

# Sisters of the Lost Marsh Lucy Strange

Chicken  
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*For my brothers, Will and Pete*



*Be sure the first girl marries well,  
The second in the home to dwell.  
A third maid can do little harm  
If set to work upon the farm.  
Four and five must both be wed,  
Or six will bury you stone dead.*


'The Curse of Six Daughters'  
Traditional rhyme from  
Hollow-in-the-Marsh





PART ONE

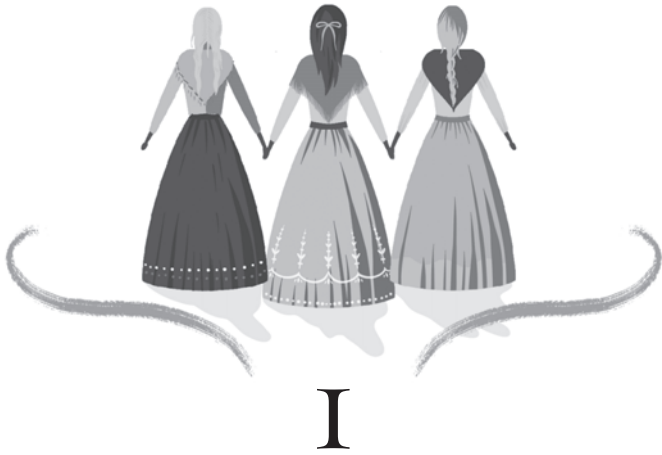
# Midwinter



*In winter, the light lies  
cold and flat on the water.  
The rushes of the marsh are  
furred with frost, and silver  
gilds each thistle . . .*

May Fernsby, 'The Forgotten Village',  
*Tales of the Marshes*





I am looking into the eyes of an enormous white horse called Flint. They are glossy brown, like puddles after fresh-fallen rain, with long black eyelashes. I hate him – this big, stupid creature we’ve been given in exchange for my eldest sister.

Silas Kirby brought him over to our farm the morning after the betrothal.

‘That’s a good ploughing horse for you, Nate Fernsby,’ he said.

‘That’s a good *anything* horse,’ Dadder replied, squinting into the cold sunshine and stumbling down the steps. He looked the horse up and down and nodded, impressed. Then he said, ‘Check him over for me, Willa.’

Dadder doesn’t know the first thing about animals.

It isn't even his farm, really – it's Grammy's. Everything we know about farming, we've learnt from her. Dadder likes to dish out orders, and he swans about at market like a gentleman farmer, but he doesn't know one end of a beast from the other.

Flint stood still in the frosty muck of our yard while I inspected him, running my hands over his big shoulders and strong back. He danced about a bit, making it tricky for me to check his hooves. He jerked away when I tried to see his teeth. 'You're a lively fellow, aren't you?' I muttered. And Flint tossed his head proudly.

At last I was done. I nodded at Dadder, and his eyes widened with a sort of baffled glee that someone should barter such a magnificent animal for one of his wretched daughters. Like gold for a sack of dung.

'Walk him up and down a bit, Willa,' Dadder said, and then he watched as Flint clopped steadily over the cobbles and back again.

'Will you be wanting to give Grace an inspection too, Mister Kirby?' I said, looking him right in the eye. Dadder glared at me, but Silas laughed, and my little sisters were delighted.

'*Grace!*' Dolly shouted at once, running to the door, with Deedee close behind. 'Mister Kirby needs to check your *feet!*'

Darcy, the youngest of the triplets, rolled her eyes at them.



Grace met Dolly and Deedee on the step; she was coming out to take kitchen scraps to the hens.

‘Here she is!’ Dadder was still half-drunk, after striking the betrothal the night before, so his smile was like the grin of a hollowed-out turnip. ‘My beautiful Grace! Soon to be *your* beautiful Grace, eh, Silas?’

Silas Kirby smiled and bowed to Grace.

She walked right past him to the henhouse, where the chickens were all aflap for the scraps. We waited for her to come back, and when she did, she didn’t go to Silas; she went to the horse instead.

*So this is what I am worth*, Grace seemed to be thinking, and perhaps Flint was thinking the same thing. He turned his head towards her and the two of them looked at each other. Then Flint pushed his nose into Grace’s open palm. She stroked him and patted his neck, smiling with her eyes in that gentle, dreamy way of hers. Then she stopped. Her fingertips had found something I’d missed: a thick, shining scar hidden by the horse’s mane.

We all looked at Silas.

‘That were from breakin’ him in,’ he grunted. ‘Bit jumpy as a colt – too cocky by half – but he’s more settled now. He’ll be a good boy if you’re firm with him. Born two summers ago to my grey mare Silver – best broodmare on the marshes . . .’

But Grace wasn’t listening. She had closed her eyes and was resting her forehead against Flint’s.

Dadder pushed past his eldest daughter. He squinted at the scar on Flint's neck. 'Ar,' he said. 'Some beasts need remindin' who's in charge. Won't have done him no harm.'

'Excuse me,' Grace said quietly, and I don't know if she was talking to us or to the horse. She stroked his nose again, then she turned to go back inside. 'I have to tend to the fire.'

Silas smiled slowly, and his gaze followed Grace as she walked up the steps to the kitchen door. Then he and Dadder shook hands.

We argued that night, Dadder and me – even worse than usual.

'You *sold* our Grace!' I screamed at him as he shoved me out of the kitchen door. 'Daughter-pedlar!' I bellowed from the middle of the stinking puddle I landed in. 'You PIG!'

It was a terrible cold night, so I had to shelter in the henhouse. My thoughts raged around and around – louder than the winter wind, and wilder too. The anger kept me warm though, at least for a while.

It was very late and the shivering was bone-deep by the time the triplets managed to get to the kitchen door to let me in. Dolly and Deedee put their fingers to their lips, giggling 'Sshh!' and Darcy nodded towards the chair by the fireplace, where Dadder was snoring – head back, mouth open, a bottle of grog

lying empty on the floor by his feet. I felt all the anger come barrelling back again: while I had been huddling in the foul straw of the henhouse, Dadder had been toasting his toes by the fire, and toasting his seedy little deal too, I'm sure.

My little sisters scampered up the stairs and into our room. They dived into their beds, Dolly and Deede pulling the blankets up high so only their pigtails could still be seen on the pillows. 'Thank you,' I mouthed to Darcy, and she gave me a serious salute before disappearing beneath her own blanket. I sat down on my bed, cold and aching and tired. My anger had squashed everything else out of me – I felt flattened by it all. I peeled off my damp clothes, put on my nightgown and blew out the candle.

Six beds crammed into one cold room, like cattle stalls.

Six sisters lying there in the dark, the midwinter moon watching us all through the frosted window.

The triplets wriggled for a bit and one of them coughed, but eventually their breathing softened into sleep.

'Grace?' I whispered. 'You awake?' I wanted to know what had happened after I'd been chucked outside; I wanted to know if my big sister was all right.

'Go to sleep, Willa,' muttered a lump in the bed next to me. 'You've caused enough trouble today.'

'Go to sleep yourself, Freya,' I hissed. I tried again,

louder this time: ‘Grace?’

A pillow thumped down hard on my face: ‘Go to *sleep!*’ Freya growled. Then, ‘Oof!’ as I thumped her right back. ‘I hope you’re next,’ she grumbled. ‘I hope Dadder sells you to Old Grubb the pig farmer and we get a nice fat pig in return – at least then we’d have bacon for breakfast.’

‘*You’ll* be next, Freya, not me,’ I whispered. ‘You’re only a year younger than Grace, and I’m just twelve. And anyway, we have to stay at home to look after the house and the farm, don’t we. It’ll be Dolly and Deedee that Dadder marries off next – like the curse says. They won’t be old enough for another nine years though . . .’

‘Oh, shut up and *go to sleep!*’ Freya groaned, heaving her pillow over her head for another mighty thump.

Then the door opened, and I froze. *Dadder?*

A candle appeared, and caught me in its light: kneeling up on my bed, pillow held aloft and ready for battle. An arm followed the candle into the room, and then a face, peering at me through crinkled-up old eyes.

*Not Dadder. Grammy.*

‘Is that you, Willa?’ she whispered. ‘Found your way back indoors, I see. You all right?’

‘I’m all right, Grammy. Just . . . trying to get comfy.’ I made a show of plumping the pillow I was holding, put it back on the bed and pulled up the

scratchy blanket (it was my turn for the horsehair one tonight). ‘Goodnight, Grammy.’

‘Goodnight, Willa.’ The candlelight shifted as our grandmother looked at the lump in the bed next to me, pretending to be asleep with a pillow clamped over its head. ‘And goodnight, Freya,’ she whispered. ‘Sleep tight.’

After the door closed again, I waited for Freya to doze off, then I tiptoed over to Grace’s bed and gently touched her shoulder. She gasped, moving her head as if she were drowning in her dream. I stroked her hair, bronze in the moonlight. ‘Don’t worry, Grace,’ I whispered. ‘We’re here. We’ll look after you.’ I stroked her until she quietened. I sang the old lullaby she’d always sung to us when we couldn’t sleep – it was one of Mamma’s songs:

*‘A damsel slept beside a brook, a-dreamin’ and a-dreamin’.  
The sky was black, the stars were bright, the waxen moon  
was gleamin’.  
The rain fell soft, the sun arose, the winter was a-creepin’.  
But still the damsel dreamt and dreamt, a-cursed to e’er be  
sleepin’ . . .’*

Then I kissed Grace’s hair and crept back to my own cold little bed.

As I lay there under the awful scratchy blanket, I thought about the deal that had been struck in our farmyard that morning – a horse for a girl. I thought

about Silas Kirby: a man twice Grace's age, whose whip-fearing dogs carried their tails between their legs . . . And Grace had been so calm about it all, so dignified.

*She was being obedient, I thought. Softly spoken, sweet-natured, Grace: afraid to curdle Dadder's good cheer, wearing a mask to hide her fear.*

But now I think the mask hid more than just fear. I think Grace was already trying to think of a way out: a way of escaping from Silas Kirby and Dadder and Hollow-in-the-Marsh for ever.