

POLLY HALL



**THE  
TAXIDERMIST'S  
LOVER**

A modern Gothic tale of a woman obsessed with her lover's taxidermy creatures and haunted by her past.

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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*F*OR MUM & DAD







YOU ARE A WONDERFUL, complex, *fucked-up* mess,” you once said to me. Sometimes when you passed these judgements I would flinch, as if the words were darts or sharp tools piercing my skin. That old saying—sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me—does not make sense. Words can be the most damaging of all things; they have life, power, intensity. Just as this place, our home, shapes us into new beings over time.

The world has frozen around us with icy precision. A closing in and sealing off, like a scar healing shut over an abscess. It is a process occurring at a rate immeasurable to the human eye. This peat-packed land of water, leat and marsh has been isolated and stilled. Everything waits.

But out of that stillness comes a word, born from circumstance. The word? Unfurling. For nothing is truly still, is it? Even ice contracts and expands, creaks and crystallizes. It has a voice of its own, speaks in eerie groans like the split trunk of an old willow in the wind. It lives and breathes. It transforms.

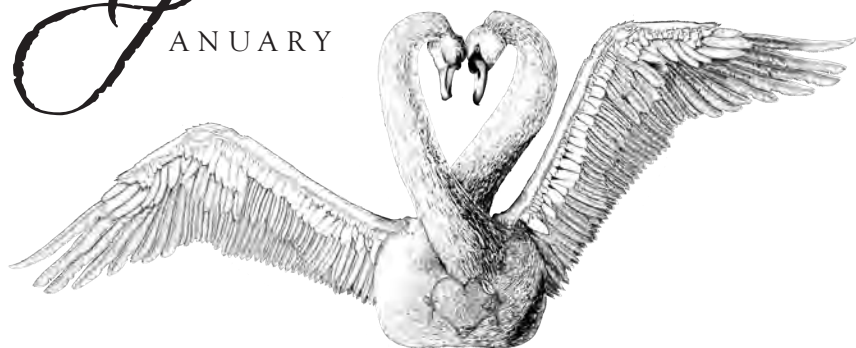
The roads are compacted like a skating rink, and the biting wind entraps breath as fine particles, each molecule of heat visible as it cools. Bodies become tense. Cruel black ice shines with no sign of thaw. Condensation makes window

*panes translucent, weeps in solemn drips as if yearning for change. The light here is movable; it shifts like the surface of water. Candlelight moves, and I want to touch the flames.*

*I want to send a message to the starlings for them to draw in the sky for you. Can you see? One tells another, then another, then another, a whispered message from wing tip to wing tip. They rise up from where they sleep in the reed beds to the misty sky to create an aerial display. Murmurations over this Summerland rustle like ash falling slowly onto china dishes. I throw my will around their swarming mass as if they were sardines in a frenzied run across a faraway ocean. I make them turn and separate into darkened shapes—a heron diving; a wave crashing; confetti lifting to form the shape of a bride; a heart; a pine tree; and the letters one after another to spell, I - L - O - V - E - Y - O - U.*



JANUARY



Do you remember January as I do? I see it as the death of one of many beginnings, or could it have been the beginning of the end? Depends how you look at it. I know that things were never quite the same after you started mixing up the species.

“You need to specialize,” I said, “find a niche—I hear cased mammals are making a comeback. Or how about mystical menageries?”

You looked at me, your moustache twitching slightly with amusement.

“A crabbit or a stox?” I offered.

“What?” you huffed.

“A crabbit is a crow crossed with a rabbit.”

I could see you mulling over the combinations in your head, picturing the sleek iridescence of the crow’s breast feathers set against the smooth down of an American Albino rabbit.

“And a stox,” you guessed, “is a stoat crossed with a fox?”

“No. A stork actually.” I imagined the body of a red fox, its flame-orange fur contrasted with the angelic white of a stork’s wingspan; a flying, majestic vixen.

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“A stork—yes a stork!” The cogs were set in motion. That was when I knew you would not return to the pampered pooches cradling their favorite toy on their favorite cushion, their cute little necks twisted in a final gesture of compliance. Or the coarse hair of a stag, tongue lolling in shock from the gunshot that sent it on its final rut to the afterlife.

There was a woman who came to you once with a bald Pomeranian. It had been petted so much after its initial taxidermy that the fur on its head had worn thin. It looked like a tonsured monk from the Middle Ages. Do you remember, you said you were in tune with the ancient Egyptians and that mummification was an art? Yet your art was more powerful, as the creature was exposed to air when you’d finished it, sometimes handled.

I had not always been interested in dead things. But they seemed to be interested in me, even from an early age.

Growing up among the wetlands of Somerset, I had plenty of opportunity to mix with the wildlife, dead or alive. It became a part of my life, a part of me. The ground was black and wet; it smelt of woeful solitude. As a child I’d collect the bones of animals I found on the compost heap and line them up on my bedroom shelf alongside plastic toys, or poke a carcass with a stick to test if life could be reanimated by my interference.

When we were nine, Rhett found a bloated badger puffed up like a balloon in the field at the back of our parents’ house, so using a kitchen knife I set about dissecting it. I wanted its coat for a hat. Imagine the badger’s head sitting upon my own like a shamanic warrior. As I sliced down its belly (a movement I’d witnessed on a TV crime drama) I pierced the viscera and the putrid gases puffed out. A river of maggots escaped from the grey snake of its intestines onto the grass. Rhett was all for leaving it to rot but, undeterred, I thought if I could flay enough of it successfully, I would have my hat and parts of the badger would live on instead of decaying by the ditch.

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But this was a child's fantasy. I had not even learned to spell the word taxidermy then. Of course, I had seen stuffed animals at the museum, or peering out from the walls of old stately homes we had visited in the school holidays. But the act of preserving was not one I had been taught at such a tender age. So, I made it up, much to my mother's disgust, and a few days later the rotting flesh from the inside of the badger's skin putrefied and infused the house with the scent of sweet decay.

I'll never forget her face as she looked at the jagged pelt, rough edged, where my knife had cut it away from the carcass, random feathers sewn crudely to the rim. She tried to hide her horror with a look of vague disappointment. Her little girl did not play with dollies like normal little girls; her little girl cut up dead animals and collected their parts to display as trophies! Even though all the remains were removed from the house, I still felt that badger near me. He lumbered toward me as I slept, then nosed about my room in the dark.

I learned that badgers preferred the dark. They showed their true nature to me in ways you cannot imagine. They would tramp through my head, uprooting my thoughts with their powerful heads and stocky bodies. These were earth dwellers, underground burrowers. They were nocturnal and peaceful, unless provoked.

My mother's disapproval did not put me off interfering with nature. Even in my dreams I would steal the wings from birds and try to fly, or grow the lithe legs of a hare so I could race across a moonlit field. Mostly my dreams consisted of sinking into the wet-black below my feet, right up to my neck, and I'd wake just before my head was covered in darkness.

But always, day or night, I'd hear them, those creatures that had starved or frozen to death or been poisoned or killed or died of natural causes. I heard them like a sort of electrical static that got louder, especially if the hunt was galloping across the fields or if the pheasants were flushed up to the sky in a bountiful bouquet. Each creature had their own unique

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signature; they all seemed to know their place in the scheme of things. I longed for that certainty. That was how I became sure that when feathers were ruffled, dead did not always mean dead.



January was the time you religiously took to your workshop, almost every day, with a renewed purpose—to create something so unusual it would be talked about in circles way past your final breath.

It was your devotion to the work that drew me closer to you, the preparation spelled out with lines of jars and tools; it was scientific, medical, and precise, not like my childhood efforts of wild abandon with blunt cutlery. Each of the stages you went through would lead to a final perfect representation of what once lived. I admired you as I would admire any artist, although your medium was grotesque. It stank. You messed with nature.

I think that's what got to us in the end. You were dealing with life, not death. Each specimen had to be renewed, like Jesus molding new life into Lazarus; you used your hands to replicate the living. Everlasting life. Even then, I witnessed the madness creep up on us and slip under our skin.



That long month. Somerset was groaning and moaning under an oppressive grey sky and endless dark nights. After the Christmas lights had been packed away, the decorations stowed in the loft for another year among the spiders and dust, we got back into the daily pattern of our lives, a pattern I had fallen into so effortlessly in those few months since we met. For us, it was a great month for resolution with all those dark hours, thinking about what to do when the sun finally appeared to warm our skin once more. We were thinking about our future—planning, dreaming.

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"I'm tired of stags," you said, as we ate venison for the fourth night in a row. It was the week after New Year. We stayed at home for that too, munching our way through pretzels and marzipan-laced stollen and a freezer full of meat. My stomach felt heavy from all the rich food I'd consumed. It was just as well I had the sort of metabolism where I never seemed to put on weight no matter how much I ate. Annoyed the hell out of you. Chunky Pepper was what they called you, wasn't it? Your childhood nickname. But I always thought we were a perfect match—you with your steady hands, me with the flighty grace of a starling. You could look at me as if seeing through my clothes, penetrating my core. I had never softened in the sights of any man before you. I usually moved too fast, letting those leering fools snap at my ankles like nasty dogs. Nothing pleased me like your strong hands on my body. Your hands, even your unkempt beard and severed finger, seemed perfect to me. You knew exactly where to touch me; your fingers palpated my skin and smoothed back the faint lines and dimples with a pressure you had mastered through your work.

You had already begun to diversify into more non-domestic animals: chinchillas; iguanas; a snow leopard that had belonged to an eccentric octogenarian; even a celebrated mirror carp that had allegedly lived for over thirty years in a local fishing lake. The fishermen had affectionately named it "Wonky Fin." It took pride of place in the clubhouse, gazing dry-eyed from a glass cabinet at the lake where it had once swum. I had watched you preserve it and paint the varnish on the scales to make it appear water-bound once more. But it cried. I never told you that. That cold fish cried at the injustice of being born again into a dry body, instead of swimming away to the great lakes in the sky.

"The eyes," you said, "they never quite show what was once inside." You would place the polished nuggets of glass onto the mount last of all, preferring the naked frame of each animal blind until you had finished sculpting and stitching the skin over layers of structure, blow-drying

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the fur, or primping the feathers, sometimes fixing with hair lacquer. “*Welcome to my boudoir!*” I could hear your throaty chuckle echo around the workshop when I delivered cups of coffee.

I loved your darkness. The way you clipped and snipped, slicing the fascia and sinews, while our dogs sometimes looked on with an expression of awe and fear. It smelt like the depths of a cave in your workshop, and the dense metallic odor of organic matter would infuse your clothes and hair.

When we made love, I’d somehow taste the essence of the creatures you’d been handling—the quick, acrid bite of a fox, the feathery scratch of an owl, the smooth perfume of someone’s beloved pet cat. At mealtimes I watched you dissect the food on your plate, as if delaying the sensation of taste. You’d carefully chew in silence, mulling over the constituent parts, preferring your meat without seasoning, plain and rare. “I like my meat to taste of meat,” you told me.



Once there was a man who kept goats in his backyard. He didn’t name the goats; they weren’t pets after all. He ate every part of them: the legs, liver, kidneys, blood, even the fat encompassing the intestines. He just clawed it off with his bony fingers and chewed it up, raw. I fantasized about us doing this. We could enact a sacrifice to the gods, drink the blood, dance naked under the moonlight. There was something honorable in rearing and dispatching your own meal.



The landscape had only changed a little since my childhood. More intensive farming methods, more houses, and more sophisticated drainage continued to pump the water off the land and into the rivers, but the contours and ridges looked much the same.

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Our county, just a car drive from Stonehenge, was famous for being mystical Avalon. We were in the middle of the hinterland, the Somerset Levels, the Moor, Land of Apples, Land of the Dead. The marshes reclaimed from the sea still haunted the place with watery whispers from withy beds, and mist rose up from the rhynes like smoke from a mariner's pipe. Here we chose to live among the vernacular of widgeon and teal; the loose earth low and slaked with moisture. We lived on borrowed ground, peat shifting beneath us, as if the bodies of buried beasts wanted to reform their ancient bones from the earth itself and resurface to taste the air with moistened tongues.

Even in the cold density of January we sensed the shift of seasons. The flight of lapwing and starling reminded us of impermanence. Their wings were flashes of light in the grey mornings as they rose like an idea suddenly surfacing.

So, January became not so much of a drag as an exploration along an unmapped road. And where you went, I would follow, an enraptured devotee of your world of grisly body parts—heads, legs, claws, beaks, feathers, scales, all catalogued and preserved then reinvested into new imagined creatures. You inspired me to use my skills as an artist, so I started sketching out ideas for you; I had studied art but was more accustomed to drawing portraits and bowls of fruit, the things I could study with my own eyes, not these bizarre monstrosities that bombarded me at night in my dreams, as if mislaid blueprints of evolution were exhumed after millions of years. I had daydreamed about becoming famous like Frida Kahlo but mostly I ended up in jobs that didn't fulfil me; waitressing, bartending, packing crisps in a factory. I was working at a call center for an insurance company when we met. I never dreamt I'd find my life filled up by another person.



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We started with the crabbit, my original idea, a crow's head attached to a rabbit's body adorned with the bird's black wings. It now sits on our mantelpiece as a reminder of those early, naïve days. I felt it watch us, trying to make sense of its own identity. Am I crow? Or am I rabbit? Its confusion was obvious to me, as if fur and feather, claw and paw, were never meant to be conjoined.



To the south of our house, your workshop nestled at the bottom of the garden. The soft glow of an electric bulb denoted your presence, a beacon, but also a “No Entry” sign for any unwelcome interference. The lit-up interior said to me, “I’m working in *my* world among *my* things—give me space.” I understood your need for solitude in your cave-like retreat, a place away from our shared home; it was yours alone. Not ours. What I’m trying to say is: I know how you worked. Having worked in lively places where people talked all day, every day, I found this quiet world with you a dreamy paradise.

We both were seeking solitude after all the layers of affection were stripped back, much like the way you peeled back an animal's skin with precision, flaying the tough sinews and fascia with sharp tools, turning it inside out, revealing, exposing it and ultimately becoming intimate with its form. Its unique essence was mastered by your hands. This couldn't be shared—it was personal. That is why I thought you'd understand my own needs. My solitude was not sought in the cool confines of a workshop but in the expanse of another place—the dark recesses of my imagination.



I suggested a website for your business, but you looked at me as if I were suggesting you sell your soul to the devil. *That* seemed unnatural to you. Too removed perhaps?



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"Who would see it?" you asked.

"Everyone."

"Everyone who knows me?"

"Yes—well, everyone who uses the internet and searches for you. Or for taxidermy."

"What—strangers too?"

"Yes—everyone!"

"What's the point of, say, people in China seeing it—"

"The point is . . ." but by this stage in our discussion you could probably sense my exasperation. "It's what people do! It's how people communicate!"

"Well, I don't."

"No. I know!"

So, we left it at that, just an understanding that there was no point in persuading you of its efficacy, especially as I was not even convincing myself. Selfishly I wanted to protect you from the rest of the world and all its lies, deceit snarled up in layers of data clogging up pages and pages of computer screens, forever there, eternal but dirtied, unverified, and open to abuse. Perhaps the internet was a form of afterlife preserved in a graveyard of dumped information. Perhaps you were right. Perhaps I was my own worst enemy.

Besides, if you had spent less time working on those creatures, you would perhaps have discovered that my world was coming undone. I felt turned inside-out like the skin of a dead rabbit, waiting to be filled, stuffed fresh and preserved, put on display and admired—*how life-like, don't the eyes follow you about the room?*—those that are new to the craft always look at the glass eyes first, just to check that the specimen is really dead. Or maybe to see if any remaining life clings on.

What I'm trying to tell you is that January was about the time when I found him. He seemed to appear at the top of all the search engines when I typed in: best taxidermist in the world.

*Felix De Souza*—a name that would become etched on our psyches, a name that signified doom. But being the petulant Scarlett that I was, how could I resist? And what Scarlett wanted, Scarlett got. From that moment I became consumed by his whereabouts, thinking that you too could achieve such international acclaim. His youth was an asset but no match for your experience. Knowing he existed gnawed away at my brain like one of those parasites that eats you from the inside.



Once a year, in Somerset, a custom called wassailing is carried out to encourage a bountiful apple harvest for the coming season. A gun is fired to scare away malevolent spirits and a wassail queen soaks bread in cider as an offering to the apple gods and goddesses. I knew about it before I met you, of course, but many didn't if they were not from the rural areas.

This was my first wassailing ceremony. We were wrapped up in thick coats and woolen scarves. In fact, the only piece of skin showing was the strip across my eyes below my hat and above my scarf-covered mouth.

You held my hands encased in padded mittens—I felt upholstered together and sweaty underneath all my layers, waiting by the door for you to fetch your gun. But I knew it would be cold in the apple orchard at Penny's place. At least it wasn't raining that night.

"Do we really have to go?" You knew Penny made me feel uncomfortable, as if she had some kind of ownership of you.

"I'm the one firing the gun this year. Come on, you'll enjoy it once you get there. There's cider! And a hog roast!" You tried to tickle me under my arms, but I had so many layers of clothes it just felt like mild pummeling.

I couldn't believe how many people were there. It was a beautiful night; the clouds had been blown away and a cold serenity seemed to open up the sky like a velvet sheet dusted with glitter. My neck hurt from

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looking at the stars, searching for a shooting one. I was about to ask you if you'd ever wished upon a star, but we were interrupted.

"Henry darling." Wafts of sickly perfume met my nostrils before she appeared, pushing through a group of people exhaling clouds over plastic cups of mulled cider. Her face was painted with ivy leaves that spiraled up her cheeks to the corners of her eyes and down her neck, as if a reptile were trying to gain access to her wrinkled cleavage.

"Penny." You nodded a clipped greeting and stood by my side to face her. This reassured me, to know where your loyalties lay. I knew she was itching to touch you as she edged closer. Her sagging bosom heaved over the neck of her dress as if something in her chest were trying to break free.

"Can I have a word about the proceedings?" She whispered like it was some kind of conspiracy between you two. You were only to play a small part, firing your gun into the air. I had watched you replace the lead shot with corn for safety, an old trick of yours you'd learned from your father.

"It will still knock you down," you told me sternly, "but you'd survive." I had no doubt you would not hesitate to use it for protection. A small shudder ran through my bones.

The wassailing ceremony began and Penny, crowned with a wreath of dark green leaves, led the parade to one of the apple trees in her orchard that had been decorated in twinkly, solar-powered lights. She looked severely underdressed for the weather but insisted on wearing a long silk gown and a velvet cape. Then, as self-appointed Wassail Queen, she dipped a hunk of toast into a jug of mulled cider, placed it carefully on one of the branches and suggestively sucked her fingers while looking at you. I felt like a voyeur.

"She's a bit serious, isn't she?" I whispered to you when she poured the rest of the cider around the base of the tree.

You shushed me, and I felt a pang of jealousy. I wondered if you had in the past shared more with her than a cup of cider in a freezing-

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cold field. I took a swig and let the warm spiced liquid sink down to my stomach. It shouldn't have mattered to me, but she'd known you for longer than I had. It wasn't even that. You seemed to have this common acceptance of each other. Perhaps you loved her?

Penny signaled to you with a nod and you fired your gun to the sky to ward off the evil spirits. Even though I was expecting it to be loud, the shot still made me jump. I saw her snigger and scowled in her direction, but she was too busy rousing the crowd into a wassail song.

*Old apple tree we wassail thee  
And hoping thou will bear  
For the Lord doth know where we shall be  
'Til apples come another year.  
For to bear well and to bloom well  
So merry let us be  
Let every man take off his hat  
And shout to the old apple tree.  
Old apple tree we wassail thee  
And hoping thou will bear  
Hat fulls, cap fulls, three bushel bag fulls  
And a little heap under the stairs*

You nuzzled your beard into my neck and whispered, "Time for bed, Miss Scarlett." Penny may have had you wrapped round her little finger, but I had you every night. As I looked again toward the branches of the trees and up above to the big indigo sky, I felt your heat reach me beneath my clothes and the effects of the cider creeping up my legs. How did I get so drunk?



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The day after that night I felt invigorated. No hangover, surprisingly. We had probably burnt it off in bed. We had stripped off and launched naked under the covers as soon as we arrived home. The patchwork of warmth from your hot hands on my cold skin, and your tongue still sticky with cider, made me sink into a weighty sleep.

In my dreams you were chasing me round and round an apple tree, and Penny was laughing, hands on her hips taunting me with a bust that was more fitting on a twenty-year old. We were all naked. The crabbit was hopping and flapping its wings beneath the tree and Felix was spraying warm cider from a champagne magnum over my head. I woke to find you kneeling upright on the bed beside my face, pumping a heavy erection. As I refocused my eyes, a globule landed on my cheek.

"I didn't want to wake you." You were out of breath from your exertions and sat back on your haunches gazing at me. The covers were pulled down below my waist and my naked body felt chilled. I sleepily reached for my face, the stickiness already sliding down toward the pillow.

"Here let me . . ." you wiped a tissue across my cheek, tossed it to the floor, then pushed your tongue into my mouth. As you slid down next to me, I could still feel your dampness fading against my thigh. You leaned over to kiss me again, but I felt a pang of anger. Even though we had shared every inch of ourselves the night before, this seemed like an intrusion into my dreams, an infiltration of my mind. I turned my head away, trying to catch glimpses of Felix from my dream, but you continued to nibble at my ear.

"You looked so sexy, so still." *The crabbit hopping and flapping.*

"I was sleeping." *Felix, perfect in every way, splashing champagne over me.*

"Did you enjoy it last night?" you continued kissing my neck, my weakness, sending shivers through me.

"My first wassail," I said.

"A wassail virgin!" *Hat fulls, cap fulls, three bushel bags full!*

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My fixation on others was just my way of proving how much I loved you. I hope you believe me. But the noises in my head grew louder. The crabbit was angry. *Am I crow or am I rabbit?* It squawked and squealed with all its might. I thought my head might explode.

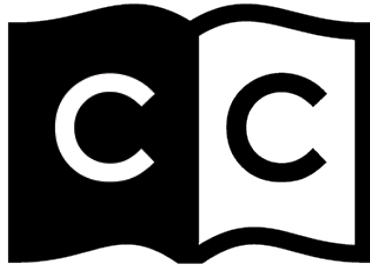


When you went down to your workshop, I fetched my laptop and clicked straight onto the internet. *Felix De Souza*. His website said he had trained as a sculptor at the Royal Academy before providing blue chip art to galleries and private collectors. It certainly looked expensive.

The magnificent coiled silkiness of a boa constrictor with wings mounted on a granite plinth, its mouth wide in attack; some sort of rodent with chicken's feet and a snake as a tail. As I flicked through his portfolio, I felt a surge of jealousy; I wanted you to show off your work like that. Whenever I looked at your creations, I felt as if they were still alive, or an essence of them had been carried through the veil of death and lived on. Your crabbit signified such an important breakthrough; it really worked. But Felix's site showed even more bizarre combinations. He seemed to mix up wild and domestic species to create almost alien-looking creatures. I know it went against all your training, but I also knew you could do it.

We all do things we don't want to, and I thought participating in an exhibition would be perfect in the spring, something to work toward with healthy competition. That was why I suggested it to you. Partly because I thought you deserved it. Partly because I thought it would be a way to expunge my stupid fascination with Felix, by meeting him in the flesh and setting him against you, as if comparison would cure me of my obsession with things that weren't mine to possess. Should I have stopped meddling and accepted things as they were? Nothing and nobody would ever come between us.





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# WHEN DEAD DOES NOT ALWAYS MEAN DEAD



When Scarlett meets taxidermist Henry, a passionate love affair commences. One year later, on Christmas Day, Scarlett recalls the ebb and flow of their intense relationship and tries to unravel her obsession with Henry's taxidermy creatures and the influence of his rival, Felix.

Both enchanted and entrapped by the isolated rural environment on the Somerset moorland she calls home, Scarlett reaches out to her only remaining family, twin brother Rhett, to make sense of the secrets they share. Soon Scarlett realizes that past promises have far reaching consequences. Drenched in the torrential rains of rural South West England and sensual pleasures of the characters, *The Taxidermist's Lover* lures you ever deeper into Scarlett's delightfully eerie world.



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