

 *Winter*  
*Rose*

**PATRICIA A. McKILLIP**

  
ACE BOOKS, NEW YORK

**“Of all the fantasy writers still alive,  
Patricia McKillip comes closest for me to capturing  
the real flavor of fairy tales . . .”**

*Winter Rose*

*Sorrow and trouble and bitterness will hound you and yours and the children of yours . . .*

Some said the dying words of Nial Lynn, murdered by his own son, were a wicked curse. To others, it was a winter’s tale spun by firelight on cold, dark nights. But when Corbet Lynn came to rebuild his family estate, memories of his grandfather’s curse were rekindled by young and old — and rumors filled the heavy air of summer. In the woods that border Lynn Hall, free-spirited Rois Melior roams wild and barefoot. And as autumn gold fades, she is consumed with Corbet Lynn, obsessed with his secret past . . .

“The pace here is deliberate and sure, with no false steps; the writing is richly textured and evocative . . . [*Winter Rose*] weaves a dense web of desire and longing, human love and inhuman need.”

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“McKillip’s writing is also warm and intimate and always approachable . . . a haunting novel . . . beautifully deliberate, richly textured.”

—*Valley Tim*

**Praise for the writings of**

***Patricia A. McKillip***

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“There are no better writers than Patricia A. McKillip.”

—Stephen R. Donaldson

“McKillip tells an intricate, beautiful . . . tale with her usual cool elegance.”

—*Chicago Sun-Times*

“Seamlessly classic in its passion and elegance.”

—*Los Angeles Times*

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—*Starline*

“McKillip’s tale is decidedly atmospheric, complex, compelling, and filled with rich imagery.”

—*Booklist*

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*Rose*

**PATRICIA A. McKILLIP**

  
ACE BOOKS, NEW YORK

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They said later that he rode into the village on a horse the color of buttermilk, but I saw him walk out of the wood.

I was kneeling at the well; I had just lifted water to my lips. The well was one of the wood's secrets: a deep spring as clear as light, hidden under an overhang of dark stones down which the briars and roses fall, white as snow, red as blood, all summer long. The vines hide the water unless you know to look. I found it one hot afternoon when I stopped to smell the roses. Beneath their sweet scent lay something shadowy, mysterious: the smell of earth, water, wet stone. I moved the cascading briars and looked down at my own reflection.

Corbet, he called himself to the villagers. But I saw him before he had any name at all.

My name is Rois, and I look nothing like a rose. The water told me that. Water never lies. I look more like a blackbird, with my flighty black hair and eyes more amber than the blackbird's sunny yellow. My skin is not fit for fairy tales, since I liked to stand in light, with my eyes closed, my face turned upward toward the sun. That's how I saw him at first: as a fall of light, and then something shaping out of the light. So it seemed. I did not move; I let the water stream silently down my wrist. There was a blur of gold: his hair. And then I blinked, and saw his face more clearly.

I must have made some noise then. Perhaps I shifted among the wild fern. Perhaps I sighed. He looked toward me, but there was too much light; I must have been a blur of shadow in his eyes.

Then he walked out of the light.

Of course I thought about him, at first the way you think about weather or time, something always at the edge of your mind. He didn't seem real to me, just something I dreamed on a hot summer day, as I swallowed water scented with roses and stone. I remembered his eyes, odd, heavy-lidded, the color, I thought then, of his hair. When I saw them a day or two later, I was surprised.

I gathered wild lilies and honeysuckle and bleeding heart, which my sister, Laurel, loved. I stayed in the wood for a long time, watching, but he had gone. The sky turned the color of a mourning dove's breast before I walked out of the trees. I remembered time, then. I was tired and ravenous, and I wished I had ridden to the wood. I wished I had worn shoes. But I had learned where to find wild ginger, and what tree bled a crust of honey out of a split in the wood, and where the blackberries would ripen. My father despaired of me; my sister wondered at me. But my despair was greater if I caged my wonder, like a wild bird. Some days I let it fly free, and followed it. On those days I found the honey, and the secret well, and the mandrake root.

My sister, Laurel, is quite beautiful. She has chestnut hair, and skin like ripened peaches, and grey eyes that seem to see things that are not quite discernible to others. She doesn't really see that well; her world is simple and fully human. Her brows lift and pucker worriedly when she encounters ambiguities, or sometimes only me. Everyone in the village loves her; she is gentle and sweet-spoken. She was to marry the next spring.

That twilight, when I came home barefoot, my skirt full of flowers, her lover, Perrin, was there. Perrin looked at me askance, as always, and shook his head.

"Barefoot. And with rose petals in your hair. You look like something conceived under a mushroom."

I stuck a stem of honeysuckle in his hair, and one of bleeding heart into my father's. It slid forward to dangle in front of his nose, a chain of little hearts. We laughed. He pointed a stubby finger

at me.

~~“It’s time you stopped dancing among the ferns and put your shoes on, and learned a thing or two from your sister’s practical ways.”~~ He drank his beer, the hearts still trembling over his nose. I nodded gravely.

“I know.”

“You say that,” he grumbled. “But you don’t really listen.” He pushed the flower stem behind his ear, and drank more beer.

“Because you don’t really mean what you say.” I dropped all my flowers in Laurel’s lap, and went behind him to put my arms around his neck. “You love me as I am. Besides, when Laurel marries, who will care for you?”

He snorted, even as he patted my hands. “You can’t even remember to close a door at night. What I think is that you should find someone to care for you, before you tumble in a pond and drown, or fall out of a tree.”

“I haven’t,” I lied with some dignity, “climbed a tree for years.”

Perrin made an outraged noise. “I saw you up a pear tree near the old Lynn ruins only last autumn.”

“I was hungry. That hardly counts.” I loosed my father, and reached for bread, being still hungry. He sighed.

“At least sit down. Never mind about getting the bracken out of your hair, or washing your hands, or anything else remotely civilized. How will you ever find a husband?”

I sat. A face turned toward me out of light, and for just a moment I forgot to breathe. Then I swallowed bread, while Laurel, gathering flowers on her lap, said amiably,

“Perhaps she doesn’t want one. Not everyone does.” But her brows had twitched into that little, anxious pucker. I was silent, making resolutions, then discarding them all as useless.

“I want,” I said shortly, “to do what I want to do.”

We lived comfortably in the rambling, thatched farmhouse that had grown askew with age. Centuries of footsteps had worn shallow valleys into the flagstones; the floors had settled haphazardly into the earth; door frames tilted; ceilings sagged. Other things happen to old houses, that only I seemed to notice. Smells had woven into the wood, so that lavender or baking bread scented the air at unexpected moments. The windows at night sometimes reflected other fires, the shadows of other faces. Spiders wove webs in high, shadowed corners that grew more elaborate through the years, as if each generation inherited and added to an airy palace. I wondered sometimes if they would die out when we did, or leave their intricate houses if we left ours. But I doubted that I would ever know: My father, with his wheat, and apple orchards, and his barns and stables, only grew more prosperous, and my sister’s marriage at least would provide him with heirs for his house and his spiders.

Perrin was looking at me with that dispassionate, speculative expression he got when he was trying to imagine who among the villagers might be enchanted by me. I couldn’t think of anyone. They were a hardheaded lot, though they were beginning to come to me for the healing oils and teas I made from my gleanings in the wood. Even Perrin, with his easy ways, would have been exasperated by me. And would never stay where I was not free; I would simply walk out the door and vanish, vows or no.

That frightened me now and then, filled me with urgent, unreasoning despair, as if I lacked something vital — an arm, an eye — but did not know what it was I lacked that other people had to make them fully human. But most of the time I did not care. It would be nice, I thought, to have a Perrin with that wayward jet hair to smooth, or those shoulders to shape beneath my hands. But not this Perrin. Nor anyone that I had grown up with, even among those whose own restlessness had led them to seek their fortunes elsewhere.

Laurel rose to put the flowers into water. I nibbled this and that: a chicken wing, a spoonful of

raisins and walnuts in a sweet sticky sauce that our cook, Beda, knew I loved. She loved the wild herbs and mushrooms, the ginger and rosehips I brought her. Everyone else had eaten, not waiting for me to come home. My father got out his pipe; Laurel put flowers in niches and corners; Perrin found Laurel's flute and blew softly into it, beginning an old ballad of lovers parted on earth and reunited in the grave. He had not gotten through a verse when Laurel said sharply, "Don't play that."

We all looked at her, astonished. Color fanned across her face; she turned abruptly, shifted a vase an inch.

Perrin said quickly, "I'm sorry, love."

"It's bad luck."

"It's only an old ballad," I said, still surprised at the tone in her voice. She was so rarely cross or abrupt. "We've all sung it a hundred times."

She was silent. Then she shivered slightly and turned to us again, her face softening into an apologetic smile. "I know. It just — I don't want to think of such unhappiness now." Perrin stretched out a hand, wordlessly; she came to him, took his hand in both of hers. "Play only happy songs," she commanded him. Her voice was light, but her smile had gone, until he spoke.

"I will play," he said gravely, "'The Ballad of Pig's Trough Tavern.'"

She loosed him then, and rapped him on the head with an empty tankard. "You will not. Play 'The Mariner's Lay for His Lady,' or I will never love you again, and you can take back the ribbons, and the blown glass horse and all your poetry."

"Poetry!" our father and I exclaimed together, and Perrin turned red as a cock's wattle. But he was laughing, and so was Laurel, and then, that was all that mattered.

A day or two later, I learned his name.

I had put my boots on, braided my hair, and ridden to the village with our father and a wagon full of apple brandy, which he had aged in small oaken kegs. While he delivered it to the village inn, I took a pot to the smithy to be mended, and bought ribbons to weave around sacks of dried petals for Laurel to lay among her wedding linens. The village was a scattering of houses, the stolid inn, a sagging tavern, an apothecary, the smithy, a stable, a baker, a weaver, a chandlery, the mill, and a swath of green in the middle of it, where geese and the weaver's sheep and the innkeeper's cow wandered. When I went into the inn to retrieve my father, who above all loved his ale and his company together, I heard the smith's lazy-boned son Crispin say, "My grandfather remembers it all: how his father and grandfather fought, and the son killed his father, and a curse was laid on the family with his grandfather's dying breath."

It was a moment before anyone sorted this out. My father said, "Wait —"

"His grandson," Crispin nodded, "it would be." He had a beautiful smile, and a smooth easy voice that made you forget the time it wasted. He sipped his beer, then enlightened my father. "Corbet, his name is. Corbet Lynn. His father died, and he has come to claim his inheritance."

"That old wreck?" The innkeeper, Travers, shook his head, mopping a ring my father's beer had left. "The land must be worth a fortune, but where's he going to live? The hall is in ruins. Nothing but a broken husk of stone overgrown with vines. The wood is taking it back. Will he sell the land?"

"He told my father no. He intends to stay. He's out there now." His eyes found a skirt and long hair in the doorway, and he smiled; he didn't need to see a face, just the suggestion of shape caught him that way. "Rois."

My father turned vaguely toward me. But his attention lay elsewhere. "Corbet."

Crispin nodded. "Riding through the village on a horse as white as milk," he said liltily. "Or buttermilk, at least. Pretty. She threw a shoe at the crossroads. So we got his story first."

"His father wasn't hanged?" the innkeeper asked.

"No. He vanished. No one searched very hard for him. My grandfather said Nial Lynn had it

coming. Anyway, no one saw anything.”

“Then how—”

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“No one admitted to seeing or hearing anything. But somehow everyone knew who spilled the blood in Lynn Hall, and how the family was cursed.”

“What was the curse?” I asked, as entranced as anyone by such passions in our quiet world, and equally as skeptical.

“‘May yours do to you what you have done to me.’ That’s what my grandfather remembers.”

My father’s brows were up; he was thanking himself, I could see, for his wisdom in having only daughters. “And did he?”

Crispin shrugged. “Kill his father? He didn’t mention it. He has his grandfather’s face. So mine said. But others may remember differently. He seemed cheerful enough, if he did.”

My feet had begun to want out of their boots. “Father,” I said, and he rose. Crispin smiled at me again, raised his beer.

I turned, walked into the hot noon light, and saw him, with his pale gold hair and light-filled eyes riding his horse the color of buttermilk across the green grass, as if he were human as the rest of us, not something that had stepped out of light into time. I could not move; I could not breathe. And then as if he read my thoughts, his eyes met mine. Pale green seemed to melt through me, and I thought: How could they be any other color?

“Rois,” my father said, and his eyes loosed me, and I could move again.



Summer nearly passed before I spoke to him. I heard his name, now and then, on a wayward breeze. He had hired several villagers, including the indolent Crispin, to help him pull the fallen roof and the weeds out of the shell of the old hall. Crispin, I thought, worked out of curiosity about the man cursed to murder and be murdered. As the foundations began to appear, he hired other villagers to mortar stone walls back together, and to begin to clear the overgrown fields. Sometimes I drifted through the trees in the deep wood behind the hall. I caught a glimpse of him high on the stone walls, guiding a roof beam dangling from ropes, or in a room with three walls, studying a fireplace that stood attached to nothing. I never saw him closely. The loose angles of his body, the rolled sleeves and open neck of his shirt, the way he wiped carelessly at the sweat on his face and shouted for water, did not suggest either a man under a curse or something that had made itself in the summer wood and walked into the human world.

But I had seen him before he had a face.

The curse, among those whose memories had out-lived their teeth, became the subject of long and rambling argument on hot afternoons. Each variation, born in blood and fraught with danger, riveted our interest on the man putting his house back together, as if the inevitable hung over his head while he bent to his work, and we could only guess if he would be struck by lightning before he fell off his roof, or before Crispin dropped a hammer on his head.

“My mother met Shave Turl’s old aunt outside the weaver’s today,” Perrin said, at the end of a breathless day when the air seemed so heavy and full of molten light, everyone sweated drops of gold instead of brine. Perrin had been harvesting his fields; he had straw in his hair and stubble on his chin. We sat outside, watching the twilight birds wheel in the trembling air, watching for lightning. Laurel, as usual those evenings, worked at something dainty, sewing lace on a pillow slip, or embroidering a handkerchief with Perrin’s initials.

She raised her eyes at Perrin’s voice. Our father grunted and drew on his pipe. “He’s even got Shave working,” he commented. “Shave hasn’t worked three days in the year. His bones are too delicate. Some days they can’t even lift him out of bed.”

“His aunt said that Crispin’s grandfather remembers the curse all wrong, and his head is full of sheep shearings.”

My father grunted again, this time with more interest. “What does she remember, then? I suppose she was there in Lynn Hall, rocking beside the great hearth while the boy killed his father.”

Perrin shrugged. “Who knows?”

“Everyone seems to.”

“Go on,” I said impatiently, my arms tightening around my knees. I sat on the grass with my skirts trailing over my knees, my bare feet. I could smell the sweet crushed grass around me. “What curse does she remember?”

“She says Nial Lynn said to his son with his dying breath, ‘Sorrow and trouble and bitterness will hound you and yours and the children of yours until Lynn falls and rises again.’”

My father raised a brow. “He said all that in one breath?”

“What did he mean?” Laurel asked curiously. “Lynn falls and rises again. The house? The family?”

“Shave’s aunt couldn’t be precise about that.”

“It’s a convenient curse, with the house beginning to rise already.” My father tapped his pipe against stone. ~~I looked out over the darkening wood, and wished I were something wild that prowled~~ night. I would run through moonlight until I reached the hall, where the wild roses grew among the tame in the old rose garden. And then, from some secret place, I would see what he became when moonlight touched him.

I shifted restlessly. Laurel dropped a hand on my shoulder, said gently, “Can you find me lavender or roses — something sweet to scent my wedding cloth until I work on it?” She had sensed my impulses; I had already brought her so much lavender to dry that the whole house smelled of it.

I nodded wordlessly. Perrin sniffed at the air. “No rain, yet.” He fretted to be done with the harvest. Then the world could drown around him. Such stillness seemed charged, dangerous: There should be snakes’ tongues flickering dryly above the trees at least, and the low, distant mutterings of thunder.

Laurel leaned back. “It’s too hot to sew. My needle sticks in my fingers, and I can’t remember what I’m doing. I can barely remember your name, Pernel. Or is it Perekin?”

“Don’t,” Perrin breathed, his face averted in the dark. She laughed and put her hand on his arm. They were both growing odd, prone to uncertainties and superstitions about their love. I supposed they would be unbearable by the time they married. And then they would forget their doubts as easily as you forget rain that falls at midnight.

She took her hand away again, her laughter fading. “It’s too hot . . .” Her voice sounded unfamiliar; if I were an animal, I would have pricked an ear. I couldn’t see her; all our faces had grown dark. If I had been her flute, I would have played a minor tune. If I had been her, I would have made a restless movement in the hot, sweet night; I would have wanted to touch and not touch; I would have misplaced my name.

The next week unburied another curse.

Perrin had got his grain into the barn; he helped our father finish his hay-making before the rains came. Each evening the clouds on the horizon turned the color of bruises, or overripe plums; the air seemed to listen, as we did, for rain. But the rains did not come. Work in the fields, work at Lynn Hall continued.

Laurel, who had not yet seen Corbet Lynn, brought home the next curse. She had gone into the village to buy dyed thread and bone buttons and more linen, of which she seemed to require extraordinary quantities. She came to supper laden with gossip.

“Leta Gett broke another bone and is bedridden again. I asked Beda to make her some soup.” She passed me cold beef and salad; it was still too hot to eat hot food. Perrin and our father, drinking ale, both looked as if they had, some time that day, dunked their heads in it. Their eyes were red with weariness; their hair stuck up stiffly; they wore threadbare beards, which they rasped absently and often but would not shave off until the hay was in. We ate outside again, fat candles smoking around us to drive away the insects. “I thought you or I could take it to her tomorrow, Rois. You could bring her some wildflowers.” I made a noncommittal noise, my mouth full of radish. Laurel touched my arm and lowered her voice, which caught the men’s attention. “And here’s a bit of scandal — Crispin must get married.”

I swallowed what felt like a whole radish. “Who?”

“Aleria Turl.”

I sucked in breath, just like an old gossip. “Aleria — she’s a child! And plain as a summer squash.”

Perrin grinned. “She’s not that young, and she’s had her eye on Crispin since she was seven. Maybe that’s why he’s working so hard suddenly.”

“He’ll take the money and run,” our father grunted. Perrin shook his head.

“I’ll wager not. He’s still here. If he were going to run, he’d have done it the moment she told him. And he can’t argue it’s not his — everyone knows Crispin was all she ever wanted. And everyone knows her. He’ll stay.”

“He’ll run,” my father said briefly.

“He’s too lazy to run.”

“He’ll not make his own wedding.”

“He will,” Perrin insisted. “He won’t leave the place he knows.”

Laurel looked at me; I shook my head. I knew both of them and neither of them at all, it seemed. That Crispin would father a child with a girl with eyes like gooseberries and a mouth like a paper cut seemed inconceivable to me; that she might possess secrets and mysteries that caused him to veer wildly off his chosen course of doing as little as possible was something no one would have bet on. But there it was.

“A keg of your apple brandy to a cask of my beer,” said Perrin, who grew hops, “that he’ll stay to marry her.”

“When?” I asked Laurel. She was smiling a little, ruefully, at the bet, or at Aleria.

“Summer’s end,” she said. “How long can she wait? And that’s not all — I found another curse.”

“They’re growing,” our father said, slapping himself, “as thick as gnats.”

“What is it?” Perrin asked, chewing celery noisily. I leaned my face on my hands, staring at Laurel, wondering at all the imminent, invisible dooms hurtling across generations at someone who had not even been born before he was cursed, if he had ever been born at all.

“Leta remembered it,” Laurel said. “She had drunk some port for the pain in her hip, and she cleaned out her attic, as Caryl Gett put it.”

Perrin chuckled. “Go on. What did she find up there?”

“That Nial Lynn had cursed his son with his dying breath saying, ‘You are the last of us and you will die the last: As many as you have, your children will never be your own.’”

We were silent; it seemed, oddly, more terrible than the other curses. Perrin broke the silence.

“If that’s true, then who is in the wood rebuilding Lynn Hall?”

I turned to stare at him. But it was an idle question; he did not wait for an answer. He pushed himself up, sighing, and went to kiss Laurel.

“Thank you,” he said. “I must be up at dawn.”

“I know.”

“Will you miss me?”

“Will you?”

I got up at that point, and wandered across the grass. I heard our father call Beda to come and clean the cloth. I stood looking across the half-mown fields to where, I knew, Lynn Hall would be bathed in moonlight, broken and not yet healed, still open to light and rain and anything that moved.

“Rois,” Laurel called, and I turned reluctantly. A stray raindrop hit my mouth as I went in. A few more pattered on the steps, vanishing instantly on the warm stone. I looked up, but it was only a passing cloud, a reminder of what was to come.

I took the soup to Leta Gett the next day, wanting to hear more of what she remembered of the curse and Nial Lynn. Who told you? I wanted to ask. Were you there? Who was there, that saw the murder and told of the curse? What did Nial Lynn do to his son that drove his son to murder? And that made Nial so hated that everyone looked the other way while the murderer fled? And if everyone was looking the other way, who was there to see what happened and to hear the curse?

But Leta Gett was sound asleep. Her daughter, Caryl, took the soup and the wild lilies I brought for her. When I asked about the curse, she only shook her head and sighed.

“It was a long winter, and too many people had too little to do besides spin tales. Nial Lynn was

murdered, his son vanished, but no one was there to hear Nial's final opinion, if he said anything at all about the matter." Then she smiled. "It's all we're doing again: tale-spinning. Rois, will you make my mother a tea against the pain? She can't keep drinking port."

I promised I would. It gave me a reason to go back into the wood, to look for camomile and lady's slipper. I would bring back water from the secret well, I told myself, knowing that I would go there, not for Leta Gett's sake, but for the sake of memory. I would drink the sweet water and watch the light. . . .

I crossed the green and heard the flock outside the apothecary's door: ancient men and women sunning themselves on his benches while they waited for his potions. In the light their hair looked silver and white-gold, their skin softly flowing like velvet, or melting beeswax. The gnarled bones in their hands resembled the roots of trees. They sat close to one another, arguing intensely in their bird voices, not listening, just wanting to remember. They paused briefly, their eyes, smoky with age, putting a name to me, a place. And then, as I entered the apothecary's open door, they began to speak again. I stopped in the shadows to listen.

" . . . will die at the year, the hour and the moment I die, and so will all your heirs."

" . . . will hate as I have hated, and die as I have died, and your sons, and their sons . . ."

" . . . never speak your own name again, and no one will know you when you die, and even your gravestone will stand silent . . ."

"None of your name will raise this house again, nor will the fields grow for any of your name, for I bequeath all to the wood and that is my final will."

I felt hollow suddenly, as if I heard the dying man's voice among their voices. The apothecary, filling a cobalt jar, said lightly, "They've been like this for days; it's just something to do. Telling stories of the dead, to remind them that they are still alive. Did you want something, Rois?"

I shook my head, swallowing. "Just to hear them. Just an answer."

He paused, then corked his cobalt. "It's my guess Nial Lynn broke his neck falling down drunk, and his son was never even there. Will that do?"

*I bequeath all to the wood . . .*

*He has his grandfathere's face . . .*

I straightened, pushing myself away from the wall.

"It will do," I said, "until the next."

He smiled, though I could not. "Send Mat Gris in here, will you? And I could use more mandrake if you spot it."

"Yes," I said, remembering. "I know where it grows."

And that's where he found me early next morning: beside the wild raspberries and beneath the silver elm, digging up mandrake root in the shadow of Lynn Hall.



# Three

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Again I could not see his face; it seemed blurred with light. Then I realized that he stood with his back to the rising sun, and though light spilled everywhere around him, his face was in shadow. He squatted down beside me to see what I was pulling out of his land, and I could see him clearly.

His face, like everyone's, was burned brown by the sun; his hair, streaked with all shades of gold, fell loosely across his brow. His lashes were ivory. He regarded me curiously out of heavy-lidded eyes; their green, washed with light, seemed barely discernible, an unnamed color that existed only in that moment. His hands, reaching for what I held, were big, lean, muscular; hauling stones, uprooting trees for half the summer, had laid muscle like smooth stones under his skin. He looked older than Perrin, or maybe only his expressions were older.

"I've seen you," he said, "in the village." His voice was light, calm; his eyes said nothing more. He looked down at what he held. "Mandrake."

"It's for the apothecary," I said. I still crouched in the elm roots, staring at him. He seemed human enough; he met my stare and matched it, expressing nothing but mild curiosity, until I added impulsively, "They say you're cursed."

"Oh." He looked away then, smiling a little. "So I've heard."

"Well, which is it?"

"Which what?"

"Which curse? Which is true?"

He stood up then, studying the mandrake root in his hand. He did not answer my question. "What is this good for?"

"Sleep," I said, "Love." I rose, too, aware of the soft bracken under my feet, the cool, crumbled earth beneath, the scents our movements stirred into the air. "It's dangerous," I added. "I don't use it; the apothecary knows how."

"Is this what you do?" he asked. "Find things for the apothecary?"

"I find things," I said. "Herbs for cooking and for soothing oils, flowers to dry, roots and berries that may be useful, or may not be. I don't find things for anyone; I take what catches my eye, and then I give them away or use them."

"Are you a witch?"

The question made my breath catch, it was so unexpected. Then I laughed. "No, of course not. I just love these woods."

He smiled too. "Yes. So do I. You know my name; I don't know yours."

"Rois Melior. My father has that farm just east of your land."

"Ah, yes." He looked down at the root he held. "Don't you have a sister —?"

"Laurel."

"Laurel Melior." He said her name softly to the mandrake root; I heard the letters lilt and glide as if he spoke an unfamiliar language. Then he put the root into my hand. He glanced toward a sound; again his eyes caught light, and I thought, surprised by what I already knew: *Light does not always reveal, light can conceal.* "What is your father's name?" he asked.

"Mathu."

"Perhaps I will come and visit. It would be neighborly."

"Yes," I said instantly. "My father loves company. But I warn you, we are all very curious about

you. Especially me.”

He looked at me, smiling the little, pleasant smile that said nothing. “Why you?”

“Because you live in these woods.”

His expression did not change. *I saw you*, I wanted to cry then, *shaping out of light beside the secret well; you are not human, you are wood; you are the hidden underground river; you are nothing we know to name.*

“Not yet,” he said. “But soon.”

“Soon?”

“I barely have a roof on my house to live here.” He turned his head again toward voices — a shout, a laugh; his workers were arriving.

“Here comes your house,” I said, and his face opened then.

“I hope so,” he said with feeling. “At least one room, a door, a fireplace, and a roof over it all that won’t leak icicles above my head all winter.”

“You don’t act like a man cursed,” I said baldly; he shrugged the curse away, more interested in his roof.

“That’s in the past,” he said a little shortly, and I added, apologetic,

“Tell me if you want me not to dig on your land.”

“Oh, no,” he said quickly, and found my eyes again. “If you love these woods, you will do no harm. Come as you want, take what you like. Perhaps you can give me advice when I begin to clear the gardens.”

I nodded. He lifted a hand in farewell, and went to meet his workers; I heard him whistle to a mockingbird, and the bird’s mocking answer.

“I spoke to him,” I told Laurel breathlessly, later, as I piled roots and myrtle leaves and wild orchids on the table. She fingered the mandrake root curiously.

“Who?”

“Corbet Lynn.”

“Is this him?”

“What?” She looked up, then dodged the orchid I threw at her. She was laughing.

“They look so strange, these roots . . . like little shrunken images. Did you ask him about the curse or were you polite?”

“Of course I asked him. And of course he did not answer.” I moved around the table restively, frowning, seeing him as he wanted us to see him, then, confused, remembering what I knew he was. “He was rude. He wouldn’t be likely to tell some stranger how his father died, or what compelled him to return here.”

“No,” Laurel said thoughtfully. “You’re right.”

“But maybe with enough of our father’s brandy in him, he’ll tell us something.”

She gathered the orchids. “You’re very curious about him.”

“And who isn’t?”

“What does he look like?”

I opened my mouth, then closed it again. Words wanted to come out of me, words I had never used for any man. *Hid hair*, I wanted to say. *Those eyes. That warm skin. His hands.* I could not speak. But she told her; she stared at me, wide-eyed, and breathed, “Rois, you’re blushing.”

I felt the heat in my face then; I looked away quickly, wondering at myself. “It’s hot,” I said shortly. Laurel, tactful as always, studied the orchids as if they might suddenly take wing. But a little smile came and went on her lips. I leaned against the table, suddenly helpless in the heat, confused as much as ever.

“It’s nothing,” I said finally. “I’m not used to strangers. Around here, there’s so little new to look

at.”

~~Her brows went up, and then together. She said softly to the orchids, “I hope he is a kind man.”~~

~~“I don’t know. I didn’t ask for kindness. Just to wander in his wood.”~~

~~She lifted her eyes then, smiling again, but still with the faint, worried frown between her brows.~~

~~“Did he mind?”~~

~~“No. He loves the wood too, he said. He said I could go where I wanted . . .” The frown was fading.~~

~~I added, “He seems to want, above all, a roof over his head. He means to stay through winter. He means to stay.”~~

~~I heard her loose a breath. “Good,” she said briskly. “Then we can get to know him better.”~~

~~“The curses,” I said slowly, “deal so much with hate. There seems nothing about him to hate. He just seems — like one of us. Come home. But from some strange, distant place.”~~

~~“Some strange past . . .” She was, I realized then, every bit as curious as I. As who wouldn’t be, in that place where the little that happened loomed so large we were still talking about it down the generations.~~

~~I did not see him again in the wood then, though I could have; I could have looked for rosehips in the tangled gardens, or burdock seeds. But I could not pretend, under those strange eyes, about what I had truly come to find. I could have watched him secretly; I was afraid those eyes would find me. How could I hide anywhere in his wood?~~

~~So I roamed the wild wood, far from the sound of axes and hammers and voices, and waited for him to come to us.~~

~~He did finally, in civilized fashion, riding down the road after supper one evening on his buttermilk mare, carrying a handful of roses that had not been stifled by vines in the old garden for Laurel and me, and a bottle of fine port from the inn for my father. He had not accounted for Perrin, but he gave him a handshake and a friendly smile, and sat with us on the stone porch, as we always did, watching the day slowly bloom into night.~~

~~That’s how it always seemed to me: not the fading of a withered flower, but the opening of some dark, rich blossom, with unexpected hues and heady scents. I sat to one side of Laurel on the steps; Perrin sat between her and our father on the long bench. Corbet dropped onto the steps, near my father, his body turned a little, as mine was, so that he could see both us and the fading colors in the sky. In the twilight, his pale hair and loose white shirt were vaguely visible. The rest of us were hardly clearer. Our father was a scent of pipe smoke, a burly shape; Laurel was a wing of white, now and then, when she lifted her hand to brush away an insect, and the light cloth of her sleeve glided on air. Perrin was a voice, a faint scent of hay and sweat, for he had come as usual straight from the fields. I don’t know what I was: a voice, a pair of eyes, watching that pale head turned toward me, toward Laurel, toward our father, toward the night.~~

~~Then our father called Beda, and she brought us fat beeswax candles, and cups and my father’s brandy. Fire streaked the dark; moths flew toward the flames, dancing around them, compelled and doomed, until fire touched them and they dropped like autumn leaves.~~

~~Light and shadow slid randomly over our faces as we talked: now revealing one eye and concealing the other, now stroking clear a straight jawline, now hiding a smile or a little anxious frown. As the brandy passed, questions came more easily.~~

~~“So you are to be married,” Corbet said, looking from Laurel to Perrin. His head turned; shadow masked his eyes, but his smile remained. “Next spring?”~~

~~“It does seem long,” Laurel said, answering the question in his voice. “But Perrin and I have known each other all our lives, and there’s no reason for haste. I want to savor the expectation.”~~

~~“With every stitch in every fine sheet,” I teased.~~

~~“Yes, and lace on every garment. Also, Perrin has been building a cottage for us behind his~~

parents' house, so we'll have a place of our own."

"You live with them?" Corbet asked Perrin.

"They're getting on," Perrin said easily. "My father still milks — he loves his cows. But I take care of the fields and even some of the milking; his hands are getting stiff. My mother cooks; my older sister does everything else for them. So you see, there's not much privacy."

"I see."

"And the house will go to my sister, if she doesn't marry, though most of the farm will go to me. I'd as soon have a place of our own. I'll build onto it, as we have children. But building takes its time — you know that."

"Yes." Corbet swallowed apple brandy. "This is wonderful."

"It's my grandfather's secret, the making of it," our father said, and Laurel swiftly caught up the thread.

"Did they know each other? Your father and Corbet's grandfather?"

My father was silent a moment, his brows knit, either trying to remember or straining to be tactful. Corbet said lightly, "Everyone knows everyone, here."

"I think," our father said finally, "they did not get along."

We all laughed. Corbet, his head bowed so that his hair shone and his face slipped into shadow, said ruefully, "What a reputation the man had. Even his dog hated him, I've heard."

We were all silent then, questions trembling along the weave of fire and night between us: *Why was he so hated? Why did his son kill him? What was the curse? How did your father die? Who are you?*

"Why?" I asked finally, and his face turned to me, fire catching in his eyes.

He said slowly, "My father told me some things when I was almost too young to understand. He must have told my mother more; I never asked her. She was very beautiful and wealthy, and she married my father despite his cursed past. I have wanted all my life to come to this place."

"Why?" Laurel echoed softly. He turned to her, his eyes again in shadow.

"I don't know," he said simply. "Perhaps it is the land."

"Or perhaps the curse," I murmured; he heard, but did not look at me.

"Perhaps," he breathed. Then he smiled suddenly and sipped brandy. "But I am too busy to worry about tales, and if I am cursed, what can I do about it? Throw myself off my roof to avoid it?"

Our father chuckled. "There's the crux of the matter. What can you do? Wearing your grandfather's face, you've stirred up some very old memories. But those who remember have few teeth left, and their minds are full of old bracken and fallen leaves. By spring — unless you provide us with something as colorful as your father did — we'll have other things to bark at."

"Laurel's wedding," Corbet suggested.

"There's always something."

"Except," I said, "that we will always be secretly watching for that curse to befall you."

"Well," he sighed, "I hope it doesn't befall before I get the roof up."

He rose then, leaving us, I thought, no wiser than before. But as he said good night to Laurel, I saw his eyes again, and suddenly I no longer knew what time might bring: a wedding or a curse or even another season. The night flower had opened all around us, with its dark, elusive colors and rich scents, holding us in its ancient mysteries.

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