

It's what's on the **inside** that counts



# FALLOW HEART

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## Beasts, of one kind and another

*I'm a fat, friendless virgin, and now I'm going to be eaten alive.*

As far as last thoughts go, it wasn't a winner. Was that all she was going to leave to the world? The pathetic last cry of a lonely, overweight seventeen-year-old girl, who had had the misfortune to be cutting down the same alleyway that she always cut down on her way to work. Her life ending, and that was all she could muster in her stupor of fear.

Lorelai could see the outline of horns above her. It had antlers, whatever it was that was on top of her, yet its snarling breath and gnashing teeth suggested a creature far more beastly than a moose or an elk. How could it be real? The glowing crimson eyes burned down into Lori's, no pupil, white or iris. And why choose her? Why was the sound of panting and gnashing ringing in her ears, filling her head with beastly noise? It couldn't be real, yet there it was, all



teeth and terror. The jaws closed in towards Lori's trembling face. Its breath was rancid, rotten eggs mixed with the metallic tang of blood, and Lori's stomach lurched at the fetid aroma. Her body shook beneath its terrible weight, spine rattling as every bone ached to be free. Free or dead. Anything but that terrifying in-between, the time of not knowing what the beast would do. Any moment now, it would devour her.

She awoke sometime later, shivering a little, with a smattering of rain soaking her face. Lori lay still for a moment on the hard cobblestones of the pathway, opening her eyes to take in the scene. There was no beast, only a grey September sky above her where one rainy cloud melted into the next. Lori's gaze slid around, taking in a sideways world of shiny, wet stones. When she dared to move, Lori was stiff from the chill air, but otherwise unharmed.

It wasn't real. Lori took a few breaths, rubbing her sternum with the heel of her hand. Beasts with



quivering jaws and massive antlers did not roam the streets of Chester. Even if they did, Lori wouldn't have been a prime target. She smiled without happiness, exhaling. The beast was no more. She was alone and deeply confused, but not about to die. She closed her eyes a moment, listening as the thud of her heart slowed back to its usual pace.

Lori heaved herself into a sitting position with one huffed breath, feeling her torso carefully. There were no bruises. In the flashbacks of her horrifying memory, she remembered the weight of the beast, the entrapment of heavy limbs on hers. But now she was fine, further proof that it wasn't real. *Perhaps all that fat absorbed the impact.* It was a nasty thought, the kind that Lori often had about herself, and she tried to push it away. It took her a moment to clamber to her feet, heavier than ever in her rain-soaked jacket and leggings. Her t-shirt clung to her body, and Lori tugged at it to try and get it to loosen around her stomach.



There was a tear. It was the only sign that anything had happened to her, a small rip in the fabric of her t-shirt, about an inch long. Lori pinched the wet shirt between her fingertips to bring the tear closer. It was a neat slice, like a knife had gone through it, yet there were no bloodstains. When she let the shirt fall again, the tear settled over her heart. Lori gulped hard. She hadn't done that at college. The tear was new. And she *had* awoken on the cobblestones after passing out in the rain. That wasn't good. How much time had she lost to unconsciousness? Lori cleared the raindrops from her watch, squinting at the time.

*Shit. I'm late for work.*

She was off like a gunshot, pounding down the alley as quickly as she could manage.

*He's not going to believe you.*

She was only a stone's throw from the place she'd been heading for, a little café on Frodsham Street that saw no shame in calling itself The Greasy Spoon.



*What can you tell him? That an antlered beast pinned you down and vanished? He'll think you're nuts.*

Lori arrived at the kitchen entrance, face flushed and chest heaving from the sudden rush. She swung into the doorway and crashed full force into someone else. By the gruff ‘oof’ of his reaction, she knew it was the café’s owner. She watched him stagger back into the kitchen to regain his balance, then followed a few steps to get out of the rain. Dark brown eyes, the same shade as her own, grew wide as he took in the sight of her. Lori tugged at her clothes again. What a soaking wet state she must have been.

“Dad, before you say anything-” Lori began, but her boss-cum-father cut her off.

“Look at you!” His dark features frowned. “You’re soaking wet, my girl. Did something happen to you? I’ve been ringing your mobile for the last forty minutes!”

“My phone?” Lori asked.



A pang of panic hit Lori. She didn't hear her father's fraught reply. Where was her bag? She had come straight from college and walked down through the city centre to get to her afternoon shift at the café. She'd had her backpack with her, a drawstring canvas bag with blue and black stripes. Now, she didn't have it at all. She hadn't even seen it since she'd woken up in the alley.

"That bastard thing took my bag!" she said.

"You lost your bag?" Her father took hold of her shoulders, looking back out through the open door. "Who took it, Lori? Were you mugged?"

He looked pained, but Lori couldn't offer any explanation. The tiny tear was one thing, a small worry that could be explained away. But she'd lost her bag too. She had no memory of entering that alleyway, or anything that had happened since she'd woken up in the rain. No memory, save for the flashing, gnashing crimson of the horned beast. It couldn't be real, but it was all she had. It would be



madness to tell her father, but she had nothing else to say.

“What’s goin’ on, babe?”

The Irish burr came ringing into the room. Something dark and unpleasant settled into Lori’s heart when she heard the nasal quality of the new voice. At the other door of the kitchen, the one that led through to the café itself, stood Pauline O’Leary, her father’s girlfriend. Pauline ran a hand through her highlighted locks, fake nails scraping past bleached strands, and quirked one perfectly plucked eyebrow. Lori felt the eyes on her, taking in her soaking body, making her squirm where she stood. She wanted to get away and pretend that none of this had ever happened. Lori looked down, trying not to focus on Pauline’s face. Instead she let her eyes roam past the woman’s skirt, far too short for her to pull off at her age, down her sunbed-tanned legs to-

“Oh God,” Lori said without thinking. “Those shoes.”





Pauline glanced downwards. Her smile grew toothier.

“Do you like them, so?” she purred. “Your dad bought them for me. He’s such a sweetheart, isn’t he?”

Pauline lifted one spindly orange leg a little, showing off the hideous shoes. They were as lurid as the rest of her, striped with red-and-black zebra print down the outside and black-and-blue giraffe patterns on the inside. Lori hadn’t meant to comment on the shoes. Her head was too full of bags and beasts to process anything other than their ugliness. After Lori passed a wordless moment, Pauline put her foot down again with a stomp.

“So you don’t like them?” She said, her words clipped. “What’s wrong with you, Lori? You’re soaked. Did you not bring an umbrella today?”

The hand on Lori’s shoulder gave her a little pat. She looked back to her dad, whose half-smile offered a little comfort.



“I think Lori’s been mugged, love,” Dad told Pauline softly.

“Oh Ian, that’s awful,” Pauline said. “Does that mean she’s not coming out to clear these tables?”

There was a jab in Lori’s stomach. Was that all she could say, when Lori had blacked out and hallucinated?

“You don’t have to,” her dad said. “Love, if you need to go home, it’s fine.”

“Of course it’s fine,” Pauline added quickly, “but I need to know. We’re swamped out here. I can call Daniel in if-”

“I’ll be there in a sec, Pauline,” Lori answered through gritted teeth. “Need to get into my uniform.”

Lori shared a look with her father. She was already late, and she wouldn’t let Dad down any further. And there was the thing about being nice to Pauline. It was a conversation she and Dad had had many times over the last two years, since Pauline O’Leary had come into Ian Blake’s life.



*She's my girlfriend, Lorelai, and she's important to me. Don't make trouble. She likes you, honest she does. She's got this briskness about her, that's all. It's the Irish way.*

“Thanks Lor, you’re a sport.” Pauline grinned. “I’d better get back to it.”

She vanished through the doorway again to see to the customers, those rancid heels clicking all the way. When Lori tried to move towards the locker where her waitress’s uniform was kept, her father caught her arm. Again, there was no bruising or pain, though a flash of memory hit her with the impact. She saw those antlers casting a terrible shadow over her again, and a pair of eyes that glowed crimson as they closed in on her face. Blinking them away brought strange tears to her eyes.

“Sweetheart, your bag,” her father insisted. “Tell me what the mugger looked like. We need to report this to the police.”



“I...” Lori stammered, searching for some way to tell her father the truth.

She knew it was no use. Whatever had happened to her, it couldn't be what she remembered. No wild animals were wandering the streets of Chester at three in the afternoon, least of all with huge bloody antlers and piercing red eyes. She had no marks on her, nothing but a shivering, soaked outer layer of clothes. For all she knew, she'd passed out in the alley, dreamed of the beast, and had her bag snatched whilst she was unconscious. For all she knew, there'd been something gone-off in the lunch at college today. For all she knew, she was simply going mad.

“I didn't see,” Lori answered eventually. “They knocked me out. I was out cold for ages, out in the rain. I don't remember what happened.”

Her father's face sank. He shook his head, raising a finger suddenly.



“I’ll report it anyway,” he insisted. “You never know, there might be some CCTV that caught them. Maybe they can trace your phone.”

“Maybe,” Lori said, feeling pretty hopeless about it all. “I’ll borrow a phone from Granddad tomorrow.”

Dad nodded. “You don’t have to work, you know.”

Lori shook her head.

“I will. It’ll take my mind off it.”

She moved to the locker and yanked at its rusty door, then pulled out her uniform ready for work.

“Lori, love, the police report,” Dad said, wringing his hands. “Can we-?”

“Later, please?” Lori begged. “Dad, I’m soaking. I need to change.”

*I need to forget.*

Dad gave in with a small nod. Lori raced up the stairs to the not-so-glorious staff quarters, which consisted of a kitchenette with a dangerous rattling



microwave and a tiny washroom covered in mirrored tiles. She hated the mirrored room, and she often got changed in the dark in there to save herself the agony of those nasty thoughts that would come unbidden into her head. Today the lights were already on, and she was in a hurry to be out of her cold, wet things.

Closing the door behind her, Lori shrugged out of her shoes, socks and leggings first. She saw herself in profile as she fought with the sopping fabric, her long black hair falling in rats' tails around her too-round face. *Legs like tree trunks. Fat bitch.* Lori shut her eyes, pulling on her work pants despite the friction from her frozen, damp skin. She pulled off her hooded jacket and yanked her t-shirt up over her head. She heaved a sigh, hearing the wet clothes land with a squelch on the ground as she dropped them. Slowly, she let her eyes flicker open again.

At first she saw her face, brown eyes staring back at her from the tiles, but it only took a second for her focus to change. *What the hell is that?* On the pale



flesh of her chest, directly over her heart, Lori had a mark. She picked up the wet t-shirt, stretching it out to line up the tear with her skin. Perfect. With one trembling thumb, Lori touched the mark. It was raised and smooth, like a newly-healed scar, and curved in the shape of a crescent moon.

She had wanted to write off the beast, put it down to her own crazy nightmares, her own clumsy, stupid ways. But the rotten scent of the creature's breath hit her memory then, and Lori knew that no dream could ever feel so horribly real. Something *had* happened to her. There was a mark, a scar that seemed weeks old, which wasn't there that same morning. Lori couldn't begin to guess where it had come from. All she knew was that a deep fear had settled into her body. A dark, empty feeling, more powerful than she could describe.



## Absence, physical and otherwise

The next day began like every other Saturday of Lori's life. She opened her eyes to the sound of Mum and Brian arguing, the telly blaring through the thin partition wall, and the howl of the wind against the outside of the caravan. When she was in high school, the other kids' favourite name for her was *fat ass trailer trash*. Sometimes Lori felt sorry enough for herself to believe it was an accurate label. Today was not one of those days. She had far more pressing things on her mind than the echoes of bullies past.

The crescent mark had brought on the most terrible dreams of Lori's life. It was like she'd been running all night, her legs aching and her body drained of its power. Though she'd tried to escape through blurry landscapes of every colour, the antlered beast had returned for her, cornering her in a dark place with red skies and burning towers. Its eyes glowed crimson with gluttony. It had come back to





devour her, she knew it, and there was nothing to do but run for her life. On waking, Lori had been more grateful than usual to find herself lying in the caravan's tiny twin bedroom.

She got ready as fast as she could to make her getaway from the van. When she emerged through the thin plastic door of her room, sidling her way out into the narrow corridor of the van, her mother was standing a few feet away. The walls of the van were like paper, and it always sounded as though Mum was inches away when she spent the morning screaming at Brian. Today Lori had to duck as her mother swung an arm back, cocking a plastic pint glass like a cricketer ready to pitch. Lori caught the side of her mother's face, which was fraught with anger. Her frazzled, curly hair was raised on end, like someone had electrocuted her. Her mother's lips seethed crimson, a matching flush in her cheeks.

"Brian, so help me God!" she raged. "If you don't tell me who did it, I'll glass you!"



“You’ll glass me?” Brian replied.

He was a stout man of around fifty, a bit older but not any wiser than Lori’s mum. He too had the red sheen across his face, a sure sign that the pair of them had been boozing last night, and his slurred speech suggested he was still way under the influence. He stood up, wobbling a little, and pointed at the glass in his partner’s hand.

“You’ll glass me *with that?*” he said, guffawing. “It’s plastic, Yvonne. We broke the glass ones years ago.”

Lori remembered that night all too well. Slowly, she reached out for her mother’s thin wrist, taking hold of it gently. The action shocked her into turning, and Lori was pained to see the familiar still-drunk blur in her eyes.

“Maybe you can help me, Lor,” her mother said, “since this useless article won’t.”

“What is it, Mum?” Lori replied, skirting around her and setting the glass down on the table.



She saw the bottles there, beer and cider, each one drained down to the dregs. In the brief glance Lori spared the table, she counted eleven cans too. There were sure to be more, but Lori made herself look away, back to her mother's pleading eyes.

“Bloody graffiti on the side of the van!” Her mother's hands flailed towards the door. “Brian swears he never saw who did it. I say it's got to be foreigners, and he goes calling me a racist! A racist? *Me?* My mother is French, for God's sake!”

Lori thought it wise to keep her mouth shut. Since she was stuck with them through thick and thin, it certainly wasn't worth upsetting either her mother or Brian over something so small and stupid. Instead, she put a hand on her mother's shoulder, felt her shaking a little, then drew it back with a tightness in her gut.

“I'll take a look, and I'll tell Granddad. He'll sort it. He always does.”



It usually took a few seconds for the information to get through to Mum's brain when she'd been drinking. Lori watched it all sink in. Then her mother deflated a little, nodding to herself and wringing her hands.

"Right then," she said softly, "Sorted then."

"See?" Brian added. "Getting yourself worked up over nothing. Silly mare."

Lori cringed.

"What did you call me?" her mother said, exploding with another fit of rage.

It was Lori's cue to leave. If they still hadn't come down from last night's bender, then there was no hope of a peaceful breakfast. The thought of getting to her grandfather's little house in Handbridge kept her going as she moved to the van's outer door. She'd put half her body through it when she heard her name called. Lori hung back, meeting her mother's glassy vision again.

"What did you say?" she asked.



“Where did you go last night?” Mum repeated with a sigh.

Lori frowned.

“What do you mean?” she said. “I didn’t go anywhere.”

She saw her mother’s jaw tighten at the retaliation. Lori had long-since learned not to contradict her mother and cause trouble, but she needed to know what she meant.

“You went outside, Lori, in the middle of the night.”

It was nonsense. Lori knew she’d been trapped in nightmares all night, and her mother had been blind drunk. But that tension was hovering in Yvonne’s features, and Lori could read it well.

“Oh, uh... nowhere,” she answered. “I’ve got to go. I’ll be late for Granddad.”

She shut the door behind her, leaving the pair to resume their fight.



*She's seeing things. It's getting serious. You have to tell someone.*

Lori shook her head, stepping down the three small stairs which led to the muddy patch around the van. Most of the caravans at Fir Trees were classy holiday homes, kept by people who had real houses and fancy cars. Mum's van was old and well-worn from full-on residential living, relegated to the far end of the park. She'd been asked several times to either refurbish the van or upgrade to a new one, but she never had the cash. Lori knew where all her money went, and it was a growing problem that she'd have to face one day soon. But so long as the van hadn't fallen apart, there was still time to fix things.

The graffiti was extensive. Lori saw why her mother had been so keen to blame foreigners, for the vivid black words sprayed across the van's side were not written in English. The letters were six feet high, if you could call them letters at all. The shapes looked more like the curves and dots of Arabic, though Lori



knew nothing about the language. She was working on her European languages at college, and other alphabets seemed a long way off in her future. How she wished that she'd had her phone, to be able to take a picture of the damage for Granddad to see. Instead, she stared hard at the symbols to try and memorise them.

There were three. The first looked like a capital E, but curved and cursive instead of straight. This was followed by two symbols that were both shaped like a lowercase j. One had the dot over the j, and the other didn't. Lori stared hard, blinked, then turned away. She was sure she could remember. Granddad would know how to clean them off, even if he couldn't shed any light on what the translation was.

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