

# Out of the Woods

## CHAPTER ONE

COME ALONG CHILDREN, down you go, the work must be done so to help you all grow. Now pick up your axes, your shovels, and shoes, the rubies are glinting, the sapphires too.

*The words whispered through the old timbers of the house, setting the wood to creaking. There was no one to hear the rhyme, no one to witness the shadow that passed from beyond the window pane and into the small shack, crept into the cupboards and beneath the table, sought out every nook and cranny where to hide a little something or someone. It walked up walls and explored the rafters, ghosting over the high beams with their ropes wrapped round, a bird's nest clinging tenaciously to the bend where roof met bedroom.*

*Nothing there, not a sound, not even the gentle brush of wind from an open window to air out the damp scent of dug earth lingering within the space. Not that a window would have helped to cover the putrid decay hidden beneath the bed.*

*The shadow flipped the white sheet atop the mattress, touched the metal grate revealed, the still fingers clinging to it, gaunt eyes staring sightlessly out.*

*Too late.*

*Too late for this child. But there was only the one. There was meant to be more. The others would return soon enough.*



THERE WAS AN old woman, once upon a time, who lived in a house built into the side of a mountain. It was by no means a shoe, but its shape and its position perhaps lent itself to being

shoe-like, or at least like the toe of a great boot. The roof was not angled like the steep planes of human settlements, nor was it the leaf covered branches of those people of the woods. It was a rather poor roof, all things considered. Thatch covered it for many years before straw was replaced with dark shoal, or at least overlaid with the tiles. It leaked in many places, was rotted in many more, and was never replaced but the once that I know of.

Birds had a habit of making their home deep within the straw, chirping away at all hours, shitting on the table and the beds in the room below. Though not actually amusing, we used to whisper that the walls were painted white, until she made us clean them and the linens and the furniture covered in their crap. Then we cursed the birds as surely as she cursed us.

But the roof sloped gently, more a rounded mound than aught else and so whispers said that she lived in a shoe and we who lived with her had no voice on the matter, dared not say anything regardless.

It was a very old house. The walls were warped from many years standing in the mountain's shadow. Sunlight rarely filtered through the windows, blocked as they were by the busted shutters and the grime from years of going unwashed, the least of Mother's worries. No, the house stood, though barely, and we stood within it, barely too, for many times many years, nearly unmemorable years, so long they passed in the same drudgery. Not always the same, I suppose. There were always new faces joining us, old faces leaving too soon. But we knew no other way, and knew better than to question her.

Mother found me when I was a small child. I don't remember it, precisely, but I remember the way she would braid my hair at night and sing me lullabies to help me sleep in those first few years. I remember the way her callused hands would pet my chin and tell me to smile, that she would tap my nose and pinch my cheeks. She was kind to me, when I was small.

And then I grew up, as all children must, and kindness was a different thing then.

She took me upon her lap, sitting on the bed we shared in her small room off the general quarters where my brothers and sisters slept. Her fingers brushed back the strands of hair from my forehead. "You have grown big and strong, my girl." She traced a line with her finger from my brow to my nose to my chin, cupped my ear in her hand. "So big and so beautiful and it's time for you to work with your brothers and sisters. Would you like that? To work with them, help them as they have helped you all these years?"

Oh yes. Yes, I had wanted to work with them for so long. For so long they'd opened the door and emerged from the dark at the end of the night and looked at me with scorn and pity because I was not one of them and I was unwanted in that division. To be a sister, to be their friend and their playmate—they did not speak with me when they returned at night. They ate their supper and went to bed and I sat on a lone stool in the kitchen and watched unwilling to break the silence they wrapped around them in their exhaustion and uninvited to sit at the table as I had not earned a place there beside them.

I understood this. I was a child, yes, but I understood this. Perhaps it was a product of my homeland, a land I didn't remember with blood kin I didn't know. But I knew my place was undetermined and I knew, when she offered me the chance to journey with them, I would not say no, I would not hesitate to accept the offer.

"Very well, my darling girl. I shall make space for you with your siblings, you shall be one of them from now on. But a final plait, for you to remember me by. Elder Sister will take care of this tomorrow until you can braid your hair on your own. Middle Sister will share her tunics until you've earned one for yourself."

A gray tunic, so dark as to be black, that I longed for with most of my being. I loved my green dress, true enough. I had loved the blue that came before it that I grew out of this past summer. I loved the red which was the first dress Mother had ever given me to wear. But I thought I would more than love the tunic for it would be mine alone, something earned and something similar, something to make me one with my siblings and not stand apart. Still, I feared Middle Sister's response at having to give up what was her own. Surely, she would resent me for the taking of her belongings when I had not earned them?

Mother settled my feet on the floor beside her bed, stood slowly and took my hand, unaware of my doubts.

I bit my lip but followed easily enough behind her, my fingers clenching at hers as she stood before the small door that sheltered my siblings sleep from my own. Her hand rose and knocked briskly at the heavy wood. She undid the bolt that kept my siblings safe from any intruder who might chance upon our hut in the dead of night. There was silence within the darkened chamber beyond my sight, only the barest outline of standing forms raised to meet us at the door. "You'll make space. Little Sister will be joining you as of tomorrow. I expect you to treat her as one of you."

That was it. No other words were spoken, no candles lit. I was pushed gently into the room and the door was shut behind me. The lock snicked into place and I stood in the darkness with their shadows leaning over me and was afraid. I was not afraid of the dark, had never been so before, and yet standing before them all, I was afraid and did not know what to do with that fear.

"You'll sleep with me."

I jerked at the sound of the voice, the deep baritone that I had not heard before. I had not heard any of my siblings' voices, usually never raised above a whisper, so loud in the silence around us. Was it Eldest Brother? Or the middle ones? Youngest surely couldn't have a voice so deep. They were not that much older than myself, were they? I thought I remembered having Youngest sleeping beside me when I was first brought to Mother's home. Didn't he share our small bed for a time before joining my siblings?

"What's your name, girl?"

He was angry now. I could hear it in his words, the harsh snarl at the moniker I had always loved from Mother's lips.

I trembled before his looming presence, the other shadows having melted back to heavy bunks buried against the wall. A bird cooed overhead. The wet splat of scat made another voice hiss and curse the Darkness.

The exhale was long and loud, exasperated. The shadow moved closer to me, shrank so that I did not have to stare up into his eyes, or what might have been his eyes, unseen to me. "Don't you know your own name, girl? Surely you have one."

"Am I not Youngest Sister?"