

AN UNGODLY CHILD



RACHEL GREEN



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ZUMAYA ARCANÉ

2012

AUSTIN TX

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ISBN 9781936144945

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Green, Rachel, 1963-

An ungodly child / Rachel Green.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-936144-94-5 (trade pbk. : alk. paper) -- ISBN 978-1-936144-95-2 (electronic/multiple format) -- ISBN 978-1-936144-99-0 (electronic/epub)

1. Antichrist--Fiction. 2. Brothers--Fiction. I. Title.

PR6107.R439U44 2012

823'.92--dc23

2011049626

FOR DK AND LU AND ALL
THOSE WHO FELL IN LOVE
WITH JASFOUD

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This tale would never have emerged but for the patience of DK and Lu during the long labour, the editing advice of Miranda and the encouragement of Feath and Tam at Musemuggers, who posted the writing prompt that nettled Jafoup the demon. Thanks, folks. I pwned your souls.

**And Lucifer did Fall from Heaven
and landed upon the earth, cursing,
for it hurt his nether regions mightily.**

*Genesis 13:7
Recidivist Edition
Laverstone 1568*

PROLOGUE

The incubus coiled in the semi-darkness of the bedroom. The woman's soft snores encouraged it to be bold enough to coalesce despite the noise from the television in the corner—a reality show where the last twenty-something to survive could win a prize.

He dropped from the air onto the bed, his foetid breath curling like a living creature around the woman's head. His breath was supposed to be a mild anaesthetic, designed to prevent his victim from waking up.

He stared at her face, puzzled. She looked too old to be receptive of his demonic seed, but her body smelled young and ripe for the taking. He shrugged, putting the disparity down to the modern predilection for hormone therapy, and began to pull back the bedclothes. He gave a startled yelp as her eyes flicked open, surprisingly clear and bright and quite able to see him.

“Haven't you heard of foreplay?” She reached to caress the scales over his ears. “It's no fun if you just jump straight in. I hope you brought a condom.” Her hand snaked out and grabbed his wrist, and he yelped. “Or three...”



Sansenoy looked up from the viewer. “Is she allowed to use condoms?”

“She can do as she likes.” Senoy raised his hands and let them drop, shaking his head. “She's already carrying the spawn of the Fallen One. What does it matter if she insists on a rubber?”

“Is she Catholic?” Semangalof ran a whetstone along the edge of his sword, producing a hiss reminiscent of a snake about to strike.

“I doubt it.” Senoy scratched himself and examined his fingernails. “I doubt it very much, given her heritage. Why?”

“I thought we might get her on condom use. Catholics aren’t allowed artificial birth control.” Semangalof returned to the sharpening of his sword.

“Even if she was, it’s not for birth control, is it?” Senoy yawned. “Not if she’s already expecting. It’ll be for the prevention of diseases. That’s quite sensible, if you ask me.”

“We’d have her on that one, then. Disease is part of God’s inef-fable plan. You can’t go around stopping yourself from catching diseases. We worked hard on them.”

“We?” Sansenoy laughed. “Pestilence did. He gets all the interesting jobs.”

“*She*, you mean.” Senoy leaned forward. “She decided she’s tried everything as a man, so she’s swapped genders. Says everything’s better as a woman.”

“Everything?” Sansenoy frowned. “When did he...she do this?”

“During the Renaissance, just before the plague. I’m surprised you didn’t hear about it. She was shackled up with a demon for ages, a young one. What was his name?”

“Jasfoup.” Semangalof held his sword up to the light. “Knocked about with that inventor bloke.”

“What happened to him?”

“He went back downstairs when she dumped him. He got promoted to minor tempter.”

“Doesn’t matter anyway. They’ll all die come the apocalypse.” Semangalof tapped his sword with a toffee hammer, smiling at the clear tone. “I haven’t done any killing for ages.”

“We don’t do badly for work.” Senoy switched off the viewer and sat back in his armchair. “We burned Sodom and Gomorrah to the ground as well as our ongoing task with Lilith.”

“Ha!” Semangalof snorted. “When we catch up with her. I haven’t seen her in years.”

“Wherever she is, she’s not producing children, or we’d know about it.” Sansenoy glared at his brother. “Why did you turn off the viewer?”

“There are some things we just aren’t meant to see.” Senoy shuddered. “One of which is what that woman was doing to the poor incubus.”

“I’m surprised he was allowed to answer her summons.” Semangalof polished a fingerprint off his blade. “If she was carrying my kid she wouldn’t be allowed to shag incubi willy-nilly.”

“That’s not going to happen, is it, Mangy?” Senoy laughed. “You weren’t issued with wedding tackle.”

Semangalof glowered. “Nor were you. The boss had a more important destiny in store for us.”

Sansenoy held up his hand to stop them bickering. “I’ve just thought of something. If she’s up the duff by the Downstairs King, she’s going to give birth to the Antichrist, isn’t she?”

“Nah.” Senoy picked up his book and turned to the page with the dogeared corner. “It stands to reason, doesn’t it? The Antichrist will be diametrically opposed to Big J, won’t he?”

“Of course.” Sansenoy nodded. “Sired by Lucifer, and born of a woman who’s had more sex than hot dinners, on the other side of the world.”

Semangalof frowned. “This woman fits all the criteria.”

“She does, yes.” Senoy looked over the top of his novel. “But she’s definitely carrying a boy, and to be the opposite of Big J, you’d have to be a girl.”

The room fell silent. Sansenoy massaged his temple as he tried to make sense of the information. He looked up at Senoy.

“A girl?” he repeated. “Whoever heard of a girl Antichrist?”

Senoy shrugged. “It’s a sign of the times, isn’t it? Women are getting much better press these days. Look at England. They had a woman prime minister in the eighties, and look at what she achieved. The destruction of British socialism and a minor war.”

“Are you saying she was one of the Other Side’s?”

“Who knows? We’re not privy to that sort of information. We just destroy what we’re told to.” Senoy settled back in his chair and lit a cigar.

“It stands to reason, if you think about it. For two thousand years men upheld the tenets of the church, drawing all the money and power toward God and crushing all the little goddess worshippers. Then—bang! Women start lobbying for the vote, become

leaders and spokespersons, and before you know it, the balance of power has shifted in their favour.”

“That’s disgusting, that is.” Semangalof spat onto the floor. “We should have the apocalypse right now and get rid of all the women.”

Senoy laughed. “We can’t do that, Mangy.”

“Why not? The boss would be grateful. He hasn’t liked women from the beginning. They all get uppity.” Semangalof counted on his fingers. “First there was Lilith. She wanted an equal relationship with Adam. Then there was Sharon, poor sod, then finally Eve, and we all know what she did.”

“She was led astray by Samael,” Senoy pointed out.

“She didn’t have to say ‘Let me taste that fruit and let the juices dribble down me chin,’ though.”

There was another silence.

“Did she really say that?” Sansenoy asked.

Semangalof nodded. “Yeah. Though it might have been in a different context, now I think about it. Anyway, the point is, women can’t be trusted.”

“Agreed.” Sansenoy scowled.

“Look.” Senoy’s tone was like mercury dribbling over hot pork rolls. “We can’t kill all the women because there’d be no-one left to gestate babies.”

“He has a point.” Semangalof sighed and put his sword away. “We can’t do it until men have learned how to do it without women.”

Sansenoy sneered. “Adam worked that one out.”

“I meant reproduction, not just to shag everything that moved and some that didn’t.”

“We can’t have the apocalypse,” Senoy enunciated every syllable, “without an Antichrist.”

“Oh.” Semangalof held his eyes closed to help him think. “People don’t generally know it has to be a girl, do they?”

“It’s not general knowledge, no.” Senoy took a long puff of his cigar. “What are you thinking?”

“Does it matter if we don’t have an actual Antichrist, if everyone thinks we do?” Semangalof waited for Senoy’s reaction.

“No.” The leader tapped ash into the viewing portal. On the world below, a light aircraft was caught in a freak maelstrom and plummeted into the sea. “I don’t suppose it does.”

CHAPTER 1

A BEAUTIFUL BOY

Ada woke early with a full bladder. In the dim light filtering past the curtains, she could make out the spent form of the incubus and gave it a nudge.

“Oy. It’s nearly dawn. I’m not paying you overtime.”

The minor demon groaned and rolled onto its back.

“You got a ciggie?” It sat upright to uncrease a wing.

“No. I don’t smoke.” Ada batted it with the back of her hand.

“Go on, clear off. I need to use the pot.”

The incubus yawned. “I’m knackered. When did we get to sleep?”

“*You* passed out at three. Before *I* was finished.” Ada glared at it. “Now sod off, before I open the window and let the church bells in.”

“Alright.” The demon held up its hands to placate her. “I’m going. I don’t know what the hurry is. It’s nothing I haven’t seen before.”

“It jolly well is.” Ada pulled the pot from under the bed. “I’m not that sort of girl.”

“Huh. Some people would offer me breakfast.”

The incubus drew a circle on the floor with its forefinger. Upon completion, the line turned red, and a portal to Hell opened. Ada waited until the circle faded before lifting her nightie. You couldn’t trust demons. A portal out sometimes doubled as a portal in.

Squatting was difficult when you were eight months pregnant, but Ada managed and washed her hands in the small basin then pulled on her dressing gown and slippers to venture downstairs. The fire had gone out overnight, leaving the house cold enough to allow frost on the inside of the windows.

She waddled into the kitchen and filled the kettle, lighting the gas on the secondhand cooker Louis had bought her. She hadn't asked from where, having learned early in their relationship that the police were often interested in things that her fiancée stored in the cellar, and the less she knew about them the better.

At least it was Saturday and she didn't have to work. Louis said she shouldn't have to at all in her condition, but Mr. Wainwright at the grocer's didn't hold with paying wages when you weren't there, especially in the run-up to Christmas.

She warmed her hands over the stove until the kettle boiled then made herself a cup of tea, braving the cold of the back step to fetch a bottle of partially frozen milk. Blue tits had already pecked away the foil to get at the cream.

Ada took her tea into the living room, placing the cup on the mantelpiece before lowering herself to the linoleum. Louis had left her plenty of kindling and refilled the coal scuttle before he'd left, and she raked out the cold ashes, ready to relight the fire.

Paper, kindling, sticks, coal. She lit a match and touched it to the paper, sitting back as it flared. Her hope was short-lived when the flames died down and left the kindling untouched. She sighed and began again.

A knock at the door startled her, and she rose, crossing to the bay window to see who was there.

Three men in white suits stood at the door, apparently unaffected by the cold. Ada sniffed the air for traces of brimstone. Nothing. What were they here for, then?

She pulled her gown more tightly around her and made her way to the door, opening it a crack.

"Mrs. Waterman?" The leader of the three raised his hat.

Ada glowered. "It's Miss. What do you want? It's cold."

"Then perhaps we could come in?" His smile was reminiscent of a film star's, all white teeth and no warmth. Ada shivered.

"How are you with fires?"

“What?”

The smile faltered for a moment, but the slightly pudgier one behind raised a hand.

“I can set fires.”

Ada looked him in the eyes for a moment.

“You can come in, then.” She pulled the door open wider. “But you can set that fire going before you do any talking.”

“As you wish, Miss.”

The leader of the three raised his hat again as he entered. Ada closed the door behind them.

“Who are you, anyway?” She looked over Mr. Chubby’s shoulder as he poked the fire. “What do you want?”

“You can call me Mr. Sen. Mr. San is seeing to your fire, and our associate is Mr. Seman.”

“Er... Just Mr. Man, I think. People will get the wrong idea.”

Mr. Sen scowled at him before turning back to Ada with a small bow

“As to why we’re here, well...have you read your Bible, Miss Waterman?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact. If you’re here about the position of three wise men, you’re a bit early.”

Mr. Sen laughed. “Very droll. We’ve come about one of the later books in the volume, the Revelation of Saint John. Are you familiar with it?”

“The end-of-the-world stuff? I suppose so.” Ada picked up her tea and cradled it in her cold hands. “I’d offer you a seat but...” Her voice trailed off as she indicated the sparsely furnished room.

“It doesn’t matter, Miss.” Mr. Man led her to the only chair in the room, the one in front of the now-blazing fire. “Nice job, San.”

“Thank you.” Mr. San stared into the flames. “There’s something very uplifting about a fire.”

“Cleansing.” Mr. Man turned to Ada. “Don’t you think so, Miss?”

Ada looked from one to the other, unsure of her position.

“Very nice, I’m sure. Now, what do you want?”

“You must have seen the portents, Miss Waterman.”

Mr. Sen squatted by her chair and touched her arm. His fingers felt warm against her skin, and she wondered what it would be like to have those fingers wander up her body until they reached...

“Ahem.” Mr. Sen coughed and stood. “What was I talking about?”

“The signs, Mr. Sen.” Mr. Man placed the tips of his fingers together and smiled.

“Oh, yes. Miss Waterman, did you know that the end is nigh?”

Ada narrowed her eyes, one arm curled over her stomach to protect the child inside.

“How could I? Your trousers are too loose.” She laughed and tapped him on the shoulder, leaving a sooty print from where she’d been cleaning the ashes.

“Very droll, I’m sure.” Mr. Sen brushed away the mark.

“You couldn’t have a go at my kitchen, could you? There’s a hell of a stain on the countertop.” Ada grinned. “Would you like some tea?”

“No, we would not.”

Mr. San took an eighteen-inch gladius from his four-inch trouser pocket and began to clean his nails. Mr. Sen stared into the flames.

“The signs of the Apocalypse have begun to appear. Babylon rises, and the Devil’s horns awaken in the West.”

“The Middle East, you mean?” Ada shuddered. “There’s always a war over there. If it’s not about oil, it’s about who owns which bit of land. If you ask me, they should just draw lots for it.”

“It’s the Holy Land.” Mr. Man scowled and took the sword from Mr. San. “You can’t just draw lots for the Holy Land. It belongs to God’s people.”

“And which of them is that, then?” Ada sniffed, wishing she’d got dressed before coming downstairs. “I thought God loved everybody.”

“Well, yes, He does.” Mr. Man shrugged. “Some more than others, obviously.”

“That’s what every religious leader says. They can’t all be right.” Ada turned back to Mr. Sen. “What devil’s horns are you on about? I haven’t seen any.”

“The twin towers in the accursed city.”

Mr. Man nodded. “They’re devil’s horns, alright. The seat of greed and avarice.”

“The World Trade Centre?” Ada put her empty cup on the hearth. “I saw that on the news. I thought you meant something supernatural. You can’t go round counting buildings as signs of the apoca-

lypse. If God didn't want a building put up, he'd send some of his minions to knock it down again."

"That's a good idea." Mr. San tugged at Mr. Man's jacket. "Can we?"

"No." Mr. Sen took a deep breath and turned back to Ada. "This is not going as it should. People are supposed to take everything we say as gospel, not argue the point. You, madam, are carrying the Antichrist. The seven seals will be broken when he comes of age."

"He'll get a damn good hiding if it's him that breaks them." Ada laughed. "You're having me on, aren't you? My little baby, the Antichrist? I don't think so."

"What about the new star in the sky?" Mr. Man pointed upward and knocked the light fitting. "That's a sign if ever there was one."

"It's a sign of a new satellite, that's all. What is it you three want, anyway? Have you come here to stop my baby being born?"

Mr. Sen took a step backwards.

"Certainly not."

"We want him born." Mr. Man nodded at her several times. "Oh, yes."

Mr San licked his lips. "We want the Apocalypse."



Harold was born at one minute after midnight on winter solstice in the maternity room of Laverstone Hospital. Contrary to expectations, Ada refused the gas and air and insisted on watching the whole procedure, delivering the child with less pain than she normally endured after a good curry.

The doctor, handing the seven-pound silent child to his mother, leaned in to whisper into her ear, "The Devil looks after his own."

"Damn right he does." Ada looked up into pale eyes. "I know you, don't I, Mr. Duke? You're a doctor now? You wouldn't get a good Christian girl to give birth so easily, would you?" She fixed Harold to one nipple. "Any chance of a cup of tea?"



In the ward, Ada was treated to the company of Ruby, a woman twice her age who had given birth to her fourth son. The attention

Ada received from Doctor Duke made Ruby believe there was something going on between them.

“Which one is your boyfriend?”

Ada laughed. “None of them. Louis will be here soon, you’ll see.”

“A foreigner?” Ruby raised her eyebrows but made no judgement.

“Sort of. I think he comes from the East End, though I’ve never actually asked.” She looked at Harold, wondering whether to tell Ruby that Louis was black but decided not to. You’d never have guessed it from looking at Harold.

“Well, if he doesn’t show up, you could do worse than that doctor. He seems very interested in you.”

“He just likes my baby.” Ada smiled and kissed her son on his forehead, noticing a black mark under his hairline as her lips puckered. Smoothing back the dark fronds, she saw three numbers and beckoned over Doctor Duke.

“See?” Duke stabbed a finger at the child. “He has the Mark of the Beast on him.”

“In biro.” Ada licked her thumb and rubbed the numbers away. “Besides, the number of the Beast is actually six-one-six. You should know that.”

“Er...I do.” He blinked. “I just didn’t think you did.”

Ruby waited until he left then gestured at the door with her knitting needles.

“He’s a funny one, that one. I don’t think he’s a real doctor. I asked him to look at my episiotomy stitches, and he turned green.”

Ada laughed. “He knows his anatomy all right. His brothers are all the same.”

“That’s a relief.” Ruby resumed knitting. “I shall be glad to get out of here, all the same. When are you out?”

“Tomorrow, I think.” Ada smoothed down Harold’s hair. “Truth be told, there’s no need for me to be in here at all. They just wanted to keep an eye on me.”

“I’m out tomorrow as well.” Ruby scribbled her address on a piece of paper. “Fancy going to bingo on Thursday night?”

Ada was doubtful. “It depends if Louis will look after Harold.”

“Just drop him off with my Albert.” Ruby cast off. “One more won’t make much difference.”

Ada smiled. "It's a date, then."



She left the hospital the following day with Ruby; Albert giving her a lift home. She found the house exactly as she had left it five days before, the festive decorations serving to enhance the emptiness rather than provide any cheer.

Ada shivered, and not just because of the weather. Setting Harold down on the one easy chair, she lit the fire, her determination sending the flames soaring and the wood crackling as it caught, giving enough time for the chunks of coal to catch and begin warming the room. In an hour or two there would be enough hot water to have a bath.

She checked on Harold, who looked up at her and giggled, his blue eyes open wide, taking in the details and colour of the paper chains strung across the ceiling, kicking his legs and reaching out to touch them.

"They're too high to reach, love." Ada let him hold her fingers. "Even for a beautiful little boy."

He laughed, and she leaned down to kiss him, putting his toy rabbit, a gift from Ruby, in his arms.

"Mummy's just going into the kitchen to make a cup of tea. You be a good boy for a few minutes, and we'll see about something for you to eat."

Harold chuckled and used his rabbit to extend his reach, still trying to get the coloured paper hanging from the picture rail.

When she returned, she was surprised to see her five-day-old son playing with the paper chain.

"Clever boy!" She put her tea on the hearth and picked him up. "Did the heat from the fire loosen the sticky tape, then?" She sat down with him on her lap and unbuttoned her dress to feed him.

Unable to put it off any longer, she picked up the letter and opened it. It was, as she knew it would be, from Louis.

My dearest Ada,

I love you.

Trust me on this, for if anyone understands love, then it is I, and I know I love you as much as

anyone has ever loved anyone else. You are my Juliet, my Guinevere, my Mary Magdalene. Alas, then, that I am the doomed prince, forced by circumstance away from your arms. I have had to leave suddenly, for a crisis in my home country requires my presence and supervision, though why my foes have chose this moment to act I shall never know. Rest assured that they will find me the more wrathful for having been driven from your arms.

I will return when I can, though it may be years before the matter is settled. I will watch over you from unexpected places and give aid when I can, so leave a candle burning for me.

I leave you with two gifts. The first is for you, my princess. Use the contents wisely. The second I bid you hold in trust for our son. He will not need it for a long time yet. Hide it from his curiosity and give it to him when he reaches despair, for he deserves to live without the knowledge of his heritage until he is mature enough and ready to embrace the truth.

Finally, fear not for your basic needs. In the box are the details I have set out with Isaacs the solicitor. The house is yours, fully paid and in your name, as is the freehold for the six houses around you. The income from them will mean you need never work. The gas and electricity have also been retro-engineered by one of my staff, and you need never worry about bills from that department. In the hall you will find a telephone, though the post office is your own problem.

Tell Harold it was not my desire to leave and I will always be devoted to him.

With everlasting love,
Louis

Harold reached up, catching her tears and screwing up his face as he tasted them.

“Daddy’s gone away.” Ada held him tightly to her chest, rocking him as silent rivers poured from her broken heart. “He says he loves you, but we won’t be seeing him for a bit.”

Harold gurgled and returned to his dinner.

Ada’s tea went cold, despite the heat of the fire.

She was jarred from her introspection by a knock at the door. Remembering what Louis had said in his letter, she no longer feared the bill collectors and opened it, happy to see her brother on the doorstep.

Frederick took one look at her tearstained face and came in, closing the door behind him. “What’s wrong, love? Why are you alone with the baby? I thought Louis...”

“He’s gone.” Ada sobbed, burying her head against Frederick’s bony shoulder. “He didn’t want to, though.”

She pulled away and showed him the letter. Frederick scanned it and put it on the mantelpiece.

“He’ll be back, love, I’m sure of it. It’s like you said—he didn’t want to go.”

Frederick rubbed her back, holding her until the dry heaving of grief had stopped. He wiggled his eyebrows at the baby, and Harold giggled.

“So, this is Harold.”

Ada turned and wiped her eyes, the sight of her son enough to make her forget her sorrow for a moment.

“Yes.” She picked him up. “Harold, this is your Uncle Frederick. He’ll teach you all about...” She stopped, wondering what her brother could teach him.

“Cars.” Frederick smiled. “He can help me look after Betsy.”

“I don’t know why you bought that thing.” Ada showed him how to hold his nephew. “Fancy buying a Beetle. They’ll never catch on, and then you’ll be stuck with it.”

“Don’t pout, Adantia.” Frederick mimicked their mother’s voice. “You’ll be glad of it when there’s shopping to be fetched.”

Ada laughed and touched his arm. “Thanks for coming round. I needed a friendly face.”

“Anytime, sis.” Frederick rubbed her arm. “I’ll look after you.” He smiled at the baby in his arms. “I’ll look after you both.”

CHAPTER 2

BRINGING UP BABY

Ada fetched Frederick a stool from the kitchen and made tea. It was the great British tradition, tea. Whatever the calamity, it was always easier to bear with a cup of the brown brew, preferably with several sugars.

Frederick put more coal on the fire and sat, his tea within easy reach. He looked at Harold, nursing from his mother.

“He’s going to be a big lad, isn’t he? He’s got a hell of an appetite.”

“He’s my beautiful boy.” Ada smiled. “Thanks for coming, Fred. I don’t know what I’d have done without you here.”

Frederick nodded, gazing into the fire.

“Aren’t you going to open the box he left you? He obviously meant it to be useful. Perhaps it’s another chair.”

“In a minute, when he’s finished.” Ada looked into Harold’s bright eyes and would have kissed him again if she could have reached without interrupting his meal. Harold reached up to her face with a pudgy hand, and she kissed that instead.

Harold detached himself and giggled, chewing on one of the toy rabbit’s ears instead.

“All right.” Ada passed him to his uncle. “Let’s have a look at what Louis left for me.”

She pulled the first box to her chair and fiddled with the knots, rolling the string into a ball and setting it to one side before unwrap-

ping the brown paper, careful not to tear it so it could be re-used. The wooden box revealed was unadorned but for the word bananas stamped upside down on one end. She turned it so the clasp was toward her and opened it.

“Oh.” She stared at the folds of silk.

“What is it?” Frederick craned his neck but couldn’t see over the open lid without disturbing Harold.

Ada pulled the silk out, fold upon fold that shimmered with reds and oranges, a spark of blue, a counterpoint within the deepest crimson.

“It’s a dress.” She stood to hold it against her slight frame. “It’s beautiful.”

“Go and put it on. It’ll cheer you up.”

Ada laughed. “I can’t. I wouldn’t want to get it dirty. It’s a special-occasion dress.”

“Bringing your baby home isn’t a special occasion?” Frederick’s eyes twinkled in his slender face. “Go on. You’ll look a million dollars.”

Ada grinned and hurried out; she could hear Frederick chatting to Harold as she clattered up the bare boards of the stairs. Her progress down them again a few minutes later was a little more stately.

Frederick gasped when she returned, the dress clinging to her slight frame and falling in waves from her arms and hips.

“You look stunning! It’s a bit risqué, but that’s the fashion these days.”

“Father would never have approved.” Ada tried a few dance steps.

Frederick laughed. “No, but he’s not here, and Mother would have loved it. You take after her, you know.”

“That’s kind of you, Fred. I often wonder if we’ll see her again.”

“We will.” Frederick’s smile left him. “You know she had to go. It was only to protect us.”

Ada nodded and sat down, the flowing dress echoing the flames licking around the coal. She looked in the box again.

“There’s more in here.”

“More?” Frederick made an effort to smile again. “Louis must like you or something.”

Ada laughed. “I think he does.”

She took out a small metal box about the size of one of Frederick's paperback books and opened it, almost dropping it when she felt the heat.

"It's a piece of coal," she said.

"That's traditional," Frederick replied. "It's almost New Year."

"Two months ago for us." Ada smiled, referring to Halloween, the pagan New Year. "This piece is hot, though." She showed the box to her brother.

"Best put it on the fire. Especially with the little chap about."

Ada put the box on the hearth and used the fire tongs to pick up the coal. As soon as it was released from the confines of the box, it began to burn with a blue flame.

"It doesn't smell like coal." Frederick leaned forward, holding Harold's hands to stop him reaching for the pretty stone. "More like matches."

Ada shrugged and put it on the fire, where it nestled among the flames.

"It's a thoughtful gift. I would have been glad of that if I was trying to light the fire."

"Like the tradition of carrying home a piece of the bale fire in a hollow turnip." Frederick rubbed his chin. "Very thoughtful chap, your Louis. I don't know how it stayed alight in that box, though."

Ada shrugged and returned to her presents, pulling out a cylinder wrapped in tissue paper.

"It's a candle. He said to keep a candle burning in his letter. He must have meant this one."

"What's it made of? That doesn't look like any wax I've ever seen before."

Ada sniffed it.

"Tallow. Rendered fat. Let's not think about what from."

"Fair enough."

Frederick watched her light it with a coal from the fire and put it in the middle of the bay window.

"Come back, my love." Ada blew a kiss through the window. "I'll be waiting."

"He likes that," said Frederick, directing her attention to Harold, who was gazing at the single flame.

Ada kissed his forehead. "Are you alright on that stool? I don't even have a cushion for it."

"Fine." Frederick patted her hand. "Finish opening your presents. You know you can stay with me in the manor whenever you want."

"No." Ada's voice was harsh but softened again. "Thanks for the offer, Fred, but I can't. There are too many memories there."

Frederick nodded. "I know, but the offer stands if you ever need it."

"Thanks, but I have my house."

"I just wish you'd at least take some furniture," Frederick said with a laugh, but Ada shook her head.

"I don't want to pay the price that would be attached to them."

"Do you still have the nightmares?"

"Sometimes." She took out the next package. "Not so often now, though."

She unwrapped the paper and fell silent, her mouth open wide.

"What is it?" Frederick craned his neck again, unable to see. He held Harold securely and half stood to see over the lid. "Stone the crows!"

Ada put three bundles on her lap and took one to examine more closely.

"There must be hundreds." She riffled through the stack of banknotes.

"Thousands. You're rich, girl!"

"Is it stolen, do you think?"

"If it is, it won't be traceable. Louis wouldn't put you in danger."

"I suppose." Ada put the money back in the chest and took out the last gift. "A jewellery box, how lovely!" The strains of "Fur Elise" filtered through the room as she opened it. "He was playing that the first time I met him. Do you remember?"

Frederick nodded. "On Mother's piano in the drawing room, before everything happened."

"I fell in love with him then. He played it with such passion, as if his heart was broken."

"I remember." Frederick half-smiled, his gaze far away. "If you hadn't gone for him, I would have." He grinned, pulling Ada from her reverie.

“You’re incorrigible.”

She took a last look inside the box. Her mouth fell open again, and she held it for Frederick to see. “Wow” was all he could muster at the sight of so many jewels and gemstones.

Ada shut it quickly, as if it were Pandora’s chest and all the jewels might escape. The room fell silent but for the crackle of the fire. She looked at Frederick.

“I don’t think I’ll be going back to work for Mr. Braithwaite.”

Frederick took a deep breath. “He said he’d look after you.”

Harold began to struggle and reached out to his mother. Frederick passed him back. He opened the trunk for another look at the fortune.

“You missed a gift.” He reached inside for the final tissue-wrapped present and passed it to Ada. “It’s the smallest one.”

Ada unwrapped a tiny grey candle.

“I wonder what this one is for.”

Frederick shrugged. “Light it and see.”

Ada passed it to him, and he lit it from the tallow candle on the windowsill.

A petulant voice came from the fireplace.

“It’s a bit cramped in here. What happened to the burning bush? That’s what I’d like to know.”

Frederick groaned. “Tell me it’s not him!”

A scaled head poked out from the flames

“How-do.” Long, spindly arms and a torso and legs to match followed the head, the creature swaying from side to side on the hearth as it extricated its tail from the flames. “Frederick! You’ve put on weight. And a few years, too.”

Frederick rubbed his face with his hand.

“It is him. Sorry, Ada love.”

“Ada?” The creature turned to her. “Surely not? You were just a girl when I saw you last, and now you’re a lovely young woman with a child of your own.”

“Flatterer.” Ada shielded Harold from the creature. “You take your normal form. You’re frightening Harold.”

“Harold, is it?” The creature drew closer. “A newborn? Unbaptised?”

“Yes.” Ada half-turned to keep the baby away from it. “Now sheathe yourself in skin, you useless lump of fat.”

She spoke some words in the creature’s native tongue, and it hissed and drew back. Far from being frightened, Harold seemed curious about the different features of the thing and was trying to touch it.

The creature stood erect, shifting through several forms before settling upon a tall man with a mop of brown hair and skin the colour of milk. It stretched a few times, working its mouth as if to get the feel of the new flesh.

“Is that better?”

Ada looked away.

“Er...” Frederick stood, lowering his voice. “You might want to put some clothes on.”

“Should I?” The demon flashed through dozens of pieces of ensembles, settling upon a colourful shirt with a wingtip collar and a brown three-quarter-length leather jacket over brown corduroy slacks. “Better?” Its hair grew to a rakish length.

“Much.” Frederick sat again. “What are you doing here, Jasfoup?”

“I was summoned.” The demon smiled, replacing three rows of needle-sharp teeth with those more appropriate to a human mouth. “It’s nice to feel wanted.”

“We didn’t summon you.” Ada scowled. “Haven’t you done enough damage to this family?”

Jasfoup looked hurt.

“Firstly,” he said, “You did summon me.” He pointed to the stubby candle Frederick had placed next to the large one. “I came in through the brimstone, since you hadn’t bothered with a circle. Most undignified, if you ask me. I thought I deserved better.”

He walked around the room, inspecting the bare walls.

“Secondly, I resent the implication that I was anything to do with the disaster at the manor. I didn’t get there until it was too late. If you’ll cast your mind back, it was me who did the clearing up and the...” He coughed. “...arrangements afterwards.”

“The funeral with no body, you mean.” Ada shifted in her seat to keep a better eye on him.

“Amongst other things.” Jasfoup returned to her side. “So, this is Harold.” He tickled the baby under the chin.

“Don’t you dare try to corrupt him. I want him to grow up properly, without your influence.”

“But I can influence him for the good.” Jasfoup moved his finger in the air, studying Harold as the baby tracked the motion. “There’s been some talk of him being the Antichrist...”

“Huh! I can guess who from.” Ada stood and faced up to him. “You tell those interfering angels that he’s not the Antichrist, and this is not the end of the world.”

“I know that.” Jasfoup put a hand on her shoulder. “I know that, and they know that, but they’re trying to use him to bring it about. You need me to look after him.”

Frederick coughed. “And who’s going to pay for your services?”

Jasfoup smiled. “All taken care of.”



By Harold’s first birthday the house had become a home, and Ada had managed to splash out on one of the new colour televisions with a nineteen-inch screen. Today, the house was crowded with visitors, namely Ruby and Albert and their four boys. Harold, temporarily forgotten, sat on Ada’s armchair, his eyes fixed to the bright screen. He pointed.

“Horsies.”

Frederick laughed. “That’s right, Harold. Horses. This is the two-fifteen from Kempton. I’ve got a flutter on the white one.” He pointed to the horse in the starting gate.

“Lucy’s Pride?” Albert laughed. “You haven’t got a chance. It’s at fifteen-to-one.”

Harold giggled and clutched his toy rabbit. It was still his favourite, despite all the others Ada had bought him.

The race started, the six horses piling out from the stalls at break-neck speed. Within moments, the favourite was in the lead by a length, closely followed by two others with Lucy’s Pride in fourth place.

“I told you.” Albert sounded smug. “You should have bet on Silver Hammer.”

“Shame.” Fred sighed. “It was a whole pound, as well.”

Harold shook his rabbit at the screen.

“White horsey.” He giggled, burying his face in the threadbare fur.

“That’s right.” Frederick smoothed his hair. “Good lad.”

“Look!” Albert pointed at the screen. “I don’t believe it!”

Frederick looked back. Lucy’s Pride was creeping up to the leaders. By the end of the race she was a neck ahead and clearly the winner.

Frederick beamed.

“Ha!” He hoisted Harold to his shoulder. “He’s my lucky charm.”

Ada looked at Jasfoup, who shook his head and shrugged.

Harold giggled, waving his rabbit.

“White horsey.”



By the time he was three, Harold had begun to collect the cards that came with tea packets. Frederick took an interest as well, showing him how to arrange them and buying the albums for him to keep them in. He gave Harold any that came his way, along with a red biscuit tin full of cards from cigarette packets.

Harold loved them, delighting in the pictures and arranging them in numerical order, by colour, by subject and by date of issue, according to how he felt on any particular day.

Frederick looked through his collection.

“Too bad you’ve got one missing.” He pointed to an empty space in the album. “You can’t get these anymore. They stopped making them years ago.”

“I’ve got it here. Mummy is getting me some glue. Sandy got it for me,” Harold pointed to the toy rabbit. Even with an ear missing and, thanks to age, a patch over half of its head, the fawn-coloured bunny was still his favourite toy.

Frederick raised an eyebrow and picked Sandy up, but the rabbit showed no sign of sentience.

“What did you expect?” Jasfoup was watching from the door. “A demon in disguise?”



When Harold was four, he began to play with action figures. Frederick brought him the very latest ones from the shops along with

their spaceships and vehicles, helping Harold make vast battle-grounds in the garden and attic. Often the missions would involve the rescue of the giantesses—three dolls sent as an anonymous gift on his fourth birthday that were a different scale to his space cow-boys.

When he was alone, Harold would forget about guns and battles and concentrated instead on the three dolls, making up complex stories about monsters and princesses. The three figurines were his first introduction to the unique anatomy of women. He was amazed to learn that their legs were proportionately half as long again as a man's, their waists as thin as a wasp's and their necks almost too long to support their heads.

"Why are men and women a different shape?" he asked his mother.

"Women have to make babies," she replied, her hands soapy from washing up after dinner. "That requires wider hips and breasts to feed them with."

"But my dolls are thinner than real women, and their necks are longer."

Ada laughed and sat down, pulling him onto her lap.

"That's because they were made by a man, and that's what men think women should look like. Do you remember the story of the Garden of Eden I told you?"

Harold nodded. "Adam and Eve and Lilith and Cain?"

Ada nodded. "That's the one. After Lilith left him and before Eve came along, Adam's sole companions were the animals, and he loved them very much."

She plucked one of the dolls from his hands and stood it upright.

"Now, God wanted Adam to fall in love with Eve and live happily ever after, so he designed her to look like an animal from behind. See how her long hair falls just short of her bottom?"

Harold giggled. "You said bottom!"

"It's a perfectly ordinary word. Now, look how her long legs are like a horse's, especially in those high heels, and her hair looks like a tail. Do you see it?"

Harold nodded. "So God made women to look like horses, so that men would want to marry them?"

“That’s right. But Eve ate the apple and realised her shape was no good for childbearing, so she made herself look the way women do now. Men, though, still think woman more beautiful when they look like an animal from behind, so they make dolls to encourage girls to grow up believing that.”

Harold gazed at the doll. “Sandy says that I can be a girl when I grow up. Can I, Mum?”

“Did he now?” Ada looked at the threadbare rabbit, her eyes thoughtful. “You can be whatever you want to be, but don’t let that silly rabbit make your decisions for you.”

“Are all dolls like this?”

Ada shook her head. “Not all of them. Some dolls are made with realistic proportions.”

“Will you buy me one?” Harold asked, the eagerness in his voice making Ada smile.

“Perhaps for your birthday. Dolls cost a lot of money.”

“An old one will do,” Harold protested.

“Old ones cost even more. They’re called antiques, and because they’re not very easy to get, people pay a lot of money for them. That goes for anything old, not just dolls.”

“When I’m older, will my dolls be worth a lot of money?”

Ada laughed. “A little bit, but to be worth a lot, they have to be in pristine condition. If they’re still in the box they came in they’re worth even more.”

“Cor.” Harold gazed at his dolls. “Can I have two dolls for my birthday, then? One to play with and one to keep plasticine?”

“Pristine.” Ada laughed. “We’ll see.”



After Ada had put him to bed with the tale of Gawain and the Lady Ragnall, explaining that the woman was not a nasty creature like the book claimed but just a woman who had been driven from her home by a greedy landlord and forced to live off the land, thus appearing ugly to the rich knights, she went around his room picking up his toys. Sandy the bunny had somehow ended up under the chest of drawers, forcing her to kneel on the floor to retrieve it.

She looked at it thoughtfully. She had thrown it away twice in the past year, thinking Harold had grown too old for the scruffy thing, but he had retrieved it from the dustbin both times.

“I’ll sort you out, Mister Sandy.” She threw it into the fire, where it burned as if it were stuffed with straw, leaving the two eyes staring at her in accusation. She shook her head and poked them down into the embers and put on more coal.

Ada made two cups of tea and went to the window, touching the candle that was still burning for Louis. In four years, it had only burned down by an inch, leading her to wonder again what animal the fat had been rendered from. She lit the smaller candle and remained looking out of the window until the hissing behind her stopped.

“What have you just burned?” Jasfoup sniffed and hissed. “It stinks like angel’s piss in here.”

Ada spoke without turning.

“Are you decent?”

It was a few moments before she heard affirmation.

“Right.” She handed Jasfoup one of the cups of tea. “I want some protection.”

He took a sip and sat in her chair.

“What for? I thought you said you wanted to bring him up without interference?”

“I’ve changed my mind. He needs someone he can trust, and I need someone to make sure that no-one’s getting to him without my knowledge.”

“I always offered to help.”

“I know, and I’m taking you up on it.” Ada stirred her tea, the spoon sliding across the china like the sound of a choir.

Jasfoup winced. “What can I do?”

TITLE: *[An Ungodly Child](#)*

AUTHOR: Rachel Green

GENRE: Fantasy/Satire

PUBLISHER: Zumaya Publications LLC

IMPRINT: Arcane

RELEASE DATE: April 2012

ISBN: Paperback: 9781936144945; ebook/
multi-format: 9781936144952; ebook/epub:
9781936144990

FORMAT: Trade paperback, perfect bound;
\$15.99; 332 pp.; 6x9; ebook, \$6.99

For review: publicity@zumayapublications.com