

CHANGELING MOON



Christine Morgan's Trinity Bay series is a smorgasbord of horror – each book deals with a different kind of terror, from dark family secrets to evil spirits to mad scientists. Morgan may be the secret love child of Koontz and Rice.

—*The Horror Fiction Review*

CHRISTINE MORGAN

Changeling

Moon

by Christine Morgan

Published by:

Sabledrake Enterprises
PO Box 30751
Seattle, WA 98113
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1st Printing – Summer, 2005
Cover Designed by Tim Morgan Copyright © 2005
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ISBN 0-9771005-0-2

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Prologue

The car with the dying girl in the back seat screamed down the black ribbon of road, headlights cutting a swath through the night. The glow of the dashboard cast eerie shadows onto the driver's tense face. He leaned forward, hunched over the wheel upon which his hands were white-knuckled clamps.

His gaze stuttered from the road ahead to the rectangular murky darkness of the rearview mirror, passing briefly over the reflection of his own worried face, which was haggard and looked much older than his years. He searched for the pursuit he knew would be coming.

He wanted to turn on the radio, fill the car with music to drown out the girl. Her breathing, a series of harsh barking gasps. Her low, helpless cries whenever the tires thudded over an uneven patch of asphalt.

A single white eye opened in the mirror, growing rapidly. As fast as they were going, so fast that the lines down the center of the two-lane blacktop were a pale streak like stars seen from a spaceship accelerating into hyperspace, their pursuer was gaining.

The driver muttered a curse and pressed the gas pedal, but it was already as far down as it would go, and the old car was shuddering from the unexpected demand of speed.

"He's coming!" his brother said from the back, where he held the girl, his own injuries ignored or even forgotten as he tried in vain to comfort her.

"I know," the driver said.

He risked a glance back, his eyes briefly meeting those of his brother

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before moving to the pale, bruise-mottled oval of the girl's face. Her clothes were in tatters, her skin streaked with blood. The back of the car was soaked with it. If hopelessness had a scent, he thought as he returned his attention to the road and the onrushing red blinker of the intersection, it would be that high, coppery, thick odor.

"Did you see . . ." his brother's voice choked off into a half-sob. "Did you see what he did to her?"

"Don't think about it. She'll be fine."

He was lying, they both knew it. How could she ever be fine after what had happened to her? Even if they were able to get to help in time, even if she survived and her body mended, her mind would never be the same. Not after what she'd suffered.

The lateness of the hour should have meant that they'd have the night to themselves, but as the car sped toward the intersection, toward that red blinking light flashing its warning into the black, the driver saw the gleam of another set of headlights approaching from the cross street.

Swearing again, he checked the mirror. That white eye was bearing down on them, and if their tired old engine hadn't been banging and rattling, he knew he would have been able to hear the hungry, primal snarl of the motorcycle.

The other vehicle – it was a pickup – stopped at the four-way red and then began to proceed sedately across. Directly into their path.

"Hold on!" the driver shouted. He jiggled the wheel to the right.

The headlights splashed across the side of the pickup truck. The driver could see two faces, all wide eyes and mouths like that famous painting of the screaming ghost-figure, in the square of the window. The back of the pickup was piled with rusty tools, old washers and dryers, a *mélange* of other junk.

The car skated by, tires wailing, and for a moment the driver thought they'd made it. The corner of the pickup was so close that he could have reached out and rapped his knuckles on it. But then the side of their car connected with the pickup's bumper.

Sparks showered. A terrible screech threatened to split his head apart. The car was kicked away, just a little, but enough to make him lose control. The steering wheel tore from his grip, abrading his palms. The back end wanted to slide one way, while the front strove for the other. The driver knew they were milliseconds away from going into a spin that would send them whipping off the road, where they'd roll in a tangle of crumpling metal.

Scarlet flared somewhere to his left and he realized it was the brake lights of the pickup, which they'd already shot past. Tools and ironmongery

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jolted out of the back, rang like gongs, struck more sparks from the pavement.

Even in the midst of his terror and alarm, the driver found room to silently urge the other driver not to stop, to just keep going, not to give in to the basic human urge of curiosity. The fact of his own mortality was very much upon him. Not only for himself, but for his brother and the girl. Bad enough the three of them were surely done for. He didn't want more deaths on their heads.

He wrested the wheel back into submission, fighting to turn the car away from the gravelly shoulder. But as the tires struck that softer surface, sending a hail of tiny rocks pinging and clanging against the undercarriage, the rear end swung around the other way, skidding on the blacktop, making the car jounce and jolt.

The car plunged nose-first into the shallow ditch. The driver threw his crossed arms in front of his face as he was hurled forward. In the frantic rush to save the girl, he hadn't even thought about buckling his seatbelt. The steering wheel smashed into his chest. His head snapped forward. The windshield imploded, showering in on him, sharp-sticky safety glass cutting his forearms.

The momentum of the crash was almost enough to carry the car up and over in an automotive somersault. The driver felt the sickening sensation of teetering, of facing what seemed to be straight down. But before that mystic balance point could be reached, the back end was reclaimed by gravity and slammed to earth.

He slumped in the seat, blood from his split forehead oozing into his eyes and his ribcage feeling as if the bones had been replaced with hot poker. Part of his mind clamored that he had to get up, get out, get away. The rest of him just wanted to sink into a comforting fog of unconsciousness.

A hand gripped his shoulder. He laboriously looked around to see his brother's familiar, desperate, battered face only inches from his own.

"We have to get out of here," his brother said.

The driver swallowed, grimacing at the taste, and tried to formulate words.

"Hey! Hey, are you all right in there? Shit! Hey, buddy, you on the bike, how about some help?"

The voice had to belong to one of the people from the pickup. The words, though, struck a chord of panic in the driver's heart that overshadowed his stunned, pained state.

He shook off his brother's hand. The driver's side door had popped open and rested now with its lower edge half buried in the loose fill of the ditch, its frame crumpled and the window a sagging net of fractured,

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spiderwebbed cracks. He scrambled out and tugged at the back door, but it had buckled and even with him yanking from the outside and his brother kicking from the inside, it wouldn't budge.

"You'll have to climb over," the driver said. "Hurry!"

"I think they're okay," called the voice from the pickup excitedly, and the beam of a flashlight came jogging toward them. "I think I see —"

The beam sliced suddenly up, losing itself in the impassive dark sky. A bleating cry came from the running figure as he was tackled, brought down. Another voice, this one female, shrieked in horror and disbelief.

The pickup had stopped a little ways past the intersection. Between its taillights and the red blinker, the entire scene was painted in uneven washes of crimson. The scant, strange illumination was enough for the driver to see everything in terrible clarity.

A woman, in her twenties and wearing a miniskirt and a patchwork rabbit fur jacket, stood by the pickup's dented rear bumper. Her hands were fisted in her hair as if she meant to pull off her scalp like a wig, and her shriek peeled endlessly, seemingly without the need for her to stop and take a breath.

A motorcycle, a black and chrome machine with gold-edged scarlet flames emblazoned on the gas tank, was tilted at a rakish angle on its kickstand. The rider, tall and muscular, rose up from the unmoving form of the man from the pickup.

The sight was almost enough to freeze the driver into immobility, and surely would have if he hadn't seen it before. If he hadn't known what was chasing them. If he hadn't already witnessed first-hand the terrible strength, and vicious lust, of the creature.

The screaming woman turned to run. The beast was upon her before she'd gotten three steps. A single bound of powerful hind legs propelled the wolfin-draconian-inhuman form with uncanny speed and grace. In the red glow of the pickup's taillights, the beast's claws glistened with blood. The pickup driver was a heap of meat in the road, the life torn out of him.

Luck was with the woman. As the beast leaped upon her, she was driven headfirst into the side of the vehicle. Even from here, the driver could hear the impact, the snapping of her neck. She went mercifully limp.

His brother was trying to move the unconscious girl over the seats. She sprawled with the glitter of windshield-glass making a tiara in her hair.

The driver leaned in through the open door, reaching for her. His hand closed on her slender wrist. He could feel her thready pulse, so weak, barely there. Her eyelids fluttered and opened, dark pools peering up at him in numb incomprehension.

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“Take her,” his brother said, wriggling halfway over the seat-backs. “Get her out of –”

The rest of his words were driven out of him in a grunt as the roof of the car buckled under the weight that had landed solidly upon it. Metal groaned. His brother was pinned in place, squirming, struggling.

A wild, animalistic scent rich with musk and blood-hunger overwhelmed the driver. He looked up. The beast was there, only inches away. It was crouched atop the car, fangs bared in a feral grin, eyes lambent pools of radiance.

The driver took an involuntary step back, losing his grasp on the girl’s wrist. A flush like a fever raced over his skin. His breath slipped like a hot zephyr in and out of his lungs. He raised his hands, ready to fight though he knew he wouldn’t stand a chance.

The beast’s growl sounded like a laugh. Before the driver could even make a move, one massive pawlike hand swung through the air. Caught off guard, he was sent flying.

A spur of ice ran itself through him. Every nerve stiffened, every muscle convulsed. He felt his spine arch into a curve. Tendons stood out like cables in his neck, jaw, temples.

He coughed, once, and the ice in his chest turned to fire. His head didn’t want to move but he forced himself to look down.

A narrow bulge hideously reminiscent of a scene from a space movie tented his shirt. As his spine relaxed its curvature, lowering his body into a slump, the fabric ripped and something dark and wet appeared. He slid down along it until his back came to rest against the slanted metal wall of an up-ended washing machine.

He was in the midst of the debris that had spilled from the pickup, impaled on a bar that poked up at a deadly angle. Other sharp edges gouged and gashed at his legs.

Another cough escaped him, and a warm, thick bubble burst on his lips.

From where he lay, helpless, he could see too well. He could see the beast hop lithely down from its perch and bend to peer into the wrecked car. His brother was still trapped between the bowed roof and the seats.

The girl had gotten to her knees by the mangled driver’s side door. Her hands were raised in supplication, shudders shaking her and red-tinted tears glimmering like trails of blood on her cheeks.

The driver grasped the bar that protruded from his chest. The heat and stickiness of it made his throat clench. He tried to lever himself up and off, but even the slightest effort was enough to send motes of blackness spinning through his mind. He fell back weakly, hearing more than feeling a

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gruesome rending from somewhere within him.

Motes . . . spinning and dancing. In his mind and in his eyes. Through the whirling mothlike specks, he saw the beast reach out, seize the girl. He closed his eyes before he had to witness what it would do to her, but couldn't close his ears to his brother's anguished wail.

That cry followed him down, a resounding echo of failure and loss. When the motes swelled into an engulfing black cloud, he surrendered.

* * *

THE HUNTERS

CHAPTER 1

DECEMBER 19, FRIDAY

An hour after the meeting was over – Mr. McGuire liked to call it a meeting rather than a counseling session, but it all boiled down to the same thing in her mind – Aiden Ferguson bundled into her parka with its faux-fur trim and went outside.

The moon, half full and pale as a pearl, hung framed in the boughs of the trees and played peek-a-boo behind the shifting wraiths of the clouds. She gazed up, remembering having read that astronomers expected the lunar sphere to break up one day, cracked into pieces by the Earth's gravity to make a ring, an asteroid belt. As interesting as that might be, she was glad it wouldn't happen until far in the future.

She made her way northward along the beach, finding the best footing by habit and experience. Soon, the terrain turned rockier. She stepped carefully from one slick stone to the next, taking her gloved hands out of her pockets in case she tripped.

The ragged bluff loomed ahead of her. Aiden could hear the distant boom of waves against tumbled rocks. The only hint that she wasn't alone in some remote part of the world, or on some alien planet like the one in her latest painting, was the muted glow of the lights of the town and the buoys, or beacons, or whatever they were, planted far out in the bay itself for the sake of the boats.

Strange to think that only a few hundred yards away, yet out of sight, was an entire town. Hundreds, even thousands of people were over there, going about the chores of daily life and getting ready for the Christmas

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holidays. While she stood here, alone as she had always been.

Aiden stopped in the shadow of a boulder, startled to realize she was on the verge of tears. For no good reason, either. What could there possibly be to cry about because she lived in a town full of friendly, caring people?

But that was it, that was exactly it. How could she ever fit into their circle? She wasn't one of them, would never be one of them. How could she, when she was too timid to make more than the most basic conversation with the checker at the market, when she buried her nose in a book at the coin-op laundry to avoid having to talk to anyone?

She knew what they must think of her, what they must say to one another. That strange Ferguson girl. Not a local girl but an outsider. The one who'd stayed when the other employees from the Seacliff school had left. Some had gone to prison and others, the innocent ones, had just been happy to get as far away from the scandal as they could.

Calming herself with a series of deep breaths, she eased away from the urge to cry. She'd let the peace of the night work its magic.

An irregular splashing, subtly different from the soothing noise of the surf, made her glance around. She spied dark shapes in the water, out by the furthest of the rocks. Sleek, graceful forms glided cleanly through the waves.

As she watched, one flipped itself onto the slick stone surface. Moonlight silvered its pelt, traced the outline of its form.

A sea lion. Aiden smiled. She'd heard them before, barking their calls, but this was the first time she'd seen one here on her very own beach. And not just one, a pack of them. Would they be called a pack? A pod? Or a pride?

The merry creatures were only a few dozen yards from her, others joining the first on the rock where they groomed and jostled for position and made sounds that could have been taken for chatter. Some slipped back into the water, only to reappear moments later.

Aiden picked her way closer. She counted five of them. The uninhibited joy and playfulness in their movements filled her with delight.

But abruptly, that warm and happy sense turned to a cold prickle of unease. Her breath caught as if her throat had been pinched off.

She wasn't alone in the night anymore. She knew that as surely as she knew her own middle name was Morag, and oh how she wished both facts weren't true.

Someone was near. Someone was watching her just as she watched the leaping, cavorting sea creatures.

Aiden tried to swallow past that pinched blockage in her throat. She slowly looked around. The moonlight was fickle, and the rocks and driftwood offered too many hiding places. The surrounding forest was too close.

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Anyone could have been concealed in the shadows.

Someone. Out there in the shadows, just beyond her range of vision. Hiding. Watching her.

She stood indecisive on the spur of rock until the twinge of unease passed. She still felt that there was a presence nearby, still felt watched, but had no immediate sense that she was in danger.

Raving lunatic or curious neighbor, either way, Aiden wasn't going to linger.

Her little house, the diffuse squares of light marking the curtained front windows, looked further away than she knew it truly was. Her hands stayed fisted at her sides, pulse drumming in her ears.

No escapee from a horror movie lunged at her. Neither did an Avon lady or a teenager selling candy bars to benefit the Trinity Bay high school band. She had the night and the shore to herself. Still, she sighed with relief as she set her hand on her own porch rail.

The moment she did so, a sudden sure intuition struck her – *now* was when someone would spring out of the darkness and seize her.

She lunged up the steps and through the door, locking it behind her. She shamed herself more by leaning against it and giving in to a fit of trembling. The fit lasted only a few seconds, because the next thing she imagined was an axe or a claw cleaving through the door beside her head.

Aiden whirled and backed up, narrowly missing the coffee table.

The door stayed as it was, whole and uncleaved. No ominous heavy tread sounded on the porch. The lights didn't wink out and plunge her into blackness.

She did hear eerie music, but that was her own fault for leaving the radio tuned to the classical station, which was currently playing the "O Fortuna" segment from Orff's *Carmina Burana*.

"You," she said, "have been watching too much *Monstorama Theater*."

Someone *had* been out there. She had no doubt of that. Someone who hadn't wanted to be seen.

Could it be, and this was a thought she found both silly and wryly amusing, that whoever it was had been wary of her? Who could possibly look at skinny little Aiden Ferguson as a threat?

Aiden laughed, stifling it quickly because laughing to oneself was almost as bad as talking to oneself and talking to oneself was only a short step from what the psychiatrists liked to call 'responding to internal stimuli.'

Even so, the silliness of the idea wouldn't go away. Afraid of her? Why would anyone be afraid of *her*?

* * *

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CHAPTER 2

DECEMBER 20, SATURDAY

Jerry Forrester slouched in the passenger seat and fiddled with the settings on his video camera. “Can’t you at least rough up a suspect?”

“I tried to tell you.” Officer Scott James kept his gaze on the twisting coastal road and the shimmering veils of mist that couldn’t quite make it as actual rain. “It was your idea to do *COPS* in Trinity Bay, not mine.”

“Huah!” grunted Jerry, and sang a little of the classic old reality show’s theme song before snorting in disgust. “Yeah, but I expected *something* would happen. Something. Anything. Other than the gripping drama of Mrs. Asherby complaining about her neighbor having his television turned up too loud.”

“I suppose you would have liked it better if I kicked in Mr. Havelock’s door and wrestled him down, walker and all.”

“Hey, yeah. Mrs. Asherby could have been screaming curses to bleep out on the final tape.”

“Sorry to disappoint you.”

“But, I mean, come on . . . there’s got to be more than this. I’m going to get an F in my film class for boring the hell out of everyone.”

“Hey, you could have asked the Eureka P. D. Why’d you pick on me?”

“Because I knew you’d go along with it.” Jerry grinned.

“Then it’s nobody’s fault but your own.”

“I did learn something, though.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah . . . you guys have a piece of cake job.”

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Scott spared him a sidelong, sour look. "Piece of cake? You wouldn't have said that two years ago when I busted into Seacliff to save your bacon."

"Oh, yeah, you're so unappreciated . . . who's dating Dani Kensington?"

The radio under the dash crackled into life with Damon Blake's rich deep voice. "Scott, you there?"

"Jeez," Jerry muttered. "No code numbers or jargon or anything."

Scott plucked the handset from its cradle. "Yeah, boss. I'm here. I got Havelock to turn on his closed-captioning. He says he'll get a new battery for his hearing aid tomorrow. The feud is settled for tonight."

"Good deal." Damon Blake, with his habitual wild-west drawl, sounded dry and amused. "But saddle up, son, we just got another call. Out Vista Drive. Ronnie Greene says there's a fight over at the Bakers' place."

Scott's sandy brows lifted. "Domestic? Mike and Stacey?"

"Ronnie says he can hear yelling. Go take a look."

"On our way."

Vista Drive was the only paved road south of town. The rest were dirt roads, mud roads nine months out of the year. They branched off here and there, leading to small lots where the homes were often either ramshackle frame houses or trailers. An ocean view from some of the lots didn't make up for the overall dismal feel of the area.

"If there is a fight going on," Scott said to Jerry, "and you stick your lens in, Mike Baker's liable to feed it to you."

"Think that'd get me an A?"

"Why is it that any idiot with a camera instantly gets a case of Jimmy Olson syndrome and thinks nothing bad can happen to him?"

The Baker house was at the end of a long gravel driveway that grated and crunched beneath the cruiser's tires. As they got closer, Jerry spotted a beat-up no-color Ford, and his pulse picked up in anticipation. He recognized that car even before Scott's headlights picked out the magnetic rectangle pasted to the side. 'Pizza X-Press' was raked across a black and white checkerboard field in slanted red lettering.

"Oh, goddamn it," Scott said. "You better stay here."

"Hell no! This'll be great!"

They got out of the patrol car and heard shouting and profanities from the rear of the house. The December chill soaked into their bones, making Jerry grateful for his Old Navy fleece. He panned across the cars and the small cinderblock box that Mike and Stacey Baker called home. The porch light shed a noontime glow across the yard, eclipsing the red and green Christmas lights that outlined the eaves.

The screen door was standing open on one hinge. On the second step, a

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cardboard box was tilted on its side with a folded, spindled, and mutilated large pizza spilling out in an ooze of cheese, sauce, olives, green peppers, and sausage. Jerry zoomed in on it, paused, and then hurried to follow Scott around the back of the house.

“All right!” Jerry crowed, as the scene came into view.

Stacey Baker stood on the back deck in panties and a mostly-unbuttoned flannel shirt. Her hair and makeup were mussed, and she shouting and waving a frying pan at a pair of men.

Mike Baker, good-looking in a cigarette commercial kind of way, was bare-assed and bleeding liberally from the nose. This footage, Jerry thought gleefully, would have to be both bleeped and blurred. His glee sank into dismay as it occurred to him that a.) none of them were going to sign releases and b.) Scott would never let him keep the tape.

The other combatant was a pudgy dude with a bad complexion, stringy ponytail and receding hairline. He wore black polyester pants and a red shirt with the Pizza X-Press logo on the back. He was currently engaged in trying to throw Mike to the ground. Where, presumably, he'd use Mike's head for a football.

“Let go of me, you shithead!” Mike roared.

“Cocksucker!” the pizza-man bellowed. “Dirty-ass whorelicking motherfuck!”

“Break it up!” Scott could put out a lot of volume when he was of a mind.

Mike tore away from the pizza-man. “This crazy asshole's trying to –”

He never finished, because the pizza-man, whose nametag read ‘Ernie’ beside a cartoon smiley-face pizza with sticklike arms and legs, hiked his knee squarely into Mike's exposed genitals.

“Jesus!” Jerry Forrester was pole-axed by sympathy pain, but held onto the camera.

Mike doubled over, emitted a high breathless cry, and crumpled to his knees with both hands clamped to his injured goodies.

“There!” Ernie spat. “There, got you so good your fucking unborn *kids* will feel it.” He made to launch a kick at Mike's face, but Scott James got there first.

Scott plowed into Ernie like a charging bull. They landed atop a weathered old picnic table. It gave way with a brittle crack and dumped them onto the soggy lawn. Ernie, cursing even more vilely than before, struggled to get out from under the burly officer.

Jerry moved closer as Stacey Baker flew down the steps to her stricken husband. Her shirt had come the rest of the way open and flapped behind

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her like wings. She touched Mike's shoulder. Mike jerked away. He fell onto his side with a groan and curled into a ball, retching.

Ernie clipped Scott on the jaw, but Scott shrugged it off, flipped Ernie onto his belly with apparent effortlessness, and braced a knee in the middle of Ernie's back while he cuffed the berserk pizza-man.

"Cool it now or I'll use the spray," Scott said.

"They think this shit is *funny!*" frothed Ernie. "Why not? We tell 'em it'll take twenty, thirty minutes, so they think, what the fuck, we've got time for a quickie. But you get here and you can hear 'em even through the door, going at it like orgy time in the monkey house, and then he fucking comes to the door *naked*, who the hell wants to see that? Like, 'hyuck, hyuck, I got your tip right here.' And it's not just these asswipes, it's fucking *everybody*."

"Okay, come on." Scott hauled him to his feet and half-led, half-dragged him toward the corner of the house.

"Think it's so fucking funny! You laughing now?" Ernie shrieked over his shoulder at Mike.

Mike didn't answer, but he didn't seem as though he was going to be thinking anything was funny for quite some time. His body was heaving like he was trying not to puke again.

Jerry rushed back around the house to film Scott forcing the rabid Ernie into the back of the car. Yes, fabulous, just like on the genuine show. Ernie threw himself on his back and slammed his heels against the window. Spit flew from his lips as he continued his ranting.

Scott picked up the radio again and, raising his voice to be heard over the din from the back seat, got in touch with Damon to apprise him of the situation.

"Holy crow!" said a high, breathless voice.

Jerry turned around to see Ronnie Greene, the Bakers' nearest neighbor. The rotund little bald man was swaddled in a yellow terry-cloth bathrobe and orange slippers, making him look like the result of a drunken fling between Big Bird and Elmer J. Fudd. Behind rimless specs, his eyes were wide.

Ronnie gawked all the more when Stacey Baker came tearing around the house, shirt still open and upper attributes bouncing like *Baywatch*.

"Let me at that son of a bitch!" she raged. "Did you see what he did to Mike?"

Jerry nodded, a little bit sickly. He'd seen it all right, captured it on tape, and would probably be an old, old man before he forgot it, thank you very much.

Scott urged her away from the car. "Stacey, you might want to . . . uh . . ." He dipped his gaze down, cleared his throat, and gestured. Jerry couldn't be

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sure, but he thought that one of Trinity Bay's finest might just be blushing to the roots of his blond crewcut.

She buttoned with quick, stabbing motions, not seeming to care that the busybody from down the road and a college kid with a camera were taking it all in. "I'm going to rip his damn face off," she said, and as she possessed acrylic nails of such a length as to make one wonder how she handled her scissors at Red's Salon, it was a believable threat.

"I got him, he's not going anywhere. I just need to find out what happened." Scott looked around. "Mr. Greene, would you mind going inside and calling Marty Arnes over at the hospital? Mike took a pretty bad beating."

When Ronnie Greene had trotted self-importantly past the mangled pizza and into the house, Scott returned his attention to Stacey Baker.

"We ordered a pizza," she said with a shrug that strained her buttons. "I was going to grab a quick shower, but, you know, one thing led to another and we forgot all about it until the doorbell rang."

"Mike didn't put anything on before answering it?"

"He had a towel on." She pointed. A blue flowered heap of cloth was visible just inside the front door. "Last time, see, we called and got that same guy. We didn't open the door right away because we were checking to be sure we had enough cash. So by the time we did open it, he bitched us out for making him stand there all night, and when he left, he hit the mailbox with his truck on purpose. Mike didn't want to keep him waiting and piss him off again, so he just threw on a towel."

"What happened then?" Scott asked.

"He went nuts!" Stacey combed her fingers through her gorgeous fall of chestnut hair, shaking her head at the recollection. "He took one look at Mike, threw down the pizza, ripped the damn screen door off, and hit him in the face. Chased him through the house and out the back door, yelling and swearing the whole time."

"What about you? Were you hurt?"

"I tried to hit him with the frying pan and missed, and he pushed me into the kitchen table." She turned and hiked the shirt, showing a long bruise blossoming on her hip.

Mike Baker was still huddled on the ground, and for the first time Jerry consciously realized how cold it was. California might be known for sand, sun, and surfers, but that was way south of here. Even in high summer, this was no part of the world to be outside naked.

He and Scott helped Mike up, both of them wincing again at the thought of what had happened. Mike couldn't unbend his body more than halfway,

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and tottered mincingly through the back door. He made it as far as the couch in the living room before falling down again.

The next hour passed busily and colorfully. The ambulance arrived and transported Mike and Stacey to the Trinity Bay Medical Center, and Jerry and Scott rode back to the police station under the constant and inventive barrage of foul language from Ernie in the back seat.

Damon Blake met them there to handle a relative rarity in Trinity Bay, the actual jailing of a prisoner. It was so rare, in fact, that they had to leave Ernie in the car for twenty minutes while they moved a bunch of cardboard boxes out of the cell.

“Jeez,” Jerry said when the heavy door was finally closed between the cell block and the outer office, muffling Ernie to a low roar. “The mouth on that guy. Last half of my tape’s going to be one long bleep.”

“About that tape –” Scott began.

“Aw, hey, come on, don’t confiscate it . . . it’s the only good footage I’ve got in five days of tagging along with you. Give me a break, what do you say?”

“Do you have releases from everyone you filmed?” asked Damon.

“I’ll get them,” Jerry said. “And if they say no, I’ll blur their faces like they do on the show.”

The police chief didn’t look thrilled, but nodded, and tipped back the brim of an imaginary cowboy hat. “So let’s have a gander.”

Jerry connected up all the wires between the video camera and the small color television Mrs. Dansbourne kept on her desk so she never missed a moment of the afternoon talk shows. He was much more at home on the stage or in front of the camera than behind the scenes or the lens, but the snazzy little device was virtually idiot-proof, so he’d done a better job capturing the drama than he would have expected.

“You are going to have to do a lot of blurring, son,” Damon said when Stacey Baker appeared on the screen. “If this wasn’t evidence, I’d have to bust us all for watching dirty movies on the city’s time.”

When that knee landed, all three men turned away with wincing and pained groans. “Now, I do wish I’d missed that part,” Jerry admitted. “Ouch. Seriously, ouch.”

“Marty Arnes gave me a ring after the docs checked Mike over,” Damon said. “No permanent damage.”

“Luckily,” Scott said.

“Hey!” Jerry leaned close to the television, so close that the slightly-too-large nose that was the bane of his existence was almost against the glass. “Did you see that?”

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“I went to school with Stacey Baker,” Scott said, “so please reconsider whatever observation you were about to make.”

“No, not that.” He rewound the tape and ran it again, finger poised on ‘pause.’ When he saw it again, he jabbed the button with video-game reflexes that hadn’t decreased much since high school. “*That.*”

Damon leaned close as well. “What the hell?”

The three of them were shoulder to shoulder, staring at the frozen image with narrowed eyes. Jerry couldn’t help but think of the first time he and Gary Haverley had logged onto the Countess Madelynn’s Dungeon website. If the scene on the screen had been a frozen close-up of Stacey Baker’s attributes, that might have made more sense. But the image in question was taken from mid-pan across the back yard, with part of Mike Baker’s agonized rolling-around in the foreground.

“Right there. See it?” Jerry pointed.

At the edge of the Bakers’ backyard, a tangle of second-growth forest had replaced the redwoods that had been cleared away lots of years before. At the fringe of the back porch light’s reach was a shadow between two trees. The shape was suggestive of a man, but there was something about it that didn’t seem right at all.

Jerry felt a shudder run through Damon Blake, transmitted to him where their shoulders were touching. The chief’s voice was taut as a wire, trying for casual but not coming anywhere close. “Who is it, can you tell?”

At about where head height would be on such a figure were two whitish blurs. “Watch.” Jerry advanced the image frame by frame, until the pale ovals vanished from the top down, and reappeared. “Eyes. It blinked.”

“Sure did,” Damon said.

“*It?*” Scott stressed. “What do you mean, *it?* Even if someone was standing there, and I still think you’re imagining things, that’d be a ‘him’, not an ‘it.’ Unless you want me to give Chet Underwood a call and have him bring over his Bigfoot kit.”

“Come on,” Jerry said. “Look at the size. The shape. That’s no regular guy.”

“Damon, you don’t think –” Scott’s words trailed off as his boss turned troubled, coffee-dark eyes upon them both.

“I think there was a time not that long ago when some downright peculiar things happened in this town,” Damon said slowly. “And ever since then, I’ve not been a one to dismiss things out of hand.”

* * *

CHAPTER 3

DECEMBER 21, SUNDAY

Lindie Grantham hated pizza.

She hadn't when she started working at Pizza X-Press. In fact, at the time it had seemed like a great idea, a way to get one of her favorite foods for free. How quickly that plan had palled. Now she could barely stand the stuff. The smell of it, uck, the greasy, oily smell most of all.

By the end of her shift, she could feel it all over her, a fine coating of pizza molecules that had settled onto her skin, into her hair. She had to shower every night when she got home, because she couldn't stand the thought of sleeping and breathing in that cloud . . . having it sink into her skin . . . yuck.

Her usual shift was weekdays six until ten, midnight on Fridays. Thanks to Ernie going ballistic all over Mike Baker, the rest of them had to pull extra hours to cover for him.

Thank God it was Christmas break and she wasn't also trying to fit in six hours of class plus homework every day. She was a junior at Humboldt State University, majoring in computer sciences and business because that's where the big bucks were, but the best she could do in the meanwhile was this sucky minimum-wage job at the pizza parlor. She'd used the job as a reason to avoid going down to Garberville for another fun-filled family holiday, glad for the excuse.

So here she was, at a time she would have normally just been hitting the books in preparation for tomorrow's classes. Instead, she was way out on Vista Drive, squinting in hopes of finding a sign that would tell her which of

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these dirt roads was Creek Street.

To make matters worse, the news of the previous night's attack had led to a record-breaking number of pizza orders. Every single one of her customers had been convinced that she, Lindie, had the inside story on Ernie's meltdown.

The digital timer on the dashboard ticked over from 24 to 25, warning her that she had five more minutes or she'd have to pay for half the damn double-pepperoni out of her own pocket. But a signpost appeared out of the gloom – ha, ha, a signpost up ahead – and miracle of miracles, it was Creek Street.

She turned right, gritting her teeth as the shocks failed to absorb the jolt of a pothole big enough to drown a cow in. Muddy water geysered over the hood. Lindie flipped on the windshield wipers and succeeded in smearing wide fans of brown muck over her entire field of vision.

“Shit!”

25 became 26. Lindie triggered the wiper-fluid. The rubber blades scraped arcs through which she could, if she scrunched down and held her head at an angle, see well enough to navigate Creek Street.

A dog was lying in the road.

Lindie braked hard, sending the insulated case on the seat beside her sliding to the floorboards. The smell intensified in a gush, that gross pizza smell that now seemed like something that would rise from an open grave, a mass grave, for lepers and plague victims.

Too late. There was no mistaking the feeling of the front wheels thumping over the animal. Already gagging, trying not to cry, Lindie unhooked her seatbelt and got out of the car.

She heard a low whine from beneath the vehicle. The dog was still alive, legs digging feebly at the earth. It was brownish, a shepherd-mix something or other, with fur that was the same color as the muddy road.

Sick at both stomach and heart, Lindie crouched beside the injured dog. She didn't want to be bitten, but she couldn't just leave it there, couldn't roll over it again with the rear wheels as she went on her merry way. Besides, the dashboard timer was at 29 and counting, so there was no way to make the deadline unless she sprouted wings.

She pulled the dog out from under the car. It plaintively licked at her hands, whimpering as if in apology of the mess, the inconvenience.

Its fur was soaked with hot, thick liquid. The splintered ends of bones pushed at its skin, making it feel like a burlap bag filled with thumbtacks. Lindie grimaced helplessly. She tried to slide her arms under its belly to lift it into the back seat and that was when she felt the loose, slippery bundle of

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intestines that bulged from the dog's torn abdomen.

The car couldn't have done that. Broke the dog's back and ribs, sure, but she'd been going way too slow to rip it open.

The dog shuddered and went limp as she picked it up. She hurled it from her with a wretched scream that turned into a spray of vomit. Blood and worse had soaked into her red smock with the logo on the breast pocket. She stumbled away from the corpse, spitting and sobbing and swiping at her gore-laden hands and arms.

* * *

Hunting, hunting, alive in the sweet and wild night. Senses on full alert, every rustle and quiver of prey music to his ears, the forest a tapestry of promise.

Low and stealthy, purposeful and swift. Through the trees, barely disturbing the fronds of the ferns with his passage. His skin tingling, prickling. High overhead, barely seen through the concealing boughs but sensed, oh, yes, sensed in the tides of his blood, the moon a white ship cruising the black.

Light. Sound. Drawing him. New scents teasing his nose. Spiced meat, cheese, dough. Blood. The sick-sweat of revulsion, the tang of tears so similar to the sea. Exhaust.

A shape moving, tall, faltering, hesitant. Female. Finding the dog. Vomiting into the stink of the blood.

The dog. It had come at him in a growling challenge. Guttled and left it for dead. Hadn't bothered with its meat. No liking for the taste of the flesh of other predators. Killing them when he could was a matter of instinct and survival. Eliminate the competition.

A car in the road, lights on, engine idling.

The hunter rising up, nostrils flaring, mouth slightly open.

Movement, there!

* * *

Lindie held onto a tree, the coarse and shaggy redwood bark feeling more lifelike than the pelt of the dog, until her gorge settled. She was still making tiny, involuntary, disgusted noises. Stripping off her smock, she used the back of it to wipe her chin, hands, and arms. Her teeth chattered; her coat was in the back seat and her blouse was thin.

Feeling a little better but wanting a shower ten times as much as she ever did after leaving the pizza parlor at the end of her shift, she looked back toward the road.

For a moment, her overwrought brain thought it saw something, a large

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hunched shape by the rear of the car. She heard a metallic jingling sound, like change rattling in a pocket. When she passed a hand over her face – a very shaky hand – and looked again, she saw just the car, and the dead dog.

Something was different, something was wrong with the picture. She couldn't figure out what.

The dog was where she'd dropped it. The ghastly wound of its belly was clearly visible in the oblong of light that fell out the open door from the dome in the ceiling. Her gaze fixed with unwilling gruesome fascination on the corpse.

What could have done that? Another dog? Fighting over a female in heat, maybe? Lindie didn't know. She wasn't a dog person, wasn't a cat person, had no use for pets of any sort. But not everyone felt the way she did and she knew that it must have been someone's pet. It was too well-groomed to be a stray. Some family, maybe some kid, was going to be wondering where Rover was.

She supposed the thing to do would be what she'd originally intended, put the dog in the car and get to a house to call someone. Find out who it belonged to. Make whatever apologies were necessary, because even if her car hadn't disemboweled poor Fido, the mutt would have been dead anyway from the broken back. In fact, she'd probably spared the dog some suffering coming along when she did. Otherwise, it might have been there for a long time, dying slowly.

That didn't stop her from feeling guilty as hell. But even the guilt wasn't helping her look forward to having to pick up the dog again. She didn't think she could do it, not without heaving up whatever she hadn't heaved up already. Her stomach yawed dizzily just at the thought.

Holding the sodden smock at arm's reach, she went to the car and leaned in to pop the trunk release. The trunk was full of miscellany – tire chains all tangled up and useless, half a dozen soda cans, a towel spotted with oil stains, a bundle of yellowed newspapers tied up with twine, another of the insulated pizza carriers with a broken strap, a can of Flat-B-Gone, a blue plastic box with a white label and red cross, other junk. She dropped the smock in and wiped her hands.

Something growled. Very nearby.

Her heart jumped and the rest of her followed suit. She spun, looking for the other dog. That was what it had to be. The winner of the fight, coming back to make sure. And damn, it had sounded big.

The growl came again. From somewhere in the woods, just beyond the dim light.

“Go on, get out of here, dog!” Lindie commanded, trying to sound

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unafraid and not let on how that growling had made the fine hairs rise up on the back of her neck.

It growled again, closer, undeterred. Had she thought it sounded big? It sounded *huge*. Huge and hulking, mean, with a mouth like a bear trap. A Rottweiler, a pit bull.

With her butt pressed to the car, Lindie sidled to the corner. She kept her eyes on the woods, the direction from which the growling had come. All thoughts of bringing the dead dog to town or to a house had been pushed to the back of her mind, and the thought of the Villiers' pizza was totally forgotten.

Just a few more steps and she'd be at the door. Hop inside, and get out of here. And if the other dog decided to show itself, maybe she'd hit it on purpose as payback for the scare it had given her.

Bushes rustled. High. Much higher than any dog.

An even crazier possibility presented itself – maybe it wasn't a dog. Maybe it was something bigger, something worse.

Lindie didn't want to even give that idea any air time. She got to the open door and was about to put her leg inside. Paused. What if it had gotten in the car? What if she sat down in the driver's seat only to look in the rearview and have it be full of teeth because it was right there in the back seat?

She took her eyes off the woods and made a quick scan of the car. Empty. Pizza carrier upended on the floor, and by now the pizzas would have folded into weird slumped origami inside their cardboard boxes. The smell didn't bother her at all now. In fact, she welcomed it.

A large, dark shape streaked across the road. Her head was still turned but she saw it from the corner of her eye. The thing moved so silently that it would have been easy to dismiss it as a trick of the moonlight if she hadn't known better.

Lindie was seized by a terror so pure it felt primal. She fell into the bucket seat, banging the back of her head on the edge of the roof. She screamed on the inhale and her throat clenched painfully.

It came at her, a dark, onrushing beast that loped with deadly, deceptive speed. Screaming on the exhale now, loud and ringing, Lindie yanked her legs in and pulled the door shut. It closed with a hearty *tchunk*-sound a split second before something solid slammed into it.

The car rocked sideways. Lindie was thrown onto the gearshift, bruising her hip. She righted herself and slapped at the lock mechanism. Dumb, like a dog was going to be able to try the door handle.

Breathing hard, she hesitantly leaned close to the window. She was braced

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for the dog to leap up suddenly, barking and spraying saliva on the glass, braced for the surge of adrenaline that would race through her body.

Nothing was there.

Less relieved than she would have liked to be, Lindie locked the other doors too. She kept glancing apprehensively out the windshield, waiting for the moment when the rabid – it had to be rabid, that was the only explanation – animal sprang onto the hood and tried to get at her that way. She didn't see it, but she could still feel it out there, snarling hatefully at the car and the woman within.

The timer on the dashboard had passed 45 minutes. By now, the Villiers would have called in, irate. Dawn would be telling them she was sure their order would be arriving any time, and that of course it would be free. But Lindie had no intention of going the rest of the way to their house. They'd be happy with a free pizza, sure, but not one that was squashed and mangled.

She put her hand on the gearshift and that was when she figured out what she'd almost noticed before. She'd left the car idling, and now it wasn't. The engine was quiet. It had stalled, or . . .

Her fingers found emptiness where they should have found the keys dangling from the ignition. They must have fallen out, she thought, when the dog broadsided the car.

She turned on the dome light again and looked on the floor. Her set was impossible to miss, having more keychains on it than actual keys. A plastic green M&M, the sexy one with the white boots. A stuffed Eeyore. A Hello Kitty figure. Most of them were kid-meal prizes from fast-food places. The last time she'd had a tune-up, the mechanic, Gus Sorenson, had warned her that all the weight would pull on her key at a weird angle, screw up her ignition.

Lindie scuffed her feet along the floor mat and didn't feel anything. She bent down, neck twisted to get her head around her knee and the lower arc of the steering wheel, and saw nothing. She craned the other way, into the foot well on the passenger side, but all she found there was a paper bag of breadsticks that had fallen out of the insulated carrier. The dipping sauce had oozed into a red puddle too much like the one that had been forming under the dead dog.

"Goddammit!" Lindie exclaimed. She sat up.

Now would have been the perfect time for the rabid dog to have sneakily risen up beside the window so that their faces would have been separated by a few inches and a thin pane of glass. She twitched in delayed expectation, but the window was clear.

She knew she hadn't taken the keys with her. The car had been idling.

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She remembered hearing it. But it had stopped, about the same time she'd thought she'd seen that shadow, heard that . . .

Heard that funny jingling noise, like a pocket full of change. Like a set of keys.

What was she thinking? That the mad killer dog had, while her back was turned, hurried to the car and swiped her keys so that she couldn't get away? That was beyond insane.

But the keys *were* gone. She patted herself down to be doubly sure, went through the car again. She even opened the ashtray, but it held only an archaic half-roll of Life Savers and a single stick of gum.

Okay, assuming for a minute that the dog . . . or whatever . . . *had* taken the keys . . . what now?

She fumbled for her cell phone, which she kept in the cup holder. What she found was a splintery chunk of casing and electronic guts, smashed beyond repair.

* * *

Fear on the prey, worn like a second skin. Confusion edging into panic as the prey examines its device, searches for its keys. Gone, gone, taken. Risky. She'd almost caught sight of him.

The lights going out, casting the dirt road into gloom. The prey possibly thinking that she'd be better able to keep watch if she let her eyes adjust to the dark.

Run at the car again? Batter it with impacts, dent in the doors? Smash through the glass? No, no.

Wrong to take such chances. Wrong to do anything that might give their presence away. But the urges in him, roaring and swelling. The moon in the sky, beckoning, teasing.

The prey's fear. Growing into terror. Sweetening her flesh.

Low. Hugging the ground. Low and silent, keys clasped tight to prevent their clinking.

His mouth watering. Anticipation. Delicious anticipation. Agony, pleasure, rutting. Passenger side door. The key, the lock. Quietly nom. Surprise.

* * *

Lindie twisted around and groped for her coat, which had fallen to the floor of the back seat. She didn't dare just reach blindly back there, because though she knew she was alone in the car, she could too readily imagine the dog being there, the hot damp breeze of its breath, the gouging pain of its

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jaws battering on her questing hand.

She fumbled her arms into the sleeves and huddled in the driver's seat. Stay or go? The longer she stayed, the more foolish she felt. After all, it wasn't like she'd actually seen this alleged mad dog. She could have mistaken the groaning of the trees in the wind for growling, could have turned an errant shadow into a lunging shape the way she had turned clouds into elephants, whales, and lions as a child.

Eventually, someone was going to come looking for her. What would happen if they found her like this? All locked into her car and afraid to venture out?

With one hand on the lock and the other on the door handle, she told herself to quit screwing around and go for it. The Villiers' house was half a mile down Creek Street. She could be there in a couple of minutes.

All she could see out her window was darkness and the rising pillars of tree trunks and utility poles. She took several sharp breaths, the way someone preparing to dive underwater might saturate his lungs with oxygen.

A barely-audible, metallic scraping came from off to her right. Panic exploded in Lindie again. She didn't stop to try to identify the sound but threw wide the door and burst out as if shot from a catapult.

She hit the muddy ground running, her sneakers skidding for traction. She had been on the track team in high school and while she hadn't been the best – she'd still been smoking then – she had been decent.

The race was on. Lindie didn't look back, didn't hear anything to make her think she was being pursued, but she *knew*. She tucked her arms close to her sides and ran for her very life. She didn't want to look back and see what was on her heels.

It came in silence, more like some onrushing death-machine or plummeting weight from the inky heavens than a living thing. She couldn't have been more terrified if the chase was set to the accompaniment of earth-shaking hoofbeats or the screeching of a host of demons.

Creek Street was what a housing developer might have called a cul-de-sac, but a dead end by any other name was still a dead end. Two houses and two trailers clustered at the end, where the forest opened up and turbulent Bethany Creek carved a deep cleft on its way to the sea. The view must have been nice by day, nice enough to warrant living where the edge of the land crumbled away into the creek a few more inches every year.

Lindie couldn't have cared less about the creek, the view, or the prospect of the homes sliding away in a mudslide. She saw lights, saw the world's gaudiest life-size plastic nativity scene, saw the big brass numbers bolted to the garage wall at 110 Creek Street.

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A stitch dug into her side. She pressed her hand to it and ran on regardless, tapping unknown reserves for the final sprint. A warm draft puffed against her back, the breath of her pursuer, almost close enough to snap its teeth at the nape of her neck.

She screamed and charged across the Villiers' yard. Her shins struck a low fence around a garden. She stumbled over it, waving her arms in a desperate effort to regain her balance, and plowed into the nativity scene.

Wise men, livestock, and Joseph the Carpenter went over like dominoes. Lindie's shoulder hit the rear wall of the manger, tipping it. The angel, all robed in white with a beatific smile, wobbled and took a header into the lawn. A shepherd fell on Lindie. She flung the plastic statue off and rolled onto her back.

The yard behind her was empty.

The front door of the house banged open and Mr. Villiers came out, his astonished expression turning to a scowl as he saw her thrashing around in the nativity scene. He hauled the Virgin Mary out of the way, kicked a sheep, and dragged Lindie to her feet.

"Where the hell is my pizza?"

* * *

Christine Morgan

CHAPTER 4
DECEMBER 25, THURSDAY

Aiden Ferguson woke before dawn on Christmas morning, not because she heard sleighbells or because she had to put a turkey in the oven so it would be done in time for a big meal later in the day.

She woke gasping, from a dream that was mostly memory, a nightmare she'd hoped was long behind her.

The car again, the overturned car. Trapped, in pain, and unable to move except to turn her head.

Even in the dream, she'd known what she would see and tried to stop herself from doing it. Tried to spare herself the sight of the blood, the torn flesh, the dull white gleam of bone. But every time, she couldn't stop her head from turning. Couldn't make herself wake from the cold, and the horror.

Once she did wake, she did not bother rolling over to seek deeper refuge in sleep.

The timer on the heater was set to click on half an hour before her alarm clock's usual buzz, so her bedroom was chilly. She slept in flannel pajamas and thick socks.

She padded into the bathroom. A nightlight in the shape of Mickey Mouse grinned from a socket beside the sink. Clouds of steam from the shower soon filled the room. The heat and the routine of washing her hair drove the last fragments of the nightmare from her mind and she was glad to see them go.

The living room was dark, undecorated. No stocking was hung by the chimney with care, and it had been anything but sugarplums dancing in her

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head. Her only nods to the holiday were Yuletide Blend coffee and a box of iced cookies decorated with red and green sprinkles, purchased at Tom's Market the day before.

Five Christmas cards were set up on top of the television. One was from the car dealership in Eureka that had sold her the little silver-grey Kia, one was from the real estate agency that had handled the sale of the house, one was from Mr. McGuire, and the last two were from former Seacliff staff members who hadn't been implicated in last year's unpleasantness.

She brewed some of the Yuletide Blend and breakfasted on cookies, and thought of Christmases she remembered from her childhood. When both of her parents had still been alive, and there had been trees and stockings and dinner parties with her father's colleagues, her mother's friends.

After her mother's death, she and her father had made an effort to keep the traditions going, but it was a transparent farce. They gradually tired of going through the motions. One custom after another had fallen by the wayside, unremarked upon by either of them. They'd still exchanged gifts, gone to the occasional party, but their own home had featured less and less of the trappings of the season as the years went by.

And so here she was, alone in her tiny house on a day usually reserved for light and love and family. No wonder people said this was the most depressing time of the year.

She finished her coffee and dried her hair and dressed for a walk on the beach. Her misgivings of the other night had been nothing to worry about, she told herself. Just the dark, just her nerves.

The morning was uncommonly clear, the sky without even a breath of a cloud. In the east, through the trees, gradients of ash-pink, dusty yellow, and pastel periwinkle heralded the sunrise. To the west, cerulean shadows still held sway. Patches of fog curled through the trees and rose in faint tendrils from the sea.

The waves were gentle, as if in respect for the day. Aiden listened, smiled as she heard the vocalizations of her sea lions. She thought of them as 'hers' now, had gone out to check on them frequently, and the unsettling sensation of being watched hadn't been repeated.

She was almost to her usual spot when she realized that she wasn't alone. This wasn't a recurrence of her case of the willies; there was someone sitting on the rocks in plain sight, facing out to sea.

Aiden stopped short. Her initial reaction, surprising her, was one of indignation. What was he doing on her beach?

It wasn't *her* beach, her property didn't extend nearly this far and she wouldn't have a legal leg to stand on by making such a ludicrous claim, but

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she'd come to think of it as hers because in a year, there'd hardly been anyone else out here.

Now there was.

He sat closer to the water than Aiden usually did, knees drawn up and arms crossed on them, chin resting on his forearms. She couldn't tell how old he was, anywhere from her own age to ten years her senior, because he had one of those faces that was just made to look perpetually youthful, boyish, innocent. His medium-brown hair was cut very short and his skin was a weathered, natural olive-bronze that was unusual in this region where most folks were either the pasty-pale of sun-deprivation or had the deep, fake-looking glow caused by a tanning bed.

She knew that the minute she tried to go quietly back the way she'd come, pebbles would click, hidden twigs of driftwood would snap loudly underfoot. She might slip and send herself crashing down noisily enough to make flocks of gulls take wheeling, scolding flight.

The stranger could hardly fail to notice that. Then, he'd wonder why she was trying to sneak away, and she'd be even more ashamed, even more distressed.

She stood where she was, palms moistening, mouth dry, blinking too often, waiting for the inevitable moment when he'd turn – perhaps glimpsing her out of his peripheral vision, perhaps just feeling her there, sensing her eyes upon him as she'd sensed someone watching her that other night.

Despite her anxiety, it struck her that he was really kind of cute. In profile, anyway. For all she knew, the other half of his face could be some gruesome, twisted, Phantom of the Opera visage.

Unaware of her scrutiny, the man stood up. He wasn't very tall, probably only an inch or two taller than Aiden, who had always been petite. His clothes – brown cords, low-topped hiking boots, and a red-and-brown checked shirt – would have been fine for an autumn day but a little under-dressed for winter.

The sea lions were almost directly below him, frolicking in the surf and barking. A thrill of fear pierced Aiden as she thought that maybe he was here to trap them, shoot them. But he didn't have any weapons that she could see, wasn't carrying anything at all. And his expression, grinning down at the sea lions, was anything but cruel. His grin was open, engaging, contagious.

She decided he had to be close to her age. Twenty-three at the most. Young, cute. Cheerful. Seemed pretty harmless. The sort of guy that it might be okay to talk to, at least to say hi, nice day, merry Christmas.

The very idea would have stunned Aiden if she hadn't already been

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rooted to the spot. Could she really be contemplating talking to someone? A stranger? A *boy*? Well, young man.

Aiden worked her tongue around in her dry mouth, because if she was really going to do this, really *speak*, she didn't want to add to her troubles by having it come out in a rusty croak.

The stranger, standing and grinning down at the sea lions, started unbuttoning his shirt.

The word "hi" froze on Aiden's lips. Her jaw would have dropped if every muscle in her face and body hadn't been rendered absolutely immobile.

He took off his shirt, folding it and setting it on a comparatively dry shelf of stone. A ribbed white tank top clung to his chest, showing a torso that was toned, sculpted. His bare arms, not bunched with gooseflesh despite sea spray and air that couldn't have been warmer than 40 degrees, were as well-defined as anything she'd seen in an anatomy or figure-drawing book.

She could not fathom what he was doing until he took off his hiking boots and reached for his belt. Then the answer, as incredible as it was, came to her . . . he was planning to go swimming! To swim with the sea lions. In water that was barely above freezing.

Naked.

He unfastened his pants and pushed them down over his lean hips, revealing plaid boxer shorts.

"Eep," said Aiden, and followed it up with a wavering little "Ah-ah?" that sounded almost exactly, humiliatingly, like Cindy Lou Who in the cartoon about the Grinch. She'd watched it just last night on Channel 9.

The half-undressed man whipped around, clutching at his pants to keep them from sliding to his ankles. His eyes, a bright and vivid blue, went wide as he saw her there.

They stared at each other while the sea lions barked and yelped. Aiden was braced for his reaction: anger, embarrassment, homicidal mania. What she wasn't expecting was what she got, a flash of pure fear.

He was frightened of *her*, and the realization shocked her all over again.

Quick as a cat, he grabbed up his discarded clothes with the hand that wasn't busy holding up his pants. He leapt down, barefoot but amazingly agile on the slick stones. The rock he'd been on was between them now, so that she could only see him from the collarbones up.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" she heard herself say, the words coming of their own volition. "I didn't mean to scare you."

Another man might have made some gruff protest. This one blinked. He was blushing, too.

Christine Morgan

Laughter bubbled up in Aiden like artesian well-water. She knew it was wrong, terribly wrong and rude, but he just looked so mortified and she suspected she did too. What else could anyone do but laugh? She tried to hold it back, bit her lips when they wanted to twitch up at the corners.

But then she saw that he was doing the same thing, undergoing a series of facial contortions as he fought to keep the mirth inside. She looked away, looked at the grey and black shine of wet rocks under her shoes, struggled to get control of herself.

When she thought she had it, she glanced up. He did too, at the same moment, and had to drop his head immediately as a snorting chuckle escaped him. Aiden emitted a shrill giggle and clapped her hands over her mouth.

His shoulders were shaking, and finally he couldn't manage any longer. He threw back his head and barked a laugh that sounded exactly like the sea lions. Aiden had to give in, or else she might have choked. Once she began, she couldn't stop, screaming with laughter until her sides spasmed and she had to hold onto a boulder to keep from falling to the ground and rolling.

When her fit had subsided to hiccups and little spates of snickers, she looked over at him again. He was wiping tears from those direct blue eyes, shaking his head.

"I didn't think there was anyone around," he said. Maybe it was because he'd been laughing so hard, but his voice had an odd, hoarse quality. If it had been lower, she might have called it gravelly, but, like his face, it was youthful, boyish. Except for that rasping undertone. "Didn't expect anyone on the beach at this hour."

"On Christmas, too," Aiden said. "Neither did I."

"You live around here?"

Before she could think better of it, she nodded and pointed at her little house, just barely visible amid the trees. His motions suggested that he was putting his clothes back on, so she averted her gaze even though the rock provided an effective barrier.

"Guess I was trespassing."

"Oh, no," she said. "It's not my property out this far. I just come out here to see the sea lions."

He grinned, the same cheery grin she'd seen before. "Me too. They're cool."

"Are you from town?" She'd never seen him, but that was hardly a news flash, given how she never saw anybody if she could help it.

"Just got here." His grin faded a little. "My family's staying at the campground."

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The Hunters

Aiden wasn't sure how to respond to that. It well past tourist season, and something in the way he said it made her think that they weren't vacationing. "Agate River?"

"Yeah."

"Have you seen the otters over there?"

The grin returned, more genuine. "Yeah. Aren't they great?"

"How'd you get out here? I don't see a car or anything."

"I walked. Around the bluff." He gestured off in the direction of Seacliff.

Aiden looked at him with renewed surprise. There used to be a path, a rocky and treacherous one but a path all the same. It had been buried when the bluff collapsed and to her knowledge, no one had found a feasible way to get around.

"Sometimes I just need to get away for a while," he went on, oblivious to her curiosity. "To be by myself."

"I know how you feel. That's why I like living out here. It's so peaceful."

"Until weird guys show up and start stripping." He rolled his eyes in chagrin. "Sorry about that. I deserved to have you creep up and scare the skin off me."

"I wasn't trying to. I didn't even see you until I was right there. Were you . . . were you going to swim?"

A guarded shadow veiled his eyes. "Uh . . ."

"That water's got to be freezing."

"The cold doesn't bother me much." He faltered uncomfortably, then added, "My name's Alex. Alexander Greye, Alex for short. What's yours?"

"Aiden Ferguson."

He stretched up on tiptoe and leaned across the rock to offer his hand. Aiden regarded it for a moment, steeling herself, and reached out. She could tell it didn't slip by him, the way that she approached the handshake as if it were a set of hurdles, or a challenge out of one of those game shows where they made people eat bugs and entrails.

"Nice to meet you," he said.

"You too." It came out little more than a gasp and a squeak.

His hand was very warm, as if he'd had it in a nice deep pocket instead of out in the frigid, damp air. The awareness – not only was she talking to a stranger, she was *touching* him, and had seen more of him than she'd ever seen of a male person in real life – built up like a wave threatening to drown conscious thought.

She was going to have a full-blown panic attack, right here and right now, and if she was lucky it would only end with her fleeing from Alex as if all the devils of hell were on her heels. He'd gape after her, hurt and con-

Christine Morgan

fused. If she wasn't lucky, she might start wheezing for breath, or even faint, and then what would he think? What would he do?

Letting go of him, Aiden put her hands to her face and closed her eyes. Slow, steady breaths. Calm, calmer.

"Aiden?"

"I'm okay, I'll be okay, honest."

He scrambled over the rock to land beside her. "What's the matter?"

The concern in his voice, the earnest concern, had a soothing effect on her. That had never happened before. Mr. McGuire had a marvelously soothing voice that only served to knot her into even more of a bundle of nerves. But the hitching in her lungs eased off, and she stopped quivering.

"Really," she said, much more steadily than she ever would have believed, "I'm all right."

She'd been right in her estimate. With Alex standing right next to her, she only had to tilt her head a little to look up at him. His shirt was buttoned all the way up, a size too big so that it concealed his build, and he didn't seem imposing at all.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I . . . yes." Flustered and overcome with a fit of shyness that was at least real shyness and not a phobic conniption, she scuffed her toe in the pebbles. "I should be getting home."

He hesitated, seemed poised on the brink of a question. Aiden was stricken with the sudden worry that he meant to ask if she wanted him to walk her back to the house. Or, even worse, ask her out.

At this last, she almost laughed again. Ask her out? Why in the world would he do that? He was good-looking, fit, charming. She was a drab little thing who got the vapors just being around anyone else. Plunging ahead before he could do one or the remote-and-unlikely other, she summoned up a smile.

"I'll see you later," she said.

"You mean you don't mind if I come back to the beach?"

She shook her head, a short, rapid gesture that probably looked more like she had a tic. "I don't mind."

"Okay." He made an abashed face. "And I'll bring a swimsuit next time."

* * *

CHAPTER 5

DECEMBER 26, FRIDAY

Simone Drachen stretched, catlike, taking a sensual pleasure-pain in the crackling of her spine as she twisted her body this way and that. She yawned deeply, not yet opening her eyes because the memory of her dream was far better than the humble surroundings she knew she'd find.

But wakefulness brought reality home to roost. She couldn't cling to the images of the past with any sort of comfort. All it did was remind her how much she'd lost. How much had been taken from her.

She couldn't bear to think of the ranch, with its fields and mountain wilderness and wide-open spaces. Her heart ached to remember the solid log and flagstone construction of the main house, almost a castle against that majestic backdrop. The fireplaces. The kitchen. The large room that had served as both gathering-place and den, where her father had . . .

No. To remember the ranch was to remember her father, her family, the life that had been torn apart. She turned her thoughts instead to the ones who'd done it, to the people who had come with their taxes and their zoning laws and their development plans, and destroyed everything she'd held dear.

That had been the beginning of her new life. Her secret life. The one she'd tried to keep hidden. But the flame of resentment had become a seething inferno of rage and finally she'd done it. Taken that one step, that one irrevocable step that changed everything.

Once she'd killed, she knew she would never have enough.

It had cost her much. Her home, her children. The love and warmth and companionship that she'd once cared so much about. They didn't under-

Christine Morgan

stand. They would never understand.

Except . . . one did. Finally. Now that she'd shown him the way.

She opened her eyes at last, and found the sight as bad as she'd expected. The shack was worthy of the name, thin grey light filtering in through gaps where the boards didn't meet. Rain drummed on the aluminum roof. Additional plinks and plonks heralded the four spots where water leaked through holes to be caught by strategically-placed buckets.

The only source of heat came from a layer of ash-coated coals in a small metal barbecue, one of the round three-legged kind. Simone rose from her cot and added wood, stirring new life into the flames.

This was no way to live. Like a beast. On what could be scrounged, or stolen. They would have been drier sleeping in the van, except that with all of their worldly possessions loaded into it, the van barely had room for them to sit while they drove.

This life was nothing like the books she sometimes read. In the books, or the movies, the ones like her were always rolling in wealth. Mansions. Limousines. Chic clothing and expensive antiques. The finest of everything that money could buy, not only in terms of material goods but power, influence.

"Just one more thing," she said, "that they got wrong."

Donovan stirred, responding to her low and throaty voice even in his sleep. His sleeping bag was by the door, where he'd be first to waken should anyone attempt to disturb them. When she did not speak again, he rolled onto his side and pillowed his head on one folded arm.

She loved to look at him, this precious son of hers. Nothing gave her more pride and vindication than to see him there, his features a more masculine version of her own, his hair the same red so dark and scarlet that no one ever believed it could be natural. The rest of him, though, took after his father in the best possible ways. Physically, at least. Mentally, emotionally, he was hers. All hers. As both of her children should have been.

Her son deserved better than this. He'd given up so much to be with her. Given up the safety and comfort that had been his, all to follow her into this uncertain future. She adored him for it, even if she knew his real reasons had been anything but filial.

Tonight, she decided. Tonight, they would go out.

"Donovan."

He came fully awake at once. As his eyes, the pale azure of faded denim, fixed on her, they first widened, and then narrowed. She pretended not to notice the way his gaze followed the long lines of her legs up to the hem of her short silk wrapper. It was belted loosely, the drape of the fabric barely

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covering the contours of her breasts.

“Yes, Simone?”

“This is no way for you to live, my dearest one,” she said. “You have been such a good boy, so dutiful. I know how hard it’s been for you, with the restrictions I imposed.”

He flushed darkly. “I understand why you made them. I know why it’s necessary.”

“It is necessary to be cautious, Donovan. But we must survive. No one will give us what we need. They have everything, *everything*, and we have so little. So we must take.”

Donovan nodded. “I will do whatever you wish.”

Simone knelt beside him and cradled his head to her bosom as if he were a child, stroking his hair. “Oh, my Donovan . . . I am so fortunate to have such a son! I never thought you would leave your father to come with me. I thought you’d reject me, hate me, as your sister did.”

She could feel his breath, hot and rapid, through the thin silk. Tension quivered in his muscles. He fought to keep his voice steady, and she did not let on that she heard the huskiness he tried to hide.

“I could never hate you, Simone. Never!”

Murmuring soothing nothings, she rocked him and petted him like she’d once done when he was very small. If any of that lingered in his memory, it had to contrast sharply with everything his senses told him. He could barely remember what it had been like to have a mother caring for him. Was it any wonder that, when she returned to his life, he looked at her and saw her as something else?

“I know what you want,” she said, and he stiffened and hissed in a breath.

“You . . . know?” He dared to raise his head and look up at her through sleep-mussed strands of scarlet. The shock was there, the shame, the desire, all brimming in his eyes.

Simone smiled benignly. “Of course I do. What we both want, what we need.”

Disbelief was writ large upon his face. Disbelief and a hint of wary hope. “Simone . . .”

“And soon, you’ll have it,” she said. “We’ll go out, find a decent meal. You must be hungry. I know I am.”

“Starved,” Donovan said shakily.

“And then we’ll see what can be done about our accommodations.” She swept the shack with a derisive glare. “I’m tired of living like an animal.”

* * *



Spring 2007 Catalog

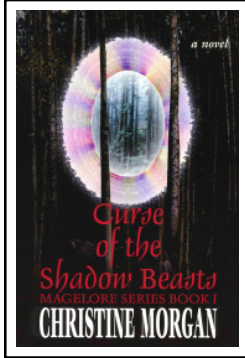
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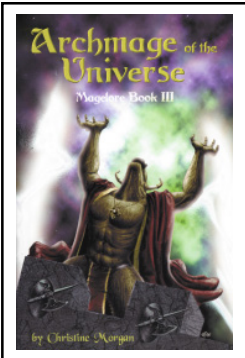
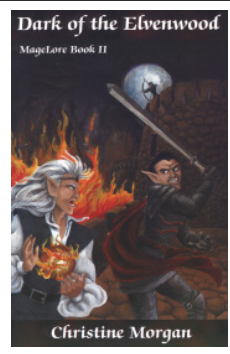
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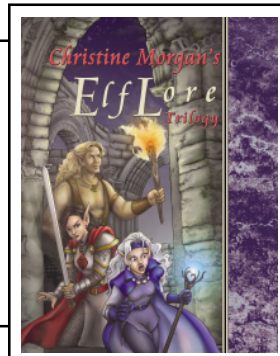
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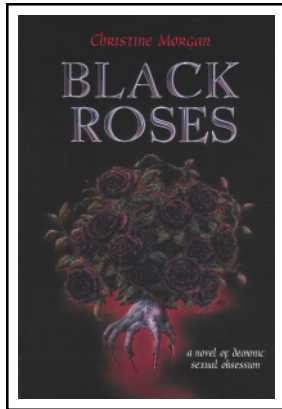
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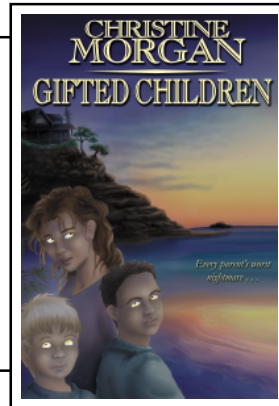
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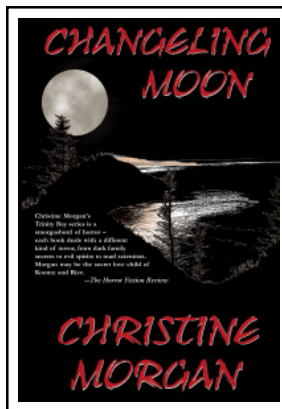
For thousands of years, they have lived among us. Their abilities have given rise to our oldest legends and our deepest fears.

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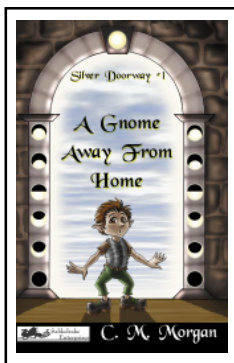
*The Silver Doorway series
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Life is complicated for the Broderick kids. They've just moved to a new neighborhood. Their parents are having problems. Mom is always busy with work, Dad is always busy on his computer. Half the time, it seems like they forget they even have children.

The kids are having problems too. Twelve-year-old Katie doesn't like having to take care of little brother Sam. Katie's twin Kevin is only interested in sports, and is mad at Mom and Dad. Eight-year-old Sam can't stand being bossed around by Katie.

The rest of the family thinks Dad's sister, Aunt Ellie, is weird. But when the kids discover a secret room in Aunt Ellie's basement, and a glowing silver doorway that leads to another world, they realize how weird their aunt really is.

Other kids sometimes come through that door. Kids from a world where magic is real, and so are gnomes, elves, goblins, and dragons. They come through the door looking for help from a good sorceress. Instead, they get Katie, Kevin and Sam.



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Marky of Gnome Keep is lost and alone. He can't find Pip, his puppy. He can't find his way out of the woods. To make matters worse, some giant owls have decided to have him for dinner.

When Dad doesn't show up to get them after Kevin's game, the Broderick kids decide to walk to Aunt Ellie's house. She isn't at home, so they use the spare key.

A sneeze leads them down to the basement, where they follow a little gnome back through the door . . .

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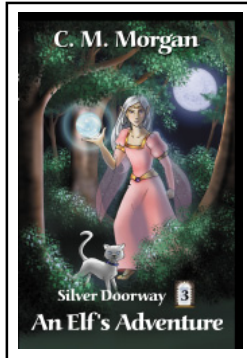
Stone Hammerfine and Sam Broderick might be from different worlds, one of them a dwarven boy and one of them a human boy, but they have something in common. Mean, bossy sisters!

Sam decides to prove he's not a baby by going off to find Stone all by himself. But when giant spiders want to tie them up in webs, and robbers with axes chase them through the dark tunnels, Sam and Stone wonder if maybe this time, just once, they should have listened to their sisters after all.

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Silver Doorway books are written for younger readers, ages 7-12.



An Elf's Adventure – Silver Doorway #3

The world on the other side of the Doorway is a dangerous place, full of giant owls, spiders, goblins, and robbers. So, just in case, Kevin gets a lesson in how to use a sword from Aunt Ellie's boyfriend, Cal.

The kids are spending the whole week with Aunt Ellie, when someone comes through the Doorway. She is the most beautiful girl Kevin has ever seen. She's an elf, able to cast magic spells, and she is on a quest for an enchanted cup that will make her divorcing parents fall in love again. She needs help. She needs someone to protect her.

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Dragon on the Loose – Silver Doorway #4

Katie thinks that she is going to have a peaceful day. Her brothers are playing video games. She is spending a pleasant afternoon reading . . . until she gets a phone call from Aunt Ellie's cat.

With Ellie gone, Chester knows that there are only three people he can turn to for help. There is no time to waste! A baby dragon is on the loose in Luna Park!

And catching the baby turns out to be just the start of their problems. They have to take the baby home to its mother, but where is its mother?

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Orcs Ahoy! – Silver Doorway #5

Sam Broderick thinks he's got it bad.

That is, he does until he meets Druush. Druush has it a lot worse.

Chagro, the fiercest warrior in the Empire of Gerosh, wants to marry Druush's mother. But before he can, he has to get rid of one thing – her son.

The people of Gerosh are seagoing orcs – strong, tough and blood-thirsty. On his own, there is no way Druush would survive. He needs help. He needs a way to convince the emperor to spare his life.

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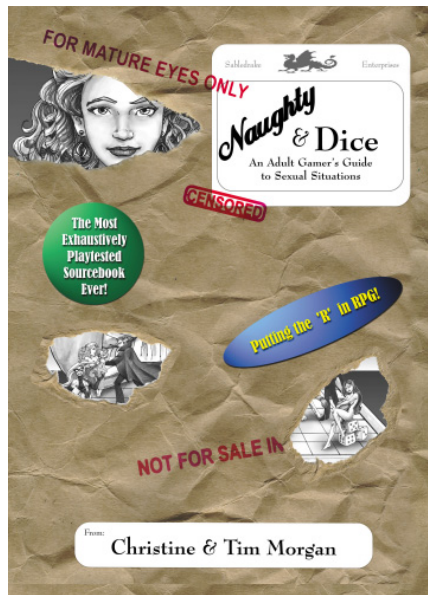
After all of their adventures, keeping the secret of the Silver Doorway has been difficult. But it becomes impossible when hostile wizards from the other side send their magic against Aunt Ellie and Chester.

Katie, Kevin and Sam must find help on both sides of the Doorway in order to rescue their Aunt, but can they do it in time?

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Roleplaying Games



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And look for *Ellis: Kingdom in Turmoil* featuring the **Simulacrum Roleplaying System**, by Tim Morgan, coming in 2007 or 2008 from Sabledrake Enterprises. We're still working on the final size and price, but check out <http://sabledrake.com> or <http://SimulacrumRPG.com> for updates, demos and up-to-date information.

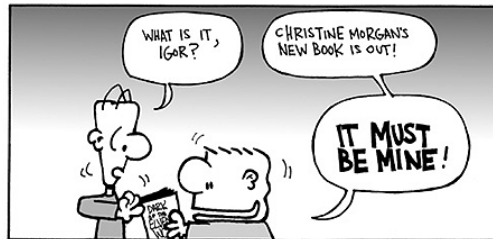
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In addition to the works presented here, Christine Morgan's writing has appeared in many magazines and story anthologies.

"Coppers, the Alchemist" in *Pyramid Magazine* #17.

"The Reaching Wall" in *Cthulhu Sex Magazine* #14, Vol 2.

Several entries in *GURPS Villians*.

"The Dawn of the Living Impaired" in *The Book of All Flesh*.

"Seven Brains, Ten Minutes" in *The Book of Final Flesh*.

"I Am . . ." in *Leather, Lace & Lust*.

"Safe Sucks" in *Closet Desires IV*.

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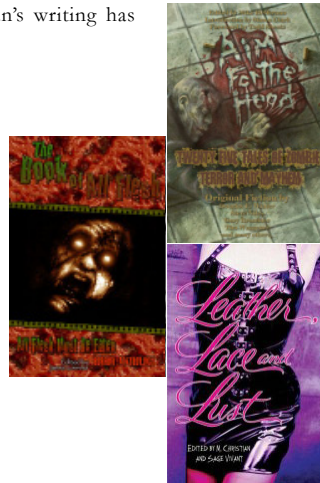
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