Misty Hollow
PROLOGUE

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She was grateful for her heated car to sit in as she filmed part of her documentary on forgotten towns...

She watched as the ivy swept over the intricate carvings on the arched doorways in the ferocious gale. She could hear it too—wind always seemed to engulf everything around it.

She stared around the deserted place, that once, at the height of its glory, had been the most EVERYTHING place in the country.

She was glad to roar the engine and drive away...

Dedicated to Laura, for being kind, amazing, always there and writing stories about characters named Ruby.
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"Make way, make way, for the amazing Stella Morris, documentary-maker extraordinaire!" shouted the jolly, suited announcer. Stella stepped out of the car into the brisk night air. She smiled and straightened the faux fur muff around her neck. Her stylist insisted on the most glitz and glamour he could find. Stella, on the other hand, would have jumped at the opportunity to live her whole life in jeans. She began to walk down the red carpet. Depressingly few (for others- not depressing for Stella) cameras flashed and fans jostled. Stella didn't mind in the least. She hated attention and was agerophobic (afraid of crowds). She breathed a sigh of relief as she hastily disappeared into the dark cinema and removed her muff (phew!!!). As she sat watching her documentary, her thoughts wandered, as thoughts do, to Misty Hollow. It was the most intriguing place she had been to, perhaps because she'd been extremely freaked out there. As the credits rolled and the cinema erupted into vigorous applause, Stella made a silent vow to go back there some day.
LATER

Stella straightened up after bending down to put food in her golden labrador puppy Charlie's food bowl. Stella let her curly red hair cover her pale face, with its snub nose, abundance of freckles, dancing sky-blue eyes and rosy cheeks.

Charlie wasted no time in scampering to his food bowl that bore his name and began crunching down his doggy treats. The excitable puppy loved nothing except his beloved mistress more than a packet of Doggy Delites.

Stella smiled at the furry rascal, hastily gathered her things and ran out the door, almost slamming into her car, (she had forgotten how close she had parked to her house) to drive off to the office for a spot of briefing. Today was an important day for Stella. She was filming the second episode on forgotten towns.
Stella frowned. The traffic jams had flared up (every second Friday—three for the price of one at the cinema) and Stella needed to be early. Suddenly, a stark white Mini Cooper was lurking behind Stella— and slammed into her!

Stella's head banged forwards and the airbags came out of their den— but Stella had fallen at a strange angle too fast and suddenly a dizzy, sinking feeling came over her, and she felt tiredness wash over her. Stella's eyelids felt heavy, and she sank down, down, down...

Hours later Stella woke to the sounds of traffic in the distance and someone loudly chewing bubblegum and popping the stuff. If this had been an average story, Stella would've gone through that whole 'where am I?' palaver. But it's not, so Stella woke up and said, "Berry, I've always told you that chewing gum is bad for you!"

"But Aunty Star, it's delicious!" protested a whiny voice.

Stella had no idea how she knew this person's name, how her muddled-up mind wasn't freaking out (this strange organism we call a brain seemed calm) and why this strange
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Berry person had called her Aunty Star. Her brain was protesting but her memory allowed her to spout the words. Stella sat up, rubbed her eyes, turned to face the speaker and gasped. There, lounging on a throne made out of cardboard boxes (it couldn't have been as comfortable as Berry made out) with an attendance of defunct dolls and scraps of teddy bears, was a spiky-haired imp, no more than twelve years of age, with a mischievous expression on his sharp-featured face. He looked Stella up and down. "Well you've seen better days, my Star.", he commented imperiously. Stella immediately tried to brush the leaves out of her bangs, push them hurriedly out of her face and straighten her skirt. She wondered why she was doing this. Why did she care what this strange kid thought of her. "Yes, you really used to dress better back then." he continued.

Berry looked at Stella's reaction (or lack of one). "You know Star, you were my nanny. Y'know??!!" Stella looked at him blankly. Suddenly she felt dizzy and disoriented.

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The loud noise of cardboard boxes crashing to the ground jolted Stella back to reality. Berry was lying on the ground, dazed, a pile of cardboard boxes having created an unusual hat. He groaned. It appeared that a seagull had flown by, spattered Berry on the forehead with muck, and startled Berry so much he had fallen over.

Stella laughed out loud. ‘What?!’ Came the muffled, indignant cry. ‘It's not funny! What if you fell! My jacket is ruined!!’

Berry was drowning in self-pity.

Stella felt like an unfamiliar hand was probing through the misty, cobwebbed corners of her mind that hadn't been explored in years. Suddenly there was an image in her mind. A small toddler in the bath, gaily laughing and splashing. Herself, a younger Stella, handing the child a towel and hugging the wet thing. Fast forward a few years, Stella packing a lunchbox, sending the boy off for his first day of school. Suddenly, the rest of the memories came flooding back, like a tsunami descending on her mind.

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"Oh, I'm not laughing at you, Berry. It's just that, I remember now. I was your nanny. You called me Aunty Star because in French, Stella means Star. You were a very smart baby."
"Yes I was." said Berry matter-of-factly." And now, important matters. You know Misty Hollow, your documentary setting, we need to help. When their King and Queen fled from Gamlin the Malevolent, the Queen was pregnant. Well now the old King and Queen are in hiding and have an adult granddaughter. It is my and others' belief we need Misty Hollow to thrive again."
"You mean..." gasped Stella.
"Yep. We need to defeat Gamlin III and get descendants of the original people and the Princess to come back. If you agree, you have one hour to pack and meet me here. We'll be away for two, three weeks. Travel light!"
And with that, Berry disappeared.

Stella sat for a while, considering weighing up pros and cons. Eventually, she decided to go. This is suicide! Exclaimed one part of her. Going off with some kid you knew as a
Eventually she decided to wing it and go home. She sighed and drove away from the daffodil field she had been lying in, hoping she would have forgotten about it by the time she had made the short drive home.

Stella opened the door of her house and immediately walked into her bedroom to collapse on her bed. She couldn't, though as there was something large and bulky on her bed. That's funny, Stella thought. I don't remember leaving my suitcase on my bed. She moved to take a closer look. It seemed, under closer inspection, that the suitcase was packed, with essentials and things Stella might have chosen herself. There was also a note attached. It read as-

Dear Star.

I was spying on your house and noticed you hadn't returned yet—so I let myself in and packed for you. Hope I chose the right stuff.

Love, Berry.

PS. Change of plans, I'll meet you here.

Shortly after Stella had read the note there was a loud tap on the window. She looked up—and who else would it be except...

Berry made strangled faces outside the window but Stella could now remember enough to know he was a trickster. Stella made her way over and opened the window. Berry half-fell half-clambered into Stella's room and stood on her armchair cracking his joints and shaking himself out.

Stella expected an imperious comment on the state of her messy room, and thought of a reply spoken indignantly. But the imperious comment didn't come.

"Come on then, let's go!" said Berry, as Stella was just standing there looking expectant, and he was flummoxed as to why.

toddler to find some princess chick. Ha! said another part. If you admit it's suicide, you admit it's dangerous and you must believe it.

Stella spent agonised minutes deciding (again).
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They set off, along a secret passage in Stella's backyard that no one except Berry knew about, not even Stella herself. After fifteen minutes, Stella asked, "Um, Berry, where exactly are we going?" "To wonders and delights, to terrors and to frights!" sang Berry. "Berry!!"
"OK, we're going to Shadow Hill, home of Gamlin III" "Doesn't sound like many wonders or delights would choose it as their home. Plenty of terrors and frights though." "That was a momentary mental blank. Don't judge." "Not judging." "You're right, actually, lots of terrors and frights there"
After an hour of slow trudging through—well, nothing much really—unnoticeable brown and grey hues around everything, when Berry declared this was the place. Place for what? Stella wondered. Berry took out of his pockets what looked like an old boot—wait, his POCKETS?! Excuse me while I edit this. Berry took out of his bag what looked like
an old boot. "Hold on!" He said to Stella, a sly grin on his little face. Stella, being a suspicious person now she had memories full of Berry's pranks, just stood there. The sly grin began to vanish and so did the boot and part of it's owner. Berry now had one hand. The other was on the outskirts of Shadow Hill. It was a teleporting boot! "Stella!!" he shouted, "It's not a prank! ITS NOT A PRANK! If you don't get on, I'll be swept away to Shadow Hill without you and you'll be stranded on the edge of the Monotonous Lands. Hold. On. To. The. Boot!!!!"

Berry now had to shout as the boot and now both Berry's arms and legs weren't there and a ferocious wind, similar to Misty Hollow those weeks ago, had blown up. While Berry had been shouting at her she had been listening to him, a shellshocked expression on her face. Now, she had tight hold on the toe of the boot and was hanging on to it as if her life depended on it, which it probably did.
Thirty seconds later Stella and Berry were standing on some old shrewelled grass looking at an amazing but terrifying structure. Shadow Hill Mansion. From the bleak dead grasslands they were standing on to the top of the blacker than black marble turrets, the whole thing gave off a formidable air. It was evening, and the setting sun cast eerie shadows over the Mansion. Stella could imagine the Princess's plight, hearing stories from your grandparent s about old good times and then being wrenched from your throne, living out your life in a deep dark dungeon, knowing you were a princess. But, in fact, Stella could not be more wrong.

Princess Laura heard the dinner bell and ran down the carved stairs, hoping her mother would not see and reprimand her for being unladylike. It was chicken pie for supper, and Laura was feeling very hungry after a long day.

She strode into the dining room and collapsed on a chair. The dining room was by far the most immaculate and grand room in the mansion, with its old irreplaceable furniture, painted ceiling and chandeliers, but Laura was too tired to notice. Laura's mother, Lady Lillia, was reclining gracefully on an armchair.
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"Laura, your dress is dirty, your hair is untidy, your slippers are frayed, you clomped in," Lady Lillia continued for a while and ended, "Laura, Master Gamlin will never marry you if you are a perfect hoyden, which you are at the moment." Laura Did Not Care. Who wanted to marry anyway? At that moment Gamlin himself swept in, a tall hard man, with eyes completely black, no white at all, black hair, a long, straight nose, a long black cloak and a black suit and staff. "Ah, my pretty little Laura. And my lovely Lillia. Now we shall dine." he said. They all sat down and a horde of servants began to bring in the food. While this feasting was going on, and Stella was dreaming of storybook-like ways to save a poor princess, Berry was thinking of very UN-storybook ways to bust out the bludgers, pardon my French. This was his newest plan. "Alright. We get in, we knock everyone out with these handy gadgets called hammers except Gamlin, who we kill with this machine gun I got outta nowhere." "Um... Berry, how did you get a gun licence if you're only twelve?"

"A, I'm thirteen and B, what's a gun
licences?"

While Stella gaped at Berry, the King of Naughtiness himself was concentrating on cleaning his Utensil of Doom.

"Berry," said Stella weakly. "Stop. We can't, I repeat, can't shoot anyone or knock anyone out. It's NOT HAPPENING. I am the responsible adult and I'm not letting you or myself harm anyone."

Berry groaned. "Guess it's back to square one then."

A pattern soon popped up. Berry would have a stupid and often violent idea, Stella would veto it, and they'd start again. Not to say that Stella wasn't planning herself. She was straining her brain, trying to use every last bit of her brainpower, to figure out how to get the Princess and her family out. But no one had come up with a good idea. At least not good enough for this complicated manoeuvre. Finally Stella came up with something.

"It's not quite a grade-a plan, but it'll have to do." said Berry grimly.

They started to operate this "not quite a grade-a plan". Stella prepared the bridle, while Berry went to work on conjuring up a stallion (Berry seemed to have the ability..."
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They started to operate this "not quite a grade-a plan". Stella prepared the bridle, while Berry went to work on conjuring up a stallion (Berry seemed to have the ability to manifest things from nowhere by thinking about them, but it seemed to take up a lot of energy so Berry didn't do it very often). As they finished their tasks they farewelled each other and went off to their positions. Stella's position was behind the blackberry bushes (Stella was glad that Berry could manifest some anti-thorn clothing) and that was just under the dining room, where Princess Laura, her mother and Gamlin were currently finishing off their dessert. Berry had instructed her to peer in and give the signal when Gamlin had drunk his fourth glass of wine.

Berry had told her she would know when this had happened because Gamlin's face would start to go rather purple. Berry found this quite funny, that their enemy was an alcoholic. Stella thought that it made this mission even more dangerous.
As Stella watched the scene she noticed two things, one, Gamlin had almost reached the telltale signs that he was in possession inside his stomach of his fourth glass of wine, and two, Lady Lillia and Princess Laura did not seem in the least to be like prisoners. They were dressed in finery (well, Lady Lillia was—Laura's dress seemed to be rather on the dirty side), Gamlin spoke to them like he wanted to impress them and so did Lady Lillia (Laura seemed bored by the whole thing), and they were eating the same fancy fare as Gamlin.

It was rather a mystery. Reluctantly, Stella whistled four times, the signal to Berry that Gamlin was intoxicated. Now she had to wait and then run like the wind when Berry gave the signal again. She counted ten
seconds under her breath and then heard the sound of clopping hooves. She relaxed. She could hear Berry shouting, "Hey Gamlin! You're the worst evil dude I've ever met! You're positively kind! Prisoners, ha! Morgath would've tortured those poor royals! Come out here and fight a real battle! Come armed or unarmed, I will defeat you any way I choose!"

From her thorny position behind the blackberry bushes she could hear Gamlin flinging open the grand front door and bellowing, "Who are you, you hooligan! How dare you insult me, me, Gamlin the Malevolent!" Evidently, Lady Lillia and her daughter were still inside. Good. Everything going according to plan. When Berry gave the signal Stella ran inside and began to get her bearings. She was standing in a large hall, everything made out of black marble. There was some furniture in this large place, tables and chairs made out of black marble(probably not very comfortable) and shadows casting eerie gloom on everything. There were also many doors leading off from the hall. Not one of them was open, so Gamlin must have slammed the door shut behind him. Stella at first found this odd, but then dismissed it as pure rage.
Princess Laura looked at her mother, and nodded. Lady Lillia nodded back. She then made hand motions of a person running and escaping. Us, she mouthed.

Princess Laura nodded again. They were reviewing the plan. The plan was: the unfamiliar girl comes in, they tackle her, remove her clothing, and Laura goes out. Lillia sneaks out the window and shimmies down the drainpipe to safety. Laura meets her at the royal carriage, preserved in the barn on the property. The reason Laura wasn't taking the window exit was partly because she WAS the crown princess of Misty Hollow and partly because unlike Lillia, she didn't possess the skill of shimmying down drainpipes.

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While Laura and Lillia were reviewing their plan, Stella had a plan of her own. Because oh no, Stella Morris was NOT going to rush headfirst into some room where some possibly devious prisoners possibly had their own plan. No, Stella was going to Take It Easy. She was thinking something along the lines of, creep in, get the Princess and whoever else, and get out of there. It was gonna be mostly improvisation. Not the way that Stella liked it. She liked careful, precise plans.

Ah well.

Stella readied herself. She crept inside... And was pounced on! Kicking and screaming, a sack was thrown over her head, classic movie-kidnapping style. The world had gone completely black. As she struggled, weird thoughts ran through her head, like Wow, a musical toilet brush, always wanted one of those, and Hey Berry, wanna go chew some gum?, and Oh dear, I forgot to put fresh carrots in Charlie's kennel. Stella had no idea why these thoughts were going through her head. Maybe it was an early midlife crisis, or a late midteen one. OK guys, imagine you're hearing that exaggerated tyre screech thing they use in action movies and TV shows.
Yeah right, said another part, get a grip, girl. As she struggled inside the sack, thoughts of midlife crises no longer running through her head, she punched in a particular spot and heard the satisfying sound of a sack ripping open. Yes, almost there Stel, she said to herself. She repeatedly put pressure on that particular spot, until she heard a huge, immensely satisfying sound of a sack COMPLETELY ripping open. She could now see daylight and hear the sounds of a window being forced open and someone violently swearing. Feisty, she thought. And weird, if that's the Princess or someone. She blinked sleepily a few times and pulled the sack completely off her head. She was slightly shocked by what she saw. The first thing she noticed was a pair of sparkly magenta platform heels. Next thing she noticed, when she looked past the heels, was a middle-aged or so lady in a floaty azure ballgown climbing out of the window. She was probably the swearer. She looked up and immediately regretted it. All she saw was darkness, and faintly in the gloom a pair of rather large knickers with Gamlin's crest on them.
When she had recovered enough from the horrible sight, she carefully looked up again, this time regretting it perhaps more than last time. She saw, a large, pretty when happy face that was growling at her ferociously. This face belonged to Princess Laura, who then saw that Stella had not flinched and gave up, sitting down and sighing. "Why, why, do the weak ones never get sent here?! And that's not a compliment", Laura said, glowering at Stella. Stella thought it rather would be, to someone else. "Hello, Princess Laura, allow me to present myself to you." said Stella, sweeping into a magnificent bow. "I am Stella, wordsmith, filmer and happy to be in your service, Your Highness."

*Hope I didn't overdo it,* thought Stella. *Probably did.*
Laura's face changed again. It now had a stony expression. "Look, 'Stella', you're not going to get to me by flattery. What are you trying to do exactly?"

"Well..." answered Stella, "We were trying to rescue you and get you back to Misty Hollow and get the descendants of the original people back there. We thought you were prisoners and were being treated badly. We were probably wrong, but I don't know enough about the situation."

"Who's we?" asked Laura.

"Well, my friend Berry and I."

"No one else?"

"Well, duh. Anyway, we need to get out of here, cos sooner or later Gamlin's going to come back in here."

"Will he, eh?" said a smooth, sinister voice. Stella turned around. Classic. The bad guy standing behind her, having just used a 'oooh, who's voice is that' thingomobobby. The worst thing was, apart from the fact that Gamlin was holding Berry by the scruff of his neck (Berry was staring dreamily from this uncomfortable position at Princess Laura) was that Stella had been sucked in, played a trick on. It was the first time this had ever happened to Stella and she didn't like it.
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She quickly summed up the situation. In the middle of the room there was Stella. Next to her, on the right, was Laura. Behind Laura, was Lady Lillia. On Stella's left was Gamlin. In Gamlin's arms, Berry. 3 vs 2 or probably 1, as Berry was lovesick. What had originally been the plan was that Berry would distract Gamlin with a replica of Gamlin's favourite horse and Stella sneaks in and gets the royals. Oh dear, what a BAD plan that had been.

TO BE CONTINUED...