

## **The Boy, the Witch and the Princess**

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[Excerpt from *Strange Love / Romance Not For Sale*]

A boy went wandering one day in the forest. He followed his nose along the forest floor, threading his way past fern and mushroom, tendril and stalk, over mossy mounds where mouseprints merged with the textured green, along velvet ways needle-gold and hushed. In time he came to a house sweetly made of gingerbread, round-edged and candy-trimmed. He went to the crisp dark door and knocked soundly.

“Come in,” a voice creaked. It sounded like rusty nails.

Unperturbed, the boy entered. He was on a mission of discovery, having left the house of his parents behind, having decided there was nothing of the old life to be pursued, and ready for new teachings from whatever source. Still, he was taken aback when he saw the old woman, with her long pitted nose, hunched over a spinning wheel, her crooked teeth grinning at him, her unkempt hair tumbling like a rag from her head—the skull thinly papered over with gray skin showing through the sparse hair.

“Whose grandmother...” he whispered.

“Not yours,” she cackled, “But come in, little one; I want to feel your bones. I imagine you’re hungry, you scrawny chicken, and we must do something about that.”

Sometime later the cauldron bubbled beside the table on a blazing hearth. The soup was tasty but thin.

“I’m wanting meat,” she told the boy with a purposeful look, and he took her to mean that she would have appreciated it if he’d brought with him a prime cut from the grocer’s, or at least a junior hunting license.

“I’ll see what I can do,” he said with some naïve hope that this would reassure her. She muttered absently, cleared the table, and brought

out the poker chips and playing cards. Shuffled in a blur too fast for the human eye.

“I don’t have any—” he started to say.

“No need for gold or silver,” she interrupted. “Life or death. How’s that?”

The boy was twelve, going on thirteen. He’d seen enough action videos, played enough Nintendo to have an inkling of this adult concept. Still it had no teeth until she laid the carving knife, big as a scimitar, on the table beside them.

“Me or you,” she added graciously. “Cut for deal?”

Down to his last white chip. The poker pot was full; the cauldron still simmering, only half-full; the fire down to glowing coals. Hustle time. He saw her pull a card from under the table to her hand. He snatched up the knife and flashed it, hovering, above her neck. The one whisker on her chin wart seemed to a quiver in a draft that swept suddenly, coolly into the cottage from the darkling forest.

“If you please,” the crone said sweetly. “Forgive me and I’ll promise you more than your own life in security. I will give you love and beauty beyond compare.”

“And how will you arrange that?” the boy demanded with a haughty air. Yet the blade wavered in his hand.

“I cannot say: you must simply trust me, and forgive. I have nothing else to offer you—except of course my bitter bones for the soup pot—until you take the oath.”

The boy considered. His home, the strict domain of his mother the psychic and father the online daytrader, was not his path ahead. In the moment his prospects were clear: off with her head (and stringy soup and gingerbread for a week or more), or take this chance on a direct jump to the promised land, the jungle of love, the mystery of leaping into the sea.

Like a drop of seafoam suspended from the lip of the cresting wave, he gave himself to fate. The carving knife fell with a clatter to the floor.

“Okay,” he said, “I’m ready.”

“Kiss me.”

Her black lips puckered: cracked and crusty. Her hollow cheeks bunched forward; her wart-whiskered chin jutted as a crag from the wave-battered headland.

The boy closed his eyes and glided into the darkness, his own rosebud mouth pursed gently, lips half-parted.

The princess spread her skirts upon the gold-green carpet of the hushed forest. Around her ginger crumbs blended into moss; candy frosting trickled from the trees. She leaned over a still pool, gazing into the surface. Her face was finely sculpted, alabaster smooth. Her hair cascaded flaxen under a jeweled crown. Her eyes danced with a secret freedom. Her radiance, in reflection, brought a tender smile to her lips, as if it turned some memory in the dark within. She blinked away that shadow, caught a movement by the pool’s muddy edge.

There a frog sat one foot in the water, one splayed on the bank, arrested in mid-slide. Its bulbous eye fixed her, its slick head cocked. The mouth, in contrast to her own, set grim in a line drawn tight against fly and worm, seal of its own primordial past. The princess reached toward the frog, she didn’t know why. In compassion, companionship, curiosity?

The frog gave a single croak and flopped into the water, kicking up and diving to a depth where it no longer could be seen. The princess, perturbed, called out: “Froggie, froggie, wait!”

In a trice she flung off her finery and, her lithe girl’s body as limber as a fawn’s, dived into the water. The ripples closed over her dainty feet, dimpled, stilled.