

Underwood

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Nom de plume-Andaleigh Archer

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Lilly's Song~A Midsummer Nights Dream

by William Shakespeare

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*With Love to~
My Family*

Where dips the rocky highland
Of Sleuth Wood in the lake,
There lies a leafy island
Where flapping herons wake
The drowsy water rats;
There we've hid our faery vats,
Full of berrys
And of reddest stolen cherries.
Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than you
can understand.

William Butler Yeats ~ 1886

Underwood
A Wicked Fairytale

By

Andaleigh Archer

Victorian England
The Garden

I wrapped my hand around the cold metal latch to the manor garden; the weight of it, like the weight of my thoughts, rested heavily in my hand. With the sound of metal upon metal, I lifted the latch and pushed the gate open.

Its rusty squeal caused me to look over my shoulder. The gaslights within the manor showcased a swirling sea of elegantly dressed men and women, giving it the appearance of a child's snow globe. Any moment, someone would take notice of my absence and come looking for me. After all, the gathering was in my honor.

"Grandmother?" I called, turning back to the garden.

Only cricket song answered. With one last look toward the manor, I stepped over the threshold and into the garden.

The moment my feet touched the moss-covered cobblestone, intense energy rose from the ground and pulsated through my entire body. Dizziness overwhelmed me, and I managed to make my way to a small bench near the gate entrance. I sat

down, closed my eyes, and took the deepest breath possible in my tightly corseted dress. Beads of sweat formed on the surface of my skin, and I was sure I would faint. A gentle breeze blew over my face, bringing me back to calm, and when I opened my eyes, the knowing gaze of a weathered statue met my own.

The garden was a magical place. There were dozens of statues, and I felt more comfortable in their stony silence than with the animated guests within the manor. Maybe that's why I visited so often. Though they rested in an eternal slumber, I felt a life force existed within each one. Today, I wished, if but for a moment, they would magically open their eyes and look upon me as I imagined as a child. For the first time in my life, I sensed we were a part of something fragile.

Perhaps it was the expectations of my so-called womanhood that seemed to coincide with noticing the garden's overall moldering mystique. It always appeared ageless, the miniature sun-faded dollhouses, windowless lanterns, and weathered statues covered in webs of silvery dew. Now it was a reminder my childhood fancies were rapidly fading away. Despite what the trappings of time endeavored to alter, it did not change what the garden represented for me—an escape.

"What are you doing in the garden, Lilly? Wondering what lies under the wood?"

I turned around and smiled at my grandmother. While I was bound up tighter than a spider's catch in my corset and finery, her attire flowed freely, like a gossamer ghost. Her red hair

hung loose and wild over her shoulders and looked ablaze in the moonlight. The whole of society thought she was eccentric, but I saw her as a free spirit, unencumbered by the trappings of societal norms.

"Are you plotting another grand escape? Best, take me with you. I simply can't stomach boring chatter," she said.

"Always. We leave before dawn," I replied. "Where have you been? I've been looking for you all evening?"

"I had something important to attend to, dear," she answered and sat next to me on the bench.

"What would that be?" I asked curiously.

She smiled with a cat-like expression. "Your mother is looking for you."

I let out a mournful sigh. "Always."

"It is your party, after all."

"No, it's not. It's all about Mother. Did you see her flitting about the manor like a prized bird?"

"A peacock comes to mind."

"A big, plumed peacock," I said, hitting each word with dramatic flair. "It's just another grand event of boring proportions."

"Is it now?" Grandmother replied, amused.

"You know, as well as I do, she throws these parties simply to flaunt her status."

"Does she now?"

"Yes. And she is trying to find me a husband. Did you see the men she invited? While they may be wealthy, they are as old as Father!" I exclaimed, becoming more and more exasperated.

"I see."

"Play the piano, Lilly. Speak French, Lilly. Smile at the gentleman you have nothing in common with, Lilly. I'm no more than a puppet in their grand theater of illusions."

Grandmother sat silently, letting me lament my frustration.

"Other girls my age might like all this pomp and circumstance, but I don't. I have no desire to marry."

"Even if the rules of society dictate otherwise?" She said, raising an eyebrow.

"Absolutely!" I exclaimed.

"That's my girl," she said, patting my hand. "Tell me. How did you manage to escape?"

"It was easy. After dinner, the men took brandy in the billiards room while the women took tea in the parlor. I slipped out unnoticed. Matters naught; they never notice me anyway," I added, looking out to the woods.

Grandmother placed an arm around my waist.

"I notice you, my dear, and that is all that matters. I have something important to give you."

My eyes lit up. "A book? I love your books, Grandmother."

Other than the bible, my parents forbade me from reading. Not my grandmother, however. She had a lovely collection of old and unusual books. We spent many hours together in the garden, reading the most fantastical stories about the woods and the strange and magical creatures dwelling within them. The stories were beautiful yet always tinged with darkness. She called these stories 'forgotten tales.'

Grandmother shook her head. "No, it's not a book. I have something more valuable," she said, placing a gentle hand on my face. The scent of sweetgrass from her wrist perfumed the air.

"My dear girl, you are so young and innocent to the ways of the world. Enjoy this precious time while you can. There will come a day when I will not be around," she said, her smile fading.

I stiffened at her warning and opened my mouth to speak, but she placed a finger to my lips.

"Hold your tongue, child, for what I am about to tell, you must always remember. I know you believe in the forgotten tales. That is why I share the stories with you. However, they are not fancy. The stories are real. They are as real as I am sitting before you now."

Her sudden tone made me forget about the manor and my parent's plans, and I listened intently to her words.

"I know you wonder what is within the woods. I know you hear the music. I know you see the lights. We have always noticed it, have we not?"

I nodded.

"Do you remember, long ago, before your parents erected this horrible iron fence, escaping to the woods?"

Something dark and rich filled my memory, and I smiled. "Yes. I was five. I was playing in the garden."

"Do you remember what called you to the woods?"

I looked out toward the trees and then back at her.

"Music. Strange and unusual music."

"When we found you, you were sitting in a toadstool ring without a stitch of clothing."

I felt my face heat with color. "I don't remember how I got there."

"Nor would you. You were pixie-led, and when you returned, you slept like the dead for days afterward. We never did find your clothes."

"Pixie-led," I said under my breath. I liked the sound of the word. I looked up at her. "I do remember being sad when Mother and Father brought me home, and you were very angry with me. Why were you so angry?"

"I wasn't angry with you, my dear. There are beast and banshee in those woods."

Grandmother stopped, smoothing down the front of her dress. "Well, it matters naught," she added, patting my hand. "Your mother got it in her head to build a bloody iron fence around the manor, despite my protests."

"Why?" I asked.

"She had her reasons. She still does."

Her response indicated she would never provide me with the answers I was seeking. As open as Grandmother was, she could be just as secretive.

"I remember how sad you were about the iron. You sat on this bench for days on end. You and Mother fought constantly, and I felt to blame for everything."

"Nonsense. You were not to blame. Never be ashamed of your curiosity. Curiosity gives us wings," she said with a wink.

"But something happened after the iron came. Once everything was completed, it was as though the garden began to age overnight, and the lights and music ceased. You said the iron made them sick. Who were you referring to?"

"The creatures of the wood," she replied sadly. "Nevertheless, none of it was your fault, and you must never blame yourself. I simply won't hear of it."

I drew in a deep breath and looked at my hands. "It doesn't matter. I'm trapped here. This is my world," I said.

2
The Gift

Grandmother stiffened and looked out toward the woods.

"Despite all your parents have taught you, there is another world beyond the iron. I know because I've seen it."

"I've never been to the city. I know nothing outside of the manor. They hide me away like some type of troll."

Grandmother's expression darkened. "Lilly, you must listen to me. Put aside silly things. Put aside this party, the manor, and what society expects of you. None of it matters. None of it! The world you live in means nothing. There's a world beyond the iron. You speak of the city, but it's the woods that call to us. It's the woods of the forgotten tales. As wondrous as the stories are, it's a world much like our own. As breathtaking and enchanting as it may seem, it can be just as cruel and evil. You must heed my words, child, and be wise to them. You must always be aware of everything around you. Just as we have rules, so do they; and furthermore, their rules are not simple. Their rules contain riddles and obscure meanings. You may feel your world lacks freedom. To a certain extent, that is true. While the world beyond this garden is enchanting, it comes

with a price. There are pleasures beyond anything you ever experienced, unlike anything you can feel, taste, smell, touch, or imagine. Still, there is evil as well, and it's as dangerous as it is enticing. You must remember evil comes in many disguises. You must listen to your heart, not your head, so as not to take leave of your senses. Dreams will become a reality, and reality will be like a dream. All that seems logical, all you can hold in the palm of your hand, may fade and turn to shadows and dust before your very eyes. You must be careful, or you will lose yourself."

I was suddenly aware my mouth was open. For the first time, I was frightened of my grandmother. I desperately wanted to go beyond the garden and experience all the hidden freedoms I imagined existed. Still, everything she was sharing, the dark look in her eyes, her very demeanor, frightened me.

"Lilly, my dear, you and I are not of this world," she said, her tone softening at my discomfort. "We believe in things others cannot possibly understand. I know what I'm saying frightens you, but you must trust this old woman. I have seen much in my time, more than you could ever dream. One day you will see it too. One day it will all be yours." she said, touching my cheek, leaving the lingering scent of her perfume behind. "Do you remember all those times you saw me go into the woods while everyone was sleeping?"

"I knew it! I knew it is you!"

"Yes, I traveled those woods many a night. You saw me because you have a gift—a gift your

mother never had. You are different. The gift is in your blood, and you will enter the woods one day as I did. When the time comes, you must be wary of those who carry a false façade. They may appear fair, offering you things, promising you things, perhaps even trying to seduce you, but you must be wise and careful. You must be cautious."

"I don't understand any of this. Even if I wanted to go into the woods, I have no way beyond the gate. Father and Mother have seen to that."

Grandmother shook her head. "There will come a day when the need to enter them will be so compelling, and you will go. You must go. The woods are a part of who you are, who I am. You are destined for something more, Lillianna. Your destiny lies within the woods, and you must seek it out. It's yours for the taking. I tried for so long to capture it for you, but I'm old and weak. The power never resided in me. It resides in you. When the time comes, you will know what to do. It will come to you in a dream. You need only touch the gate, and it will open to you. Your gate, Lilly, is a gate no one will see but you."

I looked out toward the woods. As a child, I would stare at the iron bars surrounding the manor until they faded from my field of vision, giving the illusion of freedom. In those fantastic moments, the trees would lean toward me, their branches extending like arms. They called to me, knowing how trapped and alone I felt in a world that viewed me as no more than a commodity. However, that was a child's game. What Grandmother spoke of now was altogether different.

"Why can't I see it now?"

"You are not ready," she said simply.

"Where is it? I mean, how will I see it?"

"I cannot show it to you. It's different for everyone, but you will know."

"Do you have a gate?"

"Yes, my dear."

"What does it look like?" I pressed.

"That's a secret I cannot share," she said.

I frowned. "Who are they, the ones who want me?"

Grandmother looked out into the woods once more and closed her eyes. "I'm tired. I will tell you tomorrow. I've gotten much too carried away with words."

I was disappointed, but her eyes convinced me not to pursue it any further.

"Now. Back to your special gift. What I'm about to give you, you must show no one. Just like books, you must keep this hidden from your parents and your brother."

Grandmother reached into the bodice of her dress and pulled an object from between her breasts.

"Hold out your hand," she instructed.

"It's a mirror," she said, placing it in my hand.

Mother felt mirrors were a sign of vanity, so we never had them in the house. I couldn't ever remember seeing one, so there was no comparison. It was actually quite dull, a little smaller than the size of my palm, round, smooth, black, and hung from a silver chain. It looked more like a polished stone, except the black surface sparkled in the moonlight.

"This is no ordinary mirror, my dear. I want you to focus your gaze upon it and tell me what you see."

I looked at it carefully. "I see nothing."

"No, child. Let your eyes relax. Give it a moment and tell me what you see."

Frowning, I tried again, focusing on the mirror, just as I had with the iron bars as a child. My eyes relaxed, and the mirror's surface started to swirl until the glittery flecks merged into a reflective surface.

My breath caught.

"Yes. You see something. Don't you?" She asked.

"I see you, but it's me. It's my face," I replied. It seemed silly, but I had never seen my own image. The reflection staring back was my own, but it was also my grandmother's face as I could imagine her at eighteen. My eyes were the same vivid green. My nose turned up slightly on its end, and my lips were red and full. The same red hair framed a fair and beautiful face. I was the picture image of my grandmother, and this made me very happy.

Grandmother took my face in her hands and added, "Now, look deeply into your own eyes and tell me what you see."

I looked back down at the mirror and allowed my eyes to relax until I could see my image again. I was unsure what she wanted me to see, but as I did, the surface swirled into a kaleidoscope of color. Suddenly the world around me pulsed and faded. The images within the mirror moved quickly but

absorbed into my memory the way a lucid dream stays with you long after you awaken.

What I saw went beyond any dream or nightmare, confusing and frightening me at the same time. Some images stirred feelings within me I had never experienced and produced a mixture of pleasure, fear, and excitement. I felt lost in the whirlwind of imagery, but I heard my grandmother's voice outside of myself. This caused the images to swirl backward until they faded, and my world returned to the present.

The mirror's surface looked black and bespeckled once more. I looked around, expecting I would be somewhere other than the bench on which I sat. However, I never moved. I felt cold and began to shake.

"Are you all right, my dear?" Grandmother asked with concern.

"Yes, yes, I think so. How long was I gone? Where did I go?"

"A matter of seconds, and yet you remained here. What did you see?"

Seconds seemed impossible. It felt like hours, maybe even days.

"I saw so many things. I don't know where to begin. The images were strange, real, and yet surreal. I thought I could touch them. I could smell everything around me. I could feel what they were feeling, and I saw," I stopped feeling overcome with emotion and looked down at my hands, embarrassed. I knew I shouldn't speak of some of the things I saw.

"Go on, child. It is all right. You can tell me."

"Grandmother, I saw people, strange and beautiful people, loving one another in ways that only married people do. I saw people who looked human and others that looked human but were also animals. I heard enchanting music. I saw dancing and singing, but I saw other things that frightened me."

Grandmother's eyes narrowed. "What frightened you, dear?"

I held back my tears, sensing she knew the answer to her question, and that frightened me even more.

"I saw nightmarish figures who were so angry and violent. There was so much pain. The atrocities would surely send one to hell. Was it hell that I saw?"

"No, child, you saw a glimpse of what resides within the woods. That is their world, which is separate from this one. They don't believe in heaven and hell. Moreover, like our world, there is no love without hate, no light without the dark, and no good without evil. In that respect, it's very much like our own." Grandmother leaned in and whispered in a low dark voice. "Where do you think the forgotten tales come from? The stories you have read are accounts of their world, but the stories only scratch at the surface. What you saw in the mirror is what lies under the wood."

It seemed impossible, the words she was saying, and yet I had no reason to disbelieve her. I trusted her beyond anyone or anything. "I'm not sure I wish to go there again."

"I know, child, but you are a part of that world, not this one. It's in your blood. They will call you one day, and you must go. The mirror is your

guide in that world. It's a gate key but isn't the door. It will provide information about the present, the past, and only glimpses of the future as the future is always in motion. The mirror is only one element. There is also a book, a unique book. When used together, these two elements are a potent tool."

Grandmother then took the mirror from my hands.

"We shall look upon it together. I will guide you through what you need to see."

I was afraid but moved closer. We were about to lean our heads together when the hinges of the garden gate squealed. Grandmother immediately hid the mirror in the folds of her dress.

Mother entered the garden looking sour, with her arms tightly folded against her bosom. She crossed to the both of us.

I felt myself rise in implicit obedience, but Grandmother placed a hand gently on my arm, and I sat back down. I was unsure what would happen next, but to my surprise, Grandmother and Mother spoke not a word. They seemed to have a heated, silent exchange that only they understood. Mother's eyes flared and turned cold. Grandmother simply sat and stared at her with a regal air. I watched their exchange in confusion and amusement. I wanted to laugh at the absurdity. I never understood their anger toward one another. After what seemed an eternity, Mother finally spoke.

"Lillianna, your father and I have gone to great lengths to provide you with a wonderful party. Your guests are waiting, and it's very rude of you to leave them curious as to your absence." Her voice

was shaky and insecure, something I wasn't used to hearing.

"Hush now, Josie," Grandmother said. "The girl just needed some fresh air. I will see she gets inside right away. As always, I will take care of everything."

Mother's mouth twitched in protest, but she turned in exasperation and went back towards the manor. When she was out of sight, I burst out laughing.

"She despises you, calling her 'Josie.' Just once, I would love to call her that."

"Best not, my dear. Now, let's get inside before your mother puffs up like a blowfish."

"But the mirror, we were to gaze upon it once more."

"There's always tomorrow, my child," she said, handing it to me. "Put it away and remember what I told you. Show it to no one."

Obediently, I took the mirror and opened the bench upon which we had been sitting. A simple marble box rested inside. I placed the mirror inside, closed the bench, and looked at my grandmother for guidance.

"Now, let's go have some fun, shall we?" She smiled in her familiar cat-like way. "There are several society women I have yet to embarrass."

"Yes, let's. You have much to teach me," I said.



Later that evening, I thought about the mirror and Grandmother's words. I couldn't wait to gaze upon it once more and find out about the book. It was so exciting and fantastical, and yet, confusing. I had many questions. *What did Grandmother mean, the woods were in my blood?*

Eventually, my thoughts grew fewer, and I succumbed to sleep and vivid dreams.

I dreamt of the garden as it had once been. It was not overgrown with age but alive with youth, full of flowers, music, and laughter. The statues' eyes opened, and everything breathed with life beneath the moon and stars. The statues watched as I danced, swirled, and twirled into an intoxicated frenzy. The ground shook beneath me, and the air was alive with the buzz of creatures, both great and small, whose wings glistened in the moonlight. My hair was wild, my skin tingled with the feel of the crisp autumn breeze upon it, and my body undulated to the rhythm of the strange music. I was free.

The last thing I remembered hearing was Grandmother's voice whispering in time with the music, "I am you; you are me; we are they. Some rules are made to be broken."

3
Gone

As light broke through the window, I rushed from my room to share my dream with my grandmother before it dimmed. However, when I entered her bedroom, the sound of crying from the chambermaids met my ears. They circled around her bed with heads bowed, all except my parents.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

The circle broke to reveal my grandmother. She appeared peacefully asleep and looked beautiful, almost younger, if possible.

I looked up at my mother. "What's wrong?"

"Your grandmother passed in the night," she answered in her cold, familiar way.

My knees buckled, and I crashed down upon them. "No! It's- It's not possible!"

"Not at all surprising, if you ask me. I'm sure she caught her death sitting in that garden last night."

My mother's stony declaration was a guilt serpent seeping under my skin, whose sole purpose was to squeeze painfully around my heart. A faint self-satisfied smile curled her lips, causing the bile to rise in my throat. I hated her more than ever before.

"How can you be so cruel?" I cried.

"Lillianna Rose!" my father roared.
"Apologize to your mother this instant!"

I managed to stand on shaking legs. Seething hatred filled every fiber of my being. "Never! I will never apologize to her!" The tension in the room was thick, and I was sure Father would strike me for my disobedience; however, I didn't care.

Silently, I crossed to my grandmother's bedside and sat down. I looked into the face of the woman who was my entire world. She was dressed all in white; her red hair lay wild over the white linens and reminded me of roses on snow. I gently picked up her hand and placed it against my own cheek. It was cold, and the smell of sweetgrass was gone.

"I am you; you are me; we are they. I shall never forget you. I will love you always," I whispered through my tears.

Turning, I looked up at my mother. The smile was gone from her lips, but not the cruel satisfaction taunting me from behind her eyes. She'd won in some evil way.

"Lillianna Rose, you still owe your mother an apology," Father reminded.

"I'm sorry, Father. Some rules are made to be broken," I replied and ran down the hall to my bedroom. His booming voice echoed in the distance, but I didn't care. Defying my parents was worth any punishment I might receive.



That evening I stared at the garden through my bedroom window. The servants didn't call me to dinner, and I assumed that was my punishment. Although, I was sure there would be other reprisals. I knew my parents would never let my insolence go freely. None of it mattered. The only woman I ever loved, the woman who taught me everything, to question everything in life, and explore my imagination, was gone. My light resided in her, for she alone gave me the freedom my station could not. Now, all of it was gone.

I looked back at the garden. A rolling fog was moving through the garden gate. It fell over the small bench we had just shared the evening before. From that moment forward, I vowed never to enter the garden again. I didn't want to look upon the special gift hidden in the bench. All the magic in the world ceased with the closing of my grandmother's eyes, and the lights and music within the woods disappeared forever.