

Hidden in the Moss

by Terri Mullholland

‘You wouldn’t know there’s a wall hidden under all this, would you?’ said Sophie, as she pulled the brambles and dead branches up with her gloved hands.

Sophie’s eyes were shining, and her cheeks were flushed pink in the cold air. She had swapped her court shoes for a pair of wellington boots, green, like proper country folk, and put an old overcoat over her black dress, but she still looked too well-dressed for gardening.

It was the first place she had wanted to go after the funeral. She led John, who was also still in his black suit and dress shoes, down to the bottom of the garden, over the stream, and through the woods until they reached a small clearing.

All the trees around them were winter-bare, and the woodland was silent.

In the centre of the clearing, surrounding the hidden wall that Sophie was busy uncovering with her hands, was a perfect circle of wild mushrooms.

‘A fairy ring,’ whispered Sophie. ‘Hold my hand.’ And she had grasped his hand as they stepped into the circle.

‘This is where I used to come as a child to think and dream. I called it The Quietest Place on Earth.’ She laughed, embarrassed. ‘I used to sit on a wall here, all that remained of an old cottage that fell to ruins long ago. The wall was covered in a thick blanket of moss and protected by the ring of mushrooms.’

John reached down to help her clear the wall. It was so good to see the light in her eyes, to see the transformation of the woman who had grown old before her time caring for her sick father. Her mother had died when Sophie was a little girl, and her father had been everything to Sophie. She had gone without food and sleep to make her father’s last days as comfortable as possible,

staying up, night after night, watching him and reading him stories. Her father had always loved stories.

Now, it was as if the woodland had enchanted her, erasing the lines of stress and the dark bruised skin of sleepless nights. She looked so young.

Together they pulled off most of the brambles, throwing them outside the ring, and there it was, a low, moss-covered wall, the perfect height for a child. The moss was the brightest green he had ever seen. He reached out his hand and stroked it. It was thick and lush, springing up to his touch like velvet.

Sophie went down on her hands and knees, scrabbling around over the brickwork.

‘Here, look!’ she cried. She showed John a small hole, near the base of the wall, and above it, in white paint and a childish hand, her name: *Sophie*.

‘It’s my mailbox, where I leave messages for the fairies and where they leave things for me in return.’

‘What kind of things do they leave you?’ asked John with a smile.

‘Once they left me a dead spider, that wasn’t so nice! But usually they leave me little trinkets – a blue glass marble, a seed pearl, an amber bead. And, this ring.’ She showed him a thin gold band with a green stone that she wore on her little finger.

John looked shocked. ‘Really? The fairies left you that?’

Sophie laughed. ‘I like to think so. But I guessed, in the end, it must have been my father. I told him about my secret mailbox; I made it shortly after my mother died. It was a way for the two of us to connect, for him to try and make us both happy.’

She twisted the ring on her finger. ‘My father always warned me to take it off every night before bed because my fingers would grow as I got older, and one day it would become stuck. That happened with his wedding ring because he never took it off.’

‘When did you last use the mailbox?’ asked John.

‘Oh, not for years. I never came back here after I moved out. Apart from once when I came back from university. The wall had long become overgrown then. I don’t remember if you could even see it. The fairy ring was still here though.’

She had taken off her gloves and was reaching into the hole as she was speaking.

‘Be careful doing that!’ said John. ‘It’s been overgrown so long you don’t know what might be living in there now. It might not be a dead spider this time; it might bite.’

She pulled out something; it looked just like a small cushion of moss, perfectly round.

‘They’ve left you some moss,’ smiled John.

But she didn’t smile back; she was too busy digging into the moss with her fingernails, pulling it apart. In the centre of the ball of moss was a gold ring. Much bigger and thicker than the one she was wearing, large enough to go loosely on her thumb. She held it up to the light. John could see an engraving on the inside, although he couldn’t read it.

‘What does it say?’ he asked.

‘It’s dad’s wedding ring. The one we just buried with him. The fairies thought I should have it now.’