

THE NAMELESS

I was nineteen years old when I sold my soul to the devil. I didn't ask for it to happen, but it did. When he came for me, he wasn't the horned, red-skinned demon I'd always imagined him to be. He was just a man. He was sweet and charming to me and he stole my heart away with one kiss. He promised me everything, made me feel as if I was the most precious thing in the world. And then, one day, he just went away.

He went away and left me with The Nameless growing inside me.

I could feel the darkness spreading through my body like some sort of poison. The doctors said I was fine. They said it was a normal pregnancy, but I knew different.

"And you have no idea where the father is now?" the nurse asked me during my first check up. I was young and scared and felt somehow dirty and wrong because I was unmarried and was carrying some man's bastard inside me. The nurse gazed at me with soft brown eyes that passed no judgement.

"No," I whispered. "He just left. I don't know where he is now." I felt my face begin to crease with the onset of tears and the nurse reached out and patted me on the hand. As her fingers touched my skin she drew in a sharp breath and snatched her hand away as if she'd been burned. Her reaction distracted me enough to cut my tears short. I frowned at her and she stared back at me with a look of revulsion. She blinked and cleared her throat before scrabbling for her pen and scribbling details on my pregnancy forms with a speed that made it clear she didn't want me in her office for a moment longer than necessary. She didn't so much as look at me for the rest of the appointment.

The weeks seemed to fly by but as my tummy grew bigger not once did I feel the baby move. I fretted that it might have died inside me and frequently pestered the doctor for appointments and extra scans because the thought of carrying something dead was more than I could bear.

But the doctor said that everything was fine.

He said it was a normal pregnancy.

When I was seven months pregnant, I was so big I looked as if I was full term and then some. Still I didn't feel the baby move.

One evening whilst sitting in front of my dressing table mirror lazily brushing my hair, I noticed the faint shadow of a person standing behind me. I gasped with fright and turned to look but there was nothing there. When I looked into the mirror again I saw the shadow reach out its hand and felt it touch my hair. I screamed and ran from the room, difficult though it was to move with such a large belly. I slept on the sofa that night, telling my long suffering parents that I couldn't sleep and that I wanted to sit up and watch television. They shrugged and left me alone. Things hadn't been the same at home since I'd fallen pregnant. My parents had tried to be understanding but I knew they were disappointed in me; however, an abortion had been out of the question in their eyes. What was done is done, they said, and I should live with the consequences.

At eight months, I was constantly aware of the shadow lurking in the corner of my vision. It had gained substance. It was always near me. But I could never see it when I looked directly at it. I thought I was losing my mind. I would feel it touching my face as I lay in bed pretending to sleep. I would feel its touch on my swollen stomach and I would force myself to lie still, to pretend that there was nothing there. I clung in desperation to the belief that it was just the tired and troubled imagination of a pregnant teenage mother trying to come to terms with what was happening to her.

When the day came that I went into labour I thought I was going to die. There was so much blood. So much pain. I screamed until I became hoarse and the doctors and nurses scurried around me until they began to remind me of cockroaches skittering around the grey linoleum floor. They were no longer convinced it was a normal pregnancy. No amount of painkillers seem to ease

me; the pain in my womb was so intense I prayed I would pass out. I wanted to die. Surely something was wrong? Surely they could do *something*?

The shadow that had plagued me for the past two months stood in the corner of the room. A black mass with a human form but no features. I screamed obscenities at it until the doctors themselves had to shout back at me to calm down – the baby was showing signs of distress, they said. They said I had would have to have a Caesarean.

I don't remember much about the operation itself, other than laying there while nurses tried to sooth me and my mother held my hand. The pain had subsided with the anaesthetic and I felt as if I was in a world of my own while people in green surgical gowns spoke their complicated medical language and I stared at the ever present shadow in the corner of the operating theatre.

When I felt a strange pressure on my stomach from beyond the screen they had put up over my stomach the shadow lurched forward with apparent interest. I waited for the sound of my baby's first cry. When the hush that had fallen in the operating room remained unbroken, I turned my head to look at my mother for reassurance. She was staring white faced at something beyond the screen that I could not see.

"What?" I whispered, my throat so dry I could hardly speak. "What's wrong? *Mum?*" But she didn't move. Panicking, I looked around for the shadow and found that it was now reaching over one of the nurses' shoulders, its insubstantial fingers reaching out towards my silent child.

"*Jesus...*" one of the nurses breathed, horrified. I blinked at the sound of the word and saw that the shadow had disappeared. From beyond the screen I heard a wet gurgle that should have brought me joy, but only filled me with cold dread. I heard a thin rasping breath being dragged into tiny lungs.

"*Mother...*" The Nameless hissed.

Then the screaming began.