

Rose

Once upon a time there lived a beautiful princess whose name was Rose. She was good and kind and as hardworking as the day is long.

In the mornings when the dew still gem sparkled the grass, Rose would rise and pull on her day clothes, and over these, the thick, brown gardening apron with deep pockets for all her tools. She always checked that her clippers, sharp knife, trowel and twine were in the right place. Without a bite to eat she would be outside before even the castle gardeners were around. This way she could be alone to enjoy the sights, sounds and smells of the garden as it woke for the day.

Rose liked to take some bird seed from her pockets to spread on the ground for some of the early morning visitors to the garden. The blackbirds always made her laugh when they put their heads down and charged bossily into the thick of where other birds were peacefully pecking away. Rose was well named because roses were her favourite flowers. She loved them particularly because of their wonderful fragrance. This was strongest as the moisture burned off the petals at this time of day and she inhaled their scent deeply. It seemed to nourish her soul as she moved from flower to flower sampling the various sweet, spicy aromatic combinations, heady and delicious.

At last, fulfilled, and feeling a different sort of hunger, she would head back to the castle for her breakfast. She might pass Ferdie the gardener. He was an old friend of Rose and provider of gardening knowledge. What Ferdie didn't know about plants wasn't worth knowing her mother always said. Rose remembers him teaching her the names of plants when she was tiny. Whilst you certainly couldn't call him handsome with his squat frame, clumsy features and bumpy skin, he was a good person to have on your side. Rose felt that she could trust him with anything. If she saw him, she would wave a cheery hello as she galloped like a colt up the lawn towards the castle, saving any gardening chat for later.

This particular area of the grounds is where Rose likes to spend most of her time. It is the walled garden that was designed to provide the castle with produce for the table. It is Rose's special place and she is given the freedom to garden parts of it herself. Something about the secluded, protected nature of it appeals to her. Some parts she leaves wild to grow untended, just going in to remove the more invasive incomers. 'Weed editing' she calls it, painting pictures with her plants. She has an uncommon talent for growing things and Ferdie jokes that she merely has to look at a seed to make it sprout; to stroke a stem to make it flower. Rose remembers when her Ma and Pa would both spend days with her in the gardens, but since her father died, her mother does not wish to come any more. It was as if the three of them were a single entity, bound not only by love, but also by their needs and identities so that Rose never doubted where she belonged and how much she was understood and valued. Now Rose and Ma do not know how to be together without him. Rose tries, but her mother seems not to see her.

In the morning where this story begins, Rose sees Ferdie as she is heading for breakfast.

'Good day Princess Rose', he says as he walks past, 'your stepfather the King is abroad this morning'. Mouthing her thanks to Ferdie, Rose immediately slows down, adopting a more sedate pace as she continues on. At the entrance to the castle she stops. She wouldn't normally bother, but today she removes her apron and hides it behind a chair. She smooths her hair into a semblance of tidiness as she wonders why her stepfather is up so early as he is not an early riser as a rule. Usually Rose is alone for breakfast and she often fills her pockets with rolls and fruit to eat in the garden; anything that will reduce the time she spends in this big, cold, echoing space with no one to talk to. Today she is anxious to get back to the garden that is her joy. That and the lake beyond: the beautiful green, cool lake surrounded by trees and made for trout and swimming in the hot weather. There is so much to do, so many changes to make to grow more and more beautiful and productive plants.

She is surprised to see both her parents sitting there clearly waiting for her. The King looks cross. He is probably tired, she thinks. He stays up late at night playing cards for money and drinking spirits. She catches a whiff of stale smoke and brandy as she walks past his chair to take her own next to her mother. Her mother looks upset; her eyes are red rimmed and moist.

'Good morning Your Majesty' Rose says to the King, 'Good morning Queenie'

The Queen smiles weakly at Rose. Everyone calls the Queen 'Queenie': her contemporaries, her servants, her family. She won't have it any other way. The King doesn't like it but on this one point she is adamant. In law, the Queen has the power of rule; she is the reigning Monarch, that is. However, he is a dominant man and she dislikes the administrative side of her job so he has gained a great deal of power and influence. When Rose's father died two years ago, the Queen lost something, a part of herself that she has not recovered. She knows that she leaves more of her role than she should to this new husband but can't find the energy to rule the land in the way that she knows is right. She did not wish to remarry but as there is still no male heir, she was obliged to show willing.

'You're late', complains the King. He holds his head. 'For God's sake someone get me a coffee. What's the use of these bloody servants who just hang around like useless farts'.

A footman jumps and fetches a pot of coffee and pours the King and Queen a cup each. Queenie smiles her thanks at him. Rose takes an apple from a bowl and places it on her plate. She wishes to be elsewhere; to be in the garden where she can cut the apple with her gardening knife and eat slices off the blade as she has seen the castle gardeners do when eating their bread and cheese. Ferdie gave her this knife. He carved the image of a rose into the handle, and showed her how to keep it clean and sharp. The apple would taste delightfully of iron and the steel blade would feel excitingly dangerous, cold on her lips; she could imagine she was a pirate carrying a knife in his mouth. She would need to clean the blade afterwards to keep

it in good condition but it would in any case leave dark purple smears on the fruit. Instead of eating the green, polished apple, she toys with it, rolling it back and forth with her fingertips where it reflects in shades of arsenic and silver off her shiny plate. Lost in her thoughts, Rose jumps when she sees her stepfather frowning at her.

'Now Rose, I have things to tell you.' He stops, stares, 'Is that a twig on your shoulder child? Goddammit to hell and back, how do you get flaming foliage on you at this time of day?'. Rose blushes, silently removes the twig and places it next to her plate. The footman whisks it away into a tiny dustpan with a brush and a sympathetic look. 'Now, where was I? There will be changes my girl, and none of them too soon it is clear. You are to be married. In three months' time you will choose a husband from a selection I will make. There will be several, at least three, so you have the choice that your mother insists on. In that time you will learn to behave like a proper wife, no more gadding about from now on, understand. I have engaged the staff to make sure of this. It's time to grow up, little girl'. He pauses. 'Right, that's it.' Then he lurches a little unsteadily from the room, slops coffee from the cup in his hand, bounces off the door frame and heads in the general direction of his study where he plans to have a little nap.

Rose sits, head in hands. Queenie sits, head in hands. There is a long, hollow pause. Both have faces wet with tears. Eventually, Rose lifts her head.

'Mama, please listen to me. I am not yet sixteen. I am too young to be wed. I do not wish to be wed. Not now at least. I will do as you wish: look, sound like a lady, I will sew, play delightful music and learn to make entertaining conversation. But please, give me longer and let me choose my own partner when I am ready.' Queenie raises her own tear stained face. For a fleeting moment through her blurred eyes Rose appears as the oldest of four girls of different ages, three much younger than Rose and different in appearance. She wipes her eyes and the vision disappears.

'My dear Rose, I have done what I can for you, but he will have it so. I'm afraid he can be very insistent. It seems we have a need for funds as he has lost most of our wealth to his gambling friends.' For the first time Rose notices some dark purple marks on Queenie's forearms and she falls silent, thinking back to a time when the King held her own arms hard in the exact same place when trying to force a Christmas kiss on her. 'And Rose, you must admit you have been allowed to ramble too far. We need to prune you back, smooth off those thorns and give you a nice, firm support.' Not wishing to bring further pain to Queenie, Rose nods sadly.

Later that morning Rose meets those who will become her goalers and torturers for the next few months. First of all she meets Miss Hatchet who has bones like knife edges and features like slits in a turnip. This rather unappealing person is to be her personal maid. Her job is to make sure Rose has the proper appearance and it seems there will be a great deal of grooming and dressing and undressing in a never ending stream of garments. Then there is her governess, Mademoiselle Point, who will teach her literature and history. Rose is dreading these classes as she is a poor scholar. Emmeline Point is tall and beautiful but aloof and distant. She looks at a

place above Rose's head when she addresses her. A music master will call twice a week to teach Rose the latest songs and Rose will spend several hours a week with Queenie who will sit with Rose while they work on their embroidery and make small talk. This last, Rose does not mind as she will at least get to see her mother. Singing and dancing can be fun too, she thinks a little desperately, although she tends to prefer the foot-tapping rhythms of country folk's fiddle tunes to the tinny court instruments.

She is going to be very busy, she realises, with little opportunity to escape to her garden. At the thought of this, she feels her ribs become tight in her chest so that she can't breathe properly. Poor Rose, her petals are withering and fading. Her head droops as hands fall limp and curled into her lap like crumpled leaves. It feels to her as though autumn has arrived although it is only June.

Until it is time for her wedding, Rose is sent to live high up in one of the Castle towers. This one faces north and a single slit window overlooks the road and the village beyond. It is bare, cold, musty and damp. All Rose wants to do is sit in front of the fire all day, even in this beautiful summer. It's a different world compared to her ground floor room with windows that overlook the garden. Here, Rose would often leave the windows of her south-east facing chambers open so she could hear the dawn chorus begin and see the sun as it rose low in the sky. A tame white dove would come to her there and she would feed it on her windowsill. She loved the dove and braided it a collar from some scraps of a deep pink fabric which it always wore. The walls were covered in brightly worked tapestries with glowing images of unicorns in woodlands and maidens with long, rippled hair. Her bed was a mass of soft-feather filled mattresses and pillows that she would tunnel into like a small furry animal. In this beige mausoleum she feels exposed; her rights stripped away; a prisoner being punished, although she has no idea what her crimes might be.

In the mornings, a maid brings her breakfast on a tray and leaves it outside her door before knocking and then leaving. Even if she's quick to answer, she sees nothing, maybe the shadow of someone disappearing into the stairwell. She meets no-one apart from her educators and sometimes a visit from her mother in the evenings. After some weeks, Queenie is called on to visit her first husband's sister, Marie, who has fallen from her horse and broken her legs. It is thought that she will not walk again and she is desperate to see Queenie. When Queenie receives the letter from Marie's lady companion that tells her about Marie's misfortune, she weeps. Queenie and Marie know each other so thoroughly they are more like sisters than friends. Queenie has some special healing that she wants to administer to her 'Belle Soeur'. It is truly a wrench for Queenie to leave Rose at this time, but she feels she must go. Surprisingly, the King, who usually keeps her under close watch, raises no objection to her going. It takes two weeks or so to reach Marie's lands by coach so Queenie will be away for over a month but she plans to be back before the suitors are due to visit the castle in the autumn.

Before she leaves, Queenie goes to see Emmeline Point. She wants to engage her in confidence to ensure that Rose is well cared for whilst she is away. Having thought that

Mademoiselle Point was rather haughty, Queenie is relieved when she is greeted with dimples and deep curtseys.

'Good day, my Queen, I am so happy to see you. May I be of service?' Queenie explains to Emmeline, as she is now invited to call her, that she wishes her to oversee Rose's care while she is away: to make sure she is safe and well and as happy as she can be. 'Say no more, my Queen, it will be done. I will care for her as if she were my own.' As Queenie exits the door, a shadow crosses Mademoiselle's face and in this unguarded moment she looks like a hideous crone, with her face in so black and malevolent a leer it would make your skin crawl and your heart thud with fear. When Queenie has been gone a moment, and her disguise is once more in place, Mademoiselle hastens away to see the King. On her shoulder sits a black raven who goes around with her.

'Come, my dear Bran' she hisses to it. 'Let us go and find the man who thinks he can be my master: he who thinks I help him because of the great love I bear him.' With a low chuckle, she sweeps rapidly down the castle corridors to the King's private chambers. The raven clings to her shoulder with its talons, occasionally letting loose a great caw of excitement. She finds the King getting ready for the nights' card game. As usual at this hour, he appears bright and hopeful. He believes afresh every day that he will do well in the gambling stakes.

'My King, I come to tell you that the Queen begins her travels in the morning. It seems our plan is working and she believes the letter I sent is from her sister in law Marie's house. So, now you have a clear field to marry Rose to Sugden: the snob who wants some royal blood to run in his family and is willing to pay for it.'

'Excellent', declares the King. 'Well done Emmy. Well done me. Well done us.' He grabs her and kisses her, bending her over backwards melodramatically as he does so, 'It was a fortuitous day when we met at the Black Horse Inn. Do you remember?'

Emmeline Point remembers it clearly as she had purposely set up her meeting with the King that night. As Bran surveyed the castle for her from the air she had already been aware that the King visited the inn weekly, usually to borrow money, occasionally to pay back the usurers who lurked in the bar corners like big black spiders. She sat in a corner herself with her charms and spell potions in tiny little fluted glass vials with wax stoppers. She did a fine trade there in good luck charms, selling to the gamblers. But the potions were her best source of income. All potions had to be treated with care: a little might be therapeutic, but a large dose have unforeseen, or even fatal results. When the King ordered the potion he wanted, he said: 'Something to keep a young girl quiet and biddable. I don't care about her happiness, but she must stay pretty, understand?'. Emmeline was a proficient black witch, but she had her limitations. She knew how to make a range of potions but none quite fitted the King's description. So she took one that was designed to provide energy and joy de vivre and applied a reversal spell to it. Then she added a drop of sleep potion from another bottle. She didn't actually know what the effects would be, but she hoped it would have the effect that the King wanted. She had adjusted the power of the

drug in the little glass vial to a suitable level by adding water and handed it to him with the dosage instructions: three drops in a glass of water at night and no more. After that it was short work to seduce the King and gain admission to the castle.

'Why of course, my King. I remember well. I was selling my potions and you were meeting with the moneylenders, and... mmmph'. The King stops her speech with another wet open-mouthed kiss.'

'Yes, well, no matter', he says, clearly irritated by her mention of his borrowing habit. He spins her around, squeezes her bottom and gives it a little push so that she is propelled forward. 'Off you go now dear. See to Rose will you, take some more of the tincture you made for me: the one that keeps her docile. After Queenie has left you can let Rose know that the suitors are arriving earlier than expected. We'll let her find out there's a choice of just one later. And remember, no treats for her; no fun; so remind the Hatchet. We want little Rosy Posy desperate to get out of that tower room because she'll have to be desperate to marry the one I've got lined up for her. He's not exactly Love's Young Dream.' Emmeline Point tidies her rather mussed up hair, wipes her mouth and collects Bran from the window ledge where he is crouched eyeing the King with a direct, fierce stare. The raven looks as if he would relish pecking the King's eyes out.

'I know how you feel Bran', she mutters as she stalks down the corridor. 'I can still feel his tongue in my mouth.' She spits in disgust. 'But, be patient. You must wait for your pleasures, my love, as I must wait to enjoy mine'. She licks her lips. 'I'll give the Queen what she deserves. Death wrapped up in pretty paper, she is; and little does that idiot King know that he will never see her or me again after tomorrow. It has been useful to be here but soon it will be just you and me again, just how we Coraxians like it back in the swamp with the cauldron and dark squishy dead things.'

Bran lets out a deep hoarse croak that expresses the darkness that lives in his soul. It is the way amongst the Coraxians that any killed by the hand of another will return after their death in the form of a raven so that they have the opportunity to take their revenge. Bran was always a black, brooding angry man so his current shape suits him well. When the King attacked Bran after a card game went sour at the castle he had little idea of the retribution that Bran would seek.

Queenie had been searching the castle for her pet cat, Mr Tom, when she was alarmed by loud, angry voices coming from the King's gaming room at the base of the North West tower. It was Bran doing the shouting; she knew the voice as he was often there.

'You bastard cheat. King or not, I will have your guts for garters'. Bran was waving an Ace of Spades he had just spotted lying on the floor next to the King. It took a while for Queenie to push through the stream of panicked men all trying to leave the gaming room at the same time, retrieving their weapons from the table in the ante-room where they were obliged to leave them

on the way in. The King never did, 'Because I am King', he said. When she got there, she saw that the King was unharmed but Bran, wounded and bleeding, was lying on the floor with the King's sword embedded in his chest. As she went to help him, he heaved himself to his feet and with a great roar this great bull of a man pulled the sword from him and raised it high. He was alive and up, maddened with pain from the mortal wound in his chest which was pumping blood alarmingly. The King was leaving as fast as he could but was hampered by some overturned chairs. Bran staggered behind him and was about to plunge the sword into the King's back. Queenie shouted a warning to the King and he moved just in time to avoid the descending blade. Bran had lunged again, intending to slash the King's belly. In a panic, Queenie hurled an oil lamp across the room, intending only to distract the men and stop the fight, but it hit Bran's shoulder, covering him in oil, then fell to the floor close by and ignited. Bran became an inferno of rage and flame that belched foul greasy black smoke, smelling of sulphur and roasted meat. Greasy smuts floated up and stuck to the walls. As Queenie coughed on the fumes, she watched the consequences of her actions in horror. Bran screamed and ran around blindly, bouncing from wall to wall as he died in a mass of melting flesh and burnt crackling. The King cowered in fear, whimpering from the shadows in the corner of the room.

It was an event that both Queenie and the King tried to forget and didn't speak of. For Queenie, the guilt of her part in this event piled on top of her grief and weighed on her spirit although she was not the cause of Bran's death. The King had been responsible for the fatal blow, but it was Queenie's nature to fret and to relive the incident over and over. They closed the door to that room and it was barred and locked, never to be entered again. The King's bloody sword and Bran were left on the floor where they fell. They didn't see the corpse reform that same night and the large black bird that arose from the ashes, coughing and spluttering curses to take off into the night sky from the room's slit window. But if the King thought the murder could be erased as Bran himself had been, he was wrong. Bran didn't forget, and neither did his lover Emmeline Point, or Black Ciara, as she was known in the swamp. Together they swore an oath and plotted how they would bring about the fall of the couple they hated. One life for each of them, they agreed.

Needless to say, Rose does not receive the care that was promised by Mademoiselle Point, who comes once more after Queenie has left the castle, and thereafter disappears from Rose's life. She sends a message to say that she is indisposed and must take a break from teaching. Rose is not sorry because Mademoiselle Point is spiteful; she ridicules her when she fails to remember lessons. However, without these to divert her, Rose is left to her own devices for long periods. Miss Hatchet is not actively cruel but is strict and harsh and refuses to let Rose leave the tower room even though she now has the leisure time to do so. Hatchet lives for the approval of her superiors, as she sees them, and to that end carries out her instructions faithfully. She even goes further in some regards, like her decision to double Rose's night time tincture dosage. The dress fittings are complete and the dances and songs are all learned so the dressmakers and music teacher come no more. There is no one to soften or enliven Rose's days and she becomes increasingly despondent. She sometimes goes to look at the small patch of sky that can be seen from her window and one day when she is particularly sad, the

white dove comes to visit her. She is unaware of it but the dove protects and empathises with her. Rose finds a few crumbs for it to eat from her hand. She cries great tears that the dove sips up gently from her face and coos its sympathy. This reminds Rose of her Father and the way he would stroke her cheek so tenderly and slowly that he didn't touch her skin, but just brush the baby soft down that covered it and how she would feel her eyes closing sleepily when he did. Reminded of her loss, Rose can bear no more and is overtaken by grief that comes straight from her centre. It feels to her as if she sobs out the last bits of love that remain within her and then she thinks perhaps it would be better to be dead.

The dove is alarmed and is afraid for Rose. He is a creature of light and beauty and recognises the danger that comes from the dark. The way Rose is behaving is not typical for her and she smells wrong to him. He knows her peppery, sweet scent well but now she smells bitter as if she had been tainted by something unwholesome. The presence of the unnatural raven in the castle has also been unsettling. Birds know each other's natures instinctively. He looks for the raven but now finds no sign of him. He flies away from the castle, searching, but Dark Caira and Bran are long gone. He travels further and further in ever increasing circles over many days, never stopping to eat or drink. Eventually he spots the raven in the sky, recognisable from a distance because of his dark aura. On the ground below, difficult to detect because of the density of the trees growing in this deeply forested area, he sees Dark Ciara. The dove flies down and perches in some branches near the witch. She has a faraway look in her eye as if she is seeing something that is not there. Then she moves on, stumbling a little and feeling her way and the dove realises that she is finding her way using the view from the raven's eye. Flying from tree to tree, but staying within the canopy so as to remain hidden from above and below, the dove follows. At last he sees they are approaching a number of coaches in the process of setting up camp for the night. It is already getting dark. Ciara is moving ever more stealthily now; she lets her disguise drop so that her foulness is revealed: it is almost tangible to the dove who follows behind, sure she is up to some mischief.

With his job completed, the raven flies down to join Ciara on the ground. At the edge of the group of carriages sits the food cart. The mules that pull it have been untethered for the night and allowed to forage for food on the roadside. The cook has set up a table covered with food and drink for the evening's meal. It is simple fare on the journey: bread with cheese and ham but everyone is so hungry that the food tastes delicious. A soup is heating on the fire lit nearby; this will be welcome to warm their stomachs and soften the twice baked travel bread that would otherwise be inedible. When it is served, the food will be eaten sitting on the ground or wherever a seat can be found to perch on. It is now fully dark and when the cook is otherwise occupied fetching cups from the cart, Ciara creeps over to the soup vat. The dove sees her take a vial and tip something into the soup. When she moves away back into the trees he hops over and sits on a stool so that he can see into the vat. The aroma is disgusting to him, it smells not of the beans and herbs bubbling away, but of something bitter, like dandelion sap.

Seeing Queenie sitting some distance away from the main group, the dove flies over to see her, circling around her head, then alighting on the arm she holds up for him. Queenie recognises

the collar Rose put around his neck although it is faded and tattered by his long journey. The dove is clearly agitated, bobbing his head and hopping around.

'I wish I could understand you, little one' she says, feeling a sense of alarm. She thinks 'This is Rose's dove, so has he come from Rose? Is she in trouble?' She soothes the dove, holding him softly but firmly in her hands until his agitation ceases. Then he opens his beak and tips a large bead of fluid onto Queenie's finger. It is made from Rose's tears, that he has carried all this way. Queenie stares fixedly at it for a while, feeling it must mean something important. She licks the drop from her finger and as she swallows it a vision unfolds in her mind. She sees Rose, lying on her bed. Her arms are folded over her chest as if in death, although she still breathes. The King enters Rose's room and stands over her. He shakes her. When she does not respond he slaps her twice, hard, once on each side of her face. Rose's head jerks from side to side and her cheeks redden, but she does not wake.

With a great cry of rage, Queenie rises to her feet, sending the dove back into the air. She accidentally tips over the cup of soup that the cook's assistant placed at her side some time ago. The grass turns black and sizzles and an acrid odour drifts up to her nose. She shouts as loudly as she can to the people around her 'Don't drink the soup, it is poisoned.', but scanning the campsite, she sees it is littered with bodies lying lifeless, the soup so deadly that the victims made no sound as they died. Her warning has come too late. The evil is here too then, she thinks. Her heart is pounding loudly and she feels she is thinking lucidly, acting surely for the first time in years. The way is clear, all she has to do is what feels right. She has unusual skills, she knows she does as her mother was a white witch and the skills always follow the female line, often changing in nature from generation to generation. Hers have been pushed down for a long time because it is not seemly for a ruler to have visions that foreshadow events, to see beyond the normal range of vision. Her healing is the only ability she has felt able to keep practicing. She urgently needs to get back to Rose. But what to do? It has taken almost two weeks to get this far on her journey. Without the train of carriages she could make better time she thinks. She could take a few horses and supplies and will be back in three or four days. 'Three days', the words scream in her head. It is too long, she thinks by then it will be too late to save Rose.

She sees the King, his face is dark, his mouth stuffed so full with gold coins that they spill out. His eyes are closed, his eyelids embossed with the hearts, spades, diamonds and clubs of the cards he loves to gamble with. She sees Mademoiselle Point lying naked and wanton next to the king. From between her spread legs the head of a raven emerges; it opens its beak and caws loudly. The raven is looking hungrily at the King and she knows that it is about to devour him. She feels no sorrow about that as she sees for the first time that the man she married is a manipulative, cheating, cowardly bully and thinks the world would be a better place without him. Knowing that Emmeline Point and her bird are involved too, her fear for Rose is redoubled.

She hears a loud caw, and the air is filled with clouds of white and black feathers. The dove screams and falls from the sky, no match for the massive black bird it has fought with. The

raven sits next to the soup vat glaring, as if willing to take on all comers. Queenie can guess what happened to the soup; if the raven is here then so is Emmeline. Betrayed on all sides, she is distraught. Who can she trust? She finds the dove and after gently stroking his feathers into place, she puts his lifeless body inside her bodice. The least she can do for him is to take him back to Rose.

Queenie makes preparations to leave. She wants to vomit and wail to the heavens with grief and anger but she ties a knot above her stomach hardens her heart in order to hold it all down as she moves amongst the dozen people: guides, assistants, ostlers, cooks who made up the party. Over the long journey together they have become close as constant companions often do. She needs to collect some fresh horses to begin her journey home. She knows the ostler and is a keen rider, so she knows which ones to take and how to prepare a horse for mounting. She works hurriedly because she feels that Emmeline is watching. The raven is watching her and she feels deeply uncomfortable. She must leave tonight because although it is dangerous to travel after dark she could not rest a minute in this place of mass murder. A desperate sob escapes her throat and her eyes burn with the effort of not wailing. After throwing a few basic provisions into a saddlebag she mounts the horse and leaves the camp, sitting astride and trailing two spare horses from reins held in one hand. It is a clear night with a full moon so there will be some light from the sky to travel by. She has chosen a pale grey horse to ride: one that looks stocky and strong that should go well over the rough roads. She remembers that this one is called Aither and would always come to her when she called his name. A trustworthy intuitive horse, she always thought.

Queenie has travelled only a short distance down the dark road when she becomes aware of a shape trailing her on her right, following along the tree line at the side of the road. She has the impression of a dark, humped shape darting from shadow to shadow. She tightens her lips and keeps going, not knowing what to do as in her haste to leave she packed no weapons with which she might have protected herself. Aither shys as the shape comes closer and his eyes roll in panic. It lunges at the horse's head and grabs the reins and its hood falls back. Queenie drops the reins to the spare horses as she recoils in revulsion at what is hanging onto her horse: it has a hairless, warty scalp and large, hooked, bony nose on its face. Large protuberant eyes burn red barely a metre from hers and she smells rot as the dark, toothless mouth hisses words at her in some other language. Queenie is sure that they mean nothing good. Despite the hideous aspect of the clinger on, she recognises the features of Emmeline Point and her feelings of fear and confusion increase. She feels strange, a little fuzzy, then realises that her inner thighs are tingling everywhere they touch Aither. She feels a rush of air as Aither rises into the air. The fiend still clings on. Queenie intuitively knows what to do: she finds Aither's thoughts near her own and joins them. They soar and swoop in the night sky, the three of them, surely the oddest sight the forest has ever seen. In spite of her predicament Queenie is exhilarated to be flying this amazing beast. Aither is trying to kick the black witch with his front hooves but she is out of his reach. He bites at her, but she dodges him every time, hanging on determinedly to his reins. She is scrambling with her feet and Queenie realises with horror that she is trying to get a leg over Aither's neck. Aither turns and begins a long slow circle with his body canted to

one side, so that Caira is dangling once again. Queenie sees the camp reappear below them with the campfire now burnt away to glowing cinders. She has a thought and reaches into the saddlebag and retrieves her knife. It is one Ferdie made for her, for gardening, and she finds it useful when travelling. It has the image of hawthorn blossom carved into the handle for her given name, May. Reaching across Aither's neck, she slices through his reins with the razor sharp blade. Caira makes a long drawn-out howl as she falls like a stone, landing near the fire in the camp below. As Queenie and Aither circle once more close to the ground, they see that she still lives and is attempting to stand. They land and after slithering quietly from Aither's back, Queenie approaches the witch whose appearance flickers between Caira's and Emmeline's like a candle flame guttering in the breeze.

'You bitch, have you not killed enough?' Queenie says when she is close, gesturing to the slaughter that surrounds them, the scene lit by the night sky and the dying fire. 'What is your grievance that you would do such a thing?'

'My lover' screams Caira hoarsely. 'You took my lover. My beloved Bran. There is a sob in her voice, and tears appear in the corners of her eyes.' And I shall kill your loved ones. After you I shall take your flower daughter. Bran will have your man's life for his own.' Queenie realises that she is dealing with more than a murderer; this witch is insane: a wicked chaotic force that has been unleashed and must be stopped. Quickly, before Caira can realise what she's doing, Queenie shoves her hard so that she stumbles over the cauldron, just saving herself from falling in by putting out her arms and holding onto its rim. Queenie takes hold of her warty head and pushes it down hard into what little remains of the soup in the bottom of the great pot. She shouts to the witch, to the air: 'It was not I that killed Bran, it was the King. I was trying to help.' As she utters the words, she realises the full truth of this herself for the first time. She holds on with all her force, ignoring the vile smells and noises and resisting the struggles that she feels until her arms ache. It feels like an age passes before Caira stops moving and Queenie feels Caira's end as a feeling of lightness comes over her. The witch is dead.

Queenie remounts Aither and, leaning forward in the saddle, holds onto his mane. She rests her head on his neck and closes her eyes, enjoying the warmth and comfort.

'Home, Aither. If you wouldn't mind. It's been quite a day.' Queenie says.

On the morning of the fifteenth day after Queenie left the castle, Rose became ill so that she couldn't rise from her bed. Miss Hatchet called the Court Physician, Doctor Bubble. The Doctor came immediately. He has known Rose and Queenie from infancy and is fond of them both.

'How do, little Rose', he booms as he enters. 'What's all this? You are never ill'. Rose winces at his big, jolly voice. He seems to fill the room somehow; Miss Hatchet, previously a significant presence, appears to be forced backwards and squashed flat against the wall all of a sudden. Spotting her, the Doctor impatiently gestures for her to leave the room and she scuttles off. His sharp eyes sweep the castle tower room, his nose twitches, and his wise old mind makes a few

connections. He feels Rose's forehead, looks into her ears and throat. He observes her thin, pinched little face and sallow complexion. Her naturally bouncy, shiny curls have drooped so that her hair lies in rats tails on her shoulders. He asks her questions: 'does she have a tummy ache, an ear ache, a headache, any pain?' Rose shakes her head. He asks Rose to stand and she tries but then immediately flops back down onto the bed; it seems her legs are too weak to hold her up. 'Has she been eating?', Doctor Bubble asks, now becoming quite concerned. Rose nods unconvincingly. He goes to find Miss Hatchet who he finds with a squinty sly spy eye pressed to the keyhole of Rose's bedroom door. Miss Hatchet has a strange voice, scratchy and high pitched; it reminds him of a metal nail being dragged over stone.

'The Princess eats what is good for her', Miss Hatchet says in reply to the Doctor's query. 'I order the kitchens to deliver quite what I ate at her age. At breakfast there is porridge with milk to drink. At lunch, a white soup with bread. Tea and toast at four, then boiled chicken or fish for supper. At bedtime, I give the child a tincture sent by the King to make Rose more beautiful for her wedding.'

'You don't think this diet is a little bland? Pale; flavourless; dull?' Bubble replies. He thinks of Rose's normal diet, rich and tasty with spices and herbs. The chef loved to cook her fruit puddings which she enjoyed with creams and custards. 'And does she actually eat this, this ... pap?' Miss Hatchet pales under Bubble's acute gaze.

'Yes, Well a little. Lately, not so much.' Bubble continues to scrutinise Miss Hatchet's face. 'Not at all for a few days.' she finally admits, finishing defiantly: 'It was good enough for me.'

'Tincture? Bring it.' snaps Bubble. He takes the tiny bottle that she fetches' He sniffs it, snatching his nose away as he inhales the sour vapour. He does not recognise the smell exactly, but knows instinctively it comes from nothing good. 'This is the devil's work. Just get out, and never come back.' says Bubble quietly. 'Be thankful it is no worse than that.' Miss Hatchet hurries away, looking fearfully back. There is a sense of menace in the air. She had not realised the Doctor could look so fierce.

'It was him. The King. Those were his instructions.' These words are shouted by Miss Hatchet as she descends into the stairwell. He lodges the words in his mind for future consideration. At the moment his concern is all for Rose and her immediate needs. He strokes her face and tells her to rest. He will be back shortly as he needs to collect some medicines.

Rose feels increasingly faint and unreal: on the brink of something important, as if she can choose which parts of her life have happened and which are imagined. For the present she opts for believing the latter; it's too hard for her to believe that her stepfather has been feeding her poison. Instead she sleeps. She falls into a sleep that is very deep, somewhere nearer death than life. On her way she says goodbye to the people she loves the most, but fades out before she gets to the end of the list. Her breathing is there but faint.

In the air above the castle, the sky is grey. The day has been moist and mizzly. You would have to have looked very closely to see a grey horse approaching with a figure couched low over its back. Long hair trails from the head of the rider and becomes lost in tendrils of the clouds, adding to the impression that this is a figment of your eye. But this is no figment, it is Queenie returning to the castle. She has slept on the journey so she is rested. Aither lands on the top platform of Rose's North tower and Queenie goes immediately to her rooms. She is horrified at the state of Rose.

'Oh, my beautiful child what have we done to you?' she asks aloud. She puts her head on Rose's chest and hears her heart beating slowly and feebly. She holds her cheek in front of Rose's mouth and feels a faint breath of warm air. She sobs, gasping for breath between her outpourings of sorrow, of regret. 'How she has failed her child', she thinks, 'And for what? A hollow excuse of a man and her own selfish grief'. She pats Rose's face and shakes her a little but she does not wake; her eyes are open a tiny amount, but seem to see nothing. Queenie notes Rose's pallor and lack of substance: it's as if a ghost is lying in the bed. Queenie decides Rose must be fed. 'Some soup or something is sure to do the trick.', she thinks, and there is no food in the room so Queenie heads off to the kitchens and then to find the doctor.

In the kitchen most of the staff are off having their own lunch, but she finds the Chef cooking food for Rose. It seems Doctor Bubble got there before her. The chef has tears in his eyes as he works. He feels terrible, having assumed someone was putting trays of proper food up for Rose in the dining room. He had thought all the dreadful food Hatchet was ordering was for herself. Into his dishes he pours all his healing love and skill. In no time, he has some left-over game casserole flavoured with mushroom stock and juniper berries on the stove to make a hearty meal for Rose.

For dessert he will make a simple vanilla souffle with a hidden molten chocolate heart. Simple, but oh, the rise, the crispy top, the vanilla scented steam arising from the little pot of deliciousness. Raspberries and a tiny mint leaf will garnish the dish. Then he will deliver the meal himself he decides, although it will take a while for him to get to Rose because he is no longer the young, slim man he was..

'Is there anything I can do to help? Queenie asks.

'Yes', sighs the Chef. She is making him tense and spoiling the flow of his creativity. 'I need some mint leaves and raspberries from the garden. You could fetch me some.' Queenie is away before he has finished asking.

She dashes to the garden and finds Ferdie. She tells him what she needs and Ferdie goes to get the ingredients for her. Queenie follows close behind him, almost treading on his ankles in her haste. She can't stop talking; words are just falling out of her mouth in a torrent, getting jumbled and and top of each other, so it takes Ferdie a while to piece together the whole miserable story. She bends to help him pluck the mint and when she rises he offers her his arm.

He feels himself stung as she takes it. He pulls his arm away and stares at her in astonishment as he sees the thorns sprouting out of her forearms and realises that he has not been stung, but pierced by some dangerously sharp looking thorns.

Queenie is distraught. 'Oh dear, dear, I thought all that business was over.' she said, looking embarrassed. 'It hasn't happened since I was a teenager. In my tumultuous years,' she adds in apparent explanation to the bemused gardener. 'I thought I had a hold on it. It used to happen with any strong emotion.' She offers her handkerchief to Ferdie to mop up the blood from a few scratches on his hand and arm, but he refuses the cloth, saying it is of no consequence. Queenie shakes and brushes her arms and the thorns fall away, leaving faint pink circles where they had been attached. Pulling himself together, Ferdie asks:

'May I put together a basket of flowers for the Princess? She will be lonely and sad without her garden. Maybe the smell of the flowers will wake her?' This is bold of Ferdie, but Queenie doesn't mind. Ferdie can't imagine how the Princess would manage in an environment such as Queenie has described to him, but he knows how he would feel if he were restricted to the indoors. Queenie is suddenly overcome with tears and cannot speak for fear of her voice breaking. She brushes Ferdie's cheek with hers and smiles her thanks through moist eyes, nodding her assent.

'This is a fine man', she thinks. He looks beautiful to her, as if a halo of light were illuminating him. She leaves Ferdie then; both of them flushed and disturbed by the encounter. She must get back to Rose. She goes there now. Ferdie will deliver the ingredients and find the Doctor for her.

As she enters Rose's tower staircase she pauses as she can hear voices. 'Maybe the Doctor is back', she thinks. But when she enters Rose's room she sees it is the King who is there. She sees the King is crouched over Rose, kneeling on her bed with his back to the door such that Queenie can't tell what he is doing. She creeps behind him and sees that he is stabbing Rose rhythmically on her breast and arms with the stiletto he keeps tucked in his boot. The cuts are not deep enough to cause her serious harm but make vivid red spots as the blood pools on her skin. He is chanting 'Wake up, wake up you stupid little brat.' The scene makes Queenie's hair stand up and she flushes with anger. She feels the thorns emerge from her forearms once again. This time they grow bigger, each a conical spike as long as her fingers, deadly sharp. She fires. Throwing an arm out and forwards, several of the small spears are released and pierce the King's back. He screams and leaps to the floor, the dagger falling onto the bed. He grabs for it but misses as a second flurry of spikes arrive, these hitting his torso and one or two, gone awry, penetrate his leather codpiece. Queenie can't help sniggering as he hops around the room holding his crotch and wailing. He heads for the door but doesn't reach it before his own little stiletto flies straight and true through the air and embeds itself in his ample arse. Rose always was a good shot. With renewed howls, he flees; it is too hard and painful for him here. Rose is sitting up in the bed, looking startled but fully awake.

'Oh Mama, did he hurt you?' she asks. Queenie hurrys to Rose's side. 'I felt something tell me you needed me, like you had called out my name', said Rose. And it felt like you had come back. Properly I mean. Like we used to be.' She is crying now, her cheeks pink again.

'I did come back. I should never have left you. Back then I mean, or to see Marie. But when he died, Rose, I was so sad at losing him I could not see you, or Ferdie and the others in our beautiful gardens, or the friends who tried to comfort me. It was all grey and shadowy and I was lost. I am so, so sorry my love. Can you ever forgive me?'

'There's no need to forgive. You did no wrong Mama. You were blind with a grief equal to your love for Papa. But now you are better and all will be well again.'

'I am better. I see what I must do. First I must see the King and tell him he has to leave and this time I will take some guards with me. There are some changes to be made round here. Many big changes.' Queenie lies on the bed with Rose, Rose's head is on her chest as she listens to the same heartbeat she has heard many times before. It feels right, as if she fits, as if she has come home. Queenie feels as if she never wants to move again, and simply lies there quietly, enjoying their closeness. A fluttering in her chest turns out to be more than emotion. The white dove that Queenie had quite forgotten about has revived and wants to join in the family reunion.

At this point, the chef peers around Rose's door and requests entry. Queenies calls him in. He is followed by Ferdie carrying a bunch of fragrant roses and a beaming face. Then the Doctor appears. Rose smiles a happy smile as she sees some of her favourite people and things she loves appear. She looks especially keen on a wobbly little pudding that is heading her way.

Queenie slips away to see the King, whispering to the Doctor that Rose is to always have some of them there and that she has wounds that need tending to. Oh, and to please call the Ostler as there's a horse on the turret roof that needs feeding and stabling. The normally unflappable Doctor looks taken aback at this, but nods in assent.

The King is dead. Queenie finds him on the floor of his chamber. Where his eyes used to be, there are two grey and red holes going right into his head. Blood and brain matter drip down his face. His mouth is open in a silent scream of the agony he felt as he died. His codpiece has been cut away so that it lies hinged down onto the floor between his legs. Where his genitals should be is an empty bloody space. Queenie feels sick. On the windowsill sit a pair of large ravens. They look benignly at her, then at each other. They rub their bloodstained, gory beaks together like a pair of deviant lovebirds and caw gently. When Queenie and the guards have left, Cairra and Bran take off in the direction of the swamp. What the issue of that union will be, Queenie dreads to think, but she feels sure that they are done with her.

If you visited the castle ten years later you would find a different place as Queenie made the many big changes she promised. A panel of representatives elected by the people make the decisions now and every adult has a vote. The Kingdom is no more. The castle is run as a

collective, selling fruit and vegetable produce but also hosting holidays. The chef happily oversees an army of other chefs who make splendid meals for hundreds three times a day. He has grown lean and fit with all the extra work and looks set for another twenty years at least. The rest of the castle staff have been redeployed to help run the estate as a business. It makes a good profit, enough to pay and keep everyone who works there. These days the lake is alive with the sounds of splashing as people swim and play in the water. In the evenings, after dark, it is quiet for the walkers and fishermen. The winter is Queenie's favourite time when she often has the lake to herself again and there is an otherworldly feel to the place as sound bounces from the ice that forms on top of the water and frost descends like frozen blossom from the trees with a hiss. It makes her squeal with shock and delight if it falls down her neck. Ferdie walks with her sometimes and they stroll hand in hand in the silence. They often walk down the narrow lane leading from the end of the lake, up a steep hill to Rose's cottage.

They might surprise Rose here as she feeds her many doves and tends to her plants. She is in charge of the castle gardens and helps to run a landscaping business together with Ferdie, now her stepfather. Rose is the plant specialist. She has developed her talent for growing plants and designing beautiful gardens and advises people from all over the new republic on how to landscape and lay out their gardens and nurseries. In the row of greenhouses behind her cottage she cultivates plants to make her plant babies. She touches the seeds they produce and these days they do indeed sprout immediately and grow faster when she touches them. Hours upon hours are spent in her private sanctum here. She remains a poor scholar but has taken to painting and this is the way she communicates her designs. Her paintings are works of art in themselves. On Wednesdays Rose allows her little sisters: Lily, Violet and Lavender to come and learn the plant names and how to grow them.

Lavender is the youngest but is already a gardener. She is just five but has negotiated her own patch of land in the walled garden where she is growing some sunflowers and nasturtiums. It seems that she can push any old seed into the ground with a podgy finger and something will grow. Maybe this is not so surprising when one considers that she has a master gardener for a father and a white witch for a mother.

If the family hurt themselves they go to seven year old Violet. Her sweet smile and calm demeanour make them feel better in any case but if she touches a burn, a cut, it is gone. A headache vanishes when she puts her cool fingers on any aching forehead. A fever is soothed in the same way. Violet doesn't complain but Queenie notices how much healing taxes her so she makes sure she isn't called on too often. She sees that her children's talents are more specific and powerful than her own and need to be carefully nurtured.

Lily is the eldest of the three little ones. At the great age of nine she is bossy and when she visits she makes Rose laugh with her way of separating the doves into types and trying to keep them in their groups. Rose's pink collared dove is a tattered old bird these days. Rose thinks it is interesting how Lily puts this special dove with others that have no characteristics in common to her own eye and conducts classes with them, chatting away and telling them what to do. They

do seem to listen as they line up as instructed and watch her closely with heads cocked to one side. But then, Lily sees things in animals that others don't and is the only one of the children who shows a talent for flying like their mother.

In the summers Queenie mounts Aither, sitting Lavender and Violet in front of her. Lily flies her horse with Rose holding on behind and the five go on a journey to visit Marie whose legs are, thankfully, perfectly whole and as healthy as they always have been. On the way they stop and visit the graves of the twelve who died on the fateful journey Queenie made many years before. They tend to the garden in the cemetery there and each of them plant and tend their name flowers. Queenie remembers the dead individually and tells the girls the story of what happened. The young ones shudder with disgusted pleasure as they hear the gory details of how Queenie defeated the wicked witch with her own hands and wonder at how she disappeared leaving no trace of a body. She still visits the relatives of the twelve who live on the estate at home and makes sure that they are well provided for. No one visits the King's grave in the castle grounds because no one cared enough to mourn him. Queenie opened the King's old gaming room where Bran was killed and recovered the King's sword which was buried with him. It was emptied out and turned into a room for the falconer to house his birds because it never would scrub clean.