KRYSTAL SUTHERLAND

HOUSE OF HOLLOW





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 my hair to her nose and inhaled. 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 bruised 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.

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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 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, 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 bred 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 toilets, 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.



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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 post 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 journalists 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 A&E 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 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 teenagers then, barely older than I was now. The house had been grand once, though it had sagged and sunken with time.

In my favourite 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 trousers 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 chill 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'm here, 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—"

"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 backward 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 woodsmoke 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 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 AirPod 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.