

Path of Thorns

By Terri Nixon

Chapter One

Truro Union Workhouse, April 29th, 1864

‘When’s it to be?’ Ellie Trelvellick struggled to keep her voice steady, but it broke on the last word, and her brother squeezed her hand.

‘Tomorrow, while the weather holds.’

Jack’s voice was grim, and he sounded far older than his fifteen years. His pale skin was waxy-looking, and he was sweating despite the cool evening breeze that had followed him into the laundry room. He turned up the paraffin lamp, so the glow spread to the far corners of the room, then, evidently satisfied they were alone, he turned back. ‘Six of us. You and me, Andrew and Nancy, Sally and Martin.’

‘Then we’d best tell them.’ Ellie started away, but Jack caught her arm.

‘We can’t. If anyone lets it out that we’ve even been out tonight, never mind that I’ve been listening through doors, you know what’ll happen.’

Ellie hesitated, then subsided. He was right; Andrew and his little sister Nancy were both given to panicking, and when Andrew cried you could hear him as far as Redruth. He would bring the guardians running, for sure.

‘So the others will just think it’s a working party,’ she said, wishing in the same moment that she could share their blissful ignorance; that, for the first time in their lives, Jack had kept something from her.

Her thoughts must have shown because Jack’s eyes found hers; the same cat-like shape as hers, the same hazel flecked with green. Filled with the same fear. ‘I’m sorry, Ells. I had to tell someone, and there’s no-one else that I trust. Will you bear up? For me?’

Bear up? They want us to die! But somehow she nodded. ‘If you can, I can.’

He uttered a short, shaky sigh. ‘It’s alright. We’ll work something out.’

A silence fell between them, and when she was sure she could speak without trembling, Ellie shook her work-loosened hair back from her face and cleared her throat.

‘Anyway, did you get the apples, while you were busy eavesdropping?’

‘Yeah. Only three, but I got a knife too, so we can share them around.’

‘A knife?’ Ellie’s frown returned, but when Jack produced the short-bladed, notched and broken implement from his pocket, she relaxed. ‘Well, they won’t be missing that one.’

Astonishingly, Jack’s face broke into a sudden grin. ‘No, but it’s given me another idea. Look.’

He squatted, and drew a line in the dust between his scuffed and cracked boots. ‘See, they’re taking the working party beyond Polgarris Wood.’ He drew some more lines, haphazardly, in front of the first one. ‘They believe we’ll get lost, or worse, making our way back.’

‘Well it’s likely, isn’t it? The forest is huge. You can’t see either end of it. And the paths go in all directions. We could wander for days without enough food or drink, and we’re hungry as it is.’ Ellie heard the rising panic in her own voice, but Jack gave her his quick smile again.

‘Don’t fret. I’ll mark a tree at every turn in the path. See?’ He held up the tiny knife again. ‘It doesn’t look like much, but it’ll do the job.’

‘What if the guardians see you?’

‘They won’t. There’ll be six of us, and two of them. I’ll be at the back. You’ll be up there at the front asking daft questions and getting on their nerves. Get Sally to help you. She’s good at that sort of thing.’ He sobered again. ‘My only worry is how far beyond the forest they’ll take us. I heard Mr. Rowe say a wagon would be waiting, and the guardians won’t come with us any farther.’

Ellie felt sick. ‘How could anyone do this, Jack? And why?’

‘Dunno about how, but the why’s simple enough. They’ll get the money for our keep, but they won’t have to feed nor clothe us. No-one ever checks, do they?’ He shrugged. ‘I’d like to think it’d mean the other kids’ll get a kinder ride because of it. Better food. A good doctor, even. But they won’t.’

Ellie grabbed his arm. ‘We don’t have to come back, though! We can go onward instead, find a better workhouse, or even jobs!’

‘No, Ells. Not anymore.’ Jack’s voice was quiet but determined. ‘Someone needs to *prove* what the governor’s up to. The only way to make everyone believe us is to follow it through, and let the guardians think they’ve succeeded. Think how many times they must have done this in the past!’

Ellie nodded miserably; all too often they'd been told a child they'd known had been "taken ill in the night, and died, sudden." As Jack had said, no-one ever questioned it. 'Is the matron part of it, too?'

'She wasn't there, only him and the master.'

'Someone should tell her what's happening and then she can tell the constable.'

'Governor'd kill her,' Jack said simply, and Ellie knew he was likely right about that, too. 'We have to do it our way. Do you trust me?'

'Always have,' Ellie said, and found a smile for him. It trembled at the corners of her mouth, but it brought an answering one from her brother, who tugged at her hair.

'Good girl. We'll be alright. Try to sleep tonight. You'll need to be brave tomorrow.'

'You too.' Ellie ushered him towards the door. 'Go on then, before someone finds you.'

'See you at breakfast. Oh, nearly forgot.' He gave her an apple, but she put it in her apron pocket.

'I'd better save it. And you save the other two. Just in case.'

She kept herself under control until he left, but when she was alone in the laundry room again she sat down, fighting hopeless, furious tears. How could the governor plot the deaths of innocents in this way? Where did such wickedness spring from? And how could two fifteen-year-old children hope to beat it?

Chapter Two.

It was a mixed group that readied itself for the working party the next morning. Ellie had risen at six, after a fitful night, and pushed her breakfast porridge around the bowl with her spoon. She caught Jack's eyes on her from across the table, and read his warning expression; *eat, you'll need it*. She managed to shovel a few spoonfuls down, though they hurt when she tried to swallow. However, eyes watering, she managed a brief smile to ease Jack's concern.

It was a Saturday, and as they stood by the door at seven o'clock, four of the six children were already chattering about what they would do on their rest day tomorrow, while the remaining two looked at one another, faces set, and hands gripped so tight their knuckles showed white through their skin.

'We'll be alright,' Jack said again, in a low voice. It was turning into a mantra for them both. He took a deep breath. 'I wish Joe was here, don't you?' Both parents had long since drifted into the realms of thin and patchy memory, but their elder brother had been the prop against which they had braced themselves these past years in the workhouse. Jack, especially. 'Why couldn't he have discharged us from this place too, when he left?'

'We'd have been no better off,' Ellie pointed out. 'You know that. Him and Esther've got their own troubles.'

'They've got Ma and Pa's house, though.'

'And no work. Not yet, anyway. He'll send for us though, he promised.' This was spoken more in hope than assurance. Joe's new wife Esther had looked on them both kindly, even as she'd taken their brother away from them, but the newly-weds were scratching to make way themselves, and could never have afforded to feed two extra mouths.

One of the two guardians who were to take them through the forest, clapped his hands to get their attention. 'Right! Baskets'll be in the cart waiting for you on the far side of Polgarris wood. Fill them well – the more moss you bring back, the better your meals for the next few days.'

'Moss?' Twelve-year-old Andrew broke off from his favourite pastime of tormenting his little sister. 'I don't want to eat moss!'

'Don't be stupid, boy! I'm talking about rewards! You will be collecting sphagnum moss, for our expansion of the gardens.' The guardian gave the boy a peculiar little smile. 'You'll

find it near the peat bogs on the moor, so you'll have to be careful; those are dangerous places. Watch your steps, children.'

Ellie shivered and felt Jack's hand tighten around hers. He leaned in close. 'We'll be—.'
'Alright,' she whispered back and took a deep breath.

The guardian let his gaze drift over the assembled group, then turned about, and pulled open the door. 'In twos. Follow.'

The walk through the forest took the best part of the morning. For one heart-stopping moment, as they set out, one of the guardians moved to the back of the group to keep watch on stragglers, but soon re-joined his colleague at the front, satisfied that not even the stupidest child would voluntarily wander away from the group in Polgarris Wood.

Plunging into the shadowy depths subdued them all. Even fourteen-year-old Sally, who had chirpily welcomed the chance to leave the grim stone walls of the workhouse behind, though it was for hard labour in the fields. The smells changed too, becoming damp and pungent, almost chokingly so in places, and the children covered their noses and breathed through their mouths. The pathways split so often, and the trees were so dense, it was easy to see how someone could become lost in here; a person could walk in circles for hours and not realise it. The guardians had no such concerns; they must have travelled these twisted, root-strewn footways many times in the past... A chilling thought in itself.

At each break in the path, Ellie pulled Sally with her up to the front of the group, and the two of them asked pointless questions, enduring the irritation of the guardians, while Jack tugged out the tiny knife and marked the side of the most distinctive tree he could find. Each time he caught up with her and nodded, Ellie breathed more easily. They would find their way back, and then Mr Rowe would at last face justice. She and the others might even be granted some kind of holiday, as a reward for exposing the awful, unthinkable practices of the corrupt governor.

The light began to change ahead of them. The dim green shadows began to give way to the shimmer of sunlight, the overhead canopy grew thinner, letting glimpses of the blue sky through. Even knowing what she did, it was hard not to respond to the lightening of spirits such a change brought. And tomorrow was Mayday, the start of Spring. Soon the days would stretch out, and by then Mr. Rowe would be fired – perhaps even imprisoned – and the new

governor might allow them to go farther afield on rest days. She might even have the chance to re-stock her little supply of herbs and plants.

She said as much to Jack, who smiled. ‘You’ll make a good healer someday.’

‘Like Sarah and Sebastian.’ Tales had passed down through their family about the tragic fate of the young twins; both dead at sixteen – Sebastian hanged for the murder of his own sister. ‘Do *you* believe they were witches?’

Jack shook his head. ‘It was a long time ago, in the war. People didn’t know so much then. No, I reckon they were just good at finding the right plants and stuff. Like you.’

‘They were twins, though.’

‘Trevellicks have got twins like other folk have got cats,’ Jack smiled. ‘It doesn’t mean *they’re* witches either! No, I think—’

‘Quiet!’ The head guardian stopped, and they fell silent; a swift hand could sting just as much out here as it could in the workhouse.

‘We’re almost to the edge of the forest now. Listen well. There will be a cart to take you out onto the moor. The driver will return you to the end of this path well before it gets dark, and we will be here to lead you back through the forest. Anyone who does not return is welcome to wander the moor as they wish – they won’t see another sunrise, and we won’t come searching.’

With these parting words, the guardians stepped aside and gestured up the path, allowing the six children to move on without them. Ellie felt Jack falter as they passed and tugged on his hand, frightened he would suddenly say something to arouse suspicion. He came willingly enough, but she heard him mutter something under his breath and hoped the guardians hadn’t also heard. They’d never liked any of the Trevellicks, and made no secret of it.

A few minutes later the work party had emerged on the far side of Polgarris Woods, onto a rough moorland with no houses or farms in sight. Not even a mine’s engine-house chimney marred the landscape; there was no-one here to whom they could turn for help and guidance.

As promised, a cart stood waiting, with two moor ponies stamping impatiently in the traces, and a driver who didn’t even look at them let alone greet them. Silently the six children climbed in, casting nervous looks about them as the warnings of bogs and marshes rang in their ears. Ellie had always tried to be someone the younger ones could come to when they were scared or hurt; she treated scalds from the kitchen, or welts from a birch rod, with equal calm and efficiency, but now she felt her youth and vulnerability fall over her like a heavy cloud. She looked at Jack, whose face was as still as the granite peaks around them, and every bit as hard.

There were rough wickerwork baskets rolling around in the cart, and each of them picked one up and held it on their lap, almost as a comfort, as they rattled over the faintly visible path to where the best of the moss grew. The chatter did not start up again until the cart drew to a halt, and the driver told them to get down. They were the first words he'd spoken, and his voice was tight.

Ellie and Jack glanced at one another again. This man knew what he was doing! Could he be appealed to? But Jack shook his head minutely; it was too risky. No-one must know they had learned of the shocking plot. When they returned to the workhouse, the governor would hide his surprise, and they would be spun some story about why the guardians had not been there to lead them home, but it didn't matter. They would be safe.

It was the hardest thing they'd ever done, to watch the evidently reluctant driver lay the whip along his ponies' flanks and pull away into the distance. Little Nancy spoke first.

'Will he come back?'

'Don't be silly, of course he will,' Martin said. 'We just have to make sure we know exactly where to meet him.' He looked around, his eyes screwed up against the weak April sun. 'Right, on that side there's a rock that's shaped like a triangle. Long's we keep that in view, we'll be right.'

'Well I want to get *lots* of moss, and lots of treats,' Sally announced. 'Come on.'

Ellie looked over at Jack. 'Should we wait? Give them the chance to come for us? They might still—'

'What do you mean?' Martin demanded. He looked from one Trevellick to the other, frowning.

'No,' Jack said, ignoring him. 'We have to start back now.'

'But we won't have proof. You said we needed that.'

'I didn't know how bad the woods were, then.' Jack said grimly. 'And it'll take us a good while just to get back to them.' He looked around at the others. 'Listen, everyone. They've been lying to us. No-one's coming to take us home. We have to find our own way.'

In as few words as he could, he explained what he'd overheard while sneaking apples for his ward-mates last night. Andrew's face screwed up, his lower lip trembled, and a moment later he'd let out a wail fit to shatter granite, but for once, Ellie felt sorry for him rather than irritated. Even bluff Martin's face was pasty and slack with shock. Nancy, at seven years old, was clearly waiting for them to admit it was all just a horrid story made up to frighten her, and Sally was weeping silent tears of terror, her hands twisting in the thick material of her skirt.

‘Why can’t we go around the woods, instead?’

‘It’s too far, and too dangerous. Think how long it took us to cut through Polgarris, then imagine how long it would take to skirt the wood. The peat bogs are everywhere, and it’ll be dark before got more than a mile. It’s safer to go through.’

‘What if you can’t find the trees you marked?’ Martin managed at last. He sounded almost accusing as if he thought Jack had not tried hard enough to protect them all. Ellie bristled, but Jack put a hand on her arm.

‘We will,’ he said. ‘We just have to be calm, and stay together. Come on.’

The carriage ride, which hadn’t seemed to take much more than half an hour, must have been much longer than they’d thought – by the time the path gave way to the rough ground a mile or so from the forest edge it was approaching dusk, and the air had chilled. The lowering clouds spat rain that made the ground underfoot soft and unpredictable, and Jack urged them to walk faster. They must get through the wood before full dark, or they’d never find the marks on the trees.

Sally slipped and slid, and looked around fearfully at the encroaching dark as if she expected to see something looming out of it, intent on dragging her away from the group. She edged closer to Ellie, who put a comforting arm around her.

‘Don’t fret,’ she said, echoing Jack’s words of last night. ‘We’ll be alright.’

At the forest’s edge, they found the end of the path where they’d emerged just a few hours ago.

Jack gathered them all close. ‘Right, eyes open, I shaved a long strip of bark off one tree on my left at every break in the path, so keep it on your *right* and move on to the next.’

Nancy held up her two hands and looked at Ellie. Ellie took the little girl’s right hand and peeled off her glove. ‘That one,’ she said. ‘But just make sure you and Andrew stay close together, and you won’t have to worry about it.’

Nancy nodded and followed her big brother, who still hiccupped now and again. Jack led the way, with Martin just behind, and Ellie and Sally brought up the rear. Privately, Ellie thought Martin should have come last, but he seemed intent on keeping up with Jack, getting him to tell him over and over again what he’d overheard last night.

The paths split just ahead, and Jack examined the tightly-packed trees on both sides of the fork. ‘Here!’ he called back, and Ellie smiled to hear the relief in his voice. It had worked, he would guide them all safely home. They took the path he indicated, and at the next place where the paths separated, an excited Nancy was the one to find the marked tree.

They had been walking for almost an hour when one of Sally's tired feet knocked against a root and sent her stumbling to the floor. The others stopped and waited for her to get back up, hardly bothering to hide their impatience.

'Just let me sit a minute,' she pleaded. 'I've twisted my ankle.'

Jack looked at Ellie, and they both raised their eyes to the treetops. Rain still dripped down on them through the leaves, but the sky wasn't yet properly dark.

'Just a minute, then,' Ellie said. 'We ought to push on.'

'My feet hurt too,' Nancy piped up. 'I've only got little legs.'

'Jack'll carry you,' Martin offered.

'*Jack* is going to pay a call of nature first,' Jack said. 'So don't anyone follow me this time.' He stepped off the path, marking a tree at its edge as he went.

They waited for what was probably only five minutes but felt more like twenty.

'What's keeping him?' Martin complained at last. 'I want to get out of here before dark.'

Ellie shrugged. 'He'll be here in a minute,' But after another few minutes waiting, she grew impatient herself. 'You go on. I'll go and make sure he hasn't done the same thing Sally did.'

'Will you catch us up?'

'Yes! Go on.'

Ellie watched the others start down the path, a limping Sally clutching Martin's coat, and went to the tree Jack had marked. She stepped past it and called to him. There was no answer, and she frowned. Another few steps in and the path was gone from sight behind her. She stopped, wiping her sweating hands on her skirt, and slowly turned in a circle. On all sides of her were great, sturdy trees, with gnarled trunks and spiky branches, and far above her came the low call of an owl... evening was creeping on.

Ellie listened hard until her ears caught a different kind of rustle from that of the leaves in the freshening breeze. A more rhythmic sound, boots on the squelchy wet ground only a short distance away. She moved towards it, one hand holding her skirts free of her boots, the other braced against the rough tree trunks and guiding her through them. Fear was making her chest tight, and she couldn't draw enough breath to call out, but she doggedly followed the sound until she emerged into a clearing. She peered through the gloom, and her heart leapt in relief as she caught sight of movement at the far side. 'Jack!'

'Come quick,' he called back. 'It's wonderful!'

'What is?'

'Come and see!'

Ellie hurried across the small patch of clear ground and plunged once more into densely-packed trees. When she found her brother he was walking quickly, easily, despite the uneven ground, and the protrusion of roots and scrubby little bushes that hampered her own feet.

‘Wait!’ she panted, and Jack turned, smiling.

‘Hurry, Ells! We need to keep up!’

‘With what?’

‘Not what, who!’ Jack pointed, and Ellie’s mouth fell open in astonishment. Ahead of her stood a boy, a little older than her and Jack, and dressed in the finest clothes she had ever seen. He was like a beautiful painting come to life, with an open, handsome face, and a wide smile with which he favoured her particularly. His voice, when he spoke, was low and gentle.

‘Come. I will guide you down the path.’ He held out a hand, and although Ellie was too far away to take it, it seemed to draw her on, and her feet moved without the guidance of her eyes... easily and swiftly through the difficult undergrowth, finding their way unerringly to where the boy stood.

Jack was looking at him with equal fascination, and he turned to take Ellie’s hand. ‘This is a quick way home! I knew there must be one.’

‘Come,’ the boy said again and began to walk.

Ellie and Jack followed. Now and again the ethereally beautiful boy graced Ellie with another smile; his eyes, the colour of clear honey, were warm on hers. She found her gaze drawn to as much of the profile she could see from where she walked just behind him; the bold, strong bones of a young man, moulded by the clear skin of healthy boyhood. She watched the straight, square-shouldered back, and the graceful way he moved, and her heart seemed to grow within her – a new sensation, and one that made her a little giddy, but a sweet one nevertheless. She felt a tiny smile tugging at her lips.

They walked what seemed a great distance, but Ellie’s feet, formerly hot and uncomfortable in their ill-fitting boots, had lost all tiredness. When they reached the path of which the boy had spoken, Ellie and Jack stopped. It was narrow, winding away ahead of them, and on both sides of it were tangled thorn bushes. Heavy with long, vicious-looking spikes, they dipped beneath the weight of the rain to about shoulder-height; on a fine day, when they yearned towards the skies, they would no doubt be taller than Jack, and even taller than the boy they followed. The longer branches thrust their thorns into the centre of the path, and Ellie could see that even turning sideways and shuffling down the worn footway would not keep any exposed skin clear of their grasp.

‘Do not fear the thorns’ the boy said. ‘You are protected from their bite.’

Jack was staring at the boy, and Ellie recognised the same wish to believe him, along with the natural aversion to stepping into that mass of savage-looking brambles. ‘How can we be protected?’ He was trying to sound strong, and merely curious, but was betrayed by the tremble in his voice.

The boy came over to him and put a hand on either of Jack’s shoulders. ‘Do you believe in me?’ His voice was softer than ever, and Jack stared into his eyes for a moment, then nodded.

‘Of course.’

‘Then come.’

‘What is your name?’ Ellie asked.

The boy smiled. ‘Will you not follow unless I tell you?’

‘It’s just... easier to trust you.’

‘Is it? Why?’

Ellie couldn’t answer that, and she looked to Jack for help, but he was eyeing the path with a set expression, preparing himself. In the end, she just shrugged. ‘Do you promise we won’t be hurt?’

‘I promise. Come.’

The boy stepped onto the path, and Jack followed. After a moment he turned to Ellie with a little laugh of surprise. ‘It’s true. It’s wider than it looks!’

Ellie moved forward, eyes closed, her skin shrinking on her bones in anticipation of the stinging pain of a scratch, but it never came. She opened her eyes and relaxed. Jack was right – the path was much wider than it had seemed from outside it, and the thorns came nowhere near the centre. She shook her head with a mixture of embarrassment and relief and hurried to catch up.

The three of them walked on without encountering so much as the brush of a waving leaf. It even seemed as if time was on their side; it was not growing any darker, and spots of rain no longer splashed onto their heads and down their necks. The path veered away to their left, in a gradual, sweeping curve, with trees rising high on either side, their branches meeting overhead in a beautifully-lit green canopy.

‘How far is it?’ Jack asked the boy.

‘As long as it needs to be,’ came the cryptic reply. Jack and Ellie exchanged a sceptical glance, and the boy saw them and smiled. ‘You’ll see.’

And so they went on. And on. It seemed to Ellie that they must have come in a full circle, but it was hard to tell one clump of trees from another, and the path never changed. She began to grow troubled again and slowed her step. A moment later she hissed in dismay as a

stray thorn sliced through the material of her blouse, and a bead of blood appeared on her arm.

Jack looked over his shoulder at her. 'Keep up, or we'll lose her!'

Her?

'Wait, Jack, this—'

'She's almost out of sight,' he urged. 'Come *on!*'

Ellie pressed a finger to the stinging spot on her forearm and looked at the now-empty path that lay ahead. Her head swam. 'Piskey-led,' she whispered. 'We're being piskey-led...'

'What?' Jack stopped and turned back. 'Ow!' He snatched his hand back and shook it, and a droplet of crimson flew off.

'Who are we following?' Ellie asked, her voice tight. 'Describe them to me.'

Jack sucked on the side of his hand, frowning. 'A girl, just younger than us. She's...' he flushed, 'she's very pretty.'

'I'm following an older boy.'

'Don't be stupid. She looks nothing like a boy! Anyway, what were you saying about piskies?'

'Sprites. Spirits. Mrs. Rowe says they can lead you into bogs and off cliffs. They're evil, Jack!'

Jack gave a short, disbelieving laugh, but the humour ended with the sound and did not reach his eyes. 'Bloody rubbish, she does talk.' He avoided her eyes, dropping his attention to the ground at his feet, and drew a sharp breath. His bleeding hand fell limp to his side, and Ellie followed his gaze. Along the bottom of the path grew a variety of mushrooms, some with colourful tops, some muddy brown, some wide and yellow, others tall-capped, spotted or grey. They sat, squat or nodding, at varying intervals along the path, bending away into the distance, neatly following the outer edge of the path of thorns.

A fairy ring. And they were already inside it.

Chapter Three

They stood in silence for a moment, and then both cocked their heads to listen; through the rustling of the trees they could hear music, lively and light, but with a driving rhythm that somehow got into the blood. And there was laughter; that particular laughter that comes from crowds of people – as one wave dies away another takes its place, so the sound is constant and varying. The kind that calls to the curiosity but also to the deepest desire in any child. Especially those who'd experienced as little of it as the Trelvelick twins.

In the cooling evening, with the sky once more darkening above them, Ellie and Jack looked first at one another, then at the place on the inner edge where the boy/girl had vanished. The decision made, and each nursing a fresh, stinging scratch, they hurried towards the sound, and found a small gap, just big enough to squeeze through.

Ellie hesitated. 'Should we?'

'It's a *party*, Ells!' He looked at her as if she were lacking basic intelligence, and she listened to the sounds of revelry beyond the hedge.

She smiled. 'Come on, then!'

Jack went first, tugging eagerly at Ellie's sleeve to bring her through behind him. On the other side, they both stopped and stared in awe and delight. Unlike the pathway, it was full dark inside the fairy ring, but lanterns hung from the branches of the trees, and in the wide clearing there were seats carved from felled trees; long benches from trunks, individual chairs from the stumps. Tables, laden with every kind of fruit and bread, groups of people chattering and laughing – each as beautiful as the creature who had led them here and then vanished.

The music came from a far corner. The fairy-folk beckoned them closer, to see instruments carved from wood, and stringed with the long, multi-coloured tail-hair of wild creatures. A drum beat time, and when Ellie looked more closely, she saw that it was made entirely of spider-threads. Densely woven and stretched across the hollowed trunk of a tree stump, it produced a low, resonant sound, and a different note depending on where the drummer beat his carved stick.

'Eat,' said a voice at her side. She looked around to see a young woman, proffering a bowl of crusty bread. 'You have joined us on our great celebration tonight. There will be dancing, and later I will show you to your room.'

'Room?' Ellie frowned, for the first time since she'd stepped off the path. 'Oh, we can't stay all night.'

‘Why not?’ the girl smiled and took a piece of bread from the bowl to press it into Ellie’s hand. ‘Is it so terrible?’

‘No!’ Ellie took a bite of the bread, suddenly aware of the hunger she was so used to suppressing. ‘It’s... it’s glorious,’ she added, mumbling through the warm dough, and brushing crumbs from the front of her blouse. She looked over to where Jack was trying out the spider-thread drum for himself, and the wide, happy smile he gave her melted any doubts.

‘We could stay for one night perhaps, but people are expecting us.’ Even as she spoke, she wondered why she was so eager to return to the miserable existence she had left behind, until she remembered the children whose lives depended on their return. Still, Martin and the others knew all about the governors’ evil plan now, and they had gone ahead instead of becoming foolishly dazzled and bewitched by their glamorous guide. They would tell the constable as soon as they returned to Truro.

‘We’ll set you back on your path tomorrow,’ the girl promised. ‘If that is what you still wish.’

‘The thorns—’

‘Do not fear the thorns. You will have our guidance.’

‘Then I’ll be happy to spend the night, thank you,’ Ellie said, remembering her manners,

The delighted girl spun in a little circle. ‘I am so glad! My name is Mariet. Let me show you everything!’ She put the bowl on the table and grasped Ellie’s hand, and they set off into the crowd. Ellie tagged along in a bemused but happy state of curiosity, greeting everyone with the same pleasure as they were showing her, some of them looking at her with more than a little awe, but Mariet always drew her away before she had the chance to strike up a proper conversation.

Ellie drank some of the sweet, syrupy fruit concoction that stood in jars along the food table, and after two cups, when she became a little woozy, she realised it was fermented, to some degree at least. Relaxed and laughing, she joined in the dancing – with more enthusiasm than skill, but no-one seemed to mind. She lost sight of Jack early on, but now and again she glimpsed him being treated to the same whirlwind of introductions, but by a smartly-dressed youth with white-blond hair; he didn’t appear to be pining for the beauty he’d followed here, any more than she was.

The night was almost over when Ellie’s feet finally began to protest too strongly to ignore. Mariet sighed and looked up at the lightening sky. ‘It’s time for sleep,’ she said. ‘Come, let me show you your room.’

‘Where’s Jack?’ Suddenly unutterable weary, Ellie looked around, but could see only the same groups of colourfully-clothed people as before, none wearing the drab clothes of a workhouse boy. For the first time, she became aware of her own grubby appearance and compared it to that of Mariet’s softly-floating short gown, and the bands of flowers that wrapped her lower legs.

Mariet touched her arm. ‘You will have all this, and more,’ she said. ‘You are special to us, Ellie.’

Ellie’s tired mind struggled to grasp what the girl was saying. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Sleep first. Then tomorrow you must choose your path.’

‘Thorns,’ Ellie mumbled, her eyes burning and sore.

‘Fear no thorns,’ Mariet repeated softly, and took her hand. ‘Come.’

Ellie blinked awake. She lay very still, staring upwards at an unfamiliar ceiling. The peeling grey paint she was used to was gone, replaced with a honey coloured, high arching dome, sections of which were clear and afforded a view of a glorious blue sky. Soft clouds dotted here and there, looking like whisked egg whites and sugar, ready to eat. It was only when she felt the deep, lush mattress beneath her that she remembered where she was.

Abruptly she sat up, staring around the enormous room. The bed was bigger than four of the workhouse ones pushed together, and she was the only one in it. The bedding, crisp and white beneath her, and luxurious and deep red on top, puddled now around her waist, contrasting sharply with her torn and discoloured underclothes. She couldn’t remember getting here, and certainly not undressing, yet here she was.

She pushed the covers aside and swung her legs over the side of the bed. They ached badly, and didn’t seem likely to bear her weight, but after a moment she stood up, holding on to the bedstead until she felt safe to take a step away. Over the back of a carved wooden chair lay a dress that looked newly-laundered, and beneath it, a pair of smart wooden shoes stood next to her own battered leather boots.

She touched a tentative finger to the dress, fingering the folds and frills that adorned it, wondering what it would be like to wear such a fine thing, and if she dared put it on. She looked around for her own work dress, but it must have been taken away by whoever left these here. Well, there was no choice to make now, she couldn’t go outside in her chemise and underskirts.

Once dressed she scarcely recognised herself in the glass, and looked away quickly in case she became used to such glamour. She took a moment to brush out her hair and fasten it with the combs that lay on the dresser, but her thoughts now were on Jack, and how soon they might be set back on their way home. If he wanted to come. The thought stopped her in her tracks on the way to the door. He had looked more than happy last night. He had looked comfortable, safe, and above all, as if he was where he belonged.

Ellie's hand was sweating a little as she turned the gilt door handle, and at first, she thought it had slid on the polished surface. She wiped it on her bodice and tried again, but the handle wouldn't turn. Suddenly frantic, she rattled the door as if that would make any difference, but she knew, deep down, it wouldn't.

'Hie!' she shouted. She put her lips close to the keyhole and tried again, louder. 'HIE! Let me out!'

A moment later the handle jerked under her hand and she stepped back. Mariet pushed the door open and stepped through quickly, turning to lock it again behind her.

'Hush! You'll wake the king!'

Ellie stared at her, robbed of the power of speech. She shook her head to clear it, and stepped up to the door, but Mariet pocketed the key and gestured towards the bed.

'You have to choose now, Ellie. Sit down. Listen to me.'

Ellie sat, partly because her legs were shaking so badly she had little choice. Mariet, the delightful, happy creature of the night before, was no longer smiling. Dressed far more plainly, but still beautiful, her face was grave and her voice solemn. Ellie watched her, her stomach in knots.

'You know what you are,' Mariet said.

Ellie looked at her, puzzled. 'What I am?'

'Your family. You are healers, yes?'

'Oh, I see. I know a little. Does someone need help?'

'We all need your help. But we need neither potions nor salves.'

'Then what—.'

'Wait.' Mariet went to the window and looked out, gathering her words. Then she turned back and took a deep breath. 'Back as far as time can follow, the female Trelvellick twins in each generation have been strong, powerful beings. Workers of magic. What you are pleased to call witches. But your skills are buried deep in here,' she tapped her temple, 'and you must find them, and learn to use them.'

Ellie struggled to find words. Any words. But she could only sit and look at Mariet, who seemed to understand and came to sit next to her. She put a hand on Ellie's and gave it a light squeeze.

'You have become hardened because of what you have endured, but your deepest, purest nature is gentle and sweet. You want only to help, to please...' she looked away again, and her voice faltered. 'But we have many enemies, and we need you to help vanquish them.'

'Vanquish?'

'If you refuse, all our people, all those you met last night, and many thousands more, will perish.'

'And who are these enemies?' Ellie managed, finding the only thread of this madness that floated close enough to grasp.

'The Foresters. Woodland folk.'

'Aren't you the woodland folk?'

'No. We are Moorlanders, kept prisoner by the toadstool ring. All those who dwell beyond, seek our destruction. We cannot return to our home on the moor until those who would wish us dead have themselves been killed.'

Ellie shook her head. Sitting here in this glorious room, with its honeyed walls and its luxuriant furnishings, such talk of death and vanquishing of enemies seemed unreal... But so too did the fact that she was here at all.

'We will teach you how to bring your talents to the fore,' Mariet said. 'And if you agree to use them to help us, we will return you to your world.'

'Help you? You mean destroy others.' Ellie frowned. 'And what if I don't?'

Mariet let go of her hand and rose to her feet again. She wouldn't look at Ellie, whose heart tightened in sudden fear.

'Mariet? What if I don't?'

'Then you and your brother will remain here forever.'

'That's not such a punishment, is it?' Ellie looked around again. 'It's beautiful here.'

Mariet sighed. 'You will not have such comfort as this, were you to become a prisoner. Your brother will work for us until you agree.' She still wouldn't let her eyes meet Ellie's. 'He will work hard.'

'Jack's used to hard work,' Ellie said, her own voice turning cold. 'It's all he's ever known.'

Mariet fumbled in her pocket for the key, and Ellie leaped to her feet and reached to snatch it away, but found her arm frozen in mid-air, unable to move. She broke into a light

sweat and pushed as hard as she could, but it hopeless; the air was solid between her and Mariet, a barrier that felt alien and thick, smooth, and uncomfortably warm.

Mariet stepped away. 'Please, consider what I have asked.' She looked at Ellie properly at last. 'I have some small talent, as you can see, but you... Your ancient family has been known to us since time began. We have real need of you, and would not ask unless we knew it to be our last hope.' She waved a slender hand, and Ellie's arm fell back to her side, tingling and numb from the elbow down.

Ellie massaged it with her left hand, trying to bring the feeling back. 'I can't kill people for you.'

'Listen to me,' Mariet pleaded. 'The Foresters are not what you think, they—'

'No!'

Mariet looked as though she would beg once more, then shrugged and stepped away to put the key in the lock. 'You will be brought before the king when he wakes.'

'The king!' Ellie shook her head in disbelief, remembering Mariet's assertion that she would wake such a creature with her calls for help.

'King Gilan. He will explain things to you properly. I will return soon, with food.'

'I don't want your food.' But at the mere mention of it, the knotting in Ellie's stomach gave way to a hollow gurgling, to which she was all too accustomed.

'I know you don't.' Mariet looked at her with real sadness. 'Nevertheless I will bring it.'

Left alone, Ellie tried to make some sort of sense of what she'd heard. She and Jack had spoken just yesterday, about their ancestors Sarah and Sebastian Trevellick, but it was Sebastian who'd been hanged for being a witch, after murdering his sister. A healer. Like her. Jack had seemed quite sure that the story had been embellished down the years, but what if he was the powerful one? Would *he* do what she'd been asked to do? If so, could she ever look at him again? Another, darker and more horrifying thought struck her: what if Sebastian had found himself in this same situation all those years ago, and had refused, just as she was doing? A choice that had resulted in the death of his sister. What if history remained unsatisfied, and was even now reaching out for another chance?

After a meal that she couldn't bring herself to turn away after all, despite her determination, Ellie was collected by a sober and downcast Mariet, who led her along a rather plain colonnade, to a tall, rounded, deeply-carved door.

‘You needn’t swear fealty or offer him your services,’ Mariet told her, ‘but you must show him respect.’

‘I will show him what I believe he deserves to be shown.’

Mariet didn’t reply. She lifted and dropped the ornate brass knocker, then ushered Ellie through and followed, closing the heavy door behind them.

Ellie had pictured a tall, imposing sort of man, drenched in rich fabrics and seated on a lavishly upholstered throne; an image drawn from paintings and picture books. King Gilan did not sit on any kind of throne. He had a small-ish chair, covered in rough-looking leather and placed by a grate in which flickered a newly-laid fire. There was no gold around him, no crown upon his head, no rings on his fingers, but his clothes caught and held the eye – not the bright, pretty clothes of his people, but a tunic and leggings in garish colours deliberately chosen to clash, and worn with the careless elegance of one who knows he is the centre of attention, and thrives on it.

He was as beautiful as the fairest of them, no more and no less, but when he fixed his pale eyes on Ellie’s, she was disturbed to find it hard to tear her gaze away. ‘You are the witch?’

Ellie sought, and put on her most stubborn voice. ‘No, I’m Eleanor Trevellick. From Porthstennack.’

The King regarded her a moment longer, then shifted his gaze to Mariet. ‘You have brought me one who knows no manners.’

‘My Lord, she is confused and upset. She has only just learned of her powers.’

‘She is rude.’

‘She is very sweet.’

‘Sweet!’ Gilan turned back to Ellie. ‘My servant is much taken with you. Consider yourself fortunate. Others have not been so.’

‘Others?’ Ellie heard the tremble in her voice and tried to quash it.

‘You are not the first. But it’s believed you are, or will be, the strongest. Mariet will guide you as you seek your power.’

‘To do what?’

‘You have not been told?’

‘I’ve been told nothing more than that you wish me to kill innocents.’

‘Innocents.’ Gilan cleared his throat. ‘Tell me, Eleanor Trevellick from Porthstennack, what do you know of the woodland folk?’

‘Nothing. As I knew nothing of you before last night.’

The king rose and pulled his brightly-coloured tunic straight. He was slender, and stood scarcely taller than Ellie herself, but his presence enveloped her and drove out all other thoughts. Her insides tightened as he drew closer, in contradiction to the anger and fear that tangled them. He placed a finger beneath her chin and turned her to face him. She closed her eyes, and the king gave a soft laugh, his breath grazing her cheek.

‘A girl, on the threshold of a woman’s understanding. Within a racing heartbeat of surrender. My dear, you are a fingertip’s grasp away from the key that will unlock all your powers...’

‘Stop it,’ she whispered, but found her treacherous body swaying towards him, and although her eyes were still closed, she felt the movement of his hand brushing the air near her face.

Abruptly the moment shattered. The king stepped away and Ellie opened her eyes again, mortified and searching for her former, confident-sounding demeanour. ‘The woodland folk,’ she reminded him, her voice thin and shaking.

Gilan nodded, all his playful teasing gone. ‘They wish us great harm.’

‘And if we had found them first, what would they have told us of you?’

He smiled again, but in his eyes, she saw a flash of something dark and savage. ‘They would tell you we are the weak ones. The foolish ones. That we don’t deserve our place in the world.’

‘And do you?’

He ignored her and continued in a more conversation tone. ‘We have limited powers, but yours, once you have learned how, will surpass them. You alone will grant us safe passage back to our home.’

‘Why are they keeping you here?’

‘Imagine!’ He whirled about, and Ellie took a step back, startled by the ferocity of his gaze. ‘You. Face to face with an enemy. The enemy has a sword; you have a sword. You are equal, yes?’

She considered. ‘Provided our skills are also equal.’

‘Aha!’ The king pointed at her, then looked at Mariet. ‘You see? She is cleverer than she appears.’ He went to the window and stared into the world beyond. ‘Yes, Eleanor Trelvellick from Porthstennack, that is our problem. The Foresters not only have their own sword, but they also have the skill to take ours. So they are armed, and we are not.’

‘And the sword is... what?’

‘Magic. They are devouring it, and as we grow weaker, they grow stronger.’ His voice hardened. ‘Soon we will have nothing left. And when that happens we will die.’

Ellie didn’t reply for a moment, but she watched him carefully. Mariet was standing by the door, her face pale and silently pleading. Gilan kept his back to them, but Ellie’s eyes were drawn to his hands. The long fingers flicked open and closed, stretching and curling, and she couldn’t banish the memory of that flash in his eyes, and the way he had looked away from her gaze.

‘Have you always been king among your people?’ she asked suddenly. Mariet’s head snapped up, and Gilan turned back, his expression closed.

‘What impudence is this?’

‘It’s just that... I wouldn’t expect a king to turn his back on his audience, particularly one he is keeping against her will. Besides, you seem – almost frightened.’ She ignored the anger that flickered across his face, and went on, trying to sound conciliatory, ‘I just wondered if it’s a role you were born to or one you have found yourself forced to take on. Maybe your high rank has made you a king when your true rulers are elsewhere. At your rightful home, perhaps?’

‘Yes!’ Mariet stepped forward, ignoring Gilan’s scowl. ‘We Moorlanders don’t belong here at all! We were trapped in the ring, and cannot leave.’

‘I *am* the king here,’ Gilan put in tightly. ‘That my sister is queen of the Moorlanders puts my rank above all others.’

‘But you still want to escape?’

‘Whoever would wish to be king among prisoners?’ But Gilan’s taut face said something different, and Ellie’s suspicions grew.

‘What proof have I, that the...the woodland folk, the Foresters, mean you harm?’

‘You heard what Mariet said. The fairy ring!’ Gilan gestured to his window, beyond which lay the realm that had seemed so filled with joy last night. ‘What more do you need?’

‘But your guide brought Jack and me safely through the thorns. You must have some power over it.’

‘It is all we *can* do.’ Gilan’s temper was growing dangerously short. Ellie could tell by the clipped way he spoke, and the way his eyebrows drew down into a deeper scowl every time he was called upon to answer her questions. ‘We might be able to keep the thorns at bay, but can’t escape the ring, not without a true witch’s powers. We have been searching for more years than you could count. Now you are here, but you are woefully unskilled. Mariet will take you back to your room, where you will learn what you must in order to free us.’

‘What about Jack?’

‘When you have completed your task you will both be set free.’

‘Then we will be here forever because I won’t do it.’

Gilan looked at her steadily. ‘Your brother will not thank you.’

‘He wouldn’t want me to kill innocents just to save him from a bit of hard work.’

‘I have told you of these so-called innocents—.’

‘They have not harmed us,’ Ellie insisted. ‘I will happily join Jack in his work, but I will not kill for you.’

The leather chair creaked as Gilan sat down. He rubbed his thumb and forefinger together thoughtfully, eyes narrowed, lips pursed. Eventually, he snapped his fingers.

‘Take her back to her room, Mariet. Teach her what she needs to know.’

‘I want to see Jack,’ Ellie said, jerking her arm away from Mariet’s gentle hand. ‘Where is he?’

‘He’s quite well,’ Mariet assured her. ‘He was tired from dancing, and still sleeps.’

‘Dancing?’ the King sat up again. He looked from Mariet to Ellie and back again, with a tiny smile playing about his mouth, then waved his hand to dismiss them, and would say no more.

Back in her sumptuous room, Ellie refused to listen to anything Mariet said until she had seen her brother. ‘After that, perhaps we can talk.’

‘I will rouse him and bring him to you,’ the girl said, but at the door, she hesitated. ‘I don’t want you to be unhappy, Ellie. Do you believe that?’

‘Strangely, yes, you’ve been nothing but kind to me. But I can’t kill for you.’

Mariet nodded, her eyes bright with tears. ‘I will return soon.’

‘Wait.’

Mariet turned back. ‘Yes?’

‘Would *you* do it, if you could?’

Mariet’s voice was soft and sad. ‘No-one can know what they will do, or the lengths to which they will go, until it is truly time to act. Such power as Gilan needs does not lie within me, and so I will never have to choose.’ She blinked the tears away. ‘My heart is filled with pity for you.’

‘It needn’t be,’ Ellie said stiffly. ‘I’ve made the decision. It wasn’t difficult.’

Mariet looked at her steadily for a moment, then turned away. ‘I will fetch your brother.’

When Jack came into Ellie’s room, she hugged him in relief. Something had been niggling at her, telling her he was in danger. But he was as healthy and strong as he’d always been,

and although he wore his own clothes, they had evidently been washed and mended while he slept.

He looked around the room. 'It's nicer than mine. I've got to share with two others. But I'm used to that.'

'Sit down,' Ellie said. 'I have to tell you what's happening.'

She recounted her meeting in the king's rooms. 'I think I annoyed the mighty Gilan, by not falling at his feet.'

He grinned. 'I can't pretend to be surprised about that. You, fall at someone's feet? Besides, if he's not a proper king, why should you?'

'What do you think I should do? I don't want to make you miserable while I'm sitting here in comfort.'

'Don't worry about me. I'll work just as hard as I have to. But how long before they lose patience with you?'

Ellie glanced around although they seemed to have been left alone, and dropped her voice, just in case. 'I've been thinking. What if I just pretend to want to learn? They can't punish either of us if they think I'm at least trying, can they?'

Jack nodded. 'You can't change your mind too suddenly, though. He won't believe you. Meet him halfway.'

'Halfway?'

'It'd only be natural for you to want to find out if you do possess what he thinks you do. So tell him you'll explore. Then, by the time he realises you're just like everyone else, I'll have learned enough about this place to plan our escape.'

'And in the meantime, what about you?'

He shrugged. 'At least it'll be honest work. It's you I feel sorry for.'

'In my fancy room, with my tasty meals and my new clothes,' Ellie said with a bitter little smile. 'Poor me.'

'I'm glad you'll be comfortable, Ells. You do whatever you have to do.' Jack stood up. 'Now, get that servant girl to take you back to the king, and tell him we've talked. I'll come back and see you when I can.' He put his hands on her shoulders and made her look squarely at him. 'Be careful, though. I don't like the sound of this Gilan one little bit. I'm going to find out what he's up to.'

After he'd left, the room felt empty despite the enormous bed and the pretty furniture. In the workhouse, boys and girls rarely mixed except on outside work, so it wasn't unusual for them to spend a good deal of time apart. But Ellie had always been able to picture what her

brother was doing, and where. Here, all was new, and it was clear that the glamour and lights of last night's Mayday celebrations had merely been a bright shell, wrapped around a grim and frightening existence.

'I have spoken to my brother, and we've agreed.' Ellie faced Gilan, her shoulders straight, her chin up. Showing a defiance she did not feel. 'Neither of us believes I have what you say I have, but... well, I can't help wondering. If we're wrong, and if you can prove to me that your people are in danger from the Foresters, you will have at your disposal everything I have learned.'

Gilan gave her a cold smile. 'So, you will avail yourselves of my hospitality, you will eat our food, live in the rooms we have ourselves had to build, in our position as prisoners of the Foresters. In return, you *might* consider lending some of your strength to our arm when our lives are threatened? How very kind.' He gestured to Mariet. 'Take her back. Do not bring her before me again until she has found what we know her to possess.' His voice dropped into a softly menacing tone. 'Do not believe her when she says she cannot find it.'

The lessons began. Mariet showed Ellie how to sit so quietly, and so calmly that she felt herself drifting away from everything that anchored her in her seat. Her body felt numb, then light, and her thoughts spread out before her like jewels, inviting her to pick them up and examine them. The first time it happened, after three days of training, she came to her senses again smiling and saw the pleasure mirrored on Mariet's face, mingled with a questioning look. Ellie told her what she had seen.

'You are close now,' the girl said, excitement flashing in her eyes. 'One of those will be that which unlocks what lies deep in your mind. That is what you seek.'

Suddenly frightened by a hope that Mariet was right, Ellie resolutely kept her attention away from the sparkling array from that moment on; she focused only on how she and Jack might escape. But, coming back with a jolt from a particularly deep experience, in which thoughts of freedom suddenly seemed a long way away, Ellie was dismayed to find herself frustrated.

Mariet was watching her closely. 'Did you find it?'

‘No.’

‘You look sad about that.’

‘I am.’ It was the truth, as much as she hated to acknowledge it.

‘Do you mean you now wish to succeed at this?’

‘I always wished it.’ But the lie was obvious, and Ellie looked away, embarrassed, from Mariet’s cynical expression. ‘I just didn’t think I really had it,’ she said in a low voice. ‘The power.’

‘You mean hoped you didn’t.’

‘Yes!’ Ellie swung back, her hands clenched. ‘I hoped! Mariet, I *don’t want to kill!*’

‘I know.’

‘Then why are you making me do it?’

‘Because I have made the choice to help my people. As you have made the choice to help yours.’

Ellie shook her head. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘Let us continue with your lesson.’

‘No, tell me what you mean.’

‘You were so very close,’ Mariet said. ‘One more try.’

This time, Ellie determinedly brushed aside the idea of finding something physical to unlock her mind. She didn’t want to come close, to feel that temptation, and then the disappointment that changed everything she thought she knew about herself. Instead, she let her thoughts rush away from her, leaving her mind empty. At once there was a deep clunk, not in her head, but all through her. She was captivated by a sudden widening of perception, like a vast room opening up, filled with every possibility, every combination of events... she had no control yet, but she had the key. No, she *was* the key. Her eyes flew open, and she dragged in a shocked breath.

Mariet’s smile transformed her once more into the glorious creature from the Mayday ball. ‘You have found it!’

Ellie couldn’t answer; her breathing was too shallow and she was dizzy with the sensations that coursed through her, into her fingertips and even into her toes. Her entire being was flooded with it. She was drowning... Panicked, she reached for Mariet’s hand, and the two girls linked their fingers tight enough to hurt, and bring Ellie back into the realm of calm.

After a long silence, during which Ellie's heart slowed to something close to its normal pace, she removed her hand from Mariet's grasp. 'I want to see Jack,' she managed. 'Please...'

This time, when Jack was brought in, his eyes were dark-ringed with exhaustion, and he was paler than she'd ever seen him, paler even than that night when he'd come to find her in the laundry room. A terrifying night that seemed to have happened a hundred years ago. He trembled with fatigue, and his clothes were once more filthy and torn.

Mariet left them alone, and Ellie sat down with a thump on her bedroom chair, her voice barely above a whisper. 'What have they done to you?'

'I've been working as a woodcutter. Bloody hard work it is, too.' He showed her his palms; raw with torn blisters then dropped onto her bed and lay back with a groan of relief. 'If I never see another tree it'll be too soon for me.'

Ellie handed him two snow-white handkerchiefs with which to bind his hands. 'But it's been days... They know I'm trying!'

He gave a soft snort. 'They know you're pretending to.'

'But how...' Ellie stopped, remembering. *I have made the choice to help my people. As you have made the choice to help yours...* 'It's Mariet,' she said, her voice tight. 'She's the only one who *could* know. She must have told Gilan as much. Well, don't worry. I can do it now. You'll be allowed to rest.'

Jack pulled himself upright against the plush headboard, frowning. 'It's true then, you can really do it?'

'I can do... something. I don't know what.'

He took a deep breath, clearly shaken. 'But you won't. I know you won't.' She didn't need to answer. He knew her too well. 'We can't wait any longer.' He rolled off the bed, tightened the makeshift bandages on his hands, and gave her a searching look. 'Hold them at bay a little longer, if you can. I'll come for you tonight.'

'How?'

'Remember that boy who was showing me around the night of the May Ball?'

'The fair-haired one. Yes, I saw you both, but only from a distance.'

'He doesn't trust the king, either. I'm sure I'll be able to get him to help.' He shot her a brief grin, though his expression was still strained. 'Be ready as soon as the sun goes down.'

Chapter Four

Towards the end of a seemingly fruitless afternoon's training, Ellie felt a frighteningly strong stirring deep down. Almost a pain. A swirling, churning sensation she knew had to come out somewhere, or she would be ill. That it would soon find its exit through her fingertips became obvious, so she kept her hands curled into tight fists in the folds of her skirts, and pleaded extreme tiredness. Mariet left her alone, a peculiar look on her face, and Ellie knew she had not concealed this new development as well as she'd hoped.

As the night drew on, a genuine tiredness crept through her, and, accepting that Jack had not been able to slip away unseen after all, she began to prepare herself for sleep; they would have to try again tomorrow night. But could she keep everything suppressed for another day? Even now, when she wasn't trying, she felt a low tingle in her limbs and a building pressure in her chest. Something was struggling to get free, and until she let it, she wouldn't know if she could control it—

'Ellie!'

The door crashed open, and Ellie started in shock. Jack stood there, panting, his eyes wild and his hand outstretched, but even as Ellie moved towards him, his arms were seized by two men who came up behind him on either side.

He struggled, but their grip was firm, and he could only gasp out, 'The king is lying!' As the men dragged him away, he found his voice. 'Gilan is the one keeping everyone prisoner, not the Foresters! He wants to take over everything...'

His voice faded as his captors dragged him around the corner, and Ellie stared after them, numb with shock. A moment later Mariet rounded the same bend, looking behind her in equal dismay, as she watched Jack being pulled along between the two men.

'What's happening? Where are they taking him?'

Ellie's heart pounded against her ribs, and she felt a cold drop of sweat trickle down her neck. 'I don't know... he was shouting against the king.'

Mariet looked stricken. 'Then he... Oh, Ellie, he will be set to dance.'

'Dance?' Ellie was about to ask again, thinking she had misheard, but instead addressed the more urgent matter. 'Take me to Gilan.'

'But—'

'Now!'

Mariet turned away and would not look at her again. She hurried down the hallway to Gilan's room, and with only the briefest knock, stepped aside. The king's narrow face was closed and cold, and he folded his arms and fixed Ellie with a flinty stare.

'You planned to escape tonight. Do not think to lie!' He moved closer to her. This time, there was no sense of that reluctant but heady longing at his nearness, there was only loathing. She took a step away, but he seized her arm and jerked her back. 'Mariet has been a strong advocate for your honesty. She tells me you are too sweet-natured to lie. I ask then, where does all that sweetness lead? To your brother's death?'

'Mariet said he was just dancing,' Ellie managed, fear gnawing now, making her feel sick.

'And so he is.'

'But I don't under—'

'He will dance the path until you do the king's bidding,' Mariet blurted, opening crying now. 'Ellie, I am so sorry.'

'The path?' Ellie frowned. 'Why is that so terrible?'

Gilan barked a laugh. 'It's what the prisoners do. Each evening, those who have displeased me, are set to dance until morning. It's an enchantment they cannot break, not even by that foolish notion of turning out your pockets. Around, and around, and around... they cannot fall, nor can they stop for breath. Many die of exhaustion, or of a burst heart before the sun rises.'

Ellie couldn't move. The feeling of pressure inside her was growing, and her fingers tingled – her arm still bore the deep scratch from the single thorn that had crept into the centre of the path as soon as their guide had vanished. The stinging had been bitter and surprisingly intense, and that was just one scratch. She could only pray that Jack could keep to the centre of the path, away from the vicious brambles that rose so high on both sides. When he became tired, he might stumble... she shuddered and resolved to go to him the moment she had done what she came here to do.

'Please, for Jack, and for our people, do as the king asks...' Mariet caught at her wrist, but Ellie snatched it away.

'And what does the *king* ask?'

'Fire,' Gilan said. 'Simply that. The forest must be consumed, and all who live within it. It is all that will save us.'

'You're lying!' With a flash of insight, she added, 'It's your prisoners who keep the fairy ring open, isn't it? And your own people trapped within it!'

Gilan went white, and Mariet looked as though someone had slapped her. Her eyes wide, she stared at the man she had served, and Ellie knew then that she had done so in complete faith that he was trying to protect them. She felt desperately sorry for the girl, but not as sorry as she felt for Jack and the other dancers.

‘Do you deny it?’ she said to Gilan.

‘Of course I deny it! Now make your choice, girl! What would your brother wish you to do?’

In the moment’s tense silence that followed, everything was decided: Ellie’s future, and Jack’s; the fate of countless unknown and as-yet unborn children; of Mariet and her people; even of Cornwall itself. Jack’s dismay at the knowledge of what she could do, his calm acceptance that she would never cause harm to so many, no matter what the cost to either of them... yes. She knew exactly what Jack would wish from her.

Her left arm came up and stretched towards Gilan, and she opened her hand, her palm facing him. Whatever was struggling to be free of the prison of her body rushed up through her, and along the raised limb, exploding in a rush, and enveloping the king in a cloud of furiously-spinning light. The relief was indescribable; Ellie was astonished to find herself laughing through the tears that swam in her eyes. She heard words spilling from her lips that she had not consciously formed, and had no idea from where they came.

‘False King! You have no dominion over the moor, nor over the forest. Neither shall you have it, as long as you shall live!’ The light around Gilan brightened until it was hard to look on, and began to pulse.

Gilan’s eyes flew wide, and his mouth opened. Unable to move, he could only gasp, ‘By the Lightning and the Blade, I *curse* you, child!’

Ellie pushed harder, feeling the heat building in the air around her. ‘Release your people and you will be freed. Refuse, and you will have all the fire you deserve.’

‘Very well!’ Gilan cried. ‘I will release them!’

Ellie’s arm dropped, and the heat wall around Gilan gave one last shimmer and fell into hissing sparks at his feet. At once he stepped forward to grasp Ellie’s arm, but froze halfway, and Ellie recognised the hold that Mariet had put on her that first morning, but Gilan was a far tougher subject than the scared and confused girl that Ellie had been, and Mariet had to concentrate hard.

‘Free us,’ she said through gritted teeth. ‘Break the ring.’

Gilan ignored her and spoke to Ellie. His voice was low, but his words chilled her blood.

‘Nevermore shall you find peace. Never shall your hunger cease,

Until a child's life you steal, and make his flesh your *only* meal.'

Ellie flung him all the contempt she could muster in a look. 'Your curse means nothing,' she said coldly. 'I will never take a child's life. I'd die first.' Finding Jack was what mattered now, not the empty words of a vanquished tyrant, and she turned to Mariet. 'How do I break the ring?'

'If you're right, then the dancers must be keeping it open...' Mariet raised her hands to her face, her eyes wide in horrified realisation.

Ellie frowned. 'What is it?'

Before Mariet could reply, Gilan spoke again. 'So, you know my name. Is it really *easier to trust* me now?'

Ellie turned back to him, and drew a shocked breath to see, just for the briefest moment, the boy who had led them down the path. Then he was Gilan again, grinning at her in savage amusement.

'Who is keeping those thorns at bay, do you think, since I am in here?'

Ellie could scarcely breathe. She groped blindly at the door and pulled it open, leaving Mariet with the task of keeping Gilan locked in his motionless fury. On trembling legs, she ran up out into the clean, sweet, night air beyond the colonnade.

All around her, the fairies she'd seen that first night were now dressed in clothing every bit as drab as that which she was used to in the Union Workhouse. Their faces miserable and pale in the moonlight, they cast fearful looks between her and the gap in the trees, on the other side of which lay the terrifying path of thorns. Ellie pushed through them, the blood hammering hot through her veins, and slipped through the opening. Immediately she knew she was too late. The thorns had encroached so far onto the path that the footway was barely visible, and at intervals along the tangled mess were scraps of cloth, torn from the prisoners as they danced.

'Jack!' Ellie screamed, so loud it was impossible that he hadn't heard her. But there was no answering shout. She took a step forward and cried out as a spiny branch tore the skin from the back of her hand in half a dozen places. Once again she felt the low, pulsing power deep inside her, and she raised her bleeding hand to the path ahead.

Heat leaped from her, so sudden and strong it sent her stumbling backward. She held her breath, and through the shimmering haze ahead of her she saw the thorns blacken and die, curling in on themselves, and flames danced along their branches and set others alight as they went. Somewhere deep in her consciousness, she was aware that the flames were not

confining themselves to the path alone, and she heard the spitting of living wood and the irregular exploding sounds of knots catching fire.

With her hand still raised, Ellie started forward on the rapidly-clearing path. The mushrooms gave off a rank, pungent smell as they burned, and the heat did not lessen in its ferocity as Ellie walked. She kept calling, as she went, listening through the rising roar of the fire for a reply, but none came. Then she rounded the first sweeping bend, and her heart staggered in her chest. A short distance ahead, bathed in contrasting light from the moon and fire, lay a blood-drenched figure, wrapped in a cloak of spines and brambles.

Ellie's shaking hand dropped, and the fire ahead of her spat a few sparks and died. She drew closer, terrified, but unable to look away, and crouched for a closer look; it was the fair-haired boy. The one friend Jack had made – and the price for that friendship was a shocking, brutal death. She rose, not knowing how her legs still had the strength to support her, and once more sent flames ahead of her, clearing the way, until she found him.

His height, and the weight of the rain on the thorn branches had kept most of his face unmarked, but from the jaw down his flesh was shredded. His clothing was shiny with blood, and he lay as still as death. Ellie fell to her knees on the blackened ground beside him and began to unwrap the brambles that were wound around his form, torn free of their roots by the unstoppable force that had kept him moving.

Jack's neck was scored deeply, and the blood soaked the grubby collar of his shirt. His shirt glistened in the moonlight, and his trousers lay against his torn legs in ragged lengths of crimson. She could hardly see for the tears that spilled onto him, and the only sounds she could hear were the crackle of living flame behind her and her own sobbing breath. She could only pray his heart had given out before he had been able to bleed to death.

The thorns dug into Ellie's hands, but she paid them no heed. Not anymore. Her mind kept giving her the image of this smiling boy she loved so deeply, full of hope, strong, and willing to suffer to help them escape... sent into the darkness to die at the whim of the false king Gilan.

The anger helped, for now. It dropped a dark, heavy blanket over the grief, and as Ellie tugged and tore at the thorns around her brother's body, her fury grew. The king would not live long enough to gloat over what he had done...

'Ellie!' The voice cut through the darkness and the hissing fire all around them. Mariet ran to where she knelt, and her face was etched in grief as she looked at the still form of Jack.

'Does he live?'

'How could he?' Ellie whispered. 'Look at him.'

Mariet laid her hand over Jack's heart. 'There is life in him yet,' she murmured. 'But we must be quick.'

Ellie's breath stuck, as sudden hope caught hold. 'You can save him?'

'No, but you can.'

'How? I can destroy, but I don't know how to... who's that?' She looked back down the path as she heard cursing and the sounds of stumbling among the burned thorns. 'Gilan?'

'I could not hold him,' Mariet confessed. 'Be quick, or your brother will be forever lost!'

Ellie closed her eyes and laid a hand on Jack's forehead. She tried to once again find that wide space, that peace, where her knowledge and power lived but was distracted by the crashing footsteps coming rapidly closer.

'Hurry...' Mariet pleaded.

But the more Ellie concentrated, the harder it became, and the closer came the enraged Gilan. 'I can't...' Something stirred in her fingertips, and she gasped and pressed them against Jack's brow. She had no idea what she was sending into him, but there was no time to worry. Beneath her hand she felt a movement, and her heart leapt.

'Gilan comes close,' Mariet whispered, her urgency pulling Ellie back into the burned path again.

'Stop him then,' Ellie snapped. She heard Mariet rise to her feet, but did not tear her eyes away from her stricken brother. 'Jack, can you hear me?'

'Treachery!' Gilan thundered, as he rounded the bend and saw them, and Ellie knew without a doubt that if she looked up she would kill him. But if she let go of Jack now, he would die. There was no choice to be made, but her rage was making it difficult to hold on to the healing power she was trying to pass through her brother's skin. Jack flinched under the onslaught, and Ellie fought to control her emotions.

'*Stop* him!'

'I cannot!'

A moment later a hard, bony hand clutched at Ellie's shoulder and dragged her backward. She twisted against the painful grip, but the fingers only sank deeper into her flesh, making her cry out. From the corner of her eye she saw Mariet kneeling at Jack's side, and now she was able to concentrate all her power on Gilan. She brought her hand up and around, but before she could loose the pulsing heat that surged through her arm, and direct it at Gilan, he knocked her to the ground. The fire went wild, over Gilan's head, and into the trees beyond.

She fell, dizzy and disorientated, her temple throbbed, and the last flicker of power faded from her fingers. She struggled to rise, but Gilan knelt beside her and seized a handful of her hair, twisting her face away.

He put his mouth to her ear, and she felt his damp breath and warm spittle on her skin, as he whispered, ‘Your oh-so-*sweet* nature will be your curse, Eleanor Trevellick of Porthstennack.’ He thrust her away from him, and she felt strands of her hair pull loose, still wrapped around his fingers. A moment later he had gone, and Mariet was weeping.

Ellie went cold all over. She crawled through the mud to where Jack lay still once more, the faint hope of life now gone. She had been so close. *Oh, Jack... What have I done?*

She knelt there for what seemed an eternity. The night had melted away, and the sky was painted with orange streaks when she finally tried to stand. Her muscles were stiff and sore, her heart heavy, and all around her she saw disbelieving fairy folk stepping out of the ring that had held them for so long. As soon as their feet touched the forest path on the other side, the figures faded away and were gone.

‘They are leaving the forest and returning to their home on the moor at Lynher Mill.’

Ellie turned to see Mariet at her side. The girl had left her side as the sky had begun to grow pale with the approaching dawn, and Ellie hadn’t expected to see her again. ‘Why haven’t you gone too?’ Her voice was cracked and weary, and she didn’t really care about the answer, but she felt she ought to ask anyway.

‘I wanted to give you this.’ She handed Ellie a pouch. ‘I stole it from Gilan’s room.’

‘What is it?’ Ellie hefted the pouch and felt the slide and rattle of coins. ‘I don’t want it.’ She tried to give it back to Mariet, but the girl closed Ellie’s own fingers over it.

‘You don’t want it, but you do need it.’

‘What I need is food, it’s going to be a long journey home.’

‘I brought you that, too.’ Mariet gave her a package. She looked grave. ‘I have had word that your friends never reached the edge of the forest either. They were trapped in another circle of Gilan’s making and perished by eating the mushrooms. I believe Gilan led them to their fate, too, and encouraged them in their search for food. I am sorry to bring you such news.’

Ellie examined her feelings, waiting for the shock and sadness to sink in, but she was numbed by the loss of Jack and had nothing to spare for the others. Not yet. Maybe never.

‘Ellie, listen,’ Mariet went on. ‘You *must* find your way back, or many more will die at Gilan’s hands. He has your Governor Rowe under his control – he knew it was either you or

the girl Sally, and that's why you were both among the ones he sent out to gather moss this time.'

Ellie looked at her, too numbed to take it all in. 'How long have you known all this?'

'Only tonight, you have my word.'

'You told him I was only pretending to learn. You made him punish Jack.'

'You must understand, I thought I was doing what was best for us. I truly believed it.'

'Another of those choices, I suppose,' Ellie said flatly. 'Jack's liberty, for that of your people.'

Mariet looked away. 'You will have to make such a choice one day. It will grieve you to do it, but you will do it nevertheless. What you have done to save us tonight will not deter Gilan from his determination to become ruler over all the worlds. He will simply find another like you.'

'I'll do what I can, but I have to reach home to do it.'

'The trees still stand, but your fire has burned a good many of them.'

Ellie wondered if she'd imagined the reproach in her voice, and bit back a vicious reply. But all Jack's careful marks would have gone, and it would take an unthinkable amount of time, and luck, to find them again; Ellie knew then that she had probably sealed her own fate as certainly as she had Jack's. The food parcel might turn out to be her only hope to get back to the workhouse, to warn them of what lay out here.

'Can you guide me to the right path?'

Mariet raised her hands helplessly. 'I am not of the forest. I do not know the way.'

'I can follow you back to your moorland home, surely?'

'No.' Mariet looked at her sadly. 'I wish you could, but we are elementals. You must take the mortals' path.'

Ellie looked down at her brother, her heart aching. 'I don't want to leave him,' she whispered. Her eyes burned from the hours of crying over his motionless form, and the daylight only showed her more clearly how he had suffered.

'You must.' Mariet took her elbow and turned her to face the forest path beyond the burned and blackened thorns. 'But he will be with you always. You gave him that when you tried to save him.'

'What do you mean?'

Instead of answering, Mariet reached up and kissed her cheek, and as Ellie stared after her, she took a few light steps to the edge of the path and vanished.

So Ellie returned to her own world alone. Polgarris Wood stank of damp and burning, the air was sour to taste, and evening was creeping on again before her hunger grew intense enough to overcome the stench. She sat down on a fallen tree trunk and opened the parcel Mariet had given her, certain that her grief, and the sick feeling in the pit of her stomach, would destroy any appetite. But as soon as she saw the thickly-cut bread, and rich, yellow cheese, her mouth began to water. The gurgling in her stomach grew louder, and with a tiny moan of relief she raised the sandwich to her mouth and took a bite.

Immediately she leaned over and spat, staring in horror at what fell to the forest floor. It was nothing more than a chunk of half-solid grey dust, and, as she watched, it crumbled into ashes. She spat again, tasting more ash in her mouth. She looked at the remainder of the sandwich in her hand, and it remained fresh and tasty-looking for a moment longer, before turning grey. The pressure of her fingers burst it into clouds of ash and left her empty-handed.

Never shall your hunger cease...

‘No!’ Rage drove her to her feet, and she spun in a circle, peering into the trees as if she might see Gilan there, laughing. ‘I will not fall before your stupid curse!’

She started down one of the paths, but it petered out after a few minutes, and she turned to make her way back to the main path she had been following. But she couldn’t see it. She looked up through the branches, taking comfort from the blue sky above... she would find her way out and walk beneath those white clouds again. She had to.

She slept that night in the shelter of a rotten tree, and woke to the squirming of woodlice, what her older brother Joe had always called ‘gramfers’ on her skin. She watched them for a moment, blinking and trying to order her thoughts, and then picked a gramfer off the back of her hand. It tasted nutty at first, but soon dissolved into dust, and she barely had enough saliva to expel it from her mouth. She knuckled a frustrated tear away and set to walking, with renewed determination to pick up Jack’s tree markings.

But as the day drew on, she began to feel the bite of real fear. She might be blundering around in circles for all she knew. Twice she found plants she knew she could eat, but both turned to dust in her mouth and Gilan’s curse rang discordant and harsh in her ears. Hunger was gnawing hard and relentlessly, and that was something she thought she’d understood until now. Her stomach griped and cramped, and the fear and pain stole her thoughts from where she was going, so that she constantly took short, narrow paths that went nowhere.

The sky began to darken, and a cold rain started to drip down on her from the leaves above. She turned her face to the sky and opened her mouth to catch the drops; it might at least give her a little strength, but when it landed on her tongue it burned, and she used her

dirty sleeve to wipe it away, leaving her mouth even dryer than before. Weak beyond endurance, she, at last, came to a small clearing, where she sat down and closed her eyes. Enough! She was a *witch!* She had power...

Her blindly groping hand fell upon a broken branch, and she held it tightly between both hands, and concentrated all her thoughts into it. 'Bread,' she murmured. 'Please, just... bread.'

The branch thickened, and the texture of the wood changed against her skin, became smoother. A flicker of hope seized her, and she opened her eyes and looked down. Not bread, but a candy cane. She gave a short, disbelieving laugh. Well, it was food.

She put out her tongue and licked. For a heart-stopping moment she tasted sweetness, and believed it would be alright after all, but her spirits sank once more as she saw that where her tongue touched it left a grey smear which crumbled away even as she watched.

Ellie laid the candy cane down, and picked up a stone. Again she concentrated, but all she could produce were sweet, sticky candies, and gnarled lumpy gingerbread. She was soon surrounded by food she could not eat; Gilan's curse mocked her with every morsel. Finally, exhausted, she sat with her back to a tree and rested her arms on her knees, her head lowered.

Her mind took her down a dark and dangerous path – surely it would be preferable to end her own life now, rather than to starve slowly, here in the forest? Then she thought of the children in the workhouse. All she could do to make amends for Jack and the others was to make sure the authorities knew what the workhouse governor was doing and to thwart any further plans of Gilan's. But she was utterly lost, and even if she knew the way, she hadn't the strength.

Until a child's life, you steal...

Ellie jerked upright, her heart pounding. It had sounded as though Gilan was sitting right beside her, so clear were the words. But she was alone.

...and make his flesh your only meal...

No! Nothing could justify such a thing. To kill a child? After all the suffering she had seen... it was the most evil and unforgiveable thing anyone could do. The hunger twisted in her belly, and she gasped. Hot tears squirted from her eyes, falling on the folds of her skirts between her raised knees. She thought about her conversation with Mariet, and how the girl had told her she would only know what choices she would make when the necessity arose. And now the choice lay before her: the life of one child, to give her the strength to return and save the lives of hundreds.

She couldn't.

She must.

She *wouldn't*.

All night Ellie lay doubled up in pain as her hunger grew, and her strength ebbed away. In the small hours she thought she felt a hand slip into hers, and squeeze it, and a soft voice whispered, 'We'll be alright...'

She jerked awake into darkness, and strained through the shadows but could only see the tall, rugged shapes of the trees. 'Jack!'

There was no answer, but her heart gave a painful thump as she felt his hand withdrawing gently, leaving her palm warm and tingling. *You do what you whatever you have to do...*

Ellie didn't know if he had truly spoken, or if she was just remembering his words when he'd spoken them in the warmth and comfort of her room within the ring. But Mariet had been right. He was here. With her, always.

By the first light of the new day, she knew what she had to do. She spent an exhausting morning gathering what she needed from the edges of the clearing, and sitting down to rest whenever she became dizzy; she grew more frightened as she realised the time between dizzy spells had shortened, and the time it took her to recover was much longer.

When the sun was overhead and shining down through the trees she took up a flat stone and closed her eyes. The world faded around her, and the temptation was strong to simply fade with it, but life would not let her go. Fate had its plan for her, and she must return to carry it out. Whatever the cost.

The power inside her barely stirred her blood now, but it was enough for this task; the stone became a flat slab of icing that made her mouth water just to look at it... but she put it aside. As each piece of gathered treasure changed in her grasp she laid the inevitably sugary results out on the forest floor: candy canes and soft sponge cake; coloured sugar spun into delicate and beautiful shapes; clear sugar she could look through; and hard, fruity biscuit that bore her weight as easily as any bed. Such sweetness... but she could not eat any of it.

By mid-afternoon, she felt she'd had enough, and before the sun went down on another day in Polgarris Wood, Ellie Trellick picked up the first and biggest piece of gingerbread, fashioned from the peeled bark of an oak, and began to build.

The children would be here soon.

The End.

© Terri Nixon. This edition 2017.