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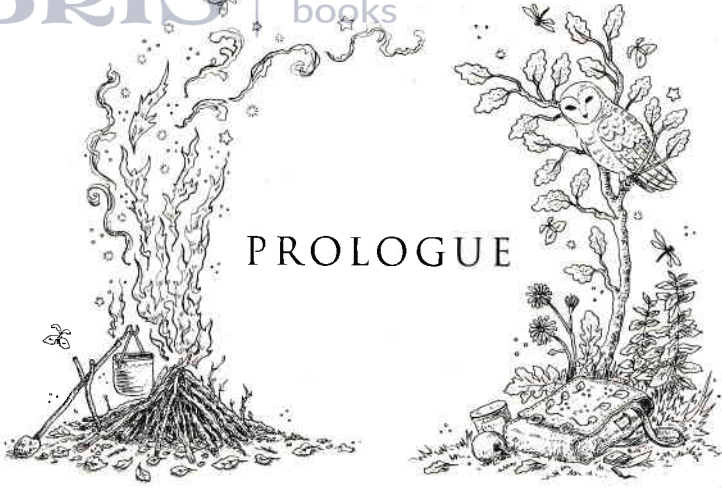
THE
STOLEN
HEIR

A NOVEL OF ELFHAME

HOLLY BLACK



LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY
NEW YORK BOSTON



PROLOGUE

A passerby discovered a toddler sitting on the chilly concrete of an alley, playing with the wrapper of a cat-food container. By the time she was brought to the hospital, her limbs were blue with cold. She was a wizened little thing, too thin, made of sticks.

She knew only one word, her name. Wren.

As she grew, her skin retained a slight bluish cast, resembling skimmed milk. Her foster parents bundled her up in jackets and coats and mittens and gloves, but unlike her sister, she was never cold. Her lip color changed like a mood ring, staying bluish and purple even in summer, turning pink only when close to a fire. And she could play in the snow for hours, constructing elaborate tunnels and mock-fighting with icicles, coming inside only when called.

Although she appeared bony and anemic, she was strong. By the time she was eight, she could lift bags of groceries that her adoptive mother struggled with.

By the time she was nine, she was gone.



As a child, Wren read lots of fairy tales. That's why, when the monsters came, she knew it was because she had been wicked.

They snuck in through her window, pushing up the jamb and slashing the screen so silently that she slept on, curled around her favorite stuffed fox. She woke only when she felt claws touch her ankle.

Before she could get out the first scream, fingers covered her mouth. Before she could get out the first kick, her legs were pinned.

"I am going to let you go," said a harsh voice with an unfamiliar accent. "But if you wake anyone in this house, you will most assuredly be sorry for it."

That was like a fairy tale, too, which made Wren wary of breaking the rules. She stayed utterly quiet and still, even when they released her, although her heart beat so hard and fast that it seemed possible it would be loud enough to summon her mother.

A selfish part of her wished it would, wished that her mother would come and turn on a light and banish the monsters. That wouldn't be breaking the rules, would it, if it was only the thundering of her heart that did the waking?

"Sit up," commanded one of the monsters.

Obediently, Wren did. But her trembling fingers buried her stuffed fox in the blankets.

Looking at the three creatures flanking her bed made her shiver uncontrollably. Two were tall, elegant beings with skin the gray of stone. The first, a woman with a fall of pale hair caught in a crown of jagged obsidian, wearing a gown of some silvery material that wafted around her. She was beautiful, but the cruel set of her mouth warned Wren not



to trust her. The man was matched to the woman as though they were pieces on a chessboard, wearing a black crown and clothes of the same silvery material.

Beside them was a huge, looming creature, spindly, with mushroom-pale skin and a head full of wild black hair. But what was most notable were her long, clawlike fingers.

“You’re our daughter,” one of the gray-faced monsters said.

“You belong to us,” rasped the other. “We made you.”

She knew about *birth parents*, which her sister had, nice people who came to visit and looked like her, and who sometimes brought over grandparents or doughnuts or presents.

She had wished for birth parents of her own, but she had never thought that her wish could conjure a nightmare like this.

“Well,” said the woman in the crown. “Have you nothing to say? Are you too in awe of our majesty?”

The claw-fingered creature gave an impolite little snort.

“That must be it,” said the man. “How grateful you will be to be taken away from all of this, changeling child. Get up. Make haste.”

“Where are we going?” Wren asked. Fear made her sink her fingers into her bedsheets, as though she could hang on to her life before this moment if she just gripped hard enough.

“To Faerie, where you will be a queen,” the woman said, a snarl in her voice where there ought to have been cajoling. “Have you never dreamed of someone coming to you and telling you that you were no mortal child, but one made of magic? Have you never dreamed about being taken from your pathetic little life to one of vast greatness?”

Wren couldn’t deny that she had. She nodded. Tears burned in the back of her throat. That’s what she had done wrong. That was

the wickedness in her heart that had been discovered. "I'll stop," she whispered.

"What?" asked the man.

"If I promise never to make wishes like that again, can I stay?" she asked, voice shaking. "Please?"

The woman's hand came against Wren's cheek in a slap so hard that it sounded like a crack of thunder. Her cheek hurt, and though tears pricked her eyes, she was too shocked and angry for them to fall. No one had ever hit her before.

"You are Suren," said the man. "And we are your makers. Your sire and dam. I am Lord Jarel and she, Lady Nore. This one accompanying us is Bogdana, the storm hag. Now that you know your true name, let me show you your true face."

Lord Jarel reached out to her, making a ripping motion. And there, underneath, was her monster self, reflected in the mirror over her dresser—her skimmed milk skin giving way to pale blue flesh, the same color as buried veins. When she parted her lips, she saw shark-sharp teeth. Only her eyes were the same mossy green, large and staring back at her in horror.

My name isn't Suren, she wanted to say. And this is a trick. That's not me. But even as she thought the words, she heard how similar Suren was to her own name. Suren. Ren. Wren. A child's shortening.

Changeling child.

"Stand," said the huge, looming creature with nails as long as knives. Bogdana. "You do not belong in this place."

Wren listened to the noises of the house, the hum of the heater, the distant scrape of the nails of the family dog as it pawed at the floor



restlessly in sleep, running through dreams. She tried to memorize every sound. Her gaze blurry with tears, she committed her room to memory, from the book titles on her shelves to the glassy eyes of her dolls.

She snuck one last pet of her fox's synthetic fur and pressed him down, deeper under the covers. If he stayed there, he'd be safe. Shuddering, she slid out of the bed.

"Please," she said again.

A cruel smile twisted up the corner of Lord Jarel's face. "The mortals no longer want you."

Wren shook her head, because that couldn't be true. Her mother and father *loved* her. Her mother cut the crusts off her sandwiches and kissed her on the tip of her nose to make her giggle. Her father cuddled up with her to watch movies and then carried her to bed when she fell asleep on the couch. She knew they loved her. And yet the certainty with which Lord Jarel spoke plucked at her terror.

"If they admit that they wish for you to remain with them," said Lady Nore, her voice soft for the first time, "then you may stay."

Wren padded into the hall, her heart frantic, rushing into her parents' room as if she'd had a nightmare. The noise of her shuffling feet and her ragged breaths woke them. Her father sat up and then startled, putting an arm up protectively over her mother, who looked at Wren and screamed.

"Don't be scared," she said, moving to the side of the bed and crushing the blankets in her small fists. "It's me, Wren. They did something to me."

"Get away, monster!" her father barked. He sounded frightening enough to send her scuttling back against the dresser. She'd never heard him shout like that, certainly never at her.

Tears tracked down her cheeks. “It’s *me*,” she said again, her voice breaking. “Your daughter. You love me.”

The room looked exactly as it always had. Pale beige walls. Queen-size bed with brown dog fur dirtying their white duvet. A towel lying beside the hamper, as though someone had thrown and missed. The scent of the furnace, and the petroleum smell of some cream used to remove makeup. But it was the distorted-mirror nightmare version, in which all those things had become horrible.

Below them, the dog barked, sounding a desperate warning.

“What are you waiting for? Get that thing out of here,” her father growled, looking toward Lady Nore and Lord Jarel as though he was seeing something other than them, some human authority.

Wren’s sister came into the hall, rubbing her eyes, clearly awakened by the screaming. Surely Rebecca would help, Rebecca who made sure no one bullied her at school, who took her to the fair even though no one else’s little sister was allowed. But at the sight of Wren, Rebecca jumped onto the bed with a horrified yelp and wrapped her arms around her mother.

“Rebecca,” Wren whispered, but her sister only dug her face deeper into their mother’s nightgown.

“Mom,” Wren pleaded, tears choking her voice, but her mother wouldn’t look at her. Wren’s shoulders shook with sobs.

“*This* is our daughter,” her father said, holding Rebecca close, as though Wren had been trying to trick him.

Rebecca, who’d been adopted, too. Who ought to have been exactly as much theirs as Wren.

Wren crawled to the bed, crying so hard that she could barely get



any words out. *Please let me stay. I'll be good. I am sorry, sorry, sorry for whatever I did, but you can't let them take me. Mommy. Mommy. Mommy, I love you, please, Mommy.*

Her father tried to push her back with his foot, pressing it against her neck. But she reached for him anyway, her voice rising to a shriek.

When her little fingers touched his calf, he kicked her in the shoulder, sending her to the floor. But she only crawled back, weeping and pleading, keening with misery.

"Enough," rasped Bogdana. She yanked Wren against her, running one of her long nails over Wren's cheek with something like gentleness. "Come, child. I will carry you."

"No," Wren said, her fingers winding themselves in the sheets. "No. No. No."

"It is not meet for the humans to have touched you in violence, you who are ours," said Lord Jarel.

"Ours to hurt," Lady Nore agreed. "Ours to punish. Never theirs."

"Shall they die for the offense?" Lord Jarel asked, and the room went quiet, except for the sound of Wren sobbing.

"Should we kill them, Suren?" he asked again, louder. "Let their pet dog in and enchant it so that it turns on them and bites out their throats?"

At that, Wren's crying abated in astonishment and outrage. "No!" she shouted. She felt beyond the ability to control herself.

"Then hear this and cease weeping," Lord Jarel told her. "You will come with us willingly, or I will slay everyone on that bed. First the child, then the others."

Rebecca gave a little frightened sob. Wren's human parents watched her with fresh horror.

"I'll go," Wren said finally, a sob still in her voice, one she couldn't stop. "Since no one loves me, I'll go."

The storm hag lifted her up, and they were away.

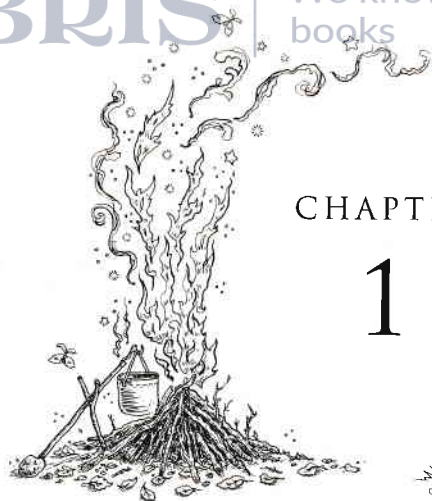


Wren was discovered in the flashing lights of a patrol car two years later, walking along the side of the highway. The soles of her shoes were as worn as if she'd danced through them, her clothing was stiff with sea salt, and scars marred the skin of her wrists and cheeks.

When the officer tried to ask her what had happened, she either wouldn't or couldn't answer. She snarled at anyone who came too close, hid beneath the cot in the room they brought her into, and refused to give a name or an address as to where her home had been to the lady they brought with them.

Their smiles hurt. Everything hurt.

When they turned their backs, she was gone.



CHAPTER

1



The slant of the moon tells me that it's half past ten when my unsister comes out the back door. She's in her second year of college and keeps odd hours. As I watch from the shadows, she sets down an empty cereal bowl on the top step of the splintery and sagging deck. Then she glugs milk into it from a carton. Spills a little. Squatting, she frowns out toward the tree line.

For an impossible moment, it's as though she's looking at me.

I draw deeper into the dark.

The scent of pine needles is heavy in the air, mingling with leaf mold and the moss I crush between my bare toes. The breeze carries the smell of the sticky, rotten, sugary dregs still clinging to bottles in the recycling bin; the putrid something at the bottom of the empty garbage can; the chemical sweetness of the perfume my unsister is wearing.

I watch her hungrily.

Bex leaves the milk for a neighborhood cat, but I like to pretend it's me she's leaving it for. Her forgotten sister.

She stands there for a few minutes while moths flit above her head and mosquitoes buzz. Only when she goes back inside do I slink closer to the house, peering through the window to watch my unmother knit in front of the television. Watching my unfather in the breakfast nook with his laptop, answering email. He puts a hand to his eyes, as though tired.

In the Court of Teeth, I was punished if I called the humans who raised me my mother and father. *Humans are animals*, Lord Jarel would say, the admonishment coming with a breathtakingly hard blow. *Filthy animals. You share no blood with them.*

I taught myself to call them unmother and unfather, hoping to avoid Lord Jarel's wrath. I keep the habit to remind myself of what they were to me, and what they will never be again. Remind myself that there is nowhere that I belong and no one to whom I belong.

The hair on the back of my neck prickles. When I look around, I note an owl on a high branch, observing me with a swivel of its head. No, not an owl.

I pick up a rock, hurling it at the creature.

It shifts into the shape of a hob and takes off into the sky with a screech, beating feathered wings. It circles twice and then glides off toward the moon.

The local Folk are no friends to me. I've seen to that.

Another reason I am no one, of nowhere.

Resisting the temptation to linger longer near the backyard where I once played, I head for the branches of a hawthorn at the edge of town. I stick to the dimness of shadowed woodland, my bare feet finding their way through the night. At the entrance to the graveyard, I stop.



Huge and covered in the white blooms of early spring, the hawthorn towers over headstones and other grave markers. Desperate locals, teenagers especially, come here and tie wishes to the branches.

I heard the stories as a kid. It's called the Devil's Tree. Come back three times, make three wishes, and the devil was supposed to appear. He'd give you what you asked for and take what he wanted in return.

It's not a devil, though. Now that I have lived among the Folk, I know the creature that fulfills those bargains is a *glaistieg*, a faerie with goat feet and a taste for human blood.

I climb into a cradle of branches and wait, petals falling around me with the sway of the tree limbs. I lean my cheek against the rough bark, listening to the susurrations of leaves. In the cemetery that surrounds the hawthorn, the nearby graves are more than a hundred years old. These stones have weathered thin and bone pale. No one visits them anymore, making this a perfect spot for desperate people to come and not be seen.

A few stars wink down at me through the canopy of flowers. In the Court of Teeth, there was a *nisse* who made charts of the sky, looking for the most propitious dates for torture and murder and betrayal.

I stare up, but whatever riddle is in the stars, I can't read it. My education in Faerie was poor, my human education, inconsistent.

The *glaistieg* arrives a little after midnight, clopping along. She is dressed in a long burgundy coat that stops at the knees, designed to highlight her goat feet. Her bark-brown hair is pulled up and back into a tight braid.

Beside her flies a sprite with grasshopper-green skin and wings to match. It's only a bit larger than a hummingbird, buzzing through the air restlessly.

The glaistig turns to the winged faerie. “The Prince of Elfhame? How interesting to have royalty so close by . . .”

My heart thuds dully at *prince*.

“Spoiled, they say,” the sprite chirps. “And wild. Far too irresponsible for a throne.”

That doesn’t sound like the boy I knew, but in the four years since I saw him last, he would have been inducted into all the pleasures of the High Court, would have been served up a surfeit of every imaginable debauched delight. Sycophants and toadies would be so busy vying for his attention that, these days, I wouldn’t be allowed close enough to kiss the hem of his cloak.

The sprite departs, darting up and away, thankfully not weaving through the branches of the tree where I crouch. I settle in to observe.

Three people come that night to make wishes. One, a sandy-haired young man I went to fourth grade with, the year before I was taken. His fingers tremble as he ties his scrap of paper to the branch with a bit of twine. The second, an elderly woman with a stooped back. She keeps wiping at her wet eyes, and her note is tearstained by the time she affixes it with a twist tie. The third is a freckled man, broad-shouldered, a baseball cap pulled low enough to hide most of his face.

This is the freckled man’s third trip, and at his arrival, the glaistig steps out of the shadows. The man gives a moan of fear. He didn’t expect this to be real. They seldom do. They embarrass themselves with their reactions, their terror, the sounds they make.

The glaistig makes him tell her what he wants, even though he’s written it three separate times on three separate notes. I don’t think she ever bothers to read the wishes.



I do. This man needs money because of some bad business deal. If he doesn't get it, he will lose his house, and then his wife will leave him. He whispers this to the glaitig, fidgeting with his wedding ring as he does so. In return, she gives him her terms—every night for seven months and seven days, he must bring her a cube of fresh human flesh. He may cut it from himself, or from another, whichever he prefers.

He agrees eagerly, desperately, foolishly, and lets her tie an ensorcelled piece of leather around his wrist.

"This was crafted from my own skin," she tells him. "It will let me find you, no matter how you try to hide from me. No mortal-made knife can cut it, and should you fail to do as you have promised, it will tighten until it slices through the veins of your arm."

For the first time, I see panic on his face, the sort that he ought to have felt all along. Too late, and part of him knows it. But he denies it a moment later, the knowledge surfacing and being shoved back down.

Some things seem too terrible to seem possible. Soon he may learn that the worst thing he can imagine is only the beginning of what they are willing to do to him. I recall that realization and hope I can spare him it.

Then the glaitig tells the freckled man to gather leaves. For each one in his pile, he'll get a crisp twenty-dollar bill in its place. He'll have three days to spend the money before it disappears.

In the note he attached to the tree, he wrote that he needed \$40,000. That's *two thousand* leaves. The man scrambles to get together a big enough pile, searching desperately through the well-manicured graveyard. He collects some from the stretch of woods along the border and rips handfuls from a few trees with low-hanging branches. Staring at