



DELICIOUS



MONSTERS

LISELLE SAMBURY

Author of *Blood Like Magic* and *Blood Like Fate*

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EARLY PRAISE FOR
DELICIOUS MONSTERS

“One part breathtaking ghost horror, one part gripping thriller, and an all-round absorbing read, *Delicious Monsters* turns an unflinching light onto the cycles of trauma and the ghosts that follow.”

—CHLOE GONG, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of the *These Violent Delights* Duet

“A haunted house thriller packed with cryptic mystery, dark humor, and bone-chilling twists. Sambury approaches the grim recesses of intergenerational trauma with diligence and bravery. The odd ghosts, fearless prose, and raw character dynamics make this an absolute page-turner and a win for psychic fiction.”

—RYAN DOUGLASS, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Taking of Jake Livingston*

“Full of eerie ghosts and secrets most sinister, *Delicious Monsters* is the perfect read for a dark and stormy night. I read most of it from behind the safety of my fingers and was left thoroughly haunted.”

—ERIN A. CRAIG, *New York Times* bestselling author of *House of Salt and Sorrows* and *Small Favors*

“On one page, this book sings a lullaby, and on the next, it throws you into a whirlwind you never could’ve seen coming. At its core, *Delicious Monsters* is a screaming declaration to the world that Black girls are complex and flawed, capable of everything, and that we matter. I’ll be putting *Delicious Monsters* into the hands of everyone I know with a pulse.”

—BRITTNEY MORRIS, author of *Slay* and *The Cost of Knowing*

“Scary, complex, emotional, lived-in, ambitious, Liselle Sambury’s *Delicious Monsters* is a can’t-miss. A Canadian gothic epic (northern gothic?) that has a

lot to say about the stories and lies we tell ourselves about our own families. Oh, and did I mention it's scary?"

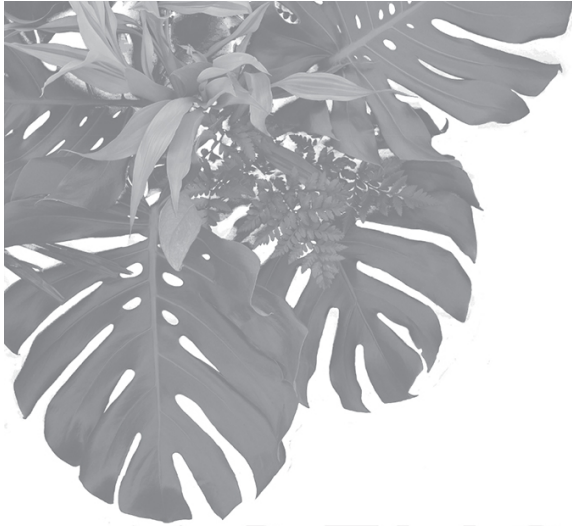
—ADAM CESARE, author of *Clown in a Cornfield* and *Video Night*

"*Delicious Monsters* grabs you by the throat in the first chapter and refuses to let go until the very end. I was on the edge of my seat for this whole book. Sambury's chillingly beautiful prose will stay with you for ages."

—VICTORIA LEE, author of *A Lesson in Vengeance*

"*Delicious Monsters* drew me in with its complex, compelling characters and richly layered secrets. A powerful story of mothers and daughters, trauma and healing, with a truly frightening haunted house at its center."

—KATE ALICE MARSHALL, author of *Rules for Vanishing* and *These Fleeting Shadows*



DELICIOUS MONSTERS

LISELLE SAMBURY

MARGARET K. McELDERRY BOOKS

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

TO MY MOM.
I AM SO PROUD AND GRATEFUL TO BE YOUR DAUGHTER.



AUTHOR NOTE

The first time I realized what happened to me also happened to other children, I was reading a book. I had never talked about my experience with anyone. And still didn't for a while after.

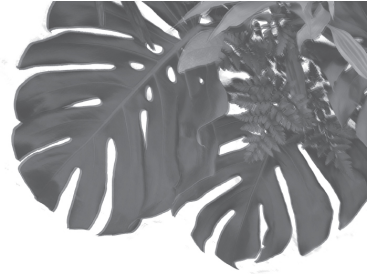
The feelings that the character had were struggles I'd reckoned with for years, alone, because I was too afraid and ashamed to tell even one person in my life. I never forgot the impact of that moment.

Not all of us can speak about the things we've gone through, and that doesn't make us worth less than those who do. Everyone survives in their own way. But it's my hope that for those who need it, this novel will help show that you aren't alone. The same way that book did for me when I needed it.

That being said, this novel does include topics that may be triggering, and it's important to me to provide a list of these for readers. I have tried to be as thorough as possible here, but you can also check my website for the most up-to-date list of content warnings.



Content warnings: childhood sexual assault (off page, some details discussed), childhood physical abuse (corporal punishment, off page, described), childhood physical abuse (confinement punishment), childhood neglect, gaslighting, grooming, suicide (off page, mention), killing of a goat (off page, described), discussions of fatphobia, body horror/gore, violence, death



CHAPTER ONE

DAISY

There were two stories of how I was named. One was what Mom told people. Never casually. Only if they asked.

It was a dream of a drive long enough that you strain not to doze off, mingled with the extra-sweet tang of wild blueberries.

All of Ontario seemed to be built along rough gray roads stretching seemingly forever into the distance, where rolling down your window meant breathing in the sharp smell of burned rubber and stinging asphalt. The sort of tar-black road that scorched your feet with its heat and left the scent on your heels, smoky and stained, lingering in the air.

In this dream, Mom pulled onto the shoulder, bright emergency blinkers flashing on an empty highway. When I was little, growing up in a city, it was hard to picture a place I knew to be packed and busy, suddenly devoid. Like a ghost town. *Abandoned*. With Mom as its only inhabitant.

She stepped over the squat metal barrier between expressway and earth, careful with the swollen bump of her belly. She walked into the wreckage of fallen trees, burnt branches crumbling to white ash that stuck to her fingers and still smelled of fire. That's where she found the blueberries. They grew in patches, short, small, and wild, alive in a field of death.

You could find the best blueberries after a burn, she'd say.

And there, in the midst of gathering the sweet fruit into the hem of her car-sweaty T-shirt, her tongue stained purple with juice, she found something else.

A daisy.

Inexplicably. In a place where only one plant seemed to grow was this other thing that shouldn't have survived.

That was where my name came from.

Now, the second story.

The one where Grandma whispered that of course a sixteen-year-old would name her kid after a flower. Which meant that the second story wasn't a story at all. Because that was the point, that there wasn't one.

That my name was nothing more than a pretty tattoo: permanent and meaningless.

CHAPTER TWO

Seeing dead people was the worst.

They shuffled from one place to another, mouths gaping wide even though most of them didn't talk. Meaning they couldn't tell me anything useful like what Noah was doing when he wasn't texting me. Mostly, they were distracting and annoying. And I seemed to be the only one cursed to notice them. I had seen them walk through people who didn't even give the tiniest shiver of subconscious recognition.

There must have been someone suffering inside the breakfast place across the street because they were clustering around it. Pressing their translucent cheeks against the window, desperate to be close to someone's tragedy. The only reason they weren't going inside was to avoid the rest of the customers, who I assumed were overjoyed to stuff homemade pancakes down their throats.

Happiness was not something the dead appreciated.

They would wait there, like the vultures they were, until the person they wanted came out, then follow them around all day while their subject was none the wiser. That was how the dead were.

They weren't even sad. They were pathetic.

And during the three hours I'd spent sitting here and scrolling through my phone to look busy, they'd been one of the few sights to look at. I had a cold coffee I didn't want and a flaky croissant I ate piece by piece to stretch out how long the server let me stay. The pastry was about half-done and now it was the early afternoon.

When I'd first gotten to the café, it was morning. The coffee aroma that had, at that time, been rich and rejuvenating now made me feel just on the edge of puking in my mouth. I was on the patio in an uncomfortable lawn-style chair,

and the server had basically forgotten about me as better-paying adults made their way in. But thankfully, there weren't enough people for her to kick me out.

Which was good because I was still waiting.

The sun was on the edge of too warm—that in-between moment that at any time could switch from comfortable to an overbearing heat that left you exhausted and sweaty. And the street was flooded with weekend crowds strolling leisurely down the sidewalks. Every one of them unhindered by the translucent dead that moved among them. Eventually, those clinging leeches would fade and disappear—it was just a matter of being around long enough. Unless they were trying hard to stay. Then someone would have to make them leave.

My fingers trembled, and I curled them into fists to stop it. I didn't like to think about those resistant ones.

I shifted on the metal chair and contemplated taking a sip of cold coffee. “Daisy” was scrawled across the side so messily that it looked like “Dazy.”

Noah called me “Daze.” It was equal parts cute pet name and a poke at how “in the clouds” people thought I was. He knew I spent time in my head because there were thoughts there deeper than other kids my age had. “Daze” was to mock people who didn't get that.

Across the street, at the breakfast place too cool to have their name displayed, the dead remained glued to the huge glass windows—likely designed that way so *living* people could peer at you as they walked by and mentally salivate over whatever you were eating. On Instagram, the restaurant had hundreds of photos of stacked pancakes with thick blueberry sauce and house-made whipped cream. The sort of thing Noah would hate. He didn't want to go to places everyone else went.

I liked that. Always going somewhere brand-new that no one had heard of. No social media likes to tell us whether it would be good or shit. We were deciding our tastes for ourselves and sharing an unfiltered and uninfluenced account. That was his favorite part—giving the full review to his friends.

I pulled a bobby pin out of my pocket and used it to scratch my head, trying to think of the last time I washed my hair. I used to be on top of it. Notes in my phone to remind me of when to get my hair relaxed. “Creamy crack,” Mom called it. Not that I needed the reminders. The instant I saw a curl peep out, I

wanted to snuff the life out of it. Once every two months like clockwork. I would do it more often, but Mom didn't want me to. So I had to settle for using the flat iron to stretch out the style between relaxers.

Now I had curls growing out an inch from my head that gave way to straight ends. The straight bits were lank and lifeless in comparison. A memory of when I cared more. I'd stuffed my hair under a hat before I'd gone out. I guess that was part of being in a committed relationship for a while—you got lazy.

Noah hadn't seemed to care until now.

The door to the breakfast place swung open, and I tugged my body to attention. I went from a state of limp ivy to a snake plant, my leaves shoved up high and rigid.

The couple who walked out were so mismatched it was ridiculous. He towered over her, dressed in a faded band T-shirt, his oak-brown hair tousled in just the right way, wire-rimmed glasses perched on his nose, pale for a white guy but not pasty. The girl was small, like a kid, her head barely reaching his shoulder. She was in a patterned body-con dress that clung to her tiny frame and made her look even smaller.

She was white too. But I already knew that. I'd done my research.

All I wanted to do last weekend was check in on Noah. See if I could get him to talk to me. Then she appeared, and obviously I had to know more. I preferred not to think about the amount of effort said research had taken given Noah's stance against an online presence. But internet stalking wasn't much different from what I was doing now, so it was too late to feel ashamed.

Probably it didn't matter. That she was white. But it stuck in my head and prodded me like a toddler discovering a dead thing for the first time. Poked, and poked, and poked. I had done that too. Pushed my fingers against a cold, stiff body. A squirrel, if you want to get specific. I'd been bewildered and excited all at once. Dead things used to have more novelty. I hadn't known to be afraid early on.

How old was she?

Noah's voice, smooth and low, reverberated in my head: *Why is everyone so obsessed with age?*

She looked younger than me, anyway. Maybe sixteen to my seventeen, or younger?

I couldn't believe he went to this Instagram place with her. He hated this shit. *We* hated this shit.

He tugged her close to his side and laughed at something. They both did. That was me just the other day. That was *my* spot. He held me there while we walked, and I lay there whenever I hung out at his place. I couldn't sleep over because my mom would worry. His words. He didn't know that Mom wouldn't. The memory of being the one pulled against his body was fresh enough that I could smell the mint of his deodorant and the spicy clove scent of the gel he carefully raked through his hair.

The metal legs of my chair scraped against the ground as I pushed it aside, craning my neck, eyes following them as they walked.

Mom wouldn't have liked Noah. She thought people should date within their age zones. High schoolers with high schoolers. University-aged with university-aged. Professional working people with professional working people. And never should any mix. She was strict about the differences between girls and women, and boys and men. Girls with boys and women with men. Or girls with girls, and boys with boys, etc., she had added after a pause. How she decided when a girl was a girl and when she was a woman wasn't something she shared with me.

Noah wouldn't date a girl.

Girls were immature, no matter their age. Women were different.

But still. The idea of mentioning him to Mom in any capacity made a chill hang over my shoulders. It happened to me every so often. A shiver would work through my body, twitches and muscle spasms, without so much as a cold breeze. And after, I would feel like I was walking on the edge of something for the rest of the day.

It usually meant that one of *them* had gotten too close.

Normal people had no idea how lucky they were to never feel it.

To never hunch their shoulders and have the hair on their arms ripped to attention.

Searching.

Shaking.

And then seeing someone who shouldn't exist but did.

Staring right at you.

That was what it would be like to mention Noah to Mom.

And now after catching him like this, I was glad I hadn't said anything to her.

I scratched at my head with the bobby pin so hard that I winced. My tender scalp crying out from the metal abuse, stinging long after I stopped.

They were getting too far. I stood and shuffled away from my chair. For a moment they turned, seemingly in my direction. I curled in on myself and dropped back into my seat, ducking under the shade of the bistro table umbrella like I had delicate leaves prone to scorching in the sunlight.

I could still see them.

Watching the girl made me hyperaware of the baggy shorts and oversized sleeveless hoodie I was in. When Noah and I started dating, I was like her. Clothes that fit tight to my body, makeup done to perfection, and bone-straight hair just past my shoulders.

Noah would finger the strands and smile. He never outright said he preferred women with long hair, but I picked up on it. I was good at that with him. I noticed that the celebrities he liked had hair down to their butts. I borrowed one of Mom's wigs to get the effect.

But he didn't seem to like that much.

That girl, Stephanie—no point in acting like I didn't know her name, where she went to school, her Starbucks order, and her closest friends. Research. Besides, her Instagram was public. Her hair, blond from a professional stylist's bottle, hit right above her butt. I guess it was all hers.

They made their way to the corner and turned where I couldn't see them anymore. I should have gotten up and followed. That was the plan.

I watched the dead move out of their path. Sneering soundlessly. Translucent noses wrinkled. Pressing themselves away.

That was how fucking happy a couple they were.

I stayed sitting.

I picked at my croissant. Shoved big pieces into my mouth without wiping away the flakes that stuck to my lips, savored the way the pieces almost melted

and flowed down my throat.

My bobby pin found its way to my scalp again. I fingered the curled roots of my hair. I'd let it go too long. That was comfort. That was feeling secure with Noah.

I was going to lose sight of them soon. I gnawed on my lip.

The last time Noah and I hung out, we'd gone to his place first. We always did. He liked to "spend time together" before we went anywhere. It was just code for sex. Which was fine. Before or after, it was all the same. It was good. I didn't have anything to compare it to, but I figured I could tell good from bad.

It was going to be a fun, chill night. Until we got to the party. Until I fucked up.

He was mad. I knew he was. But couples fought.

I didn't think it would end up like this.

There was no conversation. No working through it. Not even a formal breakup. Just silence.

Now he was out here with this white girl. It didn't really matter that she was white. I needed to stop thinking about that.

I shoved the last piece of croissant into my mouth and chugged my coffee. The liquid was cold, and the milk felt thick and gunky as it hit my tongue. I gagged and spat back into the cup. Over my shoulder, someone cringed, watching me.

They weren't important, I knew that. And no one else had seen. Or cared. But my face still burned as my eyes tracked the path where Noah and Stephanie had disappeared around the corner.

This had gone on too long. Me watching them, and the person who cringed watching me. Maybe that person was no one. Probably they were alive. But I didn't have the luxury of assuming.

For me, none of the dead were harmless, but some were worse than others.

Some were dangerous.

They blended in with the living, solid and opaque, and cast none of the warning cool breezes.

They did not want to fade.

And noticing what they were too late was not something you wanted to do.
Especially once *they'd* noticed that you'd noticed them.

I had already learned that the hard way.

Dazy.

Dazy.

Dazy.

I stood abruptly from my chair.

My scalp stung.

I needed to wash my hair.

And my tongue tasted like stomach bile and sour milk.