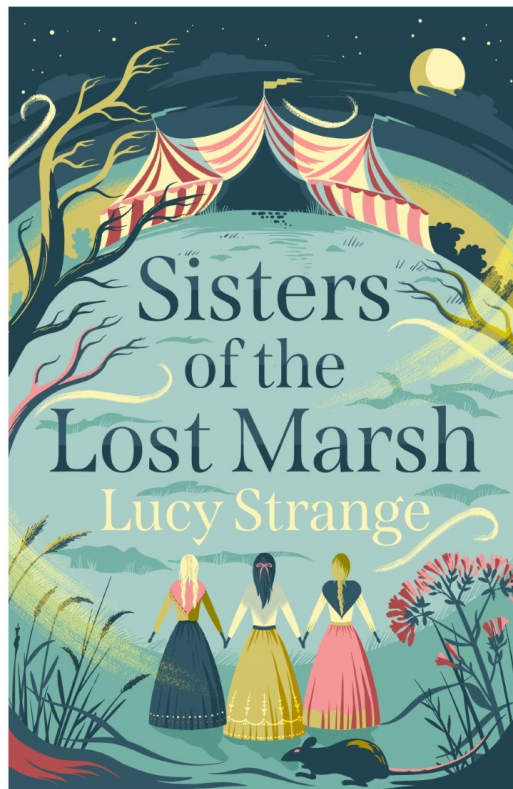


UNEDITED MANUSCRIPT

Sisters of the Lost Marsh

Lucy Strange



WHAT IF YOUR FATE HAD BEEN DECIDED THE MOMENT YOU WERE BORN?

*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

Chapter 1

My sister Grace has fled the village – run off with the Full Moon Fayre. We are broken-hearted of course, but we understand – me and my other sisters – we understand why she has gone. We even managed to keep it from Dadder for a whole day and a night so Grace could get far, far away from Hollow-in-the-Marsh before Dadder set off after her.

Grace turned sixteen last week, and Dadder betrothed her to Silas Kirby – the farmer who owns the biggest flock in the village and half of Gallows Wood. Silas offered Dadder a good horse for Grace's hand, and I will never forget the look on Dadder's face – like someone was giving him gold for a sackful of dung. Grace said nothing at all, she just kept scrubbing the kitchen table. She didn't look at Silas or Dadder, and she didn't even cry, and that made me even more angry.

'YOU SOLD OUR GRACE!' I screamed at Dadder as he dragged me to the door and threw me outside. 'DAUGHTER PEDLAR!' I bellowed from the middle of the stinking puddle I landed in. 'YOU PIG!'

It was very late and the shivering was bone-deep by the time the triplets managed to get to the door to let me in. Dolly and Deedee put their fingers to their lips – 'Sshh!' and Darcy nodded towards the fireplace chairs where Dadder and Silas were snoring – heads back, mouths open, and a stone bottle of something strong lying empty on the floor between them. While I had sheltered from the wind in the foul straw of the hen house, Dadder and Silas had been toasting their toes here by the fire, and toasting their seedy deal with grog.

The triplets scampered up the creaking stairs and into our room. They dived into their beds, Dolly and Deedee 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 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 little square window.

The triplets wriggled for a bit and one of them coughed, but eventually their loud breaths 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 tonight.’

‘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. ‘I’m only just twelve. And anyway – Dadder will keep us two at home to look after the farm. Dolly and Deedee will be married off next – like the Curse says. And they won’t be old enough for another ten years . . . ’

‘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). ‘Good night, Grammy.’

‘Good night, Willa.’ The candlelight shifted as our grandmother examined the lump in the bed next to me, pretending to be asleep with a pillow clamped over its head. ‘And good night, Freya,’ she whispered.

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, Gracie,’ I whispered, ‘We’re here. We’re all here, and we’ll look after you.’ I stroked her until she quietened. I sang a little of the song she always sang to me to make the nightmares go

away: 'A damsel slept beside a brook, a-dreamin and a-dreamin. The sky was black, the stars were bright, the waxen moon was gleamin . . .' Then I kissed her brow and crept back to my own cold little bed.

As I lay there under the awful scratchy blanket, I thought about my big sister's face when Dadder and Silas Kirby shook hands on her fate. Silas Kirby: a man twice her age, whose whip-fearing dogs carried their tails between their legs. Grace didn't even flinch. *She was being obedient*, I thought. *Softly-spoken, sweet-natured, Grace: afraid to curdle Dadder's good cheer, wearing a mask of stillness to hide her terror.*

But now I think something different. I think the mask hid much more than just fear. My sister was trying to think of a way out; a way of escaping from Silas Kirby and Dadder and Hollow-in-the-Marsh for ever.

Chapter 2

I am looking into the eyes of an enormous grey horse called Flint. They are glossy brown, like puddles after fresh-fallen rain, with long black eyelashes. I hated him at first – this big stupid creature we were given in exchange for Grace, but then I decided it wasn't really his fault any more than it was Grace's. And I don't know what will happen to him now that Grace has gone – we'll have to give him back, I suppose.

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.

Flint stood still in the muck of our yard while Dadder inspected him, running his hands over the horse's huge shoulders and strong back. He lifted each foot to check his hooves, his eyes widening with a sort of baffled glee that someone should barter such a beast for one of his wretched daughters. 'Walk him up and down a bit, Silas,' Dadder said, and then watched as Flint clopped steadily through the mud, over the broken cobbles and back again.

'Will you be wanting to give Grace an inspection too, Mr Kirby?' I said coldly. Dadder flashed a violent look at me, but Silas laughed.

'GRACE!' Dolly shouted at once, running to the door with Deedee close behind, 'Mister Kirby needs to check your FEET!'

Darcy rolled her eyes at them.

Grace met Dolly and Deedee on the step; she was on her way out already, carrying a bowl of scraps for the farm dogs.

'Here she is!' Dadder's face was still half-drunk and half-asleep, so his smile was like the demon grin of a hollowed-out turnip.

Grace nodded politely to Silas Kirby and walked past him to the barn; the farm dogs leapt about her hungrily. We all waited for her to come back, and when she did, she didn't go to her future husband; she stopped at 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.

Animals love Grace – she should have been in charge of the sheep really, not me – but we had the stupid Curse to thank for that. And for Grace’s betrothal too.

My sister was stroking Flint’s neck now, smiling with her eyes in that gentle, dreamy way of hers. Then she stopped. Her fingertips had found a thick, shining scar hidden by the horse’s mane.

‘That was from breaking him in,’ Silas grunted, ‘Bit jumpy as a colt, but he’s a good boy now. Born two summers ago to my grey mare Silver – best broodmare on the marshes . . .’

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

Dadder walked round to look at the scar. ‘Ar,’ he said. ‘Some beasts need remindin’ who’s in charge. Won’t have done him no harm.’

Grace raised her head. ‘Excuse me,’ she said quietly, and I don’t know if she was talking to us or the horse. She stroked his cheek, then she turned to go back inside: ‘I have to tend to the fire.’

Silas smiled slowly, his gaze following her as she walked up the steps to the door. ‘What do you say then, Nate?’ he murmured to Dadder, ‘Ale house to celebrate?’

Dadder put Flint in the stable with our old horse Jet, gave him some fresh hay, and set off down the lane with Silas Kirby. The pair of them fairly bounced along, though they had been drinking until late the night before, and I’m pretty sure Dadder was wearing the same reeking clothes he fell asleep in.

The triplets stood at the gate, waving as the shapes of Dadder and Silas grew smaller against the glare of morning sun. The moment the men vanished into brightness, they looked at each other, then looked at me – three wicked smiles on three shining faces. Without saying a word, we all bolted across the yard, leapt the puddles and the steps and slammed through the door into the kitchen.

‘They’ve GONE!’ Deedee yelled, and Dolly ran to the foot of the stairs: ‘GRAMMY! Dadder’s gone to the ALE HOUSE!’

‘Well, COME UP then!’

And they thundered up the stairs.

'BOOTS!' called out Freya without even turning around. She was kneeling by the fire, cutting carrots into the heavy-bottomed pan. One by one, six muddy boots tumbled back down the stairs. I picked them up and stood them by the door. Then I wiped up all the mud while Freya poured water into the pan, hung it from the iron pot hook and swung it over the glowing fire. I put a lump of turf on to keep the heat smouldering. 'Middlin' good work, Willa,' Freya muttered (which is about as close as she ever gets to saying something nice to any of us).

'Aye. You'd miss me if I was sold to the pig farmer,' I grinned.

'Maybe,' she admitted, 'But only a bit.' And she shoved me towards the stairs.

'C'mon, let's go up.'

'Where's Grace?'

'In with Grammy already I think.'

Freya was right. When we opened the door to Grammy's room, Grace was sitting on the broad windowsill with her arms wrapped around her knees. Her face was turned away from us, gazing out across the morning-bright marshes. I wondered if she had been talking to Grammy about the betrothal.

The triplets, unaware of the difficulties their biggest sister was facing, were all cross-legged on Grammy's bed, waiting.

'Quick then girls,' said Grammy to me and Freya as we came in.

'Hurry UP!' whined Deedee.

Freya perched on the end of Grammy's bed and I sat down on the sheepskin rug on the floor.

'Ready?' Grammy said at last.

We were ready.

Chapter 3

Grammy opened the doors of her big cupboard. She lifted out piles of blankets, flannel petticoats and long winter undies, then she moved the clothes that hung on the rail in the middle, drawing them back like curtains to reveal the treasure that was hidden behind.

Grammy's secret library.

The sun was coming in the low window, bright as fire, and it lit up the gold on the spine of each book. It lit up the cobwebs that hung all dusty between the black beams above us. It lit up Grammy too – our lovely Grammy – short and strong and wrapped in shawls, her long white hair hanging over her shoulder in a thick plait, her amber eyes glittering with mischief.

‘Now, it’s been a while since last time, girls,’ Grammy said, ‘so you’ll have to remind me who’s reading what.’

It isn’t exactly forbidden to read and write in our village, but the last woman caught reading was given the ducking stool down at Grey Brother’s Pond – twenty times up and down: splosh, GASP, splosh, GASP until all the learning had been washed off her. Grammy says it was even worse in her day – her friend Nell’s grammy kept books and folks said she was a witch. Blamed her for a bad harvest one year and she was burnt for it in the end. Some of the men can read a bit – just enough to trade at market or with the smugglers’ boats that come to the coast to buy and sell by lamplight. But no man would ever make a show of it, or folks would look at him sideways and that’s the beginning of a bad end for anyone.

So, no one knows we can read. Even Dolly knows to keep it secret, and she’s silly as a goose.

One by one we picked our books. Frey was reading a book about ships and pirates – I think it must have had lots of exciting bits because from time to time she went purple holding her breath. The triplets were reading *Horrors of the Marshes* (well, Darcy was reading it aloud in a gruff whisper while Dolly and Deedee sat motionless, listening round-mouthed to stories about bog monsters and marsh mermaids).

Grace shook her head when Grammy offered her the book she had been reading: ‘I don’t feel like it today, Grammy,’ she said quietly. ‘I’ll keep watch for Dadder.’ And she turned back to the window.

‘Here you are Willa,’ Grammy said, and gave me Grace’s book instead. My sister had told me about it the last time we read together: it was a story about two sisters who fall in love with two handsome princes – one who seems kind but turns out wicked, and one the other way around. I opened it up at a picture of the sisters dancing at a royal ball with their long dresses swirling in the air. It was just the right sort of book for Grace; she loves to dance. In the spring time, with flowers in her hair and coloured ribbons all flying behind her; in the winter, wearing a crown of holly, chasing her shadow round and round the Yule fires. Grace is very well-named I think – when she dances, it’s like watching the summer wind shimmer through a hayfield.

Grammy says names are very important. I was named Willa because Grammy says I had a strong will from the moment I was born: I was a fat little babby and loud as a crow – Grammy says I did nothing but scream for two whole years. Freya means noble lady which is about right because she has a very high opinion of herself. Dolly and Deedee are short for Dolores and Deidre which both mean sadness, because Mammer died giving birth to them. Everyone thought they were twins, and then little black-haired Darcy slithered out too. Her name means darkness.

Father said Darcy was never a babby at all, she was a demon that grew in Mammer and killed her, and he would have drowned her in the well like a runt puppy if Grammy hadn’t stopped him. He still thinks Darcy is jinxed, and he hates me too, though I don’t know why. Perhaps because we’re the two who look most like Mammer. The others are all fair like him – summer-blue eyes and hair like ripe corn.

I remember looking at that picture of the dancing sisters in Grammy’s book that morning and trying to make the most of this rare, precious moment – to let myself drift off to a world far beyond the Lost Marsh, to let the words spark wildfires in my head – but I couldn’t concentrate, not with Gracie feeling so sad. I’d never seen her sit so still – all huddled and folded up like there was a storm raging around her and she was trying to keep it out. Grammy was watching her too. She sat down beside her and opened a cloth-bound book that I knew very well called *Horses of the Wild*. ‘This was your Mammer’s favourite book, Grace, when she was your age,’ Grammy said softly.

It was so quiet in Grammy’s little sunshiney room. The whisper of pages turning; Darcy’s low voice murmuring about forest goblins; a mouse rustling in the thatch just a few feet above our heads. And then Grace started to cry – little sniffy shivers at first, and then

big, gulping sobs that took all the breath out of her. We all looked up from our books and stared. Grammy didn't say a word. She put her arm around Grace's shoulder and squeezed her close. She kissed her granddaughter's golden hair. Grace sobbed and sobbed into Grammy's shoulder.

I couldn't bear it any longer. 'Dadder can't force Grace to marry Mister Kirby if she doesn't want to, can he?' I said. '*You* got to choose who you married, didn't you Grammy? Why is it different for Grace?'

'Because of the Curse, Willa,' sighed Deedee, as if I was stupid.

'Because of *The Curse of Six Daughters*,' Dolly echoed, shaking her curls at me.

'I *know* about the Curse. Grace has to marry well, but why can't she choose *who to*?'

'Because your dadder has decided that's why,' Grammy said. 'I've tried talking to him, but you know what he's like when it comes to curses and such – he won't listen to sense. The Kirbys are the richest family in the village, and Silas Kirby chose our Grace. Your Dadder would never have said no.'

'Well the Curse says *I* have to stay at home,' muttered Freya, frowning down at her book. 'But I'm going to run away with Fergus and have adventures. He said I can marry him if I want to.'

Fergus is Freya's best friend. He's from a peat-digging family and they live in a cottage out on the bogland.

'The curse says we have to get wed too,' piped up Dolly, and Deedee nodded primly, but for the little ones the idea of getting wed was nothing more than fairy-tale dresses and pretty flowers. 'Dadder says we've got to be good girls and do what we're told, or the curse will fall on us all, and Darcy will . . .' Dolly stopped.

We all knew what the curse said about Darcy.

My littlest sister shrugged and smiled, and her dark eyes went back to the goblin story.

Grace had turned away from the window and was looking back at us all. She had stopped crying now. Grammy gave her another squeeze: 'Hm?' she said into Grace's hair. 'Don't despair Gracie. You're your own woman, you know. We'll think of something. I promise.'

'I'm all right, Grammy,' Grace said, wiping her eyes on her pinny. 'There's nothing to be done. I'll wed Silas when the springtide fires are lit. We still have the winter together. And I'll only be a few minutes from here. I can come home whenever I like Grammy, can't I?'

Grammy nodded and smiled but she didn't say anything.

Grace looked deep into Grammy's amber eyes. 'Let's look at the horse book again, please,' she murmured.

So we all drifted back into our books. The pages whispered once more, and the mice scabbled in the thatch, and the sunlight moved across the whitewashed wall.

In the end it was a sudden noise that jolted us out of our stories. The familiar clunk of the farmyard gate, followed by the scuffing of two heavy boots across the yard.

Freya leapt from the bed; I jumped to my feet, heart thumping. Grace twisted to look out of the window.

'He's back! QUICK everyone!'