



KRYSTAL SUTHERLAND

putnam

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, New York



Copyright © 2021 by Krystal Sutherland

Penguin supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin to continue to publish books for every reader.

G. P. Putnam's Sons is a registered trademark of Penguin Random House LLC.

Visit us online at penguinrandomhouse.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

[Insert CIP]

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 9780593110348

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Design by Suki Boynton

Text set in Laurentian Pro

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and events are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Dedication T/K





PROLOGUE

I WAS TEN years old the first time I realized I was strange.

Around midnight, a woman dressed in white slipped through my bedroom window and cut off a lock of my hair with sewing scissors. I was awake the whole time, tracking her in the dark, so frozen by fear that I couldn't move, couldn't scream.

I watched as she held the curl of hair to her nose and inhaled deeply. I watched as she put it on her tongue and closed her mouth and savored the taste for a few moments before swallowing. I watched as she bent over me and ran a fingertip along the hook-shaped scar at the base of my throat.

It was only when she opened my door—bound for the bedrooms of my older sisters, with the scissors still held at her side—that I finally screamed.

My mother tackled her in the hall. My sisters helped hold her down. The woman was rough and rabid, thrashing against the three of them with a strength we'd later learn was fueled by amphetamines. She bit my mother. She headbutted my middle

sister, Vivi, so hard in the face that her nose was crushed and both of her eye sockets were black for weeks.

It was Grey, my eldest sister, who finally subdued her. When she thought my mother wasn't looking, she bent low over the wild woman's face and pressed her lips against her mouth. It was a soft kiss right out of a fairy tale, made gruesome by the fact that the woman's chin was slick with our mother's blood.

For a moment, the air smelled sweet and wrong, a mixture of honey and something else, something rotten. Grey pulled back and held the woman's head in her hands, and then watched her, intently, waiting. My sister's eyes were so black, they looked like polished river stones. She was fourteen then, and already the most beautiful creature I could imagine. I wanted to peel the skin from her body and wear it draped over mine.

The woman shuddered beneath Grey's touch and then just . . . stopped. By the time the police arrived, the woman's eyes were wide and faraway, her limbs so liquid she could no longer stand and had to be carried out, limp as a drunk, by three officers.

I wonder if Grey already knew then what we were.



The woman, the police would later tell us, had read about us on the internet and stalked us for several weeks before the break-in.

We were famous for a bizarre thing that had happened to us three years earlier, when I was only seven, a thing I couldn't remember and never thought about but that apparently intrigued many other people a great deal.

I was keyed into our strangeness after that. I watched for it in the years that followed, saw it bloom around us in unexpected ways. There was the man who tried to pull Vivi into his car when she was

fifteen because he thought she was an angel; she broke his jaw and knocked out two of his teeth. There was the teacher, the one Grey hated, who was fired after he pressed her against a wall and kissed her neck in front of her whole class. There was the pretty, popular girl who had bullied me, who stood in front of the entire school at assembly and silently began to shave her own head, tears streaming down her face as her dark locks fell in spools at her feet.

When I found Grey's eyes through the sea of faces that day, she was staring at me. The bullying had been going on for months, but I'd only told my sisters about it the night before. Grey winked at me, then returned to the book she was reading, uninterested in the show. Vivi, always less subtle, had her feet up on the back of the chair in front of her and was grinning from ear to ear, her crooked nose wrinkled in delight.

Dark, dangerous things happened around the Hollow sisters.

We each had black eyes and hair as white as milk. We each had enchanting, four-letter names: Grey, Vivi, Iris. We walked to school together. We ate lunch together. We walked home together. We didn't have friends, because we didn't need them. We moved through the corridors like sharks, the other little fish parting around us, whispering behind our backs.

Everyone knew who we were. Everyone had heard our story. Everyone had their own theory about what had happened to us. My sisters used this to their advantage. They were very good at cultivating their own mystery like gardeners, coaxing the heady intrigue that ripened around them into the shape of their choosing. I simply followed in their wake, quiet and studious, always embarrassed by the attention. Strangeness only begat strangeness, and it felt dangerous to tempt fate, to invite in the darkness that seemed already naturally drawn to us.

It didn't occur to me that my sisters would leave school long before I did, until it actually happened. School hadn't suited either of them. Grey was blisteringly smart but never found anything in the curriculum particularly to her liking. If a class called for her to read and analyze *Jane Eyre*, she might instead decide Dante's *Inferno* was more interesting and write her essay on that. If an art class called for her to sketch a realistic self-portrait, she might instead draw a sunken-eyed monster with blood on its hands. Some teachers loved this; most did not, and before she dropped out, Grey only ever managed mediocre grades. If this bothered her, she never showed it, drifting through classes with the sureness of a person who had been told her future by a clairvoyant and had liked what she'd heard.

Vivi preferred to cut school as frequently as possible, which relieved the administration, since she was a handful when she did show up. She back-talked teachers, cut slashes in her uniforms to make them more punk, spray-painted graffiti in the bathrooms, and refused to remove her many piercings. The few assignments she handed in during her last year all scored easy As—there just weren't enough of them to keep her enrolled. Which suited Vivi just fine. Every rock star needed an origin story, and getting kicked out of your £30,000 per year high school was as good a place to start as any.

They were both like that even then, both already in possession of an alchemical self-confidence that belonged to much older humans. They didn't care what other people thought of them. They didn't care what other people thought was cool (which, of course, made them *unbearably* cool).

They left school—and home—within weeks of each other. Grey was seventeen, Vivi was fifteen. They set off into the world,

both bound for the glamorous, exotic futures they'd always known they were destined for. Which is how I found myself alone, the only Hollow left, still struggling to thrive in the long shadows they left behind. The quiet, bright one who loved science and geography and had a natural flair for mathematics. The one who wanted desperately, above all else, to be unremarkable.

Slowly, month by month, year by year, the strangeness that swelled around my sisters began to recede, and for a good long while, my life was what I'd craved ever since I'd seen Grey sedate an intruder with a simple kiss: normal.

It was, of course, not to last.



1

MY BREATH SNAGGED when I saw my sister's face staring up at me from the floor.

Grey's fine, hook-shaped scar was still the first thing you noticed about her, followed by how achingly beautiful she was. The *Vogue* magazine—her third US cover in as many years—must have arrived in the mail and landed faceup on the hall rug, smack bang, which is where I found it in the silver ghost light of the morning. The words *The Secret Keeper* hovered in mossy green text beneath her. Her body was angled toward the photographer, her lips parted in a sigh, her black eyes staring at the camera. A pair of antlers emerged from her white hair as though they were her own.

For a short, witching moment, I'd thought she was actually there, in the flesh. The infamous Grey Hollow.

In the four years since she'd left home, my eldest sister had grown into a gossamer slip of a woman with hair like spun sugar and a face out of Greek mythology. Even in still pictures there was something vaporous and hyaline about her, like she might ascend into the ether at any moment. It was perhaps why jour-

nalists were forever describing her as ethereal, though I'd always thought of Grey as more earthy. No articles ever mentioned that she felt most at home in the woods, or how good she was at making things grow. Plants loved her. The wisteria outside her childhood bedroom had often snaked in through the open window and coiled around her fingers in the night.

I picked up the magazine and flicked to the cover story.

Grey Hollow wears her secrets like silk.

When I meet her in the lobby of the Lanesborough (Hollow never allows journalists near her apartment, nor, it's rumored, does she host parties or entertain guests), she's dressed in one of her hallmark enigmatic creations. Think heavy embroidery, hundreds of beads, thread spun from actual gold, and tulle so light it drifts like smoke. Hollow's couture has been described as a fairy tale meeting a nightmare inside a fever dream. Gowns drip with leaves and decaying petals, her catwalk models wear antlers scavenged from deer carcasses and the pelts of skinned mice, and she insists on wood-smoking her fabric before it's cut so her fashion shows smell like forest fires.

Hollow's creations are beautiful and decadent and strange, but it's the clandestine nature of her pieces that has made them so famous so quickly. There are secret messages hand-stitched into the lining of each of her gowns—but that's not all. Celebrities have reported finding scraps of rolled-up paper sewn into the boning of their bodices, or shards of engraved animal bone affixed alongside precious gems, or runic symbols painted in invisible ink, or minuscule vials of perfume that crack like glow sticks when the wearer moves, releasing Hollow's heady eponymous scent. The imagery that features in her embroidery is

alien, sometimes disturbingly so. Think gene-spliced flowers and skeletal Minotaurs, their faces stripped of flesh.

Much like their creator, each piece is a puzzle box, begging to be solved.

I stopped reading there, because I knew what the rest of the article would say. I knew it would talk about the thing that happened to us as children, the thing none of us could remember. I knew it would talk about my father, the way he'd died.

I touched my fingertips to the scar at my throat. The same half-moon scar I shared with Grey, with Vivi. The scar none of us could remember getting.

I took the magazine up to my bedroom and slipped it under my pillow so my mother wouldn't find it, wouldn't burn it in the kitchen sink like the last one. Before I left, I opened my Find Friends app and checked that it was turned on and transmitting my location. It was a requirement of my daily morning runs that my mother could track my little orange avatar as it bobbed around Hampstead Heath. Actually, it was a requirement if I wanted to leave the house *at all* that my mother could track my little orange avatar as it bobbed around . . . wherever. Cate's own avatar still hovered south, at the Royal Free Hospital, her nursing shift in the emergency room dragging—as per usual—into overtime.

Leaving now, I messaged her.

Okay, I will watch you, she pinged back immediately.
Message me when you're home safe.

I set off into the predawn winter cold. We lived in a tall, pointed house, covered in rough white stucco and wrapped with leadlight windows that reminded me of dragonfly wings.

Remnants of night still clung to the eaves and collected in pools beneath the tree in our front yard. It was not the kind of place a single mother on a nurse's salary could usually afford, but it had once belonged to my mother's parents, who both died in a car accident when she was pregnant with Grey. They'd bought it at the start of their marriage, during World War II, when property prices in London had crashed because of the Blitz. They were just teenagers then, barely older than I was now. The house had been grand once, though it was sagged and sunken now, and smelled of rising damp and the past.

In my favorite old photograph of the place, taken in the kitchen sometime in the sixties, the room was fat with lazy sunlight, the kind that lingers for hours in the summer months, sticking to the tops of trees in golden halos. My grandmother was squinting at the camera, a kaleidoscope of glittering green cast across her skin from a stained glass window that had since been broken. My grandfather stood with his arm around her, a cigar in his mouth, his pants belted high and a pair of Coke-bottle glasses on his nose. The air looked warm and smoky, and my grandparents were both smiling. They were cool, relaxed. If you didn't know their story, you might think they were happy.

From the four pregnancies she'd carried to term, my grandmother had given birth to only one living child, quite late in her life: my mother, Cate. The rooms of this house that had been earmarked for children had been left empty, and my grandparents had not lived long enough to see any of their grandchildren born. There are things in every family that are not talked about. Stories you know without really knowing how you know them, tales of terrible things that cast long shadows over generations. Adelaide Fairlight's three stillborn babies was one of those stories.

Another was the thing that had happened to us when I was seven.

Vivi called before I'd even reached the end of the street. I took the call on my AirPods, knowing without even looking at my screen that it was her.

"Hey," I said. "You're up early. It can't even be lunchtime in Budapest."

"Ha ha." Vivi's voice sounded muffled, distracted. "What are you doing?"

"I'm out for a run. You know, the thing I do every morning." I turned left and ran along the footpath, past empty sports fields and the carcasses of trees that stood tall and stripped in the cold. It was a gray morning, the sun yawning sluggishly into the sky behind a pall of clouds. The cold needled my exposed skin, drawing tears from my eyes and making my ears ache with each heartbeat.

"Ew," Vivi said. I heard an airline announcement in the background. "Why would you do that to yourself?"

"It's the latest rage for cardiovascular health. Are you at an airport?"

"I'm flying in for a gig tonight, remember? I just landed in London."

"No, I do not remember. Because you definitely didn't tell me."

"I'm *sure* I told you."

"That would be a negative."

"Anyway, I will be there, and Grey's flying in from Paris for some photo shoot today, and we're all hanging out in Camden before the gig. I'll pick you up when I get out of this god-awful airport."

“Vivi, it’s a school day.”

“You’re still at that soul-destroying institution? Wait, hang on, I’m going through immigration.”

My usual path took me through the green fields of Golders Hill Park, the grass sprinkled with a confetti bomb of yellow daffodils and white-and-purple crocuses. It had been a mild winter and spring was breaking already, rolling across the city in mid-February.

Minutes dragged by. I heard more airline announcements in the background as I ran along the western border of Hampstead Heath, then into the park, past the blanched milkstone of Kenwood House. I headed deeper into the twisting wildwood warrens of the heath, so tight and green and old in places it was hard to believe you were still in London. I gravitated to the untamed parts, where the trails were muddy and thick fairy-tale trees grew over them in archways. The leaves would soon begin to return, but this morning I moved beneath a thicket of stark branches, my path bordered on both sides by a carpet of fallen detritus. The air here smelled sodden, bloated with damp. The mud was thin from recent rain and flicked up the back of my calves as I pushed on. The sun was rising now, but the early-morning light was suffused with a drop of ink. It made the shadows deep, hungry-looking.

My sister’s garbled voice on the phone: “You still there?”

“Yes,” I replied. “Much to my chagrin. Your phone manners are appalling.”

“As I was saying, school is thoroughly boring and I am very exciting. I demand you cut class and hang out with me.”

“I can’t just—”

“Don’t make me call the administration and tell them you need the day off for an STD test or something.”

“You wouldn’t—”

“Okay, good chat, see you soon!”

“Vivi—”

The line went quiet at the same time a pigeon shot out of the undergrowth and into my face. I yelped and fell backwards into the muck, my hands instinctively coming up to protect my head even though the bird had already fluttered away. And then—a small movement on the path far ahead. There was a figure, obscured by trees and overgrown grass. A man, pale and shirtless despite the cold, far enough away that I couldn’t tell if he was even looking in my direction.

From this distance, in the gunmetal light, it appeared as though he was wearing a horned skull over his head. I thought of my sister on the cover of *Vogue*, of the antlers her models wore on the catwalk, of the beasts she embroidered on her silk gowns.

I took a few deep breaths and lingered where I sat in the mud, unsure if the man had seen me or not, but he didn’t move. A breeze cooled my forehead, carrying with it the smell of wood-smoke and the wild wet stench of something feral.

I knew that smell, even if I couldn’t remember what it meant.

I scrambled to my feet and ran hard in the direction I’d come from, my blood hot and quick, my feet slipping, visions of a monster snagging my ponytail playing on repeat in my head. I kept checking behind me until I passed Kenwood House and stumbled out onto the road, but no one followed.

The world outside the green bubble of Hampstead Heath was busy, normal. London was waking up. When I finally caught my breath, my fear was replaced by embarrassment that a wet brown stain had spread over the back of my leggings. I stayed alert while I ran home, the way women do, one AirPods out, a

sharp slice of adrenaline carving up the line of my spine. A passing cabdriver laughed at me, and a man out for his first cigarette of the day told me I was beautiful, told me to smile.

Both left a prickle of fright and anger in my gut, but I kept running, and they faded back into the white noise of the city.

That's the way it was with Vivi and Grey. All it took was one phone call from them for the strangeness to start seeping in again.

At the end of my street, I messaged my middle sister:

DO NOT come to my school.



2

AT HOME, I found my mother's red Mini Cooper in the driveway and the front door ajar. It keened open and closed on its hinges, breathing with the wind. Wet footprints tracked inside. Our ancient demon of a cat, Sasha, was sitting on the doormat, licking her paw. The cat was older than me, and so threadbare and crooked she was beginning to look like a bad taxidermy job. She hissed when I picked her up—Sasha had never liked me or Vivi or Grey, and she made her feelings known with her claws—but she was too decrepit these days to put up much of a fight.

Something was off. The cat hadn't been allowed outside for probably ten years.

"Cate?" I called quietly as I pushed the door open and stepped inside. I couldn't remember when or why we'd stopped calling our mother *Mum*, but Cate preferred it this way, and it had stuck.

There was no answer. I put Sasha down and scuffed off my muddy shoes. Soft voices echoed down the stairs from the floor above, snippets of an odd conversation.

“That’s the best you can do?” my mother asked. “You can’t even tell me where they went? How it happened?”

A tinny speakerphone voice responded: a man with an American accent. “Listen, lady, you don’t need a PI, you need a psychiatric intervention.”

I followed the voices, my footfalls quiet. Cate was pacing by her bed, still in her emergency room scrubs, the top drawer of her nightstand open. The room was dark, lit only by a dim honey lamp. Night shift at the hospital called for her room to have blackout curtains, so the space always had a slightly sour smell to it from the constant lack of sunlight. In one hand, Cate held her phone. In the other, a photograph of herself with a man and three children. This happened every winter, in the weeks following the anniversary: My mother hired a PI to try and solve the mystery the police were no closer to unraveling. Inevitably, the PI always failed.

“So that’s it, then?” Cate asked.

“Jesus, why don’t you ask your *daughters*,” the man on the phone answered. “If anyone knows, it’s them.”

“Fuck you,” she said sharply. My mother rarely swore. The wrongness of it sent a prickle into my fingertips.

Cate hung up. A glottal sound escaped her throat. It was not the kind of noise you’d make in the presence of others. I was immediately embarrassed to have stumbled on something so private. I went to turn away, but the floorboards creaked like old bones beneath my weight.

“Iris?” Cate said, startled. There was a prick of something odd in her expression when she looked up at me—anger? fear?—but it was quickly replaced with concern when she spotted my muddy leggings. “What happened? Are you hurt?”

“No, I was mauled by a rabid pigeon.”

“And you were so scared that you shat your pants?”

I threw her a *very funny* pout. Cate laughed and perched on the edge of her bed and beckoned me with both hands. I went and sat cross-legged on the floor in front of her so she could fix my long blond hair into two braids, as she had done most mornings since I was little.

“Everything okay?” I asked as she ran her fingers through my hair. I caught the prickly chemical scent of hospital soap, overlaid with sweat and bad breath and other telltale hints of a fifteen-hour shift in the emergency room. Some people thought of their mothers when they smelled the perfume she wore when they were children, but for me, my mother would always be this: the cornstarch powder of latex gloves, the coppery tang of other people’s blood. “You left the front door open.”

“No, I didn’t. Did I? It was a long shift. I spent a long time with a guy who was convinced his family was controlling him with anal probes.”

“Does that count as a medical emergency?”

“I think I’d want some pretty rapid intervention if that was happening to me.”

“Fair point.” I sucked my bottom lip and exhaled through my nose. It was better to ask now, in person, than over text later. “Is it okay if I come home a little later tonight? Vivi’s in town for a gig and Grey is flying in from Paris. I want to spend time with them.”

My mother said nothing, but her fingers slipped in my hair and tugged hard enough to make me gasp. She didn’t apologize.

“They’re my sisters,” I said quietly. Sometimes, asking to see them—but especially asking to see Grey—felt like asking for permission to take up shooting heroin as an extracurricular activity. “They aren’t going to let anything bad happen to me.”

Cate gave a short, complicated laugh and started braiding again.

The picture she'd been looking at was facedown on the blanket, like she hoped I wouldn't notice it. I turned it over and studied it. It was of my mother and my father, Gabe, and the three of us girls when we were younger. Vivi wore a green tweed duffle coat. Grey was dressed in a Bordeaux faux-fur jacket. I was in a little red tartan coat with gold buttons. Around each of our necks hung matching gold heart pendants with our names pressed into the metal: IRIS, VIVI, GREY. Christmas presents from the grandparents we had been in Scotland to visit when the photo was taken.

The police had never found these items of clothing or jewelry, despite extensive searches for them.

"It's from that day," I said quietly. I hadn't seen any photographs from that day before. I hadn't even known there were any. "We all look so different."

"You can . . ." Cate's voice split, fell back down her throat. She let out a thin breath. "You can go to Vivi's gig."

"Thank you, thank you!"

"But I want you home before midnight."

"Deal."

"I should make us something to eat before you go to school and you should definitely have a shower." She finished my braids and kissed me on the crown of my head before she left.

When she was gone, I looked at the photograph again, at her face, at my father's face, only a handful of hours before the worst thing that would ever happen to them happened. It had carved something out of my mother, shaved the apples from her cheeks and left her thinner and grayer than before. For much of my life, she had been a watercolor of a woman, sapped of vibrancy.

It had carved even more out of Gabe.

Yet it was the three of us girls who'd changed the most. I hardly recognized the dark-haired, blue-eyed children who stared back at me.

I've been told we were more secretive after it happened. That we didn't speak to anyone but each other for months. That we refused to sleep in separate rooms, or even separate beds. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, our parents would wake to check on us and find us huddled together in our pajamas, our heads pressed together like witches bent over a cauldron, whispering.

Our eyes turned black. Our hair turned white. Our skin began to smell like milk and the earth after rain. We were always hungry, but never seemed to gain weight. We ate and ate and ate. We even chewed in our sleep, grinding down our baby teeth and sometimes biting our tongues and cheeks so we woke with bloodstained lips.

Doctors diagnosed us with everything from PTSD to ADHD. We collected an alphabet of acronyms, but no treatment or therapy ever seemed to be able to reset us to how we'd been before it happened. We weren't sick, it was finally decided: We were just strange.

People always found it hard to believe now that Grey and Vivi and I had come from our parents.

Everything about Gabe Hollow had been gentle, except for his hands, which were rough from his work as a carpenter and his weekend hobby of throwing mugs on a potter's wheel. He'd worn cozy clothing from charity stores. His fingers were long and felt like sandpaper when he held your hand. He never watched sports or raised his voice. He caught spiders in plastic

containers and carried them out to the garden. He talked to his kitchen herbs when he watered them.

Our mother was an equally soft woman. She drank everything—tea, juice, wine—only from the mugs my father had made for her. She owned only three pairs of shoes and wore muddy Wellingtons as often as she could. After it rained, she picked up snails from the sidewalk and moved them to safety. She loved honey—honey on toast, honey on cheese, honey stirred into her hot drinks. She sewed her own summer dresses from patterns handed down to her by her grandmother.

Together, they'd worn waxed Barbour jackets and preferred walking in the English countryside to travelling overseas. They'd owned wooden hiking poles and hand reels for fishing in streams. They'd both loved to wrap themselves in wool blankets and read on rainy days. They both had light blue eyes, dark hair and sweet, heart-shaped faces.

They were gentle people. Warm people.

Somehow, combined, they'd produced . . . us. We were each five-eleven, a full ten inches taller than our tiny mother. We were each angular, elongated, sharp. We were each inconveniently beautiful, with high cheekbones and eyes like does. People told us as children, told our parents, how exquisite we were. The way they said it, it sounded like a warning—which, I supposed, it was.

We all knew the impact of our beauty and we all dealt with it in different ways.

Grey knew her power and brandished it forcefully, in a way I had seen few girls do. In a way I was afraid to mirror myself, because I had witnessed the repercussions of being beautiful, of being pretty, of being cute, of being sexy, and of that attracting the wrong kind of attention, not only from boys and men

but other girls, other women. Grey was an enchantress who looked like sex and smelled like a field of wildflowers, the human embodiment of late-summer evenings in the South of France. She accentuated her natural beauty wherever possible. She wore high heels and delicate lace bras and soft smoky eye makeup. She always knew just the right amount of skin to show to achieve that cool-sexy look.

More than anything else, this is how I knew my eldest sister was different from me: She walked home alone at night, always beautiful, sometimes drunk, frequently in short skirts or low-cut tops. She walked through dark parks and down empty streets and along graffiti-smeared canals where itinerants clustered to drink and do drugs and sleep in piles. She did this without fear. She went to the places and wore the things that—if anything happened to her—would later prompt people to say she was asking for it.

She moved through the world like no other woman I knew.

“What you don’t understand,” she said to me once when I told her how dangerous it was, “is that *I* am the thing in the dark.”

Vivi was the opposite. She tried to banish her beauty. She shaved her head, pierced her skin, inked the words *FUCK OFF!* across her lissome fingers, a spell to try and ward off unwanted desire from unwanted men. Even with these enchantments, even with a zigzag nose and a wicked tongue and unshaved body hair and the dark grooves beneath her eyes carved out by drink and drugs and sleepless nights, she was achingly beautiful, and ached after accordingly. She collected each wolf whistle, each smacked butt cheek, each groped breast, kept them all beneath her skin where they boiled in a cauldron of rage that she let out onstage on the strings of her bass guitar.

I fell somewhere between my sisters. I didn't actively try to wield or waste my beauty. I kept my hair washed and wore no scent but deodorant. I smelled clean but not heady, not sweet, not tempting. I wore no makeup and only loose-fitting clothing. I didn't take up the hem of my uniform. I didn't walk alone at night.

I went to put the photograph back in Cate's open drawer. A manila folder, distended with paper, sat beneath her socks and underwear. I pulled it out, flicked it open. It was filled with photocopies of police files, their edges curled with age. I saw my name, my sisters' names, caught snippets of our story as I riffled through, unable to look away.

The children claim to have no memory of where they have been or what happened to them.

Officer Mackenzie and Officer Mason refuse to be in the same room as the children, citing shared nightmares after taking their statements.

The flowers found in the children's hair are unidentifiable hybrids—possible pyrophytes.

The cadaver dogs continue to react to the children even days after their return.

Gabe Hollow insists that all three children's eyes have changed, and that baby teeth have grown back in places where they were already lost.

My stomach pressed against my throat. I snapped the folder shut and tried to shove it back into the drawer, but it snagged on the wood and split open, heaving paper onto the floor. I knelt and gathered the sheets back into a pile with shaking hands, trying not to look at its contents. Pictures, witness statements, pieces of evidence. My mouth was dry. The paper felt corrupted and wrong in my fingers. I wanted to burn it, the way you'd burn a blighted crop so the rot couldn't spread.

And there, at the top of the stack of documents, I found a photograph of Grey at eleven years old, two white flowers—real, living flowers—growing out of the paper as if they were bursting from her eyes.



3

I WAS HUNGRY when I arrived at school, even after Cate had cooked me breakfast. Even now, years after whatever trauma had first sparked my unusual appetite, I was *still* always hungry. Just last week I'd gotten home ravenous and laid waste to the kitchen. The fridge and pantry had been stocked with food after Cate's fortnightly grocery shopping: two loaves of fresh sour-dough bread, a tub of marinated olives, two dozen eggs, four cans of chickpeas, a bag of carrots, chips and salsa, four avocados . . . The list goes on. Enough food for two people for two weeks. I ate it all, every bite. I ate and ate and ate. I ate until my mouth bled and my jaw ached from chewing. Even when all the new groceries were devoured, I downed an old can of beans, a box of stale cereal with a liter of milk, and a tin of shortbread.

Afterward, my hunger finally sated, I stood in front of my bedroom mirror and turned this way and that, wondering where the hell the food went. I was still skinny, not so much as bump.

At school, I felt high-strung and jumpy. When a car door slammed in the drop-off line, I smacked my hand to my chest

so hard, the skin was still stinging. I straightened my uniform tie and tried to center my thoughts. My fingers felt grimy and smelled of something putrid, even though I'd washed them three times at home. The smell came from the flowers on the photo. I'd plucked one from my sister's eye before I left. It was an odd bloom, with waxy petals and roots that threaded into the paper like stitches. I'd recognized it. It was the same flower Grey had turned into a pattern and embroidered on many of her designs.

I'd held it close to my nose and inhaled, expecting a sweet scent like gardenia, but the stench of raw meat and garbage had made me dry heave. I'd left the files and fetid bloom in my mother's drawer and slammed her bedroom door shut behind me.

I breathed a little easier at school, felt like I was coming back to myself—or at least to the carefully curated version of myself I was at Highgate Wood School for Girls. My backpack, groaning at the seams with books on Python and A-level study guides, cut hot tracks into my shoulders. The rules and structure here made sense. The weirdness that lurked in old, empty houses and the wildwood thickets of ancient heaths found it hard to permeate the monotony of uniforms and fluorescent lighting. It had become my sanctuary away from the baseline strangeness of my life, even if I didn't belong here with the children of some of London's richest families.

I hurried through the busy corridors, bound for the library.

"You're five minutes *late*," said Paisley, one of the dozen students I tutored before and after school. Paisley was a pint-size twelve-year-old who somehow managed to make the school uniform look boho chic. Her parents had been paying me decent money for weeks to try and teach her basic coding. The annoy-

ing thing was, Paisley was a natural. When she paid attention, she picked up Python with an easy elegance that reminded me of Grey.

“Oh, I’m deeply sorry, Paisley. I’ll give you a free extra hour after school to make up for it.” She glared at me. “That’s what I thought. Where’s your laptop?”

“I heard you’re a witch,” she said as she returned to tapping away at her phone, curls of mousy hair falling into her eyes. “I heard your sisters were expelled for sacrificing a teacher to the devil in the auditorium.” Wow. The rumors had gotten out of control in the last four years, but honestly, I was more surprised that it had taken this long for one to reach her.

“I’m not a witch. I’m a mermaid,” I said as I set up my laptop and opened the textbook to where we left off. “Now show me the homework I set for you last week.”

“Why is your hair white if you’re not a witch?”

“I bleach it that way,” I lied. In fact, the week after Grey and Vivi left, I’d tried to dye it darker. I’d bought three boxes of black dye and spent a rainy summer evening drinking apple cider while I painted my hair. I’d waited the forty-five minutes the instructions recommended, then a little longer just to be sure, before rinsing it out. I was excited to see the new me. It felt like the transformative scene in a spy movie when the protagonist is on the run, forced to change their appearance in a service station bathroom after they go rogue.

When I wiped away the fog of condensation on the mirror, I shrieked. My hair was its usual milky blond, entirely untouched by the dye.

“*Homework*,” I ordered again.

Paisley rolled her little eyes and dug her laptop out of her

Fjällräven bag. “There.” She turned her screen toward me. “Well?” she demanded as I scrolled through her code.

“It’s good. Despite your best efforts, you’re picking this up.”

“What a terrible shame this will be our last session.”

God, what kind of twelve-year-old talked like that?

I tsked her. “Not so fast. Unfortunately for both of us, your parents have paid through the rest of the term.”

“That was until they found out who your sisters are.” Paisley handed me an envelope. My name was written on the front in her mother’s loopy handwriting. “They’re super into Jesus. They won’t even let me read Harry Potter. Suddenly they don’t seem to think you’re such a good influence on me.” She packed her things, stood to leave. “Bye, Sabrina,” she called sweetly on her way out.

“Wow,” came a disembodied voice. “Some people are *so rude*.”

“Oh,” I said as a small bottle-blond figure made her way out of the stacks and pulled up the chair across from me. “Hello, Jennifer.”

In the months after Grey and Vivi had left school, when the loneliness of being without them sank so deeply into my body that every heartbeat ached, I’d desperately wanted to make friends with some of my peers. I’d never needed friends before, but without my sisters, I had no one to eat with at lunchtime and no one but my mother to spend time with on the weekends.

When Jennifer Weir had invited me to her sleepover birthday party (reluctantly, I suspected—our mothers worked together at the Royal Free), I’d cautiously accepted. It was an appropriately posh affair: Each girl had her own mini tipi set up in the Weirs’ vast living room, each frosted with fairy lights and set among a floating sea of blush and gold balloons. We watched three of the

Conjuring movies into the early hours of the morning and ate so much birthday cake and so many delicate baked goods that I thought someone might vomit. We talked about the boys who attended nearby schools and how cute they were. We snuck into Jennifer's parents' liquor cabinet and did two shots of tequila each. Even Justine Khan, the girl who'd bullied me and subsequently shaved her head in front of the school, seemed not to mind my presence. For a handful of pink, sugary, alcohol-softened hours, I dared to allow myself to imagine a future that looked like this—and it might have been possible, if not for the now-infamous game of spin the bottle that had landed both Justine and me in the emergency room.

Jennifer Weir hadn't spoken to me since that night, when I left her house with blood dripping from my lips.

"Did you want something?" I asked her.

"Well, *actually*," Jennifer said with a smile, "I bought tickets to the gig at Camden Jazz Café tonight. I heard your sister was going to be there."

"Of course she's going to be there," I said, confused. "She's in the band."

"Oh no, silly, I meant your other sister. *Grey*. I was wondering . . . I mean, I would totally *love* to meet her. Maybe you could introduce me?"

I stared at her for a long time. Jennifer Weir and Justine Khan (together, they called themselves JJ), had been making my life a living hell for the better part of four years. Where Jennifer outright ignored me, Justine made up the difference: *witch* scrawled across my locker in blood, dead birds slipped into my backpack, and—one time—broken glass sprinkled over my lunch.



“Anyway,” Jennifer continued, her saccharine smile beginning to go sour, “think about it. It wouldn’t be the worst thing that could happen to you, you know—being my friend. I’ll see you tonight.”

When she was gone, I read Paisley’s note, in which her parents explained they’d heard some “concerning accusations” and asked for their advance back. I tore it up and dumped it in the bin, then checked the countdown timer on my phone to see how many days were left until graduation: hundreds. Forever. The school had a long memory when it came to the Hollow sisters, and it had been my burden to bear since the month both of my sisters had skipped town.

My first class of the day was English. I took my usual seat at the front of the classroom, by the window, my annotated copy of *Frankenstein* open on my desk, its pages frilled with a rainbow of multicolored sticky notes. I’d read it twice in preparation for this class, carefully underlining passages and making notes, trying to find the pattern, the key. My English teacher, Mrs. Thistle, was deeply conflicted by this behavior: On the one hand, a student who did the assigned readings—*all* of them, always, frequently more than once—was something of a phenomenon. On the other hand, a student who wanted the *right answer* for a work of literature sent her half-mad.

It was drizzling outside. A flicker of strange movement caught my eye as I set up my things, and I looked through the glass over the wet gulch of grass between buildings.

There, in the distance, was the man in the bull skull, watching me.