

Four
women.

One world
changed
forever.

HER
FIERCE
CREATURES

MARIA
LEWIS

Maria Lewis is an author, screenwriter and film curator based in Australia. Getting her start as a police reporter, her writing on pop culture has appeared in publications such as the *New York Post*, *Guardian*, *Penthouse*, *Daily Mail*, *Empire Magazine*, *Gizmodo*, *Huffington Post*, *the Daily* and *Sunday Telegraph*, *i09*, *Junkee* and many more. A journalist for over 16 years, she transitioned into working in television as a segment producer, writer and guest presenter on live nightly news programme *The Feed* on SBS. She has worked as a screenwriter on documentary, film and scripted television projects.

Her best-selling debut novel *Who's Afraid?* was published in 2016, followed by its sequel *Who's Afraid Too?* in 2017, which was nominated for Best Horror Novel at the Aurealis Awards. *Who's Afraid?* is currently being developed for television. Her Young Adult debut, *It Came From The Deep*, was released globally in 2018, followed by her fourth book, *The Witch Who Courted Death*, which won Best Fantasy Novel at the Aurealis Awards in 2019.

Her fifth novel set within the shared supernatural universe – *The Wailing Woman* – was nominated for Best Fantasy Novel at the Aurealis Awards in 2020, followed by the publication of her sixth novel, *Who's Still Afraid?*, and book seven *The Rose Daughter*. She's the host, writer and producer on audio documentaries about popular culture and film history such as *Josie & The Podcats* on the 2001 cult film and *The Phantom Never Dies* about the world's first superhero.

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Also by Maria Lewis

Who's Afraid?

Who's Afraid Too?

The Witch Who Courted Death

It Came From The Deep

The Wailing Woman

Who's Still Afraid?

The Rose Daughter

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First published in Great Britain in 2022 by Piatkus

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

TPB ISBN 978-0-349-42727-0

Typeset in Sabon by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

Papers used by Piatkus are from well-managed forests
and other responsible sources.



Piatkus
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

www.littlebrown.co.uk

In loving memory of Ron Cobb
A dear friend, a jolly neighbour, a legend of his craft.

Chapter 1

Sadie

When she cried, someone died.

That was just the weird, new reality of Sadie Burke's life. To be perfectly frank, it wasn't even the weirdest aspect in what was a pick 'n' mix of absolutely weird shit. Sitting on a hill that overlooked a massive, sprawling farm, Sadie snuggled deeper into the puffy coat she was wearing to protect against the cold. It wasn't snowing yet, but even on a warm day it would be unusual if the temperature got above ten degrees.

Spending her entire life stuck in Australia – like every other banshee who had been shipped there in chains by the supernatural government known as the Treize and forced to die out on that continent – Sadie was used to the heat. She was also used to the fleeting cold, but not to days that started freezing and continued so. Yet hidden in Arrowtown, on New Zealand's South Island, in a tiny town few people remembered, it was adapt or die at this point.

Flinching as a tiny foot reminded her exactly why with a swift kick to her bladder, Sadie ran a hand over her swelling belly. Among all the grief and pain of losing their father, Texas

Contos, Sadie had promised herself that she would survive for *them*: the three daughters that were apparently playing FIFA in her womb. Her due date wasn't for another few months but – as her very own personal physician Dr Kikuchi had told her – with triplets they needed to be ready for anything.

Weirdly, it wasn't the babies she was worried about. They were *one* of her worries, definitely, but she knew her daughters were safe inside her. It was when they got out that things would get complicated. There were powerful forces that wanted them dead and her along with them.

'Stay in there, my darlings,' she said, barely above a whisper. 'Stay right where you are.'

Even just the murmur of her voice was something Sadie Burke was still trying to get used to. The same supernatural government that had punished her species had punished her as a child as well, slitting her throat and severing her vocal cords when she was nine. It had been to suppress a power she wasn't supposed to have, a power that was the greatest and purest example of what a banshee could do: the wail.

Yet its deadly force was supposed to have died out with her ancestors, just as the Treize had intended. It turned out banshees were a lot harder to kill than their enemies thought. Australian sign language – Auslan – had been her primary form of communication for over ten years, right up until her powers manifested once more. Now not only could she speak, she could wail. And the results were catastrophic.

Sadie hadn't meant to kill the farmhand at the property of the Dawson werewolves where they were staying. He was a nice kid around her age, with a ginger beard that matched a mop of ginger hair and a smile that was maybe a bit too flirty

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for her liking. The first and only person she'd ever loved, the father of her children, had bled out in an English field while she had cried and begged for Tex to survive. The memory felt like both a lifetime ago and something that was incredibly raw to her, so romance was off the menu for the next . . . while. Yet the farmhand Wallace – everyone called him Wally for short – had been nice to her. He had made Sadie a cup of tea while she watched him load up bales of hay to distribute among the animals.

She hadn't felt it coming, she rarely did. When one of the babies Jackie Chan-ed her internal organs, she had let out a pained cry. The mug had slipped from her hands, falling to the ground as if in slow motion as the child kicked again and her cry increased. Sadie had been so focused on her own pain, clutching her belly, that she hadn't realised what happened at first. She hadn't even been at full volume, but there on his knees, eyes wide and dead, was Wally as he collapsed to the ground.

The blood never stopped flowing from his ears, her many sisters and cousins stepping through the horrific puddle as they rushed to her side. Sorcha, the only sibling who had seen the full extent of Sadie's powers, was prepared: a pair of heavy-duty noise-cancelling headphones always dangled around her neck in case of emergencies. She'd made sure the Burke family members had a pair at all times. Sorcha had witnessed what could happen when Sadie *really* unleashed: human skulls turned into pumpkins exploding like they'd been hit with a sledgehammer. Poor Wally never stood a chance.

After the accident Sorcha made certain all of the werewolves protecting the property started carrying headphones too. Sadie

never got a moment to ask what happened to Wally, who took care of the body or where he was buried. She knew he was one of the nephews of the Dawson werewolf pack's leader, yet she couldn't bring herself to find out more. It was one thing for her to use her abilities with intent, to *intentionally* set out to hurt those who deserved it or posed a threat. It was another thing entirely to pose just as much of a lethal risk to those she didn't mean to hurt at all.

All six of her sisters, her mother, auntie and cousins, had been sharing the same sprawling farmhouse since they first reassembled in New Zealand after breaking The Covenant and fleeing Australia. Dr Kikuchi and her wife – along with the elite squadron of female werewolf enforcers known as the Aunties – had been living in the surrounding cottages, close enough to the big house but far enough away that they didn't have to be embroiled in the daily drama of Irish families. Although they were well and truly *in it* now.

Sadie wasn't sure where the Dawson pack lived and she couldn't find out since she wasn't allowed to leave the farm for her own protection. Yet this property spanned acres, with a raging rapid at the base of a ravine on one side and snow-capped mountains surrounding them on all others. They were in the dip of a valley, remote and unseen but still accessible by private road. Tiaki Ihi, her friend, had chosen this location because it was both easy to defend and unlikely when it came to physical places to stash a young woman pregnant with the three children that could flip the fates of their supernatural world.

That young woman was living alone now. Sadie demanded it, in fact, taking a cottage further away from the rest of the

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property and encased in a thick blanket of dark trees. If she wailed again, she was sufficiently far away for the nearest person to survive without headphones. Or so she hoped. She hadn't put that theory to the test yet, but she was being extra careful by only speaking to her babies and reverting back to sign language with everyone else.

Her family members had fought her on this decision, but the werewolves had welcomed it. It was an easier outpost to monitor and defend: even if they were discovered, she was tucked away out of sight. It meant they could continue doing their job – protecting her until the birth of the triplets – without killing off members of the pack they might need for any upcoming conflict. Yet it was Dr Kikuchi who had been the biggest supporter of Sadie's urgings. She insisted that wherever Sadie felt most comfortable, wherever she felt safest and the least stressed, then that was where she *had* to be for her final trimester. Regardless of what anyone else thought.

And there were thoughts to be had. There was never any lack of them in her family, to the point it could be suffocating at times, each of her siblings as loud and pushy as the next. She watched as the consequence of one of those thoughts barrelled down the farm's main road, driving past the house and continuing towards her one-woman cottage. She had been told to expect him, but that didn't mean she had to like it.

Sadie stayed exactly where she was, perched on the hill in her favourite spot like she could oversee an imaginary kingdom as she watched Simon Tianne get out of a battered four-wheel drive. It was testament to his size that he looked formidable alongside it, not just his height but the significant bulk of his muscles. She also wondered if the temperature felt

different to him here, given New Zealand – Aotearoa – was his home and his people were as much a part of it as the trees, the rivers, the mountains and the animals that brought it to life. The loose football shorts and oversized hoodie made her think that was the case, but then he gave an involuntary shudder and hopped on the spot for a moment.

‘Fucking cold as South Island,’ he muttered, the words almost lost on the icy breeze that picked up and ruffled Sadie’s hair. Up until that point, he hadn’t seen her. He’d come to this part of the farm knowing she’d be around there somewhere. Probably inside, curled up and reading *What To Expect When You’re Expecting To Either End Or Ignite The Apocalypse with the Fruit of Your Womb*. She was downwind and the gust must have blown her scent his way as he stiffened. He turned in her direction, his werewolf senses telling him exactly where she would be without him needing to have laid eyes on her.

Sadie didn’t smile at him. Didn’t wave. She liked his auntie, Tiaki, more than most people she’d encountered. She was not only Simon’s literal auntie but also the head of the Aunties and the whole pack that he was a part of, the Ihi clan. It was partly because of Tiaki and Simon’s own mother, Keisha, that the werewolves had given up valuable resources to transport Sadie safely from the North to the South Island during a time when there were considerable threats lurking around every corner. It was strange watching one of those threats climb up the slope towards her, brown calf muscles flexing against the mix of grass and rock and just the slightest dampness after a morning rain. He wasn’t a threat to her, however. The exact opposite.

Over a video call, Tiaki had told Sadie that she was sending her most trusted werewolf to Arrowtown to act as Sadie’s

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personal bodyguard. She'd been momentarily excited, thinking it would be the blue-haired woman who had guarded her and Sorcha in Galway. But it wasn't Tommi Grayson, she learned with disappointment. It was a relative of hers, Simon. With the exception of the video calls – which were encrypted and ran through the Ihi pack's private server – no one was using digital communications any more. They couldn't risk an accidental digital footprint leading the Treize or – just as bad – their soldiers, the Praetorian Guard, to their location, especially not after everything they had done to create a sanctuary here. So Sadie couldn't know what was happening in the outside world, but the dark circles under Tiaki's eyes and the sending of Simon told her it was bad.

Usually by the time she reached this point of the hill, she was puffing and straining, not just because she was unfit but because she was carrying a cart of watermelons inside her body. This man didn't look put out at all, his breath barely irregular as he stood before her, noise-cancelling headphones firmly on his ears. These weren't the ones Sorcha dispensed like candy. These were fancy, cool, black and masculine, if such a thing was possible for an inanimate appliance.

'Hi,' he said, first verbally then in sign. He must have registered the shock on her face, as he continued uninterrupted. 'I'm Simon Tianne, Tiaki's nephew, Tommi's cousin, and hopefully soon . . . your friend.'

Her surprise turned to scepticism as she signed her response back, face solemn.

'I'm not here to make friends.'

'That's fine,' he replied, mouthing the words as well as signing them to make it easier for her to read as she processed

both the movement of his lips and the hand gestures. ‘We don’t have to be friends if you don’t want to be. I find that usually makes things easier but . . . I get it. You’ve been through a lot. And I’ve been sent here to make sure you don’t go through anything else.’

She laughed out loud, literally, but there was little joy in it.

‘If only signing it would make it so,’ she communicated to him.

His smile held little joy either, yet it made her pause. There was something she hadn’t expected there: understanding. Sympathy, even. She didn’t know this wolf, didn’t know what he’d been through or what he’d had to leave behind to be here and guard *her*. There were few places more dangerous to be. Maybe that’s what made her soften towards him, just in the slightest and most imperceptible way.

‘Come on,’ Sadie signed. ‘I’ll show you round, although there’s not much to show.’

She braced her gloved hands on the ground to get up, hesitating when Simon offered his own to help. After a beat, she took it. Sadie wasn’t light to start with and her curves had manifested to almost spherical portions as her pregnancy had progressed. Simon’s strength was evident as he firmly but gently pulled her to her feet, no strain on his face as he did so. He didn’t let go of her hand as they descended the hill either, offering her his arm in a way that felt gentlemanly rather than like she was being pandered to.

‘I’m sorry,’ she signed, when they reached the pathway that led up to the cottage. ‘I’m not very good at accepting help from other people, even when I need it.’

‘These past few months must have been hard, then,’ he replied, Sadie responding with little more than a nod. Besides,

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her gaze was too focused on his hand movements and the way they varied on words in ways she didn't expect.

'Where did you learn to sign?' she asked.

'My father was deaf,' he replied.

That was not the answer she was expecting and from her reaction, it was clear he knew it.

'Yes, there are deaf werewolves,' he smirked.

'I didn't mean to be rude,' she signed. 'I just thought all your senses were . . .'

She gave a double thumbs-up to indicate what she was trying to say, cautious of offending him with another careless comment the way people often did with her.

'Werewolf healing is definitely' – he mimicked her double thumbs-up – 'but he was born deaf, it wasn't something acquired in battle or for a fight over dominance.'

'Is he Māori too?'

'Yes, he was. He's dead.'

Sadie stopped mid-step, turning to face him. She went to say something, anything, yet it felt insincere. She didn't know Simon Tianne outside of his name and association to people who had done a great many things for her, people who had put their lives on the line for her.

'If there are words . . .' he started.

'You don't seem out of practice.'

'No no, it's not that. I'm using New Zealand Sign Language, which is mostly the same as Auslan except there are Māori words – *te reo* – in there, so if you don't recognise something, you have to let me know.'

She gave him the 'okay' symbol, before guiding him to the entrance of the cottage. It was beautiful, with a stone path and

resilient flowers leading to the thick wooden door and the warmth that awaited inside courtesy of a roaring fireplace. It didn't have centralised heating; it was small enough it didn't need it as long as there were a few logs burning. She'd thought it looked like someplace hobbits might live the first time she set eyes on it while walking the grounds with Sorcha. She still thought that, except *she* was that hobbit and now she insisted on walking alone.

The door was unlocked and she held it open for Simon, noting his frown at the lack of deadbolts and reinforced steel or whatever. Locked doors wouldn't stop the kind of enemies Sadie had. Plus, if they could get past all the guards and security measures on the farm to make it as far as the cottage, nothing else would stop them.

She followed Simon as he prowled through each of the three rooms inside, inspecting the latches in the bathroom and any potential hiding places, then the final space. It was the kitchen/lounge combo, with the centrepiece being the beloved fireplace she all but worshipped at this point. There was a television and DVD player, a couch, but in terms of recreation that was the last normal item one would see. The rest was set up as a birthing suite of sorts, with Dr Kikuchi coming by at least once every day to perform check-ups and tinker with all the machines and devices she'd wrangled for the forthcoming ordeal.

Sadie had been there at the birth of her nieces and nephews, so she had no romanticised view of this being a beautiful, empowering experience. It would be hell and hellish. That's what they were preparing for and that's what she was preparing her body for, working through tedious stretches and breathing exercises that bored her senseless but could mean

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the difference between a seven-hour early labour before her caesarean or an eight-hour one. That single hour could make all the difference.

Simon touched the pile of thick, grey foam that was stacked on the kitchen counter. Sadie had been cutting it into squares the night before while listening to a podcast and trying her darnedest not to think. He held a square up for her to see, a question in his eyes.

‘Soundproofing,’ she signed.

‘In case you wail again?’

‘Oh, I’ll definitely wail again, whether I want to or not.’

The werewolf looked surprised to hear her admit that and Sadie realised she needed to add a further explanation. *Men*, she thought.

‘How many silent births have you heard of, Simon?’

‘Ah.’ He nodded, finally understanding. ‘Smart.’

He asked for a list of everyone who came to visit her at the cabin and she gave it to him, written down so it was easier. It was too many people, he said, too many scents for him to keep track of. He made her trim the list to two people, including Dr Kikuchi and excluding him.

‘This is bullshit!’ she exclaimed, her temper rising exponentially with every additional moment he was in her presence. ‘I’ve been doing fine without you! You can’t just sweep in—’

‘Actually, that’s exactly what I can and *have* to do!’ he yelled, forgetting momentarily to sign, and she waved him away when he attempted.

‘I can read your lips,’ she gestured.

‘Good, then read them now: I have to keep you alive and safe. I have to do that by any means necessary and right now,

that means limiting your visitor list. That means securing this place better. That means me getting intimately acquainted with every inch of this farm. And yes, that means pissing you off as well if that's what it takes.'

'All I have left are the women in that house,' she rebutted. 'The only thing that separates us right now is a God-damn sheep paddock, yet it may as well be an ocean. You can't make me pick. I need them.'

'You isolated yourself in this cottage to protect them, right? Them not coming here is protecting you, a choice I know any brother or sister would make for their sibling.'

She growled in frustration, which was ironic given the conversation was with a creature who was probably the DMX of growling. Yet she did it anyway. She needed her oldest sister, Shannon, because she had kids of her own and her gentle, quite musings on childbirth were endlessly soothing. She also needed Sorcha, the sister she had once thought dead and the sibling she was closest to . . . even though the likelihood of them tearing each other's hair out was always high. Shannon had just left for Australia to attend a secret supernatural summit, so she didn't have to make that tough choice yet.

'Sorcha,' she answered, Simon making a note next to her name. 'And Barastin.'

'I said only two, with Dr Kikuchi that's—'

'Barastin has no scent, he's a ghost.'

She had him there, but Sadie resisted the urge to smirk as she smoothed her hand over the mound of her stomach, much like Blofeld would his hairless cat.

'Fine,' Simon relented.

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‘Fine.’

For a moment, she felt triumphant. Right up until he asked if she had a preference to which room he took. Because of course he’d be staying there, *of course*. She felt like a dickhead for not horrifying over this sooner. She couldn’t think of anything worse than the cottage being occupied by some random man she barely knew when she had a crying spree at three in the morning. Or *him* being present for the inevitable peanut butter binge that followed at three fifteen in the morning.

The truth was it had been a long time since Sadie felt like she had any power over where her life was headed. She had never expected to be powerful in the way she was now, one of the few – maybe only – surviving banshees who could wail. Yet there was a difference between power and being powerful. She felt powerless in that moment and she hated it. Worst of all, she knew there was no other way.

As Simon excused himself to get his toolkit and start making the adjustments needed to the cottage, she fought back the urge to cry. It was the hormones, she knew it, and even the smallest things could make her bawl hysterically as she was mainlining pickles straight from the jar. He paused in the doorway, looking back at her.

‘Older,’ he said.

‘What?’

‘I thought the woman who had the fate of our worlds in her hands would be older.’

Sadie hesitated before she signed her response. ‘Me too.’