

# PYRES by Derek Nikitas

## Excerpt from CHAPTER ONE : DEATH OF BALDR

Once upon a time is hell. Lucia would learn to wish that her life could unfold more than just once upon a time. Maybe then the story of her family might improve each time it was told. Maybe then she could cut away the dark spots, just like her dad used to do when he read her those Swedish fairy tales, hunched on a kid-sized stool near her bed. He often tilted his fables away from the brutal bits, bypassed whatever would cause nightmares. Only the bright stuff, kiddo.

"You missed the part where the goblin stole the baby," Luc would say. She'd be tucked under her comforter in her Care Bears p.j.s, six years old, wearing mittens and her Yankees cap just for the heck of it. Downstairs Mom watched *Dynasty* and pretended she was studying for a bio test. Back then Mom had only two semesters left to snag that college diploma that she'd been postponing for the sake of mothering her only daughter.

"I forgot the goblin part, that is true," Dad said. He scratched his blond mustache and flashed a smirk that meant some slips happened on purpose. The sky blue binding on the book he held was thick as a dictionary. On the cover was a painting of a bearded gnome—tomte, in Swedish—no bigger than a cat and saddled to a deer's antlers. The tomte gripped those antlers with two thick mittens, throwing out his stubby legs. He wore a pointed felt cap and a leather tote strapped from his shoulder to his opposite hip. In the background the fir trees held aloft snow tufts on their upturned branches. Tomten are the creatures that deliver your Jul Mas presents if you've been a good girl.

And Dad showed her the pictures inside the book: a tomte crouched on a pillow and whispering into a sleeping child's ear, the child's loose hair twined around his legs and his little yarn-laced boots. That picture was for the story about a princess who finds a tomte caught in a rabbit trap in her garden. Afterward she keeps him in a burlap sack tied to her bedpost, and he doesn't mind the tight quarters. There's an evil queen with precious gems lodged in her eye sockets, a talking bear, an ice fairy who tells the future while a cold blue heart beats inside her chest. Even years later Luc remembered those stories.

Her father was Swedish, born and raised near Stockholm. Before Luc was born, even before Dad met Mom, he moved from Sweden to New York to go to school for his literature doctorate, and he'd only been back to Scandinavia a few times for research and visits with his distant half siblings from his father's first marriage. Dad's own parents died long ago. Luc had never visited Sweden herself, so she didn't know any better than what Dad would have her believe, though he always promised they'd go in the summer of '97 when she graduated from high school.

But for now Luc was fifteen and scrawny, five feet tall in her purple Doc Martens. Scraping her boot soles over sidewalks and down school hallways, clomping like a puppy on its adult feet. Luc's moon face teetered on her thin stalk of a neck, and her big wet eyes always looked shocked though they hardly ever were. Black-dyed hair, black pleated skirt, black fingernails. Black that stained onto bathroom towels and armrests and pillow cushions and incited Mom's hollered threats.

Blair Crowley-Moberg was her mother's name. Mom was only thirty-five, ten years younger than her professor husband. Sure she was still attractive, but she was frumpy more often than not with her wood brown hair and her orthopedic sneakers. Last time Luc saw her mother looking halfway glam was when Mom went as Madonna to the English faculty Halloween party with the blond wig and the cone bra. "I feel totally retarded," Mom had kept saying until she drank enough amaretto sours to cheer herself up. Luc went as Gregor the human dung-beetle from Kafka's "Metamorphosis" even though she never read it. At the party Mom snuck Luc enough sips of amaretto to give Luc blurred sight even with her glasses on.

But that was more than a month ago, long before the buck toothed jack-o'-lanterns rotted greenish on the front porch until Dad finally threw them out. Thanksgiving '93 had passed with a roasted chicken because nobody in the family liked turkey, and then it was back to school. Now it was the first Saturday in a December that had started warmer and wetter than usual, but with the same perpetual upstate winter gray. Nine days until Luc's sixteenth birthday, until she could test for her driver's permit.

And if she'd had that permit just nine days earlier—

Look: if only decisions weren't just once upon a time, then with a second chance Luc never would've begged her parents—Mom first—to drive her from where they lived in the Village of Hammersport to the Ontario Ridge Mall twenty minutes east toward Rochester. But there's no pulling back from that decision. Time rushed Luc only forward. Living backwards, fixing what's already been broken—it's like crawling back into the womb: it's impossible.

How it happened was Luc found her mother in the backyard raking up the dead leaves they'd neglected until now, piling them beside the vinyl pool that had been covered since September. Mom wore sweatpants and an insulated flannel shirt, her shoulders getting damp from a falling drizzle. Her hair was beaded with moisture and her lips shuddered from the chill.

"I can't take you right now. I have to finish this," Mom said.

Luc squinted at the dark churning clouds. "It's raining."

"That's why I need to finish."

"Well—later?" Raindrops piddled against Luc's glasses.

"I doubt it," Mom said, like such decisions were out of her grasp. "What do you need to go to the mall for anyways?"

Luc shrugged and laced her fingers together over the top of her head. She stood near the walkout basement door and the concrete steps leading up to the driveway. The Mobergs' patch of village property was landscaped lower than the yards around it, surrounded on three sides by stone walls like an excavation site. Back there everything loomed above the yard—their house with its finished basement and ground floor and attic, the trees shivering off the last of their dead leaves, Dad's boat draped with a tarp for winter, the neighbors' driveways. Next door, right that moment, Quinn Cutler was up there working in his mother's garage. Luc couldn't see him but she heard his tools clank and crank against his motorcycle as he tightened it up like a huge metal fist.

"Is there another rake?" Luc said. "I could help?"

"That's a first," said Mom. She hunched down and ripped away the wet leaves clogging the rake. For months Mom had been blurting smug quips like the two of them were still tangled in some argument that Luc had forgotten about. "Anyway, you don't need to be spending any more money. You still owe me for those towels you ruined."

"I was just asking," Luc said.

And then, five feet above them, just at the crest of their stone wall, Quinn Cutler appeared on his mother's driveway in jeans and an Overkill concert T-shirt, wiping his hands on a greasy rag. His denim knees were stained with smudges of dark oil. He was part Native American—with tanned skin and sharp cheekbones, silky brown hair parted down the center and draped past his shoulders. Hard little muscles with veins thick as drinking straws running through his arms. He was a senior at the high school, older than most because he'd been kept back one or two years. Luc held her breath while Quinn nodded down at them. He muttered, "What's up?"

"Hey," Luc said. Her face felt warm now, even in this wet December noon.

Mom gripped the rake handle with both hands and scowled up at their neighbor. The tendons in her neck twitched, almost like she could sense how Luc's blood heated up whenever Quinn made an appearance. Luc had seen him twice at school just yesterday, passed him walking between classes, but the thrill was the same every time—a pulse of ecstasy flashing out from her unconscious mind.

Back inside the basement, Luc detoured into her dark bedroom. The stereo glowed its liquid green readout, and pale daylight leaked red through the curtains. She swiped her jacket off her bed—a denim jacket safety-pinned with a dozen rock band patches, decorated with strips of duct tape and blotches of black and silver fabric paint. It was her self-styled uniform, along with the boots and the skirt and the black-and-white striped leotards.

Lucia Moberg: named after Saint Lucy only because of her birthday falling on Sankta Lucia, December thirteenth, the night in Sweden when little girls marched around singing carols in white dresses and flaming-candle tiaras. The saint of light and eyesight. Luc had seen icons of Saint Lucia that showed her carrying a bowl of bloody human eyeballs. Pretty freaking cool, especially since Lucia Moberg herself was badly myopic and wore glasses with thick black hipster frames, almost flaunting her impairment. Without her glasses the world was a greasy color smear.

Lucia's closest friends Gina and Kit called her Luc, pronounced like the boy's name Luke—never like luck, which was lame, or like loose, which made her sound like a slut. She'd throw a sucker punch at the gut of anyone who called her Luck or Loose or worst-of-all Lu-Lu.

Up the stairs, shoving her arms through her jacket sleeves, gunning through the kitchen and the hallway. She grabbed the wrought-iron rails of the spiral staircase leading up to her father's attic study, swung herself onto the bottom step, and craned her head backward, gazing up the twisted center of the stairs to the light above.

"Dad!" she called. "You up there?"

"Present," he said—his lame-ass college professor joke, just like how he raised his hand at the dinner table when he wanted to speak, even if nobody else was talking. They might've gotten all the way through dinner most nights without speaking if not for Dad.

"What are you doing?"

"Grading a relentless stack of freshman essays."

"Can you take me to the mall? Mom won't. All you need to do is drop me off."

"And then drive all the way back to pick you up."

"So—you can hang out at the bookstore."

"Ah, touché," Dad said with his creaky Norse lilt, and in a few minutes he was driving her through rain in an aging Volvo station wagon, wipers pushing away the drench that kept beating down. Maybe if she'd known what would happen she could've shoved open the passenger door and tossed her body to the pebbly road shoulder and captured the pain for herself. She could've stopped what she'd started. But she didn't know, and there's the shame that will not subside.

At the Barnes and Noble Lucia split from her father and headed for the other end of

the mall. Twenty minutes later, in Wonderland Music and Video, she dawdled. She tapped her fingers over the CD stacks, eyeing the employees, studying the two-dozen other customers in the store. One clerk chatted on the phone while he scanned purchases at the checkout line. Another one restocked the video aisle—a lardy woman who gasped and wheezed just because she was standing upright. Her waddle bunched above a rubber neck brace that kept her head locked in forward. Five minutes back, a third Wonderland clerk had ducked into the break room with a half liter of Pepsi and a brown-bagged lunch. So this was the best layout Luc could hope for. Now or never.

She needed two CDs for Gina and Kit—the fraternal twin sisters who lived two blocks away from her house, her best friends since forever. But nothing for Luc. She never, ever stole for herself, trusting that karma would keep her safe if she worked without a reward.

Luc plucked out a random CD that was locked inside a white plastic security case, just like all the others. Something like the Lamest Hits of Tom Petty. She pretended to read the back cover while she aimed her eyeshot toward the lardy shelf-stocker punching a label gun against video cases. Luc grabbed for the Smiths' Louder than Bombs and thumbed the plastic lock with her fingers, jammed it quick and hard and snapped it loose.

Even a toddler could beat those stupid locks, but step two was to peel the raised rectangular sticker off the back, the one with the secret computer chip trapped inside it. Usually a piece of shrink-wrap tore along with it, but nobody would notice if Luc moved fast enough. This particular sticky white rectangle came free, no problem. Then came the amateur magic where Luc crouched down like she'd dropped something and meanwhile slid the CD into the inside breast pocket of her jacket. The pocket was wide and deep enough for her prize, almost custom-made for it.

The Smiths disk was meant for Gina, older than her sister Kit by something like twenty minutes. The younger twin Kit wanted a techno sampler—any techno sampler, it didn't matter—because she was obsessed with raves even though she'd never really been to one. So Luc figured she'd pick Kit an ambient mix. The cover was a dizzying color pattern that turned 3-D if you stared at it long enough. Thumb, jam, crack—the security lock popped like a twig in a campfire, loud enough that Luc flinched her hand away too fast

and made a spectacle.

Sure enough, Lardy Clerk lurched herself into motion and limped off toward the front counter. Fast, too—like she had a mission, like maybe she'd caught that fumble in Luc's not-so-sleight-of-hand. Luc watched as Lardy grunted out one frantic full-body twist in Luc's direction, enough to confirm Luc's fear.

So Luc made for the exit, half a store's length away. She cruised but she didn't run, swerved around a lady hogging the aisle with her kid's stroller. Luc's hardened criminal act had flushed away. Now she was just a girl terrified of getting nabbed and vowing never to shoplift again if she could just clear this one last mistake.

"Hey—hey, you! Where you going?" Lardy's voice was squeezed off by her tight rubber choker, but it rang loud enough to perk half the heads in the store.

But Luc still didn't run. She couldn't let herself panic like that. Her path through the security gate was clear—until somebody grabbed at her. All she saw was an arm wrapped in a Buffalo Bills vinyl jacket. Just some asshole who thought groping a hundred-pound kid is what makes a hero. She ducked that hand and it missed her.

Luc tossed herself out into the human river streaming through the mall. She wove between the calendar kiosk racks and hurried along the inside edge of the opposite lane, squeezing herself between a jewelry stand and the slow-moving flow of Saturday shoppers headed toward the food court. Ten competing music sources hummed against the honeycomb skylights. She circled around the fountain spitting whitewater ten feet up. She passed a cottonpuff snowscape where automaton elves were busying their stiff limbs in a toy shop manger. Their hand-painted faces panned on mechanical necks, tracking her like hidden cameras. She trucked past the Mrs. Smith's cookie stand, down toward Barnes and Noble where she prayed she'd find her dad browsing.

Lord—if they snatched her now and locked her in some empty room and paged Dad over the intercom, she'd never forgive herself for causing that shame. Tenured English Professor Learns Sad, Ugly Truth About Hoodlum Daughter—news at eleven.

Luc power walked something fierce. And she was huffing too, heaving stale mall air into her lungs. Nothing nondescript about black-dyed hair, decorated denim jacket, striped leotards. Up ahead, a security cop leaned against the Sprint cell phone kiosk chatting up the clerk. When Luc passed, he reached for a voice crackling some urgent news over his walkie-talkie, unclipped it from his belt. He weighed about two-fifty, gut pressing against his blue uniform shirt. He looked easy to outrun if it came to that. Never again, God, never.

She reached Barnes and Noble just when the first sweat dab wet her bangs. This end of the mall was almost deserted, and the open space made Luc feel more vulnerable. She risked her first look back and saw no one recognizable in her tracks. There at the bookstore entrance she paced for a minute, hands on her hips, catching her breath and composure.

Luc found her dad where she expected, seated on a stool in the coffee shop and sipping a latte from a tall paper cup, wearing his blue rain parka, which looked wet even though it wasn't. He slouched over a hardcover book laid open on the table. Six-and-a-half feet tall. His golden hair sprouted in nine directions, disheveled from having been trapped inside his toque.

"Hey, I thought we were meeting in the food court," Dad said. He checked the watch he kept in his pants pocket because one of the straps had broken months ago. "A half hour from now." His face glowed ruddy from the warmth of his latte, which had also left foam on his mustache.

Luc stood behind the low iron railing that partitioned the coffee shop from the bookstore, afraid her dad would catch the scent of her panic if she stepped any closer. "I started feeling like crap," she said, "like nauseous. Can we go? I feel like I'm going to puke."

"You look feverish. Are you hot? Would you like an herbal tea?"

Luc watched the mall entrance. "Can we just go?"

"Sure, but—come over here for just a minute. I'd like to show you this." He lifted the

book spine, but not high enough that she could see the pages from where she stood. Luc peeled off her jacket and balled it against her chest while she moved around the gate. At least then security would miss her if they were looking for a kid with rock band names painted on her coat. Dad talked while she came around: "This is a brand new translation of the Prose Edda. They had an Icelandic painter do these full-color plates."

What he showed Luc was a painting of a Viking longship bright with yellow and orange flames as it drifted out to sea. Luc snatched her father's toque from the table and stuffed it over her obvious black hair.

"I thought you were hot," Dad said. "I've just been reading about the Death of Baldr—you remember that story? I told it when you were younger. There're some subtleties of language here that I haven't found in any other version. This is fantastic."

"Are you going to buy it?" Luc said. Her knees twitched.

"Ah, alas, they're charging seventy-five dollars. Maybe I'll ask the tomten to bring it to me for Christmas. Do you like this cologne? It was a sample." Dad exposed his wrist for Luc to sniff, waving it under her nose.

"I'll hurl if I smell it, Dad."

Luc waited in the entrance foyer while Dad moseyed back to reshelve his hardback Prose Edda where he found it. Compact earthquakes rumbled in her chest and trembled down her limbs, only partly caused by the cold wet air that hit her when customers pushed open the doors. Outside, people trudged through the rain, heads bowed under umbrellas and hoods. Cars stopped and waited at the crosswalk out front, then rolled with a hiss over the wet ground, steam rising off their warm headlights.

"Are we ready?" Dad asked. They stepped out into the chill and the rain, and Luc nudged her head against her father's ribs. There in the crook of his arm she felt invincible, even as the rain chilled her clenched face, even as the car marked Mall Security rolled to a stop beside them. She held her breath. The rain and the thumping wipers hid the driver from her view, and she waltzed with her father over the crosswalk.

Dad had parked the Volvo at the far end of their aisle—the closest spot he could find on a Saturday three weeks before Christmas—so by the time they reached the car and Dad fished out his keys, Luc’s leotards clung damp and heavy against her legs. She climbed into the backseat and sprawled herself there, shivering even more violently from her relief. When Dad climbed into the driver’s seat, Luc pulled the stolen CD from her jacket and slipped it underneath the passenger seat. Her prize seemed worthless now. Gina could come dig it out of the car if she wanted it so bad.

Dad sparked the engine and the wipers kicked to life. He sipped his latte through a plastic lid while Journey crooned “Open Arms” from the back speakers. Luc hunkered down, planted her wet boots against the opposite door.

“Hey, Luc, sit up,” Dad said. “You need to have your seatbelt fastened.”

“I don’t feel good.”

“I know, but I’d rather you were safe—”

A shadow washed across the back window and stopped beside the driver’s door. It came too fast for Luc to register the shape as human, until a gloved hand rapped on her father’s window. The jacket was a brown zip-up darkened by rainwater. His head, his face, loomed too far above the curve of the car roof for Luc to see. She gasped. Mall security, she was sure. Already her mind crowded with apologies.

Dad pressed the automatic window control and the glass hummed downward. Luc propped herself on her shoulders, lifted her head. This new posture only further blocked her sightline, but it was better that she didn’t see the frown this guy was probably feeding her father, prepping Dad for some shit news about his spoiled only child.

The visitor wrapped his fingers over the lip of the half-open window like he meant to push it down faster. Then he said, “What’s up, doc?” Smarmy—somebody who thinks busting teens for shoplifting is a laugh riot.

"Excuse me?" Dad said.

Then the guy shoved his other hand into the opening and pointed one thick finger squarely at Dad's face. In that blank second, Luc thought her dad was being accused, and then all her assumptions were fizzling away.

"Give me your fucking wallet!" the guy grunted. His edict rattled through his teeth.

"Vad i helvete?" Dad said, and his right hand grabbed at the gearshift. The paper cup went airborne and splashed brown muck against the dashboard and the windshield. Luc's brain caught up to her eyes: this man wasn't pointing his finger. He was aiming a gun with a dull silver barrel and slanted groove marks near the muzzle. It was trained inches from her father's head.

The Volvo jerked into reverse, shoved Luc's tensed body against the front seats, crammed her down onto the floorboards. Even while she tumbled she didn't look away from the gun that smacked the window frame and fired a shot and then vanished from sight. Her ears went deaf, then seared, stunned by the gun blast. Moist breeze flicked across her face.

Then came a collision and the whole earth jostled. Glass shards sailed. The back window, the whole panorama of it, collapsed in a million crystal bits that poured onto the seat where Luc had just been reclining. Rain splashed through this new wide maw like a cloud had burst overhead. She would understand only later that their car had heaved across the parking aisle and slammed its rear against an empty Neon parked there.

For a moment Luc's shocked eardrums heard nothing but Steve Perry on the speakers, crooning about hoping you'll see what your love means to him. Through the white-fogged windshield Luc saw a glob of darkness—the man with the gun, still poised in the parking space they'd just escaped, pivoting his outstretched arm, aiming his gun where the car now idled.

"Are you all right?" Dad asked.

"No," Luc said, though she felt no pain.

Now the Volvo's windshield warped sugary white and crackled a million fibrous trails but did not break. Dad lurched backward into his seat and there were thick warm droplets of dark red rain wetting Luc's upraised hand and spackling the back window. And puffs of yellow foam coughing backward from Dad's headrest. And his head reeling like it was flushed with booze.

"Dad?" Lucia said. One of her arms lay trapped and throbbing between her body and the floor, but she flailed her free hand, now realizing what had doused it. Her father's two hands dropped down between his open knees. This limp gesture hunched him forward and laid his ruined skull against the steering wheel.

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