



DANIELLE ACKLEY-MCPHAIL



The Redcaps' Queen

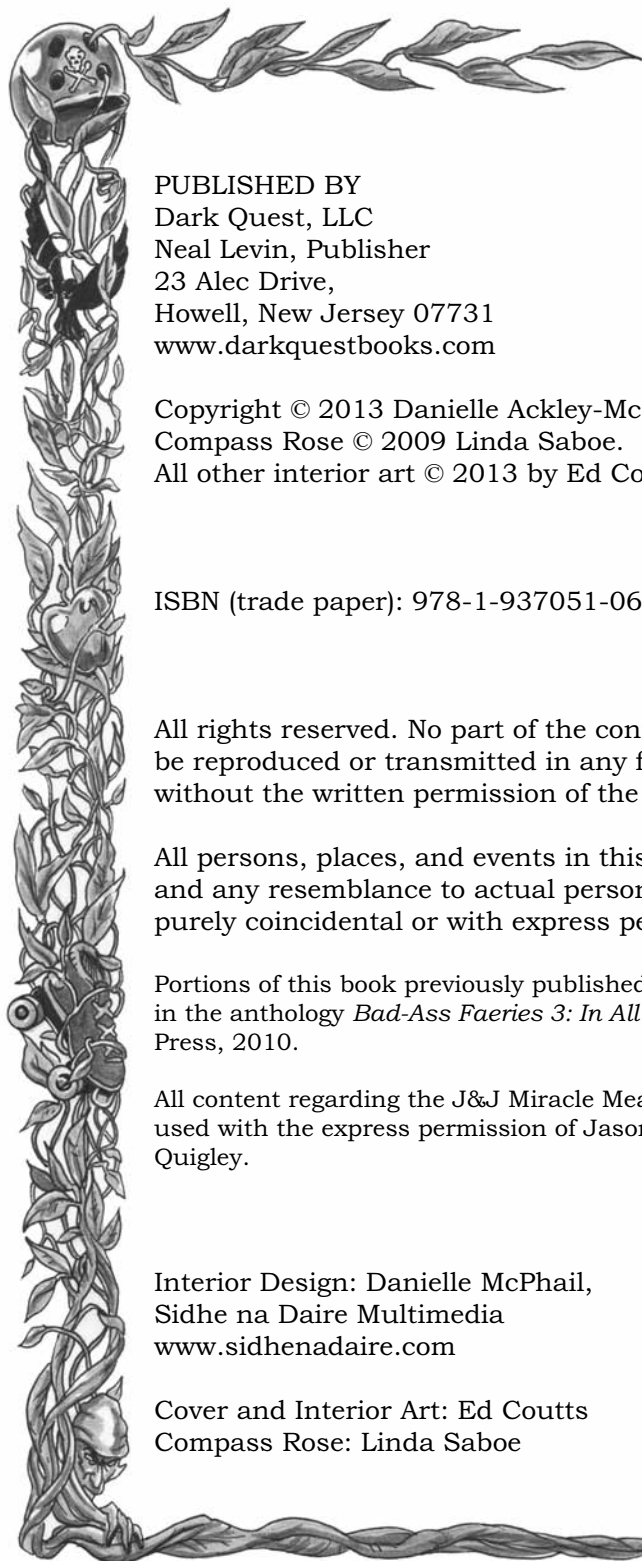
A Bad-Ass Faerie Tale

By
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with illustrations by Ed Coutts



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A decorative vertical border on the right side of the page, featuring a vine with leaves and a skull at the top. The skull has a crossbones symbol on its forehead. The vine continues down the page, with a small skull at the bottom. A horizontal vine with leaves runs across the top of the page.

Chapter One

SUZANNE SURFACED TO THE SOUNDS OF SOFTLY RUSTLING LEAVES.

The raucous cawing of crows. And sinister murmurs close by her ear. The chill of a breeze tickled her bare back as the sharp pain of bindings on her wrists and legs kindled anger in her breast.

The impulse to fight surged strongly within her, yet something more than physical bonds held her immobile. Her effort to open her eyes triggered no more than a weak flutter. The blackness briefly lightened to grey before darkening once more. Inwardly, Suzanne growled, drew several deep, centering breaths, and once more bent her will toward moving.

Nothing.

The murmurs increased. She couldn't distinguish what they said, but their growing excitement needed no words. Many hands grasped her. Lifted her up. Bore her away. Suzanne threw her effort into resisting as what felt like sharp-pointed claws pierced her flesh. Her mind fought, but her body remained lax. Her breathing labored the more she strained internally against the force that bound her. The rasp of something like barbed sandpaper swiped across her bare shoulder. Her stomach twitched at the sensation and her muscles screamed to break free of her bonds. Suzanne's pulse picked up and her frustration grew. The more anxious she became the more the fog cleared from her mind.

And then she felt him.

Lance, her lover, was somewhere nearby. The spell she had forged to link them trickled his emotions into her thoughts. Love. Concern. Anger. The last most of all; his temper boiled fierce and hot beneath his skin, even in the bare echo that she felt through their magical bond. Suzanne's soul reached for him but found itself likewise bound. Panic flooded her veins, born of memories long past of childhood beneath her father's control. Kept weak

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and powerless, her every act dictated. In the here-and-now, Suzanne's breath came in sharp gasps. The darkness deepened until she grew frantic, casting her inner self once more against restraints she could not shake free.

Someone spoke. Distant, yet all too clear. A flat, harsh voice, reminiscent of the crows' caws.

"Service rendered calls for payment due."

Her bearers lowered her to the ground and backed away. Like a rabbit sensing the hawk that circled overhead, her inner self stilled, unsure of how to evade.

"No!" Lance roared.

The world came clear as the esoteric restraints lifted. In the next instant, bitter-cold droplets struck Suzanne's skin. Acid burrowed deep and fast to devour her flesh. No longer weighed down, she bucked and thrashed. Her eyes snapped open. The clawed hands returned, pinning her down, and her vision filled with wizened faces beneath brown caps that deepened to crimson as her blood flowed and the redcaps feasted.

Suzanne screamed a piercing, earth-ending scream.



She jerked awake, sweat-soaked, her body trembling and her breath fast and shallow in reaction to the raw, brutal memory haunting her dreams. Screams still echoed in her mind. Torturous, agonized, piercing. Lance lay undisturbed beside her, arm draped over her waist, breathing in a slow, relaxed rhythm against the back of her neck. His presence calmed her, again a reminder she'd survived. Most mornings were the same lately. Ever since she had been captured by the *Dubh Fae* and his redcap minions—coming within seconds of death—her sleep had been a stalking ground.

She growled in frustration as she edged away from Lance's loose grip. A grey hint of light placed the time somewhere just before dawn. Way too early to be up. She ignored the phantom, jabbing pains as she slipped from the bed. The chill of the morning air made her shiver as she ran her fingers over naked skin that should have borne scars. She caught her unblemished reflection in the bureau mirror across the room and shivered again. Damp tendrils of platinum-blond hair clung to her face, neck, and breasts. In the low light, her blue eyes shone dark and startling against her ashen skin. She scowled at her reflection and quickly shimmied into her clothes, reflexively sliding a well-worn bandana in the front pocket of her jeans, an old habit from her childhood.

Behind her, Lance stirred. His arm reached for her in his sleep. The hint of a frown furrowed his brow. Awake or not, his protective nature

seeped through. As the leader of the Wild Hunt M.C. he considered himself responsible for every member, but most particularly for her.

Again, frustration burned along her nerves, causing her to tense as she willed him to remain asleep. She loved Lance, had for over twenty years...even before he turned thirteen and discovered the joy of girls, but he never seemed to get the fact that she needed to stand on her own, not because she *had* to, but because it was important to her to be *able* to. She'd even held a job once. For nearly a year she'd manned the drying furnace at the local auto plant, where intense heat baked the fresh paint into a protective shell. A very unfae occupation; that had been part of its charm. With a whole other world of resources to draw on she hadn't needed to work. What she had needed was to prove she could. That she was strong and capable in all things. Not until she proved that to herself and everyone else, could she and Lance move forward and build the kind of life she had always longed for. The life where they were never separate, where family meant love...and children.

That dream seemed even further out of reach now. If only she could conquer this crippling fear. In the military they called it PTSD—post-traumatic stress disorder. Suzanne...she called it fucked up. Just seeing the color red froze her up worse than a seized engine. If she did not overcome that fear on her own, she expected she never would. But Lance kept interfering. He just never seemed to know when to stand down and when it was okay to step in. When he'd learned about her recent issues, he'd actually gone so far as to try and ban anything red from *Delilah's*, the bar that served as club house for the Wild Hunt. Well-intentioned as she recognized the effort to be, she stopped him straight away. Besides being impractical, a solution like that threatened to cripple her for good. Remnants of an older fear rose up at that thought. She would let no one make her weak again. *No one*.

As she stood there trying to rally for the day, the room around her took on a steadily growing red tinge reflected from the rising sun. Suzanne tensed and refused to close her eyes against the sight. She fought to get control of the panic, resisting the urge to crawl back into Lance's arms and pretend herself safe. She wouldn't do it, though; she made a point of never lying, as her father did, even to herself. The faster her heart beat, the more her skin crawled, as if distant eyes watched her, waiting eagerly for the chance to bleed her. Surrounded by the dawn's haze she relived the attack; the flood of red light swept her back to the blasted crossroads, bound and helpless as the *Dubh Fae's* Dragon Tears ate through her skin and flesh, and the redcaps feasted on her free-flowing blood. Suzanne shuddered. The panic gained ground until she nearly crumpled to the floor. Sheer will alone kept her standing tall, her

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slender frame too rigid now to tremble. An improvement after last night, where she'd been curled nearly fetal in Lance's arms, but still unacceptable. She reminded herself that those who had harmed her couldn't get past the shields safeguarding the property, including *Delilah's* and the living space above the bar.

It didn't help. The true demons lived in her head.

Deep beneath the trauma from the attack lurked her true fear: that her father was right. That she was weak and could not defend herself. She'd fought against those beliefs her whole life. That was likely the reason so many of her gifts to Lance—and anyone else she cared for—provided protection, right down to the magic tattoo of her likeness that linked their awareness. As if proving that she could take care of others meant she could look out for herself, too. Only...look how well she'd botched that.

Again Lance stirred in the bed behind her; he grumbled and came a little more awake. The flashback lost part of its grip on her as her thoughts latched on to him. His strength and presence tempted her to depend on him, to let him protect her. Furious with herself, she scrubbed her hand hard across tear-dampened cheeks.

Before he roused fully, Suzanne leaned over and tucked the warm blanket back around him, ran her hand gently over the soft waves of his light brown hair, lying long and loose over the pillow. "It's okay, babe," she murmured by his ear, a bit of magic giving weight to her words. Her heart surged and a smile crept across her lips. Impulse took her and she brushed a tender kiss across his brow. "Go back to sleep. I'm going downstairs."

She watched to make sure Lance drifted to sleep again before leaving the room. Grabbing her leather jacket from the closet by the apartment door, she carefully kept her eyes averted from the pile of winter gear on the shelf above it. The knit hats were a mix of all colors, but Lance's favorite—red—dominated. Suzanne shuddered as another flash of memory superimposed the leering, bloody face of a redcap over the pile of hats. Squeezing her eyes closed tight she yet again fought the anxiety the flashback caused. She stumbled back and the sleeve of her jacket caught on something. Opening her eyes, she saw an old air rifle with a blown gasket that Lance hadn't had the time to fix yet. Suzanne reached out, her hand lingering on the stock of the gun. An idea took root as she forced her gaze back to the pile of knit caps. Last night she'd told Lance she would handle this problem of hers...

Now seemed like a good time.

It took a massive effort to fight past her aversion, but she reached up and managed to pick through the jumble of winter hats. Her hand shook