



From the *New York Times* Bestselling Author of  
*HOUSE OF HOLLOW*

THE  
INVOCATIONS

KRYSTAL SUTHERLAND

**ALSO BY KRYSTAL SUTHERLAND**

*House of Hollow*

*A Semi-Definitive List of Worst Nightmares*

*Our Chemical Hearts*

**THE  
INVOCATIONS**

***KRYSTAL SUTHERLAND***



**NANCY PAULSEN BOOKS**

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***For all the angry girls***



# PROLOGUE

A GIRL walks home alone at night.

It's All Hallows' Eve in London, and the street that stretches before her is empty, quiet except for the soft thud of her boots on the sidewalk and the rustle of autumn leaves plucked by the wind. Hazy sodium lights struggle to shift the dark.

The girl is dressed as a witch. Cartoon-green skin, pointy hat, a fake wart on her nose. She is coming from the Electric Ballroom, where, at a Halloween concert with her housemates, she saw the boy she likes kissing a girl dressed as a sexy angel. It immediately made her regret her costume and want to go home.

Now she slips through the gap between two buildings, past the canal-side pub she goes to with her friends in the summer. A girl sits on the other side of a window decorated with bat decals, her face smeared with blood. A couple in matching hot-pink jumpsuits are breaking up on a bench.

The girl takes a few steps onto the footbridge that leads over the water and down onto the towpath on the other side.

It is here, on the bridge, that she pauses. The canal beneath her is a thin snake of shallow water. On a clear day, you can see the algae-coated detritus that collects at the bottom: the bicycles, the shopping trolleys, the tires. Tonight it is black and impenetrable. If you didn't know its depth, you might think it fathomless.

Across the water, the bars and restaurants of Camden Market are still busy with the Halloween crowd. Men and women in costumes cluster around

the spaceship-red glow of outdoor heaters, laughing, drinking mulled wine out of steaming mugs.

Ahead, the footbridge slopes down to the towpath that winds alongside Regent's Canal, below street level.

The girl hovers at the edge of the dark, weighing her options.

Usually she avoids the canal after sunset. It is unlit. It is the kind of place she has been told all her life to avoid for the simple fact that she is a girl—but tonight she is cold and drunk and sad and hungry for the leftover pad thai she knows is waiting for her in the fridge. The path by the water is the shortest, fastest route home.

Yet something tells her not to go any farther. Perhaps it is the memory of what happened to her on another night like this one. The stranger waiting in the dark, all the warnings she had been given growing up suddenly manifesting as flesh and breath and muscle.

Then the girl remembers the words at her wrist and runs a fingertip over the cool metal letters sunken into her skin. Words that took her a year to find. Words that mean she no longer has to fear the night or anyone who might be lurking in it.

She crosses the bridge. She plunges down into the blackness.

The first part of the walk is fine. The path is narrow and cobbled. The canal is bordered on both sides by converted warehouses turned into blocks of fancy flats. Light from their windows reflects on the smooth surface of the water, creating an eerie mirror world just below the real one. Houseboats sit snug against the canal's edge, the smell of woodsmoke clinging to the air around them. A huge, fat dog sits atop one, watching her as she passes. The sounds of revelry dissolve into the distance, but there is still life here. Still people to hear her, if she were to scream.

She crosses beneath a bridge. It is mauled with graffiti and lit with shocking blue light to discourage drug use. Combined, they make the place feel dangerous. She moves on quickly, back into the waiting shadow.

The next stretch of the walk is worse. There are no more houseboats. There are no more fancy flats. There is no one to come to her aid. There's

more greenery along the side of the path, vines and brambles that don't lose their foliage as the nighttimes turn to frost. She moves closer to the water, wary of attackers hidden in the creepers.

The girl crosses under a second blue-lit bridge, and then a third that's rancid with the stink of urine. She makes it to the base of the stairs that leap up out of the darkness and onto the brightly lit street above.

A girl walks home alone, but not alone.

She feels him before she sees him. There's no sound, or movement, or smell. Just some primordial response left over in the blood from a time before humans were humans. A sudden prickle of fright in her gut. A displacement of energy that makes her gaze snap back over her shoulder and brings her footsteps to a stop.

Her eyes find the figure immediately, standing stationary on the path. He's a slip of shadow, nothing more. No face, no weapon, nothing to indicate that he might do her harm. Just a man.

But she is a girl. And she is alone. And it is night. And that is enough.

She ducks her head and takes the stairs two at a time, but tries to do it casually, the way women do when they're afraid but trying not to look rude. She forces herself not to run. There's no need for desperate measures. Not yet. He's just a man on the towpath at night. It would be rude to run.

And sometimes.

Well.

Sometimes, if you run, the monster chases you; this she learned the hard way.

So she climbs, step after measured step, up, up into the light. The staircase spits her out on Gloucester Avenue, only one street from her flat. She waits under a streetlight to see if the man will follow her, but he does not. She breathes a sigh of relief and turns for home. It's a sloe-black, moonless night. The kind that beckons demons out of the liminal world and brings them into this one, hungry to feed on the souls of the living. London is full to bursting with magic, dark and dangerous, if you know where to look . . . and she knows, now, where to look.

A dog barks.

The girl looks up and stifles a yelp with her hand.

The figure from the canal is somehow standing on the sidewalk directly in front of her. Closer than he was the first time.

The girl stops again. Stares. Her heart crashes inside her chest. She takes small, gasping breaths as she tries to understand the logistics of what has just happened. How could he have followed her? How could he have overtaken her? How could he have moved so quickly? There's no way. There's no way.

Then she remembers the words at her wrist.

There's no need to fear anymore.

There's heavy shadow to her right, the deep, wet shadow that trees cast in the forest. The girl moves toward it, into it, lets it devour her, and—

She steps from a bank of shadows on the next street over. A little out of breath. A little frazzled. She looks around. She's alone again. She went where the figure could not follow. Into one shadow, out of another.

A small smile on her face now, she again heads toward her flat, only a few buildings away. The price she paid for this power—blood and money and soul—was worth it to feel safe.

The girl climbs the five stairs up to her blue front door and unlocks it. When she steps inside and turns to close the door behind her, she finds the figure once more, now standing at the bottom of the stairs. He is unmoving and close. So very close to her now.

It is impossible. Men cannot use magic. This is what she has been told. This is what she has been promised. Men cannot write spells. Men cannot sear invocations into their skin. Men cannot bind their souls to demons in exchange for power.

Men cannot use magic.

And yet. Here he is. Again.

They stand still, staring at each other. Though—is he staring? She cannot see his face, cannot make out his eyes, his nose, his hair. He is empty space, a black hole from which no light escapes.

The girl slams the door closed and scrambles backward. She doesn't bother with the stairs that lead up to her flat on the third floor. She lunges into the shadowed corner of the hall, falls out of another shadow in her kitchen, then fumbles in the sink for one of the dirty knives her housemates are forever leaving to soak.

The blade quivers like a water reed in her white-knuckled hand as she watches her front door and waits. Waits for a bang against the wood, a turning of the handle, a horror-movie moment worthy of a scream.

It does not come.

It does not come.

It does not come.

And then, when she thinks perhaps she is safe, perhaps he was no more than a Halloween prankster out for a laugh, a pair of strong hands close around her throat.

# ONE

**EMER BYRNE** sits in a far corner of the dining hall of Brasenose College, curled over a plate laden with food. Students move in and out of the wood-paneled room, their trays neatly set out with eggs and toast and tea, not noticing the stranger in their midst. They watch their phones with sleepy eyes. They listen to AirPods. They highlight lines in textbooks as they eat. Oxford students tend to be more alert at lunch and dinner, more suspicious of faces they do not recognize, which is why Emer only ever eats in college halls for breakfast. Nobody bothers her. Nobody tries to make conversation. Nobody cares when she takes a second muffin for the road.

Outside, she unlocks her stolen bicycle from where she left it chained against the fence of the Radcliffe Camera. Emer has heard passing tourists remark quizzically at the name—“It doesn’t look like a camera”—but it has never stumped her. The word *camera* shares its roots in Greek and Latin with *chamber*. To a girl fluent in Latin and a dozen other old languages, it makes perfect sense.

As she wheels her bike through the square, she tests herself. Behind the Camera is another extravagant building: a palatial wall, beyond which rise turrets shaped like spear tips. All Souls College. To her left, a boxier more fortlike building, also of pale stone and topped with turrets. Bodleian Library. To her right, an ornate spire. University Church of St. Mary the Virgin. Oxford students are expected to know the names of these buildings, and so Emer has learned them, too.

It was a confusing place when she first arrived two summers ago, frantic and afraid that she was being hunted already. She expected the university to

be one big campus, not a collection of halls and buildings—residential colleges—scattered throughout the city, each with its own history and charm. Some are very old: Balliol was founded in the thirteenth century. Some are much newer, like Linacre, established in 1962, which is where Emer cycles to this morning.

Cool air needles her skin as she rides. Autumn has descended over the streets. The gutters are laden with leaves the color of honeycomb, and the sandstone buildings are dipped in blanched sunlight.

Linacre College has a gym in the basement. Emer scans an ID card that is not hers, then heads to the locker room to get changed. There, she pulls her workout gear from her backpack. A navy Oxford-branded hoodie and shorts, both stolen from a merchandise store. The clothes are musty and damp with sweat from last night's workout, and the workouts before that.

Emer runs, hard and fast, for forty-five minutes, until her head spins when she steps off the treadmill. Her muscles feel heavy, in a good way. She likes to be able to feel the meat of them when she walks. All that muscle, just beneath the skin, encasing her bones. That is power.

After her run, she goes back to the locker room and gets into the shower fully clothed and rubs soap over the fabric of her clothing until it lathers. Then she stands under the stream to wash away the sweat and grit of the past few days and the faint smell of sulfur that seeps from her skin. She takes off her sopping clothes and washes them properly, washes her underwear, too, all three pairs, then wrings them out and hangs them up on the hooks where people sometimes hang jackets or accidentally leave their towels. When all the cleaning is done, she stands under the water and turns up the heat until it sears her white skin pink. It is a stupid luxury. Even now, so many years after Nessa found her half-feral in the woods, having access to a shower makes her want to laugh and weep at the same time.

She dries herself with someone else's towel and considers her naked body in the foggy full-length mirror, admiring the thick cords of muscle in her arms and legs, the six-pack that has bloomed across the once-soft plane of her stomach. There are two toes missing from her left foot, an unhealed two-

inch wound on her left forearm, and an angry red rash below her collarbone where her lead pendant rests against her skin.

Linacre women leave their deodorant here, their shampoo and conditioner, their foundation and lipstick and mascara. Emer uses what she needs, then changes back into the clothes she wore here. A tan wool coat, a black turtleneck, a tweed skirt, black tights, black boots. The same clothes Nessa shoved into Emer's backpack two years ago as she pushed her out the door and told her to run, run, they will come for you after this.

At midday, Emer goes to her first and only "class" for the day. It is a lecture on mathematics. She does not understand mathematics beyond what she learned from her mother, and her mother died when she was seven. Addition, subtraction, and multiplication are concepts that make sense to her, but she struggles to put them into practice without counting on her hands. Nessa sometimes tried to teach her in fits and starts, but Nessa herself had never gone to school, had learned only what had been deemed useful for Byrne women to know: when to plant seeds in the spring, how to turn plants into tinctures, how to speak the tongues of the dead.

Emer would prefer to attend a lecture on languages, the older the better, but those are delivered in small rooms to small classes—and they do not serve food. At the mathematics lecture, they are serving bánh mì, a pork version on one side of the room, a vegetarian option on the other. The sign above the food reads PLEASE TAKE ONLY ONE. Emer takes two of the pork sandwiches, then leaves the auditorium, comes back in another door, and takes two of the vegetarian sandwiches.

The lecture is so full that she has to sit on the side of the room, on the carpeted floor. There's a young guest speaker talking about a scholarship she won to study at an elite university in America. Emer wonders what the food is like there. Then the lecture begins. The professor writes all sorts of strange symbols on the board, as he does every week. Egyptian hieroglyphs she understands, but not these. Emer listens, and watches, and eats all four of her sandwiches slowly. When the attendance sheet is passed around, she looks at it and pretends to fumble for a pen before passing it on without



writing her name down. Nobody notices. She has become proficient at being a ghost.

The lecture goes until midafternoon. When it is over, Emer returns to the Camera and goes to the Bodleian Library and sits at a dark wood table among the dark wood stacks.

The library is why she is here. It is why she decided to hide in Oxford instead of anywhere else when she fled Cork in the night two years ago.

Here, Emer reads. The sun slants long and golden through the windows. The air smells of leather and old paper. It is Emer's favorite place in the world. It is here that she finds books left for her: at her feet, on the chair next to her. She never has to go looking for them; they just appear, as if by magic. Books about protolanguages. Books about sigils and runes. Books about Sumerian, Hattic, Elamite, Hurrian. Books about Linear A. and Cretan hieroglyphs about syllabaries and logograms and constrained writing. Emer reads them all, cover to cover, taking extensive notes as she goes. While she works, she fiddles with the pendant around her neck, twisting the tightly rolled scroll of lead, beaten as thin as silk, between her fingers. A subconscious gesture to make sure it is still there.

At the end of a book on protolanguages, Emer undoes the necklace and unfurls the scroll to review her work. Into the lead are engraved all the worst words Emer has found in every dead language that ever had a writing system.

Every word for *blood*.

Every word for *hatred*.

Every word for *vengeance*.

She adds a new word today, a tiny thing scratched at the very edge with a scribe, and then she looks up to watch the other people in the room, their heads buried in books and laptops in silent contemplation. They are all so clean. They all sit so straight. They are all so sure they belong here. Emer studies them carefully and tries to emulate them. The lines of their spines. The way their eyes squint when they work through the problems on their screen, frustrated but confident in their ability to prevail in the end. The

women are bright faced, with neat ponytails and little makeup. The men have freshly cut hair and shiny shoes. Humans are pattern-recognition machines, and Emer must try hard to fit the pattern. To not arouse suspicion.

When a man gets up to go to the bathroom, Emer stands, puts her pendant back on, and walks past his workstation. He has left his wallet in his open backpack. It still surprises her how freely Oxford students leave their belongings unguarded. How freely they trust each other. Emer pretends to drop something next to the backpack and bends down. She does not take the whole wallet. Just the things that will help her around the city. His student ID card. His cash.

In the evening, Emer eats the muffin she saved from breakfast, then goes back to the gym and lifts weights for another hour. No one questions her presence in the small room meant only for Linacre students. Why would they? Emer's workout gear is still drying, so she wears an Oxford Medicine hoodie that someone left scrunched up in a locker. Sometimes men stare at her as she passes, and she thinks it might be because she is pretty, striking even, with her red hair and brown eyes, but that is not useful when you are trying not to be noticed, not to be remembered.

*What did the girl look like?* Emer imagines the police asking her neighbor back in Cork. *The girl who killed your husband?*

After the weights sessions, Emer goes to the Linacre common kitchen and makes herself a coffee, drinks it, then makes another one. The drawers here are filled with tea bags and packets of brown sauce and coffee pods and individually wrapped biscuits. So much food. She thinks of the nights she spent in the woods around Lough Leane as a child, cold and starving and wild, when there were drawers like this at Oxford the whole time. She takes four biscuits and puts them into her backpack. Then she takes four more, two for each pocket of her coat.

It is night now. The sky is clear, the college gables bleak and Gothic in the gloaming. Emer rides to Franco Manca and lingers outside, waiting for a table of students to leave. It does not take long. Three girls stand and wander

out, chatting and laughing as they go. There is still half a pizza on their table, a plate of salad, a beer that has barely been touched. Emer slips inside the restaurant and sits where the girls were sitting and eats everything they left behind. She takes her time. She savors the pizza. She sips the beer slowly. When she is done, she leaves. Nobody stops her, because the bill has already been paid.

Outside, the town is dark and cold in the November chill, late autumn settled heavily over the streets, lulling them into an early hush. The streetlights are yellow and look like gaslight. It reminds Emer of the candles her mother used to burn all throughout the house when she was small.

It is at night that she watches men. In the day she dips her gaze from theirs, smiles at them coyly when necessary, shrinks her muscular frame to look smaller, weaker, more petite. Now she pulls her shoulders back to reveal the full extent of her broadness, feels the weight and surety of the muscles she has cultivated. Under her warm clothes she looks soft, but she is strong, and this, she has learned, makes her dangerous.

Emer follows men on her bicycle. Men do not know what it feels like to be hunted. Men do not walk alone on dark streets and think about fingers closing around their throats or their skulls thudding dully against the pavement.

They do not think about strangers coming to their house and slaughtering their entire family.

Emer likes to find them where they sit or stand or walk, comfortable, unafraid. Because there is no need to fear if you are a man. You own the darkness. It is your space.

Emer slows her bike on Christ Church Meadow Walk, across from a low stone bridge. Folly Bridge. It is her favorite spot in the whole city, apart from the library. The River Thames is surrounded by a medley of mismatched trees; faded eucalyptus, rich emerald evergreens, and impossibly bright oaks in autumn tones of candy red and sherbet orange. It is close to 9:00 p.m. There is only one other person here. A light-haired man sitting on a bench,

watching the water as he eats a burger. Emer sits next to him, too close to him, and stares and waits.

Men think she looks like prey.

They do not know she is bait.

“Can I help you?” the man asks. There is no fear in his voice, no fear in his eyes. “Are you okay?”

Emer continues to stare. “Andy?” she asks. It’s been two years since she left Ireland, but her accent is still strong.

*Try me, she thinks. Try to hurt me.*

*See what happens.*

*See what I can do.*

“No. My name is John.” The man looks confused. Concerned. He says nothing more. Emer stands and backs away and leaves him be.

She rides for three more hours, until her fingers are numb with the cold and the city is quiet and there are no more men to stalk.

At midnight she goes back to Brasenose, where she ate the muffin this morning. It is Tuesday night and there is a party going on in the common room. There is food and alcohol, and Emer weaves through the crowd and takes both. Nobody notices. She belongs here. A boy tries to talk to her, asks her name, but it is too bright, and Emer has her shoulders hunched again. The boy waits for her to reply, but she does not, and soon he goes away, looking at her like she is strange.

Stupid. Flirting is part of her camouflage, her disguise. She cannot be the weird girl. She cannot be the girl people think of if anyone comes asking questions.

There are bathrooms down the hall. Emer sits on a toilet lid and eats curry puffs and sips another beer and waits for the party to end, which it does at 1:00 a.m., because there are noise restrictions. The students must be well rested if they are to rule the world one day.

Emer washes her face in the bathroom and drinks five handfuls of water from the tap. In the fluorescent light, her skin is bilious. There are blue half-