



For Xavier

Kathy Jeffords

Action/adventure, Mystery

When she closes her eyes and recalls that day, she sees herself as a spectator, crowding around, gawking at the scene.

In her memory, she cranes her neck, stands on her tiptoes, straining to see past the tall man in front of her.

But then comes the pounding in her chest, traveling straight to her temples. She sits up in bed, gasping for breath, drenched with sweat and the truth of that day: She had not been one of those staring. She had been the one they stared upon. She was the spectacle.

Yes. Yes. She can still hear the fine silk fabric of her gown rip as she sinks to the ground. She feels the cobblestones, unforgiving, uneven, digging into her knees. She hears the howl erupt out of her throat, a savage sound like a wild beast caged inside her since birth, finally breaking loose. Like her very soul violently detaching itself from her body, in a mad struggle to flee pain too great to bear.

Henry knelt down next to her. She hadn't noticed him. She wailed on, incapable of silencing herself, incapable of even knowing she should. Her fingernails dug into her own scalp. The amiable expression she always wore cracked like a ceramic mask hurled against a wall. Her pleasant face, grotesquely twisted by gut-wrenching agony, made children clutch their mother's skirts. They asked in fearful whispers if she'd been cursed, terrified she was transforming into some sort of monster before their wide eyes.

None of her royal subjects could fathom that beneath the crown perched atop her head and behind the title of Queen, there was merely a human. A human with a fragile heart which, like any of their own, could be broken.

Henry roughly clutched her upper arm. "That will be enough," he declared, with quiet anger. The guards brought her inside. With his mortar and pestle, the apothecary blended a medicinal paste, advising her chambermaid to place a spoonful under her tongue, as necessary.

The soothing mixture of herbs and oils lulled her into a deep slumber.

She appeared at peace, except for the tears that seeped from beneath her eyelids in steady rivulets down her cheeks. Her tears soaked the bedsheets, dripping onto the floor, leaving puddles of sorrow the maids mopped up like they would any other spill.

After three days, she woke, feeling hollow, as if they'd sliced her down the middle, removed everything inside, and sewed her back up, an empty shell. As if they'd drained her of her emotions and perhaps her blood.

A ghost. She felt like a ghost. As if she, too, had been slain.

Henry stood next to her as she recited an apology written by the castle scribe. She asked their public to forgive her for her unseemly behavior and selfishness. She sounded genuine, humble, worthy of grace, as she humbly confessed that she had been overcome by sorrow. She acknowledged that this tragedy and unbearable loss belonged to the entire kingdom, and she had been remiss to handle the grief, even momentarily, as if it was hers alone.

During the burial, she and Henry both sat with stoic faces, dry eyed and unmoving. Like the statues in the garden. Around them, everyone wept. A misty rain fell. The skies were gray, the day drained of color. Their golden haired, bright eyed boy was gone and she believed it possible he'd taken the sun with him.

The castle would be haunted, but she was not the ghost. She was alive.

And time went on.

She hardly looked at Henry, scarcely spoke to him, and when she did either, it was out of duty, not love. Not love, not ever again. If there had ever been love between the husband and wife at all.

When the inevitable happened, she ignored it as long as possible, before summoning the seamstress. She acknowledged her condition with a wordless glance down at her swelling abdomen. A few days later, the waistlines had been let out of her dresses and gowns.

One evening, when her stomach was too round to allow her to be comfortably seated, Henry, at the opposite end of the long table, raised his goblet and said,

“May we be blessed with a strong and healthy heir.”

“We were already blessed with a strong and healthy son,” she whispered, her voice too low for her words to reach Henry’s ears.

“Did you speak, Lenora?”

She looked at her plate, pretending she hadn’t heard him, either.

“May we be blessed with a strong and healthy heir,” he repeated.

“And may we not kill him, as we did Xavier,” she pushed the words through gritted teeth.

We, she’d said, for she was just as responsible as Henry. There was a wealth of blame to go around, but she had been Xavier’s mother. She should’ve prevented the tragedy. She should’ve saved her firstborn.

“The lad was a weakling, or he would be with us still,” Henry said, as if he spoke about something as insignificant as a squabble between peddlers at the marketplace.

At once, her eyes became moist and she stood, planting her palms flat on the wooden tabletop, leaning forward and glaring down at the most powerful man in the world. She did not shake. She did not even blink.

She had assumed the fire within her had been extinguished, the embers long gone cool, but a sudden fury was aflame in her bones, burning away the numbness she’d clung to. Her face flushed with heat and her words were tinged with sparks. “He was a boy. A child. You sent him off to be slaughtered.”

“He was the appropriate age to train; the age all princes begin training. Myself included. Tradition is tradition, just as law is law.”

“Perhaps it is time for both to change,” she said. It was not mild enough to be a mere suggestion, but she was

powerless to make it a threat.

“There will be no change. A prince must prove his worthiness of the title bestowed upon him. The lad found his death due to his small stature and weak will, both traits acquired from your lineage, Lenora. We’ll hope that will not be the case with our next heir. And you’ll watch your tone with me.”

He spoke as if her precious boy had just been a lackluster first attempt. A disappointment easily brushed aside. As if with more practice, they’d do better.

“I feel that my weak will may hinder my capability to control my tone so I shall adjourn to my quarters.”

By her bed, she dropped to her knees, as she had the day she watched the guards bring home Xavier’s limp body. His head hung back, his blonde hair streaked with crimson, matted to his forehead. His skin almost white. His lively blue eyes, closed, never to open again.

An ache gnawed at her ribs, as if her chest were collapsing inward.

She battled the memories away, as if they were demons that would devour her if she allowed even one to creep in.

Still kneeling, she pressed a hand against her stomach and prayed that the child inside was a girl. A golden haired little princess whose training would comprise nothing more dangerous than learning to waltz.

That night, Lenora dreamed of Xavier and when she woke, his laughter echoed in her ears, so close yet out of reach, left behind in her sleep. She inhaled and his scent filled nostrils, as if he’d just been in the room, scampering out seconds before she’d opened her eyes.

In that instant, she knew. Her prayer would not be answered.

She would have another little boy.

Another little boy who would turn 10.

Another little boy who in all likelihood would not turn 11.

“It’s time for you to take your place in this world, to learn what you were born to do, and to set out performing the task fearlessly,” she remembers Henry’s decree, as a guard placed a weapon almost too heavy for Xavier to

hold into his small hands.

Xavier had looked at her, questioning.

She'd felt compelled to throw herself in front of her child, to snatch him up in her arms and shriek that he was not ready. That she would not allow it. But Henry had also observed her, and she froze under his gaze. Kings reigned supreme, holding absolute authority. And in their kingdom's past, more than one queen had simply disappeared, her throne taken with little fuss by another.

"You'll slay dragons. You'll be a hero," she had told Xavier, solemnly, hoping he didn't hear the quiver that contradicted her assertion.

Would he have survived if she'd presumed he could? Had her lack of faith in his ability secured his fate? Had her little boy set out, knowing his mother didn't believe in him?

"They've located him!" she recalled the first shout and the reckless surge of hope she'd had before the next.

"They're bringing the body!"

The tearing of her gown. The cobblestones. The howl.

Again, she shook off the vicious demons as they attempted to drag the past into the present.

She instructed a chambermaid to have a carriage be sent to fetch her sister.

"I need her here for the birth," she explained, though she didn't have to explain anything to the servants. But some servant or another would pass her reasoning along to Henry, their King. Otherwise, he might question her directly about her need for Janessa's presence and she feared he may see the deceit or sheer determination in her eyes. Lenora had decided: She would never again allow another one of her children to be handed over into the claws of certain death.

Where she had failed Xavier, she would save the brother who would never get to know him. Curse the traditions and the laws and curse Henry himself. She would not spare their second son from meeting the same fate at their first. Even if she herself had to brandish a broadsword and slay every dragon that dared roam this earth.

Lenora and her sister, Janessa, were identical twins. Two babies born at the same time was unheard of. There

were murmurs of witchcraft. It wasn't natural. Their parents were warned that one sister would surely grow to be evil and they should sacrifice the youngest, to rid themselves of the curse clearly cast upon them.

Their mother and father had refused, horrified at the thought of harming either of their daughters. Both girls grew into lovely, sweet-tempered young ladies. Naturally, there had been pranks and trickery throughout their youth, since the one could always get away with pretending to be the other. Every hair on their heads, every mannerism, and every freckle was the same. They even blinked in unison.

Most eligible males of marrying age found the uncanny sameness of Lenora and Janessa eerie and repellent. But one certain young lad was smitten from the moment he laid eyes on them. Spoiled with by extravagant wealth and taught from the womb that anything rare was worth owning, Henry, still just a prince in those days, found himself bewitched by the girls.

Handsome, charming, and strong, Henry had single-handedly slain 18 dragons and loved nothing more than recounting each duel. The head of the first dragon he killed was mounted in the throne room, a trophy to remind anyone who might dare forget how brave and fearless he was.

Janessa had been enchanted by Prince Henry and the thoughts of all the wonders life with him might bring.

Lenora remained disinterested and that first difference between the identical pair made her shine brighter in Prince Henry's eyes. Lenora was another impossible battle for him to win; another opponent to take and display in the throne room.

Janessa, though sullen and distraught, couldn't blame her sister. The Prince didn't ask you to marry him. He chose you. There was no question, no opportunity for yes or no.

Janessa's everlasting love for her sister had far eclipsed her brief bout of envy.

She married a nice man and moved to his village, having three sons, none of whom would ever see a dragon, let alone come close enough to feel its scorching, fetid breath against their cheeks or know the horror of teeth, cleanly slicing their flesh like a blade before ripping out their guts.

When Janessa arrived at the castle she once yearned to call home but now despised, she hurried to her sister's side.

“I need your help,” Lenora said, once they were alone.

“You fear it will be a boy.”

“I know it’ll be a boy.”

“If it is a boy, we’ll say it was a stillbirth. I’ll take him and raise him as my own,” Janessa said without hesitation.

Lenora knew Janessa would love the baby as much as her own sons. She’d already witnessed that capability, with the way Janessa had loved Xavier. Her eyes still grew damp when she thought of her lost nephew. Every time she looked at her own children, noticing that they’d grown a bit older, an inch taller, she became overcome with sadness. She’d never get to see Xavier as a man.

With an almost imperceptible shake of her head, Lenora dashed Janessa’s hopes.

“Henry wouldn’t believe it unless he saw the dead infant’s body with his own eyes. He would figure out our plot. You would have to take your entire family into hiding and we both know what a skilled hunter he is. He would find you and put your heads in the throne room with the dragon’s.”

“We could get on a ship and...”

“No, Janessa. I love you fiercely, sister, and I will not let you to sail far away from me, never to be seen again. I will not put you in danger. And I swear with my entire being: I will never allow you to feel the fear of your sons’ lives being in danger.”

“Curse this kingdom’s foolish and wicked customs!” Janessa cried.

“I need you to remain calm, Janessa,” Lenora said.

“The dragons aren’t a threat to us. Even if they were, King Henry has an entire battalion of trained soldiers at his beck and call to defeat them. But instead, he persists in demanding this sadistic ritual of sending children to taunt creatures a hundred times their size in the name of proving their manhood, to earn their birthright. He used your child as bait, Lenora!”

“Janessa, to pull this off, we must both remain calm,” Lenora said, imploringly. She knew all too well that her sister spoke the truth. The dragons inhabited a wasteland of brittle trees and swamps across the vast river and

had never attempted to cross it, had never harmed a human soul unprovoked.

Dragon hunting was a frivolous and deadly sport that only males of royal blood were permitted to partake in. It was a privilege, Henry said.

Lenora imagined the dragons were docile and harmless until they perceived a threat against their young.

Then: Fierce. Vicious. Unrelenting.

Much like herself.

“You’ve a plan?” Janessa asked.

Lenora nodded. The twins may have inherited weak wills and small statures from their ancestors, but those same ancestors had also passed down clever brains. The sisters couldn’t overpower or outrun the King, but they could outsmart him.

“I’ll do whatever you need,” Janessa pledged.

Lenora beckoned her closer, whispering her secrets into Janessa’s ear. Janessa bent, listening, nodding, and when she straightened back up, she smoothed her skirts and said, “I believe I’ll go into town and visit with some old friends I’ve not seen in a while. Perhaps I’ll stop by the market. So many folks to see and catch up with.”

For the first time in a long time, Lenora allowed herself a bittersweet smile.

Within a day, the kingdom buzzed. Beyond the thick walls of the castle, Lenora heard a constant hum of excited voices blurring together.

She’d stayed in bed since Janessa arrived, claiming to be too tired to come to meals. Janessa dined alone with Henry, exchanging pleasantries between bites as if all were well, though it was a struggle not to spit the food she was chewing in his face each time he addressed her.

When Henry got around to checking in on Lenora’s well-being himself, she saw the gleam in his eye and knew what he would say before his lips parted.

“What is happening in the kingdom?” she asked, with a voice full with feigned innocence. “There seems to be

more hustle and bustle than usual.” She yawned. “It’s keeping me from sleeping well.”

“A dragon has been spotted in the river,” Henry said. “There is something different about this one, Lenora. According to descriptions passed around, this dragon is by far larger than any of the others. They say its eyes glowed red. A villager saw it attack a traveler from out of town, who was passing through.”

“Did they find the poor soul’s body?”

“I doubt there was much left to find. A witness said the dragon snatched him up and likely swallowed him whole before the fellow even knew of the beast’s existence.”

“Oh, I’m glad you gave up hunting,” Lenora said, each word thick with utterly fake concern. “You’ll send the army to take care of it, won’t you?”

“Lenora, you know I must be the one. The kingdom is mine to protect. This dragon is bold, straying from its territory and into ours. It’s my duty to find it and return with its head.”

“Henry, please. Our child is coming soon. How long will you be away?”

“As long as necessary. If you give birth while I’m away, Janessa is here. I trust she’ll care for you far better than I ever could.”

Lenora feebly protested.

“You will be fine in my absence,” he pronounced, with the certainty of a man who always got his way, turning on heel.

I will revel in your absence, you fool, she thought, relaxing against her pillows. She’d been so worried Henry would suspect she and Janessa were plotting. But Henry’s hunger for game, for competition, for the impossible kill, blinded him to anything other than what he sought to conquer.

Her only regret was that the ferocious and aggressive beast, a dragon that might defeat the undefeated King Henry, didn’t exist. The slight possibility Henry might not return would be a welcome comfort. Then she might not have to do the unthinkable.

An hour after Henry left Lenora's chambers, Janessa scurried to report he had left the castle, as well. She'd watched him and a few trusted men cross the river herself.

With their Queen confined to her bed and their King away, Lenora felt certain the castle's staff were all in the basement, indulging on the expensive cheese and rare ale.

Satisfied no one would notice her leaving, she rose and Janessa took her place. They arranged pillows on top of Janessa's middle, creating a convincing plumpness beneath the covers.

"You should let me come with you," Janessa said.

"No," Lenora said. "You need to be here. The chambermaids are certain to come around, just to keep up appearances they're sticking to their routines and not taking advantage of Henry's absence. You tell them you're fine, just exhausted, and wish for peace and quiet so you can rest."

"Be safe," Janessa said. "Be careful."

"All I need to be is resolved and that I am."

The crone lived in a shack deep in the woods. No one knew where she came from or when she was born. She'd been old as long as anyone living remembered and seemed to have always existed. She was called Magpie because of her penchant for anything that sparkled or shined, like the bird of the same name. Whether she was a witch or a magician or wizard or something else altogether, it was common knowledge if you wanted to make something happen, she was the person to see.

Most folks shied away. If you turned up on Magpie's doorstep, you better be ready to pay the high price she demanded. While she appeared to have no origin, Magpie's well-known history involved several unfortunate men mysteriously transforming into toads while paying her a visit. She did not appreciate having her time wasted.

The ramshackle dwelling seemed to tremble when Lenora rapped on the door which creaked opened immediately, as if the crone had been expecting her.

Almost hidden amongst her wrinkles, her squinty eyes bulged out, suddenly round and wide, at the sight of Lenora's crown.

"Your Majesty, I am honored by your presence in my humble abode," Magpie said, bowing before motioning

for Lenora to enter.

She couldn't tear her gaze from the gleaming gold atop Lenora's head.

"I need your assistance with a matter that must require the utmost discretion. No one must ever know what we discuss," Lenora said, briskly.

Magpie grinned wide, displaying her jagged, yellowing teeth. A ruby was embedded into the front tooth. Secrets were the most valuable treasure.

Magpie was trustworthy because she was greedy in the same way Henry was competitive. She thrived possessing knowledge no one else did. You could share your darkest desires with Magpie, knowing she'd never spill.

"Have a seat, my Queen," Magpie said.

Lenora hesitated only a moment before telling the odd and ancient woman what she needed.

She saw Magpie's throat bob up and down as she swallowed, listening, growing nervous.

Magpie shook her head, her knotted hair swinging. "The King will have my head. And yours."

"Who'll tell him? I know you certainly won't and neither will I," Lenora said.

She reached up and removed her crown and placing it on the table, sliding it towards Magpie. "What a pity I lost this while walking in the forest. Finders keepers, isn't that what they say?"

Magpie's hand moved towards it, unbidden, her fingers hovering close, but not yet touching the glimmering points.

She did her best to conceal her obvious giddiness. "That's a beginning. But it'll cost more than that. There'll be another family involved and the midwife. So much trickery. I may not be able to pull it off."

"Your abilities are limitless, Magpie."

Flattery from the Queen herself went a long way, and the satchel of coins and jewels Lenora brought along pushed the old crone over the edge of any indecision.

“The midwife is discreet and owes me,” Magpie said, her words quick and cryptic.

Lenora watched as the bent figure put on her cloak and left, without divulging further details.

When she returned, she brought with her news that five other women in the kingdom were pregnant and the time for them to give birth drew nigh.

She held up a vial she’d carried along on her outing, concealed in her pocket, half empty now. “They’ll be in labor very, very soon.”

“As will I,” Lenora said, taking the potion from Magpie’s outstretched hand, and swallowing what remained of its bitter contents to induce her own labor.

Before the large hand on Magpie’s stunning bronze grandfather clock ticked again, Lenora was howling in pain, just as she had the day Xavier died.

In Magpie’s ramshackle cottage, Lenora’s second son was born. This one she wouldn’t lose. This one would not be taken from her.

This one she would give away.

“I’ll leave you alone with him for a few moments,” Magpie said, slipping out into the back yard.

This baby boy was robust and pink and dark-haired, like Henry himself.

“You’ll live a long and happy life,” Lenora promised, her lips against his soft ear. “You’ll be loved and you will be safe.”

She held him tight, naming him Jacques, after her father, even though she knew within a day, he would be renamed.

She couldn’t regret the ten years she’d been blessed to spend with Xavier, but she deeply regretted not going to such extreme lengths for him.

Lenora heard muffled voices outside the door, and Magpie entered, carrying a bundle that wriggled in her arms.

Magpie gently placed the second baby next to Jacques on Lenora's chest, and for just a moment, Lenora held both of them in her arms.

Weeping quietly, she relinquished the baby she'd given birth to, the boy, to Magpie, who carried him outside to the waiting midwife. The other mother had been given the one concoction to induce labor and another that would cause her to sleep until the midwife returned and woke her with the news that she'd given birth to a healthy baby boy, completing the exchange.

Lenora hoped her heart was as big as her sister's and that she, too, could love another woman's baby as if it were her own.

"My daughter," she said, stroking the newborn's blonde head.

Henry returned to the kingdom a week later, having slain three more dragons, but still dissatisfied, never having lain eyes on the elusive one he'd gone for.

Janessa greeted him at the gates. "Lenora gave birth while you were away."

"The boy is healthy?" Henry asked, assuming.

Janessa shook her head. "But the beautiful baby girl is healthy."

Henry went to Lenora's chambers and without a glance at the newborn princess, he said, "Next time, we'll have a son."

"Next time," Lenora repeated, her mouth still coated in the foul aftertaste of the goblet of sour liquid Magpie gave her before she left to bring the baby home.

"Are you certain?" Magpie had asked. "This cannot be undone. If you drink this potion, it will ensure you can never bear another child."

"I'm certain," Lenora said, then gulped down every drop.

She decided to name the baby girl Princess Nora, after herself, and she loved her more and more each day, so fiercely that some days she could almost forget this child wasn't the baby she carried and gave birth to.

Every day, the mother and daughter took a long walk together. First, Lenora carried Nora in her arms, then

when the girl was old enough, she let her walk on her own next to her, holding her hand. They often explored the woods, always stopping within sight of a ramshackle cottage and leaving a small purse in the crook of two limbs of a giant tree there.

Henry grew more and more obsessed with the dragon that continued to elude him and began spending more time away on hunting trips than he did ruling the kingdom.

After returning to her family in the village where they dwelled, Janessa was soon pregnant again and gave birth to her fourth and fifth sons, the second known set of identical twins.

Magpie continued keeping secrets and making things happen, looking forward to the days when she glimpsed the Queen and the tow-headed princess out her window. Those afternoons, she counted the coins Queen Lenora left her. The first bundle had come with a note. I'll never be able to repay you for what you've already done, but I have one more thing to ask of you, the first line read.

Magpie was always slightly tempted to keep all the gold to herself, but she kept her word and did as the Queen requested. She evenly divided what she was given five ways, and took what wasn't hers to keep to four houses in town, leaving the money anonymously on the back doorsteps of each.

Nora shared her birthday with four other children in the kingdom, all dark-haired boys. Only the midwife would ever know which one had been switched at birth, and though she was often curious, Queen Lenora was certain it better she not know. Besides, it didn't matter which had been hers. She would ensure that each of the boys was provided for, that their every need was met, for the rest of their long, happy, safe lives.

Read more fairy tales on Fairytalez.com