

For Mum

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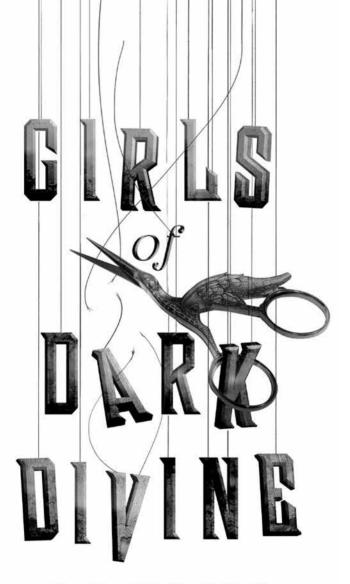
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E.V. WOODS

USBORNE





A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

In its essence, *Girls of Dark Divine* is a narrative about an abusive relationship, which means it does explore some very dark themes. Although there is no sexual violence, there are scenes depicting loss of bodily autonomy and uncomfortable moments in which the male villain asserts his belief in his ownership over the female characters through physical violence.

There are also scenes of manipulation and gaslighting throughout that may make some readers uncomfortable, as well as some instances of light gore. So, please remember to be kind to yourself as you read, and know that it is okay to walk away if you need to.

With that being said, I hope you enjoy getting lost in the darkness of Le Théâtre de Feu...and see you on the other side!

E.V. Woods, August 2025

ACT ONE

CHAPTER ONE

AN INCONVENIENT DEATH

A strange, held-breath hush had fallen through the dusty corridors beneath the theatre. Thick as the shadows that haunted this place, the silence had swollen until the solemn, watching walls could no longer contain it.

Until the screams began.

Emberlyn whipped her head up as the shrieks pierced the air, cutting apart the silence of the dormitory. She grabbed the pile of maps spread open on her bed and stuffed them beneath her mattress, leaping to her feet to tear open the door and peer out into the yawning corridor beyond. The low light emanating from the sconces shuddered as if disturbed by the noise, pirouetting through the dark. Emberlyn's blood thundered in her ears as the screams turned into echoing howls of agony.

Suddenly, there came the pounding of footsteps. Emberlyn stared as a pale figure in white appeared at the end of the corridor.

Jia. The youngest of the Marionettes raced towards her with tears shining on her cheeks.

"Emberlyn!" Jia cried.

"What's wrong? Why are they screaming?"

"It's Heather."

The breath caught in Emberlyn's throat. Instantly, every semblance of frustration from the interruption evaporated. Her vision spun as she stepped into the corridor and allowed Jia to grab her hand.

"Take me to her," Emberlyn urged.

The scent of dust and melting wax felt thick in her throat as the pair ran through the darkness. When they neared the common room, she picked out the sounds of her sisters. The shrieks had faded to a scattered, bitter sobbing, punctuated with a low moan.

She could feel the absence of Heather's honeyed voice like a weight in her stomach.

Five pairs of eyes turned to blink at Emberlyn as she and Jia burst into the room. A group of her sisters, the Marionettes, stood in the common room around a figure curled into a fetal position at their feet. Heather's pale blue nightgown was splayed out around her, coated in a fine layer of silver dust from the floorboards. The fire in the hearth raged, but Emberlyn felt no warmth as she took in the other Marionettes' faces, twisted into grimaces of grief.

Rosalyn and Miriam stared at the floor, eyes averted from their dead sister. Anushka had her arms wrapped around Ida, who had buried herself inside Anushka's thick mane of dark hair, her shoulders heaving with unrestrained sobs.

Then the smell hit Emberlyn, and she staggered back.

The smell of a Marionette's curse – the rot that had destroyed the girl on the floor from the inside out, escaping her body. Acidic. Sour. Like old vegetables soaked in vinegar, with an undertone of something so much worse. A cold cemetery at night. A coffin opening after a hundred years nailed shut.

Emberlyn covered her mouth, her throat tightening and

protesting. Her mind spun as she fought the writhing in her stomach and steadied herself.

"She just dropped." Anushka's voice trembled, coming out husky and strangled. "She said she felt strange, stood up a-a-and just... dropped." She shook her head as Ida let out another muffled cry into her neck.

Grief made a grab for Emberlyn's heart, but it didn't get far before it slammed into a wall of ice that doused the embers before they could take hold. She had to embody unwavering fortitude as her sisters fractured around her. As the longest-suffering Marionette, she had to be strong for them. But as she looked down at the crumpled, motionless body before her, Emberlyn couldn't help herself.

She thought of Esme. The very first of the Marionettes, and the only one of them to die from their curse. Until now.

She remembered how Esme had also suddenly dropped, disintegrating before her eyes as the darkness stole the final breaths from a chest that silently stilled. She remembered the cavernous, gaping feeling of her fragile world splitting in two as she'd clutched the dying hand of the one who had guided her through this cruel existence. It had slowly grown colder in her own burning grasp.

The before and after. The girl who loved her and the first body she buried. She had so dearly hoped it would be the last.

Emberlyn scanned the room. She found Aleida curled up in the armchair beside the fireplace, arms wrapped around her knees, leaning away from the heap on the floor as the shimmer of flames gently kissed along her brown skin. Her thick, dark hair was thrown over one shoulder in a dishevelled braid that looked as if she had frantically run her hands through it. Her dark eyes flicked up to meet Emberlyn's.

They were haunted with the same memories as history repeated itself in front of them.

Emberlyn broke her gaze from Aleida's and stepped forwards, dropping to her knees beside Heather. She braced herself against the smell, gritting her teeth against the images it dredged up from the back of her mind. The ones she'd spent every moment since pushing away, hopelessly and desperately trying to forget. She reached out and ran her fingers through the honey-gold hair that twisted across the floor like dead snakes. She pushed the locks away from Heather's face.

Miriam let out a scream and tore from the room, her howls echoing down the corridor. Emberlyn cringed but focused her attention on the body of her sister.

Heather looked as if she had been dead for a year rather than a minute. Her lips had peeled away, revealing bared teeth and a blackened, swollen tongue that lolled grotesquely out of the corner of her mouth. Crusted eyes stared up at nothing, all traces of their usual light gone. Her skin had stretched and was straining over protruding cheekbones, her veins a criss-cross of black inside her paper-thin, almost translucently white skin. Emberlyn picked up Heather's hand and squeezed the cold palm against her own.

Heavy footsteps sounded in the corridor. Emberlyn leaped to her feet as the Marionettes scrambled into the spaces furthest away from the door, forming a strange mourning line behind the body of their sister. They brushed down their skirts, scrubbed the tears from their faces, and clasped their hands behind their backs, gazes cast to the floor. Emberlyn tipped up her chin and trained her glare on the shadowed doorway, listening with a thundering heart as the footsteps grew louder. Closer.

The Marionettes held their breath as the Puppet Master entered their common room.

"What's all—? Oh, for goodness' sake!"

Malcolm Manrow wrinkled his nose as he paused on the threshold, his commanding frame filling the space. His hand went to his breast pocket, from which he pulled a gold-embroidered handkerchief and pressed it to his nose, brows furrowing in frustration. When his eyes flicked to the lifeless figure on the floor, his mouth pursed under his neat moustache.

Some might think of Malcolm Manrow as handsome. Some desired to be on the receiving end of the disarming smile that often lit up his eyes, to bask in the gleam of his perfectly straight, pearly white teeth. It was true, he could be endlessly charming when he wanted to be. When he wanted people to believe things about him that were simply not true. But to Emberlyn – to the rest of the Marionettes – he was hideous. He was a monstrous Puppet Master who controlled their invisible strings.

Malcolm rested his thumb inside his ornately patterned cummerbund and sighed.

"Another one? This is incredibly inconvenient." His voice was like ice: slippery, hard. Cold. Malcolm looked at Heather a moment longer, shaking his head in irritation before his eyes snapped up to the rest of the Marionettes. He regarded them steadily for a moment. Their shoulders drooped and breaths stilted as if they didn't dare make a noise without his permission. He shook his head again, exasperated. "I'll have to waste time looking for someone to take her place now."

Emberlyn sucked in a breath at his words. Malcolm's gaze fell to her at the sound. She froze but met his eyes with an ugly glare of her own. He turned away, nonplussed, then strode towards the Marionettes as he replaced his handkerchief in his breast pocket, sniffing the air cautiously. They shrank back as he neared, including Emberlyn, despite the rage dancing in her blood. Malcolm stopped next to Heather, his frown deepening as his hands twitched over her, as if testing his connection to her. He cocked his head in consideration before he leaned down and grabbed her chin, aiming her slowly crumbling face towards himself.

"Don't touch her!" Emberlyn cried in horror, taking several steps forwards before she knew what she was doing. Several of her sisters' arms flung out to stop her. But when Malcolm looked up at her, fear shot through her heart and she stopped. As his gaze hardened, she bowed her head to stare at the floor, heat rushing to her face.

She could feel Malcolm's unfaltering gaze still fixed on her. The dormitory filled with a stifled, silent kind of panic as the Marionettes stared between her and Malcolm. As they steeled themselves for what was to come.

Suddenly, he straightened and strode towards Emberlyn. A sharp coldness flooded her veins as she whipped her head up to meet narrowing, bloodshot eyes that spoke of countless nights wrapped in a haze of alcohol fumes. She stumbled away as the Marionettes clustered tightly to her, though they all knew that truly, they would be helpless to defend her.

Malcolm didn't stop marching forwards until his clothes grazed Emberlyn's fingertips, her hands stretched out in defence, gaze darting as she sought an escape. Against her will, Emberlyn's head snapped to face Malcolm. The thing that killed Heather – the curse that raced through the Marionettes' veins and forced them to obey their Puppet Master – flared to life. She hissed but glued her eyes to

the ground, heart pounding as he reached out and wrapped his fingers around her face.

"Look at me," he commanded. Emberlyn's eyes instantly rose to meet his. "You know what to do, don't you?" he asked, his voice calm.

Emberlyn swallowed, and the curse loosened just enough to allow her to nod, her body shaking in his grip. Malcolm considered her for a moment longer, watching the tears of fear budding in the corners of her eyes with a sick kind of pleasure. Finally, he smiled. That same smile he used to get his way in the world. The one that made ladies swoon and Emberlyn's throat fill with bile.

She hated him. Hated the ugly beast beneath his surface. She wished the world could see him now. She wished they all knew who he really was.

"Good. I trust you to take care of this."

He released Emberlyn's chin, but before she could breathe a sigh of relief, he reached up and traced his thumb over the bump of her cheekbone, wiping away her tears.

"I'm glad it wasn't my lead Marionette. My fiery Emberlyn."

Emberlyn was sure he could feel the erratic thudding of her heart as he regarded her. She knew he could hear it and was revelling in the sound. Basking in her fear. The power of his control.

Suddenly, he turned, dropping his hand so quickly that Emberlyn flinched and let out a small whimper. Aleida instantly pressed against her side, grabbing her arm as Malcolm began to stride towards the doorway.

"I need time to work out the logistics of tomorrow's performance," he called over his shoulder. "It's going to be a travesty with one Marionette down. Not to mention I have to start thinking about making audition arrangements now. You girls will be the death of