PRAISE FOR *BITTERTHORN*

'Kat Dunn has spun a love story both intimate and epic. *Bitterthorn* is a perfect fireside tale, thick with suspense, yearning, and wild beauty – I loved every moment of reading it'
SAMANTHA SHANNON, international bestselling author of *The Priory of the Orange Tree*

'A moody and stylish Gothic tale that feels both fresh and timeless – a masterful meditation on grief, loneliness, and terrible love. Gutting and unforgettable'
AVA REID, *Sunday Times* bestselling author of *The Wolf and the Woodsman*

'*Bitterthorn* is beautiful and haunting – the type of story that seeps into your bones and stays with you long after reading. Kat Dunn has spun a deliciously dark fairytale full of the agony and ecstasy of longing and desire, as well as celebrating the power of resilience and inner strength'
KATHERINE WEBBER, *Sunday Times* bestselling author of *Twin Crowns*

'A haunting, atmospheric tale of two lost souls finding each other, and a love that will remake the world. Exquisite'
SHELLEY PARKER-CHAN, *Sunday Times* bestselling author of *She Who Became the Sun*

'Both classic and novel, melancholy and tenderly wrought, *Bitterthorn* crackles with passion and warmth like a fire on a long winter night. With achingly atmospheric prose, Dunn has crafted characters I would die for and a love story as powerful and enduring as a fairytale. A must-read for fans of Gothic romance'
ALLISON SAFT, *New York Times* bestselling author of *A Far Wilder Magic*

‘Girl meets house. Girl meets witch. And oh, does it ever get deliciously interesting from there! Dunn has created a delicately spun cobweb of a fairytale that slowly unwinds a pattern of secrets, curses, love and betrayal – and finally settles around your heart and leaves you glad to have been captured’
FREYA MARSKE, author of *A Marvellous Light*

‘A Gothic, intimate tale of love and loneliness, the threads that bind us to others, and how a sacrifice for another can be spun into something strong and enduring. Kat Dunn shows that hope can be found even amidst bitter odds’
HELEN CORCORAN, author of *Queen of Coin and Whispers*

‘*Bitterthorn* feels like a fairytale: a beautifully wrought story of love that is as claustrophobic and unnerving as it is achingly romantic. Dunn’s prose is luminous’
SARAH UNDERWOOD, author of *Lies We Sing to the Sea*

‘*Bitterthorn* enthralled me from the very first lines to the final pages. With prose that reads like poetry, Kat Dunn draws on the threads of familiar fairytales and spins them into something wholly new, coloured with the atmospheric spookiness of a Guillermo del Toro film’
LYNDALL CLIPSTONE, author of *Lakesedge* and *Forestfall*

‘*Beauty and the Beast* – but make it gay and Gothic. Dunn’s *Bitterthorn* artfully balances the melancholy of loss with the lure of infatuation. If you only read one sapphic retelling this year, make it this one’
KATE DYLAN, author of *Mindwalker*

‘A delectable, carefully wrought fairytale full of hope and heart. *Bitterthorn* is a monument of sapphic, Gothic perfection’
TORI BOVALINO, author of *The Devil Makes Three*

‘A story about the weight of duty and the way love transforms, *Bitterthorn* is a collision of delicious prose and tangible atmosphere. It tells of hesitant, fragile longing that blooms into an enduring romance you won’t soon forget. With the dark whimsy of a classic fairytale, Dunn weaves a story that’s as bold as it is timeless’
M. K. LOBB, author of *Seven Faceless Saints*

BITTERTHORN

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To younger me,
I'm so sorry.
It is as bad as you think it is,
but you'll escape

Love doesn't just sit there, like a stone, it has to be made, like bread; remade all the time, made new.

Ursula K Le Guin

AUTUMN

I

I was born from my mother en caul, swaddled in my unbroken amniotic sac like an insect encased in amber, and entirely apart from the world.

I have, in all meaningful ways, been alone ever since.

The doctor grimaced and slit open my cocoon with a knife, spilling fluid and meconium, and like a selkie, I slipped off my first skin to reveal another human one beneath.

My mother was gone in an instant, fainting in shock at this living, squirming thing emerging from inside her.

My father took longer to leave.

I was presented to him, minutes old, in the antechamber to my mother's room, cleaned off and wrapped in lace. I am told he politely enquired after my birth, and had the good grace not to be visibly disappointed that he had no son. A daughter was perfectly adequate, and I had sensibly arrived healthy and whole. My only crime was arriving at all, into the lives of two people who weren't quite sure what to do with a child now it was here. I never doubted they loved me in their own way, but I understood clearly and quickly what I was to them: a problem to be solved.

Who should look after me? Where should I be put? How could things be arranged so neither of them had to change their lives in any real way?

I soon learned my job. A series of nannies and governesses shepherded me from nursery to school room and I saw my parents in slivers like the windows of a zoetrope: Mother dandling me on her knee before a dinner party, my father presenting me to guests as I recited Goethe. Every child is beholden to the gods of their parents, and I augured their meanings from careless words and gestures, made rituals to fit around their whims, and inscribed into my heart the rules they unwittingly handed down. I learned who I was through them.

Mina is a good girl. Mina is a sensible girl. Mina is not demanding.

I was well fed, clean, sheltered by all the protections money and status afforded.

I lacked for nothing, except real love.

My mother would visit me occasionally, when her spirits were on the way up. This interest in me – riding together, a trip to Paris, a painting course – flared up rapidly like a match being struck, and then would be dropped as the flame reached her fingertips, the shrivelled, blackened stick tossed aside before any of the heat could touch her. My mother was delicate, and a child was one burden too many for her to bear – not that she was capable of bearing many burdens at all. She struggled with life as though it wasn't her natural home. The air too thick and syrupy for her to breathe, moving through it like a poor swimmer thrashing amongst the waves.

My mother died the autumn I was twelve.

I didn't understand what it was to need someone, until she was gone.

My father, left with a daughter on the cusp of womanhood, panicked. He did what any prudent man would do and promptly married a respectable widow replete with daughters near enough my age so that someone else could handle *female issues*. As ruler of the small Duchy of Schwartzstein, his time was all accounted for and raising children was not on his schedule.

My mother was tidied away into her grave and my stepmother unpacked her things into her place. I found myself far from home without having travelled a metre. I was living on the outskirts of someone else's family and no matter how many mollifying words my father offered, I knew I was not a necessary star in this new constellation.

My stepmother was not a cruel woman, merely a disinterested one. She had three daughters of her own and no desire to take on another. Johanna, the eldest, Else in the middle, and the youngest, Klara, needed education and good matches to be found, and that was a far greater draw on her attention than a grieving girl child confused by monthly courses and a shape-shifting body.

Still, she didn't throw me into a cellar or make me their servant.

No, she simply turned me into a ghost.

When she and her daughters arrived into our house, in all meaningful ways I ceased to exist. I slipped into my adult woman body in the same way I had been born into the world: cloistered apart from the rest of humanity, shuddering from

one skin into a new one, my beating heart a problem to be dealt with.

Already well versed in entertaining myself, in womanhood I never thought to do anything but continue along the same path. If the palace that had been my home was now the domain of my stepmother, I would look beyond for something of my own – and found it in the trees outside each window, the mountains that ringed our capital city of Blumwald, in the pebbly river that churned wild in spring with snowmelt and froze solid enough to skate on in winter. I found home in the crags and branches, in birdsong and my own ragged breath as I walked and walked. I felt power in my independence: far, far safer to be alone than to want and be unwanted.

So I walked, and I walked and walked until my boots were bloody and my face was sunburned, until I became a creature like the foxes and egrets, until I was only motion and pumping heart and nothing human at all. Holding entropy at bay, I heard my father call it once, the constant output of energy to remain in one place. Life was in movement; only dead things were still.

I was a dead thing, in my heart. I knew it like a poison I drank each night and purged each morning. I knew that I was isolated, but I didn't *understand* my loneliness until I knew what I would give to escape it. What I would be willing to do.

Until I knew what it was to love, and be loved.

It was the Witch who taught me that.

II

The news of Bismark came the day summer died.

The season had stretched long this year, workers sweating in the fields as they brought in the harvest, the last of the radishes, fennel and beetroot flourishing in the shimmering heat until it burst like a blister and a thunderstorm rolled up the valley, bouncing between the mountains to thrash Blumwald with rain and lightning.

I had gone walking early, as I often did. Finally I had woken to a clear sky so I went to my trees to assess the progress of the seasons. I wrapped apples, butterkäse, a piece of smoked sausage, some dark rye bread and a slice of poppy seed cake in a cloth in my knapsack, and put on a stout pair of boots. Dawn cast long shadows across the cobbles. As I wound through the dense knot of forest at the base of the mountain, past logging stations and huntsmen's cottages, I came across a deer carcass, torn open by scavengers. From the bullet wound to its haunch I knew it was a hunter's mistake: a doe targeted then lost. She had come to a quiet hollow to die. Maggots had eaten out the jelly of her eyes and the meat of her swollen tongue. This was the nature of my forest home.

Up on the cleared stubble of the grazing pastures, I sat on a grist outcrop to eat my lunch. Summer: dead and gone. I marked it in the bloom of red smudging the base of the oak leaves, the freckle of gold sweeping the birch. *Quercus robur*, the monstrous oak trees that planted themselves firm with broad branches sweeping the forest canopy, *betula pendula,* the silver birches clustering close with their trunks like peeling skin. They marked time better than any clock or candle or bell in the rings of their trunks and the spread of their branches. All around the forest fanned out like a pack of cards, dense and overlapping, arguing for space. It curved around Blumwald like a cupped hand, across valley to climb hillsides and along riverbanks.

From my vantage point above the city, I saw my father's carriage hurtling along the valley road. At this distance it seemed to move as slowly as an ant, but from the cloud of dust around the wheels and the way the rest of the traffic parted like a ripped seam, I gathered they must have been going at some lick. I took another bite of my apple and chewed. He wasn't due back from Berlin for another week; this was either terrible or excellent news. Schwartzstein was a scrap of land as big as the space between my thumb and forefinger when I held my hand out before me, and my father was its ruler. We had slunk around the edges of history while all around countries merged and split and feuded and warred. A nation of sheep and wool and spinning. No one noticed us, except the Witch.

My father had different plans now: we were to be noticed by someone else. Chancellor Bismark was unifying Germany and we were to become part of the new Empire. I wanted to

know what the news was, but I also knew the best way to be around my father was not to be there at all. This was one of the first laws I learned: if he was in a rare good mood, I was welcome to provide entertainment; if his attention was turned to his duties, I was to pretend I didn't exist at all.

Finding a snag of fleece in my pocket, I plucked two thistles to card it in the old way, watching the carriage draw closer. In a sheep-riddled place like Blumwald, fleece was caught on every fence post, oily and ripe with ovine scent. This was a hunk the size of my palm; cream turned grey with dirt and caught up with burrs and spindly leaf stems and grasses. I brushed it rhythmically like passing over the beads of a rosary, my fingertips waxy with lanolin, to work out the knots and detritus until I had a piece of fibre ready to be washed. A scrap like this would be good for nothing but a drop spindle, spun by hand to add twists to the fibre until it became strong enough for weaving and knitting. I had no spindle of my own to do it, only my mother's, which she had kept more as a toy than a means of creation. I thought of the doe again, her milky teeth bared in a death grin. In a few more years, I would have had a dead mother longer than a living one.

I waited until my father's carriage reached the Summer Palace, then made my way back. I still had one living parent, and the more he withdrew from me, the more I wanted to find a place by his side.

At the tide line where the wheat fields met the bracken and saplings, a spate of shrines were scattered like a warning. A hollow scooped out at the base of an oak, in it a dish of salt and scraps of iron, a twist of yarn and a saint's medallion

nestled among it – Saint Anthony of Padua this time, for protection against evil – a bough of ash to one side and a branch of blackthorn on the other with a cluster of dusty purple sloes still attached. A smear of something red across it all. I thought of the old words: by oak, by ash, by bitterthorn. Half prayer, half invocation. An oath for protection, for binding. All of it a plea against the dark.

In the distance, above the golden canopy of the dying forest, about as far as I could see on a clear, bright day, was the Witch's Castle.

The Witch was our curse, the hazy shadow to the bright light of Blumwald. Once a generation, every fifty years or there around, she would descend from her castle to take a companion. One young man plucked out and never seen again. We lived according to the long seasons of her reign: the years directly after her visit like spring, joyous relief and hope. Then, summer as the memory of fear faded. Autumn would come, though, and we could no longer pretend we were safe. Finally, as half a century approached, winter set in, cold and bitter and full of dread.

Dukes rose and fell, wars shifted our borders over centuries, and still we lived tied to the rhythm of her want. It had been a little over fifty years since the Witch had last been seen. We never knew the exact moment she would strike, only that she would, and we lived around the fear of her like a volcano smoking and spitting ash, one eye raised to its fiery summit. An immutable fact that framed the world in salt sprinkled along doorways and windowsills, candles ever-burning on chapel altars, shutters locked tight at the first brush of dusk.

My mother in her worse moods called the Witch a curse on men for their coldness. To be taken from their masterful positions and turned over to the use of a woman. I thought the Witch took them because she could. Because it was a transgression. Who would lose sleep over another woman sacrificed?

I thought she took men because she wanted us to know her power.

A candle had been left burning in one shrine. In a flash of anger, I snuffed it out. Salt and iron couldn't protect you from loss. The hurtful truth of death was that it was as mundane as a meal uneaten, a cup knocked over. Exquisite pain that meant nothing. All this was nothing but a hopeful lie.

A twig cracked behind me.

I could see no one, but I felt a prickle along the back of my neck as though I was being watched. As though, in extinguishing the flame, I had opened a door, and something was waiting to come through.

I doused the smouldering candlewick with water from my canteen and hurried on, leaving the shrine in disarray behind me.



Shaking off the darkness of the forest, I made for the palace and my father's coach. Past the cathedral, the dry market day in the square, dominated by stalls of cloth and yarn, haberdashery, ironmongery, candles and knives and buckets repaired. Past bakeries already emptied to crumbs and the coffee house, tables outside with waiters fetching small cups of steaming black coffee and soft rolls and pats of creamy

butter. I would take breakfast there on a warm morning, with my sketchbook propped before me to outline the rooftops and cobbles, the carriages and water troughs and sprays of clematis shivering up the wooden-framed buildings. I plucked a blossom as I passed, tucking it in my belt.

From the window of my bedroom I could see Blumwald in almost its entirety: at one end was the cathedral with its glistening roof of coloured tiles like the side of a grass snake, at the other, our palace, and between them ran a street like a spine. From it spoked side streets, alleys, squares and wells and market places, tided up by the city walls that were only as tall as the rooftops these days and unmanned for many a generation. Downriver were the tanneries and slaughterhouses turning the water a churning brown with run-off, and the new wool mill with its thundering mechanical loom. My father thought only of railways and factories, but wool and spinning had been the lifeblood of our duchy for centuries before us. In the back alleys and attic rooms of houses, a legion of women still worked at their wheels to bring in a little extra money.

And above us always, the mountain, and the Witch's castle.

My father's horses were being stabled when I arrived, and an unfamiliar man in expensive but travel-stained clothes was directing the unpacking of a series of briefcases and what looked like equipment I'd seen in my geological journals.

My stepmother and stepsisters were in the drawing room, conversation racing along some thread I couldn't catch.

I tried to slip past but was stopped by my stepmother's voice. 'Mina? Is that you?'

I stepped into the doorway. 'Yes.'

A series of menu cards and sheets of notepaper were scattered on the tables between her and her daughters.

'Where were you this morning?'

'I went for a walk.'

She looked over my mud-stained appearance with thinned lips. 'Are you planning to join us once you have made yourself presentable?'

I made a non-committal noise and went to find my father instead.

Soon, I would be the only daughter left at home.

Klara was engaged, Else was already gone to her new husband in Munich, while Johanna had only returned to have her first child. I saw her one day changing muslin squares that she had tucked down the front of her dress. They were stained creamy yellow and smelled strongly of milk. When she spotted me she had shrieked and shooed me from the room with accusations of spying.

I wondered if all my family would change and leave me behind. First my mother had changed into a corpse, now my stepsisters would become wives and mothers, and soon enough my father an old man. It was as though by losing my mother so young, motherhood was a foreign land I had no permission to enter. I had been marked out as different, and the lives my sisters expected for themselves were not available to me.

My father was at his desk in the library, poring over a folder of trade documents he had brought back from Berlin. On a chair beside him was a furl of wool samples, labelled with weight and dye and provenance. The line between his eyes was so deep, it was cast in shadow. One thick groove

between his eyebrows, two deep scores either side of his mouth, and a fan of lines across his forehead. My father was not a young man, but I had never seen him look this worn.

I asked after his journey and he waved me into a chair with a dismissive hand. My father would bring me to his side occasionally when he felt like it, and I waited for those moments like drops of rain in a drought. For a moment I would feel like his daughter again, like the loss of my mother hadn't fractured us.

When several minutes had passed without him looking up, I said, 'Perhaps I could help you with your papers? I've said you need a secretary.'

'You were quite right.' He put down a letter and squeezed the bridge of his nose.

I began to gather the mess of papers. I saw a list of names, notes about a railway being built, a conference. 'You have returned so soon. Is everything well?' My eyes lingered on a letter signed by Bismark himself.

'We are to host a conference for the Chancellor and his cabinet next month. There is much to prepare and little time. If all goes well, I believe we will be looked upon favourably for the location of the new locomotive line.'

A smile broke across my face. 'I am happy for you. I know you have worked a long time for this.'

'I have. We must all put our efforts towards the conference's smooth running.'

'Of course. You will need help.'

I sorted the documents into groups, arranging my father's desk, but he stopped me with a confused smile.

The mistake dawned on us both.

He tried to hide his amusement. ‘Oh, no, leibchen. I hired a secretary in Berlin – perhaps you saw him? Klaus Ernhoff, newly graduated from Jena.’ He toyed with his pen for a moment then set it to one side. ‘You don’t want to be stuck in here with me.’

I flushed with humiliation. ‘Father—’

He regarded me softly and that was somehow worse. ‘Mina, you look to me too much. You must think to your own future.’

I was foolish to think he might want me with him.

My father was a man who managed people like the figures in his account books. After my mother died, I would come to him, deep in grief, looking for someone who might understand what I had lost. Instead he had told me that grief was a physiological process that lasted a year. It had comforted me at first to think there would be a neat end to my pain, but when a year arrived I understood what he had really meant: my allotted time was over and now my grief was not welcome at his door.

‘I want you to be happy,’ he continued. ‘Perhaps we can think again of a husband?’

I could not listen to his words. It was as though the rushing sound of water had risen up about me and numbed my senses.

He was correct that I had no easy prospect of a husband. The bloom of my youth had barely flowered before it seemed spent; I cannot say I noticed it passing, until I discovered in the way people looked at me that I had wilted and what small expectations there had been were gone.

'I don't think a husband will solve my unhappiness,' I said. 'I don't want to make someone else responsible for that.'

'I feel like you make me responsible.'

You're my father, I wanted to say, *who else is responsible for me, if not you?*

'I cannot be everything for you,' he added and I wondered if he was willing to be *anything* for me. 'I fail to understand you, Mina. You're a clever girl, capable, but it feels as though you're waiting for your life to begin.'

'I see.'

His mouth turned down at the corners. 'I've hurt you.'

'No.' Before he could say anything else, I got up, blood loud in my ears. 'Good luck with your work.'

I should have gone somewhere. Back outside, hacking along the field boundaries looking for flints in the tilled soil, or into the forest to sink my boots in mulch, soft and loamy from the rain to pick mushrooms; something that took me out of myself. But the blow had come too hard, felled me too thoroughly.

My room was quiet when I reached it. On the mantel, the clock ticked. Outside the window I could hear the wind in the leaves, the call of birds and the voices of servants ferrying crates to and from the icehouse in preparation for the day's meals. Everything was exactly the same as it had been. And always would be.

I kneeled by the ceramic stove that heated my room and folded back my sleeve. The enamel was painted glossy white with gold leaf along the rococo acanthus leaf scrollwork, lifted from the parquet on four ornate legs. It had been recently stoked and the heat rolled off it in waves.

I pressed the milky underbelly of my arm to the surface and felt an exquisite pain cut a line through me like a spike of lightning.

As though you're waiting for your life to begin.

I turned my father's words over like a newly acquired geological specimen, some shiny square of pyrite or rough wedge of schist, looking for the grain, the structure, the signs of its origin and nature.

I pulled my arm away and inspected the scalded red flesh.

If no one wanted me, then I would make myself disappear.