

*The Monster in  
the Woods*



Kathryn Hore

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## PUBLICATION HISTORY

*The Monster in the Woods* was originally published in:

*In Sunshine Bright and Darkness Deep:  
An Anthology of Australian Horror*  
edited by Cameron Trost and Ben Knight

Published 2015 by The Australian Horror Writers Association

## THE MONSTER IN THE WOODS



When they came to take her, she screamed and screamed and screamed.

Though she witnessed the ballot herself, all their attempts to be fair. In that long room stinking of rank fear and sweat, the village adults hovering close and clutching hands while up front the town elders stood, looking as stricken as any. The mayor, the doctor, the notary. Lord Greswold himself, owner of almost all the land hereabouts. The men who were meant to protect them.

Standing on the outer, she watched as they dragged forward the big box containing the name of every eligible adult. She saw with her own eyes the Lord reaching within to choose. You couldn't get more random than that, even she had to agree. You couldn't get more fair.

Still, when they came for her, she screamed.

'Don't do this. You bastards. Greswold! You can't do this!'

They did not listen. Refused to look her in the eye. The biggest men of the village, farmers, builders, all thick arms and grim lips, coming for her. It took four of them to restrain her struggles, pulling her forward, grabbing her waist, her legs, one man to each arm. She tried to fight, to hit and punch and kick. When they wrapped their

strength about her limbs, she tried to bite instead. When they managed to keep beyond reach of her teeth, she simply screamed.

Loud enough for all to hear.

Loud enough to wake the children.

The other adults kept back, watching without word. Condoning, approving. Not one stepping forward as she was dragged into the night, not a single voice raised in protest, *surely this is wrong?* Was that surprising? Was she really so friendless? These people came to her for advice when they were ill, when they were worried, when they were infertile and the town doctor was of little use. They thought her the keeper of some arcane knowledge and she let them, because an esoteric image could be useful. She never told them she simply read the same books their doctor studied from, mixed in some local knowledge of the herbs hereabouts and was prepared to think more broadly than the stiff old physician ever bothered to.

They came to her when their children were ill. When they were desperate. She helped them.

Didn't they understand she wanted to save them too, the children? She wanted to find a way. But that this wasn't it, this couldn't be it. Blood for blood, it could not work.

But the townspeople looked on without pity, silent as the men dragged her away. She begged for help, but their eyes reflected only relief it was not them.

She screamed.

A backhand to the jaw knocked the sound out of her. Teeth clattering, head knocking back. Black clouds edged her vision; it was all she could do keep conscious. Her limbs went slack and she struggled to remember where and when she was, what was happening, who or why.

They carried her forward, passing buildings, houses. A rough road beneath their feet. The night becoming thick as they left the town behind. Ahead, tiny pinprick lights danced in the dark. Torches carried by the four old men, Lord Greswold leading the way. And beyond them, a looming darkness.

Greswold led them to it. Down into the woods.

'This won't save them. Please,' she tried as the trees grew closer and the path twisted in. Her throat was hoarse and it came out as a whisper; something they could ignore as the forest closed around them. It was thick amid the trees. A blanket darkness barely held at bay by their torches, branches reaching out in clutching tangles. The old men lit the way down the narrow, twisting path, the younger following with her tight in their arms. They would not leave the path, not even these men, the town's strongest. None would dare step amid the trees at night.

She began to struggle again as the path spilled into an open space; a clearing lost in the woods. Claustrophobic with trees towering in a ring, the barest hint of black sky glimpsed through matted branches above. She jerked a leg. Yanked an arm and managed to get it free. Started hitting out, but they ignored each feeble blow. Senses returning, she felt the scream build again in her throat.

'Keep her quiet,' the doctor said. He sounded nervous, even to her ears.

'Tis easy for you,' a young man snapped back, but got his hand over her mouth. He clamped her lips tight with his calloused fingers so she couldn't even bite him.

In the middle of the clearing was a pole. Tall and wooden, driven deep into the ground; they had prepared for this, set it all up, and now they dragged her to it. There was rope already attached to the

pole and she felt it looped first about an ankle. They pulled it tight, until it cut deep into her flesh.

She cried out, cursing them with the pain.

Another loop went about her waist, then one around each wrist. She thrashed about, but they roped her so no limb was free. She was trapped. Tied in the woods in the middle of the night, a sacrifice given up to the dark.

She knew what happened to sacrifices in these woods. Blood on the ground and torn flesh. So did the men. When they staggered back from her, four old, four young, their expressions were aghast. Faces lit by torchlight as they stared at their handiwork, made all the more dreadful for the shadows.

‘You think this will save them? Your children?’ she said.

One young man, a farmer, stepped forward.

‘Something must be done,’ he said. He sounded afraid, but she had little pity for his fear. ‘We can’t let it take our kids.’

‘It will anyway. Sacrifice won’t stop it. We need another way.’

‘It wants blood. We have to give it someone.’

‘We don’t know what it wants!’ she said. ‘That’s what we need to find out.’

Lord Greswold put a hand on the man’s arm and pulled him back. ‘Don’t listen to her. She knows nothing.’

‘Greswold, you bastard. You know no more!’

But she did not waste time on him, it had been too many years since she’d wasted time on him and the history between them was too old for it to even hurt anymore.

Instead, she turned back to the farmers. To those she thought might listen.

‘If we can figure out why it’s come, we can figure out a way to stop it,’ she said. But their expressions remained stolid.

She tried reason, then anger, then fear, pleading with them at the last. But they turned their backs. Two picked up torches; Greswold and the doctor. The mayor and the notary left theirs, allowing her some light, even if only enough to create more shadows. She watched their backs, desperate to get away, hurrying down the path.

'You bastards!' she screamed. 'This isn't the end of it. Your children won't be safe. The monster in these woods will take them still!'

But they were gone, leaving her roped and alone, with only fear and shadows for company.

She allowed herself some tears. A damp bitterness on her cheeks, a salt taste on her tongue. For a moment she was stuck, by the ropes, by her own impotent fury. By the growing terror which wrapped itself around her gut and squeezed. They did not have a name for what was in these woods; to name such a thing brought its own danger. But they had chronicled its impact. The occasional survivor, rare and mute, trembling wrecks of people who never recovered any sense. The rest, the others, every traveller through these woods after dark. Left as little more than piles of torn flesh atop blood soaked earth.

Except for the children. The children were never found. Never seen again.

And then the children had begun disappearing from within the town. From within their very own beds.

She did not blame the townspeople their fear. She had no children and perhaps they thought she did not understand, but she did. Really she did. Only it was her name pulled from the box, her body tied out here in the night with the shadows reaching. She was the one they were giving up to the woods, their sacrifice, given to suffer for their children.

Damn it. She had to stop crying. She had to do something.

She sniffed back the tears and tried to inspect her bonds. The knots were tight, but they were only knots. Tied by men who were strong, but afraid and desperate to get away, rushing too quick to check their handiwork. Surely she could find a loose slip in one of the knots, a catch in the ropes she could work to her advantage?

She picked with one hand at the ropes around the other. As she did, she heard the trees behind her sway.

Her head snapped up. Every nerve in her body froze. Even the breath in her throat was still as she focussed her listening.

Nothing.

Then something.

A shift in the trees. Movement. In the distance.

Coming closer.

She turned back to the knotted rope with renewed scrambling. Frantic, pulling with her nails, her fingers, her teeth. Blinking rapid to clear her vision; the tears were back, but this time they were of panic and she paid them no heed. The ropes around her right wrist held. She gave it up and switched hands, trying to work at her left instead.

A finger caught under the edge of the rope. Her breath caught with it.

She heard rustling behind her. Her chest tightened, dropped into her gut.

Yanking, pulling. Her skin tearing with it, under the ropes. She barely noticed, kicking at the pole instead, grunting with effort as she wrenched hard and felt something give way.

Her left hand tore free. It allowed slack in the rope and with frenzied movement she pulled again at the knots at her right. Breaking nails, burning skin, she managed to get it loose. Ropes were every-

where, around her waist, her ankles, but she tried to shake them off, tried to get a foot out.

Something. Something moving in the trees.

Something stepping into the clearing behind her.

The torch-lit shadows stretching before her shifted. Something moving in front of the light. The skin beneath her hair crawled and she heard a terrified sound, realising only distantly it was from her own throat. And bonds only partially loosened or not, she tried her best to run.

She bolted toward the path, shaking off the remaining rope as she did so.

Her left ankle slid out beneath her. Still tied too tight.

She cried out as she fell and hit the ground hard. Her shoulder, her hip. The thump of it took the breath out of her and left her wheezing in the dirt. She heaved back into winded lungs, gasping for air as she lay on the ground. Too long. She had to get up. Struggling for breath, twisting to reach for her ankle. But the ropes cut in too tight and the knots held. Brutal spikes of pain shot through her leg as she yanked at it. The joint was twisted.

No. No, she couldn't let it take her. She couldn't die here and let the townsfolk get away with doing this to her.

A shadow fell across the ground. A darkness over her body. It brought cold. She shivered. She had to draw her hands together to stop their shake.

'Please,' she whispered, not daring to look up. 'Please. Just... please.'

'Yes. They do often plead.'

The voice was smooth. Deep and resonant, it sounded a vibration low in her gut. Despite herself, she began to look up. She had to see. She wanted to know. What manner of thing could speak so? Her

eyes lifted slowly and she told herself not to scream, no matter what she saw there. Whatever the horrific visage or inhuman dread made solid, whatever abomination that was the monster in these woods.

It was a man.

A handsome one, at that. Leaning one shoulder against the pole, muscled arms bare and crossed over a vest, looking down at her. The kind of man that had always caught her eye, her tastes, her likes. Shadows played havoc with the features of his face. He seemed to have blonde hair, or maybe it was brown. His arms were strong, thick, his torso solid; there was a strength in him, a raw masculinity to his broad shoulders. In the semi-darkness it seemed his eyes were only black.

She closed her eyes. Wiped them with torn fingers. When she opened them again, he was still there. Still the same, unmoved and unimpressed by her pleas.

'Who are you?' she asked, a breathless sound, because she wasn't sure what else to say.

He grinned. She had the fleeting impression the teeth in his mouth were sharp.

'They see what they want. What they fear most. Or want most. Or both,' he said. His voice rattled in her head. It seemed to contain its own echo. 'Not often do they see a man.'

She felt herself swallow; her throat was suddenly dry.

'It is a mask,' she said. 'This before me, what I see. So it is a mask.'

The man shrugged, uninterested in her attempts to make sense of what was happening. It seemed to bore him. He stood straight and came towards her. She shied back, a cowering movement she immediately regretted, but he did not attempt to touch her. He only stood above and looked down.

'And never,' he said, 'do they ask the right questions.'

She had to stop staring. Lying sprawled on the ground in his shadow, gazing up with breathless wonder. He was tall above her and when he moved she saw the muscles in his arms flex, the strength of his shoulders, torchlight and shadow against skin. It brought a gasp to her throat, an unwitting catch to her breath as she stared and could not stop. Could not tear her eyes away.

Move; she must move. Anything to shake some sense back into herself. She made herself stand, despite the pain shooting up from her ankle and the stinging burns from the rope. It was a slow process with little grace, wobbling lopsided to her feet bit-by-bit. But it got her up, it let her hobble backwards as far as the rope would allow her. It stopped her crouching in his shadow.

More importantly, it made her eyes turn away. Even still, she could not stop thinking of those arms. What would they be like held about her? What would the touch of his hands, firm with intent, feel like against her skin?

No. He was no man.

'*What* are you?'

His laughter echoed low. 'You would not want to know. Be satisfied with what you see.'

She fought to hold her ground as he stepped closer. She shook, but would not turn, not even as there became barely any space left between them. He came so close she could feel his breath cool on her cheek, the shifting strength of his body in the wake of her own. She had to fight an inexplicable urge to reach out and touch him.

He bent his head to her ear. She did not pull away.

'What do you want?' he whispered.

'Me?' she breathed, trying to clear her head. It was fuzzy. Hard to think with him so close. 'No. Wait. What do you want. I should be

asking...'

He shifted again. His body almost, *almost*, touching hers. Stepping behind her, moving around her, shifting near. She stayed very still. Waiting. She wasn't sure for what, for him to grab her maybe. To touch her. Perhaps to tear her apart. To do whatever he will. Her breath was short, fast, coming in gasps. Her every muscle was yearning toward him. No, not waiting; *anticipating*.

He did not touch her. He did not bridge the final inch between them.

She felt his lips by her other ear. 'Then ask.'

'What... what is it you want?'

She heard that laughter again. A rumble through her limbs.

'It is not I who wants.'

She tried to lift her chin, find defiance. Found herself leaning back toward him instead. She should be struggling, fighting, not just standing waiting for him to touch her. She saw him raise a hand. He brought it close to her face, her cheek. She braced herself, thought *finally*. Leant her head back as if already under his hold.

His skin did not brush hers. His fingers hovered millimetres from her face, but kept at that same distance as he traced them down the line of her chin, her throat, her shoulder. Her body, her breasts, her waist. Her hip. Maddening. She wanted to cry out at him, she wanted to scream: *touch me!*

She forced a breath back and turned to look straight into those black, black eyes.

'Is that...?' she began, then had to stop, swallow, start again. 'Is that all you are? A temptation made flesh? A trick of the mind seducing me?'

His lips twisted in the shadows; a smile, sharp like his teeth.

'If such is a trick, is it a good one, no?'

His voice vibrated her core. She found herself leaning toward it. It was all she could do not to clutch hold of him.

'I should be fighting you. I should be running from you.'

'Then fight. Run. But why worry about should? Focus instead on *want*.'

'What do I want?'

She wasn't sure why she asked that. The words were out of her mouth before she could consider them.

'Now you are asking the right questions.'

He turned, a languid movement, stepping away. An emptiness left behind, the feeling of something lost.

As he moved, he raised a hand, held it up. Around his wrist something weaved. Silk. Silk cuffs, ravelling, pulling together. Cloth stitching around him even as she watched, spun from the air, from the darkness and shadows. Down his arms, a fine jacket in green appearing stitch by stitch across those broad shoulders, fitted and trimmed. The other arm held out, he turned, cocked his head as the cloth stitched its way about him, down his body, covering his skin. Jacket and shirt, belt and pants. Thick, leather boots, polished and expensive, with silver buckles gleaming bright.

A hat. Bowing his head, a cane forming in one hand. When he raised his head again, when he tipped that hat to her, it was with a very familiar face.

'Greswold' she said and heard the disgust in her own voice.

But this was not the Greswold of now. This was the Greswold of the past. Brown hair not yet greyed, round face not yet lined. Muscular shoulders and youthful strength; yes, he'd had those once. There had been attractions. It had been many years since she'd seen that one so young and maybe back then it had been different, but now all it did was bring a sour taste to her mouth.

Her jaw clenched together. She felt herself shift back. It was Greswold who looked at her, but that smile was still sharp and those eyes were still black.

'Greswold is not what I want,' she said.

'You did once.'

'A long time ago. I learned my lesson.'

The sharp grin grew. 'But not the right one.'

A raised hand lashed out. She was beyond arm's reach, too far away for it to connect. But it did not need to. It was enough that it once had.

It wasn't that she felt the slap; she *remembered* it. The stinging open-palm blow to her cheek, the shock and shame flooding through her with it. Her head flicked back, a grunt passing her lips. She was pushed back a step by the force of it.

She gasped. A memory should never hurt so much.

He stood several feet from her. But she felt the grip around her wrist now just as she had then and she fought against it now as then too. Crying out, yanking herself back. This wasn't happening, this wasn't now. She fought to tell herself that. This was then, back when they were young, little more than teenagers. Back when he'd been just another village kid, if one with fierce ambition, and she a young fool attracted by good-looks and charm alone.

The grip about her waist bit in, held by hands she could not see but could only remember. She twisted in them, fighting, yanking herself away. Forming a fist, lashing out with her arms. She felt her punch connect, she heard the ghost-whispers of his cursing on the wind.

She turned to run. Back then she had run.

The rope tugged back on her ankle and she cried out with the agony of it, staggering forward. The spikes of pain bolted up her leg

and shocked the memory, if such was what it was, as physical as it was, away.

She found herself panting, gulping back breath. Untouched and standing in the night, shaking with the adrenalin of a struggle which had happened twenty years before. She had got away then. She had assumed it was over, done with. Had she been wrong in that?

She looked back over her shoulder, her face still stinging from the slap of long ago. It was no longer Greswold there. He was had returned to his first appearance, that strength of man, and she could not have said she was sorry. Perhaps this creature with his hungry black eyes pulled her forward too easily, but she would take that over Greswold any day.

And yet there was something of Greswold which remained. Before the creature was a box. A great wooden box, just like the one she had watched the Lord take a name from. The one from which he had pulled her own name.

The ballot box.

She eyed it with suspicion. It could not be real. 'What...' she began, but her words dragged off. Instead she stepped forward. limping, trying to ignore the low burning of suspicion deep inside her.

'There is a price for knowing,' he said. 'Are you sure this is what you want?'

She said nothing, just kept shuffling to that box. She could see the little bits of twisted card inside, innocuous as they lay there. Folded over so she could not read them. She stared at them. Raised a hand. Hesitated.

Her eyes flicked upwards. He was watching her. Black eyes waiting. Hungry.

She plunged her hand amid the cards. It felt real and her fingers closed around something. She pulled a tiny piece of card out and

flicked it open.

Her name was written across it.

But of course. That made sense. It had been her name.

She let the card drop, let it flutter to the ground. Looked up to stare at him. He said nothing. Only waited while she made her decisions.

Quicker now, staring at him still, she plunged her hand back among the cards. Pulled out another and tore it open.

Her name again.

And again.

And again.

'No.'

Again.

'No!'

She yanked at the box. Both hands as the bile rose up in her throat. The box was solid, heavy, all too real. It rocked as she grabbed it, pushed it. It fell with a thud, spilling its contents across the dirt. All those innocuous bits of card. All those secrets across the forest floor.

'No!' she cried out as one after the other of those bits of cards showed her own name.

She yanked herself away, staggering, stumbling. Barely staying upright, standing in the middle of the clearing, shaking and clenching her fists, the truth too hard, too bitter.

'It was meant to be fair,' she said, as if that made a difference. 'It was meant to be...'

But what did that even mean, fair? The selection of a sacrifice in some equitable manner all would accept? As if that could make it right. As if that changed anything. She was still the body given to suffer, still the one they gave up to the beast.

He was still standing, waiting, patient.

'Why?' she cried. 'Why are you here? Why do you show me this?'

'I come when called.' He shifted, moved behind her, beyond her vision. She saw him reappear from the corner of her other eye. 'I take what is given.'

'The children are not given! They are not...'

But her words dragged off. She thought of the bits of card. Her eyes clenched shut, tight enough to squeeze back the tears. She wanted to shake the suspicion from her head and refuse the possibility. There were too many secrets here which should never be found out. She told herself she no longer wanted to know them. That she no longer wanted to know any of it.

That was a lie. The truth was still the biggest temptation of all.

He stepped around in front of her. He held out one hand, one long muscled arm.

'Come,' he said. 'Come and find out what you really want.'

Her own hands were sweaty and she wiped them against her skirts. 'I do not want to die,' she said, because that much was truth she could be sure of. 'I do not want to be torn apart.'

'You will not mind. It is but a price.'

There seemed no options, no escapes. Yet he did nothing but hold out a hand. Waiting with the patience of one who knows the conclusion is forgone. She could not deny the heat which rose to her cheeks, the warmth low down in her belly as she looked back at him. She could not deny just how much she really *wanted*, even if she wasn't quite sure what.

*Come and find out.* The gesture seemed to offer answers, explanations. Perhaps it also offered pain and death. The unknown made her insides turn, though she did not back away. She understood this

was her choice. She had not expected that. Her choice. And so she chose.

She raised a shaking hand and put her clammy fingers into his.

A sound rose up out of her, a cry in the night. She tried to pull her hand away again, but once in his hold he did not give it up. His grip was cold, iced. Burning. The piercing of a thousand needles into her skin. It felt as if the flesh of her fingers was searing, tearing. As if it were ripping away from her bones.

She cried out and gripped on tighter. And the instant her skin touched his, she knew.

Around her in the clearing, she saw it. The past, the truth. The young Greswold cursing her own retreating form, running from him and leaving him furious, thwarted. She had not given him what he wanted. His blame lashed out at her, at everyone. At the town itself. Hunched over in these woods, calling out his wants to the night.

She heard his cries on the wind. *Power. Wealth. Land.* Always the same. *Power.* Of course.

She heard another come to bring answer to his desires. *What would you give to have what you want?*

Greswold hadn't even hesitated.

*The first born of all who owe me allegiance.*

And in the darkness of the wood, she cried with the sadness of it and the pain, grabbed at her own wrist, and pulled.

The contact broke. She went stumbling back, numbed hand clutched to her, staggering on her injured ankle. She fell to her knees, heaving nausea, the truth sitting rancid in her belly. It rose up her throat and she leant over, coughing, retching. Spitting out strands of foul-tasting bile, bitter tears mixing with vomit. Heaving over and over again.

She threw it all up, but she could not conquer this knowing.

Silence. She shivered in it for a long time. Thinking of Greswold. Of the town which would make her their sacrifice. Thinking of the children. After a while, she raised her good hand to wipe at her eyes, her mouth; the other remained useless and damaged in her lap. The price of knowing, of wanting to know. It begged a question, what would be the price for something even more?

When she glanced back over her shoulder, he was still there. Black eyes watching. Waiting. Interesting, but she no longer felt afraid.

'I know what I want now,' she said. Her voice sounded raw.

'Yes.'

'And you will give it to me?'

'Yes.'

'For a price?'

'There is always a price.'

She nodded and pushed herself to her feet, balancing on her good ankle. For a moment she looked at him in the semi-darkness, the torch-light and shadows competing across his skin. Taking in the strength of his jaw, the breadth of his shoulders. The power in his arms and hands. She thought again of what it would feel like to have those hands on her body, her skin. His lips at her neck, her shoulders. Her breasts. Her thighs. Impossible to deny she wanted it. She thought of his teeth sharp against her flesh, but she did not think she would mind.

She moved to stand in front of him. He did not try to touch her. He had only ever offered.

'I want...,' she began, but stopped. It was important to get this right. She wanted many things, including this visage of him, but she had long ago learned that good-looking, powerful men were rarely worth the price they demanded.

And what she was prepared to pay for was something else entirely.

In her head, she heard echoes of her own cries. *If we know why it's come, we can know how to stop it...* She knew why now. She even knew how to stop it.

But it was too late for that.

'I want,' she said and he nodded. He knew exactly what she wanted.

She lifted both hands to his face, leaned forward and kissed him.

His lips were cold. She dropped her hands to his shoulders and pushed aside his vest. His body beneath was searing with the freeze. It numbed her fingers, froze her hands. His tongue was ice in her mouth. She felt cold hands in her hair, tangling its strands, and shivers on her skin. Dragging down her back, her shirt torn from her shoulders. His fingers biting into her flesh. Sharpened nails, slicing in. Her body tearing with her clothes.

A single drop of blood fell from the corner of her mouth where it pressed against his, trickling down her chin.

She pressed herself against him all the harder.

He changed mid-way through her kiss. She had known he must. The semblance of man must fall away and it left only darkness, something rough under her hands. Something dripping red, inhuman and clutching. Claws ripping flesh, sharp points of teeth biting into her body. The reality of him came in flashes, too much to comprehend in total. She did not care. She embraced it. She wrapped her legs around it and cried out to the night.

She screamed, in the last. It was impossible not to. But she held on and got what she wanted.



IN THE NIGHT, the town sleeps. Perhaps with a sense of relief, if made unquiet with guilt. It was done, what had to be done. Sacrifice made, it would be enough.

It must be enough.

Behind locked doors, children lie safe, tucked into beds. Watched by nervous parents reluctant to admit the snaking bead of doubt. Adults telling each other they did only what was necessary.

They only want to save the children.

Outside, all is quiet. The occasional torch flickers, shadows dance. In the stillness, a cat skittles away. A dog ducks its tail and runs to hide.

A woman stands at the edge of town.

She is dressed in flowing white and her skin is the same shade. Her eyes are only black. Beneath the hem of her dress her feet are bare, with one pale ankle ringed a stark blue. A bruise, perhaps a scar. Perhaps a memory. A breeze rises up with her arrival, bringing an echoing cry, *don't do this! Your children will not be safe!* She drifts forward, dress billowing behind, black hair tangled like the woods from which she has come. There is blood at her lips. It stains her mouth, contrasts against the pallor of her skin.

Skin of snow, lips of blood, hair black as the darkness.

Behind locked doors, sleeping children toss in nightmare. The young who cannot know what their adults have done. She can feel the anxiety of parents. The desperation of the town. All their unspoken needs. Their fears. Their wants.

She wants.

The children. Sacrificed to save their children. Made to suffer for their children.

She wants to return that suffering. She wants them to scream. For the children.

The breeze picks up, brings its echoes. *If there is a monster in these woods, it will take them...*

She grins a bloodied, sharp-toothed grin and walks into the town.

The monster in the woods. Come to take their children.