

DARK ENCHANTMENT



THE HOUSE OF WINTER

LOUISE COOPER



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PUFFIN BOOKS

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Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books Ltd, 27 Wrights Lane, London W8 5TZ, England

Penguin Books USA Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York,

New York 10014, USA

Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia

Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto, Ontario,

Canada M4V 3B2

Penguin Books (NZ) Ltd, 182–190 Wairau Road, Auckland 10,

New Zealand

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: Harmondsworth, Middlesex,
England

First published 1996

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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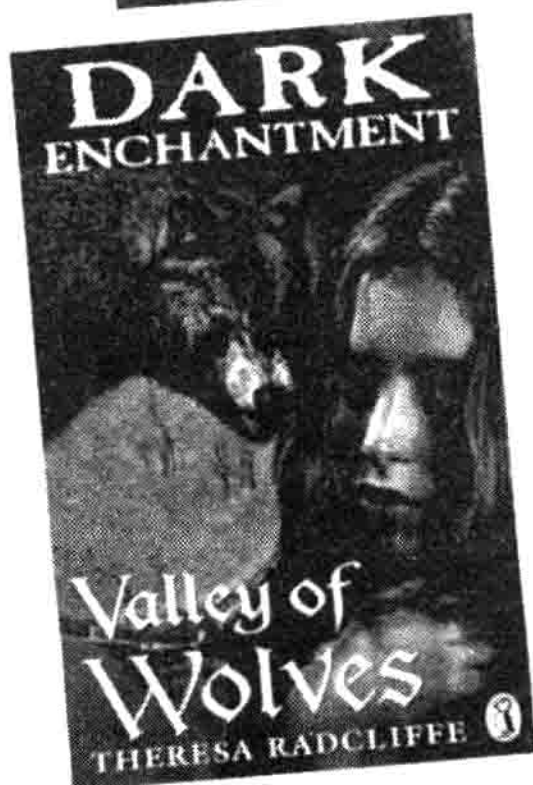
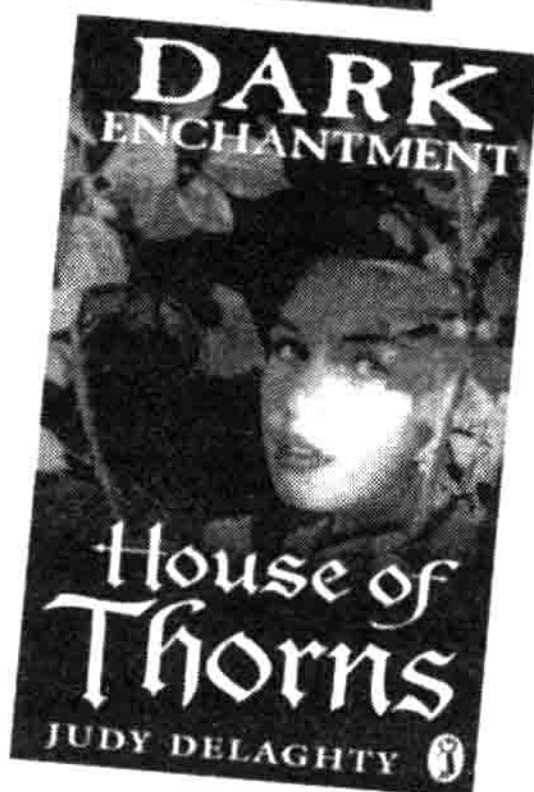
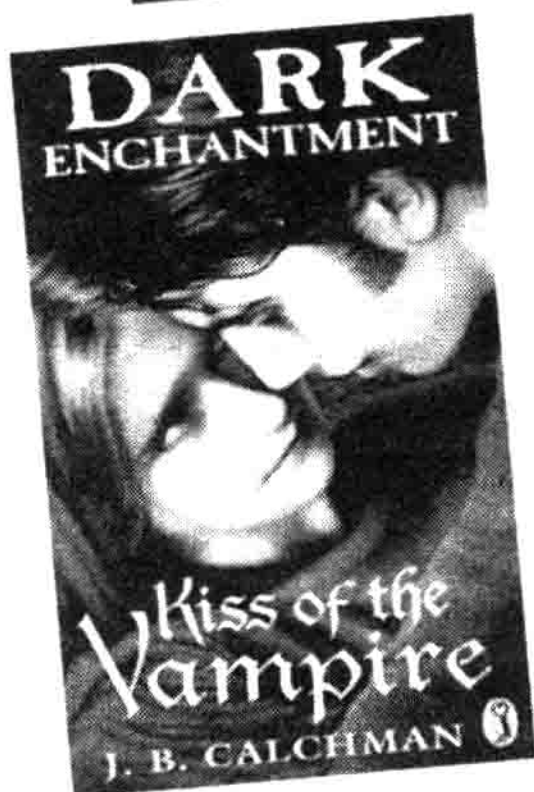
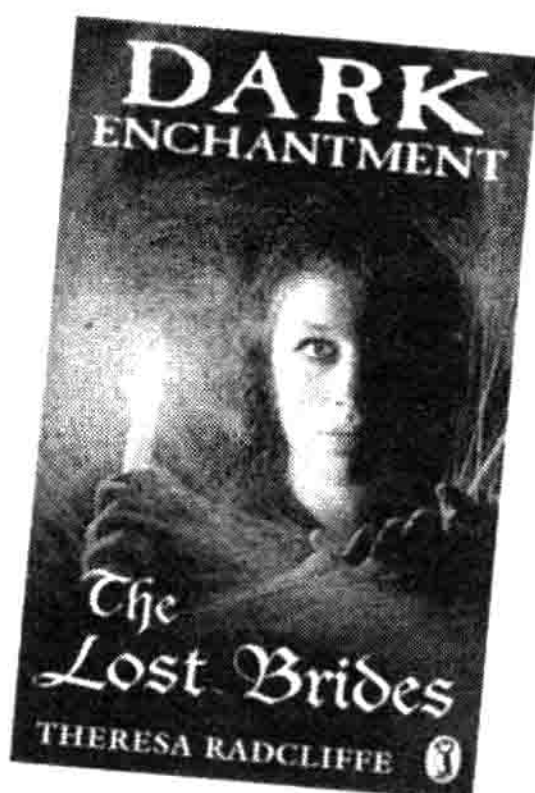
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Bungay, Suffolk

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CHAPTER I

AT THE MOMENT when Silvan put the ring on Tavia's finger, Jansie simply couldn't bear to watch but turned her head away, furiously biting back the tears. *Silvan doesn't love me, she told herself. He loves my sister, and today is their wedding day, and I must forget my dreams!*

The priest spoke the final words, and a little sigh went through the gathering of family and friends. Husband and wife. Silvan and Tavia. And as she looked at the tall, dark, gauntly handsome figure of her new brother-in-law, Jansie felt as if a knife had stabbed into her heart.

With the ceremony over, the celebration began. The house had been decorated with ribbons, garlands and good-luck symbols; a hundred candles burned in the great hall, and everywhere was brightness and laughter. All Jansie's relations had come, uncles and aunts and cousins, and many friends besides; enough people to make up for the fact that Silvan had no family of his own. Later there was music and dancing, and soon after the dancing began, Jansie's cousin Issa found Jansie sitting alone

on the landing that overlooked the great staircase.

‘Oh, Jansie!’ Issa crouched down, her face sympathetic and concerned. ‘Please don’t cry.’

‘I’m not crying,’ Jansie said fiercely. But it wasn’t true; tears were glittering on her eyelashes.

‘It’s Silvan, isn’t it?’ Issa sighed. ‘The trouble is, I think every girl who ever sets eyes on him must fall in love with him.’

‘Don’t tell Tavia, Issa, please don’t!’ Jansie pleaded. ‘I don’t want to spoil her day.’

‘Of course I won’t tell her,’ Issa said. She knew how fond Jansie and Tavia had always been of each other.

‘And I am being foolish, I know,’ Jansie went on mournfully. ‘Tavia’s three years older than me, and Silvan’s older still. I’m too young for him – Mother says I shouldn’t even be thinking about marriage until I’m at least seventeen, and that’s two years away. But oh, Issa, it doesn’t stop me *wishing*.’

‘I know.’ Issa sighed again. Then, trying to buoy Jansie with a wry joke, she added, ‘Perhaps Silvan has a younger brother? Or two would be better – then we could have one each!’

Jansie almost managed to laugh, then shook her head. ‘Silvan hasn’t got any family at all.’ And she thought silently, *Except for Tavia. She’s his family now. And tonight she’ll go*

away with him, away to his house, where they'll both be so far from me . . .

'Come on,' Issa said, seeing that Jansie was about to cry again. 'You mustn't go back with red eyes and blotchy cheeks, or Tavia *will* know that you're upset. Let me dab your face – there, that's better – and we'll go downstairs together.' She pulled her cousin to her feet and linked arms firmly with her. 'You'll get over him, Jansie. You will.'

The carriage that was to take Silvan and Tavia away to their new life was at the door shortly after sunset. All the guests gathered on the steps to wish them Godspeed on their four-day journey, and Tavia, radiant and laughing, swept Jansie into her arms.

'Oh, Jansie, this has been such a wonderful day!' Tavia hugged her sister tightly. 'Now, you'll come and see us soon, won't you? Promise?'

'I promise. As soon as you want me to come, just write to me.' And Jansie meant it. For until she was invited, until that letter came, there would be no chance to see Silvan again.

Then Silvan stepped forward. He took Jansie's hands in his and she felt a thrill rush through her fingers, through her arms, into her heart. She looked up at his face, at the fine bones, the frame of black hair with the strange but distinguishing white streak at the temples. Into his vivid green eyes . . .

Silvan smiled at her, a smile that devastated her soul. 'Goodbye, dear sister Jansie,' he said. And Jansie's dreams collapsed and blew away on the late summer breeze. *Sister*. That was all she was to him, all she would ever be. He loved Tavia. And that hurt so much.

She heard the carriage door close, heard the coachman call to the horses – 'Come *hup!*' – and the crack of the whip. Hoofs clattered, the carriage wheels rumbled, and Silvan and Tavia were carried away into the gathering night.

Jansie went up to her bedroom. The festivities were still in full swing and would go on until past midnight, but she couldn't bear to join in any more. She closed her door and sat down in front of her looking-glass, gazing at her own face. Her hair wasn't golden like Tavia's, but only brown. And her eyes were not blue, only hazel. *Tavia is beautiful*, Jansie thought, *and I'm not*. Little wonder that Silvan had fallen in love with her sister. Little wonder that he would never dream of looking twice at Jansie . . .

Suddenly Jansie couldn't face the glass any more. She ran to her bed, threw herself down on the familiar, friendly counterpane, and sobbed herself to sleep.

Tavia wrote once to say that she and Silvan had arrived safely, and then there was no further letter for months. Summer gave way to autumn and autumn to winter, and still no

word came. Jansie fretted more and more each week, until her father despaired of her and even her mother declared that she was becoming 'quite impossible!'

Then, a few days after the Midwinter Solstice, a letter came. It wasn't brought by the usual post-runner but by a fair-haired boy some two or three years older than Jansie, who rode up to the door on a stout pony one brisk, chilly morning. The boy's name was Gilmer, he said; he was in service at Silvan's house and his master had asked him to carry this message. Jansie barely gave the young messenger a second glance; she was too excited and eager to know what Tavia had to say.

But the letter wasn't from Tavia. It was from Silvan himself. He had to go away on business, he said, and would be absent from home until spring. He was worried that Tavia would be lonely, and so he wondered if Jansie might wish to stay at his house during his absence, to keep her sister company.

Jansie was thrilled by the invitation, but underlying the thrill was a feeling of great disappointment. She had missed Tavia greatly during the past few months . . . but stronger than the desire to see her sister again was the desire to see Silvan. Though Jansie had tried to forget her longings, her efforts had been futile. She still dreamed of Silvan each night, still thought of him each day. And now, when the

long-awaited invitation had finally come, he would not be there. It seemed a bitterly cruel blow.

But if she would not see Silvan himself, she thought, at least she would see his house, and that prospect fascinated her. So the following day she set out with Gilmer as escort.

The morning was bright but cold, with frost glittering on the hedgerows and a fresh, chill snap to the wind. The ponies' hoofs rang and echoed cheerfully on the road, and as they trotted along, Jansie looked sidelong at her companion. Gilmer had a charming manner, she thought. Handsome, too – though in a very different way from Silvan, for Gilmer was smaller, slim without being gaunt, and had warm grey eyes and thick, fair hair in which the winter sun made rainbows of colour. He was obviously attracted to Jansie, and she knew that if circumstances had been different she might well have been drawn to him. But each time she looked at Gilmer, the shadow of Silvan moved across her inner vision. It was wrong, Jansie *knew* it was wrong. But her brother-in-law had snared her heart, and she could have no thought for anyone else.

They did talk a great deal on the journey, however, and Jansie soon learned that Gilmer was no ordinary servant. He came from an old, respected and once-wealthy family, but in recent years they had fallen on hard times. Gilmer

knew a great deal about herbalism and his ambition was to become a physician. But such training cost money, and so Gilmer now worked for Silvan, as his steward. Soon they were laughing and talking like old friends.

‘Well, Jansie, I’m glad to hear you so cheerful despite the cold!’ Gilmer dropped the reins for a moment and rubbed his hands together. ‘Winter’s early this year, and it looks set to be a bitter one. We even had a snowfall on the Winter Solstice, and that’s very rare – in fact I don’t think it’s happened before in my father’s lifetime, let alone in mine.’

‘You mean you don’t get snow?’ Jansie was surprised.

‘Oh yes, we do, but usually not until a month after the Solstice is past. The forest where we – that is, where your sister and brother-in-law live is very sheltered. Cool in the summer, warm in the winter. Only this year the weather seems to have something else in mind. A few days ago, I even heard –’ Then, as though thinking better of it, he broke off abruptly.

Jansie looked at him, curious. ‘What did you hear?’

‘Oh, nothing.’ But there was a strange expression on Gilmer’s face. ‘It isn’t important.’

But it was. Jansie could tell. And as they rode on, suddenly silent, she felt a sense of creeping unease begin to form somewhere very deep in her mind . . .

CHAPTER II

THE SUN WAS setting on the fourth day of their journey when at last they reached their destination. The ponies crested a ridge; suddenly before them was a great sweep of forest – and, dominating the scene from a hill on the forest's edge, stood Silvan's house.

Jansie stared at the house with a mixture of awe and dismay. It was very large, far larger than her own home, and in all her life she had never seen a building that looked so grim and gloomy. Grey stone walls reared up, crowned with towers and turrets, and the great, arched entrance was like a dark mouth waiting to devour them.

The ponies clattered under the arch and into a courtyard lit by torches. Gilmer helped Jansie to dismount and she gazed up at the narrow windows, wondering how Tavia could bear to live in such a place. But then, Tavia had Silvan . . .

As if her thought had cast some peculiar spell, Silvan himself emerged from the main door at that moment. Jansie's heart gave a painful lurch as the torches lit his high-boned face and the white streak of hair. Then she took

a grip on herself and went forward to greet him. He kissed her – a brotherly kiss, and she *longed* for it to be more – and said, ‘Jansie, I’m so glad you could make the journey. Come inside. Tavia is eager to see you.’

The great hall overlooked the courtyard and was a huge, imposing chamber filled with antiques and relics. A fire blazed in the vast hearth, keeping the worst of the shadows at bay, and a long, polished table was set ready for a meal.

Tavia jumped up from a chair by the fire and ran to her sister. ‘Jansie! Oh, it’s wonderful to see you!’

Jansie was shocked. Tavia had changed. At her wedding she had been vivid-eyed, rose-cheeked, beautiful, but now her face was pale and her body thin. She looked ill.

‘Tavia, what’s wrong?’ Jansie asked. ‘Have you had a fever?’

Tavia laughed, though there was a funny little edge to the laugh. ‘A fever? Of course not – I’m perfectly well! Come along now, come to the fire and get warm.’

Silvan took Jansie’s cloak, then Gilmer came in and, before long, they were all sitting down to a lavish meal. It was a cheerful enough affair, but Jansie couldn’t shake off a feeling of unease that grew stronger as the evening progressed. And it wasn’t just the house’s atmosphere that troubled her, for she was sure now

that something was wrong with Tavia. On the surface her sister seemed happy, but occasionally Jansie saw something else in her face, and the only name she could give that something was fear.

As for Silvan . . . he was in a strange mood, she thought. He seemed very restless. He kept looking towards the window, and twice he asked Gilmer if he thought it would snow again soon. He planned to leave on his journey in the morning, and Jansie had the impression that he was very anxious indeed to be away.

The meal ended, and Silvan said that, with an early start ahead of him tomorrow, he would retire to bed. Tavia went too, and when they were gone, Gilmer was about to leave when suddenly he paused.

‘Jansie,’ he asked hesitantly, ‘is something wrong?’

Jansie was still sitting at the table, staring down at its polished surface. She made to shrug the question off, but abruptly changed her mind. If anything *was* amiss with her sister, then surely Gilmer might know and be able to explain? So she said, ‘It’s Tavia, Gilmer. She’s so pale and thin – I’m worried about her.’ She looked up, meeting his eyes. ‘Please tell me the truth. Is she ill?’

Gilmer sighed. ‘No,’ he replied. ‘Your sister isn’t ill. But she is . . . troubled.’

Jansie frowned. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Well . . . it’s just that she’s started to have nightmares.’

‘*Nightmares?*’ Jansie was taken aback. ‘What sort of nightmares?’

Gilmer shook his head. He looked uncomfortable. ‘She hasn’t told me. But she wakes up screaming sometimes, and Silvan’s very worried.’

Little wonder, Jansie thought. Tavia had never had nightmares for as long as she could remember; it was one of the many things about her sister that Jansie envied.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘perhaps she’ll talk to me about it.’

Gilmer gave her an odd look. ‘When Silvan has gone?’

Now what does that mean? Jansie wondered, but she didn’t ask, only said, ‘Yes. When he’s gone.’

Jansie’s room was large and richly furnished, with thick rugs, tapestries on the walls and a four-poster bed with crimson curtains. But for all its splendour, there was something very forbidding about it – just like the rest of this house, Jansie thought. With only Silvan, Tavia and a few servants living here, the house had an atmosphere of cold, brooding emptiness that seemed to chill her to the bone.

Lying in bed with the covers pulled up to her chin, Jansie stared at the flickering shadows

cast by her candle flame and thought about the great hall downstairs. It was full of heirlooms, some of them centuries old, for Silvan's family had a long history. One object in particular had sent a cold shiver through Jansie, but she couldn't say why. It was an ancient sword, made of bronze, which hung above the fireplace. There were gemstones set into the hilt, and something was written on the blade, though she hadn't looked closely enough to read the words. Silvan had said that it was the one thing he would never part with under any circumstances. There had been a peculiar note in his voice as he'd said it, and Tavia had looked quickly away.

Jansie shivered again. Sleep wouldn't come easily tonight, she was certain. The wind had risen now and was howling around the walls, rattling her window as though it were alive and had hands that were trying to pull the glass away. The house creaked, too, with a soft, groaning sound that made her think of a lamenting voice. Jansie stared at her candle and started to play a counting game in her mind, to distract her from the eerie sounds and the ominous atmosphere. She almost wished that she could go home tomorrow, ride away and never see this house again. But for Tavia's sake she would stay. She *must*.

Jansie did fall asleep at last, but her sleep was filled with strange dreams. Several times