

Abernathy Girls  
By Maggie B.

When the Abernathys swept through our drowsy town, they stole the breath from our lungs. I was a broad-shouldered girl of seventeen, known for spitting farther than the boys and setting fire to old furniture. Not much could render me speechless, but one look from them shut me right up. The moment their feet hit our land, violets and wildflowers sprang up in their bootprints. They kidnapped spring and laid it on our doorstep. It was the first time in a long time that we could step back from our plows. We owed them that.

I would catch glimpses of them around town. They would hover in crowds, phantoms dressed in pale shifts. We clung to their words when they spoke, which wasn't often. Occasionally we might find the ravaged carcass of a deer or a spot of dried blood. We didn't mind too much. Questions would take away the sweet smell of fruit and the crops bursting from our fields.

Gaia was the oldest, or at least the tallest. When she leaned forward, her hair fell like a sheet of dark rain. Then there was Siobhan, who had more legs than she had brains. Trailing behind them was Eve: dark eyes, dark skin, shy smile. The Abernathys called themselves sisters, but they didn't look or act the part.

One night I came back from the lake, dripping wet and laughing with the boys from across the field. Finn pinched me in places where I would bruise easily. I pretended not to notice; we were friends by necessity, meaning that we hated the rest of the town more than we hated each other. There were plenty of insults and black eyes, but by now they were almost fond.

A bonfire crackled beside the grove that led to our village. Kids our age tipped back foam cups of beer and exchanged smiles. Being the reserved young man that he was, Finn ripped off his shirt and ran for the nearest keg. I groaned and wrung the water from my hair.

It could have two minutes or twenty, but I heard him call me from across the clearing.

"Elsie," Finn shouted, waving his cup in the air. "Have you met the Abernathys?"

'Course I had, but we'd only exchanged a quick hello and a cautious glance each. The Abernathys weren't people to be *met*. All three sets of eyes honed in on me. They folded their bodies in just the right way, a perfect symphony of limbs and hands. I didn't know whether to scowl or laugh, so I settled for both.

"Thanks, but I've got to get home," I said. "Maybe next time, yeah?"

All of a sudden, the world around me got still. Calm. Finn funneled beer into his mouth in slow motion. Movements became languid, like bugs being encased in amber. My eyes fixed on the yellow-orange-blue flames lapping at the air. Those Abernathy girls kept on staring.

When I looked down, my feet were moving on their own.

One of the Abernathys bared her teeth at me. I suppose she smiled, and I suppose it was Siobhan, but the wrench in my gut was all that mattered.

"Alright," I said, my voice shaking like mad. "I guess I could stay awhile. Get me a drink, would you?"

Finn nodded, his eyes filmy and blank. There were sweat stains under his arms, a blatant lust in the way he looked at the three of them. I could practically hear him panting.

"Wipe the drool off your face," I snapped. He didn't answer.

When Finn finally bounded off, I turned to face the Abernathys. They were immovable.

"What are you doing here?" My voice didn't sound like my own. No strangers had stayed in our town for longer than a winter, much less through to spring.

"Searching," said Gaia.

"Longing," said Siobhan.

My blood turned to icy slush as Eve took my hand in hers.

"Devouring," she said. "That's something you're familiar with, isn't it?"

I remembered the couch that I'd incinerated last week. The surge of adrenaline I'd felt as the flame ate the blue-black velvet had been sickening in the best way possible.

I knew what it meant to be hungry.

"What do you want?" I whispered.

Gaia loomed over me, her hand clamping on my shoulder. All I could focus on were her eyes. They were milky white, no pupils to speak of. She opened her mouth wide to teeth that had been filed into sharp points.

“Elsie.” She gripped my jaw and turned my head from side to side. “What do *you* want?”

I wanted to buy lavish jewelry, to feel sand between my toes, to look down the edge of a cliff and taste salt in the air. Worrying is worthless, city folks will tell you, but worry can dictate who lives through the night. I tried to swallow, but my throat was dry and tight.

“I want to go,” I said.

The Abernathys nodded. My legs went out, and I had the sudden feeling that it had never been about me at all. Across the grove, Finn stumbled forward with a sloshing cup, his limbs little more than jelly. That sickly glaze still clouded his eyes. When I cast a quick glance around, everyone had the same blank, puppy-ish expression.

Servants waiting on a queen.

Siobhan smirked and beckoned Finn over with one polished fingernail. Nothing about her seemed soft anymore; she was miles of tan skin and taut muscle. Finn came running. My stomach sank to my ankles.

“Take a look around,” Siobhan said. “Is this place worth caring about?”

Part of me begged yes, a thousand times yes; there had been so many sunlit afternoons in the apple groves and nights spent under the stars. I had friends there, no matter how vacant they might be. Our mothers had been making rhubarb pies together since before we were born.

Another part of me, twisted and gnarled and wicked, wanted to watch it all burn.

“This isn’t me,” I said. “It can’t be.”

Siobhan shrugged. “People have a way of denying themselves their sickest pleasures.”

The crackle of the fire deafened me.

“We think that should change.”

Eve took Finn’s face between her hands, fingers digging into his temples. Skin puckered and tore. Bile rose in my throat; I had to hold a hand over my mouth to keep vomit from spewing everywhere. It was almost methodical, the way she peeled the skin off his face. Bits of muscle and sinew stained her perfect manicure, but she didn’t seem to mind. In fact, an angelic smile lit her face as she scraped him raw. My feet wouldn’t move.

By the end of it, he was nothing but bloody pulp and a wistful smile.

“Skin.” Gaia hummed and took a long whiff of the blood misting the air. “So easy to harvest in small towns like these. Young men are always dying for a taste of something new.”

I tried to open my mouth, but all my jaw did was quiver. The dewy-eyed villagers clapped, slow and syncopated.

Siobhan ripped a piece of skin off Finn’s arm like jerky and popped it into her mouth.

Chewed. Swallowed.

“Let me ask you again, Elsie,” she murmured, her breath hot against my cheek. “What do you want?”

I stared at Finn, who convulsed in front of me. That awful grin was still plastered on his mangled face. Tears leaked out of his eyes. They streamed down his cheeks as Siobhan gripped his throat, tapping against his jugular.

“Careful now,” she said. “We like you.”

“We want to give you a second chance,” Eve added. “A new life far away from here.”

“You can be free of this wretched place.” Gaia grabbed my hand and squeezed hard enough to break bone. “You don’t even have to stay with us.”

*I shouldn’t. I shouldn’t. I shouldn’t.*

But Finn was already half-dying, and that twisted piece of me wanted so desperately to see the ocean.

Instead, I said, “What do I have to do?”

Siobhan traced a line across Finn’s throat.

I smiled.

