

THE INVOCATIONS

ALSO BY KRYSTAL SUTHERLAND

House of Hollow

A Semi-Definitive List of Worst Nightmares

Our Chemical Hearts

**KRYSTAL
SUTHERLAND**

**THE
INVOCATIONS**

**HOT
KEY
BOOKS**

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This book contains themes and descriptions that some readers may find triggering. These include body horror, misogyny, femicide, intimate partner violence, familial abuse (mild), self-harm (mild/allegorical), stalking (mild), bereavement, decay, crime scenes, confinement (mild), cannibalism (mild) and addiction (mild).

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For all the angry girls

PROLOGUE

A GIRL walks home alone at night.

It's All Hallows' Eve in London, and the street that stretches before her is empty, quiet except for the soft thud of her boots on the pavement and the rustle of autumn leaves plucked by the wind. Hazy sodium lights struggle to shift the dark.

The girl is dressed as a witch. Cartoon-green skin, pointy hat, a fake wart on her nose. She is coming from the Electric Ballroom, where, at a Halloween concert with her housemates, she saw the boy she likes kissing a girl dressed as a sexy angel. It immediately made her regret her costume and want to go home.

Now she slips through the gap between two buildings, past the canal-side pub she goes to with her friends in the summer. A girl sits on the other side of a window decorated with bat decals, her face smeared with blood. A couple in matching hot-pink jumpsuits are breaking up on a bench.

The girl takes a few steps onto the footbridge that leads over the water and down onto the towpath on the other side.

It is here, on the bridge, that she pauses. The canal beneath her is a thin snake of shallow water. On a clear day, you can see the algae-coated detritus that collects at the bottom: the bicycles, the shopping trolleys, the tyres. Tonight it is black and impenetrable. If you didn't know its depth, you might think it fathomless.

Across the water, the bars and restaurants of Camden Market are still busy with the Halloween crowd. Men and women in costumes cluster around the spaceship-red glow of outdoor heaters, laughing, drinking mulled wine out of steaming mugs.

Ahead, the footbridge slopes down to the towpath that winds alongside Regent's Canal, below street level.

The girl hovers at the edge of the dark, weighing her options.

Usually she avoids the canal after sunset. It is unlit. It is the kind of place she has been told all her life to avoid for the simple fact that she is a girl—but tonight she is cold and drunk and sad and hungry for the leftover pad thai she knows is waiting for her in the fridge. The path by the water is the shortest, fastest route home.

Yet something tells her not to go any farther. Perhaps it is the memory of what happened to her on another night like this one. The stranger waiting in the dark, all the warnings she had been given growing up suddenly manifesting as flesh and breath and muscle.

Then the girl remembers the words at her wrist and runs a fingertip over the cool metal letters sunken into her skin. Words that took her a year to find. Words that mean she no longer has to fear the night or anyone who might be lurking in it.

She crosses the bridge. She plunges down into the blackness.

The first part of the walk is fine. The path is narrow and cobbled. The canal is bordered on both sides by converted warehouses turned into blocks of fancy flats. Light from their windows reflects

on the smooth surface of the water, creating an eerie mirror world just below the real one. Houseboats sit snug against the canal's edge, the smell of woodsmoke clinging to the air around them. A huge, fat dog sits atop one, watching her as she passes. The sounds of revelry dissolve into the distance, but there is still life here. Still people to hear her, if she were to scream.

She crosses beneath a bridge. It is mauled with graffiti and lit with shocking blue light to discourage drug use. Combined, they make the place feel dangerous. She moves on quickly, back into the waiting shadow.

The next stretch of the walk is worse. There are no more houseboats. There are no more fancy flats. There is no one to come to her aid. There's more greenery along the side of the path, vines and brambles that don't lose their foliage as the nighttimes turn to frost. She moves closer to the water, wary of attackers hidden in the creepers.

The girl crosses under a second blue-lit bridge, and then a third that's rancid with the stink of urine. She makes it to the base of the stairs that leap up out of the darkness and onto the brightly lit street above.

A girl walks home alone, but not alone.

She feels him before she sees him. There's no sound, or movement, or smell. Just some primordial response left over in the blood from a time before humans were humans. A sudden prickle of fright in her gut. A displacement of energy that makes her gaze snap back over her shoulder and brings her footsteps to a stop.

Her eyes find the figure immediately, standing stationary on the path. He's a slip of shadow, nothing more. No face, no weapon, nothing to indicate that he might do her harm. Just a man.

But she is a girl. And she is alone. And it is night. And that is enough.

She ducks her head and takes the stairs two at a time, but tries to do it casually, the way women do when they're afraid but trying not to look rude. She forces herself not to run. There's no need for desperate measures. Not yet. He's just a man on the towpath at night. It would be rude to run.

And sometimes.

Well.

Sometimes, if you run, the monster chases you; this she learned the hard way.

So she climbs, step after measured step, up, up into the light. The staircase spits her out on Gloucester Avenue, only one street from her flat. She waits under a streetlight to see if the man will follow her, but he does not. She breathes a sigh of relief and turns for home. It's a sloe-black, moonless night. The kind that beckons demons out of the liminal world and brings them into this one, hungry to feed on the souls of the living. London is full to bursting with magic, dark and dangerous, if you know where to look . . . and she knows, now, where to look.

A dog barks.

The girl looks up and stifles a yelp with her hand.

The figure from the canal is somehow standing on the pavement directly in front of her. Closer than he was the first time.

The girl stops again. Stares. Her heart crashes inside her chest. She takes small, gasping breaths as she tries to understand the logistics of what has just happened. How could he have followed her? How could he have overtaken her? How could he have moved so quickly? There's no way. There's no way.

Then she remembers the words at her wrist.

There's no need to fear anymore.

There's heavy shadow to her right, the deep, wet shadow that trees cast in the forest. The girl moves toward it, into it, lets it devour her, and—

She steps from a bank of shadows on the next street over. A little out of breath. A little frazzled. She looks around. She's alone again. She went where the figure could not follow. Into one shadow, out of another.

A small smile on her face now, she again heads toward her flat, only a few buildings away. The price she paid for this power—blood and money and soul—was worth it to feel safe.

The girl climbs the five stairs up to her blue front door and unlocks it. When she steps inside and turns to close the door behind her, she finds the figure once more, now standing at the bottom of the stairs. He is unmoving and close. So very close to her now.

It is impossible. Men cannot use magic. This is what she has been told. This is what she has been promised. Men cannot write spells. Men cannot sear invocations into their skin. Men cannot bind their souls to demons in exchange for power.

Men cannot use magic.

And yet. Here he is. Again.

They stand still, staring at each other. Though—is he staring? She cannot see his face, cannot make out his eyes, his nose, his hair. He is empty space, a black hole from which no light escapes.

The girl slams the door closed and scrambles backward. She doesn't bother with the stairs that lead up to her flat on the third floor. She lunges into the shadowed corner of the hall, falls out of another shadow in her kitchen, then fumbles in the sink for one

of the dirty knives her housemates are forever leaving to soak.

The blade quivers like a water reed in her white-knuckled hand as she watches her front door and waits. Waits for a bang against the wood, a turning of the handle, a horror-movie moment worthy of a scream.

It does not come.

It does not come.

It does not come.

And then, when she thinks perhaps she is safe, perhaps he was no more than a Halloween prankster out for a laugh, a pair of strong hands close around her throat.

ONE

EMER BYRNE sits in a far corner of the dining hall of Brasenose College, curled over a plate laden with food. Students move in and out of the wood-paneled room, their trays neatly set out with eggs and toast and tea, not noticing the stranger in their midst. They watch their phones with sleepy eyes. They listen to AirPods. They highlight lines in textbooks as they eat. Oxford students tend to be more alert at lunch and dinner, more suspicious of faces they do not recognize, which is why Emer only ever eats in college halls for breakfast. Nobody bothers her. Nobody tries to make conversation. Nobody cares when she takes a second muffin for the road.

Outside, she unlocks her stolen bicycle from where she left it chained against the fence of the Radcliffe Camera. Emer has heard passing tourists remark quizzically at the name—“It doesn’t look like a camera”—but it has never stumped her. The word *camera* shares its roots in Greek and Latin with *chamber*. To a girl fluent in Latin and a dozen other old languages, it makes perfect sense.

As she wheels her bike through the square, she tests herself. Behind the Camera is another extravagant building: a palatial wall, beyond which rise turrets shaped like spear tips. All Souls College. To her left, a boxier more fortlike building, also of pale stone and topped with turrets. The Bodleian Library. To her right, an ornate spire. University Church of St. Mary the Virgin. Oxford students are expected to know the names of these buildings, and so Emer has learned them, too.

It was a confusing place when she first arrived two summers ago, frantic and afraid that she was being hunted already. She expected the university to be one big campus, not a collection of halls and buildings—residential colleges—scattered throughout the city, each with its own history and charm. Some are very old: Balliol was founded in the thirteenth century. Some are much newer, like Linacre, established in 1962, which is where Emer cycles to this morning.

Cool air needles her skin as she rides. Autumn has descended over the streets. The gutters are laden with leaves the color of honeycomb, and the sandstone buildings are dipped in blanched sunlight.

Linacre College has a gym in the basement. Emer scans an ID card that is not hers, then heads to the locker room to get changed. There, she pulls her workout gear from her backpack. A navy Oxford-branded hoodie and shorts, both stolen from a merchandise shop. The clothes are musty and damp with sweat from last night's workout, and the workouts before that.

Emer runs, hard and fast, for forty-five minutes, until her head spins when she steps off the treadmill. Her muscles feel heavy, in a good way. She likes to be able to feel the meat of them when she walks. All that muscle, just beneath the skin, encasing her bones. That is power.

After her run, she goes back to the locker room and gets into the shower fully clothed and rubs soap over the fabric of her clothing until it lathers. Then she stands under the stream to wash away the sweat and grit of the past few days and the faint smell of sulfur that seeps from her skin. She takes off her sopping clothes and washes them properly, washes her underwear, too, all three pairs, then wrings them out and hangs them up on the hooks where people sometimes hang jackets or accidentally leave their towels. When all the cleaning is done, she stands under the water and turns up the heat until it sears her white skin pink. It is a stupid luxury. Even now, so many years after Nessa found her half-feral in the woods, having access to a shower makes her want to laugh and weep at the same time.

She dries herself with someone else's towel and considers her naked body in the foggy full-length mirror, admiring the thick cords of muscle in her arms and legs, the six-pack that has bloomed across the once-soft plane of her stomach. There are two toes missing from her left foot, an unhealed two-inch wound on her left forearm, and an angry red rash below her collarbone where her lead pendant rests against her skin.

Linacre women leave their deodorant here, their shampoo and conditioner, their foundation and lipstick and mascara. Emer uses what she needs, then changes back into the clothes she wore here. A tan wool coat, a black turtleneck, a tweed skirt, black tights, black boots. The same clothes Nessa shoved into Emer's backpack two years ago as she pushed her out the door and told her to run, run, they will come for you after this.

At midday, Emer goes to her first and only "class" for the day. It is a lecture on mathematics. She does not understand mathematics

beyond what she learned from her mother, and her mother died when she was seven. Addition, subtraction, and multiplication are concepts that make sense to her, but she struggles to put them into practice without counting on her hands. Nessa sometimes tried to teach her in fits and starts, but Nessa herself had never gone to school, had learned only what had been deemed useful for Byrne women to know: when to plant seeds in the spring, how to turn plants into tinctures, how to speak the tongues of the dead.

Emer would prefer to attend a lecture on languages, the older the better, but those are delivered in small rooms to small classes—and they do not serve food. At the mathematics lecture, they are serving bánh mì, a pork version on one side of the room, a vegetarian option on the other. The sign above the food reads PLEASE TAKE ONLY ONE. Emer takes two of the pork sandwiches, then leaves the auditorium, comes back in another door, and takes two of the vegetarian sandwiches.

The lecture is so full that she has to sit on the side of the room, on the carpeted floor. There's a young guest speaker talking about a scholarship she won to study at an elite university in America. Emer wonders what the food is like there. Then the lecture begins. The professor writes all sorts of strange symbols on the board, as he does every week. Egyptian hieroglyphs she understands, but not these. Emer listens, and watches, and eats all four of her sandwiches slowly. When the attendance sheet is passed around, she looks at it and pretends to fumble for a pen before passing it on without writing her name down. Nobody notices. She has become proficient at being a ghost.

The lecture goes until midafternoon. When it is over, Emer

returns to the Camera and goes to the Bodleian Library and sits at a dark wood table among the dark wood stacks.

The library is why she is here. It is why she decided to hide in Oxford instead of anywhere else when she fled Cork in the night two years ago.

Here, Emer reads. The sun slants long and golden through the windows. The air smells of leather and old paper. It is Emer's favorite place in the world. It is here that she finds books left for her: at her feet, on the chair next to her. She never has to go looking for them; they just appear, as if by magic. Books about protolanguages. Books about sigils and runes. Books about Sumerian, Hattic, Elamite, Hurrian. Books about Linear A. and Cretan hieroglyphs about syllabaries and logograms and constrained writing. Emer reads them all, cover to cover, taking extensive notes as she goes. While she works, she fiddles with the pendant around her neck, twisting the tightly rolled scroll of lead, beaten as thin as silk, between her fingers. A subconscious gesture to make sure it is still there.

At the end of a book on protolanguages, Emer undoes the necklace and unfurls the scroll to review her work. Into the lead are engraved all the worst words Emer has found in every dead language that ever had a writing system.

Every word for *blood*.

Every word for *hatred*.

Every word for *vengeance*.

She adds a new word today, a tiny thing scratched at the very edge with a scribe, and then she looks up to watch the other people in the room, their heads buried in books and laptops in silent contemplation. They are all so clean. They all sit so straight.

They are all so sure they belong here. Emer studies them carefully and tries to emulate them. The lines of their spines. The way their eyes squint when they work through the problems on their screen, frustrated but confident in their ability to prevail in the end. The women are bright faced, with neat ponytails and little makeup. The men have freshly cut hair and shiny shoes. Humans are pattern-recognition machines, and Emer must try hard to fit the pattern. To not arouse suspicion.

When a man gets up to go to the bathroom, Emer stands, puts her pendant back on, and walks past his workstation. He has left his wallet in his open backpack. It still surprises her how freely Oxford students leave their belongings unguarded. How freely they trust each other. Emer pretends to drop something next to the backpack and bends down. She does not take the whole wallet. Just the things that will help her around the city. His student ID card. His cash.

In the evening, Emer eats the muffin she saved from breakfast, then goes back to the gym and lifts weights for another hour. No one questions her presence in the small room meant only for Linacre students. Why would they? Emer's workout gear is still drying, so she wears an Oxford Medicine hoodie that someone left scrunched up in a locker. Sometimes men stare at her as she passes, and she thinks it might be because she is pretty, striking even, with her red hair and brown eyes, but that is not useful when you are trying not to be noticed, not to be remembered.

What did the girl look like? Emer imagines the police asking her neighbor back in Cork. *The girl who killed your husband?*

After the weights sessions, Emer goes to the Linacre common kitchen and makes herself a coffee, drinks it, then makes another one. The drawers here are filled with tea bags and packets of brown

sauce and coffee pods and individually wrapped biscuits. So much food. She thinks of the nights she spent in the woods around Lough Leane as a child, cold and starving and wild, when there were drawers like this at Oxford the whole time. She takes four biscuits and puts them into her backpack. Then she takes four more, two for each pocket of her coat.

It is night now. The sky is clear, the college gables bleak and Gothic in the gloaming. Emer rides to Franco Manca and lingers outside, waiting for a table of students to leave. It does not take long. Three girls stand and wander out, chatting and laughing as they go. There is still half a pizza on their table, a plate of salad, a beer that has barely been touched. Emer slips inside the restaurant and sits where the girls were sitting and eats everything they left behind. She takes her time. She savors the pizza. She sips the beer slowly. When she is done, she leaves. Nobody stops her, because the bill has already been paid.

Outside, the town is dark and cold in the November chill, late autumn settled heavily over the streets, lulling them into an early hush. The streetlights are yellow and look like gaslight. It reminds Emer of the candles her mother used to burn all throughout the house when she was small.

It is at night that she watches men. In the day she dips her gaze from theirs, smiles at them coyly when necessary, shrinks her muscular frame to look smaller, weaker, more petite. Now she pulls her shoulders back to reveal the full extent of her broadness, feels the weight and surety of the muscles she has cultivated. Under her warm clothes she looks soft, but she is strong, and this, she has learned, makes her dangerous.

Emer follows men on her bicycle. Men do not know what it feels

like to be hunted. Men do not walk alone on dark streets and think about fingers closing around their throats or their skulls thudding dully against the pavement.

They do not think about strangers coming to their house and slaughtering their entire family.

Emer likes to find them where they sit or stand or walk, comfortable, unafraid. Because there is no need to fear if you are a man. You own the darkness. It is your space.

Emer slows her bike on Christ Church Meadow Walk, across from a low stone bridge. Folly Bridge. It is her favorite spot in the whole city, apart from the library. The River Thames is surrounded by a medley of mismatched trees; faded eucalyptus, rich emerald evergreens, and impossibly bright oaks in autumn tones of candy red and sherbet orange. It is close to 9:00 p.m. There is only one other person here. A light-haired man sitting on a bench, watching the water as he eats a burger. Emer sits next to him, too close to him, and stares and waits.

Men think she looks like prey.

They do not know she is bait.

“Can I help you?” the man asks. There is no fear in his voice, no fear in his eyes. “Are you okay?”

Emer continues to stare. “Andy?” she asks. It’s been two years since she left Ireland, but her accent is still strong.

Try me, she thinks. Try to hurt me.

See what happens.

See what I can do.

“No. My name is John.” The man looks confused. Concerned. He says nothing more. Emer stands and backs away and leaves him be.

She rides for three more hours, until her fingers are numb with the cold and the city is quiet and there are no more men to stalk.

At midnight she goes back to Brasenose, where she ate the muffin this morning. It is Tuesday night and there is a party going on in the common room. There is food and alcohol, and Emer weaves through the crowd and takes both. Nobody notices. She belongs here. A boy tries to talk to her, asks her name, but it is too bright, and Emer has her shoulders hunched again. The boy waits for her to reply, but she does not, and soon he goes away, looking at her like she is strange.

Stupid. Flirting is part of her camouflage, her disguise. She cannot be the weird girl. She cannot be the girl people think of if anyone comes asking questions.

There are bathrooms down the hall. Emer sits on a toilet lid and eats curry puffs and sips another beer and waits for the party to end, which it does at 1:00 a.m., because there are noise restrictions. The students must be well rested if they are to rule the world one day.

Emer washes her face in the bathroom and drinks five handfuls of water from the tap. In the fluorescent light, her skin is bilious. There are blue half-moons beneath her eyes. She makes a mental note to eat more broccoli, then drinks five more handfuls of water.

When the lights are turned off and everyone is gone, Emer takes out her ring of stolen keys, which is heavy because there are dozens of them on there now, and unlocks the common room. Inside, it is messy, strewn with crumbs, the furniture askew, but it is warm and enclosed, and that's enough. That is more than enough.

Before she goes to sleep, she takes the knife from her backpack

and slides the blade down her left forearm, reopening the partially healed wound that she cut last night, and the night before, and the night before, and several hundred nights before that. The blood bubbles to the surface of her skin and begins to trickle down her arm. Emer flicks droplets of it at the walls and recites the wards her mother taught her as a child as she walks the perimeter once, twice, three times.

Then she lies down on a couch, her wool coat still on in case she needs to run, and takes solace in the sound of demons licking up her blood as she falls into a shallow sleep.

TWO

IT'S 8:00 a.m. when Jude Wolf wakes, fully clothed, gasping for breath in her bathtub.

The water she jolts up in is cold and black as ink. The room—her bedroom—is trashed, glass shattered everywhere, the Persian carpets that cover her hardwood floors waterlogged.

Jude heaves a few more breaths and tries to remember what happened. The pain had started around sunset. A dull sensation in her leg at first, teasing twinges of the storm to come. She started drinking soon after dark, when the pain became blinding, brilliant, and she could no longer control the desire to claw at the wound in her flesh, to try to excavate the source of agony with her own fingernails. That's when she drew a bath and sank her rotting flesh into the hot water to try and find some relief—there was none.

Jude knocked herself out shortly after with the world's most boring magical spell: the ability to render herself unconscious.

"You miserable bastards," Jude says as she hoists her dripping body from the tub.

Jude is still dressed, as she was yesterday, as she is every day, in a finely tailored black suit, the kind her father so dearly hates because he prefers her in a dress. Prefers her black hair long, too, despite the fact that she's had it cropped in an ear-skimming bob for years.

"It makes you look like a lesbian," he said to her once. Lawrence Wolf failed, rather spectacularly, to realize that was precisely the point.

The thick sludge in the bathtub clears and turns back into water as soon as Jude is no longer submerged. She bends down and touches the surface with a fingertip. Immediately, a glob of black drops into the water. It begins to swell and cloud and boil like a Satanic bath bomb until Jude removes her finger, and then it clears once more.

She flips the bird at the bathtub, then grasps the wet fabric covering her right thigh as a sudden punch of pain lands there. It's not over yet. The aftershocks will twist in her flesh for days. She collapses back onto her bed and tries to breathe through it.

When she can move again, she stands and peels off her damp clothes carefully, as if removing wadding from a wound, then hobbles to the gilt-framed mirror on the other side of the room. There's a gruesome lesion on her thigh, swollen and gangrenous. The skin from knee to groin looks remarkably similar to a log of wood that has been chewed up by fire. It's desiccated and hard to the touch, cut through with bone-deep fissures that leak pus and sulfur. In the wound there is writing, metallic letters melted into her flesh, but the skin is so warped that the letters no longer form words. It's no normal injury. It's old, and doesn't heal, and sometimes, in very quiet rooms, Jude can hear it whispering to her.

It whispers to her now. She breaks out into a sweat and presses

her palm over the foul thing, screaming from the white-hot pain, but at least her screams drown out the voices.

It's a language she's not supposed to be able to hear.

The language of demons.

The human body has a visceral reaction to it. Moments later Jude is vomiting, half from the demon language and half from the dazzling hurt of touching the lesion. The pain beats through her body in waves, washing over her and over her, radiating out from the husk that was once her thigh.

"I get it, I get it, don't mess with the occult," Jude gasps as she sinks to the debris-strewn floor.

More minutes pass. She lies still and examines her hand. Touching the wound for a moment has left a red welt across her palm. She uses the back of the same hand to wipe away a thread of spittle dangling from her lips and sits up to survey the damage to her body in the mirror.

Jesus Christ, they're going to suck me dry, she thinks as she takes in the big-eyed alien creature staring back at her. Once, Jude Wolf was as handsome as the devil and dressed even sharper. Tall and ballerina-limbed, like her mother, the late beauty queen Judita Nováková, she knew she was a total smoke show. Many girls—and some confused guys—wanted to take their knickers off at the sight of her. Now her body has grown so weak, so thin. A cut at her hair-line has sent blood down one side of her face, dried and sloughed away into a rusted mosaic. There's a crust of yellow sulfur on her tongue and several wobbly teeth at the back of her mouth where the bone has begun to soften.

Jude knew there was a price to pay for magic—there always had to be a price—she just didn't expect it to be quite so . . . gruesome.

Jude's phone rings. She answers.

"Hey, Jude," Elijah sings.

Jude cannot help but smile, annoying as that godforsaken song is. "I will never forgive Paul McCartney for writing that."

"You know, I was thinking the other day about the first time we got drunk. Do you remember? At that wedding where I requested the band play 'Hey Jude' and you screamed at them until they stopped?"

They had been young. Jude eleven, Elijah thirteen, the two of them left unsupervised at the wedding of one of their father's business associates. They went around the tables while the adults were dancing and each took a sip from every glass of alcohol they could find, not realizing they were getting absolutely hammered in the process until it was too late.

"I remember," Jude says. "I vomited on the bride. That was so metal."

"That's when I knew you were my favorite sibling."

"It took you eleven years to decide I was better than the Horsemen?"

"You were an exceptionally annoying child."

"That's not true. I was an angel."

Jude hears muffled voices in the background and wonders where her brother is, who he spends his time with now that she's not there.

"Yes, thank you," Elijah says to someone else, then back into the phone: "I gotta go, Judebug. I was just checking you're still alive."

"I am," Jude says, but Eli is already gone. "Okay," she says to herself. "We play to the buzzer, Wolf." The creature in the mirror

doesn't look convinced—but what other choice does she have but to give her demons hell?

Jude moves to her feet, pulls on a silk smoking jacket and mismatched brogues, then heads off to take in the damage to the rest of the house.

She lives alone in a nineteenth-century printing factory in Hoxton that has been converted into a house. There are Persian carpets on the floors, taxidermied flamingos in the reception room, a six-seat home theater with red curtains and purple velvet chairs, three bedrooms (each with its own freestanding copper bathtub), two roof terraces, and a room in which the entire south-facing wall are Crittall windows that look out over the city in the distance. The bookshelves are packed with leather-bound tomes. There is a six-oven AGA range in the kitchen.

It's a gilded prison.

The house was given to—or rather forced upon—her two years ago, not long after her fifteenth birthday, along with a monthly stipend that allows her to live in it alone. This arrangement came with some provisos: Jude was not to contact her family again. Jude was not to speak to the press. Jude was not to be photographed in any more compromising situations. Jude was not to go back to school. Jude was to sort her life out and quit bringing shame to the Wolf name.

The rest of the place is in the same state as her bedroom. Glasses lie shattered on the floor. What little furniture she has is upturned. There are holes in the walls, some putrid-smelling dark ooze—pus from her wound?—smearred on the windows. The first time this happened, Jude thought she'd been robbed while she was blacked out. It was only after installing surveillance cameras and reviewing the tapes from the next episode that she realized

she had done this herself. Or rather, an invisible and very pissed-off demon had dragged her unconscious body around, slamming her into things.

There is a battle going on inside Jude. A literal battle for her very soul. Two demons want her alive so they can suck her spirit dry. One wants her dead so it can be free of her for good. She has to live with all three of them fighting for supremacy.

In the kitchen, the fridge is open, smashed bottles of sauce congealing on the floor—but the coffee machine has mercifully been spared.

Jude makes two espressos, as she does every morning. “One for you, one for me,” she says to the floor-to-ceiling photograph of her mother as she slides to the ground cross-legged and pushes one of the coffees toward it. Judita looks down at her with bright, clever eyes—the same eyes as Jude’s—and Jude wonders what became of her mother’s soul. She knows very well that demons are real and that the devil is, too. The rest, she is unsure about. What happens to people after they die?

After coffee, Jude begins her day: She opens her laptop and checks the messy Google Doc of private investigators she’s currently paying—there are thirteen now—then she calls each of them, one after the other, for a status update. Most don’t answer, because most don’t believe what Jude is looking for can be found. They take her money, sure, but will they actually do the work? Unlikely.

Usually, this frustrates Jude, but today it infuriates her.

Three of the thirteen end up answering. Saul, the only PI who consistently takes her calls, delivers his update in a bored drawl; he’s been calling psychic hotlines and has racked up a £600 bill he wants Jude to pay before he delivers any intel. Jude resists the urge

to call him an idiot and explains, for the third time, that she's not looking for a psychic, damn it. Marta is more useful (this time at least; she has a tendency to go dark for months at a time); she has a lead on a young slam poet she saw perform at one of the venues she's been casing. It's a long shot—but what isn't a long shot in Jude's situation? The final contact who picks up is Harry, who isn't a PI so much as semi-competent on-the-ground surveillance. There are rumors of good curses coming out of Oxford at the moment, and Harry is studying English literature there. Jude hired him to scope out his classmates.

“So no one is particularly interested in Latin?” Jude asks him.

“It's Oxford. Everyone pretends they can read and write Latin. You need to be more specific.”

Again, Jude gives him the pitch, with more information and less patience than the first time: She's looking for a writer, most likely a poet. They will be fluent in Latin at the very least, but are probably proficient in other classical and ancient languages. What she didn't tell him before: There is—how to put this delicately?—likely to be a faint stench of sulfur to them. Jude is reluctant to be more specific than this, because as soon as you start using words like *curse* and *witch*, people immediately laugh or hang up. Or—and this is the mistake she made with Saul—they start sending every penny-dreadful psychic they find her way and expecting her to pay for the pleasure.

“Sulfur?” Harry asks.

“Yes, Harry. Sulfur. What I'm asking is, do you know any budding poets who reek of rotten eggs?”

“I don't know, I lost my sense of smell when I had COVID. Why would they smell of sulfur?”

Jude pinches the bridge of her nose and decides *screw it*. “A witch, Harry. I’m looking for a witch. Two years ago, I accidentally yoked an angry demon to myself against its will. Now that demon and I are bound together until I die, and it is *quite* pissed off about that because it’s starving. Demons expect payment for their services in the form of a human soul to snack on, but instead of feasting on me, it’s turned my soul necrotic, and I’m going to be totally and utterly miserable for the rest of my short, cursed life—unless I can find a very talented witch to fix me.”

Harry hangs up. Jude throws her phone across the room, yells, “TWAT,” as loud as she can, then kicks things with her left leg until she’s breathless.

After that, she trawls through Reddit forums looking for certain terms—*cursewriter*, *voces mysticae*, *demonic possession*—hoping for another diamond in the rough but finding none.

Midmorning, she begins the arduous task of cleaning and repairing the house. It’s a never-ending battle against the corrosive force of the curse. The dark magic has settled into her flesh and bones, but it has also seeped out of her and poisoned the walls and floors. When she moved in, the place was pristine, but like her, it has decayed. It’s always cold here, no matter how high she turns up the heat. The walls sag inward as if the bones of the place can no longer bear its own weight. Paint bubbles and peels beneath her fingertips. The electrics have had to be rewired several times, because the wires melt and fray behind the walls. There are leaks everywhere, so many now that Jude has given up on having them repaired: buckets of water dot every room, collecting drips. The lights convulse off and on of their own accord. Wind moans through cracks in the windows.

That the house is melting around her is not even the worst of it.

To be cursed is to be haunted. Dying things come to Jude in the night. Spiders crawl from their holes and contort into twitching knots as she sleeps. Flying insects fall out of the air in her wake. Plants yellow in her presence, their leaves puckered like leather.

Today there are dead birds on each of the terraces, their feathers coming out of them in clumps. Jude picks them up barehanded and feels the powdery coating on their feathers. When she was growing up in her father's penthouse, pigeons used to hit the windows all the time, leaving tiny snow angels on the glass.

Jude sweeps and vacuums the whole house, pushing all the broken glass and dead insects into a pile for easier collection. She plasters over the new splits in the walls, spreads grout between the cracked tiles in the bathroom. When she first moved in here at fifteen, her long-fingered hands were soft. Now they are rough and callused. It's the only thing she likes about this version of her life.

As she works, Jude thinks of herself as a modern Sisyphus, cursed to forever roll a boulder up a steep hill. Tomorrow, there will be more leaks requiring more buckets. There will be more dead animals seeping from the walls.

Once, Jude was practically a princess, the spoiled daughter of a very rich man. Now she is walking nuclear fallout in the form of a girl.

It's early afternoon when an email arrives from Saul.

There's a woman with strange markings on her arm working in Harrow. Meet her here in two hours. The next line is an address. Then: *I think I found you a witch.*

Jude grins and grabs her keys.