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The 13 Curses

written by

Michelle Harrison

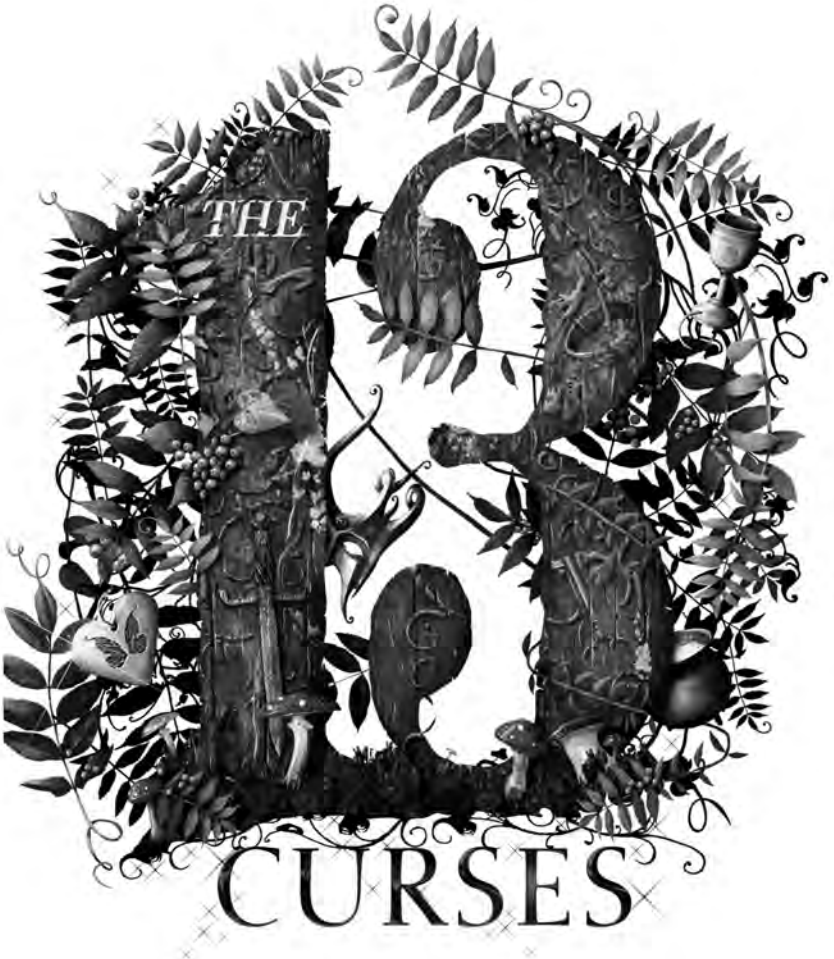
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Prologue

As midnight approached in Hangman's Wood two girls fled through the forest, desperately searching for a way out. Every pounding step through the suffocating darkness brought the witching hour closer, and with it, a moment's fusion as the human world and the fairy realm intersected.

The smaller, dark-haired of the two girls ran the hardest. Through trickery and deceit, the moment when the two worlds connected would propel her into the fairy realm unless she made it out of the woods in time.

The second girl, lanky and boyish, led the way, her green eyes darting for any opening that signalled the end to the forest. Her hands throbbed as she ran; dripping blood from the stinging cuts on her palms. She had gained them from severing the bonds that had held her companion captive only moments before.

On and on they ran, threading through the trees and over the carpet of leaves and roots that was the forest floor. In the air above, fey creatures glided and swooped; waiting for the moment when the girl would be surrendered to them. Within the gnarly barks of the trees they passed, faces stirred

and called out to them. Time was running out and the edge of the woods was nowhere in sight.

Breathing raggedly now, both girls had no choice but to persevere. But then came the moment when the inevitable could no longer be stayed.

'Stop,' the smaller girl muttered, slowing down.

'We can't stop!' the other hissed. 'Move. I said MOVE!'

Her dark-haired companion had stopped altogether, and sank to the ground, closing her eyes and clamping her hands over her ears to block out some noise that only she could hear.

'Get up!' the taller girl urged. 'Tanya, you can't stop now – get *up*!'

But Tanya was too far gone; slumping to rest against the woodland floor. Midnight had arrived and the transition was taking place. There was nothing either of the girls could do to stop it. Vines were crawling and snaking towards the fallen girl, snaring her, ready to pull her away into the dark recesses of the fairy realm. Whipping out her knife, the other girl slashed and sliced them away. There were too many. They had only moments before Tanya would be imprisoned in the fairy realm. Unless . . .

The solution was so blindingly obvious that the taller girl could not believe she had only just thought of it. Her bloody hands trembling, she reached into her pocket and removed a small pair of silver scissors. Kneeling at Tanya's side she pressed the point to the unconscious girl's thumb until a dark bead of blood formed there. Pressing her own wet, red

thumb against the wound she held on tightly as Tanya stirred at the pricking sensation.

'How did I . . .?' she began.

'Take me,' the other girl whispered, pressing her hand tighter against Tanya's. Their blood mingled, and with it, so did Tanya's legacy. 'Take me instead,' she repeated. 'She has a life to go back to. I don't . . . take me instead.'

The vines crawling over Tanya slowed . . . then shifted their direction, edging towards the other girl. She felt the cool damp of the dark leaves against her skin as the branches crept over her. Ignoring her impulse to flee, she remained perfectly still, allowing the woodland to submerge her. The scissors fell from her hand, swallowed with the rest of her by the foliage. Humming began in her ears, a low swarm that eventually gave way into murmuring voices.

She felt herself being tugged at by the vines that covered her, pulling her this way and that, like a cat toying with a spider. The voices became clearer; the curious comments of fey creatures as they awaited the new arrival into their world. Then the foliage drew back as swiftly as it had advanced, leaving her huddled on the ground central to a crowd of fairy onlookers. They watched with glittering eyes; some merely curious and others with more intent; young and ancient, beautiful and hideous. As she watched them watching her, the girl leaped to her feet and launched into a run with a ferocious yell. At the sound of her cry more than half the fairies scattered back to their hiding places

leaving several gaps in the mass that had gathered. Choosing the nearest, she ran.

Her lungs still burned, not yet recovered from her earlier running with Tanya. But now Tanya was gone, safely back on the other side in the human world. The girl heard scurrying behind her, and wings in the air. Branches moved, trying to trip her as she fled. Each jump to dodge them became harder as her limbs tired and grew heavier.

Then she saw it: a hollow in a huge old tree, a space big enough to hide. Drawing closer, she saw green berries among sprays of leaves and recognised them. No fairies would dwell here. Throwing her bag inside the hollow, she clambered in after it, arranging the foliage of berries to better conceal the hollow. Her body tensed as the scurrying passed her hiding place, then moved on. All became silent. She had done it. She had escaped.

Exhausted, the girl fell into sleep. When the sun rose hours later, she did not wake. Nor did she stir as night fell once more. All around her the forest grew, cradling the old tree and its hollow in leafy arms.

The girl in the hollow slept on.

1



VER SINCE FAIRIES HAD STOLEN away her little brother, Rowan Fox – or Red, as she now called herself – had thought of nothing except how to get him back. It consumed her and became her sole purpose, her reason for being. His disappearance had occurred less than two months after their parents' death eighteen months ago. At the first opportunity, Red had run away to search for him. During the months that followed she had lived by her wits and refused to doubt – even fleetingly – that she would find him. Her determination had been rewarded. She'd made a breakthrough. *The* breakthrough.

She had finally gained access to the fairy realm.

It was dawn when she woke from a sleep that had been like a black void. She was curled into the hollow trunk of an ancient tree. Shivering, she reached out a stiff, cold hand to push aside the tangle of branches and brambles concealing her from the forest. As the mottled morning light filtered through the undergrowth she saw the scars.

Both palms were caked with a dark substance. Dried blood.

Her skin was lacerated with thin slashes, crossing this way and that. There were too many to count, yet despite the blood, the injuries had healed to silvery scars. Her mind raced back, remembering how she had got them, freeing Tanya.

Her empty stomach growled. In addition, her full bladder was aching.

Grimacing, Red pulled herself from the hollow and stumbled away from the tree. She had pins and needles in her feet from sitting cramped for so long. Warily, she took a quick look around. Unable to hold on any longer, she lowered her trousers and squatted.

The woods were unnaturally quiet. When she was finished she stood up and collected her belongings from the hollow. From her bag she withdrew the knife that she always carried with her and strapped it into its holster on her belt. Then she took a few steps back and looked up at the tree. It was an old and sturdy oak, but thanks to the birds – or whatever else lived in the tree – seeds from another plant had found their way into some nook of the bark and taken hold, for it grew all over the tallest part of the tree. A spray of red berries caught her eye. They were rowan: her namesake, although she hadn't been called by her real name for a long time. Another lifetime. It was the reason she had chosen this particular tree. Legend had it that rowan offered protection against enchantment; the malevolent magic of witches . . . and fairies.

Uneasiness settled heavily upon her. The berries had been hard and green when she had entered the hollow

shortly after midnight. Now they were red and soft, having ripened – overnight. Added to the healed scars on her hands, this unsettled her. It seemed that time had passed.

Quickly she tried to recall what she knew of the plant. The berries usually became red in autumn. But when she had entered the hollow just after midnight it had been July, the height of summer. Something was wrong. She had heard of time slips in the fairy realm, but if her guess was correct it would mean that more than two months had passed somehow.

Red glanced around the forest. Nothing stirred, but she knew that this scene of peaceful isolation was an illusion. She wasn't alone. Something would reveal its true nature eventually; a face in the bark of a tree perhaps, or a haunting song inviting her to dance. She had heard of the dangers of the fairy realm.

Now she was in it she had to be ready for them.

There was one last thing to do before setting off. Using the knots in the bark of the oak tree as footholds, she hoisted herself up to reach a rowan branch that was marginally thinner than her wrist. The branch snapped immediately beneath her weight and fell to the ground.

The length of rowan wood was about a foot shorter than she was tall. Resting it in the crook of her arm, she removed the knife from her belt and began hacking at the smaller twigs and branches that were growing from it, snapping them off to leave a staff of sorts. Now, with this added protection, she was ready.

She moved off. The woods were silent and cool, the early morning air swirling like wraiths in a low mist on the forest floor. Dew dripped from above. Red could smell the damp leaf mould on her clothes from being inside the hollow. It was mixed with the scent of her own sweat and blood. She reeked – and she knew it.

She walked relentlessly, following the sun as it moved higher in the sky. The air warmed a little but retained an autumnal chill. Still she walked, her staff poised and her eyes and ears alert for any sound that she was being pursued. As the forest awoke, leaves rustled with movement above her head. A few times she looked up to catch sight of fey eyes peeping down at her. Sometimes they vanished as their eyes met hers. Others, less wary, more curious, emerged further from their nooks for a closer look, their wings and markings blending with the newly golden, ruby and rich brown of the trees.

Presently, she heard the welcome sound of running water. Her heart lightened. She headed towards it until she found herself before the tiny brook that cut through the forest.

It trickled past, carrying the odd leaf here and there. Red knelt at its edge thankfully, placing the wooden staff carefully in front of her knees so that it remained close, should she need it. She pulled her backpack off and unzipped one of the compartments to withdraw her water flask. She shook it; it was almost empty, containing less than a mouthful of liquid. She unscrewed the lid and emptied the stale water onto the grass next to her, before taking the

flask and plunging it into the water. It ran over her hand, icy and fresh.

Once the flask was full, she took several long gulps before returning it to her bag. Afterwards she turned back to the water and began to gently wash the blood from her hands, watching as it disappeared into the flowing stream like swirls of dark red paint. She scooped up handfuls of water and sloshed it over her face and neck. Refreshed, she sat back on her haunches and watched her reflection in the stream. It swayed with the movement of the water, and with another jolt Red saw that her hair had grown. Leaning forward, she lifted a hand to her head and touched her short, mousy tresses. She had cut it herself only days before, into a short, boyish style. But sure enough it was longer. Half an inch of her natural auburn showed at the roots. Time had definitely passed.

Suddenly a figure appeared in the water beside her reflection. Quick as a cat, Red grabbed the rowan staff and turned as the figure loomed towards her, just inches away. Red slid back in shock, losing her balance. She fell backwards into the brook, losing hold of her wooden staff. At the same time a swarm of birds and fairies scattered from the trees above, shrieking warning calls as they deserted the area.

As Red emerged spluttering from the chilly water, she glimpsed the rowan stick drifting downstream, out of reach.

A rough hand stretched towards her, accompanied by a low voice.

'Come, child . . .'

The face of the woman to whom the voice belonged was partially hidden in the shadow of the hooded green cape she wore. Beneath the hood long, grizzled hair spewed out, spilling over the woman's shoulders. There were things tied and knotted into the tendrils; pieces of rag and little rolls of parchment. Red could see little of her face. A crooked nose – thin at the bridge and broad at the tip – was the dominant feature. Her nostrils were large and pink-rimmed. Her mouth was thin and curved, her lips colourless like the rest of her skin, but when she spoke the inside of the mouth was unusually red. There were dried flecks of spittle at its corners. It was impossible to tell whether she was even fey or human.

'Come,' she said again, with difficulty, as though the words felt strange in her mouth. She hunched suddenly, giving a horrible, hacking cough.

Red stood her ground, not moving an inch. Her heart was still hammering from the woman's sudden appearance. How had she arrived so soundlessly? Water ran from Red in rivulets, and her hand gripped the hilt of her knife, ready to pull it. She saw the woman's head incline and knew she had noticed it, still sheathed firmly in Red's belt, at precisely that moment. Red moved her hand very slightly, as though she were about to draw it. Though she was unsure whether the woman meant her harm or not, something in her gut made her uneasy. She wanted the woman gone, and if it meant scaring her then so be it.

The woman backed away as silently as she had come, edging between the trees. Red watched, still motionless, as she slowly vanished from sight. There was something strange about the way the woman had moved; something she was unable to pin down. Red shook herself as goose pimples appeared on her arms. She was cold now, as well as hungry. She needed to find food – and soon.

She gathered her bag and made to move off, habitually checking her knife with a quick pat of the hand. The familiar feel of the cold hilt reassured her. Lifting her bag onto her shoulder, she set off, determined to set a quick pace in order to keep warm and dry off. Her wet clothes clung to her, and her hair dripped icy water down the nape of her neck. She shivered, and walked faster, cursing the fact that she had nothing else to change into. All she owned were the clothes on her back.

She had not walked very far when she saw another fairy. In the stillness of the wood, a subtle movement in the branches overhead caught her attention. A grey-skinned creature the size of a small child was hunched in the trees above. It was squat and rotund, its skin leathery like elephant hide. Either side of its dome-shaped head were large, bat-like ears. It looked like an ugly stone gargoyle. She paused momentarily before proceeding, never taking her eyes off it. The creature returned her gaze with an unflinching, amber-eyed stare, and crouched lower on the branch, holding on with ragged-looking claws. Its appearance made her realise that the other rustlings and whisperings had

stopped. Either the fairies were being very quiet or this part of the wood was strangely lacking in their numbers.

Cautious now, she kept up her stride as she passed beneath the branches, the creature overhead. On the pathway before her lay a fallen tree, its thick trunk's width reaching the height of her knee. In front of it lay heavy bracken and other forest debris. She needed to watch her footing. Momentarily she took her eyes off the gargoyle-like thing above to step over the tree trunk. As she did so, two things happened at once. The first was a strange sound coming from overhead: the chink and clinking of metal on metal. The second was that as she lowered her foot to the earth beyond the fallen tree, the ground gave way beneath her.

As she plummeted forward, arms flailing, her left leg, still behind the tree, was forced into its bark; carried by her own weight. She felt fabric and flesh tear as it caught the rough surface, extending down the length of her shin as gravity propelled her over. She was falling, through branches and foliage into darkness. As the ground swallowed her, the last thing she was aware of was a high-pitched cackling before everything went black.