

The Brides of Dark Wood.

By Peter Walsh

Introducing Ellie Brand



I fled into the wet night and headed for the mass of trees. I had no plan other than to just get away. Escape from the house and my crazed captors.

The rain though light rapidly soaked the white shift I wore and the cotton began to stick to my nude body beneath it. When I reached the trees I put my head down to avoid the low branches. If I could get out of sight I might have a chance. I could hide in the wood until dawn and the light.

I was enduring the major handicap in the fact that my wrists were bound in front of me and I had a tightly tied cloth gag in my mouth. I might be able to free myself later but now I just had to flee.

The barrage of trees and shrubs impeded my frantic progress at every turn. The ground under the carpet of leaves grew soft and glue like. I quickly lost both of the slipper like shoes that had made up my flimsy footwear. The stockings slipped down my legs and gathered round my ankles. I had to keep going regardless.

I stumbled deeper into the damp dark of the wood. I was cold, wet and terrified. The gag made breathing difficult but I could not stop.

I halted briefly and managed to free my feet from the wet stockings. I nearly lost my balance. The latter could be fatal.

Sticks and stones stung my bare souls as I continued my flight. The rain striking the leaves of the trees masked any sound of pursuit.

The drops falling from the night sky further plastered the sodden cotton of the shift against my cold skin. The nipples on my unconfined breasts were stiff and my wet hair was getting in my eyes.

Then suddenly I was clear of the branches which seemed to reach out and grab me. I came to an awkward halt and found myself standing in a large glade. I was already very afraid but the glade was somehow familiar and suddenly my fear was taken to a new level.

There was a circle of trees around me. I blinked the rain out of my eyes and looked about me. The trees of the trunks were very broad and the ancient growths stretched far up into the night sky.

Something made my count the trees. There were thirteen. All save one of them had something orb-like protruding from the trunk at about eye-level. They were glowing with a muted green light.

With the wet grass under my bare soles I shuffled closer and found the source of one. I looked at it and could not believe what I saw.

No gag could stifle the scream that came from deep inside me.

My terror froze me to the spot and I was not aware of the rush of bodies behind me. I was almost grateful for the drugged cloth that suddenly covered my face and sent me to oblivion.

One

The chill sunlight of the spring dawn woke me gently. My eyes flickered open and the day came into focus.

I stretched my body under the warm folds of the duvet in the massive bed which took up nearly all the available space in the room.

I heard the sounds outside of the day outside. Another North London morning was getting underway and despite my comfort I had to join it.

I showered and did all the usual start of the day girly things. I checked my phone and smiled over the text Max had sent me. I had only known him a short time but he was already making me happy and we had just gone to the next stage beyond hand holding and kissing.

I always liked to get to the gallery early and took my breakfast of fruit and cereal bars to eat there. Hair and make-up sorted I chose my outfit for the day. Black jacket over a short lace dress, black tights and my comfy brown leather ankle boots.

My shoulder bag was bulging. I suppose I carried my life in that bag. I locked the front door of the flat and tried not to make too much noise going down the wooden stairs to the front entrance.

I stepped out into a glorious morning. Clear skies and the slight chill on the air was a tonic. I looked back at the slightly ramshackle house that was home. I lived in a flat at the top of it. It was tiny and space was a real issue but that was part of the charm. All seemed within easy reach.

I walked with a spring to my step to the corner and the bus was on time. It was still quite early but the bus was nearly full. I settled into my own little world for the twenty minute ride. I got my phone out and checked my Facebook page and thought about what to add that did not sound too mundane.

My name is Ellie Brand and I am twenty-four years old. I am happy with my life. I like the arts, sunny days, red wine, short skirts, Italy, most types of music, all types of shoes and chocolate. I live in the Highgate area of London and work in a small but thriving art gallery in Kentish Town. I have a good degree from Exeter University and a good circle of friends although I often like being on my own. I have recently started going out with Max who is a musician and also very cute and very sweet. My parents live in a small town in Kent with my much younger brother Ewan who I adore.

As usual I bought my coffee from the Italian place three doors up from the gallery and smiled through the daily ritual of compliments on how beautiful I look from the Father and son owners.

I am beautiful but I have no desire to use this blessing as any type of currency. My gently dark skin, green eyes, fine features, curling black hair and slender body might charm the world but being open minded and being considerate of others is what really matters to me.

I had worked at the 'One World' Gallery for just over a year and I loved it. The gallery was a showcase for ethnic art from all over the globe where it was displayed and sold. I input all the right codes into the security system and stepped inside. I found my desk and put my bag and coffee down and took off my jacket and started my working day.

'One World' was the brain child of David and Julia West, dashing and attractive academics who were also TV personalities. They scoured the world for art from semi-

forgotten cultures and brought it back to sell in their gallery while making BBC Four documentaries about it in the process. Most of the money from the sales was sent back to the communities it came from.

I worked alone mostly. David and Julia kept in touch via e-mail and twitter. I updated the website, conducted the private viewings and organised the events for the press. If I ever needed assistance I brought in some paid interns from the London University.

That morning I had a private viewing at ten for a couple, Mr and Mrs August who were interested in the work of a young Afghan artist that the gallery was promoting. Recent art from that troubled land was something of a rarity. It was a new treasure amongst so many at the gallery.

At ten minutes to ten I unlaced my brown ankle boots and slipped on a pair of black high heeled shoes which I kept at the gallery. They perfectly complimented my lace dress and black tights. I liked to look smart and the sound the ten centimetre heels made on the gallery floor made me feel sexy and self-assured.

Mr and Mrs August were punctual. A black Mercedes with tinted windows arrived outside the gallery in the private parking space for which Westminster Council charged us a small fortune.

Mr and Mrs August were fifty something, very well spoken and very well dressed in a slightly conservative way. Mr August had a pleasant face and a warm smile and was tall and looked very fit for his age. Mrs August was also tall and fit looking although there was something slightly odd about her.

Something I could not quite put my finger on. Something dark?

‘I’m Ellie, welcome to One World’.

We shook hands.

‘You are very beautiful Ellie-may we call you Ellie?’ Mr August was underway with the compliments.

‘Thank you’. I responded. ‘Please do’.

Mrs August looked me up and down and smiled. I was not sure how to take it? Was I being appraised?

‘You are an interesting fusion of dark and light Ellie’. Mrs August then said.

Were they here to look at the art or me?

‘My mother is from St Lucia’. I told her.

She nodded slowly at my words.

I offered them assorted beverages which they declined. I then smiled and gestured that they now follow me on the gallery tour. They followed in the wake of my clicking heels. I sensed Mr August was watching my legs.

The viewing proved to be difficult. They were hard work. They showed little interest in what was on display despite my best efforts to engage them. The Afghan paintings were virtually ignored. However they seemed very interested in me.

I got a string of compliments on my looks and charm and how the website photograph did not do me justice. It was quickly getting tedious. I wanted this visit over.

‘Well? Have you seen anything you particularly like?’ I asked them with my best smile masking my frustration.

‘We have’. Mr August replied.

‘We have indeed!’ Mrs August emphasised.

This was odd. I was waiting for more information but none came. They stood there looking closely at me and smiling. I sensed something predatory in their smiles.

‘What exactly?’ My voice sounded a little nervy.

‘Why you of course!’ Mr August then said.

‘Yes Ellie, you. You will do just fine’. Mrs August almost purred.

Whatever was happening was not good and I wanted no part of it. I stepped around them and made for the desk with the panic button to the Police. My heels clattered loudly and I never made it.

They swiftly seized me and held me in a painfully strong grip. I struggled and opened my mouth to scream. A white cloth pad suddenly exploded in my face covering my nose and mouth. The pad was damp with a strange smelling substance which made me feel dizzy upon immediate contact. As my struggles grew weaker so did my hold on consciousness. The last thing I heard before I blacked out was them laughing.

Two

I first became aware of the fact that I was in something that was moving. I was lying on my side and my movement was restricted. I felt dreadful coming out of the drug induced slumber. My head hurt and my body felt stiff and heavy. Also I was covered with something. It was soft and warm. A heavy wool blanket? I tried to move, I couldn’t. I tried to speak, I couldn’t. I then swiftly realised that I was bound and gagged. Mr and Mrs August were kidnapping me!

My wrists were secured behind my back with something made of plastic which was very tight. A similar binding was about my ankles. My mouth had been taped. I was bundled up in a blanket on the back seat of a car. I still wore the short lace dress and black tights but my shoes were missing.

I wriggled under the blanket and tried to free my head from its confines. I succeeded and blinked up at the backs of the heads of Mr and Mrs August. Mr August was driving.

Mrs August turned and smiled down at me.

‘So you are awake? Did you enjoy your sleep Ellie?’

I glared at her furiously and made angry sounds through the layers of tape which sealed my mouth shut.

‘Beautiful eyes! Beautiful eyes!’ Mrs August exclaimed. ‘Like green fire’.

Mr August cast a swift backward glance.

‘Yes-beautiful eyes’.

I continued my muted protest. At that moment I was too angry to feel scared. These two dreadful people had come into my place of work, kidnapped me and tied me up! The gallery owners David and Julia West would create hell about it, so would mum and dad and Max too! Plus the police would be involved.

Mrs August tapped a long pale finger against my taped lips.

‘Hush, my sweet Ellie, we shall be home soon. Dark Wood beckons. Just be still and quiet until then’.

She reached down and pulled the blanket back over my head.

It was then that I started to feel scared.

Three

The car came to a halt. Doors opened and closed. I heard my kidnappers talking and then the crunch of feet on gravel.

The door at my feet then opened and still trapped in the blanket I was hauled out and hoisted up onto a strong shoulder. It had

to be Mr August doing the lifting and carrying. I wriggled as much as I could and made muffled protests.

‘Be still Ellie’. Mr August told me in a calm yet authoritative tone of voice. I was then still.

I was carried inside a building and up some stairs and finally deposited on a soft springy surface-a bed?

‘Stay there Ellie, we shall attend to you shortly’. I heard Mrs August say.

A door closed and a lock clicked.

The bed seemed comfortable and almost as big as my own back home. I rolled around trying to free myself from the confines of the blanket but somehow only made it worse. I forced myself to be still. My gag and bindings were impossible to break free from. I just lay there and dreaded what was to come.

I had lost all track of time when my kidnappers returned. I was rolled out of the blanket and the sudden onslaught of the light hurt my eyes. I blinked up at the man and woman standing over me. I saw a flash of something in the woman’s hand. The plastic binding about my ankles was cut away, quickly followed by the one trapping my wrists. I was then brought up to a sitting position. Fingers were at my face and the tape was peeled off my mouth. I was then handed a glass of iced water. I gulped it down, spilling some down my front.

‘Thank you’. I said and handed them the glass back.

‘What lovely manners! You are indeed a delightful girl Ellie’.

I looked up at my captors for the first time and gasped. The man and woman standing before me bore no resemblance at all to middle aged couple who had abducted me.

‘Surprised?’ Mrs August asked me.

‘Very’. I choked out.

A woman of thirty or so years stood before me. She had shoulder length dark hair, clear skin and very dark blue eyes. She was lovely but in an oddly dangerous type of way. She wore a high necked white blouse under a brown leather jacket, skinny blue jeans and brown knee-high boots. The girly part of me liked her boots.

The man was her mirror in many ways. Taller and stronger and dressed in the same smart casual manner. He too had the distinctive dark blue eyes.

‘Amazing what a little illusion can do’. The woman told me.

‘Mr and Mrs August?’ I asked. My voice trembled when I spoke.

‘They don’t exist and never have’. The woman told me.
‘Names are mere labels anyway’.

‘Who are you? Why are you doing this to me?’

‘We are just servants of some higher order and you have been chosen as worthy to serve them too’. The woman said.

‘I’ll be missed and people will look for me. There were security cameras all over the gallery’. I ventured, trying and not succeeding in subduing the fear in my voice.

‘Of course but you will never be found and any CCTV footage will be useless-Mr and Mrs August do not exist’.

I was visibly shaking now. Tears were starting to gather in my eyes.

‘Please don’t kill me! I have a mum and dad and a little brother! I don’t want to be here-please-’.

‘Ellie! We are not here to kill you’. The woman sat down on the bed next to me and took hold of my hand. ‘Quite the opposite, we are here to grant you a long and very special existence’.

I had so many questions but the woman put a finger to my lips.
'No more for now. You must bathe and change'.

Four

My place of captivity was an ancient country house that had undergone considerable modernisation. It was like one of the examples on shows of property envy that seemed to be on the TV all the time.

Fields to the front and only one road in and out. There was a large patch of very dense woodland at the back of the house. It was a bit spooky, a dark mass of trees.

'That is Dark Wood'. The woman had told me. The name came with added shivers for me.

I had bathed and changed my clothes for the ones my captors provided. The bath had been nice and the bathroom itself seemed nearly the size of my whole London flat. I had been told to put all my clothes into a black plastic bag. I did so and the woman took it from me. Wrapped in a towel I had returned to the bedroom and found my new attire waiting for me.

I now stood in the huge lounge wearing my new clothes before my captors.

'Just stunning'. The man said.

'Quite so'. The woman agreed.

I now wore a white shift of the finest cotton. It had long sleeves and reached to just below my knees. My legs were adorned by some long black stockings of silk and wool and dainty black ballet slipper-like shoes decorated my feet. I was totally naked under the shift and this made me feel most vulnerable.

'Do you like your clothes Ellie?' The woman asked me.

I think Max might have gone wild for this outfit but I looked upon it as a type of prison garb. I was not used to going commando in public.

‘They are pretty’. I ventured. ‘Could I have some underwear please?’

They both laughed at my request. What was next? I did not have to wait long to find out.

‘Here is cord’. The man said holding up lengths of pristine white silk cord.

‘Here is silence’. The woman said holding up a pair of black silk scarves and a wadded up piece of white cloth.

I quickly realised what was happening.

‘No-please-’. I backed away from them.

They advanced on me laughing.

Five

They tied me up and gagged me.

I sat in the soft folds of an enormous chair. I looked down at my wrists. They were crossed and rested in my lap and were secured together with several turns of white silk cord. A length of cord led down from my wrist bindings to my black stocking clad ankles. My ankles were also crossed and wrapped in more cord. The white cord contrasted pristinely with the black stockings. The man had put me in bondage quickly and efficiently.

After I had been bound the woman had applied the gag. The white cloth was formed into a wad and jammed inside my mouth. It was horrible. It was secured in place by a black silk scarf drawn tightly between my lips which was firmly knotted at the back of my neck. Thankfully the knot missed my hair. The

second scarf folded into a wide bandage was then tied over my mouth and secured. The woman came round and lifted up my chin and checked her work. I glared at her in mute rage. She smiled but there was no warmth in those dark blue eyes.

‘That gag will not be comfortable Ellie but you will have to get used to it. It also removes the obligation on your part to ask questions, plead, scream or swear at us. Not that I think you are swearing type of girl’.

I sat there, still and silent. I had nothing to do but look at my surroundings.

The man and woman went about various tasks in and out of my line of vision. Though I knew it to be futile I pulled at my bonds in an effort to loosen them. Being tied up was a new experience to me, ditto being gagged. It was not a good one. I knew I would stay this way until my captors decided otherwise.

There was a whole wall dedicated to books. Hefty tomes. I blinked in the dim light of my area of captivity trying to read some of the titles.

‘The God of the Witches’, ‘Psychology of the Occult’, ‘A History of Alchemy’, ‘Techniques of Astral Projection’, ‘Psychical Research’, ‘Demons-a History’, ‘The Black Arts’, ‘The Occult Liberation’, ‘Pioneers of the Unseen’, ‘Moons, Myths and Man’, ‘The Study of Trance’ and countless more. I sensed a sinister thread there.

Opposite my chair in which I sat a captive was a huge sofa with a drinks table in front of it. A book was on it. ‘Trees of Dread and Power’. The illustration on the front bore a strong resemblance to the mass of trees to the back of the house. The woman had called them ‘Dark Wood’. This added to my sense of unease.

Then I saw the picture frames adorning the walls. Like the books the contents of them all shared a dark theme. Fantastic

figures against night skies, Witches, odd symbols, Goat-like monsters. Not nice. Not nice at all.

I was becoming very frightened. I wanted answers.

I made a sound behind my gag and then another and another. They were a mix of grunts and squeaks with which I hoped to attract my captors.

But nobody came.

Six

After a while I fell asleep in the chair. I flooded myself with nice thoughts. Happy times with friends in London, seeing Max for the first time, playing with my little brother, meeting the Arctic Monkeys and shopping for shoes. I was free when I was asleep.

When I woke up I was hungry and thirsty and also needed to visit somewhere.

‘Nice sleep Ellie?’ The woman sat on the sofa opposite with one elegantly booted leg crossing the other. She had the tree book open on her lap. There were scraps of paper on the table in front of her with strange symbols drawn on them.

‘Hungry?’

I nodded.

‘Need the loo?’

I nodded even more vigorously.

The man appeared and untied me as swiftly as he had earlier tied me up. The woman carefully removed my gag and on stiff legs I was escorted to where I needed to go.

The dark of evening had arrived and they sat me down at the end of a long table to eat a vegetarian pasta dish. I had not yet

strayed from the path of carnivorousness but right then I was so hungry I did not care. They did not eat but they sat and watched me. I tried not to make eye contact with them and made no attempt at conversation. They talked about me though. I heard words like 'So lovely' and 'So soft'. I did not warm to these compliments.

After I had finished eating he bound my wrists in front of me and she gagged me. She spared me the multi part gag this time but I still had a thick band of white cotton cleaving my jaws and filling up my mouth. I was returned to my chair but my ankles were not bound this time. I was briefly distracted by the sound of rain striking the windows. I then turned and faced my captors who now sat on huge sofa opposite me.

'What do you know of the 'Brides of Dark Wood' Ellie?' The woman asked me.

I shook my head to indicate nothing.

'And why should you? Thirteen very ancient oak trees in a wood on private land far from the public eye. Trees are special. To early man trees must have seemed immortal and it is small wonder that man came to venerate trees. Tree worship is evident from the earliest records available. There are sacred trees, trees that protect, trees that heal, trees of fertility, trees of magic and-'. She briefly stopped. 'Trees of evil'. She then smiled. 'I serve such trees'.

I was scared now and wanted to ask a great many questions but my heavy cotton gag would mangle all my words.

'By day I make money by designing the interiors of houses for the foolish rich but that is not who I am. I am the Witch of Dark Wood and I live to serve The Prince of Darkness. The trees are his Brides and on the 13th night of the 13th year when all the dark elements are in place a Bride from this world is taken to meld with his. You are his new Bride Ellie, the 13th Bride and

the way by which The Prince of Darkness enter this world with the dark glory of hell following. I will be his Queen. The 13th of the 13th is tomorrow night’.

This was crazy and frightening. I shook my head furiously stating that I did not believe it and that I never would.

The Witch gestured to the tall man who sat next to her. ‘My familiar. A man is so much more useful than a Black Cat’.

The man smiled at her words.

The Witch then unfastened the buttons on her blouse. I saw that I was not the only girl in the room without a bra on. Her breasts were high, firm and rounded, smaller than my own but nice. I then noticed the left one bore an odd black mark.

‘This is where The Prince of Darkness marked me as his’. The Witch told me and then buttoned up her blouse. ‘Why did I choose you as a Bride? Your beauty and purity of heart of course? Both will be corrupted’.

This was beyond insane. I had to do something.

I then heard a nearby door open and saw the man looking out at the rain falling in the darkness. The Witch rose from where she sat and walked over to me.

‘He likes looking at the rain’. The Witch told me. She leaned down and gently gripping my elbows lifted me up from the chair. The Witch did not notice my hands were now locked together making a single fist.

‘Sweet Ellie we shall now-.’

I swung my bound hands and hit her in the face as hard as I could. The Witch gasped and fell away from me. I rushed to the door. The Familiar turned to grab me and I kicked him between the legs with all the force I could muster. He staggered and doubled over. I barged past him and ran out into the wet darkness.

Seven

When I woke up from the drug after my failed escape attempt I was dry and warm under a duvet. I was also naked not to mention bound and gagged. My wrists were bound behind my back and my ankles crossed and secured. My mouth was stuffed with a huge wad of cotton and my lips sealed up with tape. As punishments go being tied up and put to bed is only slightly severe taking into account my misdeeds.

I again thought about what I had witnessed in Dark Wood. I had stumbled upon the Brides. My sense of terror in what I had witnessed still remained. The orbs of green light and the beautiful anguished faces of the young women trapped within them. Looking out at me, crying, pleading, mouthing words I could not hear. Twelve tormented souls trapped for eternity in twelve trees. Brides of the Devil. The last tree in that evil place was waiting, waiting for me!

Eight

Despite the terrible visions and my tight bondage I managed some rest. I was woken by the duvet being pulled off me. My eyes flickered open to see the Witch and her Familiar standing over my nude and bound body. They smiled their emotionless smiles. Neither seemed marked or angry by my fight and flight of the previous night.

I was unbound and ungagged and allowed to bathe. I was given another white shift to wear along with another pair of black stockings plus a further pair of the flimsy slippers. I was taken downstairs and fed a breakfast of fruit and cereal. Once more I was the only one eating as we all sat at the table. The Witch and her Familiar just sat and watched me in silence.

I was then taken to the comfy chair. The Familiar tied me up and this time used much more of the white silk cord to secure me. Wrists bound behind me, arms secured to my sides and

bindings about my thighs, knees and ankles. The Witch then gagged me with the cloth wad and the two black silk scarves.

‘Sit there and be quiet Ellie for tonight you are to be wed in Dark Wood’. The Witch told me.

I shook my head rapidly from side to side and mewed through the gag. No!

The Witch of Dark Wood and her Familiar laughed.

For the morning I sat tied and gagged, tearful and angry, helpless and afraid.

The Witch appeared talking on her phone and gathering up papers to put in a bag with a laptop. Her hair was tied back and she wore a very smart charcoal hued suit with a short skirt, black tights and some killer black heels. She had style. The nature of her conversation was that of a busy professional woman. An interior designer who was also a Witch.

She finished the call. ‘Day job!’ She smiled at me. ‘See you later sweet Ellie, you have a very special date!’ Then she was gone.

I struggled against my bounds and made a helpless sound through my gag.

Nine

The Familiar lurked around in the background. He came to check on me sporadically. Tied up like I was there was little reason to be concerned about me. He would look me up and down knowing I was naked under the white shift. He was forbidden to touch me as I was promised to another. The cotton and silk that gagged me prevented me from pleading with him, which was the whole idea. My tearful green eyes made no emotive impact on him. I just sat there and felt defeated.

I dozed off a few times and combatted the images from Dark Wood with happy ones. I thought of everyone that I loved and felt that love increase. Mum, Dad, Ewan, Max and all my girlfriends-I love you all so much. I took real strength from this surge of emotion from deep within my heart. I would face the darkness.

I remained captive in the chair until the dusk. The Witch returned then.

‘Make her ready-it is time’.

My gag and bonds were removed and I was made to bathe again. However when I was finished no garments were on offer. I found myself in the lounge standing naked before The Witch of Dark Wood and her near silent Familiar. The thing was they were naked too! Though I didn’t have any myself I had nothing against tattoos but these two were covered in them!

Devils and occult symbols adorned every part of their bodies. A tableaux of evil images. I shuddered at the sight.

The Witch held a jet black ceramic knife in one hand and in the other a leather bound book. The tools of her trade I suppose.

‘If you accept your destiny and not try to run, you will not be tied and gagged’. The Witch told me.

I had endured enough bondage and did not want any more.

‘Ok’. I said softly.

‘It is time sweet Ellie!’

Ten

The moon was full and high in the night sky. The time of the two 13’s. It was not raining. With The Witch leading I walked behind her with the Familiar close behind me. I was naked under the night sky and was off to be wed to The Prince of Darkness. I would be one Bride of 13, the last to be chosen. I

wanted none of it but realised now I might have to accept it. I had never thought things would end so early for me and not in this way. I chose not to cry but just kept my mind focused on those that I loved.

We walked a path and I again found myself in the glade of the Brides of Dark Wood. It was a dreadful place and I could sense a very ancient evil there. I looked upon the trees and the tormented young faces within the orbs of ghostly green light. The Witch came to the final tree in the circle. 'Here!'

The Familiar seized my shoulders and propelled me forward. I was turned and backed against the rough bark of the towering ancient tree. A long length of black cord was looped around my nude body and the mighty trunk securing me in place.

The Witch raised her arms to the dark skies and began to chant. The words were foreign to me but sounded full of malignant intent. The Familiar stood a few feet behind her. Their symbol scarred bodies almost glowed in the light of the moon.

I just kept saying the names of my loved ones over and over again.

I was not sure how long The Witch had been chanting before I felt the previously cold and rough bark suddenly become warm, soft and moist. Something was changing in the tree. I shut my eyes and kept saying the names that made so much to me.

The surface of the tree suddenly started to move. I was being sucked into the tree! I saw The Witch of Dark Wood holding up her black knife and cursed book and grinning with a diabolical glee. It was happening!

Suddenly there was a flat crack and the head of The Witch of Dark Wood was blown apart in a mass of gory fragments. Her near headless corpse fell lifelessly to the ground. There was

another crack and the head of the Familiar was also obliterated. He joined his dead mistress on the ground.

A group of figures suddenly appeared in my vision. They wore dark combat uniforms, faces hidden behind balaclavas and night vision equipment. They held deadly looking black guns. There had to be a dozen of them. I saw that they had white Maltese crosses on the front of their body armour. They came towards me.

‘Get her out of there!’

They cut the cords holding me in place and began to separate me from the glutinous mass the tree had become. The tree would not release me. My saviours drew large bladed knives and cut and hacked me free.

My naked and trembling body was wrapped in the welcoming folds of a thermal blanket. Strong arms swept me up and carried me away from that evil place. A gentle male voice said softly to me. ‘Let’s get you to safety’.

Epilogue

Clad in jeans, T-shirt, hooded top and trainers and sipping a hot mug of tea I sat on the tailgate of a black Range Rover and watched the frenzied activity and sea of lights all around me. I smiled. I was safe, I was free.

My rescuers had come in force. Hundreds of Police and two ambulances. Two paramedics with a comforting skill checked me over and declared that apart from some shock I was Ok. Of the black clad unit with the white crosses there was no sign.

The house was being searched and I heard odd words that Dark Wood was going to be torched.

A bald man and a dark haired woman dressed in matching black raincoats had gently grilled me for about ten minutes. I told them all that had happened to me. I got the idea that there

would no enquiry or investigation about what had happened. I was witnessing something that amounted to an eradication. I just wanted to forget about the whole thing and get back to my life. I was to be given a scripted account as to what happened to me which would explain my brief disappearance. A botched robbery at the gallery would be the story.

I had one question for the officious looking couple. 'Can you do anything for the girls trapped within the trees?'

'No'. They told me. 'But if we destroy Dark Wood we can set their souls free'.

I did not really understand but I nodded like I did. Whatever had happened here I would do my best to forget it. I would soon be with those whom I loved.

I drank my tea and thanked someone I was Ok.

The End

