



Forest Dark

by Bonnie Hobbs

Hannah Morgan pulls herself along with the worn, redwood limb she's made into a staff, slips from the deep-shadowed forest and eases down onto the collection of smooth rocks edging the sand. She's been hefting them out here for years, one or two at a time, and piling them together. This evening, she adds one more to make a seat, or a throne, as she sometimes laughingly thinks. She squints sidelong at the setting sun. Her old eyes have grown wary of looking too closely at the sun when it performs its harshest acts; the setting and rising. "Like dying and rebirth," she murmurs, grinning at how she's fallen into talking out loud, for there is no one to hear but sea and forest.

Some places in the forest have a special kind of darkness. A kind that saved her life and now hides her. Forest Dark, is how she thinks of it, a kind different from all other shadowed places.

Only after the sun dips beneath the body of the sea, peaceful tonight and living up to its name, can she take comfort from the gentler beam from the lighthouse on the cliff to the south of where she perches. She watched men build it less than a year past, some months after the earth-shaking seconds that rattled the coast. She wonders, did the quake split San Francisco apart? Maybe destroying that city's years of trying to become civilized? Recalling her hard years there, she smiles, murmuring, "Civilized? Not likely."

The lighthouse's beam now plays across the crashing white surf, making that water yellow-hued. A welcome light, yet feeble compared to the sun. Hannah stands

and looks all around, taking in the sea, the lighthouse and the pond at the mouth of the river. She startles, jerks and nearly falls when a fish leaps in the darkness. Salmon? No, her old brain must be recalling summer eves and early mornings when she did indeed watch the salmon struggle their way upstream. No, the fish she likely sees this time is a different silver-backed kind. She can't recall its name. It's leaping after an insect, not going anywhere, content to swim and spawn in the calm waters of the pond.

A cooling breeze rises and Hannah shivers a little. She does welcome the coming of autumn, though, for the days will soon cut crisply through summer's heat, bringing rain to the forest before winter arches over it like a cold-gray dome, the redwoods standing firm against the storms. She believes they always will, hopes they do, and longs to tell someone stories about the redwoods. But she is alone. Now and forever alone, yet not unhappy to be so, not after surviving the jealous rage and violent hatred that drove her here. She gazes out over the water, taking in a deep breath, smelling the salt and sand and sea creatures living and dying.

She'll come back later this night, for the full moon is set to work her own disappearing act, though that mystic lady might hide herself in mist or fog, wearing a gauzy shawl. Sometimes, though, the moon breaks through the mist that tries to encircle her. Then she dons her bright yellow dress. Yes. Hannah believes the moon is a woman, her sister and companion. Another old woman's fantasy.

She leans on her staff and pulls herself up, moving away, glancing again toward the lighthouse. She is so glad they built it. Too many tall-masted ships have been lost on the rocks for the want of light to guide them safely to the river's mouth. They come and go, in sunlight and darkness, taking the timber from the little dog-hole harbor. She recalls John telling her about those special schooners; how they could make the sharp turns needed in the space they were given. She's sure more light has helped them. John would've been pleased.

She makes her way carefully down through the wooded gullies and up gentle slopes, never leaving paths for anyone to follow, heading for her secret home. But first, a stop in the little clearing she found years back. She eases down and stretches out the best she can, lying on her

back, staring straight up. The mists have cleared and she can see the stars. The redwoods sway a little, for a breeze rocks the very tops of those giants. They sigh, as does she.

But then comes a crashing through the trees! A deer, a wolf? No. Nothing here is so clumsy, but something surely stumbles toward her. It runs through the brush, wailing!

Hannah stretches out one arm, wanting to find a way to push up and stand, but that hand brushes, then grasps the ankle of a human. The human falls, screaming in the darkness. Is it a girl? Hannah hasn't needed speech for thirty years, but finds that it comes easily enough. "Girl! Stop your wailing."

The girl kicks out at Hannah, but falls back into a thicket of what always reminds Hannah of holly, but with sharper-edged leaves and purplish berries. The girl's shriek of terror changes to one of pain. Well, Hannah can't imagine why the girl is here, so deep in the woods, and terrified, but she can help her. There in the darkness lightened a bit now by the risen moon, she pushes herself to stand and reaches for the girl, yanking her out of those brambles and into her arms. Oh, how strange to feel the touch of a human after so many, many years.

"Come, girl. You're bleeding."

The girl goes rigid in Hannah's arms. Most likely the terror has returned, so Hannah keeps up a gentle prattle, meaning nothing, really, just pulling her along until they come to the tiny house she built years ago, hard up against a stony cliff deep in the trees by a stream that chortles and whispers over rocks and the fish traps she sets. Just enough water to help her small garden grow in its tiny patch of sunlight. No one has ventured this far into the deep, dark forest to claim these trees for lumber—or to find Hannah. Not yet.

As she moves to her house, she reminds herself to mark her wooden pole. She has done this for years. One mark for each full moon. In that way, she has counted the years and knows more than thirty have passed since she fled the murderous, well-paid monsters who chased her from the timber mill, the town and the grave of her newly-buried husband. Yes. She surmises thirty-odd years. So, she is what? Over seventy? Could that be? But still pretty strong. She smiles at that thought as she limps along, carefully hiding paths, traveling with the terrified girl into what she calls her own forest...the deepest, darkest woods. She keeps talking, but the girl says nothing. Her screams have fallen into whimpers, though, and that's a blessing. "You know?" Hannah says. "I think of this as my forest. And likely in the legal rooms of San Francisco, I'd be right to call it that, you see. Because first it was my husband John's land. He worked it, proved it, had deeds and contracts

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What? I'm helping you, girl. Just hold still a bit. Look up and—oh, I see. It's my face, isn't it? It must be a horror to your eyes. But it's just scars, child, just the crooked way it healed.

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for the timber. So now, I believe it's mine by inheritance! Yes, indeed. Of course, I imagine all those legal men now believe me dead, though probably they are too." She chuckles.

The girl says nothing to this as Hannah leads her into the tiny house and lights her oil lamp. She eases her down onto the floor cushions. Now, with light, Hannah can see a terrified, freckle-faced girl, older than she first thought. Truly a young woman. The bloody places on her face and hands are no deeper than scratches. Hannah wraps a blanket around her and set about cleaning the wounds with water she keeps in a kettle. "So, you're likely wondering who I am..."

The girl shakes her head. "No—no. I know who—what you are—you're the forest witch," the girl whispers. Then she raises her voice and crosses her arms over her head. "Please don't hurt me."

"What? I'm helping you, girl. Just hold still a bit. Look up and—oh, I see. It's my face, isn't it? It must be a horror to your eyes. But it's just scars, child, just the crooked way it healed."

"I can't—I have to get to the sea!" The girl shouts.

"My, my—I haven't had so much noise in this house for, well, I never have." Hannah tries to chuckle but it sounds more like a cough. "What's at the sea that can't wait for morning?"

"I have to—to join my husband. He's dead and—my baby is—I have nothing left. Oh, please don't kill me."

"So, you have to die, but only in the sea? You silly girl."

"I have to. I want to die. I must die. But not by your magic. Evil magic. It would keep me from heaven."

"Good Lord, child! Isn't this—let me calculate—1910 or so? Not the dark ages. Evil spells? Ridiculous."

"A witch can cast them, Gran says. You—you ran into the woods. They killed you, but...Gran tells the stories. Now you cast revenge spells. Loggers have seen you—but you're dead, so you're a witch."

"Wouldn't I be a ghost, more likely? But I don't think so, child." Hannah smirks, dabbing at the girl's wounds.

"But you—the witch—you—you make things vanish, Gran says." She trembles and drops her gaze.

"Vanish, do they? Ah, you're meaning these blankets? This lamp and candles and bit of lamp oil—and this cooking pot? Well, it seems that people are mighty careless with their things. Yes, I admit I've become good at thievery. But not by witchcraft."

The girl looks up again, her eyes wide, then sighs and her shoulders relax and drop with that sigh.

"So," Hannah says quietly, wrinkling up her nose as if smelling some stench. "Everyone in that little timber town thinks me dead, but not dead? An evil witch?"

"Yes, but—well, maybe not so evil?"

"Clever girl," Hannah says, smiling a little. "Trying to sweet-talk me."

"It's just that you scream out curses. You run, then disappear. Some loggers swear they've seen you, though far away—still running like you did back then."

"Ah, yes. I ran and I disappeared. I still can, at least the disappearing part if need be. Everything's harder these days, with how my broken bones healed up so crooked."

"Gran says those men who chased you were devils. They must've dragged you down to hell with them." Her whispers are less terror-filled now. "But, maybe not? Maybe you turned into a good witch?" She sounds hopeful.

"Your gran tells these stories, eh? What's her name? She must be about my age."

"Greta. Granny Greta."

"Oh, my! Greta? I know her. And your name, child?"

"Rose, ma'am."

"Rose. Lovely. Well, Rose, those devils did chase me. I ran and ran. I stumbled into a deep, dark place and I would've died but for being cradled by the limbs of a huge oak that kept me from falling all the way. It's the only oak I've ever seen in the forest. I don't think they're supposed to grow here, so maybe it is magic? I managed to crawl to water, I lay still and didn't die. The darkness kept me hidden. I'll tell you more of my sad story, shall I?"

The girl nods, wide-eyed.

"I came out west from the busy streets of a city called Chicago. Came on a wagon train with a kindly husband, but consumption took him. Took a lot of us. I survived. I took in laundry, trading Chicago for San Francisco. I couldn't see any difference. Then I met and married a man who loved these woods, who harvested the timber with care, following the words of a European forester named

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Brandis. My husband said he was called the father of scientific forestry. I'll not forget how my husband spoke of that man. A man who believed in improving and protecting forests, not destroying them. John idolized him. Though riches could have come our way if John had been less careful about what to cut and what to leave alone, we lived comfortably enough and gave work to people. I loved John for his ways and grew fond of how the biggest trees he protected creaked in the wind, like they were saying thank you. Some of the timber, carefully chosen, was harvested and I learned to like the buzz of the saws at the mill. I learned to tell time by the whistles signaling shift change and loved the smell of sawdust and the sound of singing by weary men and women coming home from work." Hannah takes a breath. "But my husband, John, my true love, is gone. I fear how his timber is being harvested now"

"Miss Morgan makes the men cut all they can, ma'am, doesn't matter what. The ships come and go and..."

Hannah nods. "Yes, Rose. Marie Elizabeth Morgan. My step-daughter. I've sometimes spied on the goings on at the mill. I've seen the giants fall and I hear the screams of woman who have lost men to avoidable horrors. John's daughter has hired men who are cruel to the workers, even vicious toward the timber itself, those great redwoods that have made her wealthy. I've seen it and sometimes often sit and weep. She tried to kill me and only turned me into a cowardly witch."

"But you could leave the forest. You never tried?"

"How? Dragging my broken body only to be caught and killed? No, I needed to heal and hide. Besides, this is my world, Rose. I will not be chased out. I will not leave it." Hannah slumps, then breathes deeply, rousing herself. "So, you've heard my story. Tell me why you've come crashing into this place?"

Rose's tears filled her wide eyes. Again, she sits like stone, the tears spilling to fall from her chin onto clasped hands, but she makes no sound. So Hannah sits quietly, waiting, listening to the wind in the trees outside the house. Finally, Rose speaks. "My husband worked the splash dams. One day, so tired after being made to work all day

and night, he opened a floodgate but slipped and got—caught—in the logs, drowned.”

“Oh, child. I know such grief. But would he want you to die?”

The girl closes her eyes and swallows hard.

“I mean, well, I’m likely saying everything wrong. It’s hard to talk to another after so many years talking to myself and an occasional visiting lizard or squirrel, but...”

The girl twitches one side of her closed lips into—well, nearly a smile.

“I mean,” Hannah goes on. “You’re young and strong, and now I’ve sopped up all the blood, you look pretty, with that red hair, though I will admit it’s shorn oddly close. The style these days?”

“No. She did it!”

“She?”

“After my baby was born. She took her.” Rose opened her arms wide. “See? My milk flows, but there is no mouth to take it. She took the baby from my arms, saying she always wanted a pretty baby. She laughed when I begged, laughed as her men held my mother and gran back and struck my father down with an axe handle. Then she dragged me out and chopped off my hair. Everyone fears her and her thugs.” The girl twists her fingers tight together. “No one would help us. Gran always said Miss Morgan was so spoiled by her father, but then grew into a crazed monster when he died.”

“Oh, Rose, it strains my mind to think that the silly, spoiled girl could’ve grown into someone who thinks she’s a queen, and evil queen. When her men chased me into the forest, I was with child, Rose. I lost it when I fell. I was sure I would bleed to death, but did not. I think I lost my mind for a while, too, but Rose? I believe your coming here is shaking me sane. She truly took your baby from you?” Hannah weeps.

Rose leans forward now, telling her story has set her a-light. “She took everything from me; it’s why I chose the sea. She owns the mill and the town and the ships and the whole forest,” Rose says, her voice dropping to a whisper. “But not the sea. People owe her. We are all so in debt. We will lose everything if we fight or if we run. She is the only law.”

“Hmm. I can cast doubt on all those claims. She owns nothing.” Hannah feels a sudden surge of strength, feels as sly as one of her favorite forest creatures. After all the years watching the ways of the greedy girl growing into the evil-hearted woman and feeling only helpless anger, here is something shaking her out of the self-pitying old woman she’s aged into. “Yes, as I said, Rose. John willed the business and the ships and the forest to me.” She smiles at

the confusion on the girl’s face.

“John. John Morgan. You’re so young, you don’t recall, but I’ll bet your gran remembers John Morgan.”

“She surely does. The boss? She speaks kindly of him. But he’s long gone.”

“Yes, he is. And I grieve his going. A man who loved his forest, but brought down by a falling tree. I sometimes wonder about the justice in that.” Hannah blinks away tears that now come oozing through time’s mist. “Marie Elizabeth Morgan is his daughter, and would have a portion of his fortune, but not all of it. I am Hannah Morgan.” Her voice rises with each word as she taps her chest with one closed fist. “Everything is mine.”

“But—you’re dead.” The girl whispers.

“So they must say, but I am quite sure I am not, Rose.” Hannah smiles as much as her scarred face will allow. “I’ll help you find your way out of the forest and home to your Gran. You must promise to give up that plan to visit the sea and join your man, you hear? We have work to do. Tell Greta that I’m coming home and ask her to tell everyone she can. We’ll get your baby. We’ll right some wrongs.” Hannah, her hand clasping Rose’s, limps along through the deepest forest, then shows her the way to town. Rose steps out onto a meadow as warily as a fawn.

“I’ve let that evil go on too, too long,” Hannah whispers. “Nursing my broken heart and bones, hiding the horror of my face, all these horrid scars, comforting myself with the scents of trees, the feel of wind and rain, the ways of the forest.” She shakes her head. “I have become a coward.” She lets herself remember the day she was reviewing John’s will and contracts that gave him rights to the lumber, looking through them just as those wild men came running at her. She’d gripped the metal box that held those papers, gripped it tightly. The men couldn’t wrench it from her, not even when they slashed her face and kicked her. She managed to get up and run into the woods, then fell into the crevasse, fell so far it broke her bones. The great tree limbs tore out her hair and slashed more of her flesh as she fell, but it hid her from their evil eyes. As soon as she had the strength to move, she buried the box beneath the tree that sheltered her, burying it in soil bloodied by her wounds. She thinks of it as her old self, buried. Well, time for that old self to be rising.

She watches Rose cross the meadow all the way into town. The moon is high now, ready to set and move toward true darkness. Hannah turns into the woods, thinking of the words she once scratched on the tree that saved her. ‘Stepping gently to leave no mark. Returning home to the forest dark.’ She has enough moonlight to find the place and dig up that box, then makes her way out of the forest this time, into town, into what had been her house—hers

and John's. Guards doze and doors are left unlocked. It is so easy to slip in. Marie must now feel so powerful she fears no one.

Hannah finds her asleep in her father's bedroom—Hannah's bedroom. Hannah creeps close and stands over Marie, watching the woman sleep. She's no longer youthful and beautiful, sleeping in the moonlight pouring through the western window.

Marie stirs. Hannah steps in front of the window, blocking the moonlight. Marie wakes. A sudden waking, her eyes wide. "You!" she breathes.

Hannah nods, showing Marie the undamaged side of her face. Then she turns and shows the other.

Marie lifts her lip in a kind of snarl, not showing fear or guilt. Just disgust.

"Not a pretty sight, eh, Marie?"

"You are so ugly! But you're—you're dead!" She rubs her eyes and blinks.

"Oh, Marie Elizabeth. Do you truly think so? You terrify every child in town with talk of my witchcraft. I'm dead, but also a witch?"

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Marie shakes her head as if clearing its thoughts. She sits up, looks only irritated, as if she expected this encounter and is ready for it.

Hannah continues, smiling, "So, Marie. Dear step-daughter. It's been, what thirty years?"

"Maybe a few more," Marie says, gesturing toward the rusty, dirty box in Hannah's arms. "And that?" She sneers. "A present for me, dear step-mother?"

"This? Well, in a way. It holds a stern warning for you, but a present for the town. It will be a demand for you to leave this place."

Marie is now pale as moonlight. She takes a deep breath and scowls. "My men searched every house, every piece of ground for those papers." She shrugs. "But finally,

I simply told the lawyers, new lawyers, the sad story of your mad grief, how you took the papers, but I tearfully told them I just knew I had copies somewhere. How could they doubt the brave young orphan?" She reaches for a bell by her bed with trembling fingers, rings it and smirks when the door opens, until she sees that Rose is there with three men and an older woman supporting a granny.

"Greta?" Hannah whispers. "Oh, it's you, my old friend."

Greta nods, smiles and settles into a chair.

"What is this? Where are my men?" Marie shouts. Her voice waivers, though she keeps her haughtiness. She might frighten most people, but Hannah is not one of them, not anymore, and neither is Rose.

"Those big men?" Rose says. "After I told my father and his friends about finding Mrs. Morgan and what she went through and how she planned to help us, well, Papa and the others took all those men, tied them up like hogs and set them out on one of the out-going schooners."

"Ah, that's good, Rose," Hannah says. "I hoped no one hurt them more than need be, no matter how angry we are. We don't want to be the lawless ones in this. "Let's just get them away from here." Hannah paces, limping from bed to doorway. "Greta, old friend, can I ask you to help make me presentable, real clothes and such, for soon Marie and I...with an escort from town, of course...will take this box to a law office in San Francisco. Her father's old lawyers might be dead, but I imagine the office isn't. We can determine that I am indeed alive and make sure Marie Elizabeth Morgan pays for what she's done. I'll return and hear everyone's stories. Best to put them all out in open air, I believe." She turns to Marie. "And now, Marie! You horrible woman. Where is Rose's baby?"

Rose steps close, hands to her mouth.

"That thing? It's upstairs," Marie mutters. "A wetnurse has her. Such a nightmare, that child. Nothing like I'd hoped it'd be, with its pretty red hair."

Rose darts up the stairs, the older woman, likely her mother, follows, an apron dabbing at her weeping eyes.

"So," Hannah says, turning to the men. "Can you spread the news to the townsfolk, maybe weed out any of her toadies and offer them a choice; leave by horseback, on foot, or by dog-hole schooner," she smiles. "Let's put this place right again."

The men nod and one steps forward. "Ma'am? Most of us are born here. Our fathers and mothers came to this place from far away for work. We love the forest, love our homes and don't want to leave, though many have. We've feared to make much trouble, have any kind of uprising, feared the mill would close," he says. "We knew that even if

we threw out her little army, Miss Logan could've just hired more. This is our home, ma'am and..."

"I do understand. With everyone's help, I promise that I'll keep the mill running as it should."

The man nods and they all leave. Hannah hears the baby cry, then hears it soothed by quiet murmurs from upstairs. She smiles and turns, catching sight of herself in the hall mirror. "Oh, my, Lord," she groans. "I've not seen a mirror since..."

Greta stands and comes near. "It's not so bad, Missus," Greta says, tears in her eyes.

"Oh, but I fear it is, Greta."

Marie, leaning back in her bed, snorts and snickers. "Such grand words. Putting this right and that right. Even with those papers, you'll not be able to set everything right. You'll always be the frightening, ugly forest witch." She sneers.

Hannah turns to her, sighing. "Marie. I never understood why you hated me so. From the very first day, when I came here after marrying your father."

Marie raised her chin. "Father and I were happy here, the two of us. Then you came and changed everything."

"What did I change? I only loved your father. I tried to be your friend, Marie. You weren't a child. You were what, eighteen? I never tried to mother you..."

"You...you put ideas about me in his head. Told stories about me and my friends."

"Marie, I only talked to him—and to you, about a few people who seemed a danger to you. We spoke of travel for you, or school."

"You just tried to get rid of me. Just wanted me gone."

Hannah shakes her head. "You don't remember how I tried to talk to you? You wouldn't listen, wouldn't try to understand. You decided to hate me, but, oh, Marie, to try to kill me?"

"Yes, well, looks like I failed." Marie glances away, shrugging.

"Yes. You failed. And you convinced everyone I had died?"

Marie sits up, her eyes shining, eager to tell her story. "Well, it was easy. I travelled to the city wearing my finest dresses," she smirks. "I met with those men in their offices and wept, telling how after my father died in that accident, my loving step-mother went insane with grief and ran off into the woods. How we searched for days, then found you, dead, poor thing. I was so very, very sad."

"I can imagine you batting your lovely eyes and melting their usually cold hearts."

"Well, yes, I did a lot of that."

"And as long as the timber kept coming, everyone was satisfied?"

"Seems so. No one bothered me here. There is no law yet." Marie tosses her hair.

Hannah gives a deep sigh. "Everything has been so horrid for the people here, Marie. We need to change that story a bit." Hannah turns to Greta. "What do you think, my friend? It seems the grieving Mrs. Logan didn't die after all. She has returned and holds this magic talisman." Hannah holds out the rusty box. "The good witch rose from the forest dark. And now casts a spell of redemption over everyone, yes?"

Greta smiles and nods.

"I can't set my twisted bones and torn flesh right, Marie Elizabeth, but I've lived like this for a long, long time. I can help with everything else, everything that matters. The law in San Francisco will want to speak to you about how you enslaved and terrified people for thirty years. What would John think of this?"

"My father loved me."

"Yes, he did. But he also loved the forest. And cared for the people who worked with him. You'll likely be facing some time in a much different prison than the one you chased me into."

"I can get out of this," Marie says, but she seems less sure of herself. Her voice wavers.

"I'll work to put aside the people's fear of you while I work to rise above my own grief and cowardice." Hannah shrugs. "Such a horrid dream, I've had. Husbands dying, babies lost. Yes. A nightmare we've all had. Now it's over. I imagine the trees are singing, Marie Elizabeth. Yes, those giants in the deepest forest. You don't hear them, do you? Well, I surely do. They've been my only comfort, and now they are my strength."

AUTHOR

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Bonnie began writing many years ago, working around the demands of family and her career as an RN to write about the lives of 19th century women in the American west; those too often overlooked or maligned. Now retired, she devotes full time to researching and writing their stories. Three novels have been published. Some short stories and poetry have been given awards. She and her husband live in Southern Oregon.