

## The Murderous Madár by Katie Brethorst

Burnt woodsmoke drifts over the sticky sweet scent of caramel apples, most of which were scattered across the brittle, decaying leaves of the Picadilly Apple Festival grounds. A shoe rests not too far away from one, a splash of cider and blood across the well-worn laces. A spider wanders over the false cotton webs that had meant to set the scene but had only added fuel to the flames of fear when everyone ran.

The bodies that had not been successful in their attempt to fight rather than flee rested in a haphazard heap across the pavilion tables, each one adding to the river of lifeblood that languidly oozed past the monstrous sized pile of feathers in the corner. The mound of avian flesh rose and fell, its exhales echoing like distant thunder across the cavernous space. A beak, dyed crimson, peaked out from beneath the plumes, ready to snap at any creature that meandered too close.

It had not always been this monstrous creature. In fact, it had once been quite beautiful. A woman with raven hair that hung like a shadow down her back. Her dressings were once as white as spun sugar, and her favorite treats had included apple tarts and the boy who lived at the next farm over. He had been beautiful too.

They had fallen in love, wanted a life much different than the one they were living. She wanted to build a family and a home away from her father. He wanted nothing more than to make her dreams a reality. Often they met when the sky was moonless, and she would bring him an apple tart and kisses sweeter than any caramel he'd ever tasted. She was his light, and he was her anchor.

The father found out about their moonless trysts, and he put a stop to her leaving. He left a trail of purple and yellow stains across her skin, screaming at her to confess her sins. She

would stick out her chin and say never, for her love was nothing to be ashamed of. Her father took matters into his own hands.

On a night that was only slightly brighter than the ones they usually met under, the boy received a note to come meet her beneath the willow tree that bared their initials. Elation took control of his heart, and he practically flew across the silvery stream, over the meadows that were dotted with indistinguishable flowers and rocks, and saw his love sitting rigid upon a fallen log. He approached, but when she turned, fear was etched across her marble pale skin, bound in chains.

A meteor flew across the fields, striking the boy in his too soft heart. Inky dark blood bloomed like a nocturnal flower across his chest, growing to the symphony of screams emanating from his love. She fell to the grass as he did, searching simultaneously for any spark of life from the boy and the flame of a cigar her father would light at his victorious aim. Anger seeped into her soul. Rage shook her and erupted out of her in a guttural, animalistic screech.

Talons emerged from the soft beds of her nails, her hair sprouting feathers, and she became the demon that a life without love promised. Breaking her bonds, her first meal as this winged devil came from her father, whose pleadings were lost on the deaf ears of a woman who had lost everything. As she slowly tore out his entrails, spreading them across the field, she relished the soft moans of the man who had killed her human soul.

So the legacy of the Murderous Madár began, hunting and killing anyone who had sucked the soul out of any human. This particular autumnal festival held a group of men who had taunted and attacked a boy so often that the boy became a spider, strung up in a loop of his own creation, swinging from the rafters of his mother's garage. The Murderous Madár need nothing more to attack the group of celebrating jackals gathered at the Picadilly Apple Festival.

Their bodies sat rotting across the ancient picnic tables, bleeding as flashlights from the police drifted back and forth across the grounds. Gags and moans resounded from the men in badges at the discovery of the disemboweled boys, searching for what monster had done this.

She had disappeared into the darkness, back to her den to reside until another atrocity was committed against someone who had not deserved it. As the police searched, she was nothing but a distant shadow against a moonless sky.