

THE
FLOWER
GIRLS

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R A V E N  B O O K S
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CHAPTER ONE

1997

Rosie was aware of nothing apart from her sister's shadow. It spiked, jagged and black, across the stippled, sunburnt grass. She skipped inside its edges, her white leather sandals dipping into the cool before springing out, feeling once again the blister of sunlight.

She hopped in and out of Laurel's shadow like a sprite, seeing only the ground as she danced, watching the grass change to asphalt beneath her. They flitted past the uncoiled swings where children squeaked, throwing their flying silhouettes onto the grey concrete of the playground, then past the colossal oak tree that shaded the white-and-red awning of the trailer café where a circle of mothers clustered, holding Styrofoam cups of coffee. Then they turned left, in the direction of the old metal rocking horse that creaked back and forth, its seats worn shiny and pale.

Jumping over the cracks in the concrete, Rosie skidded to a halt at the platform alongside the horse. Still gazing down at the ground, she could see her sister's feet below the horse's mouth, her scuffed red trainers, one on top of the other, the laces split short and untied. Above the trainers, attached to legs astride the horse, she could see the flowery

buckled shoes of a toddler, her podgy toes bunched up beneath a strap, her ankles fat like coddled cream.

Rosie lifted her head. Her eyeline reached that of the blank-faced horse. Metal rolls of hair curled down the mane to where the toddler's fingers clung tightly to the strands of frayed rope that served as reins.

'Where's your mother?' Laurel asked the little girl.

Rosie moved her gaze to her sister. The leaves of the oak tree swayed quietly above them; a breeze kissed their foreheads damp with sweat.

'Do you like sweeties?' Laurel said. 'I've got some if you like.'

Rosie felt the top of her lip prickle. She said nothing, though. Just waited.

The toddler shifted on the seat at the front of the horse. She wore a yellow T-shirt with a daisy on it. Light blue shorts. She had a clip in her hair, pink and shimmery. Rosie raised her hand to touch it. It was beautiful. Like the toddler's golden hair.

The little girl turned her head to where her mother stood, coffee cup in hand. Her mouth opened in a soft little 'oh'.

'Sssshhh . . .' whispered Laurel and the toddler hesitated. 'Do you know where the fairies live?' she asked. 'They live in a little dell, just down there.' And she flung her hand out, pointing over the playground fence, to where the grass dipped down and the land stretched out beyond where they could see. 'Just there. They live in tiny houses. Under buttercups and snowdrops. It's beautiful,' she said.

Rosie watched as the toddler's gaze followed the line of her sister's hand. As her eyelashes widened at the beautiful

and incomprehensible names her sister gave the fairies: *Titania; Cobweb; Mustardseed.*

Rosie began to dance and spring again, in and out of the shadow of her sister as it moved once more across the playground. She whispered the names to herself: *Lily* and *Bluebell* and, her favourite, *Rosebud.*

They skipped over the rough ground, the grey of the paving stones, through the gate and back onto the sun-stained grass, its coarse, unmowed tufts grazing their calves, flattening dock leaves as they passed. And then down the slope they went, down into the cool and the shade of the line of oak trees that stood guard, wise and silent, running the whole length of the old canal path.

That was where they went.

Down to the grass-filled gully as the trees whispered above them, watching them and waiting.

For what was yet to come.

CHAPTER TWO

It is on Hazel Archer's twenty-fifth birthday that the second girl goes missing.

The child is only five years old, with hair like Snow-White's and a rosebud mouth all puckered and soft in a never-ending pout. She was last seen as the light fell away from the land and the Devon coastline became a swathe of rough, black shadows. Night has drawn in quickly around the hotel, which perches high on a promontory over the English Channel, dark folds of rock stretching down to where the sea pounds on the wintry shore, gravelly waters pulling in and out like monstrous pistons.

Hazel is at her dressing table in the hotel room when the alarm is sounded. Jonny hums to himself, shaving at the bathroom mirror. Evie is next door in her own room, undoubtedly plugged into her headphones, eyes half-closed, long painted fingernails tapping along to the tinny beats in her ears.

The rapping on the bedroom doors begins along the corridor. At first, Hazel assumes it is room service, delivering aperitifs before the New Year celebrations start in earnest. But the knocking is too quick and moves on too swiftly for that. There is no cheerful clank of a bottle on glass, no surprised laughter or thank yous. Instead, there is a swift and sudden change of mood. A sea mist seems to

swirl frantically down the corridors, chasing ahead, while searchlights beam on each and every room.

Jonny opens the door. A towel is around his waist, soap still clinging to his cheeks, his cropped, dark hair damp from the steam in the bathroom. Mr Lamb, the manager of Balcombe Court, stands outside in the corridor. Across the way, another staff member is knocking on doors opposite. Inside their bedroom, all is soft-furnished and -hued: a four-poster bed, winged velveteen-covered armchairs, mahogany bow-legged tables. Outside, it is a different country: the air is fraught with panic.

‘Is everything all right?’ Jonny enquires.

Mr Lamb is short and compact. He bounces uneasily on the balls of his feet, his breathing pinched and held tight. ‘A little girl’s gone missing,’ he says. ‘Her name’s Georgie. Over an hour ago – nearly two.’ He skewers Jonny with a stare before shifting his gaze beyond the line of his shoulder, over to where Hazel sits. ‘Have you seen her, either of you?’

Jonny turns back to Hazel and they look at each other. After the merest second, they shake their heads almost in unison, mouths drawn closed, perceptibly nonplussed.

‘No,’ Jonny says. ‘We’ve been in here for an hour, I’d say. Wouldn’t you, Hazel? I haven’t seen any little girl.’ He frowns. ‘Maybe at lunch? I think I saw her in the dining room earlier. She’s the small dark-haired one, with the baby brother?’

Hazel’s eyes are wide, her skin shiny with moisturiser. Her hands are gathered in her lap. ‘Where was she last seen?’ she asks.

Mr Lamb shakes his head impatiently, keen to be off looking for the girl. ‘She’s five years old,’ he says, as if that is an answer. ‘Her mother is distraught. If you see her ...’

Jonny nods again.

‘Of course,’ Hazel replies. ‘Let us know if we can help.’

‘We can join in a search,’ Jonny adds.

‘Yes, yes,’ Mr Lamb answers. He lifts his eyes to the ceiling, as if praying to the gods. ‘There’s a storm coming, you see. If she’s outside ...’

Hazel glances out of the mullioned window. The sky is pitch black beyond the glass. Balcombe Court is isolated, balanced as if on the air atop the sea. If Georgie is lost out there, she could fall down over the headland. She could be badly injured.

‘You could ask Evie,’ Hazel suggests. ‘Jonny’s daughter is in the room next door,’ she explains. ‘Jonny, go with Mr Lamb to check.’

‘Hang on, let me get some clothes,’ he says, retreating to the bathroom. He emerges a few seconds later, tousled in jeans and T-shirt, and he and Mr Lamb hurry along the corridor. Hazel stands as she hears a short rap on a door, the sound of Evie’s voice as she opens it, the murmurings explaining why they are there. Hazel moves to the window and looks out to where the yellow lights of the hotel seep onto the snowy ground.

She scrutinises her reflection in the dark glass. From downstairs, the aroma of roast meat, caramelised vegetables and garlic, of fruit punch and red wine, creeps into the room and she feels a similar sense of nausea as she had done once as a child, lying upstairs with a fever while her mother fried onions down below. She leans her forehead against a diamond of cold, damp glass framed by lead and history.

‘Happy birthday, Hazel,’ she whispers. ‘Happy birthday, precious girl.’