

INTO THE
BLOODRED
WOODS

MARTHA BROCKENBROUGH

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The people who lived in the kingdom would tell you differing stories about when the forest started singing.

The woods have always made music.

No, it started as a warning. The princess arrived before her twin brother. This disrupted the order of nature, and ever since, nature has objected.

Neither was true.

The forest started singing when a girl named Esme struck a bargain in exchange for the magic that she needed to save her sister's life. And that was necessary because their father had lied to the king to make himself seem important; he'd claimed that he had a daughter of surpassing beauty who could spin grass into gold.

The Golden Lion, as the king's people called him, hastened to the humble farm to examine the daughters.

"Surely it's not *that* one." He'd pointed at Esme. She was many things: resourceful, loyal, and kind, as well as nimble and strong from her work on their farm. She had a brave and generous heart. But her beauty wasn't the obvious sort.

Their father laughed. "Of course not."

He pushed his younger daughter, Gwyneth—a maiden full of fresh and

easy beauty—toward the king, who made a threat: If she fails to spin, she dies. Then he took her to his castle and locked her in the tower.

The threat unhinged Esme. She ran to the woods, where she often went in times of sorrow. She dropped to the earth in front of the trees and made them an offer. A deal to save the sister she loved. Her womb for magic.

She didn't expect a response. But then there was a rustling of leaves. A moaning of branches. All that, in the absence of wind. Taking it as an agreement, Esme removed her own womb and buried it; in return, the trees told her the secret to pulling elements from the soil and turning them into something else. She was the only person they'd ever trusted with this knowledge. And the woods used her womb for a wish of their own: a voice that all could hear.

Still bleeding from her sacrifice, Esme reached the tower, where her sister's shadow filled the highest window. Racked with pain, Esme climbed the stones hand over hand until she reached Gwyneth, alone and weeping before an enormous pile of dry grass. Esme slid inside and spun the gold, more than could ever be used. She'd saved her sister. She had no regrets.

Not yet anyway.



According to the law of the land, the firstborn child was to inherit the throne. But the tradition had always been that a king rule. This created a conundrum for the royal couple.

“Let our daughter rule,” Queen Gwyneth said. “She was born first. It is only right.”

“It should be our son,” King Tyran said. “You are but common born yourself, so you would not understand such things.”

“I understand,” the queen said, “that your kingdom depends on the gold that I provide.”

That would invariably pause the argument. But it would not end it. Despite their unresolved disagreement, the king and queen grew to love each other, and they loved the children they had made.

The king also grew fond of the queen’s sister, who’d been permitted to stay in the castle to help care for the children. Over time, her looks became very pleasing to him. He desired her. He had two hands, after all. Why should both not be full?

Embarrassed to have been put into such a position, Esme avoided him and her sister. She doted on her infant niece and nephew instead.

Even so, the king persisted. Esme refused him again. This time she threatened to tell her sister if the king did not leave her be.

The king dared her to. “Let us tell her right now.”

Astonished, Esme did, but privately.

The queen slapped Esme so hard across the cheek, her ear rang. “How dare you attract my husband! Did you tell him you make the gold? Is that why he wanted you? Oh, Esme. You have ruined me. You have ruined everything.”

Esme burst into tears. “I would never betray you. Not with the gold, not with the king. I love you. You’re my sister.”

Esme could see that Gwyneth was afraid. Afraid that Esme would betray her, afraid that the king would choose Esme if he knew the truth about the gold.

Even so, Esme was surprised when Gwyneth told Tyran that Esme had gone mad. That she wanted to eat the children and destroy the future of the kingdom.

The king, seeing a path out of trouble, decided to believe his wife. Esme was a witch. A child-eating witch who'd cast a spell upon him. It was not his fault his eyes had strayed.

Having come to an understanding that suited them both, the king and queen agreed that something must be done.

They sent Esme to the dungeon to die.