

**THE
HURRICANE
BLONDE**



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Halley Sutton

Allison & Busby Limited
11 Wardour Mews
London W1F 8AN
allisonandbusby.com

Published by arrangement with G.P. Putnam's Sons, an imprint of
Penguin Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC.

First published in Great Britain by Allison & Busby in 2023.

Discussion guide and interview with Halley Sutton © 2023 by
G. P. Putnam's Sons

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

First Edition

ISBN 978-0-7490-3062-9

Typeset in 11/16 pt Sabon LT Pro by
Allison & Busby Ltd.

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Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

*For Paul Vangelisti, who tells the best stories.
I took one and ran with it.*

CHAPTER ONE

The pretty blonde would be dead in three minutes. She stood in front of the Biltmore Los Angeles hotel, wind snapping her black linen dress against her waist, revealing shiny Spanx and spray-tanned thighs. Ringed around her, a dozen true-crime junkies baked under the September sun, leaking electrolytes but not enthusiasm. Not yet. For three more minutes, Beth Short – better known as the Black Dahlia, Los Angeles’s most infamous unsolved murder – was alive to tell her story.

‘I hitched a ride up from San Diego with a travelling salesman,’ the Black Dahlia said. ‘A “nice guy,” married. You know the type.’ Melany Grey, the actor embodying the Dahlia, pantomimed *handsy*, skimming her palms over her bodice. My murder tourists laughed, nudged each other. *Yes, yes, we know.*

Stars Six Feet Under wasn’t the only tour company in Hollywood that promised an insider’s look at the macabre underbelly of fame. But we had something that set us apart. We had my Dead Girls. For four hours every day of the week except Mondays and holidays – though you’d be surprised how many people preferred spending Christmas

with murdered starlets over their own families – I could bring the dead back to life.

‘I told him I was meeting my sister. But he wouldn’t leave me alone. A *gentleman*.’ The Dahlia rolled her eyes. ‘I sat in that lobby trying not to play footsy with him for hours.’ She gestured to the Biltmore behind her.

I’d heard the story hundreds of times, but I couldn’t help myself. I turned on cue with my tourists and stared at the hotel, glittering in the white sun.

In 1947, when the Black Dahlia was murdered, the Biltmore was the largest, fanciest hotel west of Chicago. She was class, and money, and all the promise of Los Angeles – that mirage of fame and success and good fortune – rolled up into one.

Now, nearly a hundred years into her residency – ancient in this city, which preferred its buildings like its women: shiny, new, *young* – the Biltmore was starting to show her cracks. Sumptuous carpets a little threadbare. Gilded frescoes dingy and studded with grey gum patches old enough to vote.

In the end, she *had* brought the Black Dahlia fame.

‘By the time I got rid of him,’ the Dahlia said, blonde strands escaping her black wig, ‘it was night.’ Her voice fell to a hush, leaving us to imagine 9th January, 1947, when Beth Short wandered from the lobby of the Biltmore into the dark, dangerous cold of downtown Los Angeles and disappeared. A week later, her body, cracked open like an egg, would be discovered across town by a young mother and daughter out for a sunny morning stroll.

Melany paused, letting us sit in our imaginations, wondering. Then she shivered, fluttering her fingers over

actual goosebumps raised on her bare arms.

I peered closer, impressed. Actual goosebumps – a good trick. All the girls I hired from my mother’s acting school for my tour came with the Vivienne Powell guarantee of excellence, of course. But goosebumps on command – even Vivienne’s magic didn’t usually extend that far.

‘Who knows what might have happened to me if he hadn’t been such a *gentleman*,’ Melany said. ‘Maybe I would’ve left while it was still daylight. Maybe I would’ve lived a long life. We’ll never know.’

I nibbled on the edge of my thumb, biting deep into cuticle and sucking on the pain. Like every tour, I wanted to stop her there. Keep Beth Short alive a few more minutes. But that wasn’t the way the story ended. You couldn’t cheat the past.

I knew that better than anyone.

Melany finished the monologue I’d written, sharing theories about the Dahlia’s fate: the sons and nephews who came out of the woodwork with stories about bad daddies who might’ve killed her. Thousands of suspects. Never solved. I didn’t think it could be any more, not really. The Black Dahlia meant something to Los Angeles, but only as a mystery. Even if they didn’t know it, people preferred it that way.

Melany stared at me, eyebrows raised.

Earth to Salma. I cleared my throat. ‘Any questions?’

In the back, a woman with sunburned shoulders and a puffy purple fanny pack raised her hand. I tried not to roll my eyes. I could guess her question. She’d want personal details about the Dahlia. She’d have her own theories about who she was, what happened to her, *why* it happened to

her. I'd come to think of Beth Short as something of a litmus test: you tell me what you see when you look at the Dead Girl, and I'll tell you what's missing in *your* life.

'Yes?'

'Didn't the brochure say we'd get a cocktail?' A low rumble of laughter moved through my group. Emboldened, Purple Fanny Pack smirked. 'I mean, this *is* the Salma Lowe tour, right? I'm surprised we don't get drinks at every stop.'

The laughter was louder this time. I scrunched my face into an almost-smile. 'Funny,' I said. 'I haven't heard that one.' I gestured at the hotel. 'Upstairs, the bartender has crafted a real treat – a Black Dahlia cocktail, special for our tour. Be back here in twenty minutes, or the bus leaves without you.'

My tourists lined up for their drink tokens, jabs at my tabloid past long forgotten as they held up their palms for the promise of lobby air conditioning, the phantom taste of Chambord and Absolut citrus already on their tongues.

When I'd first started my tour, I'd made the mistake – oh, what a mistake – of believing my guests wanted to understand my own obsessions: the shadow side of the Hollywood spotlight, the darkness that beckoned for women who burnt too brightly. *She had everything until she didn't*. The Marilyn Monroes, the Jayne Mansfields, the Thelma Todds and Jean Harlows and Dorothy Strattens – none of whom lived past thirty-six.

But after five years, I knew what my riders really wanted: photographic evidence of being interesting – dark, complicated, ever so slightly twisted. They'd gladly fork over seventy-five dollars to let tragedy crinkle the edges of their cookie-cutter, basic-bitch lives, sprinkling Dead Girls

over their Instagram feed like a game of brunch, brunch, murder.

Melany hovered near my elbow as I handed out the final token. I let the doors slide shut – that air con *did* feel good – then said, ‘Goosebumps on command. Impressive.’

‘Really?’ Melany’s face lit up, pink as a shrimp. ‘You were impressed?’

I winced. Actors were like puppies, eager to soak up praise and attention. And like puppies, there was something appealing and dangerous about all that *tell me I’m good and I’ll follow you anywhere* trust. It could get a girl in trouble. ‘You made Vivienne proud.’

She bounced happily on her toes, dress swishing around her knees. I rummaged through my purse, looking for the check I owed her, along with a tip – goosebumps deserved a tip – when Melany said, the words all in a rush, nasal Texas twang creeping in, ‘Then would you put in a good word with her? There’s this part I’ll die if I don’t get – well, actually, I *already* didn’t get it, but maybe there’s *another* part, and if Vivienne freaking Powell tells him I’m a good actor, Cal will reconsider—’

‘Cal?’ My purse dropped onto the asphalt. A lip gloss and a tampon, identical shades of pink, bounced onto the street. ‘Cal Turner?’

Melany bent down, gathered the tubes for me. ‘His new super-secret project. The casting director won’t even release the full sides for auditions. It’s on an’ – her fingers made bunny quotes around my tampon and lip gloss – “as-needed basis”.’

Restricting sides – script excerpts actors used for auditions – was not the worst rumour I’d heard about

Cal. *The most dangerous director in Hollywood*, one magazine had dubbed him – like it was a good thing. When I'd known him, he'd been a fledgling auteur with a leading man's face and a bad temper. And my sister's fiancé.

'So? Will you?' Melany's face was eager, like a little girl promised a toy.

I'd always been a coward when it came to conflict.

I dug through my purse again, stalling as I fished out a floppy worm of orange sugar-free gum, thinking of Cal's face as I chomped it. 'Sure,' I lied. Even if acting wasn't high on the list of things my mother and I no longer talked about, I wouldn't have done it. Not for Cal's film. 'I'll put a bug in her ear.'

Melany gripped my arm. I couldn't look at her. 'Oh my God, I can't thank you enough. Salma, you're a lifesaver.' When I looked up, Melany's head was tilted as she watched me, her cornflower-blue eyes wide. 'Don't you ever miss acting?'

The gum fell to the back of my throat. I coughed. 'Miss it?'

'I used to watch *Morty's House* as a kid, you know. You were good. You were *funny*.' She hesitated for a moment, then said, almost shyly: '*Iron Prayer* is my favourite film.'

If I had a dollar for every time someone told me my parents' film *Iron Prayer* was their favourite movie – well, in a way, my family *did* have a dollar, more than a dollar, for every time I'd heard it.

But *Morty's House* wasn't anyone's favourite show, except maybe mine. Playing plucky Polly Parker hadn't required much acting talent besides mastering a salty

sprinkle of one-liners, like: *Gosh, Mr Morty, don't you know what to say to make a girl feel special!* with an eye roll so big, I had to ice my forehead between takes. *Morty's House* left me with a permanent bald spot behind my right ear from years of a pulled-too-tight-ponytail, meagre residual checks from our brief flirtation with syndication in the early aughts, and a taste for amphetamines in the form of producer-mandated diet pills.

It had also been the only time in my childhood when I'd had friends, real sleepover-truth-or-dare-MASH-until-morning friends.

Melany wasn't done. 'You can't tell me Vivienne Powell and Dave Lowe's daughter doesn't have acting in her blood.' Melany must have seen my face, because she clicked her tongue, shook her head. 'I'm sorry. That was thoughtless.'

Even though it had been almost two years since my father died, every mention of him was like a tiny punch still, another reminder he was gone for good. I still expected him to pick up the phone when I called. It was a shock to remember – like I'd carelessly misplaced him somewhere. But it was death that had been careless with me.

How you stop acting: never live up to your family's expectations. Delight the tabloids with a never-ending stream of bad angles and bad choices, the merry-go-rounds of rehab to red carpet and back again, the box office bombs and black sheep antics that sell more glossy covers than good news can. *You won't believe what Sloppy Salma did now!* You stop acting when you sell more magazines than movie tickets.

And in the end, when you needed it most, fame meant nothing. It couldn't protect you from the things that go

bump in the night. It couldn't protect you at all.

Melany just didn't know it yet.

'I'll put in that word,' I said. Behind us, a few of my tourists staggered down the lobby stairs, cherry-cheeked and loose. 'Thanks again, Melany.'

I turned on my heel, blinking into the smoggy sunlight as I crossed the street to my bus. I folded my arms against the steering wheel, ignoring the leather scalding me through my sleeves. Melany gave the hotel one last look, then slid the wig from her head, shaking out her long blonde hair underneath it.

She didn't need my good word anyway. She was Cal Turner's type exactly.

I closed my eyes as the tourists mounted the steps. I didn't want to watch them swaying into their seats like big drunk babies, yelping and giggling as they leant against scorching windows, making a show of fanning themselves with a Stars Six Feet Under brochure. Ready to devour one more Dead Girl before the ride home.

I was always jumpy at this part of my tour.

As the bus rocked, I practised my final monologue of the day. *Tawney Lowe – an actor you might also know as the Hurricane Blonde – died twenty years ago, in the hours between 10:30 a.m. and 1:17 p.m. on 16th June, 1997.* But no, that was pulling a punch. *Tawney Lowe was murdered in the hours between . . .*

Murder. The word stuck in my throat like a clot of phlegm.

I counted backward from ten before I tried again. It was an old trick from the Betty Ford Centre for Clean Living and No More Fun, where I'd served two tours:

a longer stint from 2001 to 2002, as a teenager, and a shorter stay in 2004, a refresher course on the appeal of court-mandated sobriety.

Twenty years ago, my sister, Tawney Lowe – also known as the Hurricane Blonde – was strangled to death. Her murder has never been solved.

I'd said it before. What was one more time?

I opened my eyes. 'Okay, everyone,' I said, glancing at my sun-mottled crew in the rear-view as I nosed the bus back onto the glitter and rush of Los Angeles streets, backward in time to 1:17 p.m. on 16th June, 1997, when my mother and I discovered Tawney's lifeless body steps from her pool. 'One last stop and then you're home free.'