



YOUNG GOTHIC



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M. A. BENNETT



WELBECK
CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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Quotations from *Fantasmagoriana*, first published in 1812

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For Conrad
who also survived an Operation

Content warning: This book contains some strong language and mentions of child loss, abortion and sexual coercion.



**THE
PRE-CREDITS
SEQUENCE**

It is a dark and stormy night.

The phrase sticks in my head as I set out from the villa. 'It was a dark and stormy night.' I happen to know where it's from. It's the opening line of Edward Bulwer-Lytton's 1830 novel *Paul Clifford*. Just one of those factoids, those useless pieces of pub quiz trivia that stick in your head. Funny how those stupid details float to the surface when you're in a panic. *Dark and stormy*. A clichéd line of fiction, a drink made with rum. And the classic beginning to a horror story.

Which is what this is.

It's factually true tonight. It is dark and stormy. The wild skies are torn apart by lightning, the rain slashes down and I can feel the thunder rumbling my ribs. What a night to have to go into the woods. A bird flies overhead and plunges into the forest behind the house, as if to show me the way.

In the forest it is even darker. Norse peoples of the past used to think that night was a great wolf devouring the sun, and they would clash pots and pans to scare it away. I'm sure they're much too polite to do that here in Switzerland, but I wish they would.

It is too dark to see anything at first, let alone a person. I would have missed her altogether but for the fact that she's wearing a white sheet, like some sort of Halloween ghost. I call her name and she turns. Our conversation is short but to the point. Then a flash of lightning illuminates us both. Now she

can see me properly. She looks at me like I'm a stranger, as if she doesn't know me from Adam.

And now she starts to scream.

Maybe it's the lightning that scared her. Or maybe it's the shock. I did sort of sneak up on her. It couldn't be helped though. We had to have this one last talk. Because she *can't* be allowed to do what she's planning to do. But neither of those things, the lightning nor the shock, explains the terror on her face when she sees mine. That only leaves one thing that's scaring her.

Me.

Her face frightens me in turn. Eyes wide, as if they had glimpsed down the pit of hell, mouth wide too, the whole face a gargoyle of horror. For the first time in my life I am looking at fear – pure fear.

I have to get her to stop screaming. We aren't far from the villa – someone will hear. One of the other three members of my strange new family.

But before I can speak again she turns and runs from me, into the undergrowth.

I walk in the stormy glade for a time, unsure of what to do. I don't know if there would be a point in going after her – she's clearly terrified of me, so it might do more harm than good. But then I make up my mind. I can't just leave her.

Not in her condition.

I find her in a clearing, lying prone on the forest floor. She's now silent. And that's somehow worse.

There's this bit in *The Silence of the Lambs* where Clarice Starling, the detective character, is explaining the meaning of the title of the movie. She says that she lived near a farm when she was young and they raised lambs. She used to hear them bleating

pitiably when they went to slaughter. But it was worse when they stopped, because that meant they were dead. It's also said that when there's a car crash, paramedics always attend the silent person first. If someone's screaming, that means they're alive.

Now I'm even more afraid. This is on *me*. I gave her the shock. For a moment I just stand over her, unsure of what to do. Then there is another crack of lightning, heaven wide, and suddenly it is as bright as day.

For a split second you can see the beauty below the villa; Lake Geneva like a haunted mirror, Chateau Chillon on its little island in the middle of it, and the silver slopes of Mont Blanc far beyond. Then the vista is gone as quickly as it had come.

But the lightning galvanises me – it was the shock *I* needed. I come to myself and fall to my knees on the wet earth, and try to revive her. Nothing. And her face is still the same, contorted with horror. I could run – *I* am still alive – and go to ground in the villa where this had all started. But I know I have to do the right thing for once in my life. I fumble wetly for my phone, my fingers as cold as the grave. Our Young Gothic WhatsApp group is open – as it always is. Shaking, I close it and call 115 – that was the emergency number we'd all been given when we'd arrived. I'd wondered why at the time; now I was so thankful. After all, time was of the essence if a spark of life *did* exist within her.

I speak to the operator, giving the address as clearly as I can.
The Villa Diodati.

I wait with her until I see blue lights circling the lake below like a collar of sapphires, and then it's back to doing the wrong thing. (I suppose we always revert to type.)

I run away.

Soon there will be gendarmes with their sharp eyes, and sharper questions. Trying to get to the truth. And I can't face that.

Because the truth is that the other three are innocent.

But me?

I am a monster.