from me," he told her. "I have come to take you to your true home, in Elfhome beneath the hill. There, you will be rich beyond measure. There, you will be with your own kind."

"No," Vivi told him in her somber little voice. "I'm never going anywhere with you."

"I'm your father," he told her, his voice harsh, rising like the crack of a lash. "You are my heir and my blood, and you will obey me in this as in all things."

She didn't move, but her jaw set.

"You're not her father," Jude shouted at the man. Even though he and Vivi had the same eyes, she wouldn't let herself believe it.

His grip tightened on her shoulders, and she made a little squeezed, squeaking sound, but she stared up defiantly. She'd won plenty of staring contests.

He looked away first, turning to watch Taryn, on her knees, shaking Mom while she sobbed, as though she was trying to wake her up. Mom didn't move. Mom and Dad were dead. They were never going to move again.

"I hate you," Vivi proclaimed to the tall man with a viciousness that Jude was glad of. "I will always hate you. I vow it."

The man's stony expression didn't change. "Nonetheless, you will come with me. Ready these little humans. Pack light. We ride before dark."

Vivienne's chin came up. "Leave them alone. If you have to, take me, but not them."

He stared at Vivi, and then he snorted. "You'd protect your sisters from me, would you? Tell me, then, where would you have them go?"

Vivi didn't answer. They had no grandparents, no living family at all. At least, none they knew.

He looked at Jude again, released her shoulders, and rose to his feet. "They are the progeny of my wife and, thus, my responsibility. I may be cruel, a monster, and a murderer, but I do not shirk my responsibilities. Nor should you shirk yours as the eldest."

Years later, when Jude told herself the story of what happened, she couldn't recall the part where they packed. Shock seemed to have erased that hour entirely. Somehow Vivi must have found bags, must have put in their favorite picture books and their most beloved toys, along with photographs and pajamas and coats and shirts.

Or maybe Jude had packed for herself. She was never sure.

She couldn't imagine how they'd done it, with their parents' bodies cooling downstairs. She couldn't imagine how it had felt, and as the years went by, she couldn't make herself feel it again. The horror of the murders dulled with time. Her memories of the day blurred.

A black horse was nibbling the grass of the lawn when they went outside. Its eyes were big and soft. Jude wanted to throw her arms around its neck and press her wet face into its silky mane. Before she could, the tall man swung her and then Taryn across the saddle, handling them like baggage rather than children. He put Vivi up behind him.

"Hold on," he said.

Jude and her sisters wept the whole way to Faerieland.



CHAPTER

1



In Faerie, there are no fish sticks, no ketchup, no television.



CHAPTER

2



I sit on a cushion as an imp braids my hair back from my face. The imp's fingers are long, her nails sharp. I wince. Her black eyes meet mine in the claw-footed mirror on my dressing table.

"The tournament is still four nights away," the creature says. Her name is Tatterfell, and she's a servant in Madoc's household, stuck here until she works off her debt to him. She's cared for me since I was a child. It was Tatterfell who smeared stinging faerie ointment over my eyes to give me True Sight so that I could see through most glamours, who brushed the mud from my boots, and who strung dried rowan berries for me to wear around my neck so I might resist enchantments. She wiped my wet nose and reminded me to wear my stockings inside out, so I'd never be led astray in the forest. "And no matter how eager you are for it, you cannot make the moon set nor rise any faster. Try to bring glory to the general's household tonight by appearing as comely as we can make you."

I sigh.

She's never had much patience with my peevishness. "It's an honor to dance with the High King's Court under the hill."

The servants are overfond of telling me how fortunate I am, a bastard daughter of a faithless wife, a human without a drop of faerie blood, to be treated like a trueborn child of Faerie. They tell Taryn much the same thing.

I know it's an honor to be raised alongside the Gentry's own children. A terrifying honor, of which I will never be worthy.

It would be hard to forget it, with all the reminders I am given.

"Yes," I say instead, because she is trying to be kind. "It's great."

Faeries can't lie, so they tend to concentrate on words and ignore tone, especially if they haven't lived among humans. Tatterfell gives me an approving nod, her eyes like two wet beads of jet, neither pupil nor iris visible. "Perhaps someone will ask for your hand and you'll be made a permanent member of the High Court."

"I want to win my place," I tell her.

The imp pauses, hairpin between her fingers, probably considering pricking me with it. "Don't be foolish."

There's no point in arguing, no point to reminding her of my mother's disastrous marriage. There are two ways for mortals to become permanent subjects of the Court: marrying into it or honing some great skill—in metallurgy or lute playing or whatever. Not interested in the first, I have to hope I can be talented enough for the second.

She finishes braiding my hair into an elaborate style that makes me look as though I have horns. She dresses me in sapphire velvet. None of it disguises what I am: human.

"I put in three knots for luck," the little faerie says, not unkindly.

I sigh as she scuttles toward the door, getting up from my dressing table to sprawl facedown on my tapestry-covered bed. I am used to having servants attend to me. Imps and hobs, goblins and grigs. Gossamer wings and green nails, horns and fangs. I have been in Faerie for ten years. None of it seems all that strange anymore. Here, I am the strange one, with my blunt fingers, round ears, and mayfly life.

Ten years is a long time for a human.

After Madoc stole us from the human world, he brought us to his estates on Insmire, the Isle of Might, where the High King of Elfhome keeps his stronghold. There, Madoc raised us—me and Vivienne and Taryn—out of an obligation of honor. Even though Taryn and I are the evidence of Mom's betrayal, by the customs of Faerie, we're his wife's kids, so we're his problem.

As the High King's general, Madoc was away often, fighting for the crown. We were well cared for nonetheless. We slept on mattresses stuffed with the soft seed-heads of dandelions. Madoc personally instructed us in the art of fighting with the cutlass and dagger, the falchion and our fists. He played Nine Men's Morris, Fidchell, and Fox and Geese with us before a fire. He let us sit on his knee and eat off his plate.

Many nights I drifted off to sleep to his rumbling voice reading from a book of battle strategy. And despite myself, despite what he'd done and what he was, I came to love him. I do love him.

It's just not a comfortable kind of love.

"Nice braids," Taryn says, rushing into my room. She's dressed in crimson velvet. Her hair is loose—long chestnut curls that fly behind her like a capelet, a few strands braided with gleaming silver thread. She hops onto the bed beside me, disarranging my small pile of threadbare

stuffed animals—a koala, a snake, a black cat—all beloved of my seven-year-old self. I cannot bear to throw out any of my relics.

I sit up to take a self-conscious look in the mirror. “I like them.”

“I’m having a premonition,” Taryn says, surprising me. “We’re going to have fun tonight.”

“Fun?” I’d been imagining myself frowning at the crowd from our usual bolt-hole and worrying over whether I’d do well enough in the tournament to impress one of the royal family into granting me knighthood. Just thinking about it makes me fidgety, yet I think about it constantly. My thumb brushes over the missing tip of my ring finger, my nervous tic.

“Yes,” she says, poking me in the side.

“Hey! Ow!” I scoot out of range. “What exactly does this plan entail?” Mostly, when we go to Court, we hide ourselves away. We’ve watched some very interesting things, but from a distance.

She throws up her hands. “What do you mean, what does fun entail? It’s fun!”

I laugh a little nervously. “You have no idea, either, do you? Fine. Let’s go see if you have a gift for prophecy.”

We are getting older and things are changing. We are changing. And as eager as I am for it, I am also afraid.

Taryn pushes herself off my bed and holds out her arm, as though she’s my escort for a dance. I allow myself to be guided from the room, my hand going automatically to assure myself that my knife is still strapped to my hip.

The interior of Madoc’s house is whitewashed plaster and massive, rough-cut wooden beams. The glass panes in the windows are stained

gray as trapped smoke, making the light strange. As Taryn and I go down the spiral stairs, I spot Vivi hiding in a little balcony, frowning over a comics zine stolen from the human world.

Vivi grins at me. She’s in jeans and a billowy shirt—obviously not intending to go to the revel. Being Madoc’s legitimate daughter, she feels no pressure to please him. She does what she likes. Including reading magazines that might have iron staples rather than glue binding their pages, not caring if her fingers get singed.

“Heading somewhere?” she asks softly from the shadows, startling Taryn.

Vivi knows perfectly well where we’re heading.

When we first came here, Taryn and Vivi and I would huddle in Vivi’s big bed and talk about what we remembered from home. We’d talk about the meals Mom burned and the popcorn Dad made. Our next-door neighbors’ names, the way the house smelled, what school was like, the holidays, the taste of icing on birthday cakes. We’d talk about the shows we’d watched, rehashing the plots, recalling the dialogue until all our memories were polished smooth and false.

There’s no more huddling in bed now, rehashing anything. All our new memories are of here, and Vivi has only a passing interest in those.

She’d vowed to hate Madoc, and she stuck to her vow. When Vivi wasn’t reminiscing about home, she was a terror. She broke things. She screamed and raged and pinched us when we were content. Eventually, she stopped all of it, but I believe there is a part of her that hates us for adapting. For making the best of things. For making this our home.

“You should come,” I tell her. “Taryn’s in a weird mood.”

Vivi gives her a speculative look and then shakes her head. “I’ve got