

# —PHAEDRA’S BABY

by Matthew Fryer

“Dad?”

Jason Warner stopped walking and squinted into the twilight beneath the trees. The voice was a strained whisper, strangely devoid of gender.

He peered into the gloom, hearing only his breathing and the gurgle of the weed-choked stream that wound through the woods.

“Dad?”

There it was again, louder. It had come from where the stream disappeared beneath a bank.

Jason shivered. It was cold, getting late and he should really be heading back home, but curiosity had snared him. He picked through the foliage and stepped down to the edge of the stream, trepidation stroking his spine. He tried to tell himself it was probably just some kids messing around, but didn’t really believe that.

He loved the solitude of this wood—the shadows, the lonely darkness—and today he had wandered further than ever before. Right now, he needed to be alone.

Jason and his expectant girlfriend Lisa had just had an enormous row.

Although her becoming pregnant was an accident, she had been pleased. A child was the one thing she wanted from life, but Jason thought that they were far too young. Their relationship hadn’t been going well lately, and as she had claimed to be using contraception, he had accused her of lying and using him. They had argued furiously before he stormed out, heading straight for the woods to clear his head. She had sent a message to his cellphone of one single word.

*Baby.*

The insult had stung. Not only was it an insult to his maturity, it was a reminder that he had walked away from his own unborn child.

With this on his mind, he had followed the stream deeper into the woodland knowing that he could always use it to retrace his steps. But the peace of this forsaken place had been broken.

Trying not to lose his footing in the mud that sucked at his feet, he peered beneath the foliage of the bank and saw that the stream vanished through a metal grill. They looked like prison bars, congealed with algae in the eternal shade.

“Dad?” the cracked voice came again, and Jason started. It had come from behind the grill.

Jason crept forward along the edge of the water, his heart quickening.

He reached out, brushing fronds to one side, peering into the dark. It smelled of

## MATTHEW FRYER

rotting vegetation and dead meat. Maybe there were rats?

The gurgle of the water became sinister, the evening cold creeping through his clothes. Suddenly, he didn't feel safe.

*Come on, he told himself. You're eighteen years old, not eight. Pull yourself together.*

A face appeared in the darkness behind the grill.

"Shit!" He jumped, scrambling back into the watery light.

Who the hell was down there? Maybe it was a kid, lost and alone, or perhaps he had found the home of some drunken vagrant.

When his heart had calmed, Jason crouched again and moved towards the grill, peering into the blackness. The face had gone.

"Hello?" he ventured and realized that his voice was shaking. The dull shadows shifted and the face slowly reappeared.

It was female. She looked feral, with thick locks of blonde hair matted together in dreadlocks. She was painfully thin and looked sick, a deep-rooted sickness that took years of neglect to develop. Her eyes glittered with dangerous suspicion, then seemed to mellow with disappointment.

"You're not my dad," she said. Her voice was hoarse, grating in an inflamed throat.

"No, I'm not," Jason managed to whisper. "What are you doing down there?"

"Waiting for my dad. He said if I was quiet he'd let me out."

Jason shivered hard. He didn't like this one bit. She came closer to the bars, and he saw dark smudges beneath her eyes, the shadows of insomnia and madness. Then he saw the hollow of her skinny throat, her sunken chest, limp breasts that were wasted and dry. The girl was naked. Something was very wrong here.

"Where's your dad gone?"

"I don't know. But he'll come back. He'll come back when I learn how to behave."

The girl reached up and clasped a bar with one fist. Her fingernails were jagged, sore with infected wounds. Her skin looked almost translucent, stretched over her scrawny frame like old latex.

"How long have you been there?" he asked.

She shrugged.

"How old are you?"

She could be anything from thirteen to thirty.

"Ten." the girl replied.

Jason blinked. She seemed older than that. Though emaciated, her breasts were developed and a matted nest of hair grew between her spindly legs. Then he saw that she had something in her hand. It was the body of a rat, gnawed to the bone, scarlet flesh glistening through the torn fur. Jason's throat closed.

"What's your name?" he whispered.

"Phaedra."

Jason stalled on the precipice of horrific enlightenment.

*No, it couldn't be.*

Jason had gone to primary school with a girl called Phaedra Crowe. His memory of her was vague, little more than an image of blonde hair and a pretty smile. Jason was ten the last time he had seen her.