

"BOLD, DARING AND MEMORABLE." PHIL EARLE



# RIVERSKIN

MIKE EDWARDS

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WALKER  
BOOKS

# For Stephen M.E.

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EU Authorized Representative: HackettFlynn Ltd  
36 Cloch Choirneal, Balrothery, Co. Dublin, K32 C942, Ireland  
EU@walkerpublishinggroup.com

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# Don't Wake Uncle Darkwater

Uncle Darkwater's in his pit and I'm in kitchum sloshing up soop. I don't want to wake him so I'm trying to be hush-soft. I've torn up perch fin and toad leg but I need a bloaty pot to sloosh-stir proper.

I soft-pad across kitchum floor, spreading my toe webbing to cush my steps and stepping light through puddle-pools. The pots are stacked at the top of a loom-high hollow. I'm going to have to clamber-climb.

Aunt Peg would tell me to bide till she comes. But Aunt Peg's out river gathering, and I want to show I *can* mek soop. Lately, Aunt Peg's soop ain't been like it used to be.

Aunt Peg ain't been like *she* used to be.

I frog-hop to a hollow ledge. This one's lined with bottles Aunt Peg's collected. Mingling scents of tadpole, eel skin, river froth, bulrush leaf. The bottles clink. I steady them.

Clamber to the next hollow, edging a little way up the turns. It's piled with old gathering-sacks and skittered with fish bone, crunchy under my feet. Higher I go, I hear river above me. A steady shooshshoosh.

Another climb. The floor below begins to look swirly. Don't eye down. Be calmwaters. Always calmwaters.

One more climb and I can almost reach the handle of the pot. I stretch. So close. The pots are wobble-stacked.

Almost. Got. It.

Don't eye down, Tess, I tell myself. But I *do* and the floor is a blur. My chest tightens; my breaths get huffhuff. No. Not now. Stay calmwaters.

*Crash!*

The tower of pots rains down on me. Bottles are knocked skittering. I fall hard and land flat-slap on shards of glass. Pain stabs at my back.

Then, a wall-shuddering whoosh-roar from the pit.

***What's that ruckus? I'll snap em in two! I'll snicker-snack em!***

A heavy clang-clank, Unkle straining against his chains. A scrambling and scratching sound as he claws the pit sides.

Above my head, I hear river getting faster. Unkle's temper is stirring the water up. More Unkle grawls, the stronger river runs. The pools on the ground start to burble.

Calmwaters. I need to stay calmwaters. Calmwaters means not being all panic and fretty. It means breathun steady, not gulpy and heave-huff.

I hear the words of my Aunt Peg. *Remember, Tess, the pit is deep and the chains are strong.*

"The pit is deep and the chains are strong," I hush to myself.

***That you, Tess?*** Unkle Darkwater's voice is deep-gargly.

I bide still.

A clang-clang-clank of chains.

***Come see yer unkle.***

I don't move. Aunt Peg bids me not to go near the pit,



especially when she ain't around.

***It's yer aunt keeps you away, ain't it?***

A scrape and screech as Unkle claws the walls.

***She's lying to yer.***

"I'm not lissening, Unkle!" I sink my teeth into my lip.

***There you are! Come here, my girl. Let me see yer face.***

His voice is soft and pity-laced. I tek a step forward, closer to the turn that leads down to his pit.

***Yer a prisoner, just like me.***

"That's enough!" A new voice comes whooshing into kitchum. It's Aunt Peg, her head up-popping from a hole in the floor. Her yellor eyes are shiny and wide. "Stay *there*, our Tess, don't lissen to yer unkle. Calmwaters now."

Another clank-clawing roar from the pit.

Aunt Peg heaves herself up into kitchum, dragging bulging gathering-sacks behind her. She scoops up a slithery stripy pike from one of the sacks and gnashes it between her jaws, its long spiky mouth blending with hers. Then she raises a hand. Her twiggy fingers, the webbing between them leafy, bids me stay where I am.

Aunt Peg ducks into the pit turns, slipping into the dark. Unkle is hush now, the roaring replaced with a low breathy rumble. I can hear Aunt Peg's footsteps, splashing through pooled water. Getting fainter the deeper she goes, closer to the pit.

A whoosh sound, summit slapped against wall.

I picktur that long fat pike released from Aunt Peg's jaws and falling through the dark. Unkle Darkwater's bloodied eyes. His gaping mouth. Those teeth.

Bone crunching, flesh tearing, spitting and hacking.

Unkle is feeding.



# The Pit

“That fat pike will keep Unkle hush for a time,” Aunt Peg says, “but he needs his slumber mix. Fetch a bottle, our Tess.”

We’re going down to the pit edge to give Unkle his slumber mix. We do this whenever his grawling gets moremore.

I get a chest-tight feelun as I swift to the hollows. This is where Aunt Peg keeps her bottles of bulrush balm, toad-slick salve, potions and powders to ease gut-ache and tooth-rot. Only nowt is where it should be. Aunt Peg used to keep everything in the same place. That was one of her sayings: *Everything in its place proper*. If she said bulrush balm was on a low hollow, it was *always* on a low hollow. Now Aunt Peg puts bulrush balm on a high hollow or not even on a hollow – she leaves it on the chopping

stone, open, or dropped on the floor all spilled out.

Unkle's slumber mix is the most important. It keeps him slug-slow, stops him from trying to gnaw and snap his chains. We *need* that mixur. Where is it?

I feel the hollow where Unkle's mixur should be but there's nowt but empty bottles, rotted leaf and fish bone. I check the hollows around it. No – just pots of scale-slap, powdered perch fin, stickleback strips.

"Aunt Peg," I say, fret rising. "We ain't got none of Unkle's slumber mix."

She's mood-swirly, Aunt Peg. Her temper changes like river currents. Slumped sorrow-sobbing one moment; next, all swift and *go-go-go*.

"It's where it *always* is, Tess!" Aunt Peg gibbles like it's me who's mind-slipping. She swoops to a hollow where the mix has *never* been kept and pulls out allsorts jumble-junk, feathers and tattered sacks, until she finds a bottle of Unkle's slumber mix.

She beamy smiles. "Everything in its place proper!"

"But, Aunt Peg, that *ain't* where... No matter."

Focus now. Going down to the pit, I need to be mind-sharp. I tek a deep breath and step towards the pit turns.



Aunt Peg is holding the bottle close to her face, gazing at the yeller-green mixur. She gives it a shake, gibbles at the froth.

“We ready, Aunt Peg?”

“Ready for what, love?” She eyes me puzzled.

“We’re giving Unkle his slumber mix, remember? Unkle’s been louderlouder, his moods fastwaters. He needs steadying.”

“Oh! Aye, corse we are! You follow me, Tess.”

*The pit is deep and the chains are strong.*

The pit turns are chest-squeezy, so we drop and belly-slither. The walls scrape rough against my skin. I try to gulp slow-steady but I feel my lungs working fast. Dark too. I know gloom but this is *true* dark, where everything is *more*. Aunt Peg’s scurry-shuffle ahead is louder; every rock she dislodges, every pool she splish-splashes through, is *more*.

Unkle is more.

The crick-crack of his jaws. His deep huff-snarls. The rattle and rasp of his chest. His rotty stink. Unkle Darkwater is the smell of river dredge and scum.

The turns slope deepdeep and then open wide.

The sink, that's what Aunt Peg calls this place sometimes. Kitchum has a stone sink, dumped in river by dry-folk: a heavy-heft bowl Aunt Peg uses to slush-slop mixurs. It's got a glug-hole in bottom, so we have to stuff it with cork to keep the mixur in. That's what it's like down here, like we're in a great sink close to the stinking glug-hole.

There's a scatter of bone and filth around the pit. Over the pit mouth are thick planks of wood, criss-crossing like a roof. At the side is a hefty rock, and lashed around the rock is a bulky coil of chains. The chains snake down and cross-cut the pit like rusty spiderweb. Deepdown there, chains heavy over him, is Unkle.

"Now, Tess, yer unkle's going to grawl *big*. You don't lissen. Let his dark words wash over you. Keep back and hold them chains tight."

She's calm-steady. It's a flash of how she used to be, how she still *can* be sometimes. Eyeing her that way meks me calm-steady too.

"Aye, Aunt Peg." I nod.

Aunt Peg moves to the pit side. She's walking tall, head up. I stay behind the weighty stone.

I've got to keep the chains tight. I wrap them around the rock and heave hard so Unkle can't roam. The tighter the chains, the more time Aunt Peg has to shift the wood off the pit top and get the slumber mix dropped on Unkle.

I feel the chains shake and pull.

***You've come to poison me, ain't yer?***

I lift the hefty chains and pull harder, lashing links around the rock and digging my heels into the ground. Unkle gives a roar.

***I'll bite yer in half, yer old trout!***

"A bit more, Tess, you've almost got him pinned."

The chains are thrashy and so heavy. My legs tremble and my hands burn as Unkle pulls against them.

"Aunt Peg! I can't hold much longer!"

"Hello, you!" Aunt Peg's voice ain't calm-steady no more. It's gibbly and soft. "What are you doing scurry-scrambling around here?"

There's a rat spinning circles at her feet. Aunt Peg ain't eyeing into the pit; she's distracted by a pesty rat!

"Aunt Peg!" I hiss. The chains are whipping and tugging away from me. "Aunt Peg! It's just a rat. *Drop the bottle!*"

Aunt Peg gives the rat a tickle under its chin.

“You like that, don’t you? Ain’t you sweet!”

“Aunt Peg!”

The chains yank forward. The force meks me lose my grip, the chains wriggling like eels. I’m knocked flat on my back and my feet are snared in the coils, pulling me towards the pit.

“Help!”

“Clever little thing, ain’t you?” Aunt Peg’s still larking with that rat.

On my back, I’m dragged through bone-strewn mulch towards the pit. A stench rises from the black, meks me hack. Closer still, until my feet teeter over the pit edge.

***Down yer come, my girl.***

“Aunt Peg! The bottle!”

Still Aunt Peg is gawping at that rat scurrying on the pit edge.

I try to dig my hands into the mud but can’t grip as Unkle pulls hard again. I bump-slide over the edge and hang dangling against the pit side, the chain lashed taut across me.



***Where d’you think yer going?***

Above me, a swish of that rat’s tail. I hoy my hand up and snatch hold of the pesty thing. It squeals and squirms in my grip.

*That* got Aunt Peg’s eye.

She drops and gawps into the pit, eyes darting thiswaythat.

“Tess? What you doing in there?”

Another roar from Unkle, hot spit-fleck breath on my dangling feet.

***She stole yer. Yer trapped just like me!***

*Stole me?* What’s Unkle talking on?

Aunt Peg gasps. “Get out of there, Tess! Yer unkle’s awake!”

She eyes the bottle in her hand and final remembers. The dreamy look vanishes and she’s Aunt Peg again.

A grab at my leg as Unkle claws my flesh. I can feel the heft of him, his strength building as he tightens his grip. And his words, which seem to hold me as tight as his fingers.

***She snatched yer down here. She’s lying to yer.***

A whoosh of air and the bottle spins down past me

and shatters. Aunt Peg's got Unkle. Doused him good. A cloud fills the pit and Unkle splutters and snorts below me. A heavy slump-crash as he drops, bashing against the pit sides.

I snap my mouth tight shut but not before I'm caught up in the cloud-swirl too. My eyes sting, I splutter-hack and sudden my head feels dizzy-swimmy. Aunt Peg leans over and pulls me out of the pit, hauling me and the tangle of chains onto the ground. I lie gulp-gasping. I swear I still feel his grip on me, heavier than the chains.

Aunt Peg unpicks the chains, helps me to my feet. I lean against her and we mek to scramble-crawl back up through the pit turns, but I feel stone-hefty, like I'm dragging a great coil of Unkle's chains behind me.

"Tess? Tess?" Aunt Peg shakes me, her voice fretty.

She's disappearing. The air around her turns blurry-black, till it's just her voice in the dark.

Then nowt.



# The Grotty Turns

I'm standing by river, eyeing across the surface. It's calmwaters, as flat and shiny as a mirror. I duck down at the edge and eye my reflexun. I'm me but I'm not me. I ain't got my river-worn skin; my hair is clean and sleek. I dip my hand into the water, cup it in my palm and let it run clear through my fingers. No webbing, no algae-green skin.

Sun is shining, a hazy summer-white light. I turn and walk up the bankside. In the distance there is a large house. Outside the house, I can just mek out tiny shapes of people waiting, waving.

Their blurry shapes start to become more solid but before I can true eye them, summit snaps at my legs. I'm dragged down the bank through the swish to river. I hit the water, thrashing in swirl and froth. I scream *Let me*

go! but the force ignores my cries and I'm pulled down into the deep.

That's when I wake, and I'm back in the grotty turns.

We don't live *in* river but we live closeclose. Updown riverbank are allsorts nooks and slips in the bankside. Covered by green swish, tucked behind twists of tree root, buried between rocks. Some are just under the surface; some disappear and appear again with river's rise and fall. Some are dug deepdeep close to riverbed. Most are narrow and chest-squeezy, others like great gawpy mouths, with jaggy rock teeth updown them. It's through these hollow-holes that Aunt Peg and me slip to reach the turns.

The turns are twisting tunnels that worm updown inout riverbank. They are narrow and stoopy most time but herethere they open up wide into great bowl-like spaces like where Aunt Peg has made us a home.

There's kitchum, where I spend plenty time, mekking soops and sorting through gatherings. Sometimes Aunt Peg calls kitchum *the pot* cus of the high curvy-smooth sides where rows of shelves are lined with kans and bottles of greedyents for mekking soops, medcins and



mixurs. In the middle of kitchum is the round stone where we chop and jaw-gnaw the gatherings. There's dry-folk stuff here too. A ketul, which is a jug that Aunt Peg fills with water nowthen and she eyes it like it's doing summit but I've never fathomed what; and a mike-crow-wave, which is nowt but a square box with a door. The mike-crow-wave is good for storing stuff out of reach of rats but I ain't sure what else.

Kitchum also has a hollow where we keep a fire, smoke rising high like steam off soop. It certun feels like I'm at the bottom of a deep pot when I wake now, head still dizzy-spinning, and eye up at kitchum's curvy-loomy walls.

"Tess?" Aunt Peg is huddled over me, fretty. "Tess, yer hurt, love. I'll fetch summit to soothe you up. Dockle-leaf balm. Aye, that'll ease it."

Aunt Peg swifts to the medcin hollows.

I rub at my leg; blood is running deep green where Unkle clawed me. My skin ain't as tough as Aunt Peg's. Aunt Peg says she has skin like a toad, hard and rough-worn, but my skin is soft and sleek-smooth. Like the flank of a tench, Aunt Peg says. When I'm cut, I cut deep.

I close my eyes, grit my teeth.

“Here we are, Tess.” Aunt Peg swifts to me, bottle in hand. She splashes a mud-brown liquid over the wound.

“Argh!” The liquid has hit my skin with a hissing sound.

“What’s wrong, our Tess? He’s hurt you bad, ain’t he!”

I snap the medcin bottle from Aunt Peg’s hand and sniff its neck. It has a sour vinegary eye-stinging smell.

“This isn’t dockle-leaf balm.” I wince. “It’s wasp-nettle salt!” Pain is scorching my leg.

“Oh, love, I’m so sorry. I could’ve mind-sworn we kept the dockle-leaf balm there. I’ll fetch some, I promise now. I’ll fetch summit to stop the bleeding ... and the smoking.”

I scoop up mud-mulch from the floor and slap it on my leg.

“No! Just leave it. Please just leave it.”

I can hear the rumble of Unkle slumbering in his pit. Even his snores sound angry, snarly and full of grot. I think again on his words. ***She stole yer. Yer trapped just like me! She snatched yer down ere.***

Unkle tells lies. He talks twisty. He’s trying to get