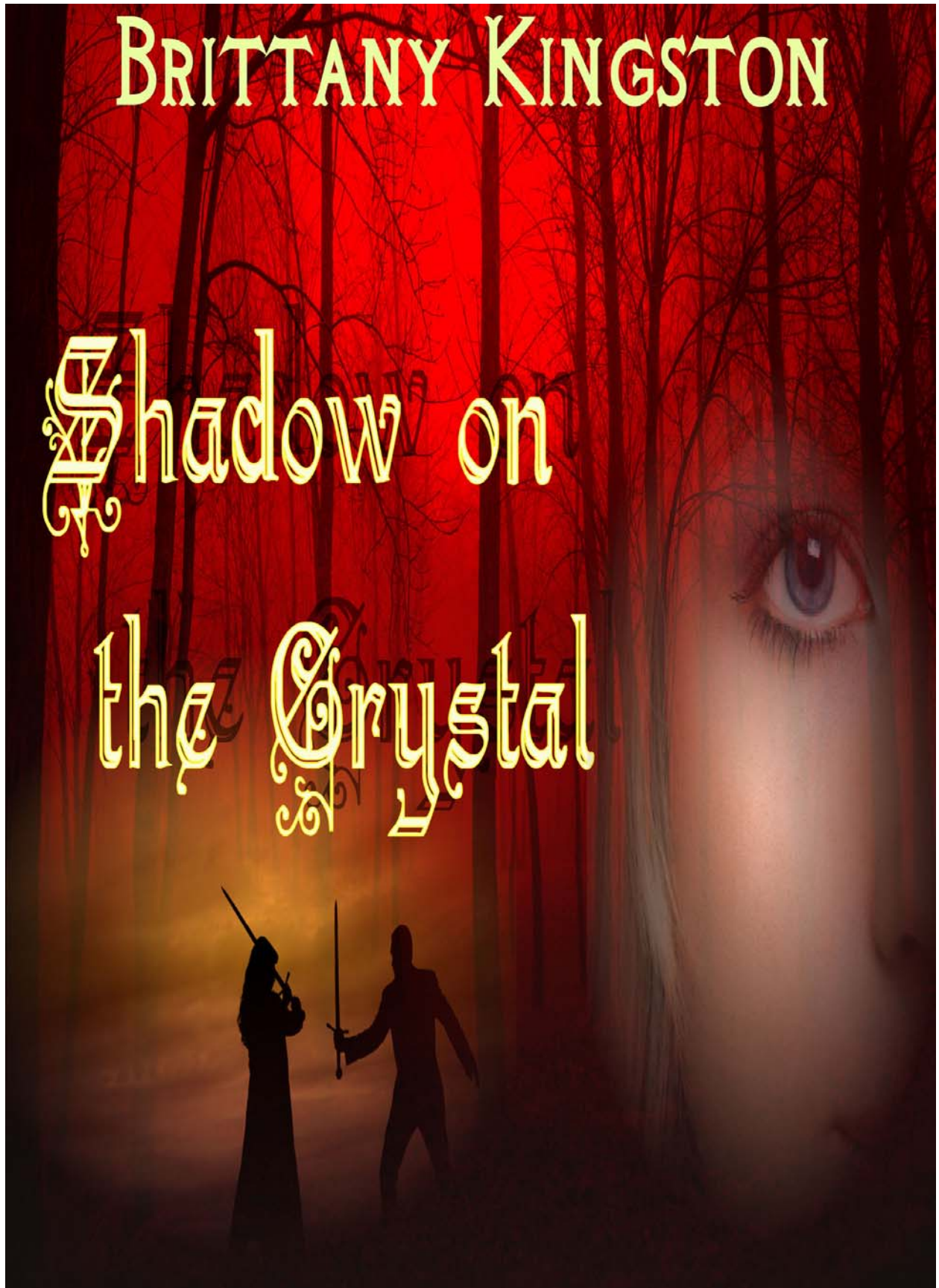


BRITTANY KINGSTON

Shadow on  
the Crystal



# *Shadow On The Crystal*

Whisper tightened his grip on his sword. "I will never be like you."

Santez circled their tight arena. "You are me. Do not deny you lust for blood the same way I do. You crave it. You take it wherever you can. You can't get enough of it." His eyes, like embers, ignited when his gaze came to rest on the frightened face of the girl. "So much the sweeter when virginal, no?" His stare challenged Whisper. "Deny that you want to drink her blood. Deny that you want it so bad you can already taste it."

Whisper glanced at Katherine. The haunted gaze that caught at the edge of his vision sent a chill up his spine.

"Deny it!"

"Whisper?" Katherine took a step backwards.

Santez laughed. "Tell her what you are, gypsy."

"Enough, Santez! Your quarrel is with me." He lunged forward swinging the sword, but Santez moved quicker. By the time the six-span blade had completed its arc, Whisper found Santez between himself and Katherine.

Nothing would have pleased Santez more than to have seized the girl and taken her right in front of Whisper, but the gypsy demanded all his concentration, and the girl slipped beyond his reach. He snarled, half crouching, ready to spring. "I should have made you wholly a vampire when I had the chance."

"You were never strong enough, Santez. My will was stronger than yours then, and it is even stronger now. Try me."

"No." Santez's voice was a low growl; his instinct for blood was overtaking his reason. He fought it. He had to keep control. "I no longer desire your company for eternity. I shall rip your throat out and feast on your heart tonight."

*Shadow On The Crystal*

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*Brittany Kingston*

# *Shadow On The Crystal*

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*Shadow On The Crystal*

Also by Brittany Kingston:

*The Sword of Anubis*

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*Where the Night Things Are*

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*Whisperings of the Soul*

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*“The Music Box”*

*- in the Paranormal Bedtime Stories Anthology*

## *Dedication:*

To Tiger, Nigg, and Mickey,  
Dixi and Rambo,  
C.J. and McCaffrey,  
Oscar and the fishy dudes,  
all of whom enrich my life with love and laughter every day.

# *Shadow On The Crystal*

Whisper suppressed a sigh. It wearied him, this endless searching and hiding. He'd followed the rumours of stock mutilations and strange murders all the way from Europe to Britain, but always the beast eluded him. It was a dangerous game they played. A game he intended to put an end to.

Near to where he was secluded, a man plied his unwelcome attentions upon a lovely young woman. Whisper could not condemn her displeasure. The man was a cadaverous middle-aged lecher, dressed in ridiculous trunk hose and peasecod belly doublet. He'd even donned one of those codpieces so in vogue amongst the gentry. Whisper shook his head. By the looks of him, that weedy Englishman wouldn't have anything substantial under it anyway.

Whisper frowned as he stared at the man. Who was he? He didn't fit with the farming folk of this region. Nor did he resemble a nobleman. There was something insidious about him, though, a shadow on his aura. But he was not the one he'd trailed to this place. This despicable specimen of manhood was no more than a blight on his sensibilities.

The girl struggled to free herself. She pleaded, but the lecher clawed beneath her skirt like a rabid dog.

Whisper's sense of honor warred with his desire to remain hidden. Unable to watch the spectacle any longer, he broke from the cover of the blackberry thicket and grasped the Englishman by the wrists. He pulled him away from the girl. "Enough, man! Leave her alone."

Samuel Pleasance stepped back and looked the other man up and down. His thin lips twisted when he realized the man's attire marked him as one of those scoundrels Her Majesty had all but driven from England. He fidgeted with his riding crop. "This is no business of yours, traveller."

"I am a gypsy, not a traveller, and you made it my business when you tried to rape the girl in sight of our campania."

"Ugh!" Of course there would be more of them. Samuel's dark beady gaze raked the forest. Just because he couldn't see them, it didn't mean they weren't there, watching, waiting for a chance to pounce.

Fear seeped into his bones. Gypsies were an unknown quantity. Local gossip proclaimed their kind often used Charnwood Forest as a temporary base. There were reports that the gypsies were stealing from nearby holdings, souring milk, putting hens off their laying, and making a general nuisance of themselves. The locals had decided to be lenient and not turn them in, but Samuel didn't hold with such leniency. It would come to no good, that was for certain. It was little wonder Her Majesty had outlawed them. He straightened his back and looked the man in the eye. You had to be firm with these people, otherwise they'd walk all over you. "This is my intended. Kindly leave me to court this fair miss and be about your own business."

Whisper laughed. "If that is the way you English court your ladies, I am surprised they don't all want to remain unwed."

Samuel's face reddened. He brandished the riding crop in the gypsy's face. "You have no business here. Leave or I shall report to the authorities that you are using our forest as a base for your treachery."

"Your forest, eh?" Whisper reached across and took the crop. He cracked it over his knee and, with a flourish, handed the pieces back to the man. He half closed his eyes, lowered his voice, and summoned a little of his considerable power. "Go now, or I shall put a curse upon your questionable manhood."

The girl clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle a gasp. She knew now what her rescuer was. Her eyes widened as she looked from one man to the other.

Samuel's face drained of colour. He was shaken but determined to stand his ground. "Her Majesty was right about your kind. I bid ye be gone." Even to his own ears, his voice lacked conviction.

Whisper summoned the rest of his coercive power and bellowed, "Go!"

Samuel's bladder gave vent to his terror and he fled. His fingers fumbled with his horse's bridle as he tried to mount on the run. Rich laughter mocked his escape. More than mocked—it fuelled his humiliation and set fire to his hatred. That gypsy and all his kin would be sorry, and so would that girl. He'd show her. There was no way he would allow her behavior to go unpunished.

Katherine watched with conflicting emotions. She'd never actually seen a gypsy in the flesh, but she'd heard stories about them. She chanced to look his way again. The way he watched her, with his eyes of twilight blue tinged with kindness, made her heart quicken.

Whisper watched the horror on her face soften to fascination. He held a hand out to assist her to her feet. "Are you all right?"

"I..." Katherine placed her small white hand in his large callused one and felt the gentleness of his strength. She straightened her clothes and tried not to think about how



close his tall, strong body was. "I thank you, kind sir." She glanced into the distance at her tutor. "I shall be in trouble now."

"Why?"

"It is a long story, sir. One I am sure you will not want to listen to." She couldn't help but stare at his darkly handsome features. "I really should go."

"Where do you live, girl?"

"Down there." She pointed to her father's holding. "If I do not start back now, my father will have my brother out after me. Especially if Mr. Pleasance returns alone" — she couldn't help but grin — "with his breeches in so shameful a condition."

"Are you sure you are fit for the ride? You look like you need a cup of mead first." He held out his hand. "Please, allow me."

"I..." She faltered. Instinct warred with curiosity. What should she do? Nice young ladies did not follow strange men into the woods. It was unseemly to be unchaperoned in the company of any male, but it was considered dangerous to talk to a gypsy. Mrs. Stokes had told her stories of what they did to women.

Whisper read her apprehension and smiled. "We will not be alone. Do you not trust me any more than that simpering fool?"

Katherine felt a blush creep up her face. "It is just that I do not know you, sir."

"My apologies." He gave a quick bow. "My name is Whisper. Until my people were outlawed, we entertained at pageants and fairs. I am a musician, a singer, a puppeteer." He winked. "Is that sufficient to earn your trust, my lady?"

She couldn't help but return the smile. "I am Katherine Browning. That" — she nodded at the speck that made its way across the patchwork of fields — "was Samuel Pleasance, my brother's tutor."

"And your betrothed?"

"An arrangement my father felt compelled to make."

He offered his arm and they walked along an overgrown forest track. "I would not find such an arrangement so satisfactory."

"But you are not my father." Katherine blushed at her temerity, but the man only smiled.

"No. Thank God."

Her eyes widened. "You believe in God?" She bit down on her lower lip. Why did she always blurt out what was on her mind? She'd been warned many times that her outspokenness would lead her to trouble.

Whisper laughed. "We are not savages, nor dealers in black magic. Nor are we murderers. Despite what I told that overstuffed popinjay, I could not put a curse on him even if I wanted to." It was a lie, of course, but only a small one to soothe the girl's nervous heart.

Katherine laughed despite her awkwardness. "He is really, is he not? Overstuffed."

Whisper decided he liked her musical laugh. It suited her well.

The track opened into a clearing where cooking pots bubbled over fires and children and large shaggy hounds raced about with unrestricted joy. Rounded tents, covered wagons and pushcarts were scattered around the perimeter. Beyond the carts, tethered

and hobbled horses cropped the sweet spring grass. Everywhere, there was wood smoke, noise, and laughter.

Whisper kept Katherine close to his side. He could feel her hesitation and did his best to reassure her of her safety, while his people, who must have seemed strangely dressed and loud to her genteel senses, stared at her with great curiosity. He wondered if she realised that they were as wary of her as she was of them.

Her grip tightened on his arm, and he smiled. Leading her over to his own fire, he seated her upon a dusted-down log. "Would you prefer a cup of spiced mead or an herbal tea?" He grinned at her stunned expression. "The herbs grow wild in the woods here. Nothing poisonous. Nothing magical."

"Oh, I...I did not mean..."

Whisper laughed. The girl was refreshingly innocent. "Come meet the English lady," he called out to the nearby benders and vardos. While his family gathered, he squatted to stoke the fire, ever mindful of his surroundings. They were being watched. He'd known it for several days now. The beast was nearby. He could feel its growing malevolence.

His people came from somewhere and nowhere. Katherine watched them materialize as if they had waited for Whisper to tell them it was all right to approach. One by one, they introduced themselves. Tilly, flamboyant, flirtatious; August, older, more cautious; the younger Catarina, all curiosity and questions. Then his puridai, Alexandrina, made her jingling appearance.

Katherine was shocked that the elderly woman smoked a clay pipe and blew smoke over everyone as she spoke. Her dark eyes were shrewd but when she smiled, they sparkled like jewels and lit her weathered face with merriment.

Katherine tried not to be self-conscious but the women's clothing, so colourful and finely woven, was very different from her own heavy, functional attire. They wore full skirts of a lighter material than she'd ever seen, dyed bright reds, yellows and blues, enhanced by elaborate embroidery and beading. Some had gold coins sewn to their hems and around the long fringed scarves tied at their waists. Everybody jingled when they walked. It gave Katherine the impression that music followed them everywhere. How she wished she could be more like them.

They talked, they finished each other's sentences, they bombarded her with questions, and laughed with abandon. Beside such butterflies, Katherine felt that she looked like a dour grey moth.

Whisper handed Katherine a clay mug of spiced mead. He watched as she sniffed the brew and knew she would be afraid to insult him. She took a sip. He laughed at her expression of surprised delight when she found the taste agreeable. When her gaze met his across the rim of the mug he smiled – a seductive, knowing, quirk of his lips.

"Tell me about your father and this...tutor."

Whisper's eyes seemed large and intent, his voice beguiling. Before she knew it, Katherine had unburdened herself. Only the crackle of the fire broke the silence that followed her tale. The noise outside their intimate circle faded into the scenery as if not wishing to intrude.

"So, in return for a bed, food, and your hand in marriage, Samuel Pleasance agreed to tutor your brother." Whisper thrust another faggot into the fire and looked at Katherine through the curtain of sparks. "I find that too high a price for a little learning."

She lowered her gaze. "My father thinks it just. Mr. Pleasance drew up a contract that included a statement that said, should we renege on any part of our agreement, our land would be forfeited to him by right of reason that he gave of his time and expertise. He deems it only fair that he would be entitled to some kind of reimbursement for his professional services. My father signed willingly." She met Whisper's stare straight on. "My father is an honest man, sir, but he has struggled since my mother died. He signed that contract in good faith. He thought he'd do the right thing by my brother, Thomas—and I, to a lesser degree—by giving us a chance of a proper education. In his own way, he means well."

"And so you are bound by your father's words, else he loses his farm to this..." He strove to find an adjective suitable for the ears of a woman. He expressed his opinion in a gesture that nobody, not even Katherine, misunderstood.

Katherine put aside her empty mug and stared into the flames. It was strange how comfortable she felt with these strangers. In one way, it was a release to tell them of her situation. Yet, in another way, that release only served to strengthen the bars she felt close in around her. It was nice that someone knew of her plight, but it still changed nothing.

Whisper watched as misery settled over her shoulders like a dank cloak. He imagined what it would be like to put his arm around those shoulders, to pull her close, press her body to his, turn that misery into desire and to feel her come alive to his touch.

Katherine straightened her back and took a deep breath. "I must return. I fear what my father might think."

From the shadows behind them, Fortune gave an almost imperceptible hand sign before he seeped back into obscurity.

Whisper gestured to his friend, then rose and held a hand out to Katherine. "I fear it grows late, my lady. I shall escort you back to the safety of your home before nightfall."

Behind her, Alexandrina sniggered. "Be careful, chal. The lady may mistake you for a gentleman." Everybody laughed.

Katherine feared that the older woman had mocked her. She said nothing, but she turned to search the woman's face for signs of amusement.

Alexandrina smiled.

Katherine saw the kindness that glowed in the depths of those darkest of eyes, along with a knowing so deep it almost frightened her.

Alexandrina took Katherine's left hand in her own. The girl's skin was soft, but tough—the hands of a farm girl. She opened Katherine's palm and made a cross sign on it with her forefinger. "For kushti bok," she whispered. "Good luck. Beware of one whose desire it is to possess you. Fear not, the stranger of the night. Learn to trust yourself, girl. You know your own heart, and you have good instincts to guide you."

Katherine would have snatched her hand back, but Alexandrina held tight.

"Know that you are safe among us, girl. Keep a strong heart to you." She patted Katherine's cheek and flounced away between the tents.

Whisper took Katherine's hand and led her back to the path. He was torn between the need to see her safely from the darkness of the forest before the beast began his hunt, and his own desire to make this walk last for as long as possible.

Katherine noticed an added intensity about Whisper. There was something guarded and dangerous about the way he walked. She wanted to say something but didn't know what. Slung across his back was an elaborately carved leather scabbard, and protruding from it, a heavy sword hilt displayed its wicked engravings. Was he wearing that before? How could she have missed it? Worried, Katherine kept her thoughts to herself.

Alexandrina's words skirled around in Whisper's mind. His puridai had never been known to be wrong, and in the silence between him and Katherine, the warning rang too loudly. So did her jest about being mistaken for a gentleman. She knew too much, that old chioviani.

Hoping words would break the spell of foreboding that crept across the forest as the shadows lengthened, Katherine summoned the courage to ask, "Why the sword? I have never seen its like before."

Her voice brought Whisper from his reverie. Her tone sounded much bolder than her trembling hand on his arm betrayed. He shifted the familiar weight of the broadsword into its place. "It was my father's sword, forged and wielded by his father, then passed on down to me. I always keep it near, of that you can be assured." He smiled down at her. "I would not be caught without it. Especially not while this creature I've heard tales about stalks these parts."

He broke pace and stared into her eyes. It was a sore temptation to not take her back, to not deliver her into the hands of that weasel. Instead, he could show her what it would be like to be loved by a real man. He could take her to heights she could never imagine alone in her virginal bed. Her pupils flared and he felt her heart quicken with innocent desire. The heat of her blood sang to his senses. Whisper shoved those thoughts away. "Have you seen him?"

"Him?"

"It. This thing that attacks livestock and unwary travellers."

"No." She was mesmerised by his gaze again. So blue, so deep... She shook her head to clear her mind. "No, I have not. But my father and brother found some of our sheep dead and drained of blood." She shuddered. "I have heard stories in the village. Do you suppose they could be true?"

"No doubt some of them are." He stopped and placed both hands on her shoulders. He searched her eyes for hidden truths, but found only guileless innocence and fear. "Katherine, you are afraid."

She nodded, unable to speak beyond the fire that radiated from his hands and raged through her body like molten lava.

"Good. Fear makes you beware." He tilted her chin upwards. "I want you to take care." He watched her lips part and noted the heaving of her bosom. Her want for him

was palpable. His own body sang with the same heat that coursed through hers. How sweet it would be to kiss that mouth, to have her kiss him back, touch him, caress him, want him...

Madness! He told himself. God, why do you torture me with such temptation? He stepped away and walked on, still too much aware of her nearness. Not for the first time, he cursed what he had become.

The day was almost at a close. Whisper didn't want Katherine to be caught out in the open when night came. Danger dwelt in darkness. Or is it, he thought, that I do not want her to see the true nature of myself? He lengthened his stride.

He didn't understand why it mattered so much to him that this one woman should not see him as he truly was. Perhaps it was the way she looked at him. Perhaps it was her innocence, or that she saw him as a man of worth and honour. Whatever it was she saw in him, it made him desire her more each moment, and that made him all the more determined not to give in to his basest of animal instincts—his desire for blood.

Whisper increased their pace and kept his senses alert. He didn't know when he first became aware of it, but he knew they were being followed. His sensitive hearing picked up sounds Katherine was oblivious to. It was a deliberate stalking. The hunter waited for the moment his prey would be most vulnerable. Whisper knew that moment would be soon, and that the predator had the advantage on this entangled pathway. He looked ahead for a clearer space, somewhere he could swing the sword.

"What is it?" Katherine sensed his change of attitude. She peered into the shadowed forest.

"Chiss!" Pretending to stoop for a kiss, he whispered in her ear, "Keep walking." He stared into her worried eyes, willing her to obey. "Trust me. I have placed a charm upon you so that no harm will befall you. If I tell you to run, run. And I warn you, if you look back, you will see things that nightmares are made of. Now, walk." He held her hand upon his arm, and projected an air of nonchalance.

Katherine strained every sense to hear or see what made Whisper so edgy. That she could discern nothing only made her more nervous. She clung to his arm. In him, she could determine no fear, just an uncommon stillness.

Close. Closer. The hairs on the back of Whisper's neck rose. It was Santez, and he was on the hunt. He could sense him the way kindred knew their own blood. It was an instinct. He'd waited so long for this moment that he dare not miss this chance. However, here was no place for a final reckoning. Not in front of Katherine, he prayed. Please God, if you can listen to one such as I, please do not make her bear witness to this.

The cleared land was just ahead. Too late. The predator was near. Whisper knew the attack would come before they reached the open. With both hands, he freed the sword from its scabbard. "Be still, Katherine."

She froze. What could he hear that she couldn't?

Santez came from the rear. Whisper whirled about. Like a wary badger, he was unleashed ferocity. He shoved Katherine behind him.

Santez stepped onto the pathway, eyes aglow, fangs gleaming. "So you want to defend your prey, gypsy!" His gaze flickered over the frightened girl. "If you think she is worth saving, perhaps I should save her for myself, no?" He laughed and advanced a couple of steps, careful to keep a respectful distance between his own light longsword and the much longer reach of that deadly broadsword.

"Forget her, Santez. I know it is me you want." Whisper edged backwards in an attempt to draw Santez towards open ground. He didn't think he'd be fooled by that old ruse, but it might give Katherine a better chance for escape. "Do not tell me one such as you is afraid of me."

Santez snarled. "Afraid of you?" He laughed. "I created you. You and I are as one."

Whisper tightened his grip on his sword. "I will never be like you."

Santez circled their tight arena. "You are me. Do not deny you lust for blood the same way I do. You crave it. You take it wherever you can. You can't get enough of it." His eyes, like embers, ignited when his gaze came to rest on the frightened face of the girl. "So much the sweeter when virginal, no?" His stare challenged Whisper. "Deny that you want to drink her blood. Deny that you want it so bad you can already taste it."

Whisper glanced at Katherine. The haunted gaze that caught at the edge of his vision sent a chill up his spine.

"Deny it!"

"Whisper?" Katherine took a step backwards.

Santez laughed. "Tell her what you are, gypsy."

"Enough, Santez! Your quarrel is with me." He lunged forward swinging the sword, but Santez moved quicker. By the time the six-span blade had completed its arc, Whisper found Santez between himself and Katherine.

Nothing would have pleased Santez more than to have seized the girl and taken her right in front of Whisper, but the gypsy demanded all his concentration, and the girl slipped beyond his reach. He snarled, half crouching, ready to spring. "I should have made you wholly a vampire when I had the chance."

"You were never strong enough, Santez. My will was stronger than yours then, and it is even stronger now. Try me."

"No." Santez's voice was a low growl; his instinct for blood was overtaking his reason. He fought it. He had to keep control. "I no longer desire your company for eternity. I shall rip your throat out and feast on your heart tonight."

Katherine edged into the clearing, never letting her attention slip from the two men who still circled each other. A vampire? No. That could not be. Whisper was so nice, so gentle. And he came out in the daylight. Were those frightful stories not true, then? Could vampires hunt during the day as well as the night?

As she edged towards her horse, Alexandrina's eyes came into her mind. What were the gypsy woman's words? It seemed important that she remember. Beware of one who desires you and trust the dangerous one? Or was it the other way about? What was it about strangers? Her mind was in turmoil. Should she run? Should she go for help? Flee and never look back as Whisper had told her? She caught her foot and stumbled.

Fearful that the man called Santez might have seen her fall, she turned, but both men were too busy to notice. Kirtling her skirt, Katherine ran to her horse and mounted. Without looking back, she kicked her mare into a full gallop for home.

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"Father!" Katherine's horse skidded to a halt outside the house. "Father!"

Unfortunately, it wasn't John Browning who came through the door first, it was Samuel Pleasance. He tore the reins from her grasp. "Temptress!" He seized her by the arm and dragged her to the ground.

"Father, come quickly."

"Harlot!" Samuel's expression was a mask of hatred as he breathed his hot breath into her face.

"Father!"

John Browning strode from the house and walked over to feel the horse's neck. "You have her all a-lather. It is almost dark, she could have stepped in a hole and broken a leg. Whatever were you thinking, Katherine?"

"Father, please. You must listen to me."

John could not make himself look upon his daughter's face. "Get inside at once."

Katherine wrenched free of Samuel's grasp and stood before her father and brother. "Come with me father, Thomas. Whisper has the vampire on the forest track. He is fighting for his life."

Samuel stepped between them. "Can you see now that I spoke the truth? The girl raves. She has been with those gypsies and now she tries to turn your mind from her wilfulness."

Katherine pushed him aside. "No, father. Listen to me. All the butchered stock, the murders—it was a vampire called Santez. Whisper has him cornered. Quickly, we must help him!"

John's brow creased. "Vampire?"

Katherine looked from her father to her brother. Even Thomas stared at her as though she'd gone mad. It was clear Samuel's poisonous tongue had already been at work against her.

Samuel grasped John's arm, his voice derisive. "The girl is full of fancy, John. She lies to take your mind from what she has done. She has been alone with that...that filthy gypsy. She has disgraced you, John, and dishonored me. Must you let her get away with such wilfulness? I assure you, I want no wife who behaves so."

John sighed and gestured to his daughter. "Into the house, girl. Do you wish Samuel to reconsider his offer?"

She wanted to say yes, but the plea in her father's eyes silenced her. She stormed up to her room and slammed the door. How could she have been so stupid? Of course, Samuel would have lied to her father. She should have returned straight away. Should have. Her mind and her emotions were in chaos. Please, God, please do not let the vampire kill Whisper.

She paced while she waited for her father's knock at the door. Outside her window, the sky darkened, and with it, her anxiety grew. Footsteps came at last. Katherine ran to the door. "Father, is that you?" She had her hand upon the latch when she heard a lock slide through the catch on the outside of the door. A key turned. She was trapped. "Father! Father please..."

Her frustration grew with the deepening twilight.

By the time darkness had descended, it was clear that her punishment was to be locked up until morning. She tried the door again. It was still locked. Damn him! she thought. Damn Samuel Pleasance to Hell! She sent a quick prayer to God to forgive her this outburst, but under the circumstances, she didn't think He'd look upon her too unkindly.

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Whisper was tired. Santez was toying with him. He fainted forward, then back, first from the front, then from behind. He wanted him tired. Wanted him to lose the sword so he could move in for the kill.

Not this time, Whisper thought. I have waited too long for this and tracked you too far. Your savagery ends here, Santez de Aragon. Patience was the key. He must overcome his mortal sentiments and meet the immortal with cool confidence.

Santez fought down his impatience. He was running out of time and that damned gypsy knew it. As the shadows deepened, his blood lust grew stronger, more difficult to control. He must end this now, once and for all, or flee and have the gypsy hunting him through all eternity. Better to kill him than try again to turn him. Whisper was a mistake. His lust for a taste of the handsome, virile young man had blinded him to the fact that he was not suited to the unlife of a vampire. Santez found out too late that gypsy blood was tainted by values too deep to be spurned. Gypsy blood was a good feast, but gypsy morality was unpalatable. He would end this mistake's life, then move on to the richer hunting grounds of London, or perhaps return to his old haunt, Notre Dame.

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Katherine made her decision. Neither her father nor her brother would listen; she would have to take matters into her own hands. She opened her window shutters and shimmied out. The kitchen was on the other side of the house, so nobody heard her scramble down the vine-covered wall and dash across to the yard where their mare stood beside Samuel's showy mount.

Both horses pricked their ears and whickered. Katherine slipped the bridle over the mare's neck and led her through the gate. There was no time for saddling. She climbed on the fence and drew the horse close so she could mount. Samuel's horse neighed and kicked up his heels, eager to be included in their second big adventure for the day.



Katherine abandoned all stealth and urged the mare into a gallop across the fields towards Charnwood Forest. She hoped the horse knew her way well enough by moonlight not to stumble. Behind her, she heard her brother yell and knew they would soon pursue. Her only hope now was to reach Whisper and the gypsies before she was caught.

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Had Whisper enough breath, he would have yelled at Katherine to go back, but all he could manage was a groan when he caught sight of her on the pathway. Why had she returned? His concentration wavered and Santez made a lunge for his sword. Whisper stumbled back and only just managed to deflect the blow. He had to keep focussed.

Katherine didn't know how both men could fight in the dark. She could see little enough through the filtered moonlight. Two dark shapes circled and lunged while the steel of their swords flashed. Now that she was there, she was unsure of what to do. A rustle to the side caught her attention.

"Only us, luv." Alexandrina caught her arm. "Leave them be."

Katherine squinted around. Tilly was there with others whose faces she couldn't make out. A tall man moved to her side and rested a hand on her shoulder.

"Ain't nothin' you can do, miss. This bin comin' a long time. They must 'ave it out."

Katherine looked up into a face too strong boned to be handsome, too full of character to be otherwise.

"Name's Fortune, miss. Me an' Whisper's bin friends since we wuz chauvis."

Katherine took what comfort she could in the press of bodies around her. How much longer could this go on? Whisper staggered under the weight of that enormous sword. He looked like he didn't have the strength to lift it one more time. "Fortune, why does nobody stop them?"

"Ain't no good, miss. Only Whisper can kill the likes of 'im. We'd only get in the way."

She wanted to ask more, but Santez's breathy laugh stole the moment.

"Give it up, gypsy. Surrender to me and I might just deem you worthy of eternal life."

"I would rather die."

"What makes you so sure I would kill you?"

"You were going to feast on my heart tonight. Remember?"

"Perhaps I have changed my mind."

"You will not get the chance."

"Ah, such noble sentiments. If you were more of a man, you would embrace the eternity I offer."

Whisper stopped circling and rested the sword tip on the ground. "All you offer is eternal damnation. I have lived long enough to know that." He released his grip on the hilt with one stiff hand and tore open his shirt to reveal his neck. "Come on Santez. I still have mortal blood in my veins. Take me!"

Santez could smell the heat of Whisper's blood and hear his quickened pulse. Devil take the man, he taunted him beyond all reason. He snarled as the heat in his loins answered the call of blood. He readied himself to leap at the gypsy's throat and would have done so if some fool hadn't blundered between them.

"Where is Katherine?"

Katherine stifled a scream. Samuel Pleasance stood between Whisper and the vampire, his eyes wild and his wispy hair at all angles.

"I demand to—"

Santez attacked.

Whisper hefted the sword but he was too late. Santez seized the man and ripped his throat out with one savage bite. He dropped him to the ground in an unbelieving heap of dying flesh.

Katherine turned her face into Fortune's shoulder. Samuel was a despicable man, but this... No man deserved such an end.

Santez paused to step over the body. That was all the time Whisper needed. He swung the sword in a sideways arc that severed the vampire's head from his shoulders. It thumped to the ground and rolled to a stop beside Samuel Pleasance. Santez's body remained on his feet for an unbearable moment, one hand outstretched towards him, then gracefully slumped to the bloody forest floor.

Whisper felt nauseous. He could not tear his gaze from the carnage. Santez's body began to smoke. It gradually dissolved into a fine white ash. A breeze swirled from somewhere and carried it away. All that was left was Samuel's still form, his eyes staring an accusation at him. Whisper dropped the sword and stumbled away, unable to clear his mind of those images—Santez's head bouncing like a child's toy across the ground, Samuel with his throat torn out, not understanding he was already dead.

Katherine ran to support Whisper as he swayed towards her.

He held her for a moment. He savored the sweet smell of her hair, the feel of her body against his, and then he stepped back to hold her at arm's length. He looked over the top of her head to meet the wild stares of John Browning and his son Thomas. "Your land is safe now. Safe from the beast and safe from..." Words failed him as he looked back at the tutor's body.

Katherine turned to her father. He opened his arms for her to go to him. She turned back to look up into Whisper's face. "I love you," she said.

"I know. But this life is not for you, and I could never be anything other than what I am. Santez worked his evil too well." He kissed her, slow and achingly, making her feel the depth of his pain and desire. He released her and returned her wearily into her father's arms.

As John led his daughter away, he paused to look into the eyes of the gypsy. "Your people will always be welcome on my land."

Whisper watched them dissolve into the darkness. Regret filled his every fibre. Which regret stung hardest? That she loved him? That he hadn't taken her to his bed? That she'd seen him for what he was and had still loved him? Or that he could never return her love?

"Whisper."

The voice was soft. It spoke to his soul in a way no other could. His cold heart filled with warmth.

"Tilly." He said nothing more. For them, no words were needed to express the dance of souls that knew each other as their only love.

Into the woods they walked, arms entwined. Tonight he would take her, and she would take him. Mind to mind, body to body, soul to soul, blood to blood. Tonight, they would sate their hunger with each other. What God would witness, no man would tear asunder. Whisper suppressed a shudder. No mortal man, at least. There were others like Santez. He didn't yet know where they were, but he could feel them out there... waiting...

He tightened his arms around Tilly and allowed the urgency of her desire to infect him. Time would be their playground now.

The others faded away—back to their fires and tents, to their joys and sorrows, to their lives of endless open roads.

Fortune sighed. He'd lost count of the hunts, the kills, the throatless innocents buried where no-one would find them. He took up his pick and shovel, then bent to the task of making sure the face of Samuel Pleasance was remembered no more.

## *About the Author*

Author, artist and Gypsy stone reader, **Brittany Kingston** has won countless competitions for poetry and short stories in several genres, most of which have appeared in publications both online and in print. Her articles on the art of writing have been published in magazines and ezines all over the world. When she's not chasing cattle all over Glenloth or creating elemental spiritual artworks in ink, Brittany Kingston immerses herself in her science fiction writing and follows her alien characters through countless adventures all over the multiverse. Her poetry anthologies *Where the Night Things Are* and *Whisperings of the Soul* are currently available from Eternal Press, as is her historical vampire story *The Sword of Anubis*. Her short story "The Music Box" is included in the *Paranormal Bedtime Stories Anthology*.

You can find Brittany online at <http://www.freewebs.com/brittanykingston>

Her official blog site is <http://www.authorsmind.blogspot.com>

*Available now from Eternal Press*

# *The Sword of Anubis*

*by Brittany Kingston*

Morgan de Ventana has tracked his archenemy, the vampire Nicolai Kesslanski, to a small bookshop in Paris where, finally, he has the chance to avenge the murder of his father. But what was it Kesslanski so desperately sought that he'd kill an old man to get his hands on it?

India has protected a secret all her life. Her parents were murdered for it by Nicolai Kesslanski years ago. Now, her grandfather, the only family she has left, lies dead. Should she trust the tall, dark stranger who comes to her aid? India is prepared to die to keep the secret from Kesslanski, but is she also willing to risk Morgan's life?

"Please, India, tell me what you know."

She raised her chin and looked into his eyes. "I know nothing."

Morgan shook his head. She was lying. Frustration welled up inside him. He wanted to scream. He wanted to take her by the shoulders and shake the information out of her. He ran a hand through his disheveled hair. Most of it pulled free from the tie at the back to fall across his face.

Violence would not get him what he wanted. He made a placating gesture with his hands and took a deep breath. When he spoke again, his voice was ragged with the strain of the long, hard road he'd taken to find the vampire. "Nicolai was once my father's friend. He murdered him the same way he killed your grandfather. For months I have tracked him and tried to get close enough to kill him. I almost had him in London. He must not escape again." He stared at her, willing her to see the pain and the need in his eyes. "Tell me what you know, please. I will avenge your family as well as my own."

India shook her head. "I don't know that I can trust you, Morgan. It could mean the end of my life. Or worse. Nicolai Kesslanski might get his hands on the one thing that has the power to make him invincible. That same power is the only thing capable of destroying him. If he gets his hands on it..." She shuddered. "No. I have to protect it."

"Please, India." Morgan's eyes beseeched her.

India hesitated. "I am sorry. I cannot tell you what you want to know."

*Brittany Kingston*

*Available now from Eternal Press*

*Dracula Doesn't Live Here any More*

*by Brian L. Porter*

Freelance journalist Alan Dexter and Christina, a beautiful but mysterious Romanian News Agency representative, journey deep into the ancient land of Transylvania to investigate a series of so-called "vampire" murders. High in the Carpathian Mountains, a raging storm develops, and an unknown presence lies in wait for the unwary traveler. As the night closes in and darkness envelops the young couple, Dexter is about to discover the secret of the murders and the truth behind Christina's enigmatic smile...or is he?

Her lips tightened, and she looked away. "There are things you should know before we go any further. Forget about the vampires described by such men as your Bram Stoker. He was very clever in his mix of truth and fiction, but the people here take vampirism quite seriously, and Stoker was inaccurate in much of his data."

"In what way?" Dexter frowned.

"Well, for a start, vampires, contrary to Stoker, can actually move about in daylight, though their powers are greatly reduced. Secondly, they do not feed exclusively on human blood. They can take cattle or fowl, or indeed any living thing, though of course human blood is the ultimate feast for the undead. Most of the time they eat whatever they can get, often the same food as ordinary humans. It keeps them alive, but in a weakened state.

"It is said that all vampires must feast on human blood every so often in order to maintain their human form, so a vampire may go months, maybe years, without tasting human and then go on a feeding frenzy when the need becomes imperative. If they are unable to fulfil their hunger, they become shriveled, and eventually nothing more than amorphous entities, condemned to inhabit a sort of half-world between the light and the darkness, losing forever the ability to hold onto their corporeal bodies. It must be a tragic sight to see a vampire losing its hold on bodily substance, Dexter, or at least, so the story goes."

*Available now from Eternal Press*

# *Paranormal Bedtime Stories*

*(An anthology of sexy supernatural tales)*

*Featuring "The Music Box"*

*by Brittany Kingston*

Steven Croft returns to his grandparents' property after his grandfather's death, where everything is as he remembered. However, a small antique music box that plays a haunting tune threatens to unravel the illusions of his idyllic childhood.

Enjoy this excerpt from "The Music Box", a haunting tale of treachery and betrayal:

He didn't know when he became aware of it, but Steve knew he wasn't alone in the darkness. A presence touched his cheek and caressed his neck.

He was asleep and dreaming, he thought. Or was he awake? His eyes were open, he was certain, but it was too dark to see. It mattered not. He couldn't move.

"Steeeeeeeeeve," a feminine voice whispered in his ear. "I've been waiting for you."

There was a breath on his cheek. Lips brushed against his. Hands traced the line of his shoulders, and fingers played through his hair as light as a breeze.

Hands, more solid now, moved in circular motions across his chest. This time, the touch of lips was no mere whisper. Her mouth was on his, claiming, wanting, coaxing his desire.

He parted his lips and allowed her tongue to explore his mouth. A soft groan escaped him at the fire that spread from her kiss right through his body, teasing his senses, bringing him alive.

"Who are...?"

*Brittany Kingston*

*Available now from Eternal Press*

## *Whisperings of the Soul*

*by Brittany Kingston*

A Gypsy storyteller draws upon her rich Romani heritage as inspiration for her poetry. Insightful, ancient and modern, these poems reveal a timeless depth of spirit and emotion. From the first page to the last, you'll be drawn into a journey of love, sorrow, laughter and beauty as she weaves her magic web of words upon the pages of this simple but beautifully presented book.

### *Fortune Teller*

crystal ball  
river stones  
tarot cards  
a bowl of bones  
holy water  
rosary beads  
an ankh, a cat  
a bag of seeds  
diamond earrings  
string of pearls  
gold and silver  
skirt that swirls  
rings of onyx  
ruby, sapphire  
lithely dance  
around the fire  
eyes that see  
beyond this world  
a woman, a hag  
a crone, a girl  
trust, believe  
give me something  
to keep  
and I will tell you  
of what you  
seek



*Storm Rider*

Silver pinions across the ocean  
Cast your freedom to the storm  
Ride the night of time and motion  
Before the febrile heart is torn.

Inclement fury, phosphorus flashes  
Faint of heart is not for thee  
Amid the tempest's wildest clashes  
Glimpse of Gypsy running free.

Eyes of flame enhance excitement  
Dare him to your virgin bed  
He will take you to enchantment  
Then leave before the night is dead.

You can't tempt nor can you capture  
A heart as feral as blizzard snow  
You can enfold, you can enrapture  
Until it's time for him to go.

Soul of fire, ice and beauty  
Steal his heart then set it free  
You can't know the soul of Gypsy  
In your heart he'll always be.