

ARC
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Labyrinth meets folk horror in this dark and romantic tale of a girl who wishes her baby brother away to the Lord of the Wood

Growing up in the small town of Winston, Pennsylvania, feels like drowning. Leah goes to church every Sunday, works when she isn't at school, and takes care of her baby brother, Owen. Like every girl in Winston, she tries to be right and good and holy. If she isn't, the Lord of the Wood will take her, and she'll disappear like so many other girls before her.

But living up to the rigorous standards of the town takes its toll. One night, when Owen won't stop screaming, Leah wishes him away, and the Lord listens. The screaming stops, and all that's left in the crib is a small bundle of sticks tied with a ribbon.

Filled with shame and the weight of the town's judgment, Leah crosses the river into the Lord of the Wood's domain to bring Owen back. But the devilish figure who has haunted Winston for generations isn't what she expects. He tells her she can have her brother back—for a price.

It's a bargain that will uncover secrets her hometown has tried to keep buried for decades. And what she unearths will have her questioning everything she's been taught to fear.



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my throat an open grave



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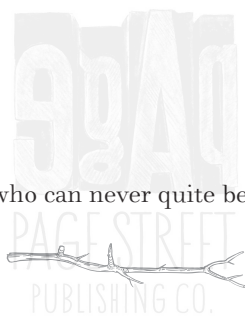
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For the girls who can never quite be good enough.

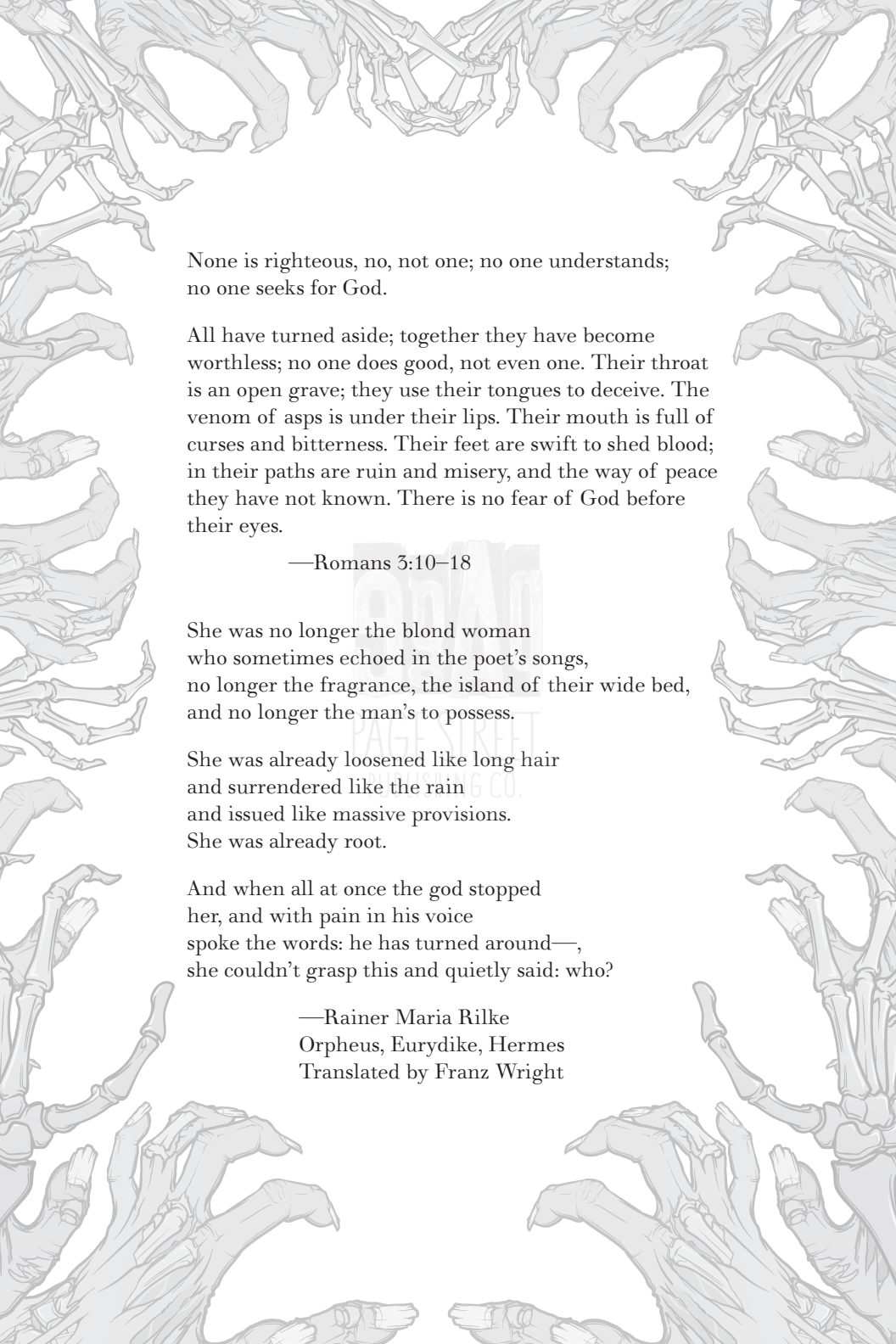




CONTENT WARNINGS

Blood, gore, death, animal death (deer),
animal gore (deer), body horror, suicidal ideation





None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands;
no one seeks for God.

All have turned aside; together they have become
worthless; no one does good, not even one. Their throat
is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The
venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of
curses and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood;
in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace
they have not known. There is no fear of God before
their eyes.

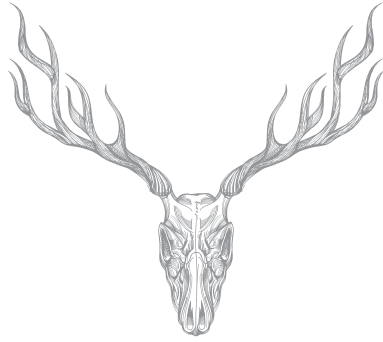
—Romans 3:10–18

She was no longer the blond woman
who sometimes echoed in the poet's songs,
no longer the fragrance, the island of their wide bed,
and no longer the man's to possess.

She was already loosened like long hair
and surrendered like the rain
and issued like massive provisions.
She was already root.

And when all at once the god stopped
her, and with pain in his voice
spoke the words: he has turned around—,
she couldn't grasp this and quietly said: who?

—Rainer Maria Rilke
Orpheus, Eurydike, Hermes
Translated by Franz Wright



One

When I think of purity, I don't think of the water that runs in the river past our backyard, or the water in the baptism font at the front of the church, where my mother and father and their mothers and fathers were baptized, all the way back; where I was baptized too. I don't think of the clean white sheets on my bed or the innocent face Owen has when he's drifting off to sleep. When I think of purity, I think of the bathtub; of cramming myself all the way in, all the way to the bottom, of squinching my eyes shut and opening my mouth and letting the water run in to clean me from the inside out. I think of screaming—but even more often, I think of inhaling. Letting go.

I haven't let myself think about it too much, not since last year, when the slope was too slippery and I was in danger of falling. Now, the last breath of summer is hot on my cheek through the window of my history class, and there's a fly buzzing against

the glass, and for the first time in a while, I again find myself thinking of drowning.

The thought is interrupted by a paper slipped under my arm, onto my desk. I peek down. It's from Jess, the only one who I'm back on regular terms with again. Few others were so keen to take me back in after last year, when I was pulled out for home-schooling; but it didn't take my parents long to give up on the institution of homeschooling entirely and throw me back in among the other kids my age.

River? the note reads. I glance up at the clock. It's a quarter after two, with only fifteen minutes left in the school day. But there's work to do at home, dishes to wash and endless piles of laundry to sort through, and Mom's shift starts at 4:30 so I need to get home to take care of Owen. But even so, I nod, just enough so she can see. An hour won't change the world—nor will it set me back too much.

A new school year. A new start. A new chance to prove that I'm normal, whole, acceptable to be friends with.

When the bell rings, I drape my bag over my back and wait for Jess to put her notes and folders into her backpack. Even though it's only September, even though more kids here drop out than go to college, Jess has her heart set on New York. She's the only one in history class still taking notes, the scratching of her pen on her paper the backing track to Mr. Cary's droning voice recounting the Battle of Gettysburg for the fifteenth time.

I don't comment on her notes like some of the other kids do.

If she wants to get out of here, escape Carver County and wash the Appalachian dirt from her skin until it burns, leave this nook of Pennsylvania behind until she forgets all of our names, I can't blame her.

Unlike the rest of us, she has a way out. A plan.

I follow Jess to her locker. I don't have anything to put in mine—I gave up taking notes and bringing my books around during the first week of school right around the time Pete Majors overdosed and the teachers stopped looking us too closely in the eye. We're seventeen. Basically adults. Should be able to get our own lives together, if we want.

She switches out her books and grabs a jacket, rambling about how she's going to homecoming in the next town over with one of the boys from their football team. Jess and I have been friends since we were babies, just about—our moms have always worked at the diner, sticking us in a booth in the back to be quiet when they had the same shift, and dropping us at one another's houses when they worked opposite shifts. Jess's face, her brown eyes and dark skin and curly black hair, are all as familiar to me as my own.

"Are you going to homecoming? Here, or at MV, or Uniontown?" Jess asks.

I shrug. "Probably not. Don't know anyone," I say.

"I can get you a date," Jess says, shooting me a sneaky look under her eyelashes. We don't talk publicly about how I dropped

off the calendar, stopped going to football games and driving to the next town over with her and a couple of other kids to see the movies. How I vanished for the entirety of last summer and our junior year, only to reappear like everything was normal on the first day back. It wasn't like I shut out everyone—Jess *did* see me, after all, even when I didn't want her to, but nobody else has. She knows I'm testy about that.

"I'm okay," I say, feigning a smile. "You know how shifts are. It's impossible for me to get a weekend off."

Jess shrugs, possibly because it's a lie and she can see right through it. Right through *me*. I've been working at the gas station in our town since I turned fifteen, and though I'm sure Hank would cover a shift if I wanted him to, I don't want to ask.

I go with her to her rusted out pickup truck, listening halfheartedly as she describes her homecoming dress and scrolls through pictures of it on her phone. She's talking to this guy, and I think he's nice enough—she's brought him by the gas station for slurpies on a few of my shifts—but my stomach is still tangled up in knots. I want to warn her, to tell her, to grip her face in my hands and press my thumbs into her cheekbones and scream until I can't breathe anymore.

But I don't. I get into the passenger seat, and when Jess goes through the drive-through at McDonald's she gets herself a Sprite and me a Coke and a large fry for us to split, and I try to find words to say to her as she drives the quick five-minute trek

to the park by the river. There, we settle on a log and drink our pops and watch the Youghiogheny rush by.

There's a peace here, on the river, with the sound of it drowning out everything else. It's like we sang in music class, when we were little: *Take me to the water, take me to the water, take me to the water, to be baptized.*

Intrusive thoughts always seem to find me here: I wonder what Jess would do if I slipped off the log, down the muddy slope, and slunk away into the rushing river.

"Where would you go if you left Winston?" Jess asks. It's a game we play, a twist of make-believe.

"New Orleans," I say this time. That's the trick—a different place every time. We pretend there's the option of escape from this town.

Jess snorts. "Why?"

I nod to the woods, spreading out endlessly across the river from us. "Different set of ghosts, I guess."

That makes Jess choke on her Sprite. "You shouldn't say things like that."

I shrug, but she's smiling now, and I feel the corner of my mouth turn up even as the lump in my throat grows harder. "What's *he* going to do? Eat me?"

It's a front. It's easier to pretend to *not* believe than to acknowledge there might be yet another deity out there that doesn't care. And Jess of all people, who knows me better than I know myself,

snorts. “He could, you know. They all could. Who knows what they’re capable of.”

“The Lord of the Wood?”

“Of course. And everything else in there.”

I take a long draw of my Coke and shove a fry in my mouth to hide anything else my expression tries to do. Jess isn’t good with silence, isn’t good at feeling like she’s wrong. But also—she knows me. She knows I believe in him with my entire crumpled, little heart, no matter how much I deny it. You can’t disbelieve something that patently exists.

“Cassie Lewis says she’s seen him. Recently.”

“Mmm.” So have I, but I don’t go around gossiping about it. Fundamentally, it doesn’t matter if the Lord is real or not: All he does is lurk in the woods and steal kids when it suits his needs. But that hasn’t happened in years, not since Maria.

“Surrounded by wraiths. Just across the river when she was up here, parking with Trent McCoy.”

“Did they . . . ?” I ask, caught by something else in that statement, my throat feeling even worse, more constricted.

“What? Cassie? No. Never.” She takes another sip, the ice rattling in her cup. “But the LoW,” she says, slipping into the nickname we used to use for him when we were kids. “Don’t laugh at me, but . . . I think he’s coming back. Coming closer. Choosing his next target. People have seen him lately.”

“Like who?”

“The night before Pete Majors had the fentanyl incident, they say he saw them too. Covered in blood, chewing on a deer heart in a clearing off the access path near the Grady’s.”

This time, I nearly choke. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Well, it’s not like we can ask him. And I believe what he said—he told me himself, at the party right before . . .” She swallows hard, then takes another sip. But I know what she means. He wasn’t the first person in our in our class to die, and he probably, terribly, won’t be the last.

“How was he sure it was the LoW?” I ask.

“Glowing eyes,” Jess says. I stare into the river, watching the water rush over the rocks. About fifteen minutes away, the Yough turns into a popular white-water tract, split into three sections. Jess and I have done it before, gone through the Middle Yough in bright yellow ducky boats, sunning ourselves on the hot vinyl with the oars resting over our hips on the lulls where there was no white water. I wish we could do that again, careless, our fingers trailing through the water as we hold on to one another’s boats with our other hands, as we talk about nothing.

“It’s been years since Maria was taken,” Jess says, swirling the ice in her Sprite. It crunches, over-loud, a human noise amidst all the nature. “Maybe he’s hungry again.”

It’s a fear that I can’t bear to examine. Not knowing what I know—not being who I am. Jess and I were at an impressionable age when the last baby was taken, when the last girl went missing;

we were nearly teenagers, right at the time when the warnings about the Lord grew louder and more frequent. The memory comes of that hot, sticky night that bled into an even hotter morning, summer in full bloom—I woke up to find Grammy sitting at the kitchen table with one of her paperback mystery novels, bleary, earlier than usual. *Where's Mom?* I'd asked, and she just shook her head, lips pressed tight, folding down the corner to mark her page. *Nowhere you want to be*, she'd told me. When she kissed my forehead, she said, *You watch yourself, Leah. Don't let yourself fall. Keep steady—he'll know if you aren't. He'll know, and he'll catch you, and once you're caught, there's no turning back. Keep up your prayers. Pray for that girl, and that baby, and pray for yourself.*

I try, desperately, to sound mocking and lighthearted. "Have you seen the LoW?" I ask her. "You live near the woods."

She snorts, but her fingers go instinctively to the dainty gold cross she wears around her neck like a charm of protection. "Everyone lives near the woods." She's right, but unlike Jess, I don't spend my free time gazing through the trees, searching for ghosts. I have other things to worry about.

Perhaps if she says yes . . . if she's seen those eyes . . . maybe I would've told her of the shadow in the woods, lurking at the edge of the tree line. But even thinking of it makes my palms sweat, my stomach clench.

"No," Jess says finally. "I've never seen him. You really don't

believe in him? Even with all the evidence? All the things he's done?"

I shake my head because, for the moment, my throat is too tight for words. Somehow, this is what we always end up on, no matter how little time has passed since the last time we deconstructed his existence: the Lord of the Wood, who we've been taught to fear. When I was a little girl, Grammy and Mom spoke of him in hushed whispers and threats of warning.

I didn't believe her then, not really. Not until I was on the edge of thirteen, a girl at risk—but not the girl he chose.

In Winston, we're taught to go to church every Sunday, to pray for our own souls, to do what is right and good and holy. And in Winston, we know that if we do not obey, there are worse things than death: The Lord of the Wood will catch us if we stray. His shadow is there in the spaces between the trees; his terrible amber eyes watch us all from just across the river, waiting for us to slip.

It's the threat hanging over all of us. He likes girls from our village, likes the ones who are wicked. Likes to lure them in by taking kids, stealing away the ones we can't live without. Perhaps, I usually think, when I talk of this with Jess . . . perhaps I should be more afraid.

"Do you ever wonder," Jess asks, very quietly, "about Maria?"

I swallow hard. Maria Sinclair, the last girl he led astray. I remember her, mostly in flashes: her pin-straight dark hair in two thick braids; the bright white smile of her school picture that

her aunt from out of town insisted on hanging around, on missing posters; Maria from down the street, wheeling her bike up the drive, nodding to Jess and me sunbathing in the front yard.

Jess knew her better. I barely knew her at all, and then she was gone, and everyone knew the absence of her better than anything.

“No,” I say.

Jess is unconvinced. She looks off into nothing, past the river, into the murky shadows of the wood, and I cannot have this conversation.

Stalling, I check my phone and find that it’s nearly four. “I should go,” I say. “Owen duty.”

Jess wrinkles her nose, but she gets up. I don’t have a car, and I live slightly too far away to walk. If I don’t have Jess to drive me, I usually take my bike, and I left it at home this morning. It was raining, so Mom dropped me off.

“I’m so glad I’m an only child,” she says.

“Jealous.”

We don’t resume our conversation about the Lord of the Wood when we’re on the winding road that passes through town, then follows the river to my house. I almost tell her I believe in him too, drop the posturing and spill it all. But I don’t. I don’t tell her that I think I’ve seen the LoW myself, with his glowing amber eyes peeking through the trees. Many times, probably, in the shadow of the wood near my house in the briefest span of

twilight, or in the curve of the road that follows the forest when we take the turns too fast, or even in my dreams.

I don't fear him, either. The Lord of the Wood, his servants and his wraiths, whatever ghosts people think live in the woods on the other side of the river—I don't care about them. I don't have the time. And maybe that marks me as an adult, a permanent resident of Winston, born here and destined to die here. Maybe the LoW appears to everyone—and maybe, it's only the ones who care about seeing him who can't hack it here, the ones who leave.

If I don't believe in him, he can't be real. If I don't believe in him, I might be safe. If I don't believe in him—

Outside my house, Jess hesitates, hands on the wheel, eyes on the road, like we're not pulled over. "I think of them all the time," she says finally.

"Who?"

"The girls."

There's a pause, a beat, and I—I almost ask. Her hand moves, going to that cross again, and she worries her lip with her teeth. My hands are clenched into fists, knuckles white, nails digging into the meat of my palms. I don't know why she keeps bringing this up—I don't know why she can't let it go.

"I think of him," I say, and it's the first honest thing I've said all afternoon.

Jess laughs, the sound short and hollow. "I thought you didn't believe in him."

But when I reach out, her hand is there ready to catch mine, and she squeezes so tight I feel my knuckles creak.

Of course I believe in him. And whatever she feels—I feel it too. A looming dread, a crackle of static in the air, like we're all waiting for the storm to descend.



Mom's not happy when I come in and ditch my backpack near the front door. She's pacing back and forth with Owen fussing in her arms, never fully frowning when she holds him, never fully able to be angry. She's been wanting Owen ever since I was little. A whole slew of kids that never came. She always wanted a big family, but instead, she just got the two of us.

"I'll put him down, but I've got to go," Mom snaps, barely looking at me. It's 4:15, sure, but the diner is five minutes down the road, and I don't remember the last time I went somewhere after school.

"That's fine," I say. "I'll feed him in a bit."

"You should've called if you were running late."

"I'm sorry," I say, going to the kitchen and searching for formula. There's not much left in the tin, but it's not like I can go out and get more—the small store in town is a thirty-minute walk, and I'm not putting Owen in a stroller and dragging him down the winding, sidewalk-less road. I'm too paranoid for that.

If anything happens to Owen on my watch, Mom will kill me.
“We’re low on formula,” I call to her.

“Right, because I don’t have eyes,” she says. “I hope your brother grows up to be just as smart as you.”

I wince, but let it go. It’s not worth pushing, not worth fighting. Mom brushes past me in her blue skirt and white uniform blouse. I watch her back as she disappears down the hallway to Owen’s room. While she struggles to get him to sleep, I gather up the discarded bottles from the living room and kitchen and wash them one by one. She leaves Owen’s door cracked when she comes back out.

“I’ll be home late,” she says quietly, leaving Owen’s door cracked. “Need to stay to close.”

“No worries.”

“Make sure he sleeps.”

“I will.”

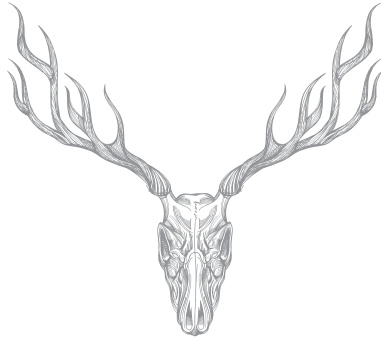
“And eats.”

“Of course.”

“And don’t you dare go out or have anyone over,” she says, pulling on her shoes. “I don’t have time to clean up after you, Leah.”

“Right.”

With that, she’s out the door, and I hear her noisy, old Toyota start up in the drive. I stare straight ahead at the window over the sink, the window that faces out over the river, out at the wood. I take deep breaths. I listen. After I feel like my heart is no longer self-destructing, I get started on the dishes.



Two

My brother Owen is nine months old. He was born in December, the night before the shortest day of the year, coming into the world with a full head of hair and ice blue eyes and a voice he hasn't stopped using since. An hour after I get home, when I've finished the dishes and I'm halfway through folding onesies and burping cloths and matching up tiny socks, he shouts from his room.

I swallow hard. But unlike a grown person, this call cannot be denied.

I go in and peer into his crib. He's squalling, his little face red and wrinkled, his hands mashed into fists that he waves into the air. I take a deep breath—I don't know what to do with him, how to hold him, how to calm him, even though he's alone with me just as much as he is with Mom, and far more than he is with Dad. But I grit my teeth, gather my nerves, and reach into

the crib. He's heavy, heavy and squirmy and hot. He does not go easily against my shoulder, but instead scratches at my face and pounds on my shoulder with his tiny hands and nails.

"I know, I know," I murmur against his sweaty head. "I wouldn't wake up either, if I didn't have to."

He does not listen to me, nor understand. He just yells and yells and yells.

I do everything I can think of: stroke his hair and change his diaper, feed him half a bottle, rock him in the chair in the corner of the living room, even though I get queasy with the press of his warm skin against mine. But nothing happens. It's as if he knows I'm not Mom, knows I have no idea about any of this. Sometimes, in the dark of the night, when I'm in my room next to his and he's screaming like this, I wonder if he hates me even though he's not old enough to feel anything like hatred. I wonder if he'll grow up scowling at me, if he'll speak to me like Mom does, with derision and cruelty, as soon as he learns how to walk.

"I'm trying," I say to no one.

Soon enough, I can't take it. I put him in his Pack n' Play in the corner of the room where he sits and screams and yells. Mom has taken him to the doctor so many times, even though we don't have the insurance to pay for visits like that—but if the baby needs something, Mom makes whatever sacrifices she needs to. I guess that's what it is to be a good mother.

But there's nothing wrong with him. Maybe he just hates me,

hates us, hates the fact that we brought him into this world and kept him.

I try and read a book, an old, cozy mystery from the collection Grammy left me when she died, but it's impossible. I even try to go through some of my English book, or watch a cooking show, but nothing can drown him out. I go to the kitchen and fix another bottle.

When I look up, I swear I catch a flash of amber across the river, just from the edge of the trees. It's probably a deer, or a fox, or even a charm hanging from a tree. It's probably not him, the Lord of the Wood, the name they whisper in town with even more reverence and fear than the name of God.

It's defiance alone that keeps me at the window, staring out with a glare that I hope would frighten even a deity away. He's taken from Winston many times before, but I can't find it within myself to care. The Lord has never hurt nor helped me, so I don't have the time to spare worrying about him.

If he's not real, he can't—

The particle board underside of the counter gives when I dig my nails in, stopping the thought in its tracks. I wish I had some name, some religion that I believed could save me. I wish I could look to the stars and whisper the name of my own personal god and be whisked away somewhere new, somewhere that didn't hurt so much.

But I can't, and it doesn't matter if the LoW exists if he only lurks in the forest and lives on in bad memories and folklore, and

in the *real* world, Owen is still crying. He takes his bottle as reluctantly as he does anything else, and by the time the sky turns red with the light of the dying sun, he is fussily closing his eyes in that sleepy way that signals bedtime.

I bathe him and dress him, touching him always but as little as possible. I dress him in a brown sleep sack with little bear ears, even though one ear is hanging by a thread. When he's cuter, it's easier to handle him.

He starts crying again in earnest the second I lay him down. But now, I can deal with it—we have a routine, one full hour of the day when I can understand him, when he can't hate me with his scrunched face and tiny punching fists. I open the window to let in the cool air and settle in front of the little electric keyboard piano.

This room used to be mine, before I moved into the one next to it, barely bigger than a closet. There was no space for my keyboard, so it lived here, and I was practicing very quietly one night when Owen was three months old, and he just went quiet behind me—then, I realized how easily he fell asleep, with the sound of me playing. After that, it became a ritual, the only thing I could conclusively get to work—but only in the hours when night is falling, only in the dim haze of twilight.

I turn the volume down and begin to play. Immediately, Owen quiets, his cries turning to small squeaks, then eventually, to silence.

I run through scales, through arpeggios, through a nocturne that I knew fully once. I started playing piano when I was in kindergarten, back when Dad had a job at the mill before it shut down for good. Before he took the trucking job that kept him from home for weeks on end, with only a scant word between assignments.

I play even when I'm sure Owen's asleep. I used to sing, too, before Owen was born. Look up chords to any song I heard on the radio, figure it all out, play like it was the only thing that could get me out of Winston. And maybe it could—I was good. But I don't sing anymore. I'm too tired.

These hours, when Owen is finally asleep and I can let go of the feeling that he hates me, when we can coexist, are my favorites. I can play piano, the muscle memory coming back with every chord, until it's all a wash of music. Until everything else fades away.

Sometimes, I play until Mom comes home and she catches me here and scolds me. She thinks I'll wake the baby up. But truthfully, I think my playing is the only thing that keeps him sleeping most nights.

Not tonight. My heart feels odd and heavy. I think again about what I talked about with Jess at the riverside. She'd said Cassie Lewis was out with Trent McCoy, just as casually as it was nothing, and I'd let it slip by as if it *was* nothing. But I remember when I was the one out with Trent.

It started with a flirtation over winter break a few years back, going to his basketball games with his jersey number written on my cheek in black face paint. That was all it should've been—a flirtation, and maybe a kiss at a party. It shouldn't have extended to the river, to his car. When I close my eyes, I can recall how his leather seats smelled of peppermint.

I don't want to remember any more. Anything else is jagged, too much, a reminder that Trent cast me off just like everyone else. I was just a girl whom he could waste his time on before moving on to the next.

I leave off playing piano. There's no point—Owen is asleep. My work is done.

Like one of the Lord of the Wood's wraiths, I haunt the house. Unlike the wraiths, I'm productive, switching out laundry and vacuuming floors, cleaning the bathroom until it's up to Mom's standards. Only then do I let myself curl up on the couch and half-heartedly look through my history homework. But shock of all shocks, even that can't hold my attention. I lie back on the couch, staring up at the water-stained ceiling, thinking of nothing. Of everything.

Jess asked if I wanted to go to homecoming. Maybe I do—but I can't afford a dress and I have nothing nice enough and no one to go with. I don't *have* to go with anyone either, but if Jess is taking a date, then . . . well, I've sworn off dating, so there is no *then*. It's nice to pretend, though. To imagine it. Dressing up,

going out, Jess's arm linked in mine. Laughing, like we used to.

I don't realize I've fallen asleep until I jolt awake, heart pounding. I must've been having some nightmare that I don't remember—but no. There's a crackling noise coming from down the hall, from where the bedrooms are. If I focus, it sounds like fire.

I leap up and tear down the hall. My mouth is full of bile, my heart pounding in my throat, and I can't stop hearing the crackling, smelling smoke in the air. I burst through Owen's door—

And nothing is wrong. There's no fire. The crackling has stopped. At least, that's what I think until I turn on the light and peer over the edge of the crib, and then I'm screaming before I even know what's happening.

There's a bundle of sticks in the place where Owen slept only an hour ago. They're tied together with white ribbon, laying in the middle of the baby mattress. There's a scattering of petals over them, red and white, unfamiliar.

Hideously, in a moment that I cannot take back nor deny, the first thing I feel is a terrible rush of relief. Like his whole life has been a dream.

But that is an irrational reaction, one that I would regret if I wasn't so deeply rotten--and I don't know if I'll ever forgive myself for that. I don't know if I'll ever feel as guilty about the relief as I should.

When I press my hand to the place where Owen slept, it's still

warm. That detail is enough to call me back: because Owen is not here and he was only minutes ago, and I spring into action. Owen *has* to be here.

The Lord.

I turn the mattress over, look everywhere in the room, under the bed and down the hall but I know the truth: *He's gone, he's gone, he's gone.*

The Lord has come.

He takes babies from from our homes in Winston, leaving behind a changeling of sticks or ice. And though I haven't put any trust in God since I was fifteen, I whisper prayer after prayer under my breath as I tear our tiny home apart. It's a lesson in futility—even if I didn't believe in the Lord of the Wood, I'd know that—but I have to do it. I have to do *something*.

There's no sign of Owen in the house, so I take my flashlight and search the perimeter outside. His window is wide open, wider than how I left it, but that only deepens the fear in my stomach.

Above his window, on the siding of our house, there's a dark handprint marring the white. I lean close enough to see the outline of where it drips, to note that it is still wet. I can't tell if it's blood or juice or paint—but in the growing darkness, it is red-tinged black.

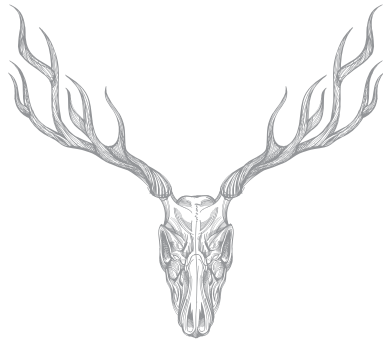
Distantly, past the river, in the woods, I hear the high-pitched sound of a woman's laugh.

TORI BOVALINO

A few feet from Owen's open window, a bit of brown fabric is caught on the grass. I stoop down and turn it over and over in my hands. It's the bear ear from his onesie, the thread torn as if it was left here to taunt me.

Owen is gone.





Three

When Mom comes home, I'm still out in the field between our house and the river, scouring the grass for any sign of him, hoping desperately I'm wrong. But there's a bloody handprint above Owen's open window, still wet, and I know that I can't be.

"Leah?" she shouts from the drive, barely illuminated by the dim bulb of the porch light. "What are you doing?"

I look at her, and the words flee from my mouth. Oddly, for a flash of a moment, I'm sure she's going to think that *I* did this.

But Mom grew up here. She's the one who told me the stories of the Lord of the Wood in the first place. Other towns might have scares and spooks and ghosts that haunt the bridges and long stretches of empty road, but here in Winston, we have the Lord. Always have, always will.

Some say he's a faerie that snatches babies from their cribs

to crunch their bones. Others think he's a ghost, too—maybe a father who lost a child, or maybe an immortal murderer, hun-kered in the wood. And of course there are the holdovers from the panic that don't think there's just one Lord of the Wood, but a whole slew of them, a cult out there primed for devil worship.

It doesn't matter what or who he is, or how he and his fol-lowers have come to be. What matters is that he takes. Every few years, just when there's a lull of peace, just when people get too comfortable, he comes back again and takes one of our own.

This time, he's opened his terrible claws and slipped through the window and taken what is *mine*.

When Mom gets close enough to see me, to see the wind whipping the sheer curtains in Owen's open window and the bloody handprint on the dirty siding of our house, her face twists into a mask of rage.

She doesn't say anything, not in words. The cry that comes from her mouth is visceral, horrible, as she throws herself toward the window. She leans in, her body half enveloped in shadows, tangled in the curtains.

Mom turns to me, and I cannot look at her. I only wince when she gets close and grabs me, when her nails dig into my cheek. "*You*," she hisses, her breathing unsteady and raw with despair. "You *fucking* let him go, Leah. How could you do this? To your brother? To *me*?"

“I didn’t know,” I insist. “I didn’t hear—I didn’t see—”

She pulls away, jerking my chin hard. She doesn’t feel like my mother anymore—in her eyes is something unknowable, a dark pit of grief that I cannot comprehend. I want so badly, in this moment, to be someone else.

“You’ll pay for this,” she says.

Please, I want to beg, grab her hands, fall to my knees and bury my face in her skirt like I used to when I was a scared child. Don’t blame me. Don’t make me do this. Don’t make this burden mine.

“Mom—” I plead, grasping at her hand. She pulls it away, quick and final, and for just a moment, I see her for who she was before Owen was born.

“You knew the risks,” she says, looking out toward the dark, snaking river and the wood beyond. I wonder if he’s watching us, the Lord who takes without warning, who ruins us all in the end. “You know what I’ve gotta do,” she says, her voice even softer.

I nod, vicious tears clawing at my throat. I refuse to cry. I will not be weak, standing before her, understanding the weight of what she’s about to sacrifice.

“Please don’t,” I say, but my voice carries no weight. “I can find him. I can fix this.”

I wish I could see the part of her that was a girl, growing up in the shadow of this town, before she let it decide to own her. Consecrated in the waters of the church in the watchful gaze of

the Lord of the Wood's domain, in this place where the forest takes more than it ever gives back.

"Of course you'll fix it. You'll have no choice," she says. "But you'll have to do it right."



Mom is up the rest of the night, making calls. I roll into fetal position in my threadbare nightgown on my twin bed, staring out at the moon through the window.

Mom said I should bathe and pray, offering my sins up. She knows what's going to happen tomorrow when dawn breaks, and I guess I do too. Not the details, not yet; but the general idea of it has been scolded into me since I was old enough to know what rules I was never permitted to break.

If the Lord of the Wood keeps Owen, his soul is lost to us. He'll die out there. They'll sacrifice him, or eat him, or keep him among their cult—whatever they do, we're not getting Owen back.

But I lost him, and I have some odd sense of power here. As long as I act quickly, according to the rules of Winston, I can go appeal to the Lord of the Wood. Get him to grant us mercy, if that's possible.

Except, I don't know if it *is* possible—no one does. Every girl who's been sent to bargain has never been seen again.

I remember her. The last girl. The last time the terrible maw of the wood opened; the last time the jaws of the Lord gnashed down on a girl that was *ours*.

The only time I was old enough to remember, it was with Maria Sinclair and her baby. It was a hot summer night, hotter than this one, and she'd gone to bed with the baby next to her after drinking a bit too much whiskey. When she woke, she found she was clutching a half-melted hunk of ice to her breast. Something about the story never struck me right—perhaps it was because Jess knew Maria from dance, and Jess swore Maria wasn't that type of girl; perhaps it was because Maria always seemed too *nice* to catch the eye of someone like the Lord.

After Maria was gone for a year, the rest of the Sinclairs left town.

I wasn't old enough, that time, to go to the church when dawn broke. Just shy of thirteen, I wasn't allowed to see the truth of it. I don't know what waits for me, what they'll say or do, or how they'll send me away.

What I do know is that Maria Sinclair and her baby were never seen again. Sometimes, when I go to a party with Jess at the Grady's or the Tate's or the Pingo's, when the night is dark and the fire is crackling down to embers, someone claims that they've seen her ghost.

Then, I used to half believe it, but now I hope they're wrong. I hope that when they sent Maria over the river and into the

wood to claim her baby from the Lord, she took the first trail she found and ran somewhere far, far away, reinvented herself as many miles from the reaches of Winston as she could get. I hope she didn't die in those woods, because if she did, there's a good chance that I'm going to die too.

They say he's the devil. They say he's hideous, the Lord of the Wood, with gnarled skin like the root of trees and the eyes of a wolf, ready to open his jaws and swallow a young girl whole. Or sometimes, they say he's the most beautiful person ever seen, with a full head of curls colored like the leaves when fall comes roaring over the mountains.

My door opens, and I shut my eyes and tuck my hands into fists under my chin like I've been sleeping this whole time.

Across the tiny room, I hear Mom breathing. Her breath hitches, just a bit. She crosses the room and I hold my breath. Her fingertips trail over my forehead, pushing aside the baby hairs stuck to my skin with sweat.

She doesn't do this anymore—she's not tender with me, not now that there's Owen around. Once, I was her baby too.

She didn't just lose Owen to the Lord of the Wood. I'm responsible for him—he was taken under my watch. If I don't come back, she's losing me too. Her daughter, her firstborn.

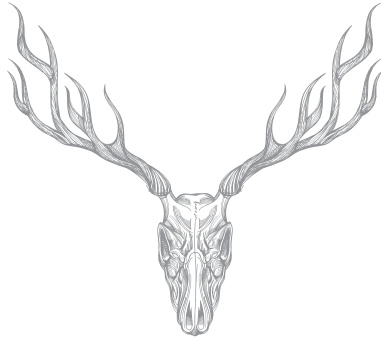
She loved me once, just as much as she loves Owen now. I have to believe that.

Mom takes her hand back and draws a shaky breath. I barely

hear her leave, shutting the door behind her. I don't open my eyes.

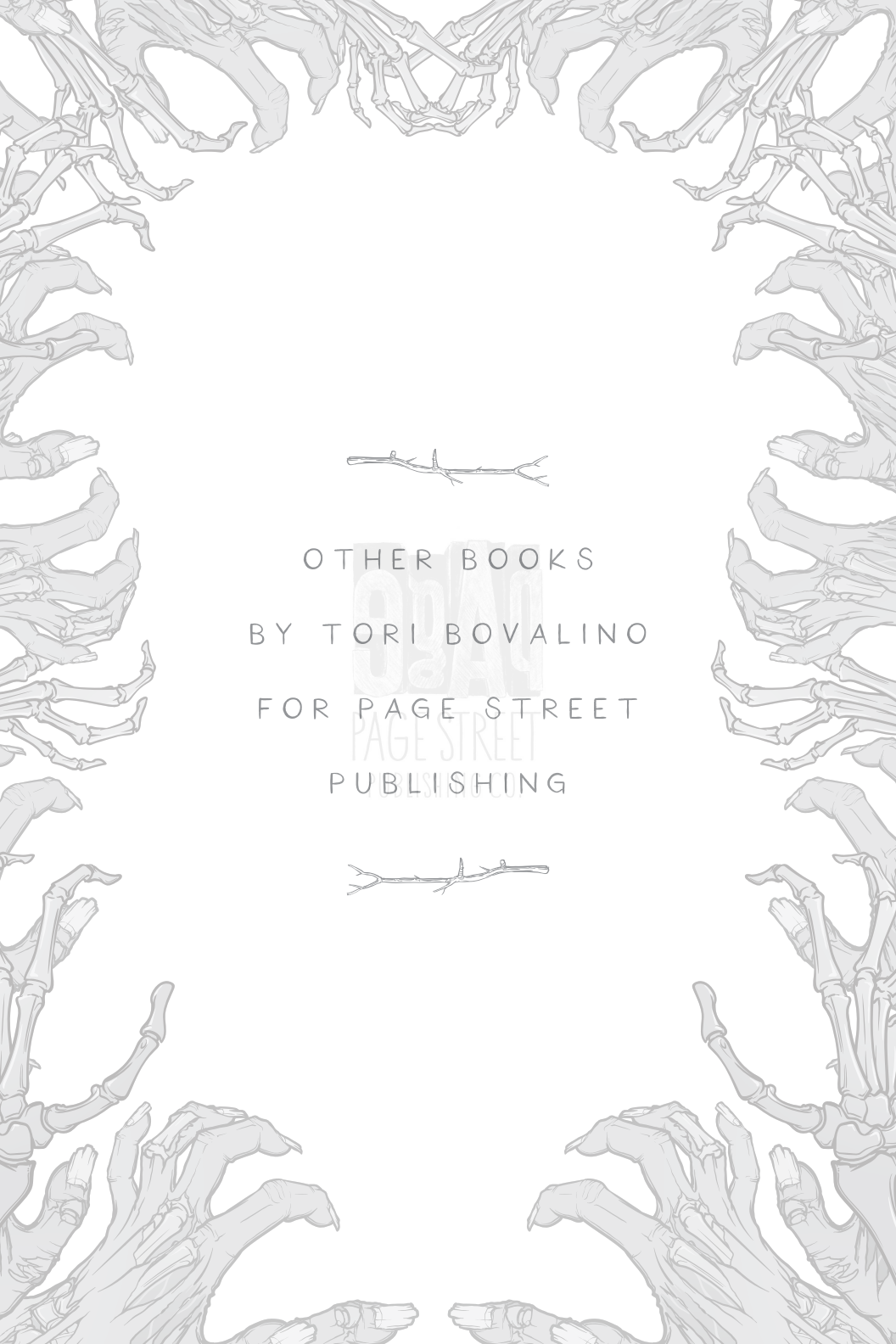
If I don't come back with Owen, she will never forgive me. It would better if I didn't come back at all.





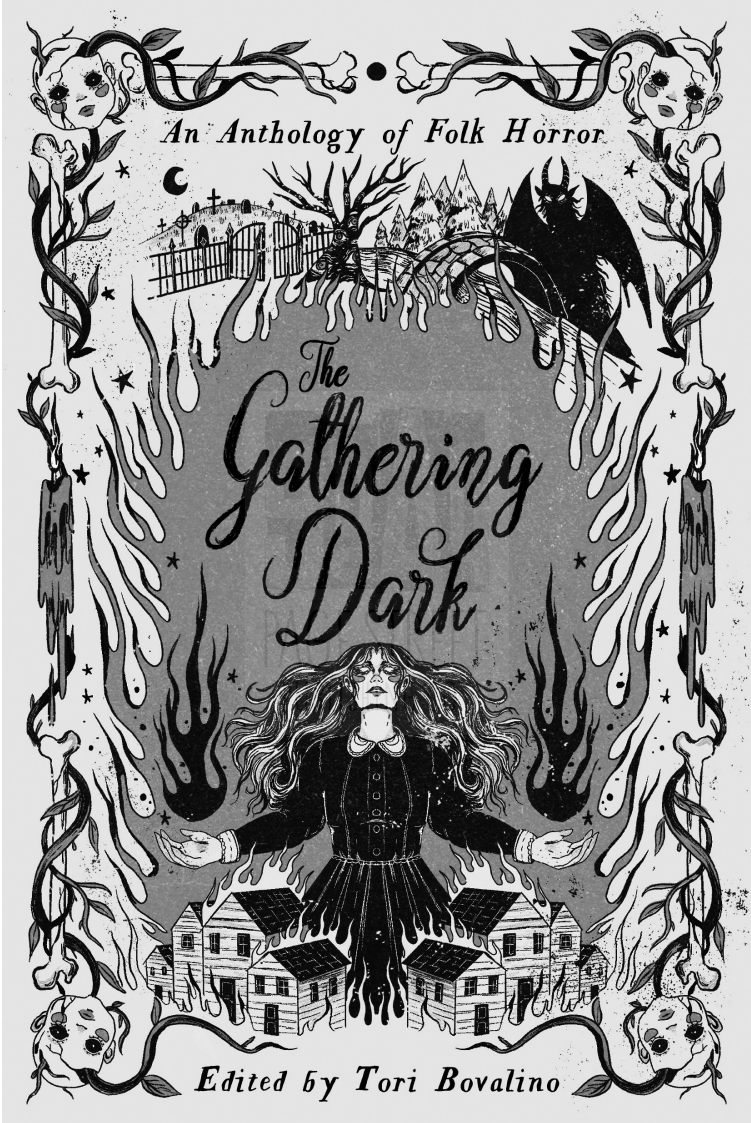
About the Author

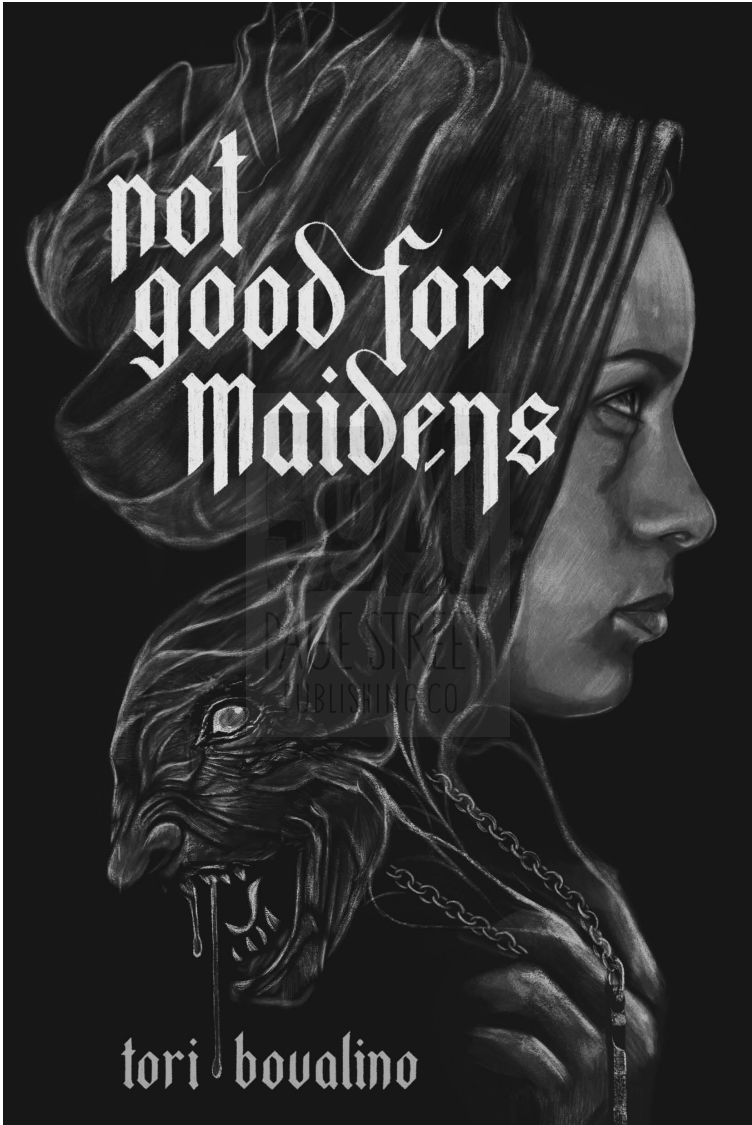
Tori Bovalino (she/her) is the author of *The Devil Makes Three* and *Not Good for Maidens*, and edited the Indie-bestselling anthology, *The Gathering Dark*. She is originally from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and now lives in the UK with her partner and their very loud cat. Tori loves scary stories, obscure academic book facts, and impractical, oversized sweaters. She can be found on Instagram as [@toribovalino](#).



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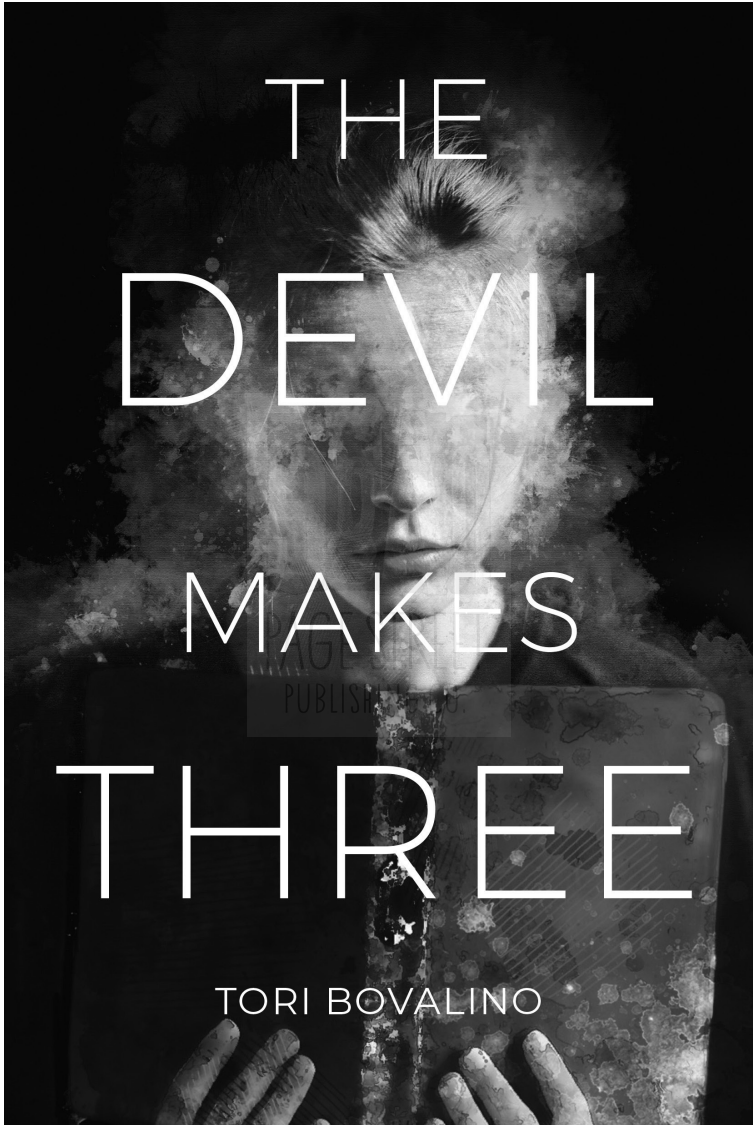




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