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B L O O D
& Flowers

PENNY BLUBAUGH

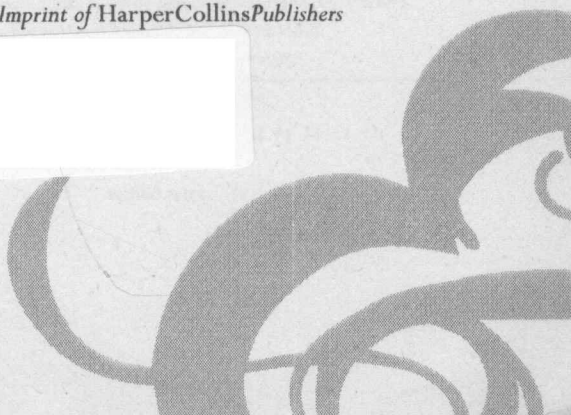



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HARPER **TEEN**

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Blood and Flowers

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First Edition

*In memory of Sharon Ball, who always believed this
book would happen. I miss you every day.*

In memory of Dewis, the best cat ever.

I

"You'll know it when you find it."

*I*n case you don't know, you use a thin paste of the flour water to stick the poster down. Put them on boards, telephone poles, newspaper boxes—whatever. The paste dries hard, but it's clear and a bitch to get off."

I demoed the process to Lucia and slapped one of our flyers on the wood covering the broken window of Clem's Furniture Store (furniture long, long gone). Then I handed her the paste tub. "Your turn."

Lucia worked carefully, setting her flyer next to mine. A double whammy. The manicured nails on her scarred hands were perfect, cream with ebony tips. Her hands were graceful and when they moved, her scars flared in

the just-turning-on streetlights. She finished and looked over at me. "Persia? How's that?"

I had to make myself stop watching her and look at the side-by-side flyers. There's something about Lucia that makes me wish I were gay. Maybe it's her quiet sadness just below the surface. If we were more than friends I'd feel like I had a reason to protect her. But we were just Lucia and Persia. "Perfect," I told her.

Our flyers said:

OUTLAW PUPPET TROUPE

presents

The Bastard and the Beauty

A play of love, dislike, and anticorruption

Place: You'll know it when you find it

Date: Now and then

Time: Eight o'clock, usually. At night.

But things can always change.

Lucia examined her pasted flyer and tapped it with one of those gorgeous nails. "It doesn't say anything about the magic that's in this show."

"You know we never like to draw too much attention to that."

"I know." Lucia nodded. "The anti-fey feelings all around town. The idea that magic is bad. But people should know that this is good magic."

I made a little hissing noise; then I said, "If we're going to flout convention and get in trouble about magic, why not just put in the whole soap-bubble theory to tell them how the magic gets here in the first place?"

Lucia looked confused. "I don't know the soap-bubble theory. Is it long? Because this is a small flyer."

I raised my eyebrows. "You mean I've never explained my 'how the fey get into our world' theory to you? Wow. I must be slipping."

"You could tell me while we work," she said.

She actually seemed interested. Not many people did, which always surprised me. I thought it was a brilliant theory. I straightened my shoulders, right there in front of Clem's, and pretended I was giving a speech. "Faerie skims around our world like a soap bubble around a glass. When the bubble of us meets one of the bubbles of them, the membranes collapse

and the fey can access our world. This only seems to work one way."

"Not always," Lucia said. She spoke in such a quiet voice I almost missed her comment. Almost, but not quite.

I'd forgotten that Lucia wished herself into Faerie once, a long time ago. "So I'm wrong?" I asked. I flushed and added, "You probably know all about this and I probably sound so stupid."

Lucia shook her head. "I don't have any idea about how people go from one side to the other. I don't know how I did it. It just happened, like a sneeze. But your theory makes as much sense as anyone else's."

I blinked three times and said, "You mean I could be right?"

Lucia nodded and I said, "How cool is that? I made it up on my own, you know." I beamed at her.

"It's better than anything I've ever come up with. But back to this." She tapped the flyer one more time. "It might not make people come. We're not telling them about the wonders."

Lucia had a point. I mean, we weren't passing out

a lot of information. But there's a reason and it's right there in the name: Outlaw Puppet Troupe. We're obviously not going for mainstream or even politically correct. Social and political commentary is a big part of every production, and there's never a lack of something to say.

We live in a world with lots of problems. The environment is in trouble, the economy's tumbling, and there's crime on the corners and corruption in the capital. Look back through history and you'll see that these are the kinds of problems that could be problems anywhere, anytime. But here and now, and ever since I can remember, really, the inhabitants of Faerie are blamed for almost everything that goes wrong. Most of that blame starts with our government. I'm not sure why, and I don't remember hearing about it in any history class I ever took. But I know there's antagonism.

I have an antagonism theory, too, to go with my soap-bubble one. It's all about the anti-fey sentiments in our world and where they come from. If I'd given Lucia a speech about that it would have sounded like

this: "When you've got plans for power and domination, you need something besides your own activities to occupy people. One of the best ways to occupy people is to give them a common enemy. A good way to identify an enemy is to point out how different they are. The fey are different—they always have been. Bingo! Adversary right here! Now just throw out some media misinformation and you're on your way. Everyone concentrates on the evilness of the different, and no one has time to pay attention to anything else."

But even though some fey surely are evil, they can't possibly be causing all of the wacky things we deal with on a daily basis. At least I don't think so, but here are samples of the kinds of stories that float around my world.

POINT YOUR FINGER AT THE FEY

Crime? Fey problem. (Bugle-Express—Faerie breaks into Shop—Steals Diamonds!)

Failing Neighborhoods? Fey problem. (Daily Times—Faerie Landlord Lets Building Collapse!)

Also—Faerie Gangs Run Rampant!)

Sick environment? Fey problem. (You and Me Magazine—Faeries Blow Poison Dust Across Border!)

Drug abuse? Fey problem. (Government Report 2693-6, Paragraph 3 —“It has been noted and corroborated that dangerous drinks and drugs have been coming from Faerie on a regular basis. Citizens are warned to be wary.” Or, as Senator Reynolds has said, sounding a lot more nervous—“Danger! Faerie Drinks and Dust on the Rise!”)

Total eclipse? Fey problem. (Talk radio WKQS—“Fey stealing life-giving sunshine with magic! Call, starting at midnight, with your comments!”)

If I had the urge to call WKQS (which I would never have) I'd say I see no problem with magic, or with the fey. First, magic is in all of our productions. Sometimes that magic is subtle, and sometimes not so much, but it's always there. And, of course, fey Floss is our chief costumer and puppet guru. If Faerie

puppet magic and the sly social jibes we always incorporate don't make us outlaws, then I don't know what would.

Lucia looked again at our side-by-side flyers and smoothed one corner. "I still like telling about the magical wonders."

"We'll mention it to Tonio," I said, "for next time."

Lucia grinned and we moved down the street to a convenient light pole.

Tonio is artistic director for the Outlaws. It still seems strange to me to think that we even have something like an artistic director, but it's as good a title as any. After all, he's artistic in a very flamboyant, very gay way—which he also is. Gay, I mean. And he certainly directs this sloppy, flopping mass we call a troupe.

When I first met Tonio I was fifteen, standing on the corner of Main and Paris, looking tough, or trying to, because Main and Paris is not the neighborhood where you want to look anything but tough. And down the street came this guy, tall and slim, with moves like a drag queen, an ankle-length cape lined with whiskey-shot silver, and a handful of hot pink

flyers. He was slapping those flyers up on any open surface, using a twee little paste pot. When he got even with me he stopped, looked me up and down, nodded, and said, "Here."

My first thought was that he was one of the resident pixie dust dealers, just cleaner and much better dressed. So I didn't ask what "Here" meant. I just stepped aside, because nobody wants to be seen with a dust dealer.

It's not like people don't know there are dealers. And it's not like those dealers can't find people who use—you can find dust dippers any night, if you're looking. They're the shadows in doorways careful to stay out of the streetlight circles. It's just that nobody wants to be blatantly involved with dust, or its companion, the wild-colored drinks that are as illegal as the dust and that slide along the same pathways.

This guy shoved his papers at me anyway. "I need a flyer person. It's too much of a pain to do it all alone. You look like you can handle it. Slap 'em up anywhere and I'll glue 'em down."

And just like that, I was part of the Outlaws.

Because, you see, I did take the flyers and I didn't even ask why. There's something very persuasive about Tonio, even when he's not trying.

There's also something otherworldly about him. For the longest time I thought he might be part fey, but no. He's just Tonio. He may be entirely mortal but he can see you and understand all about your anima. Snap! Because why else would he look twice at a fifteen-year-old girl with a penchant for dropping out of school, a mile-wide love of Shakespeare, and drugged-out, fey-bashing parents who walked through life in a fog that never involved their daughter? I scanned the flyers that day as I held them against the walls and poles. "Puppets?" I'd asked, and okay, I'd sneered.

Tonio, without really looking at me, had said, "Yes, darling. Puppets."

I'd wiggled my fingers at him, making little air-shadow rabbits.

And he'd laughed. Tonio has a great laugh. It's deep and brassy and it sounds like happy bassoons. When he was done laughing he shook his head, still grinning. "You looked like one of the open-minded

ones." And then he had looked at me, really looked, and I'd been caught by his eyes, deep green, rimmed with gold, and I'd stopped moving, stopped breathing, it seemed.

After a couple of minutes, or maybe a few days, he'd said, "Oh, good. I was right after all. You just need some training." He'd swept off down the street and without thinking at all I'd followed. Welcome to the Outlaws. Finding them was like coming home to the place I'd been looking for forever.

That was three years ago. Last year I left my parents for good and became a full-time Outlaw. The good things stick.

The Outlaws don't do shadow puppets, and they never do felt replicas of Little Bo Peep. They don't do fuzzy Santas in fleece suits and I've never once, in three years, seen anyone work with a dragon with silk and Mylar flames waving in its mouth. Although I thought this would have been dax beyond belief. Tonio says this is why I'm not artistic director. Floss just sneers and says no way is she using her fine and excellent stitches to make something as painful as

a dragon with phony flames, and besides, dragons hardly ever do that, anyway, and she should know.

"Persia," Lucia said, "I gave my last good flyer to the people in Breadbox. The ones I have left all have crumbles, the paste is gone, and it's getting too dark to see. We're close to that strip where the pink and purple drinks are supposed to come out after dark and that's always scary. Sometimes there's pixie dust, too, or at least that's what people say. We should go home. And anyway, isn't someone making pizza?"

"If by someone you mean me, no."

"You have no idea how thankful that makes me. I was hoping for something edible."

Normally when I'm dissed I sling back. But Lucia? I let her get away with murder.

REASONS FOR LETTING LUCIA GET
AWAY WITH MURDER

She's fragile and delicate.

*She's still working over a very creepy childhood. (See
previous bit about scars.)*

She's smarter than me and will always come out on top.

She's my friend, and in that role she is allowed special dispensation.

She's right about the strip. Pink and red drinks, blue and purple. Like the pixie dust, they're gifts from somewhere (and here I'd have to admit that most of this stuff does seem Faerie-related) that have been booming lately.

This is her first time hanging flyers, which can certainly be an irritating way to spend an afternoon, especially when it's getting dark and starting to rain.

So I only said, "Be glad Max is cooking then," and we went down into the sub station, catching our heels on the old steps with the scuffed red edges. Lucia had been right about it being time to leave. We passed one person who already looked dusted, even though it was still early in the evening. He was sitting on the steps next to where my left foot came down when I turned a corner, but all he did was hold out his hand, look hopeful, and say, "Change? Any spare change?" in a beautiful baritone voice. I shook my head and walked