

The more things change in Salem, the more they stay the same.

HOW
TO
HANG
A
WITCH

ADRIANA MATHER

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ALFRED A. KNOPF
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CHAPTER ONE

Too Confident

Like most fast-talking, opinionated New Yorkers, I have an affinity for sarcasm. At fifteen, though, it's hard to convince anyone that sarcasm's a cultural thing and not a bad attitude. Especially when your stepmother can't drive, 'cause she's also from New York, and spills your coffee with maniacal brake pounding.

I wipe a dribble of hazelnut latte off my chin. "It's okay. Don't worry about it. I love wearing my coffee."

Vivian keeps her hand poised over the horn, like a cat waiting to pounce. "All your clothes have holes in them. Coffee isn't your problem."

If it's possible for someone to never have an awkward moment, socially or otherwise, then that someone is my stepmother. When I was little, I admired her ability to charm roomfuls of people. Maybe I thought it would rub off on me—an idea I've since given up on. She's perfectly put together in a way I'll never be, and my vegan leather jacket and torn black jeans drive her crazy. So now I just take joy in wearing them to her dinner parties. Gotta have something, right?

"My problem is, I don't know when I'll see my dad," I say, staring out at the well-worn New England homes, with their widow's walks

and dark shutters.

Vivian's lips tighten. "We've been through this a hundred times. They'll transfer him to Mass General sometime this week."

"Which is still an hour from Salem." This is the sentence I've repeated since I found out three weeks ago that we had to sell our New York apartment, the apartment I've spent my entire life in.

"Would you rather live in New York and not be able to pay your father's medical bills? We have no idea how long he'll be in a coma."

Three months, twenty-one days, and ten hours. That's how long it's already been. We pass a row of witch-themed shops with dried herbs and brooms filling their windows.

"They really love their witches here," I say, ignoring Vivian's last question.

"This is one of the most important historical towns in America. Your relatives played a major role in that history."

"My relatives hanged witches in the sixteen hundreds. Not exactly something to be proud of."

But in truth, I'm super curious about this place, with its cobblestone alleys and eerie black houses. We pass a police car with a witch logo on the side. As a kid, I tried every tactic to get my dad to take me here, but he wouldn't hear of it. He'd say that nothing good ever happens in Salem and the conversation would end. There's no pushing my dad.

A bus with a ghost-tour ad pulls in front of us. Vivian jerks to a stop and then tailgates. She nods at the ad. "There's a nice provincial job for you."

I crack a smile. "I don't believe in ghosts." We make a right onto Blackbird Lane, the street on the return address of the cards my grandmother sent me as a child.

"Well, you're the only one in Salem who feels that way." I don't doubt she's right.

For the first time during this roller coaster of a car ride, my stomach drops in a good way. Number 1131 Blackbird Lane, the house my dad grew up in, the house he met my mother in. It's a massive two-story white building with black shutters and columned doorways. The many

peaks of the roof are covered with dark wooden shingles, weathered from the salty air. A wrought-iron fence with pointed spires surrounds the perfectly manicured lawn.

“Just the right size,” Vivian says, eyeing our new home.

The redbrick driveway is uneven with age and pushed up by tree roots. Vivian’s silver sports car jostles us as we make our way through the black arched gate and roll to a stop.

“Ten people could live here and never see each other,” I reply.

“Like I said, just the right size.”

I pull my hair into a messy ball on top of my head and grab the heavy duffel bag at my feet. Vivian’s already out of the car, and her heels click against the brick. She makes her way toward a side door with an elaborate overhang.

I take a deep breath and open my car door. Before I get a good look at our new home, a neighbor comes out of her blue-on-blue house and waves enthusiastically.

“Hellllloooo! Well, hello there!” she says with a smile bigger than I’ve ever seen on a stranger as she crosses a patch of lawn to get to our driveway.

She has rosy cheeks and a frilly white apron. She could have stepped out of a housekeeping magazine from the 1950s.

“Samantha,” she says, and beams. She holds my chin to inspect my face. “Charlie’s daughter.”

I’ve never heard anyone call my dad by a nickname. “Uh, Sam. Everyone calls me Sam.”

“Nonsense. That’s a boy’s name. Now, aren’t you pretty. Too skinny, though.” She steps back to get a proper look. “We’ll fix that in no time.” She laughs a full, tinkling laugh.

I smile, even though I’m not sure she’s complimenting me. There’s something infectious about her happiness. She examines me, and I cross my arms self-consciously. My duffel bag falls off my shoulder, jerking me forward. I trip.

“Jaxon!” she bellows toward her blue house without saying a word

about my clumsiness. A blond guy who looks seventeenish exits the side door just as I get hold of the duffel strap. “Come take Samantha’s bag.”

As he gets closer, his sandy hair flops into his eyes. *Blue*. One corner of his mouth tilts in a half smile. I stare at him. *Am I blushing? Ugh, so embarrassing*. He reaches for the bag, now awkwardly hanging from my elbow.

I reposition it onto my shoulder. “No, it’s fine.”

“This is my son, Jaxon. Isn’t he adorable?” She pats him on the cheek.

“Mom, really?” Jaxon protests.

I smile at them. “So, you know my dad?”

“Certainly. And I knew your grandmother. Took care of her and the house when she got older. I know this place inside and out.” She puts her hands on her hips.

Vivian approaches, frowning. “Mrs. Meriwether? We spoke on the phone.” She pauses. “You have the keys, I assume?”

“Sure do.” Mrs. Meriwether reaches into her apron pocket and retrieves a set of skeleton keys rubbed smooth in places from years of use. She glances at her watch. “I’ve got chocolate croissants coming out of the oven any minute now. Jaxon will give you a tour of—”

“No, that’s alright. We can show ourselves around.” There’s a finality in Vivian’s response. Vivian doesn’t trust overly friendly people. We had a doorman once who used to bring me treats, and she got him fired.

“Actually,” I say, “do you know which room used to be my dad’s?”

Mrs. Meriwether lights up. “It’s all ready for you. Up the stairs, take a left, all the way down the hall. Jaxon will show you.”

Vivian turns around without a goodbye. Jaxon and I follow her to the door.

Jaxon watches me curiously as we go inside. “I’ve never seen you here before.”

“I’ve never been here before.”

“Even when your grandmother was alive?” He closes the door behind us with a click.

“I never met my grandmother.” It’s weird to admit that.

In the front foyer are piles of boxes—all of our personal belongings from the City. Vivian sold everything heavy when she found out this place was furnished.

We step past the boxes into an open space with glossy wooden floors, a wrought-iron chandelier, and a giant staircase. Vivian’s heels click somewhere down the hallway to the left—a sound that follows her around like a shadow. As a child, I could always find her by listening for it, even in a roomful of women in high heels. I wouldn’t be surprised if she slept in those shoes.

I take in our home for the first time. Paintings in gold frames hang on the walls, separated by sconces with bulbs shaped like candles. Everything’s antique and made of dark wood, the opposite of our modern apartment in NYC. *This is some fairy-tale storybook business*, I think, looking at the curved staircase with its smooth wooden banisters and Oriental rug running up the middle.

“This way.” Jaxon nods toward the staircase. He lifts my bag off my shoulder and starts up the stairs.

“I could’ve carried that myself.”

“I know. But I wouldn’t want you to fall again. Stairs do more damage than driveways.” So he definitely saw me trip.

He smiles at my expression.

This guy is too confident for his own good. I follow him, holding the banister in case my clumsiness makes a second appearance.

Jaxon turns left at the top of the stairs. We pass a bedroom with a burgundy comforter and a canopy that any little girl would go bonkers over. After the bedroom, there’s a bathroom with a giant claw-foot tub and a mirror with a gold-plated frame.

He stops at the end of the hall in front of a small door that looks like it could use a fresh coat of paint. The doorknob’s shaped like a flower with shiny brass petals. A daisy, maybe? I twist it, and the wood groans as the door swings open.

I gasp.

“Like it?” Jaxon asks. “My mother was over here all week moving this furniture in and fixing it up for you.”

To my right is a dark wooden bed whose four posts are carved with flowers, a matching flower-carved vanity with a marble top, and a delicate nightstand with an old lamp made of yellow glass. Directly in front of me is an armoire. I love armoires. Next to my bed is a small white rug for cold mornings. And overlooking the front lawn is a window seat with white lace cushions.

“It’s a real dump,” I say.

Jaxon laughs, and an approving smile crosses his face.

I run my hand along the ivory lace bedspread and down comforter. My black duffel bag looks unsophisticated in comparison with these antiques balanced on sloping wooden floors.

Unsure what to say next, I pull my lip gloss from my pocket and pop off the cap. This is the longest conversation I’ve had with someone my own age in years.

Jaxon lifts my bag off his shoulder. “Where do you want this?”

“I’ll take it.” I reach out to grab the strap. But I misjudge his movement, and instead of smoothly lifting the bag out of his grip, as I intended, I smear my open lip gloss on his hand.

He stops and smiles. “Pink’s not really my color.”

“Sorry!” I say quickly. “I don’t usually attack people with my lip gloss.” *As though some people use lip gloss as a weapon? What am I even saying right now?*

All I can think to do is wipe it off with my hand, which I do awkwardly—more of a swat than a wipe, really. His grin widens. He puts my duffel bag down and grabs a tissue from my vanity.

Jaxon lifts my hand with the strawberry-flavored smear on it. He turns my palm up and lightly runs the tissue over it. My heart gallops. *I don’t even like blonds.*

“It’s not going to break,” I say. “My hand, I mean...it’s not going to break.”

“I’d rather not take any chances.”

His confidence is starting to frustrate me. He’s hogging it all and should really leave some for the rest of the planet.

He looks from my hand to my face. “Who knows what you’ll attack me with next.”

I take my hand back. “What? Oh yeah. I mean, no. I mean, I won’t touch you.” *Shit. Really?*

He nods, barely containing a laugh. “See you in school tomorrow.”

Don’t laugh at me. You probably never had an awkward moment in your life, with all your floppy blond hair and tanned skin. So shut it! He disappears down the hall lit by small lamps, and for the first time since my dad got sick, I actually feel like myself.

CHAPTER TWO

Pleasant Company

Vivian and I look silly at this long dining room table with our take-out food. *This thing's meant for eight people with crocheted place mats.*

I spear a bite of ravioli from the plastic container and offer Vivian some. She shakes her head. My dad's the chef in the family, which kinda makes sense, since he's a spice importer. Vivian doesn't cook much. And when she does, it's always steak and potatoes, and I'm a vegetarian.

"Your father always used to talk about his childhood here," Vivian says.

"Not to me." He never wanted to talk about Salem, especially in the past year since my grandmother died. I didn't even know we still owned this house until a couple weeks ago.

"I guess he and Meriwether were longtime friends," she continues with a tinge of judgment.

"I think she's sweet." I take a bite of garlic bread.

Vivian crinkles her nose. "Too sweet. I bet she's nosy as anything."

"I don't know." I'm not going to agree with Vivian about

Mrs. Meriwether, who seems perfectly nice.

“Watch, she’ll be sending her son over to gather information for her.” Vivian shakes her head. Then, with an eye roll, she continues, “But I bet you wouldn’t mind that.”

I stop mid-bite. “I really don’t care one way or the other.”

“Uh-huh. Well, it wouldn’t hurt you to try to make friends here.” She dabs the corners of her mouth with her napkin and a small amount of cranberry lipstick marks the linen.

My fingers tighten around my fork. “You know it ends in disaster anyway.” It’s only a matter of time before someone gets hurt or their parents forbid them to spend time with me.

“People are disappointing. Still, you’ll have to curb the attitude a bit. Smile, even.”

Vivian’s subtle judgments poke at my fears that this place will turn out to be just like the City. “Maybe I’ll visit Mrs. Meriwether.” I watch for a reaction. “Learn by example.”

Vivian raises one perfect eyebrow, trying to assess whether I’m serious. Four months ago, she would have laughed at that, and I would have meant it as a joke.

I close the ravioli container with a sigh. As a child, I used to follow Vivian everywhere. My dad called me her personal fan club. Vivian loved it. She’s always her best self while being admired. But since my dad was admitted to the hospital, there’s been tension between us. And since I found out we had to move, it’s ballooned into something I don’t know how to step back from.

I push my chair away from the table and Vivian winces as it scrapes against the floor. I don’t say anything as I exit the dining room, which looks like it was plucked from an old British movie. The only things missing are white-gloved servants and pleasant company.

It’s a short walk to the stairway. I pass a bathroom with dark mulberry walls and another room I can only describe as a lady’s tearoom, which looks out over a rose garden.

I grab the railing and take two steps at a time. When I reach the top, the only light is the one coming from my room, which glows a soft

yellow at the end of the hallway. Vivian's room is at the end of the other hall, probably her way of trying to get as far away from me as possible. Vivian and I were never the cuddly types or people who worked things out with a heart-to-heart. But I can't say this divide doesn't bother me, either.

I wish my dad were here. These old rooms must be filled with his memories. *Maybe being here is good in a way. Distracts me from constantly worrying.* I push open my door.

"Seriously?" My once neatly folded clothes in my armoire are now in a heap on the floor.

I inspect the armoire latch to see if it's broken. It seems fine. Maybe I just didn't close it all the way?

"That's one way to unpack," Vivian says, standing in my doorway.

"These were all put away an hour ago. Must've piled them too high."

"Maybe we have a ghost who doesn't like you." Vivian smiles. I'm sure she's trying to lighten the mood, but this move to Salem has left me a little raw.

"Hilarious," I say, and she turns down the dimly lit hall and away from me.

A pair of black sweatpants rests on top of the pile of clothes, and I trade my jeans for them. As I straighten the mess, I assess my new room. Pictures of my dad rest on the old trunk under the far window, and my mother's jewelry box is on the vanity. I try to imagine my parents hanging out in this room when they were young.

I put the last folded shirt back in its proper place and close the armoire, tugging on it to make sure it's latched. I pick up the small golden picture frame off my trunk before plopping onto my down- and lace-covered bed.

In the picture, I'm four years old and sitting on my dad's lap outside a café in Paris. His cheek rests on the top of my head as I hold my cream puff with both hands. He's just smeared a bit of cream on my nose, and I'm laughing. This was the trip where we met Vivian, before I started going to school and stopped traveling with him as much.

"How can I start school tomorrow without you here to give me a pep

talk?” I ask the picture. I’m really not looking forward to it. “These kids have to be nicer than at my last school, though, right? Sleep tight, Dad. I’ll love you for always.” I kiss my dad’s picture and put it down on my bedside table near a slender vase holding a single daisy-like flower with a dark center. *Looks like my doorknob.* I turn out the light.

CHAPTER THREE

About My Last Name

I double-check the paper in my hand that says “Homeroom—Room #11.” I pull the classroom door open. Being the new girl is like having a target on your forehead. People either mess with you or make bets on who will hook up with you first.

I scan the room and bite my lip. Most seats are taken, except for a couple in the first row next to two girls wearing all black. Not in the way I do with ripped jeans, but more gothic chic. Lace blouses, black blazers, and skinny jeans. The rest of the room is pretty predictably preppy, what you would expect from a town bordering Boston—a place my dad calls the khaki capital.

I slip into the seat next to the blond girl in all black.

“That seat’s taken,” she says.

“Yes, it is. By me.” I freeze. I’m so used to having to defend myself that I just picked a fight without meaning to. She and the olive-skinned brunette with curly hair on the other side of her turn toward me.

“Move,” the blonde says. Her black eye makeup frames her icy glare.

“It’s fine, Alice,” says a girl I didn’t see approach. Her dark auburn

hair is perfectly tucked into a high bun, and she wears a black lace dress that flairs at the waist. “I’ll sit here.” She gracefully lowers herself into the desk on my right. The bell rings.

“Hello, everyone. I’m Mrs. Hoxley, as many of you know. And, as you also know, I do not accept tardiness. Welcome to your first day of tenth grade,” says the stout woman with glasses and a skirt suit from the eighties. *Well, she’s a charmer.*

I pull my jacket off as Mrs. Hoxley does roll call. She goes right past the *M*’s without mentioning me.

“Is there anyone I missed?” Mrs. Hoxley scans our faces.

I raise my hand.

“Yes?”

“My name’s Sam. I just moved here from New York.” I swallow hard. *I hate talking in class.*

“Speak up. I need your full name.” Her pencil taps her clipboard.

“Samantha Mather,” I say a bit louder. All eyes are on me, and people whisper.

“Mather, is it? I did receive a notice about you. Haven’t had a Mather in this school for more than twenty years.”

She remembers the last Mather at this school....Who? My dad?

Alice and the girl next to her—Mary, I think—exchange a glance. “When that crazy old lady died, I thought they were gone,” Alice whispers to Mary but keeps her cold gaze on me.

I turn toward her. *Don’t react. Breathe.*

“But I guess we’re just not that lucky,” Alice continues.

The challenge in her expression shatters my thin hold over my temper. “Are you talking about my dead grandmother? Real classy.”

“I do not appreciate students speaking out of turn,” says Mrs. Hoxley.

How did I just wind up being the one in trouble?

Alice laughs.

“Alice, that goes for you, too,” says Mrs. Hoxley. “I expect you to keep your family history out of the classroom.”

“Got it,” Alice says.

Family history? This can’t seriously be about my last name.

For the rest of homeroom, Alice and Mary pass notes and throw sideways looks at me. I don’t see this playing out well. Mrs. Hoxley reviews the rules and hands out our schedules. Mine is delivered by someone from the principal’s office. I have AP History first period, followed by AP Chem.

When the bell rings, I grab my jacket and black shoulder bag.

In the hallway, I wander, trying to figure out which way the room numbers go. I pass a glass trophy case that has GO WITCHES! written on it. *Of course their mascot is a witch.*

Still staring at the case, I walk smack into someone. A guy with wavy dark hair and high cheekbones stares down at me. Gray eyes take note of my reddening face. He’s so attractive that I forget my words and my mouth hangs open. Is there a desk somewhere I can hide under before I make any more blunders? He walks away before I can tell him I’m sorry.

“Sam,” Jaxon says, a few feet in front of me. “You lost?”

Yes, and wishing I could press reset on this day. “Just looking for AP History.”

“It’s right here.” He points to the door on his left. “You a sophomore or a junior?”

“Sophomore. You’re a junior, though.”

“It’s that obvious, huh?”

“You’ve got that upperclassman cock—” *Oh holy hell.* I almost called him cocky. My hands go clammy. Only worse, I just said he has an upperclassman cock. I might die. This might be the end for me.

Jaxon bursts out laughing. “Why, thanks. I didn’t think you noticed.”

“Oh, no. I didn’t mean that. I meant upperclassman cockiness.” *Great, now I’ve said both the things I didn’t mean to say.*

My only escape is into the classroom, which I take, but he keeps pace with me. I take a seat in the back, trying to will myself to blink

out of existence.

Jaxon takes the seat next to me, still grinning. “That might be the best thing anyone’s ever said to me.”

I stare at my desk. This would be funny if it wasn’t so horrifying. Thankfully, he’s being nice about it. “I wish I could say that was the only stupid thing I’ve done so far.”

“Not having a good first day at Salem High?”

I shake my head. “Have you noticed a group of girls in my grade that wear all black—rich goth types?”

“The Descendants?”

I venture a look at Jaxon. “What?”

“Like that?” He nods toward a guy and a girl entering the room. The guy wears an expensive-looking black button-down shirt, black pants, and black loafers. And she has on a floor-length black dress with a tailored black blazer. Her hair is a perfect bob.

“Yeah, exactly like that.”

“There are five of them in our school. He’s the only dude. They’re descended from the original witches. Everyone kinda love-hates them. People think they can curse you if they want to. I think it’s total bull.”

“You’re kidding, right?” But I can tell from his expression that he’s not.

“Jaxon.” A girl waves from across the room. She’s pretty, in that equestrienne sort of way.

He smiles at her. “Hey.”

“Sit with us,” she says, gesturing to her equally preppy girlfriend.

“Nah, I’m good. I’m waiting for Dillon.” She looks from him to me with dagger eyes.

Great. One more person who doesn’t like me. I’m on a roll today.

CHAPTER FOUR

I Never Laugh at Cookies

I stand near the curb outside Salem High, scanning the cars pulling into the pick-up area. Across the street, four of the Descendants walk down the sidewalk. I have to admit that together they have something intriguing about them. They're hard not to watch.

As they pass, people step out of their way. Everyone follows them with their eyes, though—even me. Then all together, as if on cue, they turn and stare at me. I bite my lower lip and look away.

I feel a small pinch in the back of my head. I whip around to find Alice holding a couple strands of my hair. She raises one golden eyebrow above her dark-framed eyes. *What the...?*

She walks right past me and into the street, not even acknowledging the cars. *Creepy as hell.* I take a step off the sidewalk, and the guy with dark hair from the hallway watches me.

Just as I'm about to yell at Alice, Vivian's car stops with a screech. Alice catches up with the other Descendants, and they continue down the sidewalk.

"Making friends?" Vivian asks as I get in her car.

I guess she didn't just see Alice pull some of my hair out. "More like

enemies.” I really wish I hadn’t snapped at Alice in homeroom.

Vivian speeds away so fast that there’s the scent of burning rubber. “Sam.” Her tone suggests I did something wrong.

“Honestly, it isn’t entirely my fault. They have some creepy witch social order at this school. My last name isn’t helping.” I just want someone to hug me and tell me I’m not awful and it will all blow over, but that’s not Vivian’s way. I need my dad.

“Salem prides itself on its witches. That history is very real to the people who live here.”

“Well, that’s insane.” I can feel the upsets from my day threatening to overtake me.

She sighs. “That attitude won’t help you make friends.” She turns a corner, and I grip the door. “Maybe try to understand it from their perspective.”

“I’m not going to apologize for some dude who wore a curly white wig three hundred years ago and made bad decisions just ’cause we have the same last name.”

“It’s more complicated than that, and being stubborn is only going to make it worse.”

That’s it. Breaking point achieved. “I don’t want your advice.”

Vivian’s grip tightens on the wheel as she slams on the brakes. “Then you’ll get what you get.”

I cross my arms, pulling away from Vivian’s comment and away from her in general as we bounce along our driveway.

I beeline it for the door the second the car stops. When I enter the foyer, the fluffy white couches and big fireplace in the room to the right catch my eye. In all my unpacking yesterday, I didn’t really explore. I lean my bag against the small wooden mail table and head for the hallway to the right of the stairs, happy for something to distract me.

It’s long and lined with doors. Portraits of dead relatives hang on the walls. *I can imagine them walking down here with only a candle.* I peek inside the fireplace room—which is probably the living room. There’s a beautiful old rug, and the coffee table is an antique leather

trunk.

The next door in the hall is closed, and I push it open. “Whoa.”

The room is huge, and on the left is a grand piano. There are a couple of seating areas with white antique couches that I can’t imagine sitting on. Crystal decanters containing some sort of drink rest on a silver tray with small crystal glasses. I lift the cover on the piano keys and press an out-of-tune note.

At the far end of the room, between two tall windows, is a painting of a girl about my age. She wears a blue and white silk dress draped with lace and holds a bouquet of yellow flowers. Her expression makes her look at ease, like she knew the artist. I’m intrigued.

Under the painting is a small table with an open book of poetry on it. The pages are yellowed. “‘Black-Eyed Susan,’” I say, reading the poem title. *The flower! Right, that’s what she’s holding. And come to think of it, that’s the kind of flower that’s in my room, too.*

Something crashes behind me, and I let out a small scream. I whip around to find the keyboard cover on the piano slammed shut. *Not okay.* Vivian calls my name and I sprint out of the fancy room, closing the door behind me. My hands shake.

“Yeah?” I reply.

“Door!”

By the time I get back to the foyer, Jaxon’s standing in the middle of it holding a plate of cookies. “Don’t laugh, my mother wanted me to bring these.”

Vivian gives me a look that can only mean “I told you they were nosy” before she turns to leave. I might agree with her, but after the day I had, I’m grateful for anyone in that school who doesn’t think I suck.

I take the offered plate. “I never laugh at cookies.”

“Chocolate chip butterscotch.”

“Seriously? Your mother’s amazing,” I say loudly for Vivian’s benefit.

“Yeah, if you ever get hungry, stop by. My mother kills it in the

cooking department. It's kinda her thing. She grows herbs and all kinds of stuff, even in the winter."

A strand of sun-kissed hair falls out of place and I stare at it for a second longer than I should. "You wanna stay for a bit? I was just looking around the house." I can't remember the last time I invited someone to hang out with me. If my dad were here, he would be grinning foolishly at us, and I would feel super self-conscious. Four months ago, I would have awkwardly avoided eye contact with him. Now I only wish his eyes were here to avoid.

Jaxon pushes the loose hair off his forehead. "Sure."

I remove the plastic wrap on the plate of cookies, and he follows me down the hallway. "I only made it to the piano room," I say with a full mouth as we walk past.

I reach for the handle of the next door at the same time he does, and I almost smack him with the half-bitten cookie. He smiles. No one really talked to me in New York, especially not guys who looked like Jaxon. But the way he's enjoying my awkwardness makes me want to sock him.

He swings the door open to reveal a room covered floor to ceiling with books. Every dark wooden bookshelf is packed, and there are even books on the ground and on the small tables. The only place without books is an old brick fireplace with bare wooden paneling on either side of it. It's not fancy like the fireplace in the living room, but I like it better.

"A library." I forget all about hitting Jaxon.

"Every time I saw your grandmother she was in this room."

"It's strange you know more about my grandmother than I do." I put the cookies down on a table.

"Why didn't you ever come visit her?" Jaxon asks.

I hesitate. I wonder what he knows about my family.

Jaxon's fingers graze the top of an antique reading table surrounded by plush armchairs. A small cloud of dust rises. "It's okay if you don't wanna answer."

"No, it's fine. I just don't really talk about my family that much. I

don't have any other relatives besides my dad and my stepmom." I can tell by the expression on his face that Jaxon knows what happened to him. "My dad never wanted to come to Salem. So we never came. And he and my grandmother were always fighting, so she never came to the City, either." I busy myself by looking through a pile of books.

"Charlotte used to talk about you," Jaxon says.

I put down a book too fast and it slips off the top of the pile, sliding to the floor with a bang. My grandmother talked about me? I didn't even know she knew anything about me.

We're silent for a couple of seconds. He doesn't push the topic, even though I suspect he wants to. I pick up the fallen book and walk to the old fireplace. There are niches built into it, like small brick ovens for pizza. There's no guard separating it from the rest of the room. The wood floor just ends and the bricks begin.

"I bet this was used for cooking," I say.

He laughs. "Yeah."

"That's funny?"

"I mean, it's kinda obvious, but then again, you're a city girl," he says playfully.

I laugh, happy to be off the topic of my family. "Oh yeah? What do *you* know about old fireplaces?"

"Well, we're kinda *really* into our history around here."

"Tell me about it. You guys are obsessed with it."

"And I build furniture," he continues. "So I pay attention to these things."

"Really?" My surprise is genuine. I didn't expect that he did much of anything besides look cool.

"Some of these fireplaces have hooks for hanging kettles and things." He ducks his head under the arched brick to get a better look. "Found one. Give me your hand."

I join him under the arch of the fireplace, and he grabs my right palm. His hands are lightly callused and warm. He directs my fingers to the left side of the arch. Crouched next to me this close, he smells

like Christmas trees.

“You’re right!” I grab hold of a small iron hook and pull. It moves in my hand.

There is a loud creak and we look at each other. A gust of wind blows past us that smells like old leather and dried flowers. I back out of the fireplace, not entirely convinced bricks won’t fall on my head.

“Holy...,” I say, looking at the wall to the left of the fireplace. Part of the wood paneling has cracked open a few inches, revealing a door. “You have to see this.”

Jaxon stands next to me, eyeing the wall with curiosity. “I heard some of the older houses have these; I’ve just never seen one before.”

“How are you so calm? We just found a secret freaking door!” My volume surprises me.

I run my fingertips over the edges of the door. They match perfectly with the fireplace and the paneling on the wall. No one would ever suspect. I give it a push and it swings open. Behind it, a narrow hallway leads to an equally narrow spiral staircase. The walls inside are made of the same old brick as the fireplace, and the floor has wide wooden boards like the older parts of the house. I practically shake with excitement as I take a step in. *If there was one thing I always wanted as a kid, it was to find a secret passageway.*

“Sam!” yells Vivian from down the hall.

I jump out of the tiny, intriguing hallway and back into the library, pulling the door behind me.

“Quick, help me.”

Jaxon grabs the edge of the door and pulls. But it won’t close the last inch.

“Sam, you down here?” Vivian’s voice gets closer. I really don’t want her to see this. I haven’t even investigated it yet.

“Take your fingers out a minute,” Jaxon says, reaching into the fireplace. Just as I move my hand, he pushes the hook and the door clicks shut.

“I’ve been calling you.” An annoyed Vivian enters the room. “We

have errands to run.”

“Okay.” I try to act like everything’s normal, but I’m pretty sure I’m sweating.

She looks from me to Jaxon, and she notices something’s up. At least there’s no way she could guess it’s a secret door.

CHAPTER FIVE

Let Me Be a Tree

My head smacks the car window as Vivian stops short in front of my school. I rub my neck. *I slept for crap last night.* Not that it's anything new; I haven't slept well since my dad went into a coma.

"Here." Vivian reaches into the backseat. "Bring these to class. They might soften people up a little and help with the friend problem." She hands me a box of pastries.

I realize she's serious. *How can I say no?* This is a big gesture for her. She must be legitimately worried about me. *But seriously... pastries?* This isn't one of her luncheons. If I bring these in on day two of school, it's only going to make me look like I'm trying too hard. Those girls will jump all over it. The bell rings.

"Thanks." I try to muster a smile. I grab my stuff and run inside. By the time I turn down my homeroom hallway, there are only a few stragglers in sight. I swing Mrs. Hoxley's door open just as the second bell sounds.

Everyone is already settled, and the only available spot is next to Susannah—the Descendant whose seat I accidentally took on the first day.

"Just in time, Ms. Mather. With offerings, I see." Mrs. Hoxley

greedily eyes the pastries.

I should have dumped these in the garbage can. “These are just a... well, I thought...um...I brought these.” *Great, I sound like a complete idiot.* The Descendants laugh as I hand the box to Mrs. Hoxley.

I pull out my strawberry-flavored lip gloss and my notebook with my calendar in it and sit down. Mrs. Hoxley passes around the pastry box. Everyone takes one except for the Descendants. I study my calendar, pretending I’m busy. I can’t help but notice that my birthday is next month.

Sweet sixteen, my ass. I hate my birthday. My parties were so awful when I was little that a rumor started that I was cursed. By eleven, I stopped celebrating altogether. Everything is already so crappy, the last thing I need is more bad luck.

I circle October 27 and cross it out. I put my pen down and glance at the clock. One more minute before I can get out of here. My pen rolls toward the edge of my desk and I make an attempt to grab it, but miss. Susannah doesn’t, though. She catches it midair before it hits the ground.

We lock eyes. Susannah’s dark auburn hair is in another neat bun, and she wears a black lace dress. She reminds me of a ballerina in a weird way. She doesn’t have that mean edge the others do, either. She holds the pen out for me. Her nails are painted black.

“Thanks.”

The bell rings. I shove my notebook in my bag and stand. The Descendants don’t say a word on their way out.

When I’m in the hallway, people watch me. Not in that new-girl way, but in the they-know-something-I-don’t way. So this is what happens when the Descendants don’t like you. I really don’t get the social structure of this school.

I turn the corner toward history class. Alice’s blond ponytail and black blazer peek out from behind an open locker. She moves her hands as she speaks, and I get a glimpse of Susannah’s face. I hug the wall and walk toward them. I mean, I’m going that way anyway.

“I told you to drop it,” Alice says from behind the locker.

“You don’t think it’s strange that John’s great-grandfather died last night?” Susannah asks as I inch closer, trying to hear them over the crowd of students. I pull my schedule out of my back pocket and lean against the lockers to look less conspicuous.

“He was ninety,” Alice says.

“Yeah, but how do you explain—”

“Enough,” Alice says.

“I say we talk to her.”

Alice shakes her head and her ponytail glides across her shoulders. “Not a chance. And don’t think I didn’t see you catch her pen this morning.”

Me? Are they talking about me? I take a step forward. Why would Susannah want to talk to me about someone’s great-grandfather dying?

“So, come on. Out with it,” Jaxon says near my ear.

I jump, sending my elbow into the metal lockers. Alice whips around at the loud clang and finds me two feet away from her, staring in her direction with a guilty look on my face. She narrows her eyes and I quickly walk away from the wall, shifting my gaze to Jaxon. I don’t know why I thought that was a good idea. Stealth is not my thing. And I’m positive Alice is only going to like me less now.

“Out with what?” I reply, walking toward history class and away from Alice at a fast pace.

Jaxon holds the classroom door open for me. “The secret door. What’d you find in there?”

“Truthfully, I didn’t go in.”

“Scared?” His blue eyes light up.

I smile and slide into my seat. “No, we came home late ’cause Vivian dragged me all over town doing errands. And ten minutes after we got home, our lights went out and wouldn’t go back on.”

“So, basically, you were waiting for me to go in with you.”

I feign annoyance at his amused expression.

“Settle, everyone,” says Mr. Wardwell, taking off his blazer and

hanging it over his chair. “As many of you probably expect, our AP History class will play an active role in Salem’s annual history fair by doing a historical reenactment. I’ll assign you each a role today.”

Oh no! I can’t even talk in front of my homeroom class of twenty people.

“Also,” continues Mr. Wardwell, “you will write an essay on a specific aspect of the Witch Trials. This is a group assignment; you’ll work in pairs. Your homework tonight is to find a partner and a topic.” He lifts a stack of papers to distribute. “These are the format guidelines.”

This is not my day. *Please just let me be a tree, or something else with no lines.*

“We are pairing with Ms. Edelson’s honors class for the performance, and the jobs will be distributed equally among you. Don’t argue with me about your specific assignment; this isn’t up for a vote.

“Now, this class is special,” Mr. Wardwell continues, “because we have actual descendants of the main players in the Witch Trials. I think it only apropos they are given the opportunity to play them.”

Halfway through his sentence, my stomach jumps into my throat. *No, no, no! This is a horrible idea!* My relatives played a big part in those Trials. I can’t do that.

His eyes land on me. “Samantha, I’m not wrong in assuming you’re related to Cotton Mather, am I?” Everyone turns to get a good look at me.

I slide down a few inches in my seat. “Yeah. Um, actually, maybe someone else wants to play him?” The two Descendants in the class take a particular interest in me.

Mr. Wardwell’s forehead wrinkles. “As I said, this isn’t up for debate, Samantha.”

“Sam,” I correct him. “I’m just...*really* not a performer.”

“This isn’t about winning an acting award, *Sam*. It’s about celebrating our history. And you will participate if you hope to pass this class.”

Well, that sucked.

“John and Lizzie, you’ll also play your ancestors,” Mr. Wardwell says to the Descendants.

“Great,” says John. He shoots me a nasty look.

Wait. *John...was that whose great-grandfather died?* I shift uncomfortably in my seat.

“Mr. Wardwell,” says a girl from my homeroom in the front row. Her voice is high-pitched and she grips her stomach. “I need to use the bathroom. It’s an emergency.”

Before he can reply, she runs out of the room with her hand covering her mouth.

“Read your guidelines, and I’ll be back in a moment.” Mr. Wardwell exits the room, following the girl.

“Yo, Jax,” says the guy with the lacrosse jacket sitting in front of me. “You wanna partner on this essay or what?”

“Do you mean, do I wanna write the whole thing while you eat all my food and pass out covered in crumbs on my couch?” Jaxon asks. It’s clear they’re good friends.

“I mean, if you’re offering,” says the guy.

“No, man, I already told Sam I’d be her partner.”

“Lies,” says the guy. “But I don’t blame you. She’s way cuter than me.” He reaches out his hand and I take it. “I’m Dillon.”

“Sam,” I say, and he kisses my hand. I pull it back and he grins. Jaxon shakes his head. Lizzie’s bob swishes in my direction, and she whispers something to John. I’m suddenly regretting listening to Alice’s conversation. I kinda wish I wasn’t on their radar at all.

Mr. Wardwell steps back into the classroom. “Everything’s under control.” He doesn’t make it more than two feet before a guy, also from my homeroom, pushes past him. “Or, apparently not.”

Oh, crap! What are the chances two people from my homeroom are sick? Please let this be a coincidence. Whatever it is, do not let it be those pastries.

CHAPTER SIX

The Strangest Girl

I enter the hall after my last class, and the suspicious looks have escalated. I overhear snippets of conversations as I walk. “Poisoning... She did it on purpose....At least fifteen people, maybe more...How messed up do you have to be?”

I turn left, toward my locker, and readjust my bag on my shoulder. The other students avoid me. Did fifteen people from my homeroom really get sick? I feel awful.

There’s a group surrounding my locker and laughing. When they see me, they pretend they have somewhere to go.

You’ve got to be kidding me. PSYCHO is written in big black letters across the front of my locker. I scan the hallway. Just my luck, John and Susannah are headed in my direction. Susannah pushes a loose auburn wisp back into place and opens a locker a few feet away. She won’t meet my eyes.

John steps around Susannah and leans so close to me that I can almost taste his cologne. “Sometimes the truth hurts.”

I know I should just walk away, but how is this fair? I haven’t even said a word to him, much less done anything. He snickers, and my words erupt from me like soda from a shaken can. “Believe me, if I was

trying to get people sick, I would've started with you." I slam my locker shut and turn away from him.

"Hey, Sam," he says loudly once I'm a good fifteen feet away. "You put your father in the hospital, too? I hear he might die."

That's it. I drop my bag and lunge at his perfectly proportioned face. *I'll kill him! I'll tear his grin off!* Jaxon, who I didn't even know was there, catches me right before I make impact.

"Not cool, man," Jaxon says to John.

We've gathered a crowd of onlookers. I flail, but Jaxon has me secured, his arm tight around my waist.

John flashes a cocky smile and gives me the finger. Susannah pulls John's hand down and attempts to lead him away.

"This isn't over," I say to John. I'm not even sure what I'm threatening him with, but somehow it doesn't matter.

"Next time I'll let her get you, dude. In fact, I'll help her," Jaxon adds.

John holds out his arms, inviting me to come and get him as he walks away with Susannah. *How the hell did they find out about my dad?*

"What's going on here?" asks Principal Brennan, a tall man with a shirt one size too small and a comb-over. Everyone disperses.

Jaxon removes his arm from my waist. "Someone tagged Sam's locker."

Principal Brennan examines the writing. "I've read the reports from your school in New York. This is a bad start to the year, Samantha."

My defensive bristles go up. "You think it's my fault? How can I control this?"

"You can start by controlling your temper," he says in an authoritarian voice.

I clench my teeth.

Brennan puffs out his chest and I fear for his buttons. "Now go. I'll handle this." He makes a shooing motion with his hand.

I open my mouth but close it again when Jaxon gives me a warning

look. I pick my bag up off the floor and storm down the hall toward the exit. Jaxon follows.

“You okay?” he asks as we leave the building.

“Fine.”

“You want me to hit that clown? I’ll hit him.”

“No. I can hit him myself.”

“Yeah, I saw that. Come on, we’ll both hit him. You take his fat head, I’ll get the rest of him.” He turns back toward the school.

I can’t help but appreciate Jaxon’s effort. I crack a smile. “Stop! It’s fine, I promise.”

He pauses. “Well, can I walk you home at least?”

I nod. “Lemme text Vivian.” I pull out my cell phone and start typing. Within ten seconds, I get a response.

Vivian: *I’ll be home in a few hours.*

Obviously she’s in a real rush to pick me up. “Let’s go.”

Rounding the corner and leaving the school behind makes it easier to breathe. I kinda want to be alone right now, but Jaxon’s the only person who’s nice to me in the whole school and I feel bad telling him to go away. Can this really all be because of my last name? Even the teachers are judgy. “Jaxon, I gotta ask you something.”

“Go for it.”

“You didn’t make a bet that you’d hook up with me, did you?”

His eyes smile. “Would I win if I did?”

A hearse followed by a line of cars makes its way down the street. We watch it pass. “I’m the most hated person in that school, and you’re still nice to me. It doesn’t make sense.”

“Honestly, jokes aside, my mom told me what happened to your father. My father died a few years ago.” He looks down at his hands.

“My dad isn’t dying,” I say reflexively, and try to block the image of the hearse out of my thoughts.

“Yeah, I know.” He gives me a half smile. “I just get that this is really hard for you. I was messed up for over a year.”

Maybe Jaxon is actually a nice guy. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“If you ever want to talk about it or whatever...I mean, I know you have your stepmom, but I’ve been told that I’m an *excellent* listener.”

I look at him. He has an amazing ability to lighten any subject. I wish I could be like that. “Is that a fact?”

“Fact. And I love that you tried to kick John’s ass, by the way. That guy’s a dick.” He stops on the cobblestone sidewalk in front of the black iron fence and freshly cut grass of my house.

“I would have messed him up, too, if you hadn’t stopped me.”

“Obviously.” He heads up my driveway toward my house. “Let’s go check out that library.”

I consider saying no, but I don’t have a reason besides having had a bad day. Plus, he’s been doing his best to make it easier on me. Jaxon and I drop our bags in the front foyer and head down the hallway to the library. The wooden boards creak lightly under our feet.

“Let’s lock it,” I say, stepping into the library and flicking the light switch on.

Jaxon shuts the door and turns the brass latch. Vivian said she wouldn’t be home for a few hours, but I’d rather not chance it. Once she knows, it’ll no longer be my secret.

My fingers feel around for the hook, and a rush of excitement elbows out my stress. I’m actually glad Jaxon stayed. If he hadn’t, I’d probably be in my room right now with my face buried in a pillow. I pull the hook and the hinge clicks, popping open the dark brown panel to reveal the hidden door. Jaxon pushes the panel all the way open, and we enter the secret hallway.

There’s a lantern hanging just inside the narrow passage. I pull it down. “Think this thing works?” It’s heavier than I expect.

Jaxon inspects it in the dim lighting. “It’s an antique for sure, but more like seventy years old than three hundred.”

I flip the little knob on the metal base and a small flame shoots up, throwing dancing shadows along the old brick. “If this thing is from the nineteen hundreds, I guess we’re not the only ones who’ve discovered this passageway.”

Jaxon closes the door behind us with the handle on the inside. “Yeah, but for now this place is just ours.”

Something about the way he says “ours” makes me very aware how long it’s been since I’ve had a friend. “You know, I don’t really talk to my stepmom about my dad. You said before that I had her to talk to. Anyway, I don’t know why I’m telling you this.” I take the first steps of the spiral staircase at the end of the hallway with caution. They were clearly meant for people with tiny feet.

“’Cause of my listening skills,” he says from behind me, and I can almost hear his grin. “So what’s the thing? You guys don’t get along?”

“Actually, before my dad got sick, we used to. We’re alike in strange ways—bad-tempered, independent, maybe too straightforward. It just got weird when my dad went into the hospital. I stopped talking for a while, and when I did talk again it felt like she was mad at me. I don’t know.”

I reach the top of the stairs, and Jaxon’s right behind me. It’s everything I imagined a secret room might be. It isn’t big, and it has a cozy feel, like an old dusty bookshop in London. There’s a heavy antique desk covered in papers and books in front of a tiny square window.

“Okay, this is awesome.” Jaxon runs his hand along the sloped wall. “This must be one of the gables you can see from the street.”

“Gables?” I pick up a book on top of an old leather trunk, and the thrill of finding this place washes away my feelings about school. It’s like the library; stacks of books line the room.

“The place where the roof comes to a peak. That’s why the walls are sloped.”

“How do you know it’s called a gable, though?”

“One of Salem’s most popular tourist sites is the House of Seven Gables. I’ve been there like ten times between field trips and visiting family.”

“Oh,” I say. “It looks as if a lot of these books are about the Witch Trials.”

“Yeah.” Jaxon blows dust off the stack near him. “And your

relatives.”

On the desk rests a faded photograph of a beautiful woman with her hair tied loosely in a bun. She grips a little boy’s hand. I catch my breath. My dad’s smile still looks exactly like that. I run my finger along the gold frame. “This must have been my grandmother’s study. She was stunning. I’ve never seen a picture of her before.”

Jaxon joins me at the desk and peers at the picture. “Your father?”

I nod without looking at him and pick up a leather-bound journal. I open it to the satin ribbon marker. The page is filled with beautiful cursive. I read out loud.

It was a good day of research. I’m delighted by a letter I found in one of Perley’s books. Good and thorough historian, Perley was. The letter was written by Dr. Holyoke on Nov. 25, 1791, and read: “In the last month, there died a man in this town, by the name of John Symonds, aged a hundred years lacking about six months, having been born in the famous ’92. He has told me that his nurse had often told him...she saw, from the chamber windows, those unhappy people hanging on Gallows’ Hill, who were executed for witches by the delusion of the times.”

Finding Symonds’ house in Salem will once and for all clear up the mystery of the hanging spot. I will look for it first thing in the morning. I must go now, however, my teakettle is whistling.

I wrinkle my face. “What do you think this means?” I peer at Jaxon, whose cheek is now close to mine. I breathe in his woodsy smell. “Is she saying people don’t know where the witches were hanged?”

“Sounds like it,” says Jaxon. “I always learned it was at Gallows Hill Park. It’s possible it’s not. I never questioned it.”

The next page is blank. “This was her last entry.” I flip back to the beginning of the journal. Again, I read out loud.

I spoke to the mayor today. Nice and all, but a complete imbecile. He has no idea if the hanging spot is correct. And, he freely admits Upham willy-nilly named the current spot in Gallows Hill Park. Then everyone in this town blindly followed. Upham even admits that he has no evidence for naming that place. Ridiculous.

I've asked the mayor to look into it and he politely brushed me off. Disgraceful, if you ask me, that Salem does not know the most historically important spot in its own town. Mable and I will sort this. My biggest hope is that this will bring me closer to getting my Charles and my Samantha back home to me.

I close the journal, not sure how to process that last line. My grandmother wanted a relationship with me? My dad always said that she was the reclusive eccentric type, which I assumed was a euphemism for grumpy and crazy. I knew they fought, but if she really wanted to see me, she would have, right?

“My mom’s name is Mable,” Jaxon says.

“Really?” I pause, looking at my grandmother’s picture on the desk. “What do you think she meant by that last line? I don’t see how the hanging spot’s related to me.” I wonder what his mom knows about this.

“Yeah, it’s pretty mysterious. I think we found our paper topic for class, though.”

“The location of the hangings? That’s actually a really good idea. It’ll be like a treasure hunt, trying to find the place.”

Jaxon’s phone rings and he glances at it. “It’s my mom. I kinda forgot about a dentist appointment today.”

“Forgot?”

“Or, maybe wanted to come here more.” He turns his body to face mine.

I’m suddenly very aware that my grandmother’s journal is between us. “Thanks for being nice to me when no one else is. I can’t promise I

won't screw it up, though."

Jaxon smiles. "You're the strangest girl I've ever met."

I realize I'm smiling, too. "Well I'm not sure what that means about you, since you want to spend time with me."

"It means—" He leans forward a little. His phone rings again, and I take a step backward. *Was he going to kiss me? Do I want him to kiss me?*

He looks disappointed. "Gotta go," he says, looking at his phone.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Watching and Whispering

I head straight to the public library, excitement about the secret study fueling my steps. After a useless search online for that house my grandmother wrote about, I figure my only shot at finding it *and* the hanging location is to look in the old archives.

The air's crisp with the smell of autumn, and the first few leaves have started to change color. The streets have that family-friendly feel. Store windows already have pumpkins and witches' hats in them. I pass an old brick-walled pub called Mather's Maleficence and trip on a tree root jutting out of the sidewalk. Fantastic—so everyone in this town knows my relatives.

I stop in front of the library, marked by a handmade wooden sign hanging from a post. It's a brick and brownstone building with columns supporting the doorway. Apparently, it used to be the home of Captain John Bertram, a successful merchant and shipowner. He had bad luck, and most of his family died off in the mid-1800s, probably in this very building. I read all about it when I was looking up the address.

I push open one of the heavy wooden doors and make my way to the woman at the front desk. She's a small, white-haired creature with

reading glasses balanced on the end of her nose.

“I’m looking for some old records of Salem from the seventeen hundreds,” I say quietly.

She inspects me over her glasses in a way that makes me conscious of my posture. “I haven’t seen you here before.”

Great. I get to be the new girl in Salem High *and* in the town. “I just moved here.”

“You’ll be needing a library card. What’s your full name?”

“Samantha Mather,” I whisper.

“What was that, now? Speak up, girl,” she says, and leans a little closer.

“Samantha Mather,” I say a little louder, more conscious of my own last name than I’ve ever been.

“Mather, is it?” she replies at full volume. She raises a disapproving eyebrow at me. “Lots of history here. Not all of it good.”

I nod, and can feel eyes staring at my back. I bet there are at least a couple of people here who know about my locker incident today.

“Do you know where I could find information about where people lived in the late sixteen and early seventeen hundreds? And maybe a map?” I ask, anxious to leave the onlookers.

“Upstairs to your left, in the back, small room on your right. Have copies of all the original town documents from around the time of the Witch Trials. Come back when you’re done and we’ll see about that card.”

“Thanks.” I dart for the stairs without making eye contact with anyone. *You can judge me, but I don’t have to look at you while you’re doing it.*

—

Two hours with a stack of dusty old books at a small wooden table in a cramped room and I’m finally getting some useful information. I found the address for Symonds’s house that Perley referenced in his essay “Where the Salem ‘Witches’ Were Hanged.” But it’s unclear if it

exists anymore. It doesn't line up with the current streets.

I run my hand along a pile of books about my relatives Cotton Mather and Increase Mather. If my last name is gonna be such an issue here, I want to know why. I mean, they *were* highly respected members of society. Increase even brought over the charter from England saying that Massachusetts was a province.

Unfortunately, Cotton was kinda the thorn. He was crazy smart, graduated Harvard at sixteen, and wrote seven languages, including Iroquois, by the time he was twenty-five. Some historians say he was good and honest, but more think he was the main instigator of the Witch Trials. He was so concerned with uprooting "evil" that he was willing to let people hang to do it. I can't help but think how the tables have turned for the Mathers in Salem.

A shadow falls on the page I'm reading. I look up to find Lizzie standing just outside the doorway of the reference room. I notice she has two different-colored eyes—one golden brown and one green—that seem more dramatic because of her black hair.

"So it's true," she says, and inspects her black nails with glittery skulls painted on them.

"'Scuse me?" I fold the paper with the information I was collecting and push it into my pocket.

"They told me you were here."

What's her angle? "They, who?"

"You can't hide in a town like this, Mather."

I can't help but think about the witch accusations. And the fact that she's addressing me by my last name doesn't escape me. "Are you saying you followed me here?"

"What I'm saying is that I know where you are." She lifts her gaze from her nails, and her two-toned eyes assess me.

Goose bumps sprint down my arms. I'm not even going to pretend I'm not creeped out by this. She clearly doesn't mean just now. She means always. I try to play it off. "So, what, you spend your free time tracking me? Your life sounds like it sucks."

For the briefest of seconds her eyes narrow. "You'll find that there're

only a few things that matter in Salem and that you're not one of them. No one cares what happens to you here."

Was that a threat? If there is one thing I learned in the City, it's that I can't show her this bothers me. "I'm not sure I care if you know where I am. You found me reading a book. Congratulations on your discovery."

She actually smiles. "Give it time. You will."

That's it. I'm done with this conversation. I kick the door with my black boot and it slams in her face. By some highly unfortunate coincidence, as the door booms shut the lights turn off. From outside the tiny sliver of a window in the door, which is now my only source of light, she laughs.

You've got to be kidding me. I stand up and bang my knee into one of the wooden chairs. "Ow!"

I push the chair aside and more slowly make my way to the wall. *This cannot be happening right now.* I swat the wall with my hands and land on a small switch. Up, down, up, down. Nothing.

I grab the door handle and pull, but it doesn't budge. I pull harder. Nothing. I throw my weight back, and with all my might I pull again. Still nothing. Lizzie walks away, leaving me stuck and all alone.

Did she lock me in somehow? As far as I can tell, there's no manual lock. She would need a key. How'd she do it? Maybe it's an old lock and it jammed when I slammed the door? But that still doesn't explain why the lights went out. I reach for my cell phone, but there's no signal.

That only leaves banging and yelling. "Help!"

What if no one hears me? I'm in an unpopular part of the library. Not so unpopular that Lizzie and her spies couldn't find me, but still. What's that girl planning, anyway? I find it hard to believe that this and the locker stunt are unrelated.

Twenty minutes pass before a scraggly-looking janitor finds me.

"Please help me get out of here!" I yell. It's starting to smell really musty, and it's dark. Plus, I'm not a huge fan of spiders, which I'm sure have taken up permanent residence in this rarely used room. I

can almost hear them crawling toward me over the old manuscripts. Above all, I don't like being trapped.

He fidgets with a ring of keys but doesn't seem to have the right one. He puts his hand up as if to say "Hold on" and walks off.

Another ten minutes pass, and I'm getting jumpy. In fact, I'm sweating pretty badly. I press against the window. *Please, someone come back...anyone.*

My face is fogging up the glass when the librarian from downstairs appears in front of me. My heart jumps into my throat. *Holy moly, she scared the crap out of me!* And she didn't come alone; there's a small group of spectators forming behind her.

"Don't panic. It only makes it worse!" she yells.

"I'm not!" I lie.

"Good. They can feel it, you know," she warns.

"Who can feel what?" I ask.

"The ghosts," she says loudly.

Involuntarily, I look over my shoulder. Nothing's there. Of course nothing's there. What's wrong with this town? I want to yell that I don't believe in ghosts, that it was probably Lizzie's fault the door locked. But by this point I've already made enough of a spectacle of myself.

There's a low buzzing noise. *A drill?*

"Stand back!" yells the janitor.

The door vibrates, and within seconds a small metal bit falls near my feet. The door swings open, almost hitting me. I jump out of the way and crash backward into the table, my feet lifting six inches off the ground. I flail my arms wildly to regain my balance. There are gasps from the crowd.

"Are you all right?" asks the librarian with a bit of drama in her tone.

"Yeah. Thanks," I say to her and the janitor. I must look crazy. With all these eyes on me, I half wish I could stay in the dark room until everyone loses interest. I'm slick with sweat, there are little tendrils of hair stuck to my face, and I just threw myself into a table. Much to my

disappointment, the watching and whispering crowd has doubled in size.

I step into the light and I spot John near one of the back rows of people, leaning against a bookshelf. We make eye contact, and my abused nerves go haywire. I don't think. I just run.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Something Is Off Here

“I got a call from the principal today,” says Vivian from the living room doorway.

I sit cross-legged on the big white couch. Papers and books surround me in disarray.

I fidget. “Did he tell you about the locker?”

“Yes.” Judgment’s written in her eyebrows. “I just don’t understand how you could garner that kind of reaction so quickly.”

I tense. “As though it would make more sense if it happened later on? When people knew me better?”

“You know I don’t mean it that way. You snap at people unnecessarily. What’s going on with you lately? You don’t tell me anything anymore.”

I steady myself. She’s right. Before my dad got sick, I would have told her what happened and she would have made some biting comment about the kids who did it. Which of course would make me laugh and make the whole thing easier somehow. Now it feels like I’m always on the defensive. I sigh. “There was something wrong with those pastries this morning. More than fifteen kids went home puking.

Everyone blames me. That's why they wrote PSYCHO on my locker."

Her lips tighten. She places a small pizza box down on the couch next to me. "I'll handle this." She walks out of the room.

She's calling the bakery. Her voice gets progressively louder and she's using her you-are-obviously-an-idiot tone. We both have short tempers, and being on the receiving end of hers is terrifying. There were only two times when I was little that we lost our tempers at each other. But those fights were so bad, our neighbors called the police on us, once because she threw a vase at our connecting wall and another time because she screamed so loud and so long that they were afraid someone was being murdered.

Of course, my dad wasn't home for those fights, and I never told him. They were about me going to therapy because I didn't have friends, and she thought I was too attached to my dad. There was always some part of me that was afraid she was right, that I was the problem.

I open the box and take a bite of the cheese pizza—not New York standard. I check my phone for the hundredth time to see if Jaxon texted me. Nothing. All the stuff he told me today seemed real. It is a little odd, though, that he's really nice when no one else in school is. *Great, Vivian's suspicion of nice people has rubbed off on me.*

I stop mid-bite and put the half-eaten pizza back in the box. Jaxon admitted today that he knew about my dad. No one else in school knew. How could they? That's the only way John could have found out. I feel sick.

I gather my books and papers and head for my room. I can't believe I almost trusted him. It's easy to trick someone who's lonely with pretty words. *I'm so stupid.*

"That doesn't change the fact that I'm going to talk to Mable about this." Vivian has steel in her voice. "Sorry isn't good enough."

Mrs. Meriwether? I plod up the stairs. What does she have to do with the bakery? Suddenly what Jaxon said about his mother's cooking makes sense. The sick feeling I have spreads. Maybe Vivian was right about them.

“It’s handled,” says Vivian from the bottom of the staircase.

She’ll fight for me, but right now I really need comfort more than anything. “Great.” My tone reflects my disappointment.

“You’re welcome,” she says, and I walk down the hall toward my room.

There’s a light creaking of old wood as I approach the burgundy bedroom. I peek inside and flip on the light. The rocking chair moves back and forth. I grab the arm and it stops. I scan the room, but everything’s still.

Stepping back into the hallway, I look both ways before heading to my room, wishing the hallway sconces were brighter and didn’t cast so many shadows.

I stick my hand in my room and flip the lights on before I enter. I slowly push the door open to find my clothes are once again in a pile on my floor.

“What the hell,” I say to the empty bedroom.

Okay, that’s it. Either someone’s messing with me or there’s something wrong with this armoire. I press the old latch a couple of times, and it squeaks. I lift what remains of the folded clothes in the upper part of the armoire and place them on the floor next to the pile. In the center of the back panel is a delicately carved black-eyed Susan, matching the rest of the furniture in my bedroom. I check all the edges of the wood and the hinges, to see if anything is faulty.

As a last resort, I knock on the wood itself—the doors, the sides, and the back panel. *Wait, this part sounds different.* I tap near the flower. Definitely hollow. I pull my head out of the armoire and give it a push to move it from the wall. It doesn’t budge. The thing weighs like five hundred pounds.

I return to the flower and grab the edges of it. There’s a small noise, and one of the petals appears to have tilted. *Did it just move or did I imagine that?* I brace the flower with the tips of my fingers and pull. It pops off easily and lands in my palm.

I reach my hand into the hole where the flower was, and the edge of something silky brushes my fingertips. I lean forward and manage to

pinch it. Carefully, I pull out a bundle of old letters tied with blue ribbon. They're yellowed with age and have a musty perfume smell. I now couldn't care less about my clothes being all over the floor.

I sit at my vanity and untie the bow that holds them together. Gently, I open the flap of the first envelope and unfold the thick stationery inside. The writing is small and so elaborately curled, it's difficult to make out.

My dearest Abigail,

Nothing wouldst give me more joye than to once agane see your smile. I verily believe mother's illness is nigh finished and that I maye return to you. Have patience, my love, for I am over a barrel with these unfortunate times.

Forever yours,

William

Old love letters. How romantic. *I bet they belonged to the girl in the portrait by the piano.* Was this her room? And for some reason, I have a strong feeling it was. She loved black-eyed Susans. That's why they're all over this furniture.

The lights go off, and I jump. *You have got to be kidding me! Not now!* I put the delicate letters down and feel around for the flashlight on my nightstand. My hands shake.

"Vivian!" I yell as I run through the dark hallway, but no one responds. When I get to the top of the stairs, lights glow in the foyer. "Vivian!"

"What?" Her voice comes faintly from down the hallway.

I run all the way to the kitchen, knowing that's where I'll find her. She always makes loose-leaf tea at night. I push the swinging door at the end of the hallway. She's next to the stove, lighting a flame beneath an antique kettle.

"My lights went out again," I say.

"The repairman fixed the lights."

After the weird things that have already happened to me today, I'm definitely not excited about my room being dark. "Well, they're out in my bedroom."

She puts her empty mug down with a clang on the marble countertop and walks out the back door to the patio. I follow, and hold the flashlight as she opens the breaker box filled with switches.

"You're right; one of them is off." She flips it back into position. "Let's go take a look." She enters the house, moving quickly.

I don't want her to see those letters. "It's fine." I keep pace with her. "I'll let you know if they're back on."

"I'll look myself. If there's still a problem, I'll call that idiot and make him come back. I have no interest in spending another evening bumping into my own furniture because I can't see ten feet in front of my face."

There is no arguing with her, especially when she's feeling snippy. We walk toward my room. Did I close my door? I don't remember doing that. The back of my neck tingles. I grab the handle before Vivian does, hoping I can hide those letters. "The light's on," I say quickly.

"You're acting like a nervous wreck. Are you okay?" She eyes me and pushes my door open.

I immediately look at my vanity, but the letters are gone. *Gone! What the...?* I walk to it and pull the chair out to see if they fell.

"This room's a disaster." Vivian wrinkles her nose. "Sam, are you sure everything's okay?"

My heart sinks. I can't understand where they could have gone. "Yes. And I didn't do this."

"The lights?"

"This!" I point at the clothes. "It was like this when I got here. And now something's disappeared, and I think someone's messing with me."

"Are you trying to tell me you think someone was in the house? All the doors were locked."

“Something is missing from my room, and this is the second time my clothes are all over the floor.” I’m having trouble keeping my cool.

“Slow down. What’s missing?”

“Just something.”

Her eyes land on the hole in the back of my armoire. “If you’re not going to tell me, then how can I help?”

“Fine. Letters. I found them in the back of my armoire.”

“So you’re telling me that someone threw your clothes on the floor. You somehow found letters in your armoire. And then the lights went out and they disappeared?”

“And the rocking chair in the burgundy bedroom was rocking by itself.”

She frowns. “Are you sleeping well? You know I was kidding when I said the ghost didn’t like you, right?”

“I don’t *think* it was a ghost. I *think* it was a person.”

Her kettle starts whistling. “I need to get that. Then we can talk more about this.”

“No.” I close the door behind her as she leaves.

This is only going to start the therapy conversation again. I’m not crazy. And my sleep has nothing to do with this. I’m being deliberately toyed with. *Would those witch lunatics from my school go so far as to mess with my house? Yes, I think they would. Maybe even Jaxon’s in on it. I bet they’re all having a good laugh over this.*

My cell phone buzzes on my nightstand. It’s a text.

Jaxon: *Find anything?*

For some reason this makes my blood boil. *He’s playing me for sure.*

Me: *A liar.*

Jaxon: ???

I throw my phone on my bed and grab my metal flashlight—a light source or a potential weapon. I resist stamping down the staircase only because I have no desire for Vivian to know where I am.

I go into the piano room and stand in front of Abigail’s painting,

examining every detail. She's calm, with her dark brown hair and happy gray eyes. Behind her, everything is heavily shadowed. But I'm pretty sure she's standing next to the fireplace in the library, right in front of the hidden door.

"Somehow I've stepped into your world of secrets," I say to her painting.

I look for a painter's signature, but there's none. Carefully, I shine my flashlight behind the portrait. *Bingo*—there's an index card taped to the back, with some writing in my grandmother's cursive. Thank you, Charlotte. It reads *Abigail Roe ~1691*.

The year before the Witch Trials? I look at her lace and silk dress again. This seems way too fancy for Colonial America. I've seen drawings of Puritans from that time in my history textbook and they wore super-plain clothes and bonnets. Black and earth tones, not these cheery blues and whites. From what I read, children didn't play or have toys because those things were considered frivolous and sinful. There's no way she could have walked around in this thing in seventeenth-century Salem. *Something is off here.*

Behind me, a crystal glass falls to the floor.

CHAPTER NINE

Cursed

I slow my pace in the hallway to leave no time for Jaxon to talk to me before class. It's only my third day, and no one will make eye contact with me. Where I'd normally have to squeeze between people, they just step out of my way. It's not like how they move out of respect for the Descendants; it's like they're afraid to touch me. I overhear snippets of conversations about my library fiasco, which is already common knowledge.

The bell rings as I reach AP History, and I try to ignore the tightness in my chest. I steel my face and open the door. Wardwell gives me a disapproving look but can't say anything since I'm technically on time.

I take my seat next to Jaxon but keep my gaze straight ahead.

"We'll begin with your paper assignment." Mr. Wardwell wears a tweed blazer with suede elbow patches.

"Sam?" Jaxon whispers. I ignore him, and the tightness spreads.

"Jaxon," says Mr. Wardwell, "if you're so eager to talk in my class, then maybe you'd like to tell me your paper topic."

"Sure." Jaxon isn't fazed. "I'm working with Sam, and we're doing our paper on the location of the witch hangings." He leaves out the bit

where we think the current location is wrong.

The pretty girl who saved Jaxon a seat the other day doesn't turn around to look at us, but everyone else does. *Don't worry, I think in the pretty girl's direction, you can have him.*

"Wonderful choice." Wardwell nods. "We're visiting Gallows Hill Park on Friday. You can do some research then."

I raise my hand, and Mr. Wardwell nods. "Yes?"

"Can I do the paper by myself?"

"No. It's a group assignment." He moves on to another student, and Jaxon stares at me. I don't dare look at him or I might cry.

Lizzie turns toward me from a few rows up, her hair hiding her awful smile from Mr. Wardwell. Behind her desk, she pulls out a little handmade doll with MATHER embroidered on it and a noose around its neck. Jaxon grabs my arm, as if to tell me not to react. I shake it off.

John, from the desk next to Lizzie, mouths "cursed" at me.

I freeze. This was the word that tore apart my friendships as a child. It started not that long after my friend Kara fell into the lion's cage at my seventh birthday party.

"She's not well enough to see you," Kara's mother said, holding the door only halfway open.

"We'll come back in a couple of days," my dad said, and put his hand on my shoulder.

"Sam?" Kara's voice came from down the hallway.

"I'm so sorry, Kara!" I yelled, trying to peer around her mother. I didn't know what I was apologizing for, but I knew I was sorry.

As Kara reached the door, her mother yanked her backward. "Kara, you're not going to be seeing Sam anymore. They were just leaving."

My eyes began to fill with tears, and my dad stiffened next to me. "Of course you're upset about what happened. But it's not Sam's fault. Keeping the girls apart is an over—"

I reached out for Kara, but her mother blocked me.

The door slammed in my face. I didn't really understand what it all

meant. All I knew was that I didn't have Kara anymore because there was something wrong with me, and I wasn't sure I could take that.

John grins at the shocked look on my face. Is there some way they could know about all the bad luck I had when I was a kid? Or is this just some awful coincidence?

“I'm not cursed. And if you say it again, I'll smack that smile off you!” I yell. The room goes silent and everyone stares.

Mr. Wardwell stands straighter. “Miss Mather, I will *not* have that kind of threatening outburst in my classroom. If you cannot control yourself, you'll leave. Is that clear?”

Lizzie tightens the noose around the little doll's neck.

I clench my fist. “So it's totally fine that she has some sick voodoo doll with a *noose*? Are you kidding me? They took my freaking hair the other day!”

Mr. Wardwell looks at Lizzie, but the doll is nowhere in sight.

“Out!” Mr. Wardwell points toward the door. I yank my bag up and storm off.

“Mr. Wardwell,” Jaxon says, “it's not—”

“I don't want to hear it, Jaxon.” Mr. Wardwell follows me into the hallway.

“I want you to go into that room there.” Mr. Wardwell shakes his finger at me. “And calm yourself down. I'll be in to talk to you when I'm ready.”

I cross the hall, enter the empty classroom, and throw my bag on the floor. I know I shouldn't let my temper get the better of me like that, but those Descendants are completely insane. Who does that? I don't believe in witchcraft or whatever that crap was, but still. And was Jaxon defending me? I don't need his help. I've always been just fine on my own. I don't know why I got it into my head I might make friends here.

I pace around the room until I wear myself out. I kick the desk near the window before I sit in it. I want my dad back. I need to talk to him. I need to hear that eventually things will get better. Right now everything is so very wrong. And it seems to be slipping further out of

my control by the minute. I put my head in my hands, and my hair falls in my face.

My dad knelt down beside me. "It's not your fault. You know that, right, Sam? That woman is a...She's scared about what happened to Kara and she wants to blame someone." He pushed my hair back from my wet cheeks. "You're one of the most kind and beautiful people I've ever known, and I promise you I'll do everything I can to fix this."

I nodded. "Okay, Daddy." But somewhere inside me, I knew things would never be the same.

After some minutes of closing my eyes, my breath slows. When I sit up again, the dark-haired guy I collided with the other day stands just inside the doorway. For a few seconds, we're both silent.

"You will leave." His voice is flat, but his face is intense.

"The classroom? I can't."

"Salem," he says, and for the first time I notice that he, too, wears all black.

CHAPTER TEN

Under All That Bravado

The bell rings at the end of my sixth-period literature class, and I'm the first person out of the classroom. I can't wait to get out of this place. If I hear one more person whisper that the Descendants cursed me, I'll scream.

I rush to my locker. Good, Susannah isn't there yet. I spin the numbers on my combination lock and quickly open the latch. As I grab my notebooks, Jaxon heads straight for me. I slam my locker shut and walk toward the exit. But by the time I reach the door, he catches up.

"Sam, what the hell's going on?"

"Go away."

"Not until you tell me why you're so angry." He keeps pace with my speed-walking. "You've been avoiding me all day."

"You know why." I turn down the sidewalk away from the school.

"No, I really don't."

"Please, I don't need to feel any more ridiculous than I already do." I watch the cracks in the sidewalk pass under my feet, trying to steer my mind away from how hurt I feel.

"I've been nothing but nice to you. Am I missing something here?"

I look at him for the first time since we started talking. “How did the Descendants find out about my dad being in the hospital?”

“I don’t...Oh, shit.”

“Shit is right.” I adjust my gaze downward again and walk faster than before. There had been some part of me that still hoped it wasn’t him. I shouldn’t have trusted him.

“It’s not what you think.”

“I don’t want to have this conversation.”

“Sam, you weren’t there. You don’t know what I said.”

“I don’t care.” *I’m better off alone.*

“Well, I do,” he says. “By lunchtime of your first day, I heard the Descendants were going to make your life hell. There were rumors all over about you. I talked to Susannah, told her to get the group to back off, that you were going through some tough things. I had no idea they were going to use it against you.”

The weight of the day settles behind my eyes and I want to get away from him before I embarrass myself more. I make my way onto the sidewalk near my house. He steps in front of me before I reach my driveway.

“Move,” I say.

“No. Not until you say you believe me.”

“Jaxon, come on.” I make eye contact with him. “You’re a junior with a ton of friends. People like you. I don’t believe for a second that you want to spend all this time with me.” My voice shakes a little. “I just want you to stop making fun of me.”

“I’m not making fun of you.” He’s so sincere, I’m not sure whether to hit him for being such a good liar or to believe him.

“You already won. I feel like crap. Job done.”

“Come over and talk to my mom.”

I stop. *What’s he up to?*

“I’ll make a deal with you. Come talk to my mom, and if you’re not convinced I’m telling the truth, then I’ll leave you alone.” He watches me consider it. “*And I’ll do our history paper. You won’t even have to*

talk to me.”

I eye him suspiciously. “Fine. But you better not suck at history.”

I follow him to his house, with its blue shutters and nautical star. The moment he opens the screen door, delicious scents of warm dough and apple-cinnamon fill my nose.

The house is surprising. Its interior is reminiscent of the inside of a boat, one with high masts, used for adventures. Rustic raw-wood beams stripe the white ceilings. The shelves are made from driftwood, and so is the banister.

“Mom!” Jaxon yells, and heads down the hallway to the left. He leads me through an arched wooden doorway.

The kitchen counters are covered with cookies, pies, and every wonderful thing. Models of ships decorate the walls, and glass jars of spices line the windowsills.

“Samantha!” Mrs. Meriwether beams from behind her mixing bowl. “You’ve finally come to visit.”

“Hi, Mrs. Meriwether.” I approach the island filled with sweets.

“My mom owns Sugar Spells Bakery in town,” Jaxon explains. “But she spends most of her time here, making new recipes.”

So she *owns* the bakery. I nod, hoping that Vivian didn’t yell at Mrs. Meriwether over those pastries.

Mrs. Meriwether smiles. “Have anything you like.”

I choose a heart-shaped tart with fresh raspberries and bite into it. “It’s delicious.”

“Mom, tell Sam what I told you when I came home after the first day of school,” Jaxon says.

She tilts her head. “He told me the students were turning on you.”

“And?”

She eyes Jaxon curiously. “And that he knew what it was like to have that happen and would try to stop it.”

“See.”

I look back and forth between them.

Mrs. Meriwether puts down her mixing bowl. “Jaxon, leave us a

minute.”

“Mom—”

“Jaxon.”

He huffs, but walks out of the room.

“Take a seat,” she says, and I pull out one of the high-backed chairs at the island. She adds brown sugar to her bowl before continuing. “Did you know I grew up in this house?”

I shake my head.

“Your father and I were practically inseparable. We were born one month apart. Did everything together. He was the best at thinking up pranks but a total cheat at running races.” She laughs. “Used to make me look the wrong way and would take off.”

I try to imagine my dad acting silly with a young Mrs. Meriwether. After everything started going downhill for me socially, my dad lost a lot of his playfulness. He took it hard that he couldn’t change things for me. I sigh. “I always wanted to know about this place, but he wouldn’t talk about it. I didn’t know about you.” I worry I’ve said the wrong thing, but she only looks thoughtful.

“Yes.” She stirs her bowl. “He divorced this place after your mother died. He was devastated. We all were. But he didn’t let it interfere with being a father. You should have seen the way he wouldn’t put you down as a baby.”

I look at my hands. “I miss him.” *Every day without him feels empty.*

“I know you do.” Her voice is kind. “My heart breaks for you, thinking how you must be suffering. But it won’t help to shut people out. I see Charlie’s stubbornness written all over you. You know, he sprained his ankle one year while we were ice-skating down at the river. Dragged himself home the whole mile and a half. Wouldn’t even let me carry his shoes. Charlotte nearly had a fit.”

“I’m not trying to shut people out. It’s just, no one really likes me here.”

“Jaxon does. And if you let him in, you might find something worth knowing under all that bravado.”

“I don’t have any bravado,” Jaxon says from the hallway. “I’m just naturally awesome.”

“Jaxon, eavesdropping is a terrible habit,” she says, “made common by swindlers and little old ladies.”

He appears in the doorway with his confident grin. “Don’t worry. I just came back to see if you were done.”

“That’s up to Samantha,” she says.

“Yeah, I think so,” I say. “Can I come back at some point? I’d love to hear some of those stories about my dad.”

“There’s nothing I’d like more.” She scoops out a mound of batter that smells like eggnog and warm butter.

Jaxon gestures for me to follow him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Friendship

“How are you not fat?” I ask, gripping the warm cup of hot chocolate with a hint of chili and cinnamon from Mrs. Meriwether’s Sugar Spells Bakery.

Jaxon pats his flat stomach. “Good genes.”

We cross the street toward the harbor, and I get my first view of the enormous ship. “Whoa.”

“You haven’t seen *The Friendship* yet?” He’s all smiles.

“Is that what this pirate ship’s called?”

He laughs. “It’s actually a reconstruction of an East India trading ship, built in 1797.”

I look at him sideways. “You know the exact date?”

“My father used to take me down here as a kid. He built boats, and he loved this one in particular.”

Suddenly his house makes a lot more sense. I sip my hot cocoa.

“It traveled the globe over a dozen times and returned to Salem after each trip, bringing things from all over the world.” He looks out at the masts with their complex wooden tiers.

“Really?” I’m charmed by Jaxon’s love for this old boat.

“Unfortunately, the British took the original in the War of 1812 and sold it for parts.”

“That’s sad. It’s beautiful.”

There’s an openness about him when he talks about this ship. “Yeah, I hate when people tear apart beautiful things.”

My cheeks warm. “So you used to come here with your dad?”

“Yeah, he’d explain all the parts of a ship and how they worked. That’s why I like to build furniture. I built a lot of things with my dad.”

The sky has started to turn from orange to pink. “What was he like?”

Jaxon smiles. “He always wore suspenders, and he had a deep laugh, one of those ones where your whole body shakes. And he carried this old pipe around with him that drove my mom nuts. She used to say he was stinking up the place. But more than anything, he loved my mother. He had the biggest sweet tooth. He used to sneak into the kitchen late at night and eat the new pastries she made for the shop. She would complain, but secretly she loved it.”

His love for his father is so relatable that my breath catches in my throat. “He sounds wonderful.”

He puts his arm around my shoulder and pulls me closer. I tense at his touch. *Maybe Mrs. Meriwether was right about Jaxon. I haven’t even really given him a chance.* I’m just not used to people being nice to me. The couple of times someone from school sought me out like this, it was to play a trick on me, which didn’t exactly help me in the trusting department. I relax my muscles and lean gently against him, getting a whiff of pine needles.

“I didn’t have any friends in the City.” We watch the colorful sky reflected in the water, and I wonder about his arm, which hasn’t released me.

“You always say what you think, don’t you?” He says this like it’s a good thing.

I shrug. “Vivian says I have no filter. Funny thing is, I think I get it from her. But really, I just don’t see a need to sugarcoat things.”

“So then I guess you don’t miss New York?”

“Not exactly. But I miss being able to go to the hospital every day. This is the longest I’ve gone without seeing my dad since he went into a coma. The apartment sold way faster than Vivian thought it would, and we had to move before we could get him transferred to Boston.”

Jaxon holds me a little tighter, and I don’t resist snuggling into the warmth of his body. My chest rises and falls a little faster against his side. Jaxon looks down at me. “If you don’t mind my asking, what happened?”

I pause. Jaxon’s the first person to ask me to tell this story. “Four months ago, my dad was cooking breakfast. It was Saturday morning, and before he got sick I had a talent for sleeping till noon. I’d sleep through car alarms, fire trucks, basically anything. But that morning, somewhere in my unconscious brain, Vivian’s panicked voice registered and I shot straight out of bed. I didn’t know it then, but what I was reacting to was her on the phone with nine-one-one.

“I just remember running into the kitchen and seeing my dad lying on the black tiles. The weirdest thing is, in that exact moment I realized that he had been in the middle of making me my favorite breakfast—chocolate chip banana pancakes. His eyes closed just before I reached him.

“The doctors said there was a small tear in the lining of his heart. They fixed it with surgery, but he’s been in a coma ever since. They don’t know why.”

Jaxon shakes his head. “I’m incredibly sorry.”

“I wake up feeling panicked a lot now. I...I think it might be my fault. My dad’s getting sick, I mean.” I’ve never admitted that to anyone.

“Sam, it’s definitely not your fault.”

Suddenly I feel exposed and have a desperate need to hide. I pull away from Jaxon’s side. “You don’t know me that well. People always get hurt around me. I’m like a magnet for disaster.”

“You can’t blame yourself for—”

“Let’s just drop it.” I bite my lower lip. “I better get home. I never told Vivian where I was going.”

“Sure.”

We walk off the dock and back toward the street. It’s colder without Jaxon’s arm, but I’m not sure I’m comfortable being that close to anyone. Mostly people don’t touch me.

“Is there anything else to see on the way home?” I ask, hoping to push out my own dark thoughts. “Historical landmarks or anything?”

“Yeah, they’re everywhere,” he says as we walk. “Down that way a couple of blocks is Old Burying Point, the oldest graveyard in Salem. One of the Mathers is buried there. I’ll take you one day when it’s not dark.”

“Who’s scared now?” I ask.

He grins as we walk through a small street lined with beautiful old houses. “And down that way, Judge Corwin lived. A lot of people from Salem went there to discuss witchcraft accusations.”

His hand grazes mine, and I pull it away before I consider if I want to. “You really do know a lot of history. I’m impressed.”

“Is that a compliment?”

“I give them when they’re deserved.”

“Can you repeat it? I wanna remember it.”

“No.” I try not to smile, but fail.

He stops in front of a ginormous mansion with big glass windows and a roof dotted with cupolas. It reminds me of a New England–style castle. The greens are beautifully laid out, and an imposing fence surrounds the property.

“What is this place?” I ask.

“It used to be a jail.”

“Fancy jail.”

“It held prisoners from the War of 1812,” he explains. “A lot of people died here, most of them hanged. Home to the Boston Strangler.”

He points past the building to a graveyard. “Howard Street Cemetery.”

“You guys have cemeteries everywhere.”

“I guess there are just a lotta dead people in Salem.”

“That’s not creepy at all,” I say.

“Giles Corey was pressed to death here.” His voice has a dramatic edge. “It happened in this very alley.”

“What? Why would anyone do that?”

“Well, when he was accused of committing witchcraft as a very old dude, he refused to plead guilty or not guilty. Giles was stripped naked, put in a pit, and two heavy boards were laid on his chest with heavier and heavier rocks placed on top.”

“That’s seriously barbaric. Why didn’t he just plead not guilty?”

Jaxon shrugs. “All I know is that over two days he was asked to plead three times. And all he said was, ‘More weight!’ At some point people say his tongue came out of his mouth and the sheriff pushed it back in with his cane. Then right before he died, he cursed the sheriff.”

“That’s one of the most horrible things I’ve ever heard.” *I wish I wasn’t visualizing it.*

“Apparently, every sheriff since then has died of a heart attack or contracted some blood disease.”

“Oh man. So what’s this place used for now?”

“Eventually the town bought it and turned it into apartments and a restaurant.”

“Huh. People live in an old jail.” *I wonder if I could ever do that.*

“People say that Giles Corey haunts this place and that sometimes you’ll feel a cold hand on your shoulder.” He lifts his eyebrows.

“I don’t believe in ghosts.”

“Yeah, me neither. But we might be the only ones.”

The wind picks up and I cross my arms. At which point, something lightly grazes my shoulder. I jump. Jaxon laughs.

“That’s not funny.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in ghosts?”

“I don’t! Doesn’t mean I don’t jump when people poke me unexpectedly.”

“Got it. No unexpected pokings.” He smirks. “Only expected ones.”

“For a moment there, I was *almost* thinking how mature and knowledgeable you are. Then you act like a total ass.”

“What was that? I heard everything up to the knowledgeable part.”

“Unbelievable.” I shake my head, and we turn around the corner as the sun sets behind the old houses and tall trees.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Right Time to Leave

The floorboards creak under my feet in the long hallway that leads to the library. A painting of a particularly surly-looking old man with a large dog catches my eye and I stop short. My dad told me about this painting.

“Tell me again how you met Mom,” I said as I slid under my covers.

My dad sat on the side of my bed and tucked in the blankets around my feet. “I was fifteen at the time, six years older than you are now. And I was the most handsome thing you’d ever seen.”

I giggled. I’d seen pictures of my dad at fifteen, and he was skinny, with hair that stuck off his head in patches like a half-bald porcupine.

“Your mom was delivering some books to your gram. Your mom’s family owned the local bookshop. And I was walking down the hallway toward her. She stepped to her right to let me pass, but I stepped the same way at the same time. We went back and forth like this five or six times. I admit that in the end I was doing it on purpose just to look at her a little longer.” He winked at me.

“Your mom demanded that I stop moving altogether, and when I did, she pushed me with both hands into the wall. I knew in that moment that I loved her, with her wild curly hair. Above me, my

great-grandfather's painting scowled down disapprovingly. I couldn't help but grin at the cranky old man and his basset hound."

I sigh and walk into the library, toward the fireplace. There is so much about my family I don't know. I don't even really know the story of how my mom died. My dad always said that she died happier than he'd ever seen her because I was in her arms. That for a few short minutes after I was born, we were the perfect family. Then he would shut himself in his office for the rest of the night.

I pull the hook, flick on the lantern, and push the secret door closed behind me. The bricks and old wooden beams light up. I go to the spiral staircase and take the steps slowly, enjoying the thrill of this hidden place. I wonder if my dad ever knew about this passageway or if it was something my grandmother kept to herself.

I smile at the little room filled with books and make my way to my grandmother's desk, strewn with papers that she must have expected to return to. I set down the lantern and situate myself. I open the journal and read.

I received a letter from Charles today containing pictures of my darling Samantha. I simply cannot bear this wall he constructed between us. He won't even let me visit New York. I understand why Charles fears this family. He fears the curse, even though his stubbornness prevents him from saying so.

I am more determined than ever these days to solve this mystery. Mable is a great help and a dear comfort. Although, I'm not sure I haven't gained a few pounds from her cooking.

My breath catches on the word "curse," and my hand shakes as I turn the page.

I spoke with some of the descendants of the accused witches and asked them about their death records. It's obvious they think I'm mental. But to be frank, I'm too

busy to care. After a few hours of nonsense conversations, I went directly to town hall and compiled a list of deaths of Witch Trials descendants.

I will spend my day tomorrow mapping them out, but I can already tell there is a pattern. Every hundred years or so, for unknown reasons, members of those families and my own seem to die within a very short time period. I don't know the cause yet, but I must break this curse before it gets to my Charles or my Samantha. Period.

If she wanted to know me, why did Dad keep us separated? It's not like him. There are two possibilities. One, my grandmother was nuts. Or two, my grandmother was right, and my family is literally cursed. In which case, my dad's illness is probably connected. Maybe he really is sick because of me. A dull ache pounds in my chest. I put pressure over my heart with my hand to keep the ache from spreading. *Please, no.*

There's a faint shuffling noise downstairs. Vivian must be home. I snap the journal closed and pick up the lantern. Quietly, I make my way down the twisty staircase and listen at the door. I open it, leaving just enough room for my left eye to peer through. Nothing. I yank the door open, slip through, and close it behind me in one fluid motion. My heart drums in my ears.

I tiptoe through the library and my foot catches on a book. I stumble forward and put my hand out before my face connects with the wall. *Where the hell did that come from?* Before I toss it on the shelf, I catch the title—*The Right Time to Leave*. I stiffen, remembering what the dark-haired guy said about leaving Salem. I grip the book and open the door.

"Vivian!" I yell, but there's no response.

I look both ways down the hall. "I know I locked the doors," I tell myself. It's a habit every New Yorker's neurotic about. I walk to the front foyer and scan the room.

"Vivian!" I yell.

Still holding the book, I bolt upstairs. I reach my room in seconds and lock the door behind me. How would anyone know I was in the library? Was someone watching me?

Glass shatters, and I jump backward, hitting the locked door with a thud. A pane of my bedroom window lies in shards on my floor. For a few seconds, I don't move. I focus on a pinkie-sized black rock nearly camouflaged against the dark floorboards.

My right hand curls into a fist. *I will not be harassed in my own house!* I lunge forward and grab the rock. It's cold and smooth. I turn it over in my palm. Scratched into one side is the word DIE.

The front door slams, and I freeze.

"Sam!" Vivian's voice echoes in the foyer. I release my breath.

"Vivian!" I yell back and swing open my door. "Come up here! Someone just threw a rock through my window!"

Her heels are muffled by the rug on the stairs but click in a hurried pace once she reaches the wooden floorboards of the hallway.

She studies the broken window and then the glass. "Outrageous," she says angrily.

"Here." I hand her the rock.

The muscles around her eyes tighten. "What's this about, Sam?"

I pause, not sure how to begin. "Today in school, this guy said 'You'll leave Salem.' Almost like a threat. And then, I find this book in the doorway of the library." I hold out the book. "I was creeped out, so I came up here. I wasn't in the room for more than a minute before this rock came crashing through."

"You're sure this book wasn't already there? That whole room's bursting with books."

"Positive."

"I'm going to check all the windows and doors," she says, and exits.

"I'm fine. Thanks for asking," I say to myself, and peer through the shattered glass to the dark yard below.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

You'll Regret Every Word

“Nineteen people and two dogs were hanged, one person was pressed to death, and, at the very least, four people died in prison.” Mr. Wardwell sits on the edge of his desk scanning our faces. “These are the deaths directly associated with the Salem Witch Trials. But, as many of you know, the repercussions had a far greater reach. Many families suffered for generations, lost their property, went into debt from their stay in jail, and were emotionally shattered.

“I ask this question every year to my students, and I will ask you. What was the cause of the Salem Witch Trials? Were the factors complex and entangled? Or was there one major factor that drove them forward? Was it politics, religion, culture, or just plain hysteria? As we navigate these essays you’re writing, and as we prepare for the reenactment, we’ll continue to examine these questions. Any preliminary answers are welcome.”

Lizzie raises her manicured hand, sporting a diamond-studded skull ring.

Mr. Wardwell nods. “Lizzie.”

“Cotton Mather,” she replies. “The main cause was Cotton Mather.”

Jaxon rolls his eyes. I appreciate that he knows how ridiculous she

is.

“He was an expert in witchcraft,” she says, “which he studied for many years prior to the Salem Witch Trials, waiting for his opportunity to discover some. Then he consulted on a witchcraft case in Boston and arrogantly wrote a book about it. This book became a bestseller and provided the map for what happened three years later in Salem.” She pauses, then adds, “Some people don’t know when to quit. And their actions get people killed.”

Talk about arrogance. *I know she had something to do with that rock.*

“Well-thought-out answer, Lizzie,” says Mr. Wardwell.

Lizzie turns toward me, wearing a dangerous look. I stare back at her, not willing to concede that I’m bothered. The hair on my arms stands up, and she raises an eyebrow before she turns away.

“Great.” Mr. Wardwell looks around the room. “Any other theories?” The class is silent. No one dares answer after Lizzie. “If not, we’ll take five minutes to discuss with your partners.”

There’s a two-second pause, and then everyone erupts into chatter.

“Sam—” Jaxon starts in a consoling tone.

“It’s fine, Jaxon, really. Let’s not talk about it.”

“I forgot...You’re a tough city girl.”

I smile. “Would you expect anything else?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Oh, by the way, I found the house, or at least the general location,” I say.

“What house?”

“The one my grandmother said you can see the hanging site from. I read up on it at the public library.”

Jaxon’s face flickers in recognition when I say “library.” So, the whole world does know. At least he has the decency not to bring it up.

“Wanna go check out my map after school today?” I continue.

“Are you asking me on a date?”

I laugh.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” he says. The bell rings.

We grab our bags and head for the door.

“Meet you after classes,” I say.

“Yeah, pick me up at my locker. I like red roses and European chocolates. None of the cheap stuff.”

I shake my head as we part ways.

People recoil from me as I navigate the hallway. Not the freshmen so much—they don’t know jack about social dynamics. But all the upperclassmen avoid me. I can distinctly hear the word “cursed” being whispered. The Descendants either know how I was made fun of with that word at my old school, which means they’re really putting effort into making my life difficult, or it’s a coincidence, which is creepy in its own way. I honestly don’t know which scenario is worse.

I round the corner toward chemistry and collide with Lizzie’s back while she’s talking to Susannah. Lizzie turns and stares.

People around us notice. Susannah fidgets with her hands and avoids looking at me.

“This is where you say you’re sorry, hope like hell I forgive you, and walk away,” Lizzie says slowly and deliberately, like I’m an idiot.

My nails press into my palms. “Or this is where *you* apologize for throwing a goddamn rock through my window. Then you can walk away and go play with your little dolls.”

Lizzie’s different-colored eyes narrow and she takes a step toward me. She smells like bonfire and mint gum. Susannah grabs Lizzie’s hand, but she shakes Susannah off.

“You’ll regret every word of that,” Lizzie says just as the dark-haired guy walks past us.

“And you!” I yell at him. Lizzie looks confused as I redirect the conversation. The guy pauses for a second to give me a disapproving glare, and keeps going like I’ve offended his sensibilities.

This only frustrates me more, and I make a fast attempt to grab his arm. My fingers make contact with his black shirt, but he pulls away and I lose my hold. I take a step forward, trying to recover my footing,

but it only gets worse. I fall toward the metal lockers.

I put my hand out, but it's too late; my clumsiness is in full swing. My forehead collides with a lock, creating a reverberating bang. The hallway blurs momentarily and I slide to the floor. Everyone turns to watch. I try to get up, but there's a sharp pain radiating from my forehead and I'm super dizzy.

Lizzie stands over me, amused. Around me, people whisper that Lizzie used a spell on me, that she cursed me. I want to scream at them, but my head pounds.

"Okay, back up." Principal Brennan pushes through the crowd. "What happened here?"

"She threw herself into the lockers," Lizzie says, and the whispers continue.

"I tripped." I wince.

"Everyone, disperse. Now!" says Principal Brennan. "Let's get you to the nurse. Can you stand?"

"I think so," I say, but when blood drips onto my hand, I faint.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Death Is Like That

I pull one of my legs out from under the down comforter and readjust the pillow under my head. The sun sets through my taped-up window. I grab the water on my bedside table and take another Advil just in case my head decides to pound again. On the whole, though, my head is not my problem. My overwhelming sense of embarrassment is.

Vivian pops her head inside my bedroom door. “Jaxon and his mother dropped by. I told them you were resting.” I never asked her if she yelled at Mrs. Meriwether about those pastries, but I’m not sure I want to know.

“Oh, okay.” I attempt a smile. “You know, Mrs. Meriwether is actually a nice person. You might like her.”

Vivian wrinkles her nose. “I’m going out to pick up some food. What would you like?”

“Grilled cheese and tomato soup.”

She nods. “I’ll be back soon.”

I close my eyes as she leaves. Between this and that weird locked door in Salem Library, it’s like I went out of my way to make Lizzie look powerful. I’m sure the rumors are flying by now.

A smooth, cold hand covers my mouth and pushes down on my lips. My eyes snap open. The guy with the dark hair sits on my bed, his black waves falling onto his cheeks as he leans over me. His fingers increase their pressure as I struggle. I scream, but only a muffled moan escapes his fingers.

“Stop,” he says flatly, as though nothing out of the ordinary is happening.

I pull at his hand, but he’s too strong. He looks at me with such intensity that goose bumps sprint along my skin.

“I am not going to hurt you.”

That’s what every psycho says right before he eats you! I swipe at him with my right hand, but he catches it midair. I reach toward his face with my left hand. He blocks with his elbow. *I’m trapped!*

“I said I am not going to hurt you.” He has a slight British accent, and the formality of it seems out of place. “I will release your mouth if you do not scream. But if you continue to fight, I will continue to hold you down.”

I lock eyes with him and stop pushing. Anything is better than being held down. I nod. *Please let Vivian still be here.* She would definitely kick the crap out of this guy for me. She once tripped a businessman crossing the street just for looking at me inappropriately. The dark-haired guy assesses me for a few seconds and then pulls his hand off my mouth.

I push myself up and back so fast that I slam into my headboard. Even so, there is only one foot of space between us. I absolutely do regret saying those things to Lizzie. I had no idea she would go so far as to send this guy to my house. I consider screaming, but from this close distance, he could do some real damage before anyone would hear. I look at my door.

“It is locked,” he says.

I turn to the window. The sun hangs low in the sky, and there isn’t much light left.

He follows my gaze. “She is gone.”

My heart sinks. I didn’t hear her engine start.

He examines the bandage on my forehead. "You are injured."

"Yes." The word sticks in my mouth.

He frowns.

"What do you want?" My voice has become a whisper, which only makes me angry. I should be punching him and fighting instead of whispering questions at him.

"I want you to know that I regret what happened today."

Wait, what? I search his face for some hidden meaning and find none.

"But you had no right to open those letters." There's a calmness about him that's unnerving.

I can't be hearing this correctly. "The letters in my armoire?"

"It is rude to read someone else's private correspondence."

"Rude?" My brain fights through the fog of fear. "Rude!" I say a little louder. "You broke into my room. You have no right to talk about rude." I shut my mouth tightly, aware of his proximity and my hair-trigger temper. His dark gray eyes don't react.

"I can see your manners do not improve upon closer inspection."

"Are you insulting me?"

"And you are not very clever."

It takes everything in my power not to push him off my bed. "Listen, creep, I do *not* have to defend myself to you. *You* have to defend yourself to *me*! Now you better explain why you broke in."

"I have already explained."

"If you wanted those letters, why didn't you knock on the door and ask for them?"

"Because you were reading them."

"Tough! They were in my room." I fail to match his calm. "And what? You followed me, watched me through windows?"

"I have been watching you since you arrived in Salem."

This is worse than I thought. *He's crazy.* I look at the door again and bite my lip.

“I told you it was locked.”

“Just tell me what you want and go away.”

He sighs. “I used to live in this house. And I do not trust you.”

His explanation doesn't make me feel better. “So you stalked me? You're a lunatic!” Is this where Lizzie's getting her information?

His gray eyes narrow. “Then you should leave Salem before I do something crazy.”

For a second I wonder if I've pushed him too far. “Get out of my room.”

“No.”

“Then I hope you like jail,” I say with force. He almost laughs. I almost punch him. “That book in my library—that was you, wasn't it?”

He nods.

“Why? Because I'm a Mather?”

“That is one piece of it, yes.”

“What's the rest?”

“You seem to enjoy repetition in conversation. Once again, I did not want you reading those letters.”

He's the most infuriating person I've ever talked to. “So they're yours?”

“More than yours.”

“Those letters are really old. They can't be yours.” I'm positive they belong to the Abigail in the painting downstairs.

He pauses. “They belonged to my sister.” There is a slight waver in his voice.

“Then, your sister shouldn't have left them here!”

“She is dead.” He sounds so sad that for a moment, I not only feel bad about yelling at him, I want to reach out and comfort him.

I shake it off. “Well, they were in my armoire.”

“They do not belong to you. And neither does the armoire, for that matter,” he says with finality.

“This is my grandmother's house. Everything in it belongs to my

family.”

“Not necessarily.”

Is there some situation where my grandmother could have his sister’s furniture? “Why would anyone leave their furniture in someone else’s house?”

“Because they could not help it.”

“Why wouldn’t someone be able to help it?”

“Death is like that.”

I examine his face, with its proud expression. “Did your sister know my grandmother?”

“I should not think so.”

“When was she here?”

“For the last time, on the day she died in 1692.” There is no hint of sarcasm in his delivery.

I take a hard look at him. He wears all black like before, black dress pants, black dress shoes, and a thin black cashmere sweater. The clothes match his formal accent. His hair hangs in waves around his face, and he smells of freshly washed linen. I shake my head, annoyed at myself for even considering believing that he’s telling the truth.

“Seriously, what is this? Either you’re crazy or you’re messing with me. And besides, you touched me. You held my mouth down. You can’t be a ghost. This must be Lizzie’s idea of a sick joke.”

“I can see it was a mistake to come here.” He stands and walks toward my door.

I swing my legs out of bed and land on the soft white rug. “Don’t think...” Black spots form in my vision. I shouldn’t have gotten up so fast. I stumble.

“Samantha?”

I reach out for my bedpost, but he grabs my arm and steadies me. “Lie back down. You are ill.”

“Don’t tell me what to do.” I scowl at him and his accent as he helps lower me into the bed. “I’m calling the police.”

“I would not suggest it.” He walks to my door but does not reach for

the lock or the doorknob. He just keeps going and disappears right through the wood.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Manic Hummingbird

I slide into the navy blue pleather bus seat, and Jaxon slides in after me. Everyone talks excitedly as they arrange themselves in pairs. A field trip on a Friday—what could be better? It takes more than a few tries for Mr. Wardwell to get a word in.

When the class is somewhat settled, the bus lurches forward. I touch the small bandage on the right side of my forehead.

“Does it hurt?” Jaxon asks.

I pull out my strawberry lip gloss and put it on. “Not really. More humiliating than painful.”

“Everyone’s saying Lizzie cast some spell on you and that you literally flew across the hall, smashing into the lockers. So, basically, Salem’s crazy, which we already knew.” He offers me a butterscotch candy and I decline.

I agree that it sounds nuts, and a week ago I would’ve laughed. But I can’t deny that every time I get near her, weird things happen. “I sorta had an epic fall.”

“Yeah, I’m not gonna lie, that was some bad luck.”

“Story of my life.”

“Seriously, though, I’ve seen the Descendants gang up on people before. Don’t worry; they lose interest. They just get off on people thinking they know magic. You’re the perfect target for that.”

“Maybe. It’s just that the stuff with my house freaks me out,” I say before I catch myself. I’m just starting to accept this friend thing, but I’m not ready to tell him about the rock or what happened last night. I haven’t even figured it out myself yet. And it all makes me sound nuts.

Jaxon’s smile disappears. “What stuff with your house?”

“Okay, everyone,” Mr. Wardwell says from the front of the bus. “We are pulling into Gallows Hill Park. And before we get out, I want to make one thing clear: You must stay in the designated areas. If you don’t, you’ll spend the entire field trip on this bus.”

He ushers us out of our seats and into the parking lot.

“What stuff with your house?” Jaxon repeats as we walk onto the circular grassy field surrounded by small hills and bushy trees.

I glance at Lizzie and John in the front of the group. “I’ll explain later.”

“As all of you know,” says Mr. Wardwell, “when citizens of Salem were convicted of witchcraft in 1692, they were sentenced to hang. Witchcraft was a capital crime, and people believed that if they killed the individuals practicing it, they could keep the devil from taking root in their communities.

“The court set group hanging dates, and Sheriff Corwin was charged with picking the execution site. He was instructed that it must be outside the town limits. This location at the time was outside Salem proper, believe it or not. On their assigned hanging day, the convicted witches were bound with their hands behind their backs, placed in the back of carts, and pulled up this hill to my left. Shall we go up?”

We follow him onto a dirt trail and up a hill covered in tall trees. The path gets steeper, and my breath quickens. Through the branches to my right, the dark-haired guy watches me. I stop so fast, I almost lose my balance. A surprised yelp escapes my lips before I steady myself.

“They’re just trying to mess with your head. Don’t let it get to you,” Jaxon says, kicking the ground. I shift my gaze to our feet and to the

last bit of a stick drawing in the dirt of someone hanging. *Mather* is written above it before Jaxon destroys it all with his shoe. He obviously thinks it was Lizzie and John. Maybe it was.

I look back to the trees, but the dark-haired guy's gone. Did I actually see him, or am I so on edge that my mind's playing tricks on me?

"Keep up, everyone!" Mr. Wardwell bellows.

After another minute of climbing a practically vertical trail, we come out on the top of the hill. *How did a cart get up here, much less one carrying people?*

"This is the exact spot where the convicted witches were hanged," Mr. Wardwell says and scans our group. "Bridget Bishop, Sarah Good, Samuel Wardwell, and many more."

I lean toward Jaxon and whisper, "Wait, Mr. Wardwell is descended from a witch?" *No wonder he doesn't like me.*

Jaxon shakes his head. "I think his name is just a coincidence. There was some scandal about it years ago, but I don't really remember."

Mr. Wardwell looks pointedly at me and Jaxon, and we pretend we weren't talking. "Don't let the name of this park fool you. They didn't use gallows in the late sixteen hundreds. Instead, they threw a rope over a high tree branch. The convicted would stand on the back of the cart with nooses around their necks and the cart would roll away."

That's disgusting.

"I'm going to give you all time to look around. Don't wander off this hill. We'll meet back here in ten minutes."

Jaxon grabs my hand. It's warm and feels solid against my own. Heat shoots up my arm and into my cheeks. We follow a small offshoot of the trail to the left and into a patch of trees.

"It's kinda creepy to think about this stuff," I say, trying to pull my attention from his thumb gently rubbing against the back of my hand.

Jaxon shrugs. "I don't even notice it anymore. I've been hearing it my whole life."

Jaxon stops and leans his back against a tree. My hand slips out of

his. "So, now tell me what happened in your house."

Me and my big mouth. "A rock came through my bedroom window with the word DIE scratched into it." Between the sighting, the drawing, and Jaxon's hand, I'm too frazzled to argue about not telling him.

Jaxon's face hardens. "Are you serious? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I mean, what were you going to do about it?"

"Help you find the people who did it and beat their asses." He says this like it's obvious.

Even if one of them might be a figment of my imagination? "I don't know."

"Is that it?" he presses. "Was there anything else that happened?"

I bite my lip and look down.

"You're obviously not telling me something."

"I'm just not good at trusting people, or telling people my problems, or talking in general. Really, the list goes on," I say. Little does he know that this is the most I've opened up in years.

"Try."

"I wasn't kidding when I said people get hurt around me."

"I'm willing to take that chance."

Are you? "You might think I'm crazy."

"I already do."

I smile. "It's not your problem, though."

"Don't you get it?"

"Get what?"

His face softens. "That I like you." He pulls me close to him and my stomach bottoms out. He puts his hands on my hips, and I can feel his fingers guide me.

I place my hands on his chest, trying to concentrate. My body's acting like a lost, manic hummingbird. "It's kinda weird."

"I still wanna know."

My thoughts are too cloudy to protest. "Fine. You win. I'll tell you."

He smiles. "If I was winning, you'd be kissing me right now." He leans close, and his breath is warm on my face. I consider walking away, but my body won't budge. In fact, it's betraying me by moving closer to him. His lips lightly graze mine.

"You taste like strawberries," he says.

His lips press into mine again, only not so softly this time, and everything inside me lights up. He pulls me closer, and I open my mouth.

"Best to leave the letters out of it," a voice says next to me.

I push off Jaxon's chest so hard and so fast that I slam him into the tree he's leaning against. The dark-haired guy stands next to us. I shake my head, hoping he'll disappear.

"I'm sorry, I just thought..." Jaxon says.

"He cannot see me," the dark-haired guy says, as calm as ever.

I look wide-eyed at Jaxon. He doesn't even glance toward the guy standing a foot away from us. *Ghost*. This is just bad. I'm so embarrassed, that I'm angry.

"You need to go away, *now*," I say through clenched teeth.

"Shit. Sorry," Jaxon says. "But you did kiss me back."

The dark-haired guy raises an eyebrow and turns back into the trees. I stand there for a few seconds, trying to make sense of what just happened. He just ruined my first kiss. "Not you. I didn't mean you should go away."

"Well, you said it."

"Ten minutes is just about up!" Mr. Wardwell yells.

I can't do this. It's all too much. From friends to kissing in one day, and now this dead guy who's stalking me. I'll figure out all this stuff about a family curse by myself. I don't need anyone's help. "Jaxon, seriously. I'm not good for anyone. I'm not so sure I'm not cursed." My bottom lip trembles. I turn away and walk toward the class.

Jaxon grabs my arm. "I don't believe in curses."

I brush him off and keep walking. "Just stay away from me before I get you hurt, too." I wish I could crawl in a hole and disappear.

“I don’t want to stay away from you,” he says.

“Well, I want you to.” I fight back tears as I rejoin the group.

“Great, you’re all here! Quiet down, everyone. Now, did you all know that it can take more than an hour to die by hanging?” Mr. Wardwell asks cheerfully.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Salem Isn't Like Other Places

I make a left onto Blackbird Lane, dreading the idea of going home. It's Friday night, and the only thing waiting for me is a ghost who hates me. And Jaxon...I can't even think about him without getting sick with embarrassment. The only thing I have to look forward to is finally visiting my dad on Sunday, when they transfer him to Boston.

I stare at my door without opening it. "Screw this," I say to the house.

I drop my shoulder bag by the side door and turn toward town. I don't know where I'm going, but I'm sick of feeling like someone's going to attack me all the time. I need some space.

I plod down the sidewalk, looking at the pretty houses and quaint shops. People have already started to put out Halloween decorations even though it's mid-September. *Coffee sounds perfect*, I think as I stop in front of a little café named The Brew.

I open the door and a bell chimes. Freshly ground beans and holiday spices fill the honey-colored shop. No one is in line.

"Pumpkin latte," I say to a girl with a high ponytail behind the counter.

“Yup,” says the girl, and grabs a cup. “Last name?” she asks with a marker in hand.

You’ve got to be kidding me. I go into the one freaking coffee shop that writes your last name on the cup instead of your first? This is just not my day.

“Mather,” I say quickly, and hand her my credit card.

The recognition clicks. *Great.* Usually when I have a bad day like this, I put on my jams, get in bed with some mint chocolate chip ice cream, and watch funny movies until I feel better. But the last place I want to be is in my room.

“Pumpkin for Mather!” announces the girl.

Really? You need to yell that? I snatch my latte and give her the stink eye. The cup holder has a coffee stain on it that looks remarkably like a noose. I glance around the shop suspiciously. A few of the customers eye me with thinly veiled judgment. Is it gonna be like this every time I leave the house?

“Why, yes,” I say to the judgy starers with a dramatic accent. “I’m one of *those* Mathers.” The few people not watching now turn toward me. “We do eat babies, but only on Fridays. Oh, wait. It is Friday.” One woman grabs her boyfriend’s hand and walks out.

“Afraid my curse is going to rub off on you? Ooooooh!” I wave my hands, latte included, in the air. Then I stick my tongue out at the lot of them and stamp out. I know there was nothing mature about it, but it did make me feel a little better.

I zigzag through the streets until the sun goes down, counting black houses and how many shop names allude to witches or witchcraft. By one of the antique iron lampposts on the edge of town rest a bouquet of roses and an unlit black candle. Someone must have died here. Probably a car accident. For a moment, I think the roses are black, too, but when I get closer, I realize they’re dark purple.

A few kids from my school walk past me on the sidewalk, headed for the lit-up shops. They point and whisper. I pull up my hood, hoping to disappear in its shadow, and keep walking. This blows.

I cut through an alley and wind up at the entrance of Old Burying

Point. It's surrounded by trees and the backs of old wooden buildings, oddly tucked away in the center of town.

It's cold, now that I'm not speed-walking. Also, it's way darker. Where did the lampposts go? Large gray stones line the ground before the cemetery. I step onto them, leaving the brick of the sidewalk behind, and realize there are words engraved under my feet. I bend down.

"'I am wholly innocent of such wickedness,'" I read out loud.

"Mary Bradbury said that at her trial," says a girl's voice. I turn to find Susannah standing behind me, wearing a black ballerina dress. How did she know it was me with my hood up? Was she following me?

"Oh" is all I say, expecting to see the other Descendants pop up at any moment.

"This is the Witch Trials Memorial." She inspects me for a reaction. "Each of those stone benches has the name of someone who hanged. My ancestor Susannah Martin is over there." She points into the darkness.

"You were named after her?" *That's super creepy.*

"We all were. It's tradition. Our families have done it for generations."

Her casual conversation sets me on edge. *What does she want?* "I'm glad my parents didn't name me Cotton. I don't think it would suit me."

She laughs, and the wind blows a few pieces of her hair around her face. "No, probably not."

"Why are you talking to me?"

She ignores my question. "There's a Mather gravestone in here. Want to see it?"

Now I feel like I'm being set up. I look around, but there's no one in sight. "I guess."

"You don't have to."

"I know I don't have to."

At that, she walks toward a small iron gate. I follow but continue to

look over my shoulder. She points to the shadowed stone slab benches in the Witch Trials Memorial as we pass. “Alice Parker and Mary Parker. Not blood related. Just a lot of Parkers in old Salem.”

There is something heavy and dark about her pointing out the hanged relatives who share names with her best friends. I zip up my hoodie the last inch. “Might as well be family, the way you all stick together.”

“We’ve always been that way.”

Does she mean her and her friends or all their ancestors for the past three hundred years? We make our way through the first few gravestones. They’re discolored, the letters worn with age.

I wonder why she only mentions Mary and Alice. “What about Lizzie and John?”

Susannah opens her mouth but closes it again. After a few seconds, she asks, “Why did you fall into those lockers?”

“I just did.”

“It wasn’t Lizzie,” she says, as though it’s a fact.

“There, we agree.” Although, I never did figure out that thing in the public library.

“I was there. You yelled ‘And you!’ to someone, but there was no one there.” She twists a black beaded bracelet on her wrist, the kind elementary school kids make for friendship.

We walk toward the far right corner of the graveyard. I try to avoid the headstones in the dark. Even so, I worry that I’m standing on someone’s face. Susannah, on the other hand, glides gracefully along.

“I don’t know,” I say.

“I think you do.”

“It’s hard to explain.” What is it about this girl? I shouldn’t tell her things. Her friends hate me. Until ten minutes ago, I thought she hated me. Maybe she does.

“Here.” She points at a small old gravestone.

I shine my cell phone on it. It reads: M^R NATHANAEL MATHER DEC^D OCTOBER Y^e 17, 1688. AN AGED PERSON THAT HAD SEEN BUT NINETEEN WINTERS

IN THE WORLD.

“Did you see someone in the hallway?” she asks.

I hesitate.

“You did, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

She furrows her brow. “I thought so,” she says, and after a pause, “I have to go.”

She got what she wanted, and now she’s leaving. I shouldn’t have told her. She heads for the graveyard exit at a much faster pace than we came in.

I struggle to keep up. “Wait, that’s it?”

“Yes.”

“Why do you care that I saw something in the hallway, anyway? And what was that you were saying about John’s great-grandfather dying the other day?”

She stops abruptly on the brick sidewalk by the entrance to the graveyard. *Oops. I just openly admitted to eavesdropping.* Maybe I need to work on this filter thing a little more.

She turns toward me. “Be careful, Sam.”

Is that a warning or a threat? “What do I need to be careful of?”

She looks over her shoulder and back at me. “Salem isn’t like other places.”

“Well, that I know.” I hate this. I can’t continue to live with horrible anxiety that some dark-haired lunatic will pop in or goth nutjobs will terrorize me at school.

“No, you don’t know,” she says, and turns toward town without another word.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Common and Uncouth

Mr. Wardwell gets in his car, parked on the sidewalk near my gate. He doesn't see me in the dark and pulls away from the curb by the time I get to the driveway.

I run for my house, anger propelling me forward. "Vivian!" I yell as I open the door, but there is no need. She is standing fifteen feet away from me at the small table covered in mail. "What was Mr. Wardwell doing here?"

"He was helping to fix the window."

"In my bedroom?" I ask, getting louder.

"Yes."

"How did that happen? That is *not* okay." My world is spinning out of control.

She stiffens. "I met him at the hardware store, and he brought over his repair guy. Really, Sam, I don't appreciate being grilled on this subject."

I narrow my eyes. "My dad is in the hospital."

She puts down the mail. "I know exactly where your father is. Don't you dare ever make an insinuation like that again."

I march straight to my room and slam the door. I glare at the new glass in my window and pace around in circles.

“Ghost?” I say out loud. “Hellllo? Where are you?”

Silence.

“Go ahead. Ignore me. I’ll just go straight downstairs and destroy that painting of Abigail.”

I head for my door, but before I get there, he blocks my path. I almost walk smack into him. His hands wrap around my arms. He squeezes so hard it hurts.

“The arrogance.” His gray eyes fix on mine. “Summoning me like a dog.” His accent’s more pronounced when he’s annoyed.

“I don’t care if you don’t like me,” I say. “I don’t like you, either.”

“Keep my sister’s name off your lips.”

I lift my chin and use the voice my dad uses when doing business with difficult people. “I want to make a deal with you.” He relaxes his grip a little, and I can tell I’ve surprised him. “Help me figure out if I’m cursed and how to break it, and I’ll leave this house.”

He lets go of me. “I have no reason to trust you.”

“Then we’re even.”

“I could make you leave without the bargain.”

“Yeah, but I could do a lot of damage before I go. There’s all kinds of stuff around here covered in black-eyed Susans.”

There is a long pause. “Yes.”

I let out the breath I didn’t know I was holding. “Good. Where do we start?”

“That is not something I know.”

“But you’ve been around for three hundred years, watching people. You have to know something.”

“I have not been in Salem since the late sixteen hundreds.”

“At all?”

“No.”

“Where were you?”

“Other places.”

Could he be more vague? “Why?”

“That is my business.”

“Okay, fine. What do you know about my family?”

“Very little. I know that Increase Mather was well respected in the seventeenth century and quite influential in Boston, that his son Cotton Mather followed in his footsteps, and that his tenth or eleventh great-granddaughter, Samantha Mather, is common.”

“Did you just call me common?”

“I believe I did.”

I clench my teeth. “You’re a jackass.”

“Common and uncouth.”

“I wasn’t born in the sixteen hundreds! Girls curse. Get used to it.”

“I would rather not.”

I grab my head in frustration. “Fine. Don’t. Let’s go to my grandmother’s secret study and I’ll show you what I found.”

“The study is mine. I designed it.”

“I don’t care whose study it is. Just meet me there.”

He disappears. I kick my boots off to avoid making noise in the hallways and close my door gently behind me. I hope he’s not a figment of my imagination. Who in their right mind would create an imaginary person who insults them?

There’s no sign of Vivian as I creep through the hallways and enter the library, but I don’t turn on the lights, just to be safe. Instead, I navigate the tables and books with the light from my phone. I run my fingers along the arch of the brick fireplace and pull the hook.

The door pops open, and a soft glow illuminates the end of the hallway. *Great. The ghost took the lantern?* It must be convenient to disappear from one place and appear in another.

When I reach the top of the stairs, he’s standing in the middle of the room on a faded rug. For a second, I realize how out of place I am compared to him. These antiques match him, make him more attractive and proud than he already is.

“What’s your name? I can’t keep calling you dark-haired dude in my head.”

He frowns. “I would rather you did not call me that, as well. My name is Elijah Roe.”

Odd name, but it suits him. I walk to my grandmother’s desk and sit down, thumbing through her journal.

“Here.” I show him the entry referencing the curse, and he moves close to me.

While he reads, I sift through papers for the deaths of the descendants my grandmother mapped out. I don’t have to look far; the folder rests on the top of a nearby pile.

There are fifty or so pages of death statistics in the folder. I flip through and find that she circled three years in red. And in those years, all the descendants she was tracking died in a very short time frame. My stomach drops. This doesn’t bode well for my dad. I shake my head and try to concentrate on the numbers. I don’t understand the pattern, but I can see there is one.

Elijah hands me the journal. “An old woman’s diary does not constitute evidence of a curse.”

If I didn’t want to figure this out so badly, I would tell him what he could do with his comment. “Look, this is where she mapped out the deaths of the descendants. It includes all the main families involved with the Witch Trials.” I hand him the folder. “My life is falling apart, and if my grandmother’s right and it’s because of some stupid curse, then I want to know.”

He takes the death records.

“I know this whole thing sounds ridiculous,” I say. “No one knows that more than me. I don’t even believe in ghosts. Salem has warped my mind.”

“Spirits,” he replies.

“What?”

“We are called spirits. ‘Ghost’ is a vulgar term.”

“Well, *pardonnez-moi*.” I can’t help myself.

He raises an eyebrow. “This will take careful consideration. The records are incomplete in recent years. I will amend them.”

“Great.” Before the word leaves my mouth, he’s gone.

I sit back in my grandmother’s chair and push my hair away from my face. I hope I didn’t just make a very stupid deal.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Delicate Things

I stare at the picture of me and my dad in Paris.

My dad held a glossy pastry in his hands, with cream billowing from the top. “Sam, you’re about to eat the most delicious thing you’ve ever tasted. And I’m the lucky one that gets to be here to witness it. If you pass out from delight, don’t say I didn’t warn you first.”

I grinned foolishly at my dad as he hoisted me up onto his lap. He placed the large cream puff into my small hands.

“Now, hold on. Before you bite it, we should document this moment.” My dad waved at a pretty woman about to enter the café we were sitting outside of. “Mademoiselle, pardon. Pouvez-vous prendre une photo de nous?”

She smiled at my dad as he handed her his camera. She had a loose braid, long legs, and high heels. “Of course I will.”

“Now, wait a second, something can be improved here,” my dad said as he pulled me closer. “And I know just what it is.” He swiped a piece of cream from the pastry and put it on my nose. “That’s it. Perfection.”

I laughed, and my dad wrapped his arms around me. He was right. In that moment, everything was perfect.

I put down the picture. *One more day until I see you.* My cell phone is next to the frame and I notice a missed call from Jaxon from late last night. I cringe, remembering our botched kiss.

I push back the covers and slide my feet into black flip-flops. The black-eyed Susan in the slender vase on my bedside table catches my eye and I touch its silky petals. There's no way this is the same flower as when I got here. Elijah must replace it. He must have really loved his sister. I wonder what happened to her.

I listen for heels clicking as I walk down the hallway, but everything's silent.

"Elijah?" I whisper in the front foyer. No response.

I should've asked him about the hanging location. He just left too fast. *Whatever.* I'll find the house my grandmother talked about myself. I'm curious about it anyway, and I'll need it for that history paper. I can't write "The ghost in my house told me" in my footnote and expect it to go over as hard evidence.

I push the kitchen door open. A faint smell of coffee lingers. Vivian left some in the pot for me. I grab a white mug from the cupboard and see the #1 DAD mug behind it. I gave it to my dad on his birthday when I was in fourth grade. He used it every morning since. He said he's proud of the title and wants everyone to know. It's one of the few things I brought from the NYC apartment.

I mix a generous amount of cream and sugar into my coffee and make my way to the back door. I step onto the patio and sit at the white cast-iron table. It smells like the beginning of fall.

"Samantha!" booms Mrs. Meriwether from her enormous garden. She waves with a handful of herbs.

I look around. No Jaxon in sight. "Good morning, Mrs. Meriwether!"

"Have you had breakfast?"

"No." Then I quickly add, "But I'm alright."

"Nonsense. Come over and have some with me. Jaxon usually sleeps

for a few more hours, and I'm just about to sit down."

"Don't worry. I'm okay."

"I don't see Vivian's car in the driveway, and I would hate to think you're hungry over there when I have so much food."

"I'm in my pajamas." I glance at my black plaid jams.

"Best clothes in a person's wardrobe," she replies, and I give up. There's no resisting this cheerful woman.

I walk off the patio into the damp grass. I might seriously regret this decision if Jaxon wakes up and finds me at his kitchen table. But she did say he sleeps late. Maybe I can find out something about my grandmother.

Mrs. Meriwether opens the back door. "Come on in."

She leads me toward the dining room table, which is made from weathered wood and has the same rustic edges as everything else in the house. Eggs, strawberry waffles, and hash browns are laid out in an impressive display.

I sit. "This looks amazing."

"You'll have to come over more often. I never have enough people to cook for. Should've had a dozen children."

I smile at her and pile food on my plate. "Mrs. Meriwether, you were close with my grandmother, right?"

"Charlotte was a second mother to me. Took care of her right up until the end."

"What was she like? I mean, was she..." I want to say "sane," but that sounds so rude. "Clear-minded when she got older?"

"Charlotte had a mind of her own. People didn't always understand her." She pauses. "Her eccentricities were more pronounced with age, especially her belief in the unseen. But yes, she had a perfectly sound mind until the day she passed."

"Do you believe in things you can't see?" I ask, not really sure how to address the curse or the grumpy ghost.

"Almost everything worth believing in cannot be seen. Love, for instance."

“I never really thought about that.”

“Sam?” Jaxon says behind me. *Shitballs.*

Mrs. Meriwether notices my reaction. “Jaxon, you’re awake before noon. Isn’t this a lovely surprise.”

“I heard voices,” he says. *Join the club.*

“Take a seat. I’ll get you a plate.”

He sits at the end of the table, between me and Mrs. Meriwether. She heads toward the kitchen, and I stare at my food.

“I’ll go,” I say as soon as she’s out of earshot.

“Why?”

“You know why, because of...well, yesterday.”

“So you’re mad at me?” He frowns.

“What? No. I’m just...I don’t know what I am.”

Mrs. Meriwether returns with a plate and a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice. She looks at us. “Need to go check on my macarons. Delicate things, you know.”

When she’s out of the room, I get up.

“Sam, stop. I won’t kiss you anymore. I just don’t wanna fight.”

“Believe me. It’s not that.”

He looks relieved. “So you do want me to kiss you?”

My face turns bright red. “Sometimes I seriously want to knock you out.”

“I’m not afraid of some stupid curse, or whatever you think is wrong with you.”

I sit back down and lower my voice. I’m not thrilled about Mrs. Meriwether overhearing this. “I know you don’t believe me. But I’m not lying. One of my best friends fell down the stairs in my apartment building. Another got hit by a car when we were crossing the street. I attract disaster.”

He ignores my warning. “You wouldn’t have come here if you were trying to avoid me. You’re at my house in your pajamas.”

“I came because your mom invited me.”

He looks at me like I can't possibly be serious.

"Okay, fine." I pick my fork back up. "So what?"

"So, you like me." He smiles, shoveling eggs onto his plate.

I can't help it. I laugh. *I do like you, more than you know.* What if something does happen to Jaxon and it's my fault? I couldn't live with that.

"You still taking me on a date to that house today?" Jaxon asks.

I smile. "Not if you put it like that."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Black House

I study the map I made of the house's location.

"It's definitely in those woods. I'm telling you," Jaxon says.

I frown at the large trees, not willing to accept that truth. I'm not an off-roader. "I didn't bring a flashlight."

He laughs. "It's the middle of the afternoon."

Woods always make me nervous. I grew up on concrete.

"If your map's right, then I know the house you're talking about... know *of*, anyway. It's one of those things that everyone dares each other to find on Halloween. There's an old tale about it."

"Oh, that makes me feel much better."

"It's just a bunch of ghost stories. Nothing to worry about. None of it's true."

He doesn't know it, but that's the worst thing he could have said. "What if we get lost?"

"We won't. I have a compass on my phone."

Cell phones. That's right. At least there's that. "Okay, but who lives in the middle of the woods? It doesn't seem natural."

I walk reluctantly. The moment we hit the shade of the trees, I

shiver.

“It looks like there’s an old trail headed in the right direction. See how the growth is younger over there?” Jaxon points ahead and to the right at some short brush. “Also, I’m sure it wasn’t weird to live this way when the house was built. It’s not like they had paved roads then.”

The idea of no paved roads only makes me feel more out of control. A bird caws, and I grab Jaxon’s arm. He slips his hand into mine, and I’m too consumed with nerves to analyze my feelings about it.

He stops to look at the ground around us. “If your map’s right, I think it’s up this hill.”

“You’re paying attention to which way we walked, right?”

“You know, it’s pretty cute the way you’re ready to punch John out in the middle of a hallway like it’s nothing, but trees scare you.”

“I’m not scared.” Neither of us believes me.

“Then maybe I should tell you the story about this place.”

My stomach twists. “Wouldn’t bother me at all.”

He puts on the dramatic voice he used to tell me that Giles Corey was pressed to death. “Legend has it, an old woman lived out here for hundreds of years. She wasn’t ugly like in storybooks, but she had mean eyes. And she could kill you just by looking at you. She ate birds, and her house was filled with their dead bodies. Most of all, she hated people who were in love. Once in a while a young couple would wander too far out and would never be seen again.”

Strangely, that made me feel better. “That’s ridiculous.”

“Yup. Told you it was.”

“People actually believe that crap?”

“People believe a lot of weird stuff in Salem.”

Through the trees ahead of us, a rundown two-story black house becomes visible. The windows are made up of tiny panes, half of which are broken. The trees press close to the sides and vines overgrow parts of the walls.

Every instinct I have tells me to turn around and go home. “You guys really like your black houses here.”

“Yeah.” Jaxon scratches his neck with his free hand. “That’s weird. It’s not more than a mile into the forest.”

“Why is that weird?”

“I’ve just never heard of anyone actually seeing it before. I mean, if it’s only a mile in, it should be totally findable. I considered telling you before we started that it was most likely made up. But I didn’t want to ruin the adventure of searching for it.”

I have to force my body to continue toward the house. “So what are you saying?”

Jaxon grins. “You must be good luck.”

“Well, that would be a first.”

“Wanna go in?”

“Not really. But we need to go to the second floor to look out the bedroom window to see the hanging location.” My palm sweats against Jaxon’s.

“If you want, I’ll go in and take a look, and you can wait here,” Jaxon offers.

“Yeah, that’s definitely not happening.”

We approach the front door, and he grabs the door handle. Very unfortunately, it unlatches. Why isn’t this thing boarded up?

The door opens into a large, empty room with a fireplace at one end, like the one in my library. There is barely any light, and I step tentatively onto the creaky floorboards. It smells like decaying leaves. The strange thing is, it’s too clean.

“I don’t get it. This place has been abandoned for a long time, right? Shouldn’t there be graffiti or garbage or something?”

“Maybe we’re the first people to find it.”

I don’t buy it. “Let’s just go upstairs and get this over with.”

There is a narrow hallway to the left of the room. And in it, the bottom steps of a staircase are shadowed in dim light. Jaxon heads for it and I stay close behind him, gripping his hand and trying to steady myself. The stairs groan under our feet. Jaxon stops.

“What?” I ask reflexively.

“Nothing—just a broken stair. Be careful.”

Behind me, a step creaks. “Did you hear that?” I ask as we maneuver around the broken stair. “The steps creaking when we were standing still?”

“Sam, it’s an old house. They make noises.”

I’m not convinced. I look over my shoulder every two seconds. I don’t know what I’m expecting to see, but whatever it is, I don’t want to see it.

Reaching the top of the staircase, we find ourselves in another small hallway. There are two doors to choose from. Jaxon drops my hand and heads for the one on the left. He opens it.

“It’s too small for the master bedroom,” I say from the hallway, not wanting to go in if I don’t have to.

Jaxon walks past me and toward the second door. The wood whines as he opens it, and I wrinkle my nose at the dusty, stagnant air. It’s larger than the first room and has a broken rope bed frame and a few pieces of decrepit furniture.

Jaxon smiles optimistically. “At least there’s only one window in here. Makes it easy to figure out where to look.”

I approach the shattered diamond-shaped panes. “And it also makes it dark.”

“Look.” Jaxon points to the wall behind the rope bed. “Your name.”

My muscles tighten. *What did he just say?* I leave the window. As I get closer to him, I notice the walls are covered floor to ceiling with writing, blurred under a layer of dirt. Near Jaxon’s finger are written *Charles* and *Samantha*. All the blood drains from my face.

“That’s not funny. Charles is my dad’s name.” I knew I shouldn’t have come here.

Jaxon gestures at the room. “Sam, did you see these walls? They’re covered with names and crazy stuff. I’m sure it’s just a coincidence.”

“How do you explain that our names are together?”

“They’re both really common names. I thought it’d make you feel better. This is the graffiti you were missing downstairs.”

I look at the writing more closely. “No, this looks like the rants of a psychotic person who was locked in here for years. Let’s find that hanging spot and get outta here.”

I walk back to the window, my skin crawling. *I want out of this place.* The windowsill has carvings that look like bird feathers. I can’t help but think about Jaxon’s ridiculous story.

Jaxon joins me. “Okay, definitely wasn’t expecting that,” he says as he takes in the view. Over the tops of the trees there’s a small hill way in the distance just behind the Walgreens.

Walgreens? “No. No way. That’s crazy.”

He nods. “It’s the only hill in sight. Everything else’s flat. If the letter you found was right and you can see the hill from this window, that’s the place.”

I lean forward to get a better view of the forest, and place my hand against the weathered frame. A woman sobs, a deep rib-cracking wail. I whip around. My heartbeat pounds in my ears. “What was that? Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“A woman crying.”

Jaxon puts his hand on my lower back, and I jump. The walls with their writing feel claustrophobic. I can’t stay here. I head for the exit, not waiting for him. As my feet hit the hallway, the door at the end of it slams shut. I lunge for the staircase.

“Sam, it’s just the wind,” Jaxon says as he tries to keep up with me. I can hear him grinning.

I jump over the broken stair. “So not okay.”

I’m moving so fast, I’m positive I’m going to trip. I sprint through the room with the fireplace and swing the front door open. An amused Jaxon follows me out. I shake my hands in front of me, trying to get the feeling of the house off me.

“Honestly,” I say, speed-walking away from the awful place, “you didn’t hear that?”

“Sam, it was a bird.”

I slow down a little and look at him. “Maybe.”

“Definitely.”

“Let’s just get out of these woods. Worst place ever,” I say.

“Yeah, you’re officially off date location duty.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Death Records

Jaxon and I walk up my redbrick driveway as the last bit of light leaves the horizon. Under the overhang of the doorway stands Elijah. *Did he find something?*

“I’m gonna go over to Dillon’s house in a bit. He’s having a couple of people over. You should come,” says Jaxon.

I stop a few feet away from the overhang.

“She will be otherwise engaged,” says Elijah.

I glare at him before I catch myself. “Actually, I need to get up early in the morning. We’re driving to Boston to see my dad.”

Jaxon moves closer to me. “I’ll text you tomorrow, then.”

“Say farewell or I will for you,” says Elijah.

In any other circumstance I would tell him where to stick it, but I just made up with Jaxon and I don’t need to look crazy again.

“Sounds good,” I say, and turn toward my door just as Jaxon leans forward.

Jaxon lingers for a few seconds before turning toward his house. I push my door open and close it before Elijah can follow. It doesn’t matter, though, because he walks right through the wall.

“What the hell, Elijah? Are you trying to embarrass me?”

“Who’s Elijah?” Vivian asks, entering the foyer. She’s in a particularly good mood.

I look down at the mail on the table, trying to act casual.

“You succeed artfully in embarrassment without any help from me,” Elijah says.

“No one important,” I say to Vivian. “A boy at school.”

Vivian’s eyebrows push together. “Then why were you talking to him in our foyer?”

“I wasn’t. I was talking to myself.”

“Right.” Her look of worry turns to a smile. “Are you hungry? I thought we might go out for a change. Celebrate your father’s transfer.”

“No thanks. I grabbed some food with Jaxon on my way home.”

“Suit yourself,” she says.

I walk past her and up to my room, Elijah by my side.

“Don’t do that!” I whisper, and close my bedroom door behind me.

“I do not enjoy waiting,” he says flatly, his wavy hair brushing against his cheek.

“Then why didn’t you come find me?”

“I have no intention of searching all of Salem for you.”

I scowl. “I was trying to find the hanging location. Which I could’ve just asked you for and saved myself a lot of trouble, if you didn’t disappear last night.”

“It is behind the Walgreens.”

“I know!” I snap, although I wasn’t convinced until he confirmed it.

“I have made sense of the death records.”

“Really?” Curiosity replaces my annoyance.

He picks up a few sheets of paper from my window seat and sits down. The handwriting on them is in old-fashioned cursive. I sit down next to him, and for just a second I swear he smells like freshly cut grass.

“At first glance, the clustering of death tolls follows no discernible pattern.”

He speaks with his old-world accent. His eyelashes are long, longer than mine, and his eyebrows are perfectly shaped. It seems unfair that they're on a guy, especially a dead one.

“I looked for medical causes, but there was nothing out of the ordinary during the years your grandmother dog-eared. In fact, the rest of Salem's population was birthing and dying at a perfectly consistent rate.”

“Is there something different about the Witch Trials' families?”

“Kindly do not interrupt me,” he says with anything but kindness.

Kindly I will smack you in your perfect face.

“After a few false starts, I mapped out the approximate population size of the Witch Trials' families. My efforts showed that there was a significant increase in the number of descendants living in Salem around years with more deaths. And, more important, there were members from each of the major families in Salem itself. In years when there were not, everything was status quo.”

“So it has to do with the number of descendants in Salem? I'm not following.”

“The deaths appear to start when critical mass is reached,” he says.

“Elijah! What does that mean?”

“Stay in school, Samantha.”

You arrogant SOB.

“At least one descendant from each major family must be present in Salem. The moment they are, the deaths start.”

My thoughts go straight to my dad. “What about now? Are there descendants from all the families in Salem?”

“Yes.”

My stomach drops. “Are you sure?”

“By the proportionately largest number to date.”

My mouth is dry. I know the answer to this question, but like a moth drawn to a flame, I feel compelled to ask it. “Have there been any

descendant deaths?”

“Seven. All since you moved here. You were the only missing lineage.”

And John’s great-grandfather was one of them. “Seven? Maybe it’s over?”

“Unlikely, if you compare the numbers to previous years. If I had to guess, I would say there are a lot more coming.”

It’s hard to breathe. I look at his papers to make sense of the figures he’s written out. But when I see the death count at twenty-five for a previous year, I wish I hadn’t. *Please don’t let my dad be one of them. Please.*

“So there is definitely a curse. You see that, right?” I start pacing. *We actually moved my dad closer to Salem from New York. Does that make it worse? Can we transfer him back?*

“I do not know.”

“But you admit that it’s more than a coincidence?”

“It is unusual, yes.”

“How are you so calm?”

“I am already dead.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

You'll Never Be Alone

“Room ten-twenty-seven is that way,” says the nurse, and points down the hospital corridor.

I don't wait for her to finish her sentence before I take off running. A surprised visitor jumps out of my way as my feet pound down the hall. I swing my dad's door open and let out my breath. His face is covered with tubes, but I'm used to that.

His blankets are neatly tucked around him. They're a different shade of blue from the last hospital's. I touch his arm, the one without the IV and heart monitor.

Vivian clicks into the room and shuts the door behind her. “You almost knocked that man over.”

“Uh-huh,” I say, without paying attention.

I sit on my dad's bed and hold his hand. Without thinking, I trace the cooking scar on his pointer finger. *He looks the same.* I examine the streaks of white around his temples. Maybe a little thinner than last time I saw him, but not too different.

“We moved to Salem,” I say. “After all those times I bugged you to take me there, we're living in Grandma's house. It's enormous. I can't

believe you grew up in that place. I get lost trying to find the bathroom....I'm using your bedroom. The one you had as a kid, with different furniture, though.

"Mrs. Meriwether fixed it up for me. She told me you guys were best friends when you were little." I laugh. "You never told me about her. She's kinda great. And, holy moly, her cooking is out of control."

I examine his palm. "When you wake up, maybe you can tell me about Grandma—" I stop short. His heart monitor alarm wails.

"Why is it doing that?" I ask Vivian.

She steps forward, examining the display of his vitals, and shakes her head. "Did you knock the monitor off his finger?"

"No." I run to the door. But by the time I get there, a nurse comes in.

She feels his pulse, and presses a button on the intercom. "I need two nurses in ten-twenty-seven now."

My hands shake. "What's wrong? What happened?"

Two men in scrubs enter. "I'm gonna need you to leave the room," the first one says.

"Let's give them some room to work, Sam," says Vivian, heading for the door.

"No!" I yell. My dad's heartbeat flatlines. "Dad! Please. You can't. I don't know....Please, Dad. I need you!"

One of the male nurses catches me before I reach the hospital bed. The first nurse pulls out a set of defibrillators. They open my dad's gown.

"It's okay," the male nurse tells me. "I'm gonna take you out of here."

I can't get my breath. I try, but there's only wheezing. The room spins.

The nurse guides me toward a chair in the hallway.

"Breathe, Sam," says Vivian.

I can barely hear her. This isn't happening. My dad isn't dying. Minutes pass. I don't know how many. I close my eyes and attempt to breathe.

I pulled my knees closer and my back pressed into the cold steps outside my apartment building as my dad's town car pulled up.

"Sam?" He didn't say his usual goodbye and thank you to his driver. He knew why I was perched outside in the dark against the railing.

I held up a few jagged pieces of hair hanging above my shoulder. "They cut my braid off."

He sat down next to me and forced a smile. "That's just because they knew how pretty you'd look with short hair."

My lip trembled as I held up my one remaining long braid to show him how bad my situation was. "They laughed." A few tears fell onto my cheeks.

He grabbed my hand and easily hoisted me from my sitting position. "Come on."

I let him lead me into our well-lit lobby, with its big chandelier. He headed straight for the doorman's desk and grabbed a pair of scissors. Without any hesitation, he cut off a big chunk of his own black hair right from the front.

I was so shocked that I stopped crying.

"There. Now we're the same. You'll never be alone, Samantha. As long as I am in this world, I'll be there with you. What do I always tell you?"

"Fall down seven times, stand up eight."

"And what are you going to do?"

"Stand up."

"That's my girl. Now, should we go show Vivian our new haircuts? Maybe she'll want one."

I couldn't help but laugh. The thought of Vivian cutting her own hair was too ridiculous. I leaned into my dad's side, and he held me while we waited for the elevator.

The first nurse comes out of my dad's room. She approaches Vivian. "He's stable," she says, and my chest releases its grip on my lungs. "He may have had a heart attack, but it's hard to tell until the doctor sees

him.”

“Will he be alright?” Vivian asks, and I stand.

“For now, yes,” says the nurse. “I would wait a couple of days before visiting again. He just transferred here, and sometimes patients have a bad reaction to moving. I would give us a few days to monitor him. We’ll be in touch if anything changes.”

“Can I see him?” I ask.

“I would let him rest, Sam,” says Vivian. “We’ll come back when he’s more stable.”

“Why don’t we just wait here until he’s more stable?”

The nurse interjects. “I really think it best you go home.”

“Thank you. We’ll do that,” says Vivian.

“Please, can I say goodbye?” I ask.

The nurse looks unsure. “Just be quick.”

I run into his room before anyone can object. His tubes are back in place, and except for his disrupted bedsheets, you would never know anything happened. I kiss him on the forehead.

“I promise I’ll fix this,” I whisper. “I won’t let anything happen to you. I love you.”

The nurse opens the door, and I back away, taking a mental picture of him as I go.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Way to Say Goodbye

“We should transfer him back to New York,” I say to Vivian as we turn down our street. This is the most I’ve spoken since we left the hospital.

“Don’t be ridiculous. You heard what that nurse said about travel being hard on patients. It could be bad for him.”

“I don’t trust it here. He’d be better off in New York.”

“Where you couldn’t see him?”

“I’d take the bus.”

Vivian shakes her head. “We’ll talk about this when you’ve calmed down.”

“I am calm,” I say as we bounce into our driveway.

“Sam, you seem really unsettled lately. Agitated, even. I know this move has been stressful. Maybe it’s best if you talk to someone about it.” She puts the car in park and turns toward me, dropping her jeweled wrist from the steering wheel.

“You mean therapy.”

“Well, you haven’t been sleeping, and you’ve been seeing things. I just think it’s worth thinking about. I have a few errands to run, but

maybe we can chat about it when I get home.”

I get out of the car, shaking. “I’m *not* going to therapy and I’m *not* seeing things. My dad is in a coma. Just because *you* can sleep doesn’t mean I can.”

“Well, that’s more than a little unfair.”

I slam the car door.

She speeds away in reverse. The back bumper of her car scratches against the dip at the mouth of the driveway. How did we wind up like this, where we fight more than not? I unlock the side door, and the heaviness of my situation presses down on me with a steel hand.

I only make it to the middle of the foyer before I sit on the floor. I fold over and put my forehead on the wood. My back shakes and tears fall down my cheeks.

“Elijah?” I say through my sobs. I lift my head off the floor. “I know you don’t like to be summoned, but I need your help. Please.”

He appears. “Let me help you up, Samantha.”

“I don’t care about me.” I wipe my tears with the back of my sleeve. “I only care about my dad. I don’t want him to die. I’ll do anything. Help me break the curse.”

He sighs. “I am helping; I made that confounded deal with you.”

“I mean really help, like you care, like you would if it were Abigail.”

His eyes get a faraway look.

“What if I leave Salem and transfer my dad back to New York? Then all the families won’t be here—”

“An elderly descendant died in her sleep while you were in Boston today. I don’t believe it will make any difference if you leave now.”

My heart sinks.

“Please, you must get off the floor.” Elijah offers me his hand, and I take it. His palm is cold the way it was when it was pressed against my mouth. He pulls me into a standing position and tucks my hand into the crook of his arm.

We walk into the living room, and he gestures toward the white couches. “Sit.”

“You’re the bossiest person I’ve ever met,” I say, but plop down onto a cushion anyway. I wipe the remaining dampness from under my eyes. He grabs some wood to start a fire.

“I am a lot older than you. I know better.”

“You don’t look a lot older.”

“That is beside the point.”

“How old were you when you died?”

He lights the kindling and closes the screen around the fire.
“Eighteen.”

“You loved Abigail a lot, didn’t you?”

Looking at him standing next to the mantel, flames lighting up his face, I can’t help but think how attractive he is. “Yes. Our parents died when I was fifteen and Abigail was thirteen. It became my responsibility to take over my father’s business. I dedicated myself to caring for her so she would not have to endure living with our relatives. We were as close as any two people could be.”

“What happened to her?”

“I am not going to discuss that, Samantha. I have said too much already.”

“You haven’t said anything. I barely know anything about you except that you want me to leave.”

“That is enough.”

I sigh. “Fine. Don’t talk to me. But will you help me?”

He sits down in one of the white armchairs. “Yes, if I can. But you may not like everything I have to suggest.”

“Like what?”

His movements are elegant as he adjusts his posture. “I do not think you will disrupt this pattern by yourself.”

“I have Jaxon and Mrs. Meriwether...and you. Who else do I need?”

“I believe it will require the assistance of the Descendants.”

“Those nuts?” My face falls. “You’re right. I don’t like that suggestion.”

“Considering that these deaths do not affect your family alone, I think it prudent to inform the potentially injured parties. They may be able to help with information.”

“Of all the things you could’ve said, you had to say that? Now I feel guilty if I don’t tell them. I don’t know. Maybe they can help. We don’t even know how the curse started.”

“If there is such a curse, I imagine it started with the Trials.”

“Well, what was the cause of the Salem Witch Trials?” As soon as the question leaves my mouth, I remember Lizzie’s answer from class. “It was Cotton Mather, wasn’t it?”

He looks like he’s reliving unpleasant memories. “He was a main player but not the only one. Give me time to think about it.”

“Can I borrow your notes on the descendants’ deaths?”

“If you want them.”

“If I have to convince a group of people who hate me to help solve a curse that could be killing our families...I can’t even say this without thinking I sound one hundred percent crazy. Anyway, I just need those notes, otherwise I have no chance with the Descendants.”

He nods and disappears.

“Way to say goodbye.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

People Are Dying

I slip into my seat next to Susannah in homeroom before the bell. It's Monday morning of week two at Salem High, and my situation has only gotten more anxiety-inducing.

"Alice," I say. Might as well go straight to the difficult one.

Alice, Mary, and Susannah turn—black clothes and dark expressions. There's something undeniably beautiful about them. If they weren't so mean, I'd feel the same awe other people do.

"Look, I know you hate me. But I know something important about your families that you'll wanna hear."

"I doubt you have anything to say that I want to hear," says Alice. "Unless it's the sound of you shutting the hell up."

"Talking to you is basically the last thing that I want to do. But, again, it's important."

"Well, what is it?" asks Mary.

Alice glares at her. "Mary, stop."

"What if it's actually important, Alice? She said it was about our families."

Alice rolls her eyes before facing me. "You have thirty seconds."

Man, I so wish I didn't have to be nice to you. “It can't be explained in thirty seconds.”

“That took ten. Twenty seconds left.” Alice waits to see if I'll challenge her.

It takes all my willpower to smother my frustration. “The simplest way to say it is...we're cursed.”

Mary laughs. “You mean, you're cursed.”

I can't help but wince. “I mean *we*, as in all of us. As in people are dying.”

Mary laughs again, but Alice and Susannah don't. The bell rings.

“Welcome to Monday morning,” says Mrs. Hoxley. “Fresh start to the week. We only have one announcement. This Wednesday, school's canceled for Remembrance Day—the official start to Salem's History Month.” People hoot. “Now I'll give you time to sort your schedules and finish your homework. There will be *no* talking.”

Mrs. Hoxley scans the room, looking for dissent. And even though I never talk, she glares at me. She's hated me since the pastry incident, when she threw up in the middle of the hallway.

I pull out my agenda. I honestly don't know how I'm gonna get these girls to talk to me long enough to convince them. I'd think I was crazy, too. What a nightmare.

Susannah slips a note onto my desk. It reads *Explain*.

I stare at the small piece of paper without a clue what to write. I make three failed attempts, which sound equivalent to “my gut told me something was wrong and then—bingo—I figured out people were dying.”

With one minute left to homeroom, I write *read these*, and pass the note back with Elijah's handwritten papers. Mrs. Hoxley looks ready to comment, but the bell cuts her off.

The Descendants leave without a glance. At least Susannah takes the papers with her. I shove my stuff in my bag and rush to history. I didn't return Jaxon's texts yesterday, and I'd like to explain before class starts.

I barely step one foot inside the door when Mr. Wardwell says, “Sam, you’ve been called to the principal’s office.”

“But—”

“No buts. Head over there.”

I glance at Jaxon’s empty seat and leave. What’s this all about? Susannah wouldn’t give those papers to a teacher, would she? I would look like a total psychopath.

When I open the heavy glass door to the principal’s office, the secretary’s eyes are glued to a book. I walk right past him, and I turn the handle of the door that says PRINCIPAL BRENNAN in a large font. Vivian sits in a chair facing Brennan’s desk. I freeze.

“Is Dad okay? What happened?”

“Your father’s fine. Jimmy here just wanted to have a chat with us,” Vivian says in her I’m-the-nicest-person voice. *Gross, did she just call him Jimmy?*

I look between them and take the seat next to Vivian. Am I in trouble?

“Now, Sam,” Brennan says, “I know you’ve struggled to adjust in your first week at Salem High. Which is perfectly understandable given your father’s illness and all. But it’s come to my attention that the problem is larger than I imagined.”

At least this isn’t about those papers I gave to Susannah. “Okay?”

“I think it best you visit the school counselor once a week for the next couple of months, to monitor your progress,” Brennan continues.

“Monitor my progress? Like therapy?” I glare at Vivian. I’ll give her one thing; she’s persistent.

“Not therapy. Just an informal check-in. Jimmy—’scuse me, *Principal Brennan*—thought it would make your transition easier. That way you could discuss anything that’s bothering you.”

“No.”

“Sam.” Principal Brennan runs his hand through his thinning hair. “It’s not a request. I want you to go to the counseling office and set a schedule with Mrs. Lippy before you return to class.”

“You want me to go talk to someone named Mrs. Lippy? If you—”

“Let’s discuss this outside.” Vivian cuts me off. “Don’t worry, Principal Brennan. I’ll handle it.”

He looks at me sharply, but Vivian stands, and her long legs distract him. “It was a pleasure meeting you, Vivian. Sam, I look forward to good progress reports.”

I get up and walk straight through the waiting room and into the hallway.

“Sam.” Vivian catches up with me. “It was the best I could do. Apparently, a lot of students complain about you. I know how it sounds, but the principal called all concerned about you not fitting in with the school. This seemed like the best-case scenario. That is, if you want to continue going to high school.”

“Whatever.”

“Do not give me attitude when I just saved you in there.”

“I can’t talk. Mrs. Lippy is waiting.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Ropes Mansion

I unfold a small piece of white paper shoved into the edge of my locker. It reads: *Meet us at Ropes Mansion garden on Essex at 3:15 ~Susannah.* I look at my cell phone. It's 3:05. I speed-walk through the crowded hall and out the door.

I text Jaxon not to wait for me, and search Ropes Mansion on my phone. It's not far. Either they plan on jumping me in a garden or they think Elijah's notes have credibility.

A few blocks from the school, I pass a funeral home with a young woman outside it struggling to keep her composure as she greets people. Who did she lose, I wonder? A friend, her husband, her father? I shake my head to clear the thought, but look right at the placard that says the name of the deceased...*Proctor. Another descendant death.* I bite my lip and pick up my pace.

It only takes me a few minutes to get to Essex. It's an old street lined with brambly trees and redbrick sidewalks. I approach the tall tower of a Gothic church and check my phone again. The map says it's right here, but I don't see a garden or Susannah.

I follow the spiked iron fence around the church. *FIRST CHURCH IN SALEM, FOUNDED IN 1629*, a sign reads. The fence ends, and there's a big

wooden trellis covered in vines. *Should I go through?* I look around, and step onto the path that leads toward the archway.

Passing under the thick vines, the small dirt walkway opens into a labyrinth of trails, all lined with blooming flowers. In the center of the buzzing garden is a sundial, and around it, Susannah, Mary, and Alice.

I can tell they're arguing by their hushed voices and hard expressions.

"Samantha," Susannah says, and they all turn. With their black clothes and the Gothic tower in the background, they look more intense than usual.

"You're late," says Alice.

I look at my phone. "By two minutes."

"Exactly," Alice says to Susannah as though it proves a point.

What were they talking about before I arrived? "Did you read the papers I gave you?"

"Yes," says Susannah, handing them back to me.

Alice fixes me with her gaze. "Who gave them to you?"

"There's no way that's your handwriting," adds Mary, and Alice pinches her in the arm.

"Ow." Mary pulls her arm away. "That hurt, you know."

"Don't worry about where I got them. What did you think?"

"Are you incapable of answering a simple question?" Alice squints at me like I'm dim-witted.

"We were surprised that you knew so much about the local families," says Susannah.

"You knew about these deaths, didn't you?" I ask, reading into the diplomacy of Susannah's answer. Was that why she wanted to talk to me about John's great-grandfather and why she told me to be careful in the graveyard? What are these girls up to?

Mary sulks. "It's news to me."

Susannah looks at Alice before continuing. "Those papers contain decades of records. How'd you track them all down?"

I guess that's what they were fighting about when I came. Alice and

Susannah know something they didn't tell Mary. Hmmm. Mary pulls at her springy brown curls and frowns. She's not as closed off as Alice or as poised as Susannah. If there's one of them that's likely to speak freely, it's her. That's why Alice always tells her to shut up. "Mary, what do you think?"

"I think you're right. I think we're cursed. And I, for one, wanna figure it out. I have zero interest in dying or watching my family die. Lizzie's brother—"

"Mary." Alice cuts her off. "Enough."

So they know I'm right about these deaths being more than a coincidence. Thank you, Mary. "Okay, Alice, if you don't think there's anything weird about this, then I'll just go."

"That handwriting is old cursive, and that information would take you months to compile. You're clearly up to something. And I want to know what."

"And you three are in a hidden garden without Lizzie and John. Plus, Mary didn't even know any of this until today. You're up to something yourself."

"I'm not playing games with you."

"You could just ask me nicely, and I *might* consider telling you," I say.

Alice gives me the finger.

I walk away. Alice either accepts me as an equal and we work together on this or I'll figure it out with Elijah. I'm not going to put up with her crap every day. I'm done.

"Don't go, Samantha," says Susannah. For some reason, I can't bring myself to hate her. "Please tell us what you know."

I stop.

"Let her go," says Alice.

"You don't like your family, Alice, but I'm really close with mine. What if these numbers are right?" Susannah presses.

"Yeah, really, Alice," adds Mary. "I'm not cool with gambling on this."

“Fine. But this is between us. Lizzie and John are out of it for now.” Alice looks at me. “Well?”

Not that I ever want to talk to Lizzie or John again, but I don’t get why Alice is excluding them. Makes me wonder what else she’s hiding. I rejoin them at the sundial. There is an inscription on it that reads HOURS FLY. FLOWERS BLOOM AND DIE. OLD DAYS OLD WAYS PASS BY. LOVE STAYS. *And so does a curse.*

“Let’s go to your house, Mary. It’s only a block away from here,” Susannah suggests.

“Not gonna happen,” Alice says before Mary can answer.

I can’t help but notice that together we look like a friggin’ coven. I clear my throat. “Okay, here’s what I know. These deaths aren’t random. They occur in a pattern. And they’re triggered when at least one member of each of the major Witch Trials’ families is in Salem. Unfortunately, there’s a complete list of major families here right now.”

The shock is obvious in Alice’s expression. She quickly glances over her shoulder. “We need to discuss this somewhere more private.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

She's Not One of Us

“You expect me to believe that?” Alice asks, cracking her knuckles and leaning back on the burgundy pillows on Mary’s couch. Mary’s house has a much more homey feel than mine does. Nothing is terribly fancy or breakable, and everything looks lived-in. The coffee table has light scratches, and there is a small chip in the platter holding the veggies and dip that we’ve been munching on.

“Look.” I lean forward in my armchair and hand Alice my phone displaying an old map of Salem. “Mr. Wardwell said the main requirement for the hanging location was that it had to be outside of town. The *only* way out of town at the time was over Town Bridge. That Walgreens is right on the other side of where that bridge used to be. It would have been the closest and easiest place to choose.”

“We should go check it out,” says Mary, sitting cross-legged on the floor, wrapping a curl around her finger.

Alice examines the map. “Being in a convenient location and visible from some window you say you found doesn’t mean you’re right.”

“Okay, well, look. There’s an old cart road on that map right behind where the Walgreens is now. And *no* cart road or any road at all where everyone thinks the hangings happened. I mean, I went to the place

you guys call Gallows Hill and there's no way they got carts full of people up that steep thing easily. They definitely didn't do it without a cleared road," I say.

Susannah and Alice share a knowing look.

Susannah nods. "Then it's settled. We go."

My recent woods experience comes to mind. "Now? In the dark?"

Alice smirks. "If you're scared, you should stay here. You won't be missed."

I shift in my chair. "I'm just not sure what we'll get out of seeing it in the dark."

"Clarity," says Susannah, and looks at me. "Your grandmother thought the real hanging location was important, Samantha, because it holds an imprint of that event. Like a memory."

I'm not following.

Alice shakes her head. "No way, Susannah. We're not doing that with her."

"I think we should," says Mary.

Okay, seriously, what's going on?

"How can we expect her to tell us what she finds, if we don't include her in what we know?" Susannah asks.

"She's not one of us," says Alice. "Don't forget that."

"She *is* one of the descendant families," says Mary.

"On the wrong effing side of history, Mary."

"Well, she wears black," Mary says as though that means anything. I crack a smile. There is something endearing about her.

"Alice, it's too important." Susannah plays with the fringe of the pillow on her lap.

Alice points her finger at me. "If you say one word of this to Jaxon or anyone else at school, I will burn you to the ground."

"Uh, okay," I say. Her threat doesn't really make sense, but it sounds morbid.

Mary stands up, practically bouncing. "I'll get the candles."

Candles? I do *not* want to be in those woods with candles. But if I don't go, I might break this thing we have going, and they might never include me again.

Mary opens the coat closet near the front door and digs around in the bottom of it. She returns with a cloth bag and four black hooded capes and tosses one to each of us. *My life is getting more ridiculous by the minute.*

The front door opens, and someone who is unmistakably Mary's mother comes through with a bag of groceries. Her hair is more tightly curled than Mary's and she wears it pinned high up on her head, but her eyes and mouth are almost exactly the same.

"I see I've arrived just as you girls are leaving," Mary's mom says, clearly noticing our black capes.

My instinct is to hide mine under my butt. I can only imagine the questions that would pour out of Vivian if she walked in on a similar scene.

Mary throws her arms around her mother with enthusiasm, almost knocking the groceries out of her hands. For a second Mary looks more like a little girl than she does a gothic chic, secretive Descendant.

Mary's mother kisses the top of Mary's head. "Come back home soon—we're going to have dinner in a few hours. You girls are welcome to stay."

"My mom is expecting me," Susannah says. "But thanks, Mrs. P."

"I'll be here," Alice says.

"I don't doubt that," Mrs. P says, and winks at Alice.

These girls must spend an awful lot of time together. I can't even imagine what it must be like to have a routine like that with a group of friends. I awkwardly stare at Mary's mom, unsure if the invitation extends to me.

"This is Sam." Mary gestures toward me, and I'm grateful for the well-timed introduction.

Mrs. P's eyes widen ever so slightly and I'm positive she knows who I am. "Don't let these girls make you dance naked in the moonlight."

I appreciate that someone else finds the whole witch thing silly, but her nonreaction to the black capes and that comment make me seriously wonder what it is these girls do in their spare time.

Mary laughs. "But it's such a fun initiation."

"Yeah," Susannah says. "And it beats the heck out of the sacrificial one we used to have."

Alice rolls her eyes. I don't think she likes that her friends are joking with me, however twisted the jokes might be.

"You should see your face," Mary says, grinning at me. She kisses her mom on the cheek. "Be back soon."

I follow the girls out the front door and into the long driveway. Mary pulls out car keys.

"You have a car?" The New Yorker in me is surprised.

Alice and Susannah smile. "Yup," says Mary. "I only have a learner's permit, but Alice just got her junior operator license."

I don't even want to know which level of inexperienced that is. Mary throws the keys to Alice and we all climb into a black Jeep Wrangler. The moment my door closes, I grab my seat belt.

"Have you guys always lived in Salem?" I ask.

Susannah turns toward me in the backseat. "Always. For generations. As far as I know, most of the witch descendants never left."

"I'm leaving," Alice says. Alice drives like a City taxi driver, fast and aggressive. Vivian's maneuvering seems tame next to hers. Thankfully, the Walgreens is only a half mile away.

Mary pouts. "You can't. The circle will break if you do."

"Here," says Alice as the Jeep screeches to a stop in a parking space. We all fly forward. What circle? They act like they're in a secret society. If it's possible, I think they might be more distrustful than I am.

The parking lot is U-shaped and there's a fifteen-foot cliff of rocks and dirt running along the back of the property. We walk toward it, Susannah and Mary carrying bags of spider legs or whatever nonsense they packed.

“It looks like we can get up the hill over there,” says Mary, and points toward the dark corner of the lot where the slope is less steep.

Alice steps onto the slanted earth and we follow. I grab a couple of tree branches to keep from sliding. *This is really not my thing.*

“Let’s walk to a more secluded spot,” suggests Susannah.

Let’s not. The light from the streetlamps fades as we make our way deeper into the trees, and I can’t see more than a couple feet ahead of me. Low-hanging branches threaten to take my eyes out, or at least disturb the tiny sense of security I have left. I walk with my hands in front of me.

“This’ll work,” says Alice when we reach a small circular clearing.

I look in all directions, but I can’t place where we are. The trees are thick, and as far as I can tell there’s no moon. Mary pulls out a dark blanket, and we help her spread it out. The clearing’s just big enough for it.

I sit down and pull on the hooded cape, mainly to minimize my peripheral vision. If I can see Elijah, does that mean I can see other ghosts? *Quick, think about something else. Kittens, puppies, daisies... black-eyed Susans, Abigail, ghosts. Shit.*

Susannah and Mary light candles and arrange them on the blanket. The trees flicker in the flames and the branches look like they’re moving. I have a strong urge to look over my shoulder. Why didn’t I back out when I had the chance? If someone says “Let’s contact the dead,” I don’t care how stupid I look, I’m running full speed outta here.

Alice ties little bundles of I don’t know what...herbs? This silent ritual thing is killing me. *Someone say something so I can get out of my own freakin’ head!* “So, what ex—” I start.

“I’ll tell you when to speak. Until then, shut up,” Alice snaps, her long blond hair shining in the candlelight.

“Don’t worry,” says Susannah. “You’ll catch on.”

Susannah lights four candles in the middle of the blanket, and everyone’s faces glow. *So not comfortable.* Alice looks at Susannah and she nods.

“I call upon the power of water. That it may wash away my doubts and calm my spirit. Only through stillness may I see clearly.” Susannah finishes her words by dripping water from a small glass bottle onto her fingers and flicking it over the candles. They sizzle but don’t go out.

Susannah looks to her left at Mary. “I call upon the power of earth. That it may guide my path and ground my spirit. Only through balance may I see clearly.” Mary picks up some dirt from the edge of the blanket and sprinkles it over the candles.

Mary looks at Alice. “I call upon the power of air. That it may elevate my thoughts and lift my spirit. Only through breath may I see clearly.” Alice waves her hands around the flames and they leap into the air.

They all look at me. *Fire? Am I supposed to say ‘fire’? What are the words again?* “I call,” I say uncomfortably. “I call upon...the, um, fire...power of fire.”

“That it may light my way and impassion my spirit. Only through purification may I see clearly,” they all continue in unison.

Alice hands each of us one of the bundles she made. I mimic them and stick the end of mine in the fire. Alice holds out a bowl, and we drop in the burning herbs. There’s a strong musky smell and a lot of smoke.

They all say together, “I mean what I say, and I say what I intend. Know my desire and give me clarity.”

“Repeat,” Susannah whispers.

“I mean what I say...and I say what I intend. Know my desire and give me clarity?”

Susannah and Alice offer me their hands. I take them. Through the smoke, their faces waver slightly, like bad reception on a TV. *Wait, what is that?* A moment passes and their faces flicker more violently. Then they blur completely with the faces of other women. It’s as if I’m seeing two sets of people at once, the Descendants and some unknown older women.

I open my mouth, but everything goes black. Even the noise of the crackling flames stops. For a split second, a picture flashes through the

darkness—the back of a boy’s head bleeding on the ground, his body crushed under a large piece of metal.

Mary’s scream breaks my vision and the blackness, and I once again see the girls as they normally are, without the blurred faces. It takes me a second to figure out what’s happening. Everyone’s panicking, blowing out candles and scooping up the spell ingredients.

“Samantha, come on,” says Susannah, and I get up.

Alice snatches the blanket, and I follow them at a fast clip through the trees. With each step I become more aware of the blackness and the nagging sense that something was in the woods with us. I run so fast that I slide down the slope of the hill and land back in the parking lot with scratched hands. Mary paces by the Jeep.

“What was that?” Mary demands.

I grab my head, trying to stop the nausea. My skin pulses with the impossible rhythm of my heart. Maybe there were hallucinogens in those herbs? Was I wrong all along? Do they actually know magic? I mean, I see ghosts. This isn’t that different.

“I don’t know,” says Alice. “Those faces...”

Mary pulls her cape off. “You saw that, right, Susannah?”

“I did.”

And who was that crushed guy? *There was so much blood.* “Did you —”

“Everyone just stop talking for a minute,” says Alice.

“I wanna go home,” says Mary.

Alice pulls out the keys and unlocks the Jeep. No one hesitates; we all jump in. *I so wish I hadn’t come to this,* I think as I climb in the backseat. From the side mirrors, I can see that everyone has the same disturbed expression. We ride home in silence.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Something in Common

I don't get three steps into my foyer before Vivian yells, "How dare you come home this late and not call!"

I haven't had time to process what I saw, and Vivian's yelling only agitates me further.

"You're filthy. Where were you?" She's talking at me, not to me.

"I was with some girls from school." I don't apologize, not after what she did today.

"Why didn't you answer your phone? I called at least five times."

Ignoring her never gets a good reaction, but it's not like I can tell her what I was doing. "I didn't want to talk to you."

She stiffens, and I know I've gone too far. "I'm surprised you have any friends with the way your principal says you behave. But we both know they won't last long."

"Really? You had to say that? I bet you feel awesome about yourself for finally getting me into counseling. Maybe I can use my time to talk about what a crap parent you are."

"You just bought yourself a week before you see your father."

"You can't keep me from seeing my dad!"

“I can and I will until you learn how to behave.”

I head for the staircase.

“You don’t want me as your enemy, Samantha. You won’t like it.”

I don’t bother to turn around.

I open the door to my room, and Elijah’s sitting on my window seat. He takes one look at my expression and my clothes and stands. “I will leave you.”

“Why would she say that?” I demand.

He shakes his head. “I cannot say.”

“Why would anyone do that? It’s just mean.”

“Yes.”

“Am I really that awful?” My bottom lip trembles.

His brow furrows.

“If I don’t have my dad, I don’t have anyone. I’m all alone.”

He turns toward my window and doesn’t answer. I just need someone to be nice to me right now. I’ve hit my limit. “Forget it. You can’t stand me, either.” I kick off my muddy boots.

He stares out my window. “I was just remembering that I once had a very similar conversation with Abigail.”

His comment surprises me. “Really? About what?”

“It is a long story.”

Does that mean he might tell me? I wouldn’t mind hearing about someone else’s life right now. “That’s okay.”

For a moment he hesitates. Then he turns, his face etched with emotion. “Sit.”

I look down at my legs. “My jeans are muddy. Turn around.” I don’t care if he’s been dead for three hundred years. He’s the closest thing I have to a friend besides Jaxon.

He looks at my legs, and seeing that I’m right, turns to the window again. I slip off my clothes and into my sweats.

I look back up at him and realize my reflection is visible in the windowpane. Was he watching me? I sit cross-legged on my bed. “You

can turn around.”

He grips his hands behind his back. “You already know that Abigail loved black-eyed Susans. She thought them the beauty of New England, said we were lucky to have them. She used to pick them during the late summer, and I would find them the rest of the year pressed in books and journals, and even in my accounting paperwork.”

I wrap a blanket around my legs. “That’s sweet.”

He nods. “That bed you are sitting on. I had it made for her, along with all the furniture in this room. I rode to Ipswich to have it designed and surprised her with it on her sixteenth birthday. You should have seen her face when she first saw it. She ran her fingers over the flowers and cried.”

“So you’re the one that had the secret compartment put in the back of the armoire? And the secret door in the library? You really like hidden things, don’t you?” What I want to ask is, What were you hiding? But I know better. He’s always just out of reach even without any instigation.

He almost looks amused by my observation. “Those letters you found, they were love letters between Abigail and a boy we grew up with. He was a few years older than her—my classmate and my friend. I always knew there was something between them, but I never let on. I did not want to cause her any embarrassment.”

His respect for his sister makes me feel self-conscious about trying to read her letters.

“One day, she confided in me that she was in love. She asked that I carry a letter to him in secret. I agreed but was nervous for her, knowing his family was pushing for him to marry the governor’s daughter. If their love became public, they would have been kept apart. Or Abigail’s propriety would be questioned. Pretty soon, I became their direct line of communication.” He looks at the armoire in a nostalgic way. “The hidden compartment was intended to give her a place to keep her private things.”

“Did they wind up together?” William’s words in the letter I read sounded apologetic.

“No,” he says.

I wait, but he doesn't continue. “Thank you for sharing that with me. When I found those letters, I knew they were special. Now I know why.”

His face softens. “I have not spoken about her in hundreds of years. It is not entirely comfortable.”

“I get that. Not the hundreds of years part, but I don't share personal things, either. I don't have friends long enough. And when I do, they tend to use the things I say against me. It's just easier not to talk.”

“I hate to think that we have something in common.” He sits next to me, and for the first time, I think he's joking.

“Yeah, that would be terrible.”

The corners of his mouth move ever so slightly in the direction of a smile.

“Are you smiling?” I ask.

“Absolutely not.” His mouth lifts a tad higher.

“Be careful. I might actually think you like me.”

“I will be sure to leave you another book, then.”

“Or another rock,” I reply.

His smile disappears. “I did not throw that rock through your window.”

“Really?” I pause. “Do you know who did?”

He shakes his head. “Did you speak with the Descendants today?”

The events of my night rush back to me. “Yeah, they agreed to help. But...we went to the hanging location and, um...” *How do I say this?* “And we performed a ritual or a spell or something?”

His face turns serious. “You practiced witchcraft?”

I can't help it. I laugh. It sounds crazy. And now that I'm not in those terrifying woods, I'm starting to think I imagined it. “I guess.”

“What happened?”

His tone worries me. I trace the lace pattern on my bedspread with

my fingers. I thought if anyone would say witchcraft doesn't exist, it'd be him. "The girls' faces blurred and became other faces. Then everything went black and I saw a guy crushed under a piece of metal."

He stands. "Whose faces?"

"I honestly don't know. They were older, though."

"You must return to the hanging location with the Descendants. I will observe this for myself."

"No way! I'm not doing that again. I almost threw up, I was so scared."

"Unless you can think of another way to see those faces, we are returning to that hill." His tone indicates that I'm not going to get anywhere by arguing.

"There's obviously something you're not telling me. What is it?"

"I took it upon myself to read some journals belonging to descendants in the years with more deaths. Most of what I found was useless, mundane musings. But there was one thing that stood out. One hundred years apart, two individuals saw faces like you are describing."

"And then what?"

His forehead wrinkles. "They died shortly after."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

I'm on Display

I scan the lunchroom tables. Alice, Mary, and Susannah are at their usual place near the window. I so wish I had asked them to go to the hanging spot in homeroom. And if I don't do it now, school will be over, and tomorrow's Wednesday—Remembrance Day. I just need to do this, even if Alice embarrasses me in front of everyone.

As I close in on their table, people's heads turn in my direction. I've never seen anyone approach them during lunch. It's like walking up to the throne without an invitation. I stop at the edge of their round table. This is much worse than in the garden. I'm on display here.

"Take a seat, Samantha," says Susannah.

I look at Alice. "Stop standing there like an idiot," she says.

Usually someone calling me an idiot would not inspire feelings of relief. But in this case, it does. I pull out a chair and sit down. "I really don't know how to say this, other than to just say it. We need to go back to the hanging location."

"That's your big announcement?" Alice exudes confidence. "We know. We'll go after the witches and warlocks party tonight."

"I wasn't invited to the party." Why did I say that?

They all pause. Then Susannah says, “Come to the party, and we’ll go together after.”

“Okay, but this is on you,” Alice warns Susannah.

I’m not sure if I should say thanks for the invitation or ask Alice what the risk is. Is it because Lizzie hates me? Alice definitely isn’t my biggest fan, either. Also, why were they keeping yesterday a secret from Lizzie and John? Whatever. This is about my dad, not about being friends.

Alice breaks the momentary silence. “Are you done? Or did you have any other brilliant ideas?”

“I think other descendants might have seen those blurred faces we saw in the woods. In previous years where a lotta people died, I mean.”

Mary shifts uncomfortably. “You’re just full of good news.”

“You think or you know?” asks Alice.

“I know.”

“How could you know that, Samantha?” Susannah asks.

“I can’t explain that. But there’s something you should know about it. The descendants who saw those blurred faces—”

“I don’t know whether to be embarrassed for you or disgusted by you,” says Lizzie’s voice behind me. *Oh, crap.* What is she doing in the freshman-sophomore lunch period?

Alice gives me a look that says *It’s your own fault, for trying to sit with us.* I stand and face Lizzie, but she looks past me to the Descendants. There are about twenty juniors in the lunchroom, including Jaxon.

“This better be a joke,” Lizzie says to the girls.

“Well if it is, the punch line sucks,” says Alice.

Lizzie looks unsure. I’m confused, too. Was that directed at Lizzie or me? I try to exit the group, but Lizzie grabs my arm and her nails dig into my skin.

“I can break you if I want to,” she says before she lets go, her brown and green eyes issuing a warning.

Jaxon watches me from a table across the room, and I decide to just

walk away from her. I really don't wanna cause a scene in the middle of the cafeteria when half the school is watching.

"What was that?" Jaxon asks as I walk toward him. He pulls an impressively large lunch out of a bag.

I take the seat next to him. "Nothing, don't worry about it."

"Didn't look like nothing."

"I was just talking to the Descendants, and Lizzie got mad." I try to act casual about it.

"No one talks to them at lunch. Believe me, I've seen people try. They're just met with blank stares until they feel so self-conscious they walk away."

"I believe that."

"You wanna tell me what's going on?" Jaxon offers me a peanut butter, banana, and honey sandwich.

"You sure?" I ask.

"I have two."

I laugh and take the sandwich. "What're you doing in my lunch period?"

"Teacher was sick and the sub never showed. You weren't handing out pastries again, were you?" He grins. Does he not know they came from his mother's bakery? Maybe Vivian didn't bring it up to Mrs. Meriwether after all. That's a relief.

I smile and bite the delicious sandwich. "Do you know something about a witches and warlocks party tonight?"

"Yup."

"Is that all you're gonna say?"

"Depends. Is that all *you're* gonna say about the Descendants?"

I shake my head at him, amused. But in reality, I don't know what to say. I don't want to lie, but I can't tell him the truth. If I do, I might compromise the civility I have going with the Descendants and then they won't go back to the hanging location with me. "Susannah left her notebook in homeroom, and I was just returning it." Weak, but not the worst.

“Kinda looked like you were sitting at their table. Like you were friends with them.”

“Come on. No way.” I *was* sitting there. I *was* being friendly with them. But that doesn’t mean we’re friends. Right?

He’s not convinced, but lets it go. “Costume party. Alice’s house. Descendants throw it every year right before Remembrance Day. It’s a tradition.”

Costume party? Hosted by Descendants? Not my idea of a good time. But if I don’t go, they might not wait for me to go back to the hanging location. “Are you going?”

“I look very good in a warlock costume. Wouldn’t seem right to deprive people of that.”

“Yeah, the school might never forgive you.”

Jaxon gives me a choice of pastries from a small box tied with string. I wonder if I can somehow convince Mrs. Meriwether to pack my lunches.

“I’ll pick you up at nine, nine-thirty?” asks Jaxon.

“Uh, yeah. Sure. Do I have to wear a costume?”

“You won’t be let in without it.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

You Bit Everyone

Line dancing, costume parties, and public speaking are at the top of my slow-death-through-embarrassment list. My clothes are spread out on every available piece of furniture in my room. I so wish I didn't have to go to this thing.

"Sam! Door!" yells Vivian from downstairs.

I glance at my cell phone. It's 8:17 p.m. Could Jaxon be that early? I scoop up some clothes and shove them back into Abigail's armoire in a messy pile. "Coming!"

I make it down the first couple of stairs before I stop dead in my tracks. Vivian's talking to Susannah in the foyer.

"Hey," I say, and they look up.

"I didn't know you girls were going to a theme party," Vivian says in a friendly tone as I make my way down the rest of the stairs.

That's because we haven't spoken a word to each other since last night. I shrug.

"I might have something in my closet for you," Vivian says. This is a perfect example of our current relationship. Fight, and then ignore the fact that the fight ever happened.

“I’ll be fine.”

“Let me know if you change your mind,” she says, and clicks down the hall.

Susannah is wearing a flattering black Victorian dress with a full skirt and a high neck. Her hair is fashioned in an elaborate version of her usual bun.

“Whoa. You look awesome.” There’s no way I’m going to be able to match that.

“Thanks.” She smiles.

“I was just getting ready. You want to come up?” She obviously came for some specific reason, and I don’t want Vivian overhearing whatever that reason is. She already thinks I’m unstable; all I need is for her to hear I’m inadvertently practicing witchcraft.

“Sure. This is a beautiful old house. I always wondered what it looked like inside.”

We walk up the stairs together. “I spent about three days getting lost in it.”

“I can imagine.” She takes note of the dimly lit sconces in the hallway.

“Here we are,” I say, opening the door to my room.

“It’s like stepping back in time.” She repeats my exact thoughts when I saw this place.

“So what’s up? I know you didn’t just happen to be in the neighborhood.”

“No, I didn’t.” She looks down at the antique silk purse at her side and pulls out an envelope. “This is a letter from your grandmother to mine. I found it when I was helping my mother go through some old boxes this summer. It talks about the mysterious deaths.”

“So you did know about them?” I was right in the garden. There was definitely something they knew and didn’t tell me.

“Sort of. To be honest, I thought your grandmother was, well, unbalanced. It was *my* grandmother’s response that worried me. It was shoved into the same envelope. She never sent it.”

“Okay,” I say, unsure.

“Samantha, how did you know other descendants saw blurred faces?”

“Is that what that letter says? The one from your grandmother?”

“Yes. I showed it to Alice, and she agreed that there might be something to it. Then you come into school saying that other descendants saw blurred faces.”

I’m beginning to see why Alice is so suspicious of me. The information I have would seem weird to me, too, if I were in her position.

“My grandmother never sent the letter. So how’d you find out?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“I know we haven’t given you any reason to trust us, with writing on your locker and the hair pulling and all the rumors—”

“And the rock,” I say.

“Rock?”

“The rock you guys threw through my window that said DIE on it?”

She scrunches her delicate features. “I don’t know anything about that. That’s horrible.”

Maybe Lizzie and John did it and she didn’t know? “Yeah, well. You can see why I’m not exactly jumping at the chance to trust you.”

“I get that. What can I do to change your mind?”

“I don’t know. I guess to start you can tell me why Lizzie’s been following me around.”

She glances toward my window, which doesn’t lessen my suspicions or comfort me one bit. “It’s complicated.”

“Does it have anything to do with why you didn’t invite her or John that day you met me in the garden?”

She touches the lace around her collar. “Yes.”

I wait, but she doesn’t continue. “Susannah, if you won’t even tell me why Lizzie’s doing all these awful things to me or why you guys are hiding the fact that you’re hanging out with me, how am I ever supposed to change my mind about trusting you?” This comes out

more forcefully than I intend. But really, I feel like I'm being attacked from all sides here. And if Lizzie has some master plan, I wanna know what it is.

She nods. "You're right. We shouldn't hide it. That's wrong."

We stand in awkward silence for a few seconds, but she doesn't explain further. "Okay, then I guess we can just go to the hanging location tonight and then go our separate ways." Saying this out loud hurts. I didn't realize how much I was hoping things might be different.

She grips her thin fingers together. "My little sister has cancer, Samantha. She was in and out of hospitals a lot last year. For a while we thought she was getting better. Just recently, though, they found more malignant cells. Now you understand why I'm so worried about this pattern of deaths. We both have so much to lose."

The weight of her words takes me by surprise. "I'm so sorry." That's why Jaxon approached her about my dad. He thought she would be sympathetic.

"I don't expect you to trust me right away, especially with everything that's happened. Just, please, think about it. We can't go our separate ways, because then..."

She doesn't need to finish for me to understand the fear at the end of that sentence. I know it all too well. "Okay. I'll think about it."

She nods. "I'll let you get ready. I can show myself out." She walks out my bedroom door, and part of me wants to tell her that everything's going to be okay. But the truth is that I have no idea if it is.

Instinctively, I let my gaze fall on the pictures of my dad, resting on my trunk. "I'm gonna figure this out, Dad. I'm doing everything I can. I'm falling down seven times, and standing up eight." Which means I now need to go to this party so that I can figure out what those blurred faces were all about. Even if all I want to do is camp out in the hospital.

I check my cell. It's 8:39. I swing open my armoire and examine the mess inside. On top of the pile is a neatly folded black lace dress.

What's this doing here? I carefully pull it out, and it swishes to the floor. It's the prettiest thing I've ever seen.

"Elijah?" No response. "Thank you. Thank you so much." I wait, but there's no answer.

I pull off my ripped jeans and shirt. Did he do this because he wants to make sure I go to the hanging location with the girls? Or was he just being nice?

I examine myself in my vanity mirror and feel self-conscious. I slip on a pair of lace-up boots and shove my wallet into one of them. Somehow that detail makes me feel more like myself.

"That's a beautiful dress. I don't remember it," says Vivian from my doorway.

I turn around, but don't answer.

"Looks like an antique," she continues.

"Maybe." I pull out my jacket and put it on my bed, avoiding eye contact.

"You can't wear a leather jacket with that dress. Especially a fake leather jacket. It won't look right."

I want to yell at her to get out of my room, but I'm afraid she won't let me go out if I do.

"Sam, take my black cape. It'll match perfectly. Consider it a peace offering."

That's the closest Vivian ever gets to an apology. "Can we go see my dad tomorrow?"

She sighs. "Don't you think I want to see him, too? I was just worried about you last night. We can definitely visit him tomorrow."

Some of the tension leaves my chest. "Okay," I say. "Let's see that cape."

She smiles, and clicks toward her room at the opposite end of the house. I follow as she talks about clothing eras and how the cape's from such and such a time period. She goes straight into her bedroom and then to her closet.

I have no idea what she means by all of it. I'm just relieved that I'll

see my dad. I punctuate her fashion talk with a “Great” occasionally. On her dresser, I spot the corner of a medical bill. Note to self: come back when she’s not home.

“Here,” she says, and hands me a heavy silk cape. It’s actually quite beautiful.

She always dressed me up as a kid, like I was her personal doll. Funny thing is, I used to like it. The attention made me feel special.

Vivian sat down on my bed and placed a shiny black box in front of me.

“What is it?” I asked, sitting up against my pillows.

“The only way to find out is to open it.”

Vivian used the same tone of voice with me as she did with adults. She never treated me any differently because of my age. I liked her for that.

I lifted the lid and pulled aside the tissue paper. Inside was a cream dress with intricate beading patterns. “Whoa. It looks like yours.”

“It’s exactly like mine. I had it made. You know why?”

I could not believe that I was holding a replica of my very favorite thing in Vivian’s wardrobe. And that was saying a lot, considering the size of her closet. “For my fifth-grade graduation?”

She nodded. “A twenties-style dress will match your short hair perfectly. And when everyone is admiring your bold fashion choices, you can give those girls who chopped your hair off the finger.”

I laughed.

I put on the cape and she inspects me. “Hmmm,” she says to herself, and digs through a jewelry box. She slips a silver necklace over my head. It has a pendant made of silver loops entwined to form a knot. “Much better.”

She straightens the cape on my shoulders, and I suddenly feel the heavy awfulness of the fights we’ve been having lately. Maybe I’ve made the wrong decision, keeping what’s happening in Salem from her. If Elijah was right, and my dad is in serious danger, doesn’t she deserve to know? At least some piece of it?

“V, do you remember when you had that twenties dress made for me?”

She smiles. She always likes it when I call her V. I haven’t done it in months. “Back when you had the brains to follow my fashion sense.”

I laugh. “Yeah. I was really scared to go to my graduation that year and face everyone. That dress made it a lot better.”

“It didn’t hurt that one of those punks fell on her way up to the stage, either.”

I grin. “Nope. That didn’t hurt one bit. Anyway, thanks for all this.”

She tilts her head slightly. “You’re welcome.”

The tension in the air is thinner, at least for the moment. I can’t help but think how nice it is. “I was just thinking that maybe we could spend a little time together, like we used to. I know I’ve been weird lately...and difficult. I’ve just been overwhelmed.”

The grandfather clock chimes downstairs. It’s 9:00. Jaxon will be here any minute.

Vivian’s expression softens. “You want to talk about it?”

“Yeah, I think maybe I do. I have to leave in a minute, but could we talk tomorrow?”

“Dinner. I’ll make it a good one, after we visit your father.”

“Deal,” I say. If we were the hugging types, we probably would right now. Instead, I smile and she nods and I walk quickly down the hallway toward my room.

I examine myself in my vanity mirror. I’m too dressed up to be a witch. Green face paint would help. Wait, I’ll make a wart. At least that gives me something witchy. I draw a dot in the middle of my cheek with my eyeliner. *Better.*

“Sam, Jaxon’s here!” Vivian yells.

I turn my light off and head into the hall. I stop at the top of the stairs and look down at Jaxon. He smiles. I take the steps cautiously, to not step on my dress. Reaching the bottom, I turn to face him.

“What?” I say after a few seconds of silence.

“You’re beautiful.”

My cheeks get hot. “Thanks.”

“I like the whole Marilyn Monroe mole thing.”

“What? No, it’s a wart,” I say. Jaxon laughs.

We cross the foyer and Jaxon holds the door open for me. He wears a black vest with gold buttons, black pants, and a floor-length black coat. “I have to say, I’m impressed.”

“That I opened the door for you? Or that I was right about looking good as a warlock?” Jaxon walks toward his driveway and offers me his hand. I take it.

I shake my head. “With your costume, stupid.”

He opens the passenger door of a pickup truck and helps me in. “There are a lotta costume parties here. I’d start preparing, if I were you.” He walks around the truck.

“I’m sure I won’t have to worry about it. I highly doubt I’m at the top of everyone’s invite list. You got your mom to lend you her truck?”

“It’s actually mine.” He starts his engine and backs out of the driveway.

Come to think of it, I did wonder why Mrs. Meriwether had two trucks in her driveway. “Why don’t you ever drive to school, then?”

He grins. “Because I was doing donuts late at night with my friends and she caught me. I only convinced Mom to let me drive because you’re wearing heels.”

“What made you think I was gonna wear heels?”

“Just a good guess.”

“Well, I’m not.”

“Whoops.” His grin widens.

“You’re the worst,” I say, smiling.

“You mean I’m the awesomest, because now you don’t have to walk in a dress.”

“‘Awesomest’ isn’t a word.”

“It is now.” He reaches into the glove compartment and pulls out a small box. “Oh, and my mom sent this for you.” He places it on my lap.

It's a tiny pink pastry box from her bakery, tied up with black and gold ribbons. I pull at the bows and open the small lid. Inside is a bunch of black and purple violets sparkling with sugar.

"It's a corsage," he explains as we pass a large house with white columns wrapped in white lights. Each window has a candle in it. Must be Alice's. Jaxon parks his truck in the first available spot on the crowded street.

"No one's ever given me a corsage before," I say in a quieter voice than normal, lifting the delicate flower arrangement out of the box.

He turns toward me and takes it from my hands. "She says it's edible. So when the party's over, you can eat it." He carefully pins it to my dress. "I told her this wasn't prom, but you know my mom. There's no telling her no."

I smile at him. "It's beautiful." Maybe this party won't be so bad after all.

"Let me get your door," he offers.

But before he makes it to my side of the truck, I open it myself. I step tentatively onto the uneven sidewalk so that I don't catch my dress on anything.

Jaxon laughs. "Sam, you're the most stubborn girl I've ever met."

"And just think, this is me in a good mood."

He puts his hands on either side of my waist and pulls me close to him. His woodsy smell encompasses me. "Good thing I find stubbornness hot." His face is inches away from mine.

I lean forward, and the edge of my boot slides into one of the sidewalk cracks. I take a step to keep from falling. "Do you also like girls who can trip standing still?" I ask. *That's the closest he's come to kissing me since the woods, and I trip?*

He laughs and grabs my hand. We walk up the lawn to the front door.

"Welcome to the Parker residence," says a butler at the entrance. "May I take your coats?" I give him my cape.

My stomach drops when I realize this party's like Vivian's dinners

on steroids. It's a high school party. Why's it so fancy? Everyone stares at us in an obvious way. "Let's get something to drink."

"Sure," Jaxon says.

"Hey!" calls a familiar voice as we make our way toward a beautifully arranged table covered with autumn treats. It's Dillon. And he's standing with the pretty girl from our history class who always flirts with Jaxon.

"Hey," Jaxon says. He nods at Dillon and gives the girl a hug. She wears a lace-up corset and a skintight short black skirt. I don't get the as-close-to-naked-as-possible costume thing. Dillon, on the other hand, threw on every black item of clothing he owns with no real thought. If he wasn't clean-shaven, with coiffed hair, he'd look homeless.

"You know Dillon, and this is Niki." Jaxon gestures to them. "This is Sam."

"Nice to meet you," I say to Niki, but she keeps her attention on Jaxon. *Well, this is gonna be fun.* I glance at the costumed people. The whispers and stares are blatant.

Dillon hands us hot apple cider from the table and pulls out a flask. He dumps a shot in each of our cups, and tucks it back into his many layers. "We have a real Mather at a party full of witches. I'll drink to that!" He lifts his cup.

He's dopey, but I kinda like him. I take a sip of my cider, and it's delicious.

"You'll drink to anything," Jaxon says.

Niki looks at me for the first time. "You have something on your face."

It takes me a second to figure out what she means. "It's a wart."

"Oh." She sounds skeptical.

I scan the crowd but don't see the Descendants. Strangely, I notice I'm also looking for Elijah.

"That's what I like to see," Dillon comments as I take a big sip of my drink, and I realize I've just about finished it. "We'll do shots later,

Sam.”

I’m already starting to feel a little light-headed.

“Or maybe we won’t,” Jaxon says. “I’m gonna show Sam around. I’ll find you guys in a bit.”

“Okay, man,” Dillon says.

Niki says nothing, but her disappointment is clear.

“Samantha!” Dillon yells as we walk away. “He likes you!”

My cheeks flush. I’m sure Niki wants to kill me.

“Shut up, dude!” Jaxon yells over his shoulder.

“Don’t break his heart!” Dillon yells, but we’re already making our way through the crowd.

Jaxon grins. “Don’t listen to that clown. He’s obviously drunk.”

“So you talk about me to your friends?”

“Maaaybe I said something about liking you.” Jaxon blushes, and we step into a formal sitting room decorated with a copious amount of black candles.

“It’s hard to believe anyone likes you,” Lizzie says from the chaise longue, and I stop short. “Get out.”

Please don’t let this happen right now. I can’t leave until I come up with a plan with the girls.

“Shut up, Lizzie. It’s not your house,” Jaxon says.

Lizzie gets up. Her skintight dress brushes the floor. It has a lace collar that stands high in the air behind her head and makes her more terrifying. “It’s my party, Jaxon. Why don’t you just step aside and let me deal with her. Unless you want me to start on your crazy mother.”

Mrs. Meriwether? That’s so mean. For the first time since I’ve met him, Jaxon gets really mad. If she were a dude, I’m pretty sure he would punch her.

Before Jaxon has time to respond, John interrupts. “What the hell?” He holds out his arms for Lizzie to see. A severe rash of red ovals covers his hands.

We all stare. “It looks like bite marks,” he says, his voice unsure. A girl screams and we turn. She has the same rash on her face. Dread

drops an anchor in the pit of my stomach.

Lizzie points at me. “Did you do this? No one’s forgotten about that pastry stunt you pulled.” Her voice is loud enough that all the people within twenty feet of us start whispering.

I glance at Jaxon, mortified. But he’s looking at his own hands, which also have red marks on them. Oh no.

Lizzie chews on the side of her mouth. I try to focus on a possible out, but can’t. I wish I didn’t drink that alcohol. I take a step backward. Lizzie grins, and she mutters something under her breath.

Susannah, who I didn’t know was in the room with us, interjects, “Lizzie, don’t.”

Is she standing up for me?

“Walk away, Susannah. *I’m* going to deal with this problem because you clearly can’t.”

Susannah grabs Lizzie’s arm. “No, Lizzie. I want her here.”

All the amusement on Lizzie’s face drains away. Only anger remains. “You disrespectful little shit. You have no loyalty!”

I don’t know what Lizzie planned to do, but I’m pretty sure Susannah just saved me from it. “Susannah, you don’t have to do this,” I say, feeling bad that Lizzie’s anger is now focused on her.

Lizzie glares at me and throws her drink at my face. I try to step to the side, but I’m not fast enough and the cider splashes on my hair and cheek. I look at Jaxon. He’s scanning the hysterical crowd, not paying attention to the Descendants. His rash is worse and the house is in chaos. Everyone’s screaming.

Lizzie walks toward Susannah, who steadily backs away. Lizzie raises her hand, and Susannah’s eyes widen. Glasses crash against the floor and people run.

“Sam, let’s get out of here,” Jaxon says.

“I can’t leave Susannah like that.” But really, I can’t leave. I have to go to the hanging location.

“She’ll work it out on her own.”

I look at poor Susannah, who’s now backed against a wall by Lizzie.

Alice pushes past a group of screaming people to get to her. I break away from Jaxon and move toward the girls. Jaxon grabs my arm.

“Stop—I have to tell them something,” I say.

“No, you have to get out of here right now.”

Alice pushes Lizzie away from Susannah. “Alice!” I yell, but she can’t hear me.

“Sam, people think it’s you,” Jaxon says.

I pause, realizing I’m the only one without bite marks. And Jaxon’s right; my name is being flung around. “I just have to say one thing.” I try to push past some hysterical girls.

“Leave, Samantha,” Elijah says, appearing by my side. “It is not safe.”

Alice and Lizzie are yelling at each other. Jaxon pulls on my arm.

“I will follow the Descendants,” Elijah says.

More people push in around me. The wedge between me and the Descendants widens.

“You did this!” a girl I’ve never seen before yells. She lunges at my face with her marked hands. She misses but manages to rip off my corsage. I don’t resist anymore. I run.

Tables are knocked over, and the floor is strewn with broken glass. Jaxon and I move quickly through a formal dining room, into the kitchen, and out a door.

He sidesteps a crying girl on the ground.

“Jaxon, it’s on your neck,” I say as we loop around the house to the front yard. I hold my dress in my hand so I don’t trip. “The rash.”

“There she is!” yells a guy from my homeroom, and he points at me.

A group turns toward me. Jaxon and I sprint to the truck. My breathing’s heavy. Someone shouts my name as we get in. Jaxon turns his key in the ignition, and the yelling guy pounds on my window with the side of his fist. I smack the lock button, and Jaxon’s truck screeches away from the curb.

“What was that?” I ask, not sure how to process the wild scene.

“I’ve never seen anything like it in my life.”

I look at the bite marks on his neck as he drives. “Does it hurt? The rash?”

“No, not really. Just looks gross.”

“Jaxon, come on. People were screaming and throwing themselves on the ground. There is no way it doesn’t hurt.”

“Yeah, I guess it stings a little.”

“Or a lot.”

“I don’t know how you avoided it.”

“I swear I didn’t do that,” I say, touching my dress where the corsage used to be.

“That’s so weird, ’cause I totally thought you bit everyone at the party.”

I smile despite all the stress. Still, I’m not sure it wasn’t my fault. What if it’s part of the curse? We sit in silence for a few blocks.

Jaxon pulls into his driveway and parks. We both jump out fast, like we can somehow get away from the experience we just had.

He flips his hands over, and the red marks look a little less angry. “It’s so weird that you didn’t get this. I mean, I’m glad you didn’t.”

“I told you people around me get hurt.” I can’t erase this guilty feeling I have.

“Just don’t start telling me to stay away from you again.”

I can’t stay here, though. I have to go change, and wait to hear what Elijah says about the Descendants. There’s still a chance we can go to the woods. “I gotta go.”

“Sam—”

“It’s not about that. I just gotta go.”

Seconds pass. “Fine.” He turns around and walks toward his house.

My heart tightens. I want to say thanks. I can only imagine what they might have done to me if he hadn’t pushed to leave when he did. But instead, I watch him walk away.

I turn toward my house, and Vivian is standing in the doorway. “Where’s my cape?”

I pull the necklace off and hand it to her. “I left it.” I walk toward the stairs.

“Real nice attitude, Sam.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Puritan Rebel

I run my hands through my wet hair to make sure all the cider's out. I lock my bedroom door and pull out my phone. Nothing. There's no way that rash was coincidental. Either someone set me up or I caused it in some weird way.

Elijah appears in front of me.

"Good. You're here." I grab my boots. "Let me get a jacket and we can go."

"You are not going into the woods tonight, Samantha. At least not with the Descendants."

"But we have to! We don't know how much time we have left," I almost yell.

"The police are at Alice's house now, and a good number of parents. A lot of people are blaming you. They are already nervous about all the recent deaths in Salem, and this only makes them more anxious. They are not thinking clearly."

The hearse I saw with Jaxon, the purple roses by the lamppost, the woman outside the funeral hall, and John's great-grandfather all flood my thoughts.

“It would not be wise to go back there. You will have to go tomorrow.”

My voice wavers. “But my dad...”

“You have to calm yourself. You cannot solve this without a clear mind.”

I take a deep breath and try to stop myself from crying.

Elijah takes my hands. “I will help you, Samantha. In whatever way I can.”

His gray eyes are kind. I take my hands back and wrap my arms around him. I bury my face in his chest. For a moment he’s still. Then slowly he returns my hug. He smells subtly of burning logs in a fireplace.

“Will you stay for a little while?”

“If you like.”

“Will you tell me about Abigail?” I want to talk about something other than my fear.

“Yes,” he says into my wet hair, his cheek resting on my head. “What would you like to hear?”

I’d really like to know what happened to her, but I know better than to ask. “Who painted the portrait of her downstairs?”

“I did.”

I pull away to look at his face and I realize he has a tiny freckle on his bottom lip. “You’re a painter?”

His eyes smile. “There were no Puritan painters. Idle action was discouraged in all forms.”

“Then how?”

He releases his arms from my body. “It started as drawings for Abigail when she was little. But after our parents died, she did not speak for a long time. I was looking for ways to make her happy.”

I sit down on my bed and scooch up to the pillows. “But that painting is beautiful. No one does that on their first try.”

He appears embarrassed. “Lots of time in the evenings. Not much to do then. I practiced. No sports or dancing or music. People believed

they led to laziness and to sin. Poor Abigail. She loved to make up songs but could only do it at home.”

I motion for him to sit next to me, and after a moment of hesitation, he does. “I’ve seen drawings of that time, and everyone wore bonnets and ugly black dresses. Where did she get the blue silk gown in the painting?”

“A merchant by the harbor made frequent trips to Europe. Same way I got my paints and canvases and the extra candles by which to paint.”

“So you were a Puritan rebel?”

“Earning that title took minimal effort. Laughing too loudly would probably suffice.”

I smile at him. “Did anyone ever find out what you were doing?”

“One person, yes.”

“Who?”

“My fiancée.”

My eyes widen. “You were engaged?”

He looks away for a moment and the happiness in his expression disappears.

“What?” I ask gently, hoping he’ll let me in a little.

“I told you my sister was in love with William. She was happy, Samantha. I have never seen anyone so happy. I also told you that William’s family wanted him to marry the governor’s daughter. They were stupid, snobbish people. William assured Abigail, however, that she had nothing to worry about.”

Reliving this memory makes his eyes heavy and his voice strained.

“This was concurrent with the time when people became hysterical about witchcraft. As you know, it escalated and they arrested many townspeople. By July, Salem was dangerous and untrusting. People looked suspiciously at their neighbors and closest friends. I was most fearful for Abigail’s safety, so I arranged passage for us on a ship to Europe. But she refused to leave William.”

My stomach tightens. “Please tell me they didn’t accuse her.”

“There were rumors about Abigail over the next couple of months, about her singing to the devil. William came to me, nervous about the gossip. I begged him to elope with her and get her out before any official accusations were made. But his mother had fallen ill, and he did not want to leave his family. As time went on, the rumors got worse. Officials showed up at our door and questioned her.”

“You must have panicked.”

“I was sick with it. But my sweet sister was calm. She was confident that good would prevail. Then, somehow word of their relationship got out and William stopped talking to her. He denied all of it.”

“He abandoned her?” My voice rises.

“I went to talk some sense into him. He said the stress was bad for his mother, and he could not tie his family to an orphan suspected of witchcraft. That he had to protect his good name. I wanted to kill him. But I knew that if I took action it would be worse for Abigail. It was all too much for her, first the town turning against her, and then William. She would not talk or eat. She just lay in her room, drawing black-eyed Susans. Doctors came, but they had no solutions. So I sat by her bed, watching her day after day.

“Then the officials came back.” He pauses. “They would have arrested her, Samantha. They had every plan to, but I dissuaded them on account of her being so ill. I told them that if they took her and she died from their lack of care, they would be sure to rot in hell. For everyone knew my sister would not hurt a soul. I never told her that.”

The extraordinary weight he had carried. “Did William at least check up on her?”

“No.” For a second his fist clenches. “She did not give up hope, though, not until we got the news. He was engaged.”

“To the governor’s daughter?”

“Yes. When my sister heard, she let out a single scream. Two weeks later she died of a broken heart.”

“I would’ve killed him,” I say.

“At first I was angry. But more than retribution, I wanted answers. It did not take me long to track the rumors back to my fiancée. The worst

betrayal of my life. I had told her things that led to my own sister's death. I confronted her. She admitted it. Said she was jealous of my relationship with Abigail, and she did not mean for everything to escalate. After that, I was furious with everyone. Most of all with myself."

My heart hurts for him. I'm not sure if I could stand something like that. "How did you ever get through it?"

His eyes look haunted. "I hanged myself from the balcony of the general store in town in the middle of the night. The townspeople found my body with a note that read 'It is the greatest evil of all, to separate people who love each other. I blame all of you.'"

I cover my mouth with my hand. "I never heard that story."

"That is because no one wanted to remember it."

No wonder he's heartbroken and furious. I would be, too. "What can I do?"

"You can save your father. I failed to protect Abigail, and I have never forgiven myself."

I wish I could make his sadness disappear. It seems so unfair that he had to go through all of that. I gently slip my fingers into his. He looks from my hand to my face. "Samantha." We lock eyes. For a second, his expression softens, and I want to pull him close. But he lets go of my hand and walks to the window.

The hold he had on my body dissipates, and I examine my hands. Why am I feeling this strong connection? And why am I embarrassed? "Why did you bring me that dress tonight?"

"I could see you were badly in need of assistance."

"You were watching me?"

He doesn't respond. He just stares out the window.

"Thank you. That was one of the nicest things anyone has ever done for me."

He almost smiles. "Yes. It looked well on you."

My body warms with the compliment. My phone buzzes. It's a text from Jaxon. "Rash is better. Sleep tight and don't let the zombies bite."

Elijah disappears.

CHAPTER THIRTY

I Can See You

Twigs snap under my feet as I run through the dark trees. There's a man standing in a patch of light just ahead. A branch scrapes my cheek. I grab my face but don't stop. I need to get to him. He's youngish, maybe late twenties, and he wears antiquated clothes. His hands fold behind his back the same way Elijah's do.

He looks up when I enter the clearing and I follow his gaze. A crow sits on a large branch. And below it hangs a noose. I try to scream, but the sound is muffled.

I sit straight up as the rest of the scream leaves my mouth. My phone says it's 7:27 a.m. I slip out of my bed, trying to shake the anxiety of my dream as I head into the hall.

It's Wednesday, and there's no school. I walk straight to Vivian's room, hoping she's awake and we can go to Boston. Her door is cracked open, and I push it. Her bed is made and I don't hear her in the bathroom. I eye the medical bill on her dresser. Just a quick look.

Carefully, I lift the papers on top of it. It reads *Explanation of Benefits—This is not a bill*. I guess it's a summary of Dad's insurance coverage? There are columns of numbers. The amount-billed column is high—many thousands of dollars high. I scan the deductible and

copayment columns. They're all zeros. I turn to the next page, same thing.

I scan ahead to the bottom of the last page, where the totals are. It reads *Patient responsibility (amount you paid or owe to provider): \$0*. I look at the date. It was sent less than two weeks ago. My heart stutters as I arrange the papers in their original positions.

What does this mean, exactly? Does this mean she lied this whole time about my dad's medical bills being high? The thought terrifies me. Not because she lied, but because of the scale of the lie.

I make my way to the stairs and grip the banister. Unless I'm completely missing something, there was no reason to sell the New York apartment. Why do it? Money. But my dad makes a really good living. Vivian wants more money? That's the only answer. So, what, is she waiting for my dad to die to get a huge inheritance? I feel ill. How could she do this?

"You look like you saw a ghost," says Vivian from the bottom of the stairs.

I'm afraid to look at her. I don't know what I'll say. I can't believe I almost opened up to her last night. "I had a nightmare."

"Well, I just got off the phone with the hospital, and the doctor scheduled tests for your father throughout the afternoon. I think we should shoot for visiting this weekend."

Now I look at her. I want to tell her she has no right to even talk about my dad.

She frowns. "I know you're disappointed, but don't be mad at *me* about it. I didn't schedule those tests."

I walk past her on the stairs and don't say a word. I just head straight to the kitchen. Normally, I would scream. But I can't. What if she really is waiting for my dad to die, to get his money? And then I yell at her and push her to do something crazy? She's controlling his medical treatment. I need to think about this. I can't let her know that I found that statement.

I mix my coffee, barely looking at it. I need to solve this curse. That's my only avenue to helping Dad, my best chance at his waking up. It's a

long shot, but I have to believe in something.

“Is all well?” Elijah asks in his proper English–inspired accent.

“How does it work, being a spirit?” I ask, without answering his question. I sip my coffee.

“I am not sure what you are asking.”

“You said you followed me a lot when I first got here. What did you mean?”

“If I know where you are, and I focus on you in that space, I can see you. It is like having a window into your world, much like your television. If you know what channel to go to and what time to tune in, you can see your show.”

Well, that explains how he knew I was in danger at the party. “And if you don’t know where I am?”

“Then I must search for you. It can take quite a while.”

“And what about physical things? If you carry my coffee cup, for instance, would other people be able to see it?”

“That is more complex. Small things I can make disappear from view. Large things I cannot. It is akin to physical strength. Some things I am strong enough to lift, while others I cannot move. And blinking, the act of appearing and disappearing...blinking physical items from one space to another is even more difficult. It takes a lot of practice and concentration.”

“What about me? What if you lift me up?”

He looks amused. “You would appear to float. I do not have any ability to make the living disappear, only inanimate objects.”

“I don’t think I understand these rules.”

“You will.”

“Could you do me a favor?” I ask.

“I was wondering how long it would take for you to say that sentence. I have already retrieved the cape.”

“Oh! Thanks.” I’m embarrassed by how easy I am to read. “Actually, could you check on my dad? Vivian said they’re running tests on him today. I’m just not sure I believe her. And I had my heart set on

visiting him.”

“Yes, they are running tests today.”

I slump down in a chair at the small breakfast table near the window. “How do you know? Did you focus on him or something?” If he knows where my dad is, does that mean he watched when I went to the hospital?

“No. I checked on him earlier.”

He checks on my dad? “How was he?”

“The hospital is taking good care of him.”

I relax a little. I desperately want to see him, but I’m glad he’s okay. And the thought of going to the hospital with Vivian is awful. I couldn’t stand watching her pretend she cares.

If I can’t go to the hospital... “We need to find out more about the curse and whatever that chaos was last night.”

“Figuring out last night may take a while. Everyone is still recovering.”

“Did all of the Descendants get the rash?”

“Yes, Susannah worst of all.”

“So I really was the only one who didn’t get it?”

“I am afraid so.”

I was hanging on to the hope that maybe I wasn’t. I sigh.

“I spent my night going through more of your grandmother’s research. I have not finished, however.”

“I’ll help you.” I get up and head for the kitchen door. I’m grateful he doesn’t sleep and can work on this stuff at night. I already feel the intense pressure that I’m not figuring this out fast enough and that at any moment my world could fall apart.

He doesn’t blink out, or whatever he calls it, this time. Instead, he walks by my side through the house and toward the library.

“Why am I the only one who sees you? Is it because you choose not to let other people know you’re around?” I keep my voice hushed. I like that idea.

He closes the library door behind us. “I have nothing to do with your

seeing me.”

So much for that theory. “Then, why do I?”

“That is not something I know.”

I pull the hook in the fireplace and we step into the narrow hallway.
“But you’re dead.”

“I am aware.”

“Shouldn’t you know these things?”

He almost laughs. “I know little more than when I was living. I just move around faster.”

The idea that death brings clarity is blown. “Have you met other people who could see you?”

“Yes, a few. They are rare.”

As I reach the top of the stairs, I notice Elijah has rearranged the piles of books into organized stacks. The dust’s gone. Spirits clean?

I’m not sure I wanna ask this next question, but my curiosity is running the show. “If I see you, then do I see other spirits?”

“Yes.”

Visiting graveyards just shot to the top of my never-again list. Was I walking around all this time seeing spirits and thinking they were living people? “So what’s in these piles of books?” Let’s just think about something more cheery, like curses, for instance.

“Most of this is research on the Trials and the Mathers. I left Salem before the Trials concluded; I needed to educate myself.”

“Why did you leave Salem?”

“No one kills themselves because they are happy where they are.”

Well, that makes perfect sense. I can only imagine his surprise when he died and found himself back in Salem for some indefinite period of time. I’d leave, too. And now he’s back here researching the Trials. I guess you can’t avoid your life, even in death.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Love and Arrows

I turn to the last page of my grandmother's research notebook. "Nothing new in this one, either," I say to Elijah, who has a stack of diaries in front of him from historical collections and people's attics.

"Research is not instantaneous and must be built piece by piece. Quick does not mean good. That perspective will impair your perception. You will miss something."

Easier said than done when my dad's life is at risk. "What about Mrs. Meriwether? She knew my grandmother really well. Better than anyone. Maybe there's something that my grandmother didn't write down? Something that Mrs. Meriwether knows?"

"Possibly. However, speaking with her will only yield results if you are direct."

"Were you listening when I went to her house the other day?"

He looks disapproving. *Great.* That means he heard me with Jaxon. How embarrassing. I'm already awkward enough without some attractive dead dude overhearing everything I say. I may never toot again.

I flip through a journal I've already read to see if there's something I

missed. “Do you think my grandmother’s drawings could be of any significance? They’re in the margins, and she doesn’t say anything specific about them.”

“Perhaps. Let me see.”

I hand the notebook to Elijah.

He studies it, and his brow furrows. “Are there more?”

“Yes, but they’re all similar versions of a woman with long wavy hair seen from behind.”

He turns the pages of the notebook. “None that show a face?”

“No, why?”

“You should ask Mrs. Meriwether.”

“Is there something strange about it?”

“It is better to ask too many questions than not enough.”

I agree, but I think he might be omitting some detail. “Okay. I’m gonna go over there.”

He nods, and continues reading. I pull my hair up into a ponytail as I make my way through the passage. When I enter the library, the light outside is already dimming. I need to find the Descendants once the sun goes down.

“Well, there you are. Where’ve you been all day?” Vivian asks as I walk to the side door.

“Here.”

“I looked for you earlier and couldn’t find you.”

I did hear her calling, but had no desire to answer. “Must’ve been on a walk.”

She looks unsure. “Must have.”

“I’m going next door.”

“Okay.” She checks her gold watch. “Just be back by seven for dinner. I’ve ordered a ridiculous amount of French food.”

“Oh.” The word catches in my throat. An image of a younger Vivian snapping that picture at the Parisian café flashes through my mind. Since my dad and I met her, French cuisine has been a bonding food

for the three of us, something that is just ours. We always have it on special nights, like when my dad comes home from a long trip, or for the first snowfall in winter.

“I know you were sad about not seeing your dad today. I thought this might cheer you up. And we can have our chat. You might faint when you see how many desserts I got.”

It’s painful to watch her be nice after seeing that bill this morning. “Gotta go,” I say, swallowing my sadness.

I walk out the door and make my way to Mrs. Meriwether’s porch, struggling to push Vivian out of my mind. I raise my hand to knock, but Jaxon steps out of the door.

“Hey. I didn’t think you were home. I came over earlier, but no one answered.”

“Really? I guess I didn’t hear the door. Is your mom here?”

“And here I got excited you were looking for me.”

I smile. “I wanted to ask her about some of my grandmother’s things I found.”

“I’m going to see her. She’s at the Remembrance Day Fair down at Salem Common. Her bakery has a booth. Come with me.”

“I don’t know.” I look at the barely visible sun. I need to find the Descendants.

“Sam, it’s your first fall in Salem. The fair won’t come around again for another year.”

“Uh...I was supposed to maybe do something with Susannah.”

“She’s down there. She showed up right before I ran home to grab twine for my mom’s pastry boxes. Come on. The whole town is there. It’s fun.”

I relax slightly. This saves me from going to the Descendants’ houses. Who knows what their parents think of me after last night. “Let’s do it.”

Jaxon and I head down the sidewalk. “If you’re nice to me, I might even give you one of my mom’s famous funnel cakes.”

“And if you’re nice to me, I’ll refrain from giving you that zombie

rash again.”

We share an amused look. “Glad you got your sense of humor back instead of all that doom and gloom.”

I still think that doom and gloom stuff. It’s just not fair to unload it on Jaxon.

“You’re pretty cute for a witch.”

He’s joking, but it hits too close to the weird stuff I’ve been doing recently. “Do you think there’s any way that rash could be witchcraft?”

Jaxon laughs. “Definitely. Strong theory. Right up there with fairies and ghosts.”

Worst answer ever. “I hope you don’t mind my asking, but why would Lizzie say your mom was crazy?”

Jaxon’s jaw tenses. “My mom had a rough patch after my father died. She got really depressed, and for a while she’d still talk to him. She didn’t care who overheard. There were other things, too. But the gist of it is that people in town thought she’d lost it. They even stopped going to her bakery for a bit. It took a couple of years to get everything back in order. We almost lost the house. And Lizzie sort of instigated those rumors. She wasn’t a fan of your grandmother, either.”

I’m getting the sense not many people were. “Wow, Jaxon. I don’t know what to say.” No wonder Jaxon’s so nice even though the school hates me. He knows what it feels like to have awful rumors spread about his family. “I could kill Lizzie for saying that to you.”

His grin returns. “Don’t let me stand in your way.”

We approach the edge of Salem Common, a large park in the center of town packed with people and lights. Music plays, and the air is thick with the aroma of carnival food. There’s the distinct roar of excited conversation.

Jaxon leads me through the crowd to his mother’s booth. “Hey, Mom. Look who I found on our porch. She was coming to talk to you.”

“Oh, Samantha! What a wonderful surprise. Have a funnel cake.”

I don’t resist as she hands me a plate of delicious fried dough covered with powdered sugar.

“Mom, you just killed my whole strategy.”

She looks from one of us to the other. “Samantha’s no fool. You’ll have to do better than bargaining my funnel cakes, Jaxon.” I laugh. She knows him so well. “Now, my darling girl, what did you want to see me about?”

She reads the hesitation on my face. “Jaxon, make yourself useful and help out in the booth while Samantha and I have a word.”

Jaxon walks toward the booth, and I wipe the powdered sugar from my shirt before I begin. “I know this is a weird question. But I was going through my grandmother’s things and I noticed that she had drawings in her notebooks of a woman with dark wavy hair. Does that mean anything to you?”

Mrs. Meriwether’s cheer fades. “Charlotte had a lot of nightmares, poor thing. Especially near the end. This woman was in most of them. She never saw her face, but she used to call her ‘the crow woman’ because there were always crows with her.”

I stop mid-bite. There was a crow in my dream this morning.

“She thought the woman was somehow connected to the Mather curse. Which I suspect you know all about, since you are reading Charlotte’s journals.” She raises her eyebrows.

She just saved me from my next awkward question. “Do you believe there is a curse?”

Mrs. Meriwether purses her lips. “I don’t know. But Charlotte did. She never figured out what it all meant, though. And Charlotte was very special to me, as I’ve said before. Sometimes you do things because you believe in a person, and not because you believe in everything they do.”

I guess the whole idea of a curse is a bit out there. I’m just glad my grandmother had Mrs. Meriwether. “That makes sense. Thanks.”

“Anytime. Now I imagine you’ll want to enjoy this lovely fair. Jaxon!”

Jaxon doesn’t need to be called twice. He hurries back. “Find out what you needed to know?”

I nod. Jaxon pulls me into the crowd. Could there be a connection

between my dream and the crow woman? I want to ask Elijah. I scan the crowd for the Descendants, but no luck. I get a few nasty looks, though.

“Basketball?” Jaxon asks as we approach one of those carnival games where you need to make a basket in a hoop that is one inch wider than the ball itself.

An older woman is walking next to us, holding her husband’s arm. “I just have a bad feeling about it. There have been too many accidents and deaths recently. It’s not natural,” she says. They continue walking and are drowned out by carnival noise.

“Can we find Susannah first?” I ask, feeling even more urgency than I did before.

“Sam, unless there’s some pressing issue, I’m going to insist that you have some fun.”

I need an angle fast if I’m not going to explain myself.

“Archery?” I ask as we approach targets lined up against hay bales.

“Abso-friggin-lutely.”

We stop at one of the stations and wait for the guy with the bows. “There’s one condition,” I say, hoping I don’t regret this. “If I win, you help me find Susannah. If I lose, you choose the next game.”

“Deal.” His grin widens. When it doesn’t disappear after a second, I get uncomfortable.

“What?”

“You have powdered sugar on your face.”

“What! Why didn’t you tell me?”

He grabs my hand before I can wipe it off. “Leave it.”

“Are you nuts? I’m not leaving powdered sugar on my face.”

“I think it’s cute.”

“Well, it’s not.” I’m trying to sound annoyed, but fail.

He leans in and kisses the sugar off of me. My skin turns warm where his lips were.

“Are you trying to distract me so I don’t beat you at archery?” I ask.

He lands a kiss on my lips, and all the sensors in my body go off at once.

“Nothing like young love and arrows,” says the robust man with a full beard holding out our two bows.

We back away from each other, and I’m positive I’m beet red.

He chuckles. “How many arrows would ya like?”

“Three each,” I say.

I pull out my wallet and give him the money. Jaxon opens his mouth to protest as we grab our bows. “My challenge, my treat.”

“Have ya shot a bow before?” the man asks.

“Nope,” says Jaxon, and I shake my head. *Good*. At least my chances of winning are fair. There was no way I was going to beat him at that basketball game.

“Ya grip the bow here. Straight arm, solid hold. Put yer arrow in at the notch. Then ya pull back the string all the way to yer chin. Don’t pinch the arrow, ’cause it won’t go nowhere ya want it to. Got that?” We nod. He looses one arrow, and it hits a small *x* on the wall behind the target.

“Thanks,” Jaxon says, and the man steps back.

“You go first,” I say.

Jaxon approaches the short hay barricade and stands in the position the bearded man demonstrated. He lets one arrow go, and it hits the bottom ring of the target. His second hits the same area but slightly to the left. The third lands securely in the small ring around the bull’s-eye. *Crapola*.

“Looks like I’ll be choosing the next game,” Jaxon says. “I’m thinkin’ pie-eating contest.”

“Shut it.” I step up to the barricade. My first try, I pinch the arrow. And to my intense disappointment, it wobbles to the ground two feet in front of the target. Jaxon chuckles. Thankfully, my second one lands nicely in the middle ring.

“Nervous?” I ask.

“Not even a little.”

I take aim, and my arm shakes. As I release my last arrow, Elijah appears, and it goes right through his body. I scream and stumble backward into Jaxon. He wraps his arms around me, and the instructor takes my bow.

Jaxon squeezes me. “I have to admit that was one of the more dramatic approaches I’ve seen, but considering you just made a bull’s-eye, I can’t say much. In fact, I think I got conned.”

My heart rate slows as I realize that I won and everything is alright. What was that, a joke? Elijah looks too pleased for it to be accidental. *Dark friggin’ humor.* He’s dead, but *come on.* I suddenly become very conscious that Jaxon’s arm is around me, and I break contact. I shouldn’t care if Elijah sees that. The thought tugs at me uncomfortably.

Before I can gloat about my win, Susannah, Mary, and Alice walk up.

“Let’s go,” says Alice. I couldn’t be happier to see her.

Jaxon’s smile disappears. “Nice attitude.”

“I don’t have time for small talk.”

I hate to agree, but Alice is right, even though her attitude sucks. I turn toward Jaxon. He’s about to respond, but I put my hand on his chest. “It’s okay. I’ll give you a call later.”

“I don’t get you, Sam. Why are you jumping to Alice’s commands?”

“Because she’s less of an idiot than most people,” Alice says.

“Believe it or not,” I say to Jaxon, “I think that was a compliment.”

Jaxon shakes his head. “What could be so important?”

“I just gotta go.” I walk toward the Descendants.

He looks disappointed. “You say that a lot.”

Before I can tell him I’m sorry, Mary grabs my arm and pulls me into the crowd. “We gotta move. My parents only agreed to let me out for a few hours.”

“And we lost a damn half hour going to your house looking for you. No one figured you’d come out into public,” Alice continues as we approach the edge of the Common.

“Is everyone really blaming me for that rash?”

Susannah nods. “I told the police it wasn’t your fault, but there are a lot of rumors.” I hope Lizzie didn’t come down on her too hard last night.

Alice pulls out Mary’s keys and unlocks the Jeep. “And the irony of this situation is that people are calling *you* a witch. I bet Cotton’s rolling in his grave.”

I would laugh, but the whole thing sucks. “Did you guys find anything that might explain what happened?”

“Alice’s house was a wreck. But nothing out of the ordinary. If you ask me, it was a spell,” says Mary. “The way it came and went so fast was eerie.”

“Bull. Who do you know who could make a spell that strong?” Alice demands.

“Well, Lizzie—”

“No.” Alice swerves around a car and my stomach drops.

I don’t like the idea that someone could wave a wand and everyone gets a rash. Feels too unpredictable. Speaking of which, where’s Elijah? “Wait, so Lizzie can or can’t do magic?”

“Well,” Susannah says, “it’s not that she can’t. We’re all a little inclined. But I, personally, think it was the curse that caused it.”

It’s not comforting to know there’s someone out to get you who has an *inclination* toward magic. “If it was the curse, then why didn’t I get the rash?”

“That’s the part we can’t figure out,” says Mary.

Susannah pinches her bottom lip between her fingers. “We will, though.”

I know I’m lucky they’re talking to me at all, but something about this Lizzie thing gnaws at me. “Why aren’t Lizzie and John with you guys?”

“Because Lizzie—” Mary starts.

“Hates you,” Alice cuts her off.

Susannah turns toward me in the backseat. “Lizzie thinks you’re

responsible for certain things that have been going wrong in Salem. She links them to your arrival.”

“And she’s dating John, so there’s that,” Mary chimes in.

Well, Lizzie’s not wrong, exactly. And I’m not surprised they’re dating. I could have figured that out myself if I wasn’t so preoccupied with the curse and my dad. “That’s why she’s been following me?”

“Enough,” Alice says, and Susannah breaks eye contact.

“Did something happen I don’t know about?”

Alice jerks us to a halt in the Walgreens parking lot. “That rash wasn’t enough for you?”

Seeing the dark trees, and remembering that dream I had, makes me sick. “You know what I meant,” I say.

Mary hands me a hooded cape and I put it on.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

The Markings of Witchcraft

Alice takes the first step onto the slope and we follow. The silence between us is thick with secrets. I try to forget my surroundings, but as we lose the light of the parking lot to the overgrown forest, my anxiety tries to crush me.

My cape catches on a branch and I jolt to a stop. The other girls keep moving. I yank at the cape, but it's stuck. Everything looks the same in the dark—faint, crooked shadows, black on black.

“Wait!” I yell to the girls, and my voice cracks.

The wind howls in the trees, and it sounds eerily similar to the woman's wail I heard in that awful house. I pull at the branch my cape is attached to with force, and the rough bark scratches my palm.

“I am here, Samantha,” says Elijah.

I suck in air and put my hand on my forehead to steady myself. My shaky legs become steadier as Elijah untangles my cape from the branch. I grab his hand tightly, probably too tightly. He doesn't say anything, but curls his cold fingers around my own. When we catch up with the girls, they start walking again.

We come to the little clearing, and Mary pulls out the blanket. I'm

impressed that Alice found this place a second time. I'm not sure I could do the same. The girls unpack the herbs.

"This bears all the markings of witchcraft," Elijah says, releasing my hand. I almost respond before I catch myself.

Susannah lights the candles, and I scan the trees for a noose. I wish I could delete that dream from my memory. In the candlelight, Mary looks as nervous as I feel, Susannah seems only slightly on edge, and Alice doesn't seem bothered at all. I don't get that girl.

Susannah starts the words of the...chant? Expectation hangs heavily like a cloud before a downpour.

"I call upon the power of fire," I say clearly when it's my turn. Elijah raises an eyebrow.

"That it may light my way and impassion my spirit. Only through purification may I see clearly," they all continue.

We light the bundles of herbs and drop them into the wooden bowl.

"I mean what I say, and I say what I intend. Know my desire and give me clarity," they say slowly, so that I can follow along. The strong scent of the burning herbs fills the air between us.

We join hands, and my muscles tense. For a moment, there's nothing. Then, as before, their faces flicker—slowly and faintly at first, then building to a rapid blur. There's a strange, ethereal layer to each of the girls, as though other people share the same physical space with them. The flickering faces are the same older women as before, and there's something desperately sad about them.

The older woman now occupying Mary's face looks around her and settles her gaze on me. She says, "These trees were locust once. This growth is new."

"The water used to come right up to this hill," says the old woman sharing Susannah's body, also turning toward me. "It was called Bickford's Pond. It is how Benjamin Nurse came to retrieve his dead mother."

"From the crevasse where they *threw* our bodies," says the older Alice with a toughness that reminds me of her young counterpart. My eyes follow her pointing finger to barely visible rocks that steeply drop

off.

My skin goes cold, and sweat forms on my palms. *What is this?*

“July nineteenth, sixteen ninety-two. I was in the first group to hang,” continues the old Susannah.

I’m not seeing this. Am I? *These women...I don’t know how to process this.* My heart punches me inwardly. I try to stand, to end the vision or whatever it is, but my body won’t move. I can’t even lift a finger.

“The first time I walked into that court”—the old Susannah says “court” with severe distaste—“the young girls started having fits. One even threw her glove at me.”

Are the Descendants using a spell on me?

The old Susannah’s wrinkled face frowns. “I laughed at them. I knew immediately by the astonishment of the magistrate that I had deeply misjudged the situation. ‘Do you laugh at this?’ he asked. ‘Well I may at such folly’ is what I told him. But the magistrate was serious. ‘Is this folly? The hurt of persons?’ he asked. I declared that ‘I never hurt man, woman, or child.’ I even recited passages from the Bible to prove my faith. But they only claimed that the Devil’s servants could imitate the innocent.” She sighs.

“The worst part was that jail,” says the old Mary, shivering at the memory.

“No,” says the old Alice. “The worst was that we were denied counsel and sentenced to death because children said they had visions of us hurting them. When that girl had a fit in the courtroom and accused me of being the cause of it, I told her plainly—”

The older women’s faces flicker. Mary gasps and wheezes, breaking the circle. The hold on my body shatters like ice hitting concrete and my hands fly to my chest, pulling at my clothes to get more air.

“It felt like the life was being sucked out of me,” Mary says between pants.

“We were getting somewhere,” says Susannah, leaning forward with both hands on the ground in front of her.

“We should try to continue,” says Alice.

Mary shakes her head. “No way. That was terrifying! And for what? For stories we already know?”

They know these stories?

“We didn’t know about the trees or the water,” Susannah says between staggered breaths.

Elijah kneels beside me. “You appeared as Cotton Mather.”

My head snaps up. “Cotton!”

Alice doesn’t miss a beat. “How’d you know your face looked male?”

“I didn’t. It was a guess.”

“Bull. You were the only one who didn’t speak.”

Mary, gaining control over her breathing, pulls her knees into her chest. “Let’s discuss this in the car.”

“I’m not leaving until Sam tells us the truth.”

It suddenly occurs to me that they must have known last time that my face blurred with Cotton’s. And they said nothing. What game are these girls playing? “You know what? I’m done answering your questions. You *knew* I looked like Cotton last time we were here.”

Alice regains control of her breathing. “Well, now you know, too.”

The confirmation that they hid it from me really bothers me. I look at Susannah. “And you wanted me to trust you?”

Alice looks at Susannah, too. “You talked to her without us?” Alice asks. “So Lizzie was right. You were disloyal.”

Okay, now I’m lost.

Susannah folds her small hands in her lap. “I told you I think it’s a bad idea not to tell Samantha everything we know. You think we’re being careful, but what we’re doing is shutting out the one person who could help us.”

“Or hurt us,” says Alice.

“I’m sure we can solve this in the Jeep,” Mary says.

Alice and Susannah turn to her. “No!” they say in unison.

I can’t help but feel bad for Mary. Elijah’s being here is the only reason I’m not running out of these woods. And even with him here, I

catch myself peering into the blackness suspiciously.

“I think you’re making a mistake about Samantha, and people could die because of it. My sister could die because of it,” Susannah says.

Alice takes a breath. “And what if you’re wrong?”

“Then I’ll take responsibility for that.”

“Lizzie won’t forgive you,” Alice says.

Susannah nods. “I know.”

Elijah paces next to me.

“Fine,” Alice says, and gestures toward Susannah.

“Alice reads bones the same way some people read tarot cards,” Susannah says, as though that is even a quasi-normal thing. “And about four months ago, she got a reading that something really bad was about to happen.”

“My dad went into a coma four months ago,” I say before I have a chance to think about it.

Alice and Susannah exchange a look. “The readings Alice did after that showed sadness and loss and the same warning that something bad was coming.”

Mary hugs her knees a little tighter. “Alice’s readings are always right.”

Alice nods. “Then you showed up. And every reading since then has just been you.”

“Wait, what do you mean, just been me?” My practical self is struggling with this. Bones and spells and ghosts. I want my simple reality back.

“Just your name,” Alice says. “Over and over.”

Their strong reactions to me the first day of school don’t seem so weird anymore.

“Lizzie and I think it means *you* are the bad thing that was coming, but Susannah isn’t convinced.”

“Is that why Lizzie’s been stalking me?”

“Lizzie’s been affected strongly by this awful chain of events,” Susannah says. “And she blames you. If she knew we were talking to

you openly, she might do something.”

I would ask how Lizzie was affected, but I know Alice would shut the conversation down. “Do what?”

“A spell,” Mary says.

Elijah stiffens beside me.

“You have to understand that strange things have been happening all over town,” Susannah says before Mary can continue. “It’s not just the descendant deaths. Alice’s uncle owns a coffee shop. And when he opened up yesterday, each table had a noose on it. There were no signs of a break-in, just nooses.”

“Was it The Brew?” I ask.

“You shouldn’t know about this,” Alice says. “Only a few people were told.”

They all stare at me, even Elijah. “I went there the other day and my latte had a coffee stain on it that looked exactly like a noose. I thought maybe the girl that worked there was messing with me.” I’m starting to regret my little outburst.

“See, even when we have information, you have it right after us. The blurred faces, Cotton, the pattern of deaths,” Susannah says.

They all wait.

I look at Elijah. “Just leave my personal details out of it,” he says. He doesn’t seem bothered, just resolute.

“I...I see spirits. Well, one, at least.” No one reacts, and I wonder if they heard me.

“I knew it,” Susannah says.

“You’re a witch,” says Mary.

“I’m not a witch.”

“And this ghost is here now?” Alice seems skeptical.

“Yes.”

“Prove it.”

“No.” I don’t have to look at Elijah to know he’s not going to perform some trick.

Alice raises an eyebrow.

Mary scans the trees nervously for Elijah. “Can we please go? I need to get home.”

Alice stands in answer and Mary shoots up like she can’t get out fast enough. There are still so many questions I need to ask them. And some part of me worries that I *am* the cause of these awful things. Maybe the curse is part of me?

We blow out the candles and pack everything into Mary’s and Susannah’s bags. The woods become even darker.

Alice turns to me. “If you’re lying to us about that ghost and I find out you were somehow involved in these deaths, you won’t like the consequences.”

“I have just as much to lose as you do if we don’t figure this out.” I can tell she accepts this, because she turns around and walks into the trees without another word.

“Alice,” I say, and she stops, her blond head the most visible thing in the blackness. “The vision we just had. What did Alice Parker say when that girl accused her of witchcraft?” Mary said they knew these stories, but I don’t. And whether they’re messing with me or not, those women were trying to tell us something.

Alice turns. “In response to the accusations, she said, ‘I wish God would open the earth and swallow me up presently, if one word of this is true.’”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Angry, Not Sad

“Get in here.” Vivian’s words are barbed.

I read the grandfather clock in the foyer before I enter the living room. It’s 9:27. I know I missed her dinner, but I can barely look at her right now without wanting to cry and scream all at once.

“Apologize and I’ll consider not grounding you.”

I should just do it and walk away. “No.” *You apologize. You don’t care about my father...about our family.*

She puts her glass of wine down and stands. “You’re not sorry at all, are you?”

“Samantha, leave her,” Elijah says, standing next to a cluster of empty wine bottles.

“Maybe you should be worrying about visiting my dad instead of running around town shopping all the time and getting drunk.”

Her eyes harden. I know that look. We’ve hit the point of no return. “You seem awfully social yourself for someone who says she only wants to be by her father’s side.”

“You have no idea what I’ve been doing.”

“Did I upset you, *mon chou?*” Vivian taunts, using the pet name my

dad called me when I was a little girl. It means “my little cream puff.”

My fingers curl into my palms. “Screw you.”

Vivian’s hand whips across my cheek so hard and so fast that everything goes black for a second. I raise my chin and stare at her. I don’t massage my face, even though it hurts like hell. I want to tell her I found the insurance summary and call her every name I can think of, but before I can open my mouth her wineglass shatters on the floor.

Vivian jolts. “You’re grounded.” She shifts her attention to the broken glass.

Elijah, who I’m pretty sure was the cause of it, gently touches my arm. “Do not give her the satisfaction of seeing you upset.”

I nod and run to my room with Elijah by my side. My whole body trembles. I slam my door and slide the lock into place. I stand there fuming. Elijah lifts my chin. He brushes a tear away with his cold thumb.

“I’m angry, not sad,” I say with a voice that’s sad and not angry.

“I need no explanation.”

I’m grateful for that. I don’t want to talk about how I feel. What I want is my dad back.

“I will bring you ice.” He blinks out of the room.

“Don’t cry,” I say to myself, and dab my eyes with the sleeves of my black hoodie. I take a few deep breaths, and Elijah blinks in with a small ice pack. I take it from him. “Thanks.”

He nods. “May I bring you some tea?”

The formality of his question catches me by surprise. “Actually, yeah. I’d really like some tea. Will you have some with me?”

“Certainly.”

He blinks out, and I take my boots off. I pace with my ice pack, trying to clear Vivian from my thoughts and decide what to do next. *What does it mean that Cotton’s face blurred with mine?* I don’t like the idea that I’m connected to him. And if I am, does it mean he’s trapped here like Elijah...or worse, he’s trapped inside of me?

Elijah blinks in with a large silver tray full of tea. A wicker basket

hangs from his arm, and a fluffy rug is over his shoulder. For the first time ever, he looks uncertain. “Will you hold this tray a moment, Samantha?” I swear he’d be blushing if he had blood.

I pull the ice pack off my cheek and take the tray. “What is all this?”

He unfolds the fluffy rug and spreads it out on my floor. “A room picnic.”

I almost fumble the tray. *Why is he doing this?* He takes it and places it in the middle of the rug. He offers his hand, and when our fingers touch I light up. My body temperature steadily rises and I break eye contact. We sit. He opens the basket and pulls out delicious-looking foods.

“Where’d you get all this?” I ask, still flustered.

“The tea and scones are from London. The finger sandwiches and pastries are from Paris. And the Devonshire cream is from Devonshire.”

He went all over Europe picking out food for me? How’s this happening right now? “This is the best cheering-up present I’ve ever gotten.”

He smiles, and all his uncertainty drains away. It’s a real smile. The first one I’ve ever seen on him. *He has dimples!* Everything in me wants to touch them. I need to change the subject before I embarrass myself. “Do you think Cotton’s trapped inside me?”

He offers me a finger sandwich. “The thought did occur to me.”

I crinkle my face. “That makes me want to vom.”

“Please refrain from murdering the English language while we eat.”

I laugh. His humor always comes as a surprise. I wonder what he was like before Abigail died. “After tonight, I feel like I don’t know nearly enough about Cotton.”

“Well, I know he was born in 1663 into a prominent family of ministers and followed that path himself. He was prolific and wrote nearly four hundred books and pamphlets.”

I glance at the stack of books I brought down from my grandmother’s secret study. One of them was written by Cotton. I’ll

read that one first. “My grandmother’s notebooks said he had a difficult relationship with his father. And that his need to impress him may have driven some of the things he did?”

“Increase Mather was an influential figure in the Puritan community. Cotton was determined to match his success. But Increase did not agree with the Trials using spectral evidence—the testimonies where people claimed the specter or spirit of the witch was trying to harm them.”

I watch his lips as he speaks. *Are they cold like his hands?* “In history class we learned they would strip people naked and search them for witches’ teats. Gross word, by the way. Something that a ‘demon familiar,’ I think my teacher called it, could suck from. And they poked the witches with pins, right? To see if they could feel them? I mean, that’s some nutty stuff.”

“Indeed. Often, they would show bite marks as proof. Or they would fall into fits in the presence of the witch.”

The rash suddenly doesn’t seem out of left field. “How did anyone believe these accusations?”

He looks thoughtful as he chews. “They were very convincing. My fiancée was one of the primary accusers.”

“How’d you feel about that?”

“Initially, I imagined her claim to illness legitimate. I worried terribly for her. She would stiffen and stop speaking, or suddenly become frightened by a sight that was not there. I spent many a wakeful hour walking her floors determined to find a medical solution.”

“And she was just jealous of your relationship with Abigail?” He must have felt so betrayed.

“Yes. That is where it started, certainly. Then it became about old insults and family grudges. She was consumed with the power of it. And her accusations took the lives of good people. By the time I left, she was a shadow of the girl I had loved. Dark and distorted.”

It sounds like a scarier version of high school. “How could people push each other to death like that? It seems so cruel.”

“She did it because she felt important. People got away with it because no one stood up for the accused. The first people accused of witchcraft in Salem were an invalid, a homeless woman, and a servant. Who would speak for them?”

Those poor people.

“It is not dissimilar to your own situation. Do you believe the Descendants could torment you without the consent of the other students and teachers?”

“It’s not like they exactly agreed. They’re just kinda silent about the whole thing,” I say.

“Group silence can be a death sentence. It was in Salem,” he says.

“Those accusations went to court, though.”

Elijah nods. “Court was different then. The accused witches had no way to defend themselves.”

That sounds awful. “So, once you went to trial, you were found guilty.”

“You went in through the door and out hanging from the nearest tree,” Elijah says.

“What role did Cotton play, exactly?”

“It’s complex. He wrote a book about a witchcraft case in Boston. Reading material was scarce at the time, and Cotton’s book read like a gossip magazine. As you might imagine, it was extremely popular. When the witchcraft scare broke out in Salem Village, the afflicted exhibited the exact symptoms as the people in his book. A copy of that book was present on their bookshelves.”

“Oh man. So he unknowingly wrote a guidebook for accusing witches?” Maybe Lizzie’s answer in class wasn’t so far off.

“Also, understand that Puritan society was oppressively austere. Everyone worked and prayed and that was it.”

I shake my head. “So when these accusations began, it was like crazy reality TV and everyone got consumed by them?”

“Completely consumed. It happened faster than one would imagine,” he says, and pauses. “You never know in life when

something unpredictable will happen.” He looks away quickly and lifts the china pot. “How do you take your tea?”

“Cream and sugar, please.” These words feel oddly proper. “Elijah, why did you come back to Salem?”

“I missed Abigail. I wanted to see something that reminded me of her.”

“But you didn’t leave again?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Troublesome houseguests.” He almost smiles.

“Do you still want me to leave?” I ask, terrified of his answer.

He thinks for a moment, and his boyish nervousness returns. “Samantha, you are the bravest person I have met in three hundred years.”

My eyes well up. I carry so much weight every day, and no one cares. Having someone acknowledge it is almost overwhelming.

“I am honored to know you,” he continues. “I only wish that Abigail could have had the same pleasure.”

I wipe away a tear.

He smiles. “I must remember to compliment you more so that you get used to it.”

He’s right. No one ever compliments me except my dad. I stare at him, and the fluttering around my heart starts again. Why do I feel this way? And more important, why can’t I breathe?

He slides his hand into mine and lifts it up. He gently kisses my fingers with almost warm lips. Goose bumps rise all over my body in the best way. My phone buzzes in my pocket. I jump, pulling my hand out of his grip. Unsure how to recover, I take my phone out. Jaxon’s calling.

There’s a muffled scream of frustration down the hall. “What was that?” I ask.

“Hard to say. Possibly, she discovered the wine on the back of her dress. I dare wonder how she will react when she gets to her new pair

of shoes.”

“Sam?” says a muffled voice, and we both look down at my phone. I bite my lip. I must have pressed Answer. Guilt ripples through my body—guilt that I interrupted our room picnic and guilt that I considered not taking Jaxon’s call.

“Hey, Jaxon,” I say into my phone, and stare at Elijah.
He nods knowingly and disappears.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Now It's Too Late

My hands are folded in my lap. The sleeves of my black dress cover my wrists and make my arms itch. I hate wool.

“It should next be proved that witchcraft is!” booms a voice at the pulpit in the front of an old-fashioned church. It’s the man from the woods. He looks too young to have that voice.

“The being of such a thing is denied by many....Their chief argument is, that they never saw any witches, therefore there are none. Just as if you or I should say, we never met with any robbers on the road, therefore there never was any padding there.”

I glance side to side, to see if anyone else thinks this sounds crazy. I discover the pew is full of people wearing essentially the same crap clothes I am, and bonnets, too.

“What the hell?” I say.

All eyes turn toward me.

“Do not call for things you do not desire,” says the man, his eyes boring into mine.

He takes a few steps toward me. I push past the people in the pew and back down the aisle. A rope grazes my shoulder. I jerk away

from it and look up. A noose hangs from the ceiling. When my gaze falls back on the man, he's only inches from my face.

My eyes fly open and I grip the sides of my desk.

"Nice of you to join us," says Mrs. Hoxley, her lips pushed together like a cranky fish's.

To my left, Susannah looks concerned. *School. Right, it's Thursday morning.* I rub my eyes.

"Sorry," I say, and look down at Cotton Mather's book on my desk. I don't remember taking it out of my bag. I'm really not getting enough sleep.

"As I was saying, those of you who are participating in the historical reenactment will report to the auditorium for first period. Mr. Wardwell and Ms. Edelson asked me to remind you. It will be the same every Thursday for the next two weeks."

This is so not good news. A breeze blows in through the cracked window, bringing with it crisp fall-scented air. The bell rings.

I rub my eyes again and put on my jacket. The Descendants are out of the room without a word. So much for civility.

I enter the hallway, walking at a slow pace toward the auditorium. As soon as people see me, they recoil, like they don't want to chance touching me. *Damn that rash.*

"Sam," says Mrs. Lippy, waving at me right outside the auditorium door. Her hair falls limply around her face and she has lipstick on her teeth.

Not this. "Is everything okay?"

"Peachy. But I will need you to come to my office after classes today."

"I thought our meeting wasn't until Monday." I don't really have time for this.

"Just the same. I've had a few calls. Not all of them pleasant." She straightens her duck brooch. "Parents worry. As we all do. Some of us more than others."

Great. This is only going to make things worse. What happens next

time Vivian is called to the principal's office? If Vivian was telling the truth, they could expel me. And with the way our relationship has been going lately, I wouldn't be surprised if she lets them.

The bell rings. "Okay, well, I gotta go to class."

I open the heavy door and walk the long center aisle to Mr. Wardwell.

"You're late," he says, and hands me what looks like a play.

Everyone is on stage already. And with Ms. Edelson's class, there are twice as many people to watch me stutter through my lines. My mouth goes dry.

I'm getting some pretty nasty looks. Except from Jaxon, of course. I walk up the stairs and stand near him on the stage. He smiles.

"The packets I gave you contain the entire performance with stage directions. I'd like us to read it all out loud. That way if there are any questions we can address them immediately," says Mr. Wardwell in an overly enthusiastic voice that suggests he's likely the playwright.

Ms. Edelson joins him. Not far from me and Jaxon, Alice, Mary, and Susannah stand with Lizzie and John. I didn't know they were in Ms. Edelson's class, but I'm willing to bet they knew I was in Wardwell's. Is that why they left homeroom without a word, because they didn't want to walk with me? I chew on my lip. Alice and Lizzie appear to be arguing about something, but their voices are too quiet for me to make out their words.

"Everyone not directly involved in a given scene will stand against the curtains and wait their turn," Ms. Edelson says in a voice that's gratingly high-pitched. "The restrooms are in the back. If anyone needs to use them, feel free, just don't hold up a scene you're in."

My hands shake as I flip through the first few pages, looking for Cotton's name. It's not there. "Who are you again?" I whisper to Jaxon.

"Reverend Parris. I'm up first," he says with fake enthusiasm.

I sympathize even though he's perfectly calm. We arrange ourselves against the curtain, with Jaxon and a few others center stage. There's ten feet between me and the next person. This is so unfair. They're

treating me like I have leprosy, and I was the only one *without* the rash.

In my peripheral vision I see Lizzie staring at me. I can't help it; I look at her. She holds the little Mather doll against her side and is wrapping something that looks like hair around its neck. I can only assume it's *my* hair. The other girls don't seem to notice, or maybe they don't care. Maybe everything Susannah told me last night was to get information out of me. My stomach tenses, and I turn toward the restroom.

I slip through an opening in the curtain and into the backstage area. It's dimly lit and smells like an attic. There are pulleys that control the curtains and large metal shelves. I head for the hallway in the back right corner.

A warm hand slips over my mouth, jerking my head back against a male chest. I struggle, but the grip is too strong.

"It's easy to hurt you," John's voice says in my ear, my neck straining. "You should never have come to Salem, Mather. We know all about you. I owe you one for that rash. And for Lizzie's—"

I slam my elbow into his ribs. He grunts and loosens his hand on my mouth enough for me to bite down, hard. There's a moment before he reacts, and I worry he might not care. His arm tightens around my rib cage, making me gasp for breath. I keep my teeth clamped onto his hand.

All at once he releases me. I fling myself forward and away from him. In the dim lighting, I stumble into the pulleys. I get caught in the ropes and struggle to untangle my legs. I grab on to one to steady myself.

Just before I turn to face John, terrified he might be ready to pounce on me again, everything goes black. I look around frantically, but I can't see the room at all. All I can see is the rope in my hand—every detail of it and nothing else.

Panic creeps along my skin. At the top of the rope there's a girl's body hanging. She rotates slowly in my direction, but her hair covers her face.

After a few seconds of forever, I release my grip on the rope. The moment I let go, the blackness dissipates and the backstage area comes back into view.

What's in front of me is just as gruesome as the image of the girl hanging, though. One of the huge metal shelves is on the floor with its contents scattered around it. Under the shelf is John, facedown, blood oozing from his head.

I freeze. It's the vision I had in the woods with the Descendants.

Students rush back to where we are. Screams erupt. Mr. Wardwell pushes through the crowd. "Ms. Edelson, call nine-one-one!" he yells. Then, to a couple of the frightened students, "Help me pick up this shelf!"

It takes five of them to lift it. Jaxon's one of them. Meanwhile, the blood around John's head forms a pool. Lizzie screams, and rushes to him. Susannah, Mary, and Alice comfort her. I can't make out their words.

"Everyone, move!" yells Ms. Edelson. Some of the students back away, and the Descendants pull Lizzie from John.

"Sam. Samantha!" Jaxon walks up to me.

Ms. Edelson tries to remove the traumatized students from backstage. My vision blurs in and out. Time passes, but I couldn't say how much. Someone is sobbing. More teachers show up, and Brennan is with them.

Then come the EMTs. "No pulse," one says. Jaxon steps between me and John's body, breaking my view of the blood for the first time. I blink.

Jaxon grabs my hand and pulls me gently. My feet move. He asks me if I'm okay, but my mouth refuses to answer. I just keep thinking about my vision in the woods. I didn't even try to figure out who was in that vision. Now it's too late.

How many seconds did I miss while having that vision of the hanging girl? I didn't hear the shelf fall. I don't understand how a shelf falls by itself. The only things I'm sure of are that I have to figure out who was hanging and I need to tell the Descendants about what I saw.

I snap my head up and scan the room for them, seeing the chaos for the first time. I'm sitting in a chair in the front of the auditorium. When did I sit down?

"I think she's in shock," Jaxon explains to a policeman with a bushy gray mustache who takes the seat next to me.

"Can ya hear me, Sam?" says the policeman with a husky voice.

I meet his eyes. "Yes." Jaxon seems relieved.

"Do you feel up to answering a few questions about what happened back there?"

"I guess so," I respond.

"I'm Captain Bradbury. I'll go nice and slow. You let me know if you need a break," he says, and Jaxon sits down on the other side of me.

"Okay." The room's full of policemen, and other students are being questioned, too.

"As I understand it, you were the only person backstage with John when the shelf fell. You wanna tell me what you remember?" He licks his thumb and flips the page of his notepad.

"I went backstage to go to the bathroom." My voice shakes. "I felt a hand over my mouth and another one holding my stomach." Jaxon tenses. "He whispered in my ear, 'It's easy to hurt you.' I managed to get my elbow into his ribs and I bit his hand. He let go and I went flying forward into the ropes. I got tangled in them."

Bradbury furrows his brow. "You're saying this young man attacked you?"

"In a way."

"Have you had any altercations with him before?" Bradbury asks.

I hesitate. "Well, not exactly. He doesn't like me."

"Had he ever physically assaulted you before today?"

"No." I can't tell him about the locker or the rock because I can't prove those.

"And how did the shelf fall?" Bradbury asks.

"I'm not sure. I blacked out when I hit the ropes." *Hanging girl.* "And then he was just lying there."

“It’s not likely you’re strong enough to knock over one of them shelves....It would take two of my bigger officers to push one of those over. I’d imagine something else musta happened. Did you hear anything or see anyone?”

He already checked out the shelves? I must’ve been sitting here for a while. “No. I blacked out.”

“Shock, most likely. It’s common.” He really is trying to be nice. “If you remember anything more, even in a few days, I want you to give me a call.” He hands me a business card. “We might have you down to the station to give a more formal statement.”

“Okay,” I say, examining the card with a witch logo on it and tucking it into my wallet.

Bradbury stands and pats me on the shoulder.

“Sam, he attacked you?” Jaxon seems conflicted.

“He’s dead, isn’t he?” I already know the answer, and the weight of it is more than I can bear.

Jaxon nods. “I’ll call my mother to pick us up.”

I scan the room again. “Where are the Descendants? I have to tell them something.”

“They left. Lizzie was pretty hysterical.”

I can’t let this vision, or whatever it was, go. The last time I did that, someone died. Next it’ll be a girl, possibly someone I know. I need to find Elijah. I stand, and Jaxon stands with me. My legs feel weak and my head spins. I reach out for Jaxon. I feel his hand on my arm before the room blurs.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

I Saw His Death

“**T**here she is,” says Mrs. Meriwether, placing a cool towel on my forehead.

I squint at her. Judging by the blue-and-white-striped couch and the ships on the walls, I realize I’m in her living room. Jaxon paces next to her.

“What happened?” I ask before the events of the afternoon come barreling back. I sit straight up, and the wet towel plops onto my lap. I remember coming over here after school, but I have no memory of falling asleep. How long have I been out? “I gotta go.”

“Calm yourself.” Mrs. Meriwether takes the towel. “Vivian knows you’re here. You’ve been out for quite a while. You must be starving. I’ve got soup all ready for you.”

I want to argue, but I feel dizzy. I haven’t eaten anything all day.

Mrs. Meriwether heads to the kitchen, and Jaxon sits next to me. He touches my forehead. “How do you feel?”

“Okay, I think. Sorry I fainted. I feel stupid.”

His eyes are gentle. “No way. It was like a movie. You fell into my arms, and I carried you to the nurse’s office.”

“Yeah, that’s how all romantic movies end. The dude carries the girl to the school nurse.”

He laughs, and Mrs. Meriwether comes in with a tray of delicious-smelling food. She places it on my lap. Corn chowder, warm corn bread with butter, freshly squeezed orange juice, and an éclair.

“Vivian won’t be home for some time.” I can tell by her delivery, she disapproves. “So please, stay as long as you like.”

I smile as she leaves. “Any update on what happened today?” I ask between spoonfuls of chowder.

“Not really.” He looks uncomfortable, and I can guess why.

“They’re blaming me, aren’t they?” He doesn’t answer. “I feel sick over it. I feel like I should have prevented it.”

He shakes his head. “There’s no way you could’ve prevented that. He attacked you.”

“You don’t know the whole story.”

The muscles around his eyes tense. “What do you mean?”

I pause, considering how I would even explain it. “You’ll think I’m nuts.”

“Sam, try and trust me. Even a little. I’m not the enemy.” He’s incredibly hard to resist when he’s not being pompous.

I sigh. “Well...” *How do I start?* “I saw his death a few days ago. I just didn’t see his face.”

Jaxon looks confused. “What do you mean *saw*?”

I study my corn bread for answers. “Like in a vision.”

“As in a dream?” He’s skeptical.

I should never have opened my mouth. “A vision. Everything went black, and I saw a guy crushed under a piece of metal. Wait. What’s the date?”

Jaxon thinks for a second. “September nineteenth.”

I drop my spoon. “Today’s the day Giles Corey was pressed to death.” I read about it right after Jaxon took me to that jail. My thoughts move a mile a minute. I need to find Elijah.

“Sam, maybe you should lie back down.”

I lift the tray off my lap. "I'm fine. I'm just trying to tell you that I saw John die in a vision. You can choose not to believe me. But I gotta go right now."

"You sound, well...really stressed. I think you might still be in shock." By "stressed," he means crazy.

I scoop up my bag and walk past him. He reaches out and grabs my arm. "Jaxon, I can't let someone else die." I'm angry at myself for letting my guard down. *He thinks I'm nuts.*

"You didn't let anyone die. It was an accident. You heard Bradbury. There's no way you could've knocked that shelf over."

"I don't mean like that. I can't explain it. You wouldn't believe me if I did." I remove Jaxon's hand from my arm, trying to escape his questioning eyes.

"Just 'cause I don't believe in visions doesn't mean I don't believe you. I'd be freaked out, too, if I saw someone get crushed in front of me." Jaxon follows me to the door.

The sun is almost down when I step outside. The word "crushed" grates on my nerves. Giles Corey and John were crushed. Who's next? "Tell your mom I say thanks."

Jaxon still follows me. "Can I help?"

I want help. But if he's uncomfortable with the idea of a vision, there is no way I could tell him the other stuff. There's a piece of me that hoped he'd believe me.

"Why don't you come back in and lie down and we can talk about all of this when you're fully rested."

"No," I snap. "I don't need to be patronized. People are *dying*."

He looks hurt. "That's so not fair, Sam."

"Nothing's fair right now. Everything's a mess."

I walk to my house and close the door behind me. "Elijah!" I yell.

"Samantha," he says in a worried tone of voice in the foyer. I must look as frazzled as I feel.

"How's my dad?"

"Well."

I nod. "Did you see what happened? To John, I mean?"

"No, I was doing research. I heard some of the aftermath while you were resting."

I pace in the foyer. "*John* is the guy I saw in my vision. And when he got crushed in front of me today, I had another vision, or whatever. Am I going crazy?"

"You had a vision without performing a ritual?"

"Yeah, well..." I remember my dream. "I dozed off in homeroom and dreamed of a guy giving a sermon about witchcraft. He made some analogy, saying how people assume there are no witches because they've never seen one. And would you think there are no robbers just because nothing was ever stolen from you? Or something—"

Elijah cuts me off. "Where is your copy of Cotton Mather's *Memorable Providences Relating to Witchcrafts and Possessions*?"

"Here." I reach into my shoulder bag. "What is it?"

Elijah skims through the pages and points to a paragraph. I read the words and a chill runs through me. "These are the exact words from my dream. But I didn't read this far. I never saw this paragraph." It was a young Cotton in my dream. I just didn't recognize him. "That means it wasn't exactly a dream, was it?"

"I would guess not. Tell me what happened."

"We were in a church, sort of a plain room with wooden pews. I was scared and walking backward. A rope touched my shoulder. I looked up and saw a noose hanging above my head. Then I woke up." Knowing that it wasn't some fantasy my brain invented makes retelling it awful.

"And how did that relate to John's death?"

"John grabbed me and I fell into the ropes behind the stage." Elijah's face hardens. It's obvious he didn't know that part. "My vision went black and I couldn't see anything but the rope I grabbed on to. Then I saw a noose over my head, like I did in my dream, only now there was a girl hanging from it. I don't know who, because her hair was in her face."

"We need to find out." Elijah's tone confirms my fear.

“If we can prevent it, maybe that’s a step in the direction of breaking the curse.”

Elijah nods.

“Is Cotton trying to warn me or scare me?” The thought of sleeping is now perfectly horrifying. “If only I could talk to him like I do with you, without it being so awful.”

“I am confident his spirit is not here the way mine is. There is no scenario where my face would blend with someone’s the way his did with yours. He is part of you or bound to you.”

I want to puke. “So what? Try to sleep and hope he...Shit, I have to call him, don’t I.” It’s not a question. How have I come to a point in my life where I see things that aren’t there while I’m awake and I see things that might be there while I’m asleep?

“I do not believe the Descendants will assist you this time. The town is in an uproar over John’s death. There have been too many fatal accidents since you arrived, and the townspeople are searching for an explanation. The word ‘murder’ is being used liberally, and the Descendants’ families are suspicious of you. They are not letting their children out of sight.”

The truth of that sinks in. I wouldn’t let my kids out of my sight, either. I show up in a prominent and unexplainable way in relation to the rash and John’s death and, now that I think about it, to the nooses in the coffee shop, too. “Okay. I guess I have to try without them. Do you think I can do it somewhere other than those woods?”

Elijah’s thoughtful. “Is it fair to say that every time he appeared, you were afraid?”

I don’t like where this is going. “Yeah.”

“You were also in the woods where the witches hanged, a place that related to him personally,” Elijah continues.

“So I have to go someplace scary that relates to him personally?”

“Sometimes extreme circumstances or emotions can break the barrier between the living and the dead.” I immediately think of Jaxon’s story about his mother talking to his dead father.

This makes sense. The majority of the time I've been in Salem, I was under duress of some kind. "His brother Nathanael has a gravestone in Old Burying Point." The moment the words leave my mouth I regret them.

"Interesting. Nathanael was his younger brother. And you know how important prestige was to Cotton. Nathanael bested Cotton in learning and attended Harvard at a younger age. I would venture a guess that Cotton had mixed emotions about that. The year after he died, Cotton wrote *Memorable Providences*."

"So, what, am I supposed to antagonize him to make him show up?" I like the idea less and less.

"It worked with me when you read Abigail's letters."

"Great. I'm going to get a flashlight." *No way I'm making that mistake again.*

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Default to Sarcasm

“Do dead people usually hang out in graveyards?” I ask Elijah as I step through the iron gate into Old Burying Point.

“Are you asking me if spirits spend their free time roaming graveyards with the occasional hope of scaring someone?”

“Point taken.” I shine my flashlight, trying not to walk into any headstones. “Where are you buried?”

He pauses a moment. “My body is gone.”

My eyes widen. “What do you mean *gone*?”

“I should not have told you. It is nothing you need to concern yourself about. But I believe it was dug up.” He sounds calmer than I am, and it’s *his* body.

“Dug up! Who would do that?”

“Perhaps grave robbers.”

I shudder. I picture it before I can stop myself. I shine my flashlight on Nathanael Mather’s headstone in the corner of the graveyard under a big tree. I prefer the Cotton conversation to this one. “So this is Cotton’s exceptional brother.”

He nods. I pull out a small blanket from my bag and sit next to the

headstone. My skin crawls. I light a candle, and the light flickers across Nathanael's headstone—which has a flying skull on it. If someone tapped my shoulder right now, I would launch in the air like a cartoon character.

“If you remember it, it might be worth trying the spell you used with the Descendants.”

In some ways, I'm more scared that this'll work than that it won't. I close my eyes. “Cotton...I don't know if you can hear me. Or if you're bound to me. But I need to know a few things. Namely, who was hanging.” I speak slowly, unsure what words to use. I peek at Elijah.

He nods.

I take a deep breath. *I can do this. I have to do this. People will continue dying. My dad could be one of those people.* “Cotton, I need you to show me the face of the girl who was hanging. Show me something I can stop. Something I can understand.” I wait.

“Show me what you know about this curse. I mean what I say. I say what I intend. Know my desire and give me clarity.” For a second, everything's still. The wind stops rustling through the leaves, and my body vibrates. Then, nothing.

Crap. “Listen, Minister. I know you were trying to get Daddy's approval. It must've pissed you off when your little brother turned out to be smarter than you. The year after he died you wrote your book. And then you sit back while people spin lies in Salem, just happy about your fame. Disgusting.” My body vibrates again and the air whooshes out of my lungs.

The force throws me backward, and my eyes open. The graveyard is gone, and I'm in the woods. They're different from when I was there with the Descendants. The trees are bigger, wilder. There's a large crowd of people in a clearing. I run toward them, tripping over branches.

A male voice recites a prayer. Nearing the edge of the clearing, I can now see that the voice belongs to a man with a noose around his neck. Young Cotton is on horseback in front of the crowd. I push the people to get through, but they ignore me. Cotton yells to the spectators,

“Even the most wicked of creatures can feign the semblance of good. Do not let this man’s words deceive you. For it is his actions you must examine. I ask you. Is he guilty?”

The crowd roars in agreement, and the cart is rolled away. The man falls, struggling against the rope. I push the spectators harder. The moment I break through, the crowd disappears. There’s no one left besides Cotton and the strangled man.

I can’t pull my eyes from the rope. As I watch, the hanging man transforms into the girl I saw at school, her hair obscuring her face. She turns her strained eyes toward me, and her hair moves. It’s Susannah. Cotton dismounts from his horse and lands in front of me. I try to get past him, but he blocks my path.

“Susannah!” I yell as she chokes.

Cotton grabs me by the neck, his strong hand making it impossible to speak.

“You are behind the horse. Focusing on the wrong things,” he spits. The pressure on my neck increases.

I start to lose consciousness and can’t hold on to the vision. I try to pry his hand away, but it’s no use. My eyes shoot open, and Elijah’s shaking me. “Breathe, Samantha!”

I gasp. “Susannah,” I manage. “It was Susannah hanging.” I stand, panting. “We have to go to her house. Do you know where it is?”

“Yes. What did you see, exactly?”

I want to get out of the graveyard. I gather my things and walk as quickly as my body allows. I explain the man’s prayer and the crowd as Elijah and I make our way onto the street. I describe every detail and every word I can remember. He’s particularly interested in the face of the man on the cart.

“George Burroughs,” he concludes as we plod along. “He was the only minister convicted of witchcraft. He was accused of being the ringleader of all the witches in Salem. People said he recited a prayer before he hanged. Witches were thought unable to do such things.”

I trip on the uneven sidewalk. “The crowd seemed affected. I mean, until Cotton convinced them he was guilty, anyway. So what I saw

really happened during the Trials?”

“I do not know. I need to locate the story’s origin.”

“What do you think he meant by I’m focusing on the wrong things?” I ask.

“Probably just that. But it begs the question, what are the right things?” Elijah stops walking. “Susannah’s house.” He points up a small stone walkway to a forest green door.

I walk toward her stoop. Why was Cotton so angry? Was it what I said about him, or is he really mad that I’m missing something? I raise my hand to knock, but the door opens before my hand touches the wood. Susannah stands on the other side, looking worried.

“Sus—”

“Shhh. Keep your voice down,” she warns. “It’s not a good time, Samantha.” Her eyes are puffy from tears.

“I know. I’m sorry. I wouldn’t have come, but it’s important. Remember when we were in the woods the first time?”

She nods and glances over her shoulder.

“That guy we saw crushed under the piece of metal must’ve been John.”

“I didn’t see anyone get crushed.” Her frown deepens.

Wait, she didn’t see that? We talked about it. Actually, no, Alice told everyone to shut up, and then we only discussed the blurred faces. I just assumed the other girls saw it, too. “Oh man. Well, I *did* see that. I didn’t know what it meant, until after John died.”

“Why didn’t you say anything? We could have stopped it.” Her voice is now full volume.

Susannah’s mother comes to the door just as she finishes her sentence. “Susannah, no visitors.” Apparently, she knows who I am.

“I didn’t know this was gonna happen. I swear. I didn’t know it would be John,” I say before Susannah’s mother pulls her away. “But I had another vision—”

At the mention of John’s name, Susannah’s mother turns angry. “Get off my property, or I will call the police!”

I have to tell her. “Please, Susannah, you’ve got to listen. I saw you hanging in my vision. I think you’re next!” I yell. The door slams in my face.

That was *really* bad. “I’m an idiot.”

Elijah follows me toward my house. “You told the truth. You would never have forgiven yourself if you did not warn her.” He’s trying to be nice, but we both know I screwed up.

“I highly doubt Susannah’s mother will let her anywhere near me now.”

“Well, that is fairly certain.”

“I’ll try to explain in school tomorrow.” I sigh. “Do you think she believed me about the vision?”

“It is difficult to tell. I think it best you explain it when your emotions have calmed.”

I agree. “Elijah, what am I missing? What’s the thing I’m not looking at that Cotton was talking about? We need to find that story about George Burroughs and see if there’s a clue in it.”

“Yes.”

“Susannah’s ancestor recited prayers like Burroughs, didn’t she? Also, you said Susannah got the rash the worst, right? And now I saw her hanging. They must be related.”

Elijah pauses. “I will do some digging.”

“Great.” Now I need to make sense of that passage Cotton quoted in my dream. He said people don’t believe in witches because they’ve never seen one. Could he mean me not really believing in all of these things I’m seeing?

We walk to my house, deep in thought. If that’s what he’s saying, then I need to stop being skeptical and embrace this weirdness. Resisting it has gotten me exactly nowhere. My dad always says that you don’t get to choose what happens in the world, only how you react to it.

There isn’t much time left. But if Cotton’s bound to me, the answer is here. I should be able to figure out whatever he knows. I open the

door to my house and lock it behind me.

“I *just* got off the phone with Susannah’s mother,” Vivian says, waving the phone in her hand. “She said you threatened her daughter. What were you thinking, Sam, after what happened today?”

I don’t acknowledge her, and she doesn’t try to stop me as I go upstairs. I shake Vivian’s comment off and close the door to my bedroom. Things were never easy socially in NYC. There were times I begged my dad to let me change schools. But this is by far the worst situation I’ve ever been in.

I take off my jacket and slump down on my bed. “I’m scared, Elijah. I’m scared I won’t figure this out in time. That I’m not strong enough. Tomorrow’s Friday, four days from when we first saw the blurred faces, and I don’t feel like I’m any closer to solving this curse.”

“There is something I want to show you. It may help in that regard.”

“What?”

“I was not certain until yesterday.”

I sit up. “Certain of what?”

He walks to my armoire and pulls Abigail’s letters down from the recess in the top. He removes one letter from the bundle and puts the rest back. I perk up.

“One of Abigail’s letters?” *They were in my room the whole time.*

Elijah sits down on my bed. “This is not one of her letters from William. This one, she wrote to me. I found it the morning she passed away.”

I take the envelope from him and touch it lightly with my fingertips. It’s yellowed with age and has his name beautifully written in calligraphy on the front. It smells like old books, musty and comforting.

With great care, I pull out the heavy stationery. The crease in the middle suggests it has been folded and unfolded many times. There is a hand-drawn black-eyed Susan in the corner.

My dearest Elijah,

I know the great unhappiness you beare, and I am truly sorry. I do not mean for you to worry about me. Please understand that it is not William I grieve for these past days. He hath created a crack in my heart, but it is all those families upon which it broke. Those men and women ripped away from the ones they love and who love them in turn. It is the greatest evil of all, to separate people who love each other. I weep for all of us. Their barnish fear has kept them from compassion.

Most important, I do not want you thinking that you could have saved me, because you could not. It is my time. There is nothing you could have done to change this. Change the world, sweet brother. They need you, just as I have needed you all these years. It will be a long time before you understand this, but please let me go now with love.

When change cometh, she will bring peace at her back. She will not bend to your will; you must bend to hers. Help her.

*With love and fare thee well,
Abigail*

I read it slowly, working out the elaborate handwriting and the sentence structure as I go. “She was wonderful, wasn’t she?”

“More than you know.”

I stare at the letter, imagining how he felt reading this. My heart aches for him.

“I spent a great deal of time considering that last paragraph,” he says. “She means you.”

He’s so intently focused on me that I almost forget how to speak. “What do you mean?”

“We were meant to meet. You are change, Samantha.”

I’m not convinced, but I want to be. “She wrote this three hundred years ago.”

“My sister was special like you are. She did not see spirits, but she had premonitions. Our parents forbade her to speak of it. But, I assure you, Samantha, she was always right.”

Was I really meant to meet Elijah? “What makes you think this is about me, though? I’m not change. I can’t even change my own situation.”

“You changed me.”

“How could I possibly change you? You’re so stubborn.”

He smiles. “You are the first person I have wanted to talk to in three centuries.”

I want that to be true.

“And I believe that you can break this curse, that you can change your fate and those of the Descendants. You are the true reason I came back to Salem. I was unconsciously seeking you.”

I don’t know if I’m what Abigail meant when she left this goodbye letter. I don’t know how to be change or even how to have a civil conversation sometimes. But I want to break the curse more than I’ve ever wanted anything in my life.

Overwhelmed, I default to sarcasm. “Abigail was right about one thing, though. I’m definitely everyone’s first pick at peace.”

I steal a glance at my dad’s picture. *I promise you, if there is a way to stop this, I will. I’ll do whatever it takes, however nutty.*

“You have more power than you know, Samantha. You just have to be brave enough to realize it.”

“Easy for you to say. All you have to do is bend to my will.”

He smiles, and his dimples reappear. “Do not get ahead of yourself.”

I smile now, too. “But that was my favorite part.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

How to Hang a Witch

I step into the chilly morning air and close the door behind me, happy to avoid an awkward conversation with Vivian about her driving me to school. This isn't the longest we've gone without speaking, but it's the worst fight we've ever had. It's not even a fight; it's something more. It's like my world is collapsing. For as long as I can remember, my dad and Vivian were my only people.

I can barely keep my eyes open as I jiggle the key in the lock. I got three hours of sleep, and my drowsiness is giving me a sick feeling. I turn around and almost collide with a male chest. I scream and look up to see Jaxon's worried face.

After all the effort to get out quietly, I'm screaming, "Don't do that!" I speed-walk toward school.

"Sorry, didn't mean to scare you." Jaxon slips my bag off my shoulder, and I'm too tired to protest. "I thought I might walk with you."

He's walked me home, but never *to* school before. "You're checking up on me?"

"Maybe." He doesn't make eye contact. I've never seen Jaxon unsure of himself, and it doesn't feel natural.

He probably thinks I'm still a mess from yesterday. Which I am. But his treating me like I'm unstable only reminds me of how messed up things are and agitates me more. "I don't need you to."

Jaxon keeps up with my pace. He pushes his hair out of his face. "Sam, I wanted to talk—"

"Sick people need to be checked on. I'm not sick." Whatever he wants to talk about, I'm not sure I can handle it right now. I'm not in the best control of myself.

"You saw someone die in front of you. It's not like you're going to be normal, either." His tone is serious, and I tense.

My whole life, people have told me I'm not normal and need help, and Jaxon's joining them makes me feel like I'm drowning. "I don't want to talk right now, Jaxon."

"Why? Because I won't say that I believe you had a vision about John? Or that I think people are going to die?"

My cheeks redden, and I move faster. We're almost to school. "I don't want to defend myself to you. I already have to do that with everyone else." I take my bag back from him, and he catches the strap before I can put it on my shoulder.

He searches my face. "Since when do I make you defend yourself? All I want is for you to talk to me. I want—"

"Let go." I pull on my bag, and his lips tighten. He nods and releases his grip. I push through the door to the school, but he doesn't follow. The second I'm inside, I regret my words. I *do* want to talk to Jaxon. But how could I ever explain Elijah and the curse? He would never believe me.

In the hallway, the few early students greet me with ugly looks. Insults are spoken just loud enough for me to hear. I clench my jaw to keep from crying.

As I turn the corner, a nondescript door opens. I can just make out Elijah's angled face in the shadow. I head straight for it and slip inside. The door clicks shut. It's pitch black, and my shoe hits something hard. I grab on to Elijah. He flicks on the light switch.

It's a custodial closet with barely enough room for both of us. Our

chests are only inches apart.

For a moment, we're both silent. Shadows fall on his cheekbones, and his lips part slightly. I have the sudden desire to be closer to them. I lean forward before I realize what I'm doing.

"How's my dad?" I ask, bringing my heels back down to the ground.

"Well cared for."

Good. "Did you find anything, or do you just like broom closets?"

A small smile forms on his lips. "I found the story of Cotton at George Burroughs's hanging. You see, Cotton wrote another book about witchcraft called *Wonders of the Invisible World* after the Trials."

I can barely understand *Memorable Providences*.

"After which, a man named Robert Calef wrote a book called *More Wonders of the Invisible World*. This contained the story of which you had the vision."

"Why was Calef's book title like Cotton's?" I ask, realizing I'm still holding on to Elijah's arm. I make no effort to let go. He feels so solid and alive.

"Robert Calef was making a commentary on the Witch Trials. He had a lot of unpleasant things to say about Cotton."

"Wait, so Calef was Cotton's enemy? And he boosted his own fame by destroying Cotton's reputation?" I hear people bustling in the hallway, but I don't care. "Then it's possible that story about Cotton and Burroughs isn't true? Why would Cotton show me a story some dude told to make him look bad?"

"It is hard to say. Cotton wrote in his journal that he did not believe Calef's book would ever make it to print. And if it did, that none would take the book seriously. Tell me again what Cotton said about Burroughs after he recited the prayer."

"Something about how wicked people can pretend to be good. So don't let them deceive you." I readjust my feet in the small space between the buckets, and my body brushes against Elijah's for a moment. He puts his hand on my waist to steady me, and my stomach drops like I came over a hill too quickly.

He lets go. “Potentially, it is a metaphor. He may be pointing someone out, someone who seems good and is not.”

“Actually, if we take the whole Calef thing into consideration, it would be someone who spun a story about me *and* appears to be good but really sucks. Lizzie? I mean, she’s been awful to me, but everyone else in school thinks she’s awesome.”

“Or one of the other Descendants,” Elijah says.

The thought that Mary or Alice or Susannah could be my secret enemy makes my chest ache. *Not Susannah. Anyone but her.* “Did you get a chance to look for the cause of the rash?”

“No, but now is the perfect time—empty houses.”

The first bell rings, and I grab on to his shirt. I don’t want to go out there. I want to stay in this lemon-scented closet with Elijah. He knows all the weird things that are happening to me, and he doesn’t think I’m crazy; he thinks I’m special. Heat spreads through my body like flame with dry wood.

He lifts his hands up and holds my face. His fingers are gentle, and he brushes my hair back. “I’m right here with you. And I will be for as long as you need me. You are not alone.”

The comfort in his words wraps around me like a hug. He pulls my face toward him and kisses my forehead. Before I say a word, he blinks out. I’m left gripping the air where Elijah’s shirt used to be and feeling the weight of his absence. I flick off the light and exit into the sea of people.

I rush to my homeroom, and when I open the door the hostility is palpable. The Descendants’ seats are empty. I sit down in my usual place. Behind me, hushed voices discuss John’s death. The bell rings.

Mrs. Hoxley doesn’t need to quiet everyone. The room goes silent by itself. “There will be a special assembly this afternoon, an opportunity to discuss the tragedy that occurred yesterday. If anyone feels they need to discuss the event individually, please ask for a pass to the counselor’s office.”

I put my forehead in my hands. My tiredness and anxiety mix as my unbrushed hair falls around my face. I’m sure by now Alice and Mary

know about my blunder at Susannah's house. I had no idea they didn't see the vision of John when I did. My telling it to them after what happened to John does look suspicious. Alice already suspects me as the cause of all this. If only I can explain. There's no guarantee how much time we have before Susannah...I can't even think about that. I won't let the same thing happen to her.

The bell rings. I open my eyes, and my head feels heavy. On my way out, a guy bumps into me. I stumble, but he doesn't turn around. *Great, a day of this type of thing.* I wouldn't be surprised if they lynch me in that assembly. Wait, what if they do? My stomach rumbles with nerves and lack of food.

I make my way into history class and catch Jaxon watching me. I feel terrible, but I don't know what to say. Lizzie's not in her seat, either. Are all the Descendants together? Would Susannah have told Lizzie about my visit to her house? If so, this is all going to get a lot worse.

The bell rings.

"I'm not sure there's a good way to begin today," says Mr. Wardwell, and he proceeds with his lesson. I stare out the window, not listening.

What Elijah told me this morning about an enemy gnaws at me. It was definitely a warning. Cotton was furious when he said I was focusing on the wrong things.

Elijah blinks in, and I jump. Jaxon notices.

"I found something you will want to see," Elijah says.

I raise my hand, but Mr. Wardwell doesn't call on me. I can see the bathroom pass is already gone from his desk. He continues for a few more seconds while my hand is in the air.

"Yes, Sam." Mr. Wardwell sounds annoyed.

Am I imagining it, or is he being a real jerk? Does he think I had something to do with John's death, too? Maybe Jaxon was wrong; maybe Wardwell is a descendant. "May I have a pass for the counselor's office?" I really don't want to see Mrs. Lippy, but he can't say no.

"Just go." He waves his hand toward the door.

I grab my bag. As I pass one of the girls in the front row, she says, “Don’t come back.”

I rub my face as I enter the hallway. “What did you find?”

Elijah hands me a tiny piece of paper. I carefully unroll it. There are symbols written in black ink, smeared in places from some kind of liquid. “What is this?”

“That is parchment paper, and those symbols are a spell.”

I open my mouth to argue the legitimacy of this and remember the promise I made to my dad last night that I wasn’t gonna resist believing in this stuff. “Where was it?”

“Artfully concealed in a ruffle of the dress Susannah wore to the party.”

“So this was most likely the cause of the rash since she got it the worst, right?” I always assumed the rash somehow manifested by itself, like a sign of the apocalypse or something. “This doesn’t explain why I didn’t get the rash when everyone else did, though.”

“You see spirits, and have visions. You are many things, but typical is not one of them.”

Maybe this is what Cotton meant by his warning. “If Lizzie was trying to set me up, my not getting the rash would be the perfect way to do that.” *Or Alice.* Oh man, I so hope it’s not her.

One of the classroom doors near me opens and we start walking toward Mrs. Lippy’s office.

I should show this to the Descendants. Susannah would get that someone planted it and trace it back to Lizzie. Who else knows witchcraft besides these girls? “Oh no! Susannah came to my house before the party. That makes me a prime suspect.”

“I considered that.”

“Is there any way to prove who wrote this?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

I stare at the little paper that possibly caused all this trouble. “Can I keep this?”

“Certainly,” Elijah says as we arrive in front of the counselor’s office.

My bad luck rears its head, and Mrs. Lippy steps out of the door. “I thought I heard a voice in the hallway. You’re in luck, Sam. I’m currently free.”

I take one last look at Elijah before he blinks out, and step inside her office. I tuck the spell into my wallet and notice the business card Captain Bradbury gave me when he questioned me.

“I’m glad you came down here. It was the right choice.”

I was hoping this place would be packed and I would spend the rest of the period in the waiting room. I sit down at her desk.

“I imagine you’re here about the tragic event.”

I nod. “I’m not sure what to think.”

“Were you close to John?”

“He was in my class.”

“How did you feel when you saw him? You found him, correct?” If she knows this, everyone in the school knows I was the only one with him when he died.

I sigh. “Honestly? Numb. I couldn’t move.”

“And when the numbness left?”

I pause. “Guilt.”

She releases her breath as though she’s relieved we’re getting somewhere.

“I felt like I should have been able to stop it.” I hated John, but I didn’t want him to die.

“Hindsight is twenty-twenty, Sam. It might help if we talk about the events leading up to this incident. See if we can find the source of the problem.” She pulls out a paper full of notes. “Have you been in any physical altercations recently?”

“As in physical fights? No.”

“Have you touched anyone and then realized they were sick shortly after?”

So much for my moment of honesty. “No.”

“Have you purposefully sabotaged anyone’s grade during a quiz?”

“I’m not sure I understand.” So this is the list of complaints Mrs. Lippy was trying to go over with me yesterday.

“Have you ever wished anyone ill will with your eyes?”

That has to be the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard. “So people are coming in here making these crazy complaints about me? Or, their parents are?” Elijah was right. The whole school wants to vilify me. They might not openly attack me, but the result is the same.

“It may be that some of these are more of a stretch than others,” Mrs. Lippy concedes. “But this many people can’t all be wrong. I believe if we break this pattern you seem to have with the other students, we’ll get somewhere.”

Break this pattern? But it’s not my...Wait a second. Maybe I *can* break the pattern I have with them. Everything about this curse seems to be a pattern. If I can break one link in the chain, it might help. Elijah did compare my social situation here to the Witch Trials.

“Sam?”

“Sorry, Mrs. Lippy. I actually think you helped me figure something out.”

Mrs. Lippy beams. “All part of my job.”

I need some time to think this through. “Is there a place where I could sit quietly for a little while? An empty classroom or something?”

“It’s not exactly school policy.”

“You gave me a lot to think about. I’m afraid if I go back to class I’ll lose all this progress we’ve made.”

Mrs. Lippy wavers. “Are you sure we can’t talk this out?”

“Believe me, I have to think about things privately first. Then I can share.”

She nods and begins filling out a slip of paper. “This is for room one twenty-seven. It’s usually empty at this time.” She hands me the pass. “This will give you a half hour.”

“Thank you so much!” I smile at her, and she looks pleased. I pick up my bag and bolt out of her office.

As soon as I’m in the hallway, I start whispering Elijah’s name. By

the time I open the door to the empty classroom, he is standing right in front of me. “You whispered?”

“Sorry,” I reply. “I don’t really know how else to get in touch with you.”

His face softens. “I do not mind if you call me.”

“Elijah, how do you know that I’m calling you if you aren’t watching me?”

“I have not quite figured it out myself. I believe it is correlated to the amount of time I focus on you. I must be tuned in to you. I can hear when you say my name. Names have power.”

I like that he’s tuned in to me. “I think I stumbled across something while talking to Mrs. Lippy. Did you know people were complaining that I messed up their grades and got them sick with my eyes and all kinds of nonsense?”

“Not exactly those things. But I did have an idea.”

“Remember how you said my situation is like the accused witches’ in the sixteen hundreds? And that silence is a death sentence.” He nods. “I was thinking my situation is more like that than I initially thought. That it might all be part of a larger pattern.”

“Elaborate.”

“So, the deaths occur in a pattern. That we know. And we figured out that they were occurring only when descendants of all the main Witch Trials families were in Salem at the same time. What if the pattern is more complex than we thought? What if the original Trials are re-created? As in, the same basic thing happens, just in a different form. In this case, it would be my being accused as a witch and everyone else falling in line to kill me off, at least metaphorically.”

He tilts his head. “It is a better rationale than anything we have come up with thus far.”

“Right?” I’m so excited that my sleepiness fades. “Let’s review the major causes of the Trials. Maybe if we stop some of those things from happening we can break the curse...or at least slow it down.” I pull out a piece of paper and pen to make notes. “To start with, there was Cotton’s book.”

“To *start*, we must look farther back. Witchcraft was a common crime in those times. In only a few hundred years there were upward of eighty thousand witchcraft executions in Europe. And before the Salem Trials, approximately fifteen people had been executed in New England.”

I wince. “So witchcraft was something that people accepted as real.”

“Indeed. And, as I have told you, Massachusetts Bay Colony was a Puritan community. The political leaders were all members of Puritan churches and consulted their ministers frequently. Puritans were Calvinist—all rituals besides the approved ones were associated with paganism.”

I write quickly in my notebook. “Basically, anything outside of the norm was jumped on as evil or something.”

Elijah nods. “Also, Salem Village was a quarrelsome place. Villagers fought over land and church-related matters. Almost every villager could come up with a list of complaints about his or her neighbors.”

That’s high school in a nutshell. “I bet once the accusations started flying, they spread like wildfire.”

“Certainly. Now, what you said about Cotton’s book was correct. It provided people with the information they needed to make their accusations plausible.” Elijah sounds regretful.

“So it was the perfect setting for things to get out of hand.” I pause for a moment. “Which is like my situation here. High schoolers immediately go for the throat of the different person. And once the war starts, it just rages on until someone is broken.”

Elijah frowns. “I guess witchcraft accusations have not disappeared. They have just transformed.”

I was hoping for a more straightforward task. “How am I going to change a whole system? Something that’s been happening forever?”

Elijah smiles at the word *change*. “I wanted you to understand the context of witchcraft accusations in Salem. We can look at it more specifically, examining which things are necessary to convict a witch.”

“Okay.” I’m more comfortable with that idea. “You tell me what happened during the Trials, and I’ll find the equivalent for my

situation.”

I write in my notebook:

How to Hang a Witch

Witch Trials

Now

“To start with, you need a fearful community,” Elijah says. “In addition to what I have already said about the townspeople, the French and Indian battles made New Englanders particularly skittish. There were people in Salem who had been attacked, lost ones they loved, or were refugees. They feared the wilderness and were always ready for something bad to happen. They wanted something to explain their losses and fears.”

“Like all the mysterious deaths and weirdness in Salem. Alice said they were looking for an explanation.”

Elijah nods. “And most of the accusations were formed by a select group of people.”

“The Descendants.”

“Once that group decided to turn against a witch, no one in the town would stand up for that individual. They feared that they would also be accused if they said anything.”

“My whole school’s scared to stand up to the Descendants, especially to Lizzie. Maybe the town is, too.” Connecting these dots is too easy. I don’t like it.

“Oftentimes, the complaints about the witch would increase in frequency. More townspeople would join in and reinforce the idea that there was something wrong with that person.”

“The complaints Mrs. Lippy read...”

Elijah nods. “Then proof was provided in the form of physical harm and visions, going so far as to blame past murders on the witch.”

“The rash and John’s death.” It’s pretty morbid.

“The evidence was reviewed by the magistrates and the community

in the court. When everyone agreed that the evidence was sufficient, the witch took a hanging sentence.”

My heart pounds. There’s no way they could hang me, right? Even if it’s a metaphor, the idea is sick and disturbing. My mind goes to the drawing in the dirt at Gallows Hill Park and the noose on my coffee cup. “On this one, I got nothin’.”

How to Hang a Witch

Witch Trials

- 1) fearful community
(French/Indian battles)
- 2) convictions by select group
(who no one would stand up to)
- 3) increasing frequency of
complaints about accused
witch to reinforce that there is
something wrong with that
person
- 4) proof of witchcraft
(visions, murder, etc.)
- 5) evidence reviewed in court
- 6) hanging sentence

Now

descendant deaths in Salem

the Descendants

what parents and
students are telling
Mrs. Lippy and Brennan

the rash, John's death

???

“I’m not sure what could be the equivalent of going to trial,” I say.
“Also, most of those things have already happened. I can’t stop them.
Was it ever possible to escape a death sentence?”

“Occasionally, yes. But that individual needed a good deal of support and a way to make her voice heard. You will need an audience and you will have to be convincing.”

My stomach drops so low, I feel it in my toes. “Like a speech?”

“Yes, I suppose so.” He pauses, and I know what he’s going to say next. “Also, our courts were not formal the way you might imagine them. They were more of a community event. Will the school gather to discuss John’s death?”

I stare at my hands, which have stopped taking notes. “Yes. There’s an assembly today.”

“Providence.”

“You mean worst thing ever.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Reasons for Disliking Me

I grip the paper written in my crappy handwriting and take the last seat in the last row of the auditorium. People speak in hushed voices, but the energy is high.

Principal Brennan clears his throat at the podium. “As you all know, one of our own students died tragically yesterday.”

I tune him out and look over my speech. My hands shake and the paper rustles. *Just don't let me faint*—which I have done twice since I came to Salem for some crazy reason. *And don't let anyone throw anything.*

“Samantha, if you are not careful, it will tear,” Elijah warns. I ease my grip.

I look at the backs of the students' heads and involuntarily begin to count them. When I get to five hundred, I start to dry-heave.

Elijah appears calm, but I can tell by the slight wrinkle in his brow that he's worrying. “If you must regurgitate your food, I suggest doing so before the speech.”

“I didn't eat anything today,” I say.

He lifts his brow. “I suppose that is good fortune.”

I can't help but agree.

"Now I would like to hand over the microphone to some of John's closest friends," Brennan says, concluding his brief introduction.

The Descendants take the stage wearing floor-length black dresses and appearing almost to float. Lizzie carries a bundle of roses such a deep shade of purple, they look black from a distance. She places them near a picture of John on the stage.

Those roses! They're the same kind I saw by the lamppost in town. My mind races. Could they have been from her as well? Susannah did say that Lizzie's been affected more than most and that she blames me. Did something happen to someone else she loves?

Lizzie takes the podium with the three girls behind her. "I cannot give you a carefully constructed speech about how special John was, or what a good life he had until yesterday. You all knew him. You all know." Her demeanor's cold and commanding. "I'm not going to make you laugh or cry or even tell you how I feel without him. My feelings are obvious. I can sum them up in one word—anger."

The Descendants, behind Lizzie, glance at each other. I guess she's not giving whatever speech they were expecting.

"He shouldn't have died. It was not an accident. And the responsible party must pay. We all know who that is: Samantha Mather."

Sweat breaks out on my forehead, and I slink down in my chair as far as I can. Nausea throbs through my body, and the edge of my vision flickers like camera flashes.

"Susannah was there when Samantha tried to attack him in the hallway. I was there when she threatened him in class. And Jaxon was there to discover her bite mark on his lifeless palm."

My heart nearly stops when I hear Jaxon's name. He talked to the Descendants about me? He was the only one there when I told Bradbury about biting John's hand. Has he been lying to me all along? The betrayal stabs at me, and all I want to do is run. Surprised reactions ripple through the crowd in gasps and whispers. Many turn around and search for me. Elijah fumes. This is my conviction. Brennan stands, looking like he is going to interject.

“That’s all we have to say.” Lizzie turns away from the podium. Susannah hesitates near the microphone, but Lizzie grabs her arm. They follow her off the stage. Lizzie convinced them I had something to do with John’s death. And Jaxon...I want to cry.

A flustered Brennan takes the microphone. “Uh...I would just like to say that the police report indicated that John’s death was most likely an accident, as I said earlier. Now I would like to introduce Dr. Myers, a grief therapist, to the stage.” Dr. Myers takes the microphone.

“Maybe this isn’t such a good idea,” I say.

“Samantha, there is no retreating. You either go up there or your trial is concluded. Lizzie is victorious.”

“How can I change people’s minds after that?”

“You simply have to introduce doubt. Make them question their dislike of you. That should be enough to buy us time. This is your chance. Do not miss it.”

I take a breath. I have to focus on why I’m trying to break the curse. My dad...and now Susannah. I saw her hesitate on stage. She doesn’t agree with Lizzie—at least not completely. I need every shred of support I can get.

My whole body shakes as I stand. Thankfully, everyone’s watching Dr. Myers. I hug the wall and make my way toward the front of the auditorium. I don’t look at anyone because I can’t bear knowing what I’ll see. I walk up the stairs to the stage.

“Steady, Samantha,” Elijah says.

Dr. Myers looks confused as I approach the podium.

“I have to say something.” My voice is quiet.

Brennan attempts to get on the stage, but Myers stops him with a hand gesture. To my surprise, Myers puts the microphone back on the podium and steps away from it. I’m not sure whether I’m grateful or wish that he stopped me.

I place my crinkled speech on the podium. The room’s unnaturally silent. No one moves. I don’t look at the crowd. I can’t. I just focus on my paper and try to keep my voice steady.

“I...well...I know that...I haven’t made a good impression on most of you. Some of you...well, you have legitimate reasons for disliking me.”

People begin to whisper, and the counselor hushes the room.

“Get off the stage!” someone yells, and a few people boo me.

I’m making this worse for myself. “There are many...” The boos increase.

Lizzie yells, “Murderer!” and others echo her.

I lift my head and take in the audience for the first time. Angry faces stare at me. I clear my throat, and Brennan and Dr. Myers attempt to quiet the hostile students. I straighten my speech, hoping people will stop booing long enough for me to get the words out.

In one jerky movement I knock the piece of paper off the podium and over the edge of the stage. Elijah grabs it mid-fall. It takes me a second before I realize the auditorium has gone silent. Slowly, Elijah lifts the paper. Everyone stares at it, floating in the air. I take it, but finding my place in my speech now seems silly. How can I go on like nothing strange just happened?

I scan the auditorium the way I peek at a bad cut. I have the Descendants’ attention. Good. I spot Jaxon in my peripheral vision, but don’t look directly at him. I fold my speech and tuck it into my back pocket. “I’m not perfect. I’m far from it. I’m weird. The strangest things happen around me all the time. I don’t know why, and maybe I never will.

“I can explain that paper, though. It was a spirit. I can’t make friends at school, but I can with the dead. So at least I’ve got that.” There are a few nervous laughs that end as abruptly as they start.

“And I’m pretty sure I know why John died, even though I don’t know how.” The tension in the room is palpable. “But to explain that, I have to back up a bit. You see, there were three times in the years since the Trials when a whole bunch of descendants died. My spirit friend helped me figure out that these deaths happen in a pattern. All the major Witch Trials families have to be in Salem at once. A few weeks ago, the Mathers were the only major family missing. And as you may have noticed, when I moved here, people started dying quickly.”

To my surprise, the crowd's not acting like I've said the most ridiculous thing they've ever heard. With a quick glance, I catch Jaxon putting his head in his hands. My lip trembles.

"You said that I'm cursed. I am. And so are the Descendants, their families, and possibly this town." Actually owning these words feels oddly light. I've been running from them for a long time. "I am trying to figure it out. But I don't think I can do it by myself. I'm not asking you to like me. I'm asking you to stop hating me long enough for me to work this thing out." The whispers start. "That's all, I guess. Thanks for listening."

As I walk away from the podium, a girl yells, "Prove that you can see a ghost!"

Not this again. The room waits for my reply. "No." But as the word leaves my mouth, Elijah lifts me by my waist. The audience bursts into shocked conversation. No one tries to get control of the situation. I make eye contact with Susannah, and Elijah sets me back on my feet. She nods calmly while Alice and Lizzie battle it out on either side of Mary, who looks ill.

I don't sit back down in the auditorium. I steal a glance toward Jaxon, but he's not in his seat. I walk through the heavy double doors and then out of the school entirely.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

A Crow and a Noose

Books and old transcripts of the Trials cover the table where Elijah and I sit. The reference room of the public library is as stuffy as ever, but at least it's private.

I gesture at the book I'm reading. "This says Cotton was prejudiced against Burroughs for his unorthodox beliefs. As far as I can tell, Burroughs's hanging was the only one Cotton attended. I haven't read the trial transcript yet, though."

Elijah nods. "I remember Burroughs. He had an unfortunate history with my fiancée's family. He owed them money. Although he eventually repaid it, my fiancée was well acquainted with gossip concerning him. When she twisted the gossip properly, she formed it into an allegation of witchcraft. He became pinned as the ringleader of the witches because he was a minister."

It must be strange for him to research all these people his fiancée accused. "I'm not sure how these things tie together. It's so tangled. But there has to be some sort of common thread we're missing."

"Indeed."

I play with the cap of my pen. "I'm just thinking out loud. But what have we learned from the things I've seen? My first dream had a crow

and a noose. The second was Cotton's sermon about witchcraft, and it had another noose. And my visions consisted of John being crushed and the girl hanging from a rope. The one time I actually called on Cotton, I saw Burroughs hanging. Before he turned into Susannah, that is."

Elijah and I are both silent, considering for the hundredth time how these events connect. "Riddles, metaphors, double meanings," I say. "Did you find anything on the crow woman Mrs. Meriwether said my grandmother used to dream about?"

"Nothing near the time of the Trials. But people were more superstitious then and would refrain from committing to paper anything that could attract a curse or black magic. It is possible I am not looking closely enough. I will search for more-recent diaries, from the eighteen hundreds. It may even be that the bird is wrong. Or that I am not considering the right metaphors for a bird."

Metaphors for a bird...flight, flying, feathers. Feathers carved into a windowsill. House in the woods. Woman-with-dead-birds story. "I missed something," I say, putting my pen down. "I think I blocked it out, honestly. It happened before I believed most of this stuff could be real. Remember that day I spent with Jaxon, when you were waiting at my door? Did you see where I went that day?" Saying Jaxon's name out loud creates a sharp pain in my chest.

"No. I was engaged in my own research."

The one time it would have been helpful to have him watching me, he wasn't. "We were in the woods. We went to find a house that's hands-down the creepiest place I've ever been. It has a bedroom with walls covered in scribbled rantings from some lunatic. And the windowsill has feathers carved into it. Jaxon told me a story at the time about an old woman who lived there and ate birds. It sounded so crazy that I disregarded it completely."

Elijah sits unnaturally still.

"And my name and my dad's name were written on the wall. Our first names, anyway. I never thought those feathers could be related to the crow woman." I'm really frustrated with myself for not considering

it.

He snaps the pencil he's holding and puts it on the table. How could I be such an idiot? I should have told him about those names from the beginning.

"Where is this house, Samantha?"

"I can draw you a map."

"Quickly."

I draw the streets and what I remember of the woods. "Jaxon could see an old trail that led to the house, but I'm not positive of its angle. I'm pretty sure the place is haunted."

"Did you see someone?" Elijah asks. He's almost frantic.

"No, but I heard a woman crying."

He blinks out. I still think Jaxon's story is bull, but there might be some piece of truth in it. Like the birds piece. Birds, feathers, crows. It doesn't take a genius to put these things together. Thinking about Jaxon hurts more than I thought it would. I can't believe he would talk to the Descendants about me. I bet they had a good laugh about how he fooled me into thinking he liked me.

I flip through the pages of a book without reading it. My eyes well up, and I push my feelings away, hiding them with all the others that I can't deal with right now. Jaxon's not the first friend who's turned on me, and I'm sure he won't be the last. This is exactly why I don't let people near me.

This dimly lit room that seemed sort of old-world romantic when Elijah was in it suddenly feels isolated and devoid of oxygen. I prop open the wooden door to get some air, and there's a freshman from my school in the book aisle. He eyes me curiously. I return to the round table to pack up my things.

"Mather?" he says.

"Huh?" My heart beats a little faster.

"I saw your speech today." He leans against the doorway. He isn't particularly tall, but he's stocky and takes up most of the entrance.

"Okay." I eye the space between him and the doorway, trying to

decide whether or not I could squeeze past him if he turns out to be a creep.

“I know all about your family.”

“Great.” I’m not sure if he’s making fun of me or trying to talk to me.

“Can I take a picture of you?” he asks, pulling out his cell phone.

“Seriously, no. Go be weird somewhere else.” I want people to stop hating me, not treat me like a sideshow.

“Cheese,” he says. Only before I can say “What?” that little punk flashes his cell phone light in my face and takes the worst picture ever. Then he runs down the aisle, laughing.

“I will break that phone!” I yell after him as the white-haired librarian comes around the corner. I’m developing a phobia about this library.

“Keep your voice down,” she says. “Five minutes until closing.” Then she peers at me in a you-know-what-you-did way and walks off.

I grab my shoulder bag and head toward the stairs. Why did that boy take a picture of me? Is that a sign that people might not hate me, or does that just mean they’re finding new ways to torment me?

As I exit the library, I fold my arms against the cold night air.

“More spells,” says Elijah, blinking in.

“What?”

“The house...” He looks more agitated than when he left. “There are stones by the windows and doors bound with string and sealed with black wax. I do not know the exact meaning, and I do not dare cross the barrier.”

I try to remember if I saw that, but in all likelihood I wouldn’t have noticed. “But you’re already dead. What’s the worst that can happen?”

His look tells me I don’t know the half of it. “I need to talk to you. Important conversations are not intended for the street.”

I smile at his formality. “There’s a garden right over there.” I point toward the Ropes Mansion, where I met the Descendants.

“Yes, that will do.” He walks at such a fast pace that I almost have to run to keep up. I’ve never seen him like this.

I follow him under the trellis and into the labyrinth of flowers. Even in the dark, this place feels alive. The Gothic tower looms over us in the moonlight. He winds along the dirt paths to a bench under a canopy of vines. I sit before he asks me to. He sits next to me.

Elijah collects his thoughts. “Reading through old diaries, I found accounts regarding my fiancée that were disturbing. I did not tell you because I believed them my personal business, and irrelevant. You see, my fiancée formed an obsession with my death. She buried my body at the edge of her property.”

That’s right. If you commit suicide you can’t be buried on hallowed ground, or whatever. I vacillate between curiosity and dread.

“Her family found her wailing over my grave night after night. She spoke to me freely around her house, refusing to accept I was gone.” I’m reminded of what Jaxon told me about his mom when his dad died. “Out of spite, her witch accusations became more frequent and demanding. When the Trials concluded, she snapped. She became vicious and incoherent. She had luck on her side, though. Because the shame of the Trials was so great and her family so influential, they refrained from arresting her.”

“You could be arrested for being crazy?”

“If your fits cause others physical harm, then yes. And her fits were...terrifying, from what I have read. Even though they spared her arrest, she was banished from the town. She refused to leave on the grounds that she would not be parted from me.”

“So you think she lived in that house? The one in the woods?” I interrupt, feeling anxious.

“I know it. Her parents bought it for her because it was just outside the town limits. That house was remote even then, well surrounded by trees. For a while, her mother visited her. My fiancée was losing her mind, and her violent outbursts increased. After a while, her mother stopped going altogether. I found a letter saying she saw my fiancée from a distance years later, feral and dirty.”

“Okay.” My voice is measured. “What does this have to do with the feathers I found on the windowsill and the story about the birds Jaxon

told me?”

Elijah looks regretful. “Like everyone else at the time, I kept a diary. It was leather-bound, with a feather on the front. It was part of a set, and she had the matching one. She inspired the purchase, in fact. She used to say my hair was as black as a raven’s, and her nickname for me was Bird. She would tell me that when we died we would fly away together.” He looks away.

Suddenly the writing on the walls seems way worse. And the crying I heard when I touched the carved feather. My brain is on overload. *Why was my name there, and what is that place used for now?*

“Elijah, maybe the stories about the evil old woman that lived there with birds were about your fiancée, not the crow woman...” My voice trails off as I try to figure out how the crow woman and Elijah’s fiancée could be different people. I can’t.

“I did not associate the word ‘crow’ with my fiancée. I am frustrated that I did not make this connection sooner. There was something about your grandmother’s drawing that struck me as familiar. The way the woman’s hair fell. The way she held her body. I just could not put my finger on what it was until now.”

My heart races. “Why would my grandmother draw your fiancée?”

“And why would Cotton show you a crow in a dream?” He sounds as anxious as I feel.

Elijah’s fiancée is the crow woman. There’s only one thing that explains this. “She’s wrapped up in the curse. She must be.”

“I just never imagined...” He doesn’t finish.

He told me several times she was one of the main accusers of witches. It makes sense she would be involved in the curse. “She helped start the hysteria.”

“Yes. And if she is involved, I do not believe myself exempt from this situation, as I once did,” Elijah says.

“Are you suggesting you’re part of the curse, too?”

“Indeed. It is possible. I was the one who disapproved of her actions at the time. Then I killed myself because of the Trials, and left her alone. And here I am again, helping you attempt to stop the curse. She

has every reason to seek revenge.”

“If you’re tied to this and we figure it out, what will happen to you?” I always thought he was stuck here because of his suicide, not the curse.

“Are you inquiring whether I will remain a spirit?”

I nod at him.

“I cannot say.”

A tightness forms in my chest. For the first time since I learned about the curse, the idea of solving it doesn’t feel like a relief. “Do you want to stop being a spirit?”

His face is unreadable, but he maintains eye contact. “I have often wished it.”

The tightness spreads. “Of course.”

“In truth, I have not enjoyed these years. I have loathed many of them. And returning to Salem only increased my suffering. Then...”

As he talks, it becomes increasingly hard to breathe. “Then what?” I whisper.

“I recalled the reason I was in pain. Loss of beauty, of connection. Abigail’s singing while I painted. How we laughed so when no one was watching. And how finding a black-eyed Susan tucked into my business contracts reminded me of why I was doing that business in the first place. To really care for another is a reason to live. When that beauty was blotted out of my world, I no longer wanted to be in it.”

I understand him completely. Without my dad, I don’t know who I am.

“You reminded me of that beauty again. Not in one minute of my death have I wished for my life back, until I met you.”

Under the vines, on that little bench, I stare into his gray eyes. Before I can consider what I’m doing, I lean forward until I’m only inches from his face. He gently brushes my hair behind my ear. “Samantha, I—”

“I don’t care,” I whisper.

He doesn’t argue with me. Instead, he leans forward and presses his

lips to mine. Softly at first, then with pressure. The coolness of his mouth warms against my own. Everything about him feels alive and hungry. His hand moves under my hair to my neck and pulls me toward him.

His tongue slips into my mouth, and my body tingles from my lips to my thighs. *I want this, you, all of it. I don't care if it doesn't make sense.* I reach out, entwining my fingers in his clothes and pulling him closer. He holds me tightly, the tips of his fingers pressing into my back. Then, like flipping a switch, he stops kissing me.

I look at him, confused. There's a pause before I release my hands from his body. "What?"

He shakes his head and stands. "This cannot be, Samantha. You are living."

CHAPTER FORTY

Midnight Mission

The clock on my bedside table reads 2:27 a.m. I snuggle farther into my down comforter. With the crap sleep I've gotten recently, I should have passed out hours ago. But all the details of the curse won't leave my head, and it's driving me crazy that I can't connect them. How much time do I have left?

There is a soft tapping on my window, and I launch myself from my bed in a tangle of blankets. I squint at the crouched silhouette on my roof and can just make out the shape of a bun. "Susannah?"

"Sorry," she says, but her voice is muffled by the glass.

I kneel on the window seat and open the window.

"How did you get on my roof?" I peer behind her just to make sure she's alone.

She slides into my room and closes the window. "I climbed the latticework and jumped up."

She scaled my house?

I flip my bedside lamp on. She's wearing green plaid pajamas and a fluffy white winter coat. Okay, so she's not wearing black, she's a mini ninja, and she's on a midnight mission. What else don't I know about

this girl?

“Everything’s a mess, Samantha,” she says, and sits down on my window seat.

“Yeah, I know,” I say. I’m not sure how to process this visit. I’m partly relieved and partly suspicious, especially after Lizzie’s hateful speech.

“No, I mean it’s gotten worse. I need to know—have you had any more visions?” she says, and I can hear the fear in her voice.

“You mean other than the one of you?” I wish I had phrased that better.

“Yeah. Anyone else? Even someone you don’t know?”

I recognize the look on her face. I’ve worn it myself. “Your sister…”

Her eyes widen.

“No, I mean, I didn’t see your sister. But did something happen to her?”

Her panic deflates. She nods. “She was admitted to the hospital not long after I came home from school. She collapsed.” Her voice shakes.

I sit down next to her. “I’m so very sorry. I don’t know what to say.”

“And she’s not the only one. Lizzie’s brother and cousin got in a car accident. Her cousin’s dead and her brother’s in the ICU. And Alice’s uncle, the one who owns The Brew, had a heart attack.”

Lizzie’s brother and cousin? *That’s what those purple roses in town were about.* It takes all my self-control not to jump up and start pacing. “It’s escalating.”

“I think you might be the key to figuring all this out.”

I’m so nervous, I almost laugh. “You guys have been keeping me in the dark. Why would you do that if you think I can solve the curse?”

“That’s why I’m here. Anything I know that can help you, I’ll tell you.”

I definitely didn’t expect that answer. “What changed?”

She takes a breath. “We did the clarity spell with Lizzie and it didn’t work.”

“Do you mean you didn’t see the blurred faces?”

“Let me back up. Alice, Mary, Lizzie, and I have been friends since we were little. Our mothers were friends, and their mothers. And from the time we were ten or so we were casting. It took us a long time before we could make anything work, and it wasn’t until recently that any of us besides Lizzie could do spells individually. We always needed the circle. We still do, for most things.”

“The circle?”

“Four of us.”

“What about John?”

Susannah hesitates at the mention of his name, and I regret bringing him up. “He wasn’t as interested as we were. When he was there, it was mainly for Lizzie.”

“So everyone knows you do witchcraft—they’re not just spreading rumors?”

“Not exactly. People make guesses, but we never discuss it with anyone outside of ourselves. That’s why I didn’t answer when you were asking me questions the day I came to your house.”

I was right. They’re like a secret society. “But you did a spell with me. Isn’t that a violation of your secrecy?”

“Yes and no. The thing is, I get feelings about people. Not everyone, but certain people I just know things about. And as much as Lizzie and Alice kept saying you were the bad thing coming to Salem, I knew the moment I met you that wasn’t true. Alice argued with me, but Lizzie wouldn’t hear it. Eventually, Alice agreed that if I could prove it, she would help me convince Lizzie. That’s when we met you in the garden, and that’s why Alice agreed to do that spell.”

Alice reads bones and Susannah reads people? I’m really not sure which end is up anymore. “You were testing me?”

“Yes. The clarity spell should have told us something about you, brought to light the truth. But those blurred faces were something no one planned on. Nothing like that had ever happened before. When we saw Cotton, Alice and I started arguing all over again. We decided to go back one more time to sort it out before discussing it with Lizzie.”

“But why were you arguing with your friends about me?” *What does*

she see when she reads me?

She places her hand on mine. “Samantha, Alice’s bones kept directing us to you. You are obviously connected to us for better or for worse.”

“And so what happened with Lizzie?”

“We tried the clarity spell in the same spot in the woods, and we didn’t even get a normal reading. We got nothing. It didn’t work at all.”

“Could it be a fluke?” I don’t know how this stuff works, but it sounds like I need to. I look at my dad’s picture.

Susannah shakes her head. “Things like that don’t happen randomly. You made that spell work; I’m sure of it.”

I open my mouth to protest, and shut it again. “Did you ever tell Lizzie?”

Susannah fidgets with the zipper on her coat. “Alice brought you up in the auditorium, right before...everything happened.”

Oh no. That has to be the worst timing ever.

“Lizzie’s not thinking clearly. She’s coming after you. She’s convinced that these deaths and accidents are your fault, and she’s doing everything she can to convince the town of the same thing. And because she’s angry with us, she’s not telling us what she’s planning. But it’s not just gossip. Her family is well connected here.”

“What do I do?”

“Meet us tomorrow in the woods behind Walgreens at midnight. We’ll bring Lizzie, and we’ll sort this thing out. If we can’t work together, then we’re all gonna lose. These divisions are costing us time.”

A chill runs through me. “Okay.”

Susannah pulls out her phone. “I have to run. My parents are expecting me back at the hospital.” She lifts my window and slips through it.

“Susannah, be careful. That vision I had...”

“Just meet us tomorrow,” she says, and closes my window behind her.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Becoming a Witch

I rub my eyes against the early morning light as I walk into the kitchen. Coffee's brewed and everything's quiet. Vivian's car isn't in the driveway. Looks like she's avoiding me now. Somehow this hurts worse than the anger. She's the one who sold the apartment and lied to me; she's the one who slapped me. How is it fair that she's now mad at me, on top of everything else?

I pull down a mug and fill it with coffee, half-and-half, and a bit of cinnamon. There are new empty wine bottles in the recycling can. Maybe Vivian's just waiting for my dad to die to get rid of me. I have no family and nowhere to go. Why doesn't she care about me anymore? I shake my head. I need to stop thinking about this.

"Elijah," I say as I sit down at the round wooden table in the kitchen.

He blinks in, with an old leather-bound book in his hand. He takes a seat at the table and smiles. "Good. You are awake."

I immediately blush and look at my coffee. Seeing his dimples just makes me remember the way his lips felt. I shift the conversation to our usual morning topic. "How's my dad today?"

"Very much the same."

It's Saturday, a week since I was at the hospital, and the separation's panicking me. "I really wish I could go see him."

Elijah looks sympathetic. "You are helping him more by staying here."

I'm grateful for the reinforcement. "What's the book?"

"It is an old spell book. I am using it to figure out what kind of spell is around the house in the woods. It took me all night to locate one that I did not suspect was protected by some enchantment or another."

"It surprises me that anything can hurt you." Not that anything makes sense anymore.

"Understand that my existence as a spirit has no guaranteed end date. I would surely hate to spend the next few hundred years suffering over a spell because I was not cautious."

The idea that objects can hold that kind of power is unsettling. "Could that really happen?"

"Samantha, death reveals that the world is more fantastical than you thought, not less. The veil between possible and impossible is often lifted."

"I think I need to get on board with this spell stuff, too. I feel like I've been on the sidelines."

"How so?"

"Well, I have that parchment you gave me. Maybe there's some sort of identity-revealing spell that I can use to figure out who wrote the thing." On the off chance it does work, it will save me a bunch of time.

Elijah smiles. "Becoming a witch, are we?"

I feign annoyance. "Not funny. So, did you find out what those stones and things at the old house meant?"

"I believe they are some form of binding spell to keep things in or shut things out. I am not positive. They could also be a way of hiding the house from general view. I have not gotten far enough in my research."

I wonder why Elijah's using an old spell book to decipher a new

spell. I freeze, and my coffee cup only makes it halfway to my mouth. “Elijah, do you think there’s any way your fiancée could still be around?”

His lips tighten. “Yes. I do. It is one of my greatest fears. One of the reasons I did not come back to Salem.”

“But you haven’t seen her? Right? You’d see her if she was here.” All I need is a crazy spirit obsessed with Elijah to make this situation worse.

“My first few days after I returned to Salem, I was on guard for her. When she did not appear, I began to relax a little. Eventually, I assumed she had passed on. It was not until yesterday that my fears about her resurfaced.”

I’m sure that if she knew where his spirit was, these past three hundred years would have been unbearable. “What’s her name? It’s weird to keep calling her your fiancée.”

“As I told you yesterday, names have power. I have been careful not to say it all these years, and I ask that you do not say it, either. But you know her name. She accused Burroughs and Giles Corey....She testified against Susannah Martin....”

I would be lying if I said I hadn’t already been considering this. And these details definitely confirm my suspicion. I bet anything his fiancée was Ann. She was the leader of the girls who claimed to be afflicted by the accused. I nod. “I won’t say her name. Can I see the spell book?”

He hands it to me, and the weight is surprising. The leather cover is old and cracked and has silver accents. I gently open it, and the pages are thick and soft like cloth. The spells are handwritten in the same type of calligraphy Elijah uses. The book has a homey feel to it—the way old houses have a personality.

I skim the titles of the spells. They are about love, protection, growth, and harmony. It must have belonged to a good witch. I almost laugh at the thought.

After some page-flipping, I come across a spell entitled “The Origin of a Spell.” I skim the text. “This says it reveals a witch’s signature, so

you know who's casting against you."

Elijah's eyebrows push together. "I do not know, Samantha. If this does work, you risk drawing the witch's attention. She may sense you searching for her. Someone powerful enough to cast the spell that caused that rash is not someone you want to attract."

He could be right. But this is our best option. "Maybe. But I think we have to take the risk. Besides, if it's Lizzie, she already hates me."

"And if it is not Lizzie?" he asks.

The vision Cotton showed me of Burroughs suggested I have a secret enemy. But it's only a secret to me, not to my enemy. This is something concrete that might level the playing field. "Then we deal with that as it comes. I'm already in the middle of this...You aren't thinking it could be your fiancée, though, right?"

"No. The dead cannot conjure." His voice has finality in it, so much so that I wonder if he has tried magic himself.

At least I can rule her out. I study the required list of ingredients. I don't recognize all of them, but then again, I've never been good with plants. Oh, crap. It specifies that everything must be freshly cut by the spell caster.

Elijah stands behind my shoulder. "How do you plan on getting those ingredients?"

My options are limited without a car and without asking Vivian. I look out the kitchen window. "I can ask Mrs. Meriwether. I'm guessing her huge garden has some, if not all, of these things." I don't want to go anywhere near Jaxon right now, but this isn't about me and my wants. Plus, Mrs. Meriwether loves cooking. I'm sure she could tell me where to get something if she doesn't have it.

I grab a pen and paper from the kitchen drawer and make a list of ingredients. Elijah frowns. "I do not like this at all."

"Me neither, but we need to take anything we can get at this point. Susannah stopped by last night and told me about more injuries in Salem. The problem is getting bigger, faster." Judging by his look, I know he agrees with me.

I finish my list, and he blinks out and takes the book with him.

That's okay. It's probably easier to talk to Mrs. Meriwether without him there.

I take one final sip of my coffee and put my mug in the sink. I walk out the back door and onto the grass toward Mrs. Meriwether's. There's always the chance Jaxon's asleep.

I knock on the back door. It only takes a moment for her rosy cheeks and warm smile to greet me. "Top 'o the mornin' to ya," she says in a playful Irish accent.

I smile, and step through the doorway. "And the rest of the day to yourself."

Mrs. Meriwether lights up. "How'd you know that was the right response?"

"I went to Ireland with my dad when I was a kid." I listen for Jaxon as I follow Mrs. Meriwether down the hall, but everything's quiet.

"Come in and sit awhile." She walks through the arched doorway and into the kitchen.

I take a seat at the island, which is once again covered with beautiful desserts. She offers me my pick, and I gladly accept.

"I was wondering if I could have a few things from your garden?" I ask between bites.

"Of course you may! What is it you're looking for?"

Her enthusiasm makes this all a little easier. I pull the list out of my hoodie pocket.

"Wild leek. Checkerberry. Fiddlehead." She reads to herself and then looks at me curiously. "What are you using these for?"

"Uh...a recipe I found."

"Did you know that these are all native New England plants?"

That makes perfect sense if the spell book was from Elijah's time. The witch it belonged to would need to use local ingredients. "No. How funny." My voice is higher-pitched than usual.

"Checkerberries are found in the forest."

That's not good. "So you don't have them?"

She smiles. "Actually, I do. I use them for a Native American

medicinal tea. The thing is, that besides tea, I've seen only one other recipe that calls for them—a seasonal muffin.”

Crap. She knows this is a weird ingredient. I should've taken a few minutes to research before marching over here. This is where impulsiveness gets you. “Oh.”

Mrs. Meriwether walks to the island. “Samantha, leek and checkerberry do not belong in the same recipe.”

I look at the desserts, hoping they'll provide me with some advice. “I'm afraid you'll think I'm crazy.”

“You would be surprised at the things I can accept, especially if they're the truth.” She's so calm and nonjudgmental that I feel awful.

What made me think I would sneak this one past a woman who bakes for a living? “They're for a spell.”

To my great surprise, she laughs. “You sound so much like your father. We used to spend hours raiding our parents' gardens trying to mix together any magical concoction. I half thought that was why he grew up to be a spice importer and I, a baker.”

I almost choke on my pastry. My dad, mixing spells? That seems like the last thing in the world he'd do. He wouldn't even let me get one of those fortunes out of a vending machine at a carnival. I suddenly see his spice business in a whole new light. How many things did he change about himself after my mother died? “Did the potions ever work?”

“Oh no, not exactly. But it didn't stop us from trying.” She laughs again. “You cannot imagine how angry Charlotte was the day we used up all the mint she liked in her lemonade.”

I smile now, too. “So you don't think I'm nuts?”

“I live in Salem. There are ten stores within walking distance that have tonics and potions for true love and any other thing you desire. Everyone swears by my happy cakes. Nothing like the magic of triple chocolate to perk a body right up.” She winks.

I never considered that spells could be part of the culture here. “I'm sorry for not telling you. I really am.”

“Not to worry. Trust is grown over time. You're still just planting

your first seeds.” She brushes her hands on her apron. “Shall we get what you need?”

I shove the last bite of a cinnamon and sugar challah knot into my mouth. She leads me out the door and down a small stone pathway toward her enormous garden. Part is enclosed in a greenhouse, and a short stone wall surrounds the rest.

Mrs. Meriwether points to the stones. “My mother always told me stones like these were New England’s winter crop. Because every year when the snow left there would be loads of them sticking out of the ground. Only made sense to build walls.”

She brings me to the checkerberries first and hands me a wooden bowl to collect them. She urges me to try one, and they taste just like wintergreen. As we move through the list, she explains the plant flavors and shows me which plants can be used to treat anxiety, illnesses, or even be used for beauty products.

My bowl fills quickly, and I’m strangely satisfied with the experience. As we walk back to the house, I find myself smiling. I can see why she was my dad’s best friend. She’s one of the most good-natured people I’ve ever met.

“Now, Samantha,” Mrs. Meriwether says as we return to the kitchen. “Would you like to bring over that spell so I can help you with it?”

If I do the spell here, there’s no risk of Vivian coming home and finding out. Also, the instructions looked complex, and it would be nice to have help. But I’ll have to explain what the spell is for.

“Oh, come on. It’ll be fun. And when Charlie wakes up, we can tell him all about it. I’m sure we’ll all have a good laugh.” She looks so happy about the idea.

The bit about my dad tips the scales. I’m not sure he’ll find it funny, but I do like the idea of him waking up and us all laughing together. “Okay. I’ll be right back.”

I put down the bowl and run next door through the grass. When I open my back door, Elijah’s standing there. “I heard,” he says.

I’m not sure if he means that as a good or a bad thing. He hands me the book. I open the door again, but he doesn’t follow me. I stop. “You

coming?”

“I will be along in a while. I am searching for something.”

By his vagueness, I’m sure it has to do with his fiancée.

“Okay. See you soon. Good luck with your search,” I say, and head back out the door.

I return to Mrs. Meriwether’s kitchen and place the old book on her counter.

“Isn’t this something? This must be two or three hundred years old.” She examines the leather. “I would’ve loved to have this when I was a girl.”

She flips through the pages, oohing and aahing at the spell names. “Which one are we doing?”

“‘Origin of a Spell,’” I say, and she waits for an explanation. Might as well just dive in. “I don’t know if Jaxon told you, but I got blamed for the rash at the party. I’m trying to figure out who did it ’cause I think that person set me up.”

I remove the tiny piece of parchment from my wallet and hand it to Mrs. Meriwether. “This was found at the party.”

She unrolls the paper as I flip the pages of the spell book. “And here I thought we might be doing a true love spell,” she says, looking more serious than she did a moment ago. She examines the spell I’ve chosen. “Well, it’s certainly worth a try.”

“Mom...Sam?” Jaxon enters the kitchen in his pajamas, his blond hair messy and falling in his eyes.

My heart gallops, and I instinctively block his view of the spell book. I yank back the wave of emotion that threatens to crash. He looks from one of us to the other suspiciously.

“Breakfast, Jaxon? There’s some lovely warm broccoli-and-cheddar quiche, and your orange juice is in the fridge.”

Jaxon stares at me. “What are you guys doing?”

“A spell,” Mrs. Meriwether says matter-of-factly.

Watching the shock register on Jaxon’s face is uncomfortable. “You’re definitely not doing a spell in my kitchen, Sam.”

I set my jaw and stare at him.

“You may help if you like, dear,” his mother continues. “But otherwise, will you please take your quiche into the dining room? I suspect we’ll have to concentrate.”

“Mom! I’m not kidding!”

Mrs. Meriwether pauses. “Okay, sweetheart. What’s bothering you?”

“You know what. For years everyone thought you were crazy because of her...” He looks frustrated.

“My grandmother,” I guess, and I know I’m right. He told me his mother was shunned because people thought she was crazy. He said there were “other reasons” besides depression. I just never put it together till now.

“It’s finally blown over, and now you’re doing spells? And you—” He looks at me but doesn’t finish his sentence. His eyes are accusatory.

Mrs. Meriwether watches her son wrestle with his emotions. “I’m in my own kitchen. You shouldn’t worry so much about what other people think. Besides, you know Charlotte was as much my mother as my own. I don’t regret one moment I spent with her, no matter what the small-minded townspeople thought. I raised you better than that.”

Jaxon looks straight at me. “You were right. You do hurt the people around you.”

“And what about you?” I mean this to sound confident, but my voice falters. “Helping the Descendants crucify me.”

He looks down and shakes his head. “I knew you’d think that was true. I don’t know why I bother.” Jaxon’s look makes me wish I could take it all back. He turns and walks away.

“Jaxon,” I say, but he keeps walking.

Mrs. Meriwether stops me before I chase after him. “Give him time. Jaxon’s one that needs to process. If you push him now, it will only get worse.”

“I’m so sorry, Mrs. Meriwether.”

“No need for apologies. You’ve done nothing wrong.”

Yes I have. I’ve thought the worst about someone who was nothing

but nice to me. I turn around and look at everything she helped me pick and just feel rotten. “I’ll leave.”

Her expression softens. “You’ll do no such thing. We have a spell to do. No sense in everyone being unhappy.”

“What about Jaxon?”

She smooths her apron. “I know you’re worried about him. It’s sweet of you. My Jaxon is a very practical soul, bless his heart. Just like his father. But sometimes people need to be believed in more than they need to be told what is so. In time, he’ll learn this. Just be patient with him, Samantha.”

Does she mean he needs to believe in me or I need to believe in him? “Thanks for being so nice.”

She reties her apron. “Alrighty now. What do we do first?”

I turn to the book and try to ignore my sadness. “We have to boil the berries.”

Mrs. Meriwether gets a small but heavy-looking pot. “This is called a chowder. It’s where they got the name for the soup.”

She fills it halfway with water and puts it on to boil. Then we drop the checkerberries in, which makes the whole room smell like minty gum. We read the directions together. Thankfully, she understands, because I have no clue how to “finely shred” leafy greens.

Mrs. Meriwether gives me a cutting board and a knife. “First, cut the root off the leek. Like this. Then slice it lengthwise. Now brace it with your fingers and chop it in nice even pieces.”

I’m amazed at how fast her hands move. I take the knife and try to replicate it. Unfortunately, I’m at twenty percent her speed and zero percent of her finesse. Together, we cut all the greens into their proper forms and place them into the chowder pot.

“Whoo. That is one strong smell,” Mrs. Meriwether says as we watch our ingredients boil together in a thick soup.

I double-check the instructions, and Mrs. Meriwether pulls a small baster from a drawer. We clear a portion of the counter near the pot, and I carefully unroll the tiny piece of parchment paper. There’s something exciting about doing this with her. It’s how I always

imagined some kids baked cookies with their moms.

I take a deep breath and concentrate on the words. “What is hidden, come to view. Make plain the hand with which you drew. Your magic mark I wish to see. With these three drops reveal to me.”

I pull the hot liquid from the pot into the baster and squeeze three red drops onto the parchment. We both stare at it, afraid to blink. The red liquid coats the tiny piece of paper, causing the remaining black ink symbols to bleed. Then, all at once, the red potion moves to the center of the parchment in a concentrated dot. It slowly curves and winds itself, like there’s a pen instructing it where to go. After a moment of this, it makes an elegant red feather.

I stare at it, trying to will it to turn into something else. Anything but a feather. My stomach twists in on itself, and I almost drop the baster on the floor.

“The crow woman,” Mrs. Meriwether says in a hushed voice.

I grab the edge of the paper, trying to touch it as little as possible. “I’m really sorry, but I have to run.” I pick up the book. *I need Elijah. Now.*

“What does this mean, exactly?” Mrs. Meriwether looks serious, with none of the bubbly sweetness of her usual demeanor. “Your grandmother said—”

I cut her off. If I don’t go now, I’ll have a panic attack. “I’m not sure. If I can explain, I promise I will. I’m sorry again for taking off like this.” I run out of the kitchen before Mrs. Meriwether has time to respond.

“Elijah,” I say as I sprint across the grass.

When I open the back door of my house, he’s in the hallway. I hand him the parchment. His face shows more than surprise. He’s angry.

“Not possible,” he says to himself. “Turn around, Samantha. We are leaving.”

The front door slams shut. “Sam?” yells Vivian.

If I run now, she’ll see. I stand still, unsure what to do. “Yeah?”

Elijah grabs the book and the parchment from me as Vivian appears

in the hallway.

“Where have you been? I called the house and your cell three times. I think we—” She sees my face and stops. “Did something happen?”

“Um, yeah.” I know she’ll never believe that nothing’s wrong.

“Quickly, Samantha,” Elijah urges. “I will carry you out of here if you do not find another way.”

His insistence makes it harder to think. “I forgot that I have a paper due on Monday.”

The worry leaves her face. “I thought we could go visit your father. And on the way, we can talk about all the fighting we’ve been doing lately. I know this hasn’t been easy for you, and I know I’ve been on edge recently.”

This surprises me. She never tries to resolve things like this. But then again, we’ve never fought this badly, either. Part of me really wants to say yes, wants to forgive her and believe there is an explanation for that medical bill. But I need to go with Elijah and figure out what this feather means. “I have to meet my group at the library.” I turn toward the back door. I hate to leave, but I can’t stay.

“Here I am trying to do something nice when really I should be the one mad at you for the way you acted. And I didn’t say you could leave this house,” she says, the hurt in her tone turning to anger.

I reach for the door handle and grab it. I take one look at her. She’s fuming mad. I run.

“Don’t you dare run from me!” she yells so loudly I hear her from the driveway.

I don’t look back. It’s too late to change my mind. But part of me worries that shrugging off Vivian’s offer might have broken our relationship for good. My dad always softened me and Vivian, like a disk between vertebrae. Now we’re just rubbing together in the worst and most painful way. Maybe we don’t work without him.

“This way,” says Elijah, keeping pace with my sprint.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

There's No Way Out

I wipe sweat from my forehead as I enter a small cobblestone street just outside town. I stopped running five blocks back, but my body didn't get the message.

"I'm in so much trouble."

"I could not risk you staying there," Elijah says.

"Okay, but *why*?" I stop, not wanting to leave this sleepy street, where I can talk to him.

"You called attention to yourself with that spell today. My fiancée's attention."

I feel exposed. "So she knows where I live now?"

"I imagine she already knew where you lived. After all, you live in the house that used to belong to me. What she would not have known is that you could do spells."

"You're saying I just announced myself as a threat?"

"I would think so."

If I wasn't a threat before and she was already casting spells, I might as well paint a target on my forehead now. "But you told me spirits can't do spells."

“They cannot.”

“Am I missing something?”

He nods, looking uncomfortable.

“Sam?”

I whip around as Jaxon turns the corner. I’m partly relieved and partly terrified that he’s seeking me out. Did he see me talking to Elijah? “You followed me?”

“I know you like this boy, but there is no time for this. I must tell you something,” Elijah says, and I get the feeling I’m not going to like whatever it is.

Jaxon walks up to me. “Yeah, well, you saw someone die, then you levitated onstage. I find you doing spells with my mother, and then I see you running full sprint down the street. I think it makes sense that I followed you.”

“You never told Lizzie about me biting John’s hand, did you?”

“What do you think?”

“Jaxon, I...I’m sorry. I don’t know what to say.”

“Why don’t you start by explaining.”

“Samantha,” Elijah says. I don’t need to look at him to know this isn’t a good idea.

“I don’t have time.” It’s the most truthful thing I can say.

“Why?”

“You wouldn’t understand.” I twist my fingers together.

Jaxon waits for me to continue. When I don’t, he asks, “Why don’t you trust me?”

My heart aches. “It’s not that.”

Elijah throws his hands in the air.

“Then why don’t you tell me anything?” Jaxon asks. “I found out with the rest of the school these things happened to you. Even the Descendants knew more than me.” I open my mouth, but he stops me. “Don’t try to tell me they didn’t. I saw their faces. Then, you believe Lizzie’s lies about me. They aren’t even nice to you. Meanwhile, I do everything I can for you, and you shut me out.”

I bite my lip. I completely misunderstood why Jaxon was angry with me. I can't help but agree with him. "I never meant to shut you out," I whisper.

"Then stop," says Jaxon.

Elijah paces. "The longer you delay, the more danger you are in."

Which means Jaxon is in danger being near me. "It's not safe for you to be here," I say.

Jaxon looks at the historic houses and quaint benches. "We are on a quiet street in an expensive neighborhood. *And* it's still light out. I don't really think it gets much safer."

I blush, embarrassed by how paranoid I sound. "I *know* that. I'm not suggesting the trees are gonna eat us. I'm saying that it's not safe for *you* to be with *me*."

"And again, I ask why." I've never seen Jaxon act like this. He's dead serious.

How do I tell him anything that will make sense to him? "I want to tell you; I just don't know how."

"Do you have feelings for me, Sam?" He takes a step toward me and my heart picks up speed. "I have to know. Because if you do, I will stand here fighting you all day until you let me in. But if you don't..."

I glance at Elijah, who grumbles unhappily and walks off a few feet to give me space. My instinct is to bolt. I'm impossibly nervous, and I'm not going to have this conversation in front of Elijah. But I can't ignore Jaxon's question. There's no way out.

"Sam? What are you looking at?"

My eyes meet Jaxon's with fear.

"Wait...it's here?" Jaxon asks.

"He," I correct him.

"Great. *He* is here?" Jaxon scans the street again and Elijah walks toward us.

"Yes, I am here. Trying to keep her safe. Not attempting to discuss my feelings for her while she is quite obviously distressed," Elijah snaps at Jaxon.

“It’s not his fault; he doesn’t understand,” I say to Elijah before I catch myself.

“What did he say to me?” Jaxon asks.

“Go home, Jaxon, before you cause her harm,” Elijah says.

“Sam?” Jaxon takes a step forward, not shying away from this uncomfortable situation.

I want to cry. It’s not like I can lie; Elijah’s standing next to me. “He said for you to go home before you cause me harm.” I cringe at every word. And by the way Jaxon’s face falls, I know I shouldn’t have said them.

“Is that how you feel?” Jaxon asks quietly.

It’s more complicated than that. But if I say that, he’ll stay. It takes all my will to say, “Yes.”

Jaxon nods, and his eyes glisten. “I guess that’s my answer.” He waits for me to say something else, anything else. After a few moments of silence, he walks away.

“Jaxon! I’m sorry.” Pushing Jaxon and Vivian away within the same hour is killing me. Maybe I *am* the problem. Maybe Lizzie’s right. All I do is hurt people.

He stops and starts to turn toward me, but changes his mind. He shakes his head and continues down the street. With every step he takes, the ache in my heart grows bigger.

I look at Elijah. “I know,” he says, and wraps his arms around me. I bury my face in his chest and cling to his shirt. He smells like old books. “I just could not put you at further risk. It is safer for everyone, including him, if he goes home.”

I nod against his body. “What did you want to tell me?”

Elijah holds me for a second longer before releasing me. “While you were with Mrs. Meriwether, I searched again for diary entries.”

“You found something, didn’t you?”

He nods. “One in the late seventeen hundreds that referenced a woman living with crows in the woods. The writer claimed that no one would walk past her house for fear of being cursed.”

“Wouldn’t she have been over a hundred by the late seventeen hundreds?”

“That is precisely what worried me. So I looked in the eighteen hundreds. I found two more mentions of her. Then one in the early nineteen hundreds.”

How could people write about the same person over hundreds of years? “Maybe they were just repeating stories they heard from other people and never actually saw her.”

Elijah pushes his dark wavy hair back. “What gives me pause is that the descriptions were extremely similar.”

“What are you saying, exactly? That you think she’s lived for hundreds of years? That’s impossible.” My words don’t hold the conviction I’d like. I just did a spell with my next-door neighbor, and my best friend’s a spirit—who I’ve kissed. The word “impossible” holds a much looser definition than it did in NYC.

“Is it impossible?” Elijah asks. I can only imagine how freaked out he must be.

I fidget. “If she’s casting spells, she has to be alive in some way, right?”

“I think we can assume definitively that she is the unknown enemy Cotton was referencing in your Burroughs vision.”

The blood drains from my face. “Cotton said I was paying attention to the wrong things. But why wouldn’t Cotton just tell me your fiancée was my secret enemy instead of all these coded messages?”

“Names have power. He was trying to protect you or himself, I imagine.”

If Cotton’s frightened of her, what does that mean for me? I glance around the street, feeling like a sitting target. “Do you think she’s out to get me because of Cotton?”

“Potentially.”

“But my dad’s name was written alongside mine.” If she gave people that rash, I bet she’s responsible for other things. The pastries that got everyone sick? John’s death? “So now there are two things that can hurt my dad...the curse *and* your fiancée.”

“I think they are one and the same. I am just not sure where the connection lies.” A car door slams shut, and I jump.

I step closer to Elijah, lowering my voice to a whisper. “How do we find her?”

“We go to a café or some public place where you are at less risk, while I try to make sense of it all.”

“No way. I’m not hiding out drinking a latte while you go looking for her.”

“If I can speak with her, I may be able to persuade her to stop.” He looks every bit as determined as me.

“No. Cotton and your fiancée were at the top of the food chain.” I picture my “How to Hang a Witch” chart. “Cotton couldn’t have started the witch hysteria without her, or she without him. Oh man, and my coming to Salem inadvertently started the chain of deaths. I would bet money that she’s involved in these deaths and accidents, too. Probably *not* inadvertently. And if we were the ones to start it, she and I are the only ones who can stop it.” The moment I say it, I know I’m right. Susannah said I was the key to solving this. Alice thinks I’m the problem. They might both be right. The thought makes me dizzy.

“I dislike that idea greatly.” Elijah’s upset only confirms my suspicions.

“I’m not wild about it, either.” That’s an understatement. “But Cotton could’ve stopped the accusations all those years ago if he’d tried, which would’ve saved the lives of innocent people. If everything’s as parallel as we think, I’m the one who needs to try.” As I speak, my theory makes more sense to me.

He frowns. “Do not forget you are the witch in this version of the pattern.”

“Your fiancée lost everything. If she wanted to blame anyone for the Trials, Cotton would be a likely choice. What would be a better revenge than to brand a Mather as a witch and make that Mather look responsible for all the deaths?”

“How could Cotton have stopped my fiancée?”

“Expose her as a fraud. Uncover her lies,” I say. In which case, that

spell I did was a step in the right direction. I look at the spell book on the bench a few feet from where we stand. “But in order to do that, I need to know where she is.”

Elijah follows my eye line. “A spell is not a good idea, Samantha.”

“What choice do we have? If I need to stop her, I can’t stand here waiting for her to take me by surprise.”

“It is not safe,” Elijah says definitively. “We do not know enough yet.”

More than anything, I want to agree. But if I don’t track her down, I will continue to be behind the horse, like Cotton said. “Elijah, we need to come up with a plan. And then I need to try one of those spells.”

“What plan? We do not know what we are planning for.” His voice deviates from its evenness. “I do not want you to get hurt.”

My heart thuds. “If I die, then I guess we’ll be spending lots of time together.”

He grabs my arms and holds on to me as though he will shake the idea out of me. “Do not ever say that, Samantha. You have your whole wonderful life ahead of you. You cannot imagine all the experiences you will have. I would never wish this upon you so young.”

“But how can I have those things if I don’t stop your fiancée?” I match his passionate tone, and my voice rises. “And how many other people won’t get to live their lives if I don’t break this curse?”

“You will break it. You just need to be reasonable.” He pulls me forward a couple of inches.

Our faces are close together. “John’s already dead. Susannah’s next. Not to mention all those others. I can’t know that I had the answer and didn’t take action. I would never be able to live with myself. I’m not going to be like Cotton, sit back and watch it unfold.” I’m getting more determined by the minute. I have no desire to meet Elijah’s fiancée. But I’ll be damned if I’m going to miss my chance because I’m too cautious.

“You do not know what she is capable of.” He pulls me closer again, like he’s trying to shield me with his body.

Suddenly his role in this curse makes sense. “You know the enemy

this time, Elijah.”

He looks at me questioningly.

I steady my voice. “You couldn’t protect Abigail because you didn’t know who the enemy was. Now you’re trying to protect me. Difference is, we know who we’re fighting.”

His eyes go wide, and he releases me. He sits down on the bench. “I killed myself last time I failed.”

I sit down next to him, my voice gentle. “I can’t do this without you.”

He turns toward me. For a few seconds we’re quiet. His gray eyes are big and sad. “I cannot live the rest of eternity knowing I failed you, too.”

My breath catches in my throat. “You could never fail me....”

He sighs. “Okay, Samantha. I will bend to your will.”

I exhale. But my victory’s short-lived. Police sirens blare in the distance. Elijah blinks out. I stand, examining my surroundings, and realize Ms. Edelson is peering through a curtain from a second-story window. When we make eye contact, she shuts the drapes. How could I be so stupid as to stay in one place for so long? It must look like I’m arguing with myself.

Elijah blinks back in. “Run!”

I take off down the cobblestones.

“Turn right,” he says, and I duck into an alley. The police sirens get louder. “The park.”

I sprint onto the sidewalk, almost knocking down a pedestrian. I quickly check the traffic and run across the street into a patch of trees. I stop by the trunk of a big maple. The police car passes us and heads in the direction we came from.

“You need to get off the street,” Elijah says. “That officer had a notepad full of comments about you.”

“Wait, why?”

“I did not stay to find out. We need to get you to Mrs. Meriwether’s.”

“What!” I stare at him in horror. “No.”

“Can you think of a better location to do a spell?”

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

What the...?

“I will unlock the door,” Elijah says as I crouch behind a bush in Mrs. Meriwether’s front yard. I grip the spell book to my chest and scan my house. Vivian’s car is in the driveway and the lights are on. Elijah opens Mrs. Meriwether’s front door.

I bolt across the lawn in the fading light, my heart pushing against my rib cage. I take the two entrance steps in one jump, clumsily barreling through the doorway. I close it behind me with a bang.

“Hello?” says Jaxon from the living room. I want to run at the thought of facing his hurt look. Within a few seconds he’s standing in front of me.

“Hey,” I say, looking at my feet.

“Did you just break into my house?”

“I didn’t want anyone to see me. But I didn’t mean to break in.” It’s the truth.

“Why do you care if someone sees you come into my house?”

Elijah frowns. “Time is passing quickly.”

I’m silent for a few seconds, unsure how to answer either of them. “Well, I...” I run through the various explanations, but they all suck.

There is only one thing I can say. “I should never have believed Lizzie’s lie. I know I made you uncomfortable with all the spell stuff and the auditorium. And then again in the street today. I’m really sorry. I so want to tell you something that will explain it all...and convince you that I never meant to hurt you, that I care. I just haven’t sorted it out myself yet.”

“You care?” I’ve never seen Jaxon vulnerable before. It makes me feel so much worse.

“Samantha,” Elijah warns. I give Elijah a please-give-me-a-minute look. I know he’s afraid that I’ll get lost in this conversation, but I don’t want to hurt Jaxon any more than I already have.

I nod. “Yes.”

Jaxon’s face relaxes slightly. “As long as I know that, I can deal with the rest of it. Even the ghost.” He says the last part unhappily.

Elijah scowls. Guilt overwhelms me as I look from one to the other. *How did I get myself into this mess?*

“Samantha?” Mrs. Meriwether enters the front hall. “I was worried.”

I tense. “I’m sorry I ran off.”

“When I saw that feather, I...Well, to be perfectly upfront, the idea that your grandmother was correct about the crow woman has been haunting me all day.”

I take a deep breath. “I need to track her down...the crow woman.” Mrs. Meriwether nods as though she expected this. “And I could really use your help.”

Jaxon’s upset expression returns. “So you came here to apologize, huh?”

I’ve really botched this up. At this point, all I can do is hope he doesn’t hate me.

“Jaxon, I’m gonna tell you the truth. No lies, no omissions. But I can’t explain everything. There just isn’t time. You’re gonna have to believe me for now. Can you do that?”

His eyebrows push together, and he looks at his mother before answering. Maybe she talked to him? “Only if you promise not to shut

me out like that again. I felt ridiculous.”

I release my breath. “I promise.” He’s way more forgiving than I might be. “So...the reason I’ve been acting so crazy lately is ’cause I’m positive John’s death was part of a larger pattern. Susannah is next. And I’m betting my dad and I are close behind.”

Mrs. Meriwether and Jaxon exchange looks again. What did they talk about today?

“If you really think this, you need to go to the police,” Jaxon says.

The mention of the police tenses me even more. Could Lizzie somehow be behind them coming after me? Susannah did say her family was well connected.

“This is one of those things you just need to trust me on,” I say, and I can tell that Jaxon wants to argue.

“Dear, let’s go to the kitchen and discuss what you need,” Mrs. Meriwether says.

“Clever woman,” says Elijah.

I nod, grateful for Mrs. Meriwether’s support, and follow her down the hallway toward the kitchen. To my surprise, Jaxon comes as well.

“I swear I’m not on something,” I say under my breath to Jaxon as we walk.

The beginning of a smile tugs at his lips. “Debatable.”

“Are you sure you want to know all of this? It’ll sound wacky.”

“I saw you float in midair. If I can handle that, I don’t think a spell is gonna make me faint.” His voice is moving back toward its usual playfulness.

“Fine, but this is difficult enough for me to accept. If you laugh, I will knock you out.”

Jaxon smiles. “I’m counting on it.”

We walk into the kitchen, and Mrs. Meriwether clears some counter space. “Tell us your plan, Samantha.”

Elijah paces, deep in thought.

I sit down at the island, and Jaxon sits next to me. “The only way I think I can stop the deaths is to find this crow woman and expose what

she's doing. I'm pretty sure she's setting me up to take the fall for all the weird things that happened recently, and if I'm not careful, the deaths will get pinned on me, too." Lizzie's no help, either.

I put down the spell book and can tell Jaxon's impressed by it. It is kinda beautiful. I flip through the pages, looking for a location spell. When I land on one, Elijah reads over my shoulder. He grabs a basket from the counter and blinks out.

"So what's the reason this crow woman's out to get you?" At least Jaxon isn't making fun of me, even if his tone is doubtful.

"There's a lot of bad blood between her and the Mathers. I think she's enjoying branding me as a witch, and will try to hang me for it. Metaphorically, or whatever."

"Sam, you're in my kitchen with a *spell book* doing *spells* with my mother. Is there a different definition of a witch I don't know about?"

I open my mouth and close it again.

Mrs. Meriwether looks at the location spell. Her face is serious. "Your grandmother was searching for information about the curse before she died. She talked to me about it constantly. I even helped her do research."

I knew Mrs. Meriwether helped her. I figured it was one of the reasons she wasn't pressing me for details.

"One of the things she was most interested in was the location of the hangings, which Jaxon tells me you've already sorted out," Mrs. Meriwether continues.

So this is what they were discussing today. In my grandmother's last journal entry it said she found the address to the house in the woods and planned to go visit it. But since she didn't write any more, I figured she never did. "We actually got the idea from her journal."

"Yes, well. One evening, Charlotte came to my house ranting. She always had some odd ideas, but I never saw her this worked up. She kept calling your father, insisting she saw the crow woman, and that your family was in danger. She was so frantic that I could barely understand her. I thought she was unwell. I desperately tried to calm her."

“She went to the house in the woods, didn’t she?” The hairs on my neck stand up.

“She died that night, Samantha.” Mrs. Meriwether pauses. “I was fearful when you started asking me about the curse. You sounded so much like Charlotte. I had no idea you and Jaxon had found her research and went to that house. Even I couldn’t find it. I wish...” She’s too full of emotion to continue.

Of course Mrs. Meriwether couldn’t find my grandmother’s notes. They were in the secret study. What happened to my grandmother when she went to that house?

“I remember that night. My dad left me with Vivian while he came here to make arrangements. He never told me what happened.” I remember my dad’s face when he came home, distant and sad.

“I blame myself,” Mrs. Meriwether says, shaking her head. “I helped her, but I didn’t always believe Charlotte. I thought because your grandmother dreamed of the crow woman so often, she was confusing dreams with reality. And when I saw that feather today, all I could think was that I was dreadfully wrong all these years. If I could go back, I—”

“It’s not your fault,” Jaxon says. “You can’t even be sure what happened.”

“I cannot change the past, I suppose.” She pats her eyes. “But I can help you, Samantha. I won’t doubt this story a second time. If there’s a way to find her, it must be done.”

Mrs. Meriwether’s comments about believing in people all make sense now. “Jaxon’s right. It’s better that you didn’t go to that house.”

She stops patting her eyes. “Which ingredients will you need?”

Elijah blinks in with a full basket of plants and places it on the counter. Jaxon jumps when he sees it appear. Mrs. Meriwether’s face brightens with the novelty of it.

“Well, there is the location spell, which Elijah already got ingredients for.” I blush a little, not sure how to explain him. “But I think I need to do another one, too.”

Jaxon can’t hide his annoyance. “The ghost I told you about, Mom.”

“How very curious!” Mrs. Meriwether says, examining her newly full basket and clasping her hands together. “He’s here now?”

“Yeah,” I say, making eye contact with him. *He’s always here when I need him.*

“What other spell were you thinking of?” Mrs. Meriwether asks, looking around her kitchen for signs of Elijah. I can’t help but enjoy her interest in him.

“Well...” If I were Cotton, I would have to expose the crow woman as a fraud. “I don’t know much about her plans. Maybe something about clarity or truth?”

Elijah nods and comes to my side. I flip through the pages with all three of them leaning in. I move past all the good-fortune and beauty spells without reading the titles.

“Maybe something to fight her with?” Jaxon says as I flip past the healing section.

Elijah shoots Jaxon an icy glare. “I chose this book specifically because I did not want Samantha using spells that were intended to harm.”

He picked this book for *me*? “She’s three hundred years ahead of me in learning magic,” I say to Jaxon. “If I try to battle her, I’ll lose for sure.”

Jaxon flinches at “three hundred years” but refrains from commenting. I keep flipping.

“A justice spell?” Mrs. Meriwether suggests.

“Hmmm.” I flip the next couple of pages with excitement. “‘Inside Out’—it says it brings a person’s inward self to the surface. Like a truth serum?”

“That sounds like a strong contender,” says Mrs. Meriwether.

“She relies on manipulation,” Elijah agrees. “Take that away, and you would succeed in disorienting her.”

Both Jaxon and Mrs. Meriwether read the description. “Just pulling out what she knows and what she’s planning would be great,” I say.

“I should have some of that to use on you when this is all over,”

Jaxon jokes.

Elijah frowns.

“Samantha, don’t you think you should do something for protection?” Mrs. Meriwether now flips through the pages herself.

“Yes,” Elijah chimes in.

“I thought about that. I just don’t know how much time I have.” I don’t bother to say that at any moment the crow woman could hunt me down. Ugh. Now that I’ve thought it, I feel guilty not warning Jaxon and Mrs. Meriwether. “There is...I need to be honest with you. I’m worried she might be looking for me, now that I revealed her spell.” I glance at Elijah. He seems to know my intentions.

To my surprise, it’s Jaxon who answers. “Didn’t you just say she’s trying to frame you?”

“Yeah. So?”

“So why would she storm my house to get you? Wouldn’t that blow her whole plan?”

Holy crap. Jaxon’s making some serious sense.

Mrs. Meriwether nods. “You’re like family. There’s no way we’d leave you to do this alone.”

“Not too much like family,” Jaxon says, which earns him another hard look from Elijah. Mrs. Meriwether points to a protection spell she found.

It’s called “Shield and Protect.” There’s a drawing of a familiar knot next to the title. *I’ve seen it before. Where? Oh, right. It’s the same as the pendant on Vivian’s necklace. She lent it to me for the party. What the...?*

My hands are suddenly cold, and my mouth is dry. Is that what kept me from getting that rash? Elijah takes a protective step toward me.

“Samantha? Are you okay?” Mrs. Meriwether asks.

“Do you know what this is?” I say, pointing to the drawing of the knot.

“Yes, dear. It’s a witch’s knot. It protects people and objects. Charlotte always wore one,” Mrs. Meriwether answers easily. “Why?”

“I just...I was wearing one the night everyone got the rash except me. It looked like an antique. Could it have been my grandmother’s?” I stare at the book, trying to make sense of it.

“Your grandmother lost hers the night she died. But with the state she was in, it doesn’t surprise me that it’s in the house. Did you find it in her bedroom?” Mrs. Meriwether asks.

“Vivian lent it to me. She has my grandmother’s old room. Do you think that’s what stopped me from getting the rash?” Vivian could have said something about finding it. I was mostly in my own head at the time.

Elijah stiffens. “It may also be that my fiancée was at that party without my knowing it.”

I shudder at the idea that I may have already met her.

“Can you get it? We could use it in this spell,” asks Mrs. Meriwether.

I hesitate. Going into Vivian’s bedroom does not sound awesome. I glance at Elijah.

“Happy to oblige,” he replies to my unspoken request.

“Elijah will,” I say to Mrs. Meriwether.

She nods, and picks up a large wooden bowl. “Now I’m going to get those additional things from the garden. Jaxon, offer Samantha some food.” Mrs. Meriwether turns and heads for the back door. Elijah blinks out.

“I’m not hungry,” I say to Jaxon.

He looks down for a moment. When he looks back up, his expression is kind. “Sam, I...I honestly had no idea what you were going through. I mean, your father, people dying in front of you, and even though I’m having trouble believing it, this crow-woman thing. I shouldn’t have come down on you for not including me. I seriously don’t know how you’re dealing with all of this.”

“Thanks, Jaxon. But you were right. I do need to learn how to trust people more. I was so suspicious of you when we met, and you were sincerely trying to be nice.”

Jaxon’s cheeks turn slightly pink. “Actually...my mother kinda made

me promise to go over and see you in the beginning. And to talk to you at school, too. Charlotte meant a lot to her. I told her you were gonna think I was some crazy stalker, but she wouldn't hear it."

My heart sinks.

Jaxon's pink deepens to a full blush. "Then I talked to you the day you moved in. You flat out refused my help and wiped your lip gloss all over me. Then I got to know you a little better and realized that you were smart and stubborn and fearless enough to stand up to anyone. At that point, she couldn't have convinced me to stay away from you."

I look down. "So you're attracted to girls who are difficult?"

"If that's what you are, then, yes." There's not the usual humor in his tone.

Conflicted feelings creep through me. The back door opens, and I'm grateful for the distraction. I stand and grab the chowder pot.

"Okay, which one first?" Mrs. Meriwether sets a full basket down on her counter.

"We should do the location one last. Just in case that somehow tells her I'm coming. So I guess the inside-out spell and then the protection one," I reply.

She removes greens from the basket while I read the directions. She places the needed items in a small pile near the cutting boards.

Mrs. Meriwether joins me at the spell book. "It says to use one inch of water in the pot."

I put the pot under the faucet as Mrs. Meriwether reads on. "Jaxon, I need you to mince the sage as small as it will go." She hands him a knife and a bundle of dark green leaves.

He's not as fast as Mrs. Meriwether, but he's certainly skilled. I pause to watch him.

"I'll take the dill and coriander, if you want to start on the bachelor's buttons," she says.

"No problem." I grab the brilliant blue flowers and drop the petals into the water.

Elijah blinks in with the necklace. I push it into my pocket, and

mouth “thank you.”

I return to the spell book as Jaxon and Mrs. Meriwether dump ingredients into the pot. “Only the pansy petals left,” I say, grabbing the deep purple flower from the counter.

Then all I have to do is pour five drops into the person’s food or onto their skin for it to work. I’m sure that’s gonna go over smoothly. *Hey, Elijah’s fiancée, I know you hate me, but will you just hold still while I pour this liquid all over you?* Yup, should be a real breeze.

I look down at the bubbling leaves and carefully pull the petals off. As I drop them in, I clear my mind and repeat the words “Truth be known,” three times. When the last petal lands, the mixture takes on an iridescent sheen. I really hope that means it worked.

I pull the necklace out of my pocket.

Mrs. Meriwether approaches me. “Charlotte’s necklace...” She holds it gently.

Before I can ask her anything, sirens blare outside the window. A car bounces up my uneven brick driveway. Elijah blinks out, and Jaxon and Mrs. Meriwether go to the back door. I follow them.

Car doors slam. I can make out faint voices but can’t understand their words. Jaxon steps back inside. “Two officers headed for your door.” He searches my face for an answer.

My stomach churns. I put my hands on my forehead. Is it Lizzie’s doing or Elijah’s fiancée’s?

Worry lines wrinkle Jaxon’s brow. “I’ll check it out.”

“Come,” says Mrs. Meriwether, putting her arm around my shoulders. “Let’s go bottle that spell and start on the next one. No sense in biting our nails off waiting.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Plan or No Plan

The few minutes Jaxon's gone feel like ten years. I clench my hands and stare at my feet. The back door slams, and my body flies forward toward the sound. Jaxon's footsteps are quick in the hallway as he heads back to the kitchen.

The bad news is clear by the tension in his jaw. "It's the Descendants. They're missing."

"What?" I yell. I knew something was going to happen to Susannah, but I wasn't expecting this. What if I'm too late? "Which Descendants?"

"All four of them."

"I have to talk to those cops." I move toward the door.

"Sam." Jaxon grabs my arm. "You can't. They're looking for you. They think you're involved in their disappearance. Something about a threat you made in front of Susannah's mother. And then ranting on the street, talking to thin air." He gives me a knowing look.

Mrs. Meriwether speaks calmly as she separates the ingredients into piles. "Breathe. You need to focus. We must do the location spell."

She's right. I have to focus. I dart back to the spell book. "Jaxon, was

there anything the police knew?”

He shakes his head. “They didn’t say much.” There’s an edge in his voice. He’s looking at me more seriously than he did before.

Mrs. Meriwether hands Jaxon a few greens to chop.

Elijah blinks back in. “Susannah, Mary, Alice, and Lizzie went missing this afternoon according to the policeman’s notepad. They told their parents that they were going to Walgreens and would be back home in an hour.”

“Wait, I wasn’t supposed to meet them there until tonight. Why would they be there this afternoon?” Were they setting me up? Susannah wouldn’t do that, would she?

Elijah raises a knowing eyebrow at me. “I cannot say.”

“Maybe they got caught up in what they were doing and didn’t go home? Or they were too far in the woods and the cops couldn’t see them?” I would love to believe they aren’t gone.

Mrs. Meriwether and Jaxon watch me talk to Elijah.

“I searched,” Elijah tells me. “There is no sign of them other than Mary’s Jeep in the parking lot.”

“They’ve been missing for hours, then. Someone could already...” I don’t finish that thought, because I don’t want it to be true.

“The story of their disappearance has already begun to spread throughout the town. It is known that you are a main suspect. It is only a matter of time before the townspeople send out a search party for you.”

I picture them lining up outside my house, screaming and waving torches.

Elijah looks uncomfortable. “Samantha, it is most likely a trap.”

I pause. His fiancée has been messing with me all this time and I couldn’t predict a single move. In fact, the things I’ve done to try to solve the curse only gave her ammo to use against me. “You think she knows I’ll look for them?”

“I think she is counting on it. You were the only one there when John died. Then Lizzie accused you of murder at the assembly, and

Susannah's mother claims you threatened her daughter. If she makes it appear that you were the responsible party for the Descendants' disappearance, the consequences will be great. You will be formally accused."

"If I don't track her down, I run the risk of someone dying."

I can't even send the police. She'd probably punish me by killing them slowly.

Jaxon stops chopping. "I'm coming with you, Sam. To find her."

I shake my head. "No. It's not safe."

"So you think I should just let you go do this dangerous thing by yourself? I'm coming."

I clench my hands so tightly that my knuckles turn white. There's no way I'm bringing Jaxon with me. And now there's also no way I'm getting out of here without a fight.

Mrs. Meriwether interjects. "Dear, we can't hear Elijah. Does he have information?"

"He said they went missing hours ago. I tried to warn Susannah the other day about the curse and the danger she might be in and her mother heard. That's why the cops came looking for me. If the crow woman was planning to set me up, this would be one way to do it." I grab a bunch of chives.

I chop as fast as my untrained hands will go. What if Jaxon follows me out of here? He'd just be one more target for her. I dump the cut chives in the pot and return to the book, but I don't continue with the directions. Instead, I flip back a few pages to a sleep spell. This spell might be the last straw. He might never forgive me. But putting him in danger is worse.

I skim the directions. For potent long-lasting spells, a potion is required. But to temporarily disarm someone, a series of symbols can be written. Elijah hands me a piece of paper and I copy the elaborate symbols. *Just in case*, I tell myself. I hand the paper to Elijah. Mrs. Meriwether walks toward me, and I flip back to the location spell as fast as I can.

"Only the rosemary left, and you'll have to put that in," says

Mrs. Meriwether.

She grabs a handful from the basket. I move to the pot and close my eyes. I attempt to form the image of Susannah in my mind, but the vision that comes is of her hanging. I shake my head and try again.

Just her face. I just need to focus on her eyes and her hair. When I'm sure I can hold the image of her, I drop the rosemary into the pot. The green liquid sizzles, and I open my eyes. We all wait anxiously as black steam begins to form. No one breathes.

The steam rises slowly at first, then forms large puffs like exhaust from a coal-fueled train. It doesn't disperse like normal steam. Instead, it makes a cloud over the pot. We all lean forward.

Like the red drops did on the parchment, it twists and turns. The first shapes it makes are trees. I need something more specific. And why is it always those damn woods, anyway?

The trees part and branch out to form a path. At the end of the path, the black steam creates another shape—a house with broken windows. Any hope I had of the Descendants' disappearance being a mistake is extinguished like burning wood doused with water.

Jaxon is so much calmer than I am. "At least we know where that is."

Mrs. Meriwether grips her hands together.

That's the worst possible location—it's so isolated. "My fingerprints are in that house already." I grab the counter, hoping the solidness of the stone will steady me.

"We need to call the police," Jaxon says.

"No! You can't call the police. It'll put the Descendants at risk." I don't want them to suffer because I'm scared.

Mrs. Meriwether paces. "It's not a good idea, Samantha, to go to that house. We all need to think about this. I'm not sure that Jaxon's wrong."

They want to protect me, but I don't think they can. It's just a matter of time before Elijah's fiancée lures me in. I can't have more deaths on my head.

The doorbell rings and we all jump.

“Stay here, both of you,” says Mrs. Meriwether.

Jaxon’s eyes follow his mother with concern. I wish I could make this whole situation go away.

Elijah blinks in. “It is done. You should check on her.”

My heart thuds. I run toward the front door. Jaxon follows, close by my heels. When we get to the hallway, Mrs. Meriwether is braced against the wall, holding the piece of paper with the sleep spell in her hand.

“This was left on the stoop.” Mrs. Meriwether’s volume trails off at the end of her sentence, like it’s a real struggle for her to speak.

“Mom!” Jaxon takes one of her arms and I take the other.

“I’m okay. It’s just...” Mrs. Meriwether yawns as we bring her into the living room. “I’m just so...tired.”

We set her down on the couch. Jaxon shakes her, but her eyelids are heavy. He removes the spell from her hand and looks at it. I don’t stop him. He, too, falls back on the couch.

“Sam?” he says in confusion, his voice heavy with drowsiness.

Elijah stands by the fireplace.

I look from Jaxon to Mrs. Meriwether and feel horrible. “Jaxon, I’m so sorry.” I fight to steady my voice. “This is all my fault. I shouldn’t have involved you guys. I never wanted...”

They both blink without responding. The recognition of what I’ve done appears in Jaxon’s eyes. “You...” He starts the accusation but yawns instead of finishing it.

I breathe deeply and fight through my guilt. “Lay thee down and slumber take. A peaceful rest before thou wake.”

Their eyes close, and I’m not sure if I’m relieved or horrified. I grab the spell from Jaxon’s hand, tear it up, and throw it in the fireplace. The flames consume it.

“How long will they sleep?” I ask.

“Could be a few hours or a few days.”

Am I a bad person? “Come on. Let’s go. I don’t want this to be for

nothing.”

I take one final look at Jaxon sleeping on the couch and run to the kitchen. I snatch up the small bottle of the inside-out spell and pull the knot pendant off my grandmother’s necklace. No need to advertise my defense system. I drop the chain on the counter with a clang, and put the silver knot in my pocket.

I turn to Elijah. “Now we need a strategy. What can you tell me about her?”

Elijah’s face is full of worry. “In the many years I have spent thinking about what happened, I have come to realize that control was the most important thing to her.”

I focus all my attention on his words. I *need* this information.

“The one thing she could not control was my affection for my sister. I believe that was the reason she set out to ruin her. What she did not count on was that I did not care if the whole world turned against Abigail. Even if Abigail were the witch ringleader, I would have loved her the same. In fact, it only made me protect her more. It was the job I had dedicated my life to.”

“She must’ve been furious when she saw that she couldn’t come between you.”

He nods. “When I stayed by Abigail’s side, she doubled her efforts. And when Abigail did pass, my fiancée momentarily got what she wanted. I went to her for comfort. She became the only person of consequence in my world.”

So that’s what she was after. She didn’t want to share him with anyone, even his sister.

“She almost succeeded in convincing me that it was a foolish accident that got out of control. Her lies were well spoken and calculating. But I could see in her eyes that she was secretly delighted Abigail was gone. I knew in that moment I could never be near her again.” Elijah’s eyes brim with pain.

I can’t imagine the weight of that betrayal. And to know that he was the one who told her about Abigail’s singing and her secret love in the first place. What a heavy guilt to carry around. And all these hundreds

of years, he hasn't been able to escape it.

"Understand, Samantha, that if you take away her sense of control, you may be able to stop her. I believe it is the only way."

Elijah's strategy seems useful but super difficult to carry out. I'll have to do something big, something to take her by surprise. And more than that, it needs to be clever. "Is it enough to expose her as a fraud and get her to admit to her lies? One person knowing that the witch accusers were lying wouldn't have made a difference."

"The public has to know in order for the perception to shift."

"That house is in the middle of the woods. There's no way to make it public. Plus, I just knocked out the people who would believe me."

"Indeed."

Great, so I have to expose her publicly, but I also have to go to that house alone. "I hope there's a way I can convince her all by myself to stop what she's doing."

To my surprise, he reaches out for me, pulling me into his body. "I will be there with you," he says gently, his face bent down toward mine. I press into him, wanting to soak in the feeling of his arms holding me for even this brief moment. "I will do everything and anything to keep you safe." He flickers slightly.

"What was that?"

"Samantha?" Elijah's voice is strangely faint. He flickers again. The counter behind him becomes visible through his body.

My hold on him weakens. I grab at the air, but it doesn't make a difference. He only fades faster. Elijah opens his mouth, but no sound comes out. He's barely visible anymore. Then all at once, he's gone.

"No!" I scream.

I scan the room for an answer, but no one's there, and everything's still. It was *her*—I just know it. I run for the front door. Plan or no plan, I'm going to get Elijah back.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Stunning and Vicious

I stop to slow my heart rate and examine the imposing trees before taking my first step into the pitch-dark woods. I never thought I'd come here alone.

I pull my cell phone from my hoodie and scroll through the icons until I land on the flashlight. I shine my phone at the forest floor. With each step into the darkness, the damp scent of fallen leaves gets stronger. I keep my eyes trained on the ground to avoid the full view of my surroundings.

A branch smacks me in the face. I touch my stinging cheek. The skin's raised, and I feel a few droplets of blood. My dream comes rushing back like a slap to the head. *In the dream where I scratched my cheek, I saw...a noose and a crow.* Sweat forms on my palms. Cotton knew this was going to happen.

I point the light in front of me again and force myself through the trees. What does it mean that he knew? That it's fated to happen? If it's fated, how can I stop it? I could just be playing into the pattern, contributing to another century of deaths.

Ahead of me a light flickers. *The house.* I crouch down and cover my phone with my hand. I'm about to shut it off when I notice the camera

icon. I press the video option, and my shoes, surrounded by dark leaves, appear on the screen. I pull out Bradbury's business card from when he questioned me and snap off my phone case. I tuck the card against the back of my phone before putting the case back on. My conversation with Elijah about public opinion plays in my thoughts.

"Even if I don't make it through this, I hope that someone finds this video and knows that I tried to stop her. And that I tried to save them," I whisper at my phone.

I creep toward the light and stop twenty feet from the house. The shadows on the black, decrepit walls look alive in the moonlight. I study a jagged window for clues of what awaits, but it's covered with vines.

I step forward and crunch a twig. Panic stabs me, and for a brief second, I hold my breath and listen to the rustling wind. If I don't do this quickly, I'll lose my nerve.

I run to the front door and fling it open with a bang. As my feet hit the old wooden floorboards, I take in the large room. It's not empty anymore. There's a single stool in the center and a large wooden table covered with jars, candles, and bowls to the right. The fireplace blazes. Near the left wall are four more stools—standing on them are Mary, Alice, Susannah, and Lizzie, nooses around their necks.

Their eyes are closed as though they're asleep. Is this a trick? There's no sign of Elijah's fiancée. *Don't you dare fall before I can get you down.* High heels click in the nearby hallway.

I stop so abruptly, it's as though I slammed into an invisible wall. A familiar wavy-haired shadow appears on the floor. "Vivian?"

She steps gracefully into the room, wearing a dark blue dress and a cloak, as though nothing's awry. I shake my head at her, trying to will her to disappear. Her body language suggests that she's in perfect control, the way it always does. In control...I gag. *No, I don't accept this. I don't want to know this.*

I stand frozen, feeling like someone sucker-punched me in the gut. *I know you; I live with you. You're supposed to be some awful stranger.*

“We were never people to indulge in our emotions. Why start now?” She moves toward the table strewn with spell ingredients, and her dress swooshes behind her.

I stare at the Descendants and bite my lip hard in an effort to stop the overwhelming sadness that threatens to come. There’s no good way to get all four down at once.

Vivian turns to face me. “If you try to help them, you’ll regret it.” The door slams.

I don’t look at her. Maybe I can drag that other stool over and slip the ropes off their necks. I take a step toward them. The stools start rattling and the girls’ feet vibrate on top of them.

“No!” I yell, looking straight at her now. Vivian was never one to make idle threats. I back away, and the stools stop shaking. *Vivian is Elijah’s fiancée. Vivian knows witchcraft. Vivian isn’t Vivian.* The idea could choke me. Why did Elijah never recognize her? And where is he? Did she do something to him?

Vivian sorts spell ingredients with the self-assurance that comes through practice.

As I watch her here, in what is clearly her element, my mind struggles to make sense of this. What does it mean for my entire childhood? What does it mean for the time we’ve been in Salem? “Did you cause that rash?”

She nods.

“And you killed John?”

She stops breaking apart dried leaves. “Obviously.”

“Now what? You’ll kill these girls and make it my fault, too?” I can’t hide the hurt in my voice.

“‘Hang’ would be more accurate. And that’s up to you.”

I dig my nails into my hand to keep myself from having a breakdown. “I thought Elijah would be here.”

She pauses.

I want to hurt her. I want her to feel just a fraction of what I’m feeling. “Oh, wait. He killed himself to get away from you.”

Anger flashes in her eyes. She moves away from her herbs and grabs my chin with her hand. Her nails dig into my face so hard, I'm sure she'll break the skin. "I warned you once—you don't want me for an enemy."

I set my jaw and stare back at her. She releases me with a push, and I land on the floor.

"This is a business arrangement, Sam. Don't cry. Don't beg. Don't instigate. If need be, I'll mute you."

I stand, and rub my jaw where her hand was.

Vivian examines the sleeping Descendants. "I'm going to give you a choice." Vivian wiggles her fingers, and the stools begin to dance, one after the other.

The girls open their eyes. Confusion, then panic, washes over them as they realize they have nooses around their necks. They desperately try to steady themselves. Mary screams.

Vivian looks at me pointedly. "Which one should we hang?"

The word "we" makes me sick. I look at Lizzie and immediately feel guilty about it. Alice locks eyes with me, her fear quickly turning to accusation. When we did the clarity spell, their ancestors were telling me about their hangings. Cotton didn't stand up for them. If I have any hope of breaking this chain of accusation and hanging, I have to change that. "Me," I whisper, and the word sticks. "I choose me."

Susannah shakes her head. "Samantha, don't."

Vivian's expression goes dark. "You would hang for someone who threw a rock through your window with DIE written on it?"

This catches me off guard. So it *was* Lizzie. And Vivian knew?

"Of course, she's been punished," Vivian says, and by the way she flaunts those words I know I'm not the only one meant to hear them.

Lizzie's eyes widen. "Punished? Throwing a rock does not equal killing my cousin and paralyzing my brother!" There's a hysterical edge to her voice. What did Vivian say or do to these girls before I got here?

Vivian flicks her wrist, and Lizzie bends forward in pain. Her footing

becomes wobbly as she strains against the rope. In a few seconds, she will slip from the stool. My stomach turns.

“Stop! I choose me! Please stop!”

The stools settle abruptly. “Fine, Sam. If you want to hang, then that is exactly what you’ll get.” Her voice is angry. *I don’t understand this at all. What is she after?*

I face Vivian. “That rock wasn’t even directed at you.”

“Indirectly, it was.”

Mary sobs, and Vivian wrinkles her nose. “Continue to make that sound, and I’ll tear your vocal cords out.” Mary’s cheeks pale and her mouth closes.

I make eye contact with a fuming Alice, and Vivian returns to her spell ingredients. I can’t bear to look at Susannah. Vivian knows I’ve been spending time with these girls, and now she’s manipulating me with them.

Vivian lifts a cloth-wrapped book off the table. She unwraps it like it has great value. It’s an old leather-bound journal. When she puts it down, I can just make out the feather on the cover.

“When you bring someone back to life, Sam, you need a personal item of theirs.”

My eyes fix on the journal. Elijah told me they had a matching set. *I thought this was about revenge. This is about bringing him back to life? Did she lure me here to be part of her spell?* The moment I think it, the horrifying truth sets in. She didn’t drag me by my hair because she must need a willing participant. It’s the only way baiting me with the Descendants makes sense.

“This is why we moved to Salem,” I say quietly. Everything I knew about my world is crashing down around me.

She opens a jar of black powder and pinches some with her fingers. “Don’t convince yourself this is personal. This spell took lifetimes to perfect, and you just happen to be the one here for it.”

No one spends years spinning a false relationship if any schmo off the street would do. This is about me specifically. But why? Because I’m a Mather? If I’m the key to bringing Elijah back to life, I could also

be the key to unraveling her plan. “How did you figure out the spell?”

For a split second she looks up at me with curiosity, like I’ve said something right. She places a few dried herbs into a worn wooden bowl. “I first succeeded by reversing the death of a crow back in the seventeen hundreds. I didn’t know then that breaking the barrier of death would give me such a great reward—my eternal life.”

It’s as though she were explaining the latest fashion. The familiarity of her voice stabs at my thinning composure. “Why didn’t you bring him back to life, then?”

“I tried.” She stops her mixing.

I move closer to the table to inspect the journal.

She sighs. “It took me centuries to figure out that the reason I could bring that bird back to life was because I was the cause of its death.”

But she was the cause of Elijah’s death, too, at least indirectly. There’s something I’m missing. She watches me, waiting for me to figure it out. The Descendants watch me, too.

She lifts a small knife. “Give me your right hand.”

I stick my hands in my hoodie pockets and shake my head.

She raises an eyebrow. “Do you imagine for a moment that I won’t make you?”

I reluctantly take my right hand out. My left grips the pendant.

Vivian places my hand over a small bowl. “Repeat these words: ‘I give my blood. I welcome the knife. The soul I took, I call to life.’”

I know I shouldn’t. My gut screams at me not to. But if I refuse, she will kill the Descendants. I don’t doubt that. I repeat the spell. Vivian pulls the knife easily over my palm. The blade slices into my skin, and I choke back a whimper. My blood flows in a steady stream into her bowl.

“Do you know what the cause of Elijah’s death was?” she asks.

I force myself to think through the pain. If Vivian wasn’t the direct cause, then it was the town, it was...“The Trials?” I ask through clenched teeth.

She smiles.

She and Cotton couldn't have started the Trials without each other. That's why she needs a descendant from Cotton Mather to bring him back. And I just said the words that confirmed my part in her spell. The room spins, and I look away from my hand.

Why me instead of some other Mather?

All the blood drains from my face. I bet she tried other Mathers but it didn't work. Maybe even my grandmother. The past clicks into place at a sickening speed. She dated my dad to build trust. When she figured out he wouldn't willingly return to Salem, she put him in a coma. Then I came here willingly. To Salem, to this house in the woods. I offered myself in the place of the Descendants.

She drops my hand, and I pull it to my body, trying to stop the bleeding and trying to shield myself from the intensity of the betrayal. My bottom lip trembles and I bite it. I can't get lost in my feelings right now or I won't be able to think clearly. I need to do something she won't expect. I steal a glance at the journal.

Vivian picks up a jar of red powder and walks toward the center of the room. I pull out the protection knot, hiding it in my fist. She opens the jar and starts slowly pouring the powder out to form a large circle on the floor around the stool. A noose hangs above it.

I wait until her back is turned and slip my hand behind me to find the edge of the book on the table. I attempt to push the pendant under the leather cover of Elijah's journal, but it's difficult to do with one hand. Any second, I'll be in her line of vision again.

"You put the nooses in my uncle's store, didn't you?" Alice asks.

Vivian glances toward the girls just as I get the pendant securely in place. *Thank you, Alice.* I yank my hand away from the journal. With a look, Mary sends a silent, terrified plea for Alice not to antagonize Vivian.

Vivian puts down the powder and takes a step toward the girls. "I thought I made it clear—"

I know that tone. I can't let her hurt them. "What if I tell you I changed my mind about being part of your spell?" I reach for the bowl she put my blood in.

She turns back in my direction. Her eyes are dangerous. I don't break eye contact.

She approaches me so fast, it's as though she flies across the floor. She grabs my cut, outstretched hand and squeezes it. "Then I'd tell you that I can always torture your father until you agree again."

Her nails dig deeper into my open wound, sending shooting pains up my arm. My knees get weak. "Okay. I agree." She doesn't let go. "I agree!"

She releases my cut hand. "I had a suspicion you might feel that way."

She's too angry. What am I missing here? I nurse my bleeding palm. She eyes me for a second before she returns to forming her circle. I hope like hell the protection knot buys me a little time.

Vivian mutters in a language I don't recognize. The air shifts around her, and her clothes move as though she's caught in a strong wind. Her hair darkens and grows. Her face becomes younger, eighteen maybe. Her blue eyes turn light brown, and they tilt at the corners. She shrinks until she's shorter than I am, and her curves soften, giving her a much slighter frame. She almost appears dainty. *Ann.*

She shakes her arms and looks at me. I believe she interprets my shock as approval, because she wears a smug expression. She runs her hands through her waist-length waves. She's stunning and vicious. No wonder Elijah fell in love with her.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

The Witch of Salem

The transformed Vivian kicks off her high heels, and her cloak slips to the floor. She stretches like a cat. “Much more comfortable.” Even her voice is different.

The Descendants are having the same stunned reaction that I am. Mary’s mouth is agape.

Vivian walks around the stool and circle, chanting the words of a spell with new confidence. The air flickers in the circle. *Elijah!* I move toward him as he materializes.

He looks from her to me. His eyes fill with dread. “Samantha, you are bleeding.”

“Elijah...” I take another step toward him.

She lets out a sigh of relief when I say his name. “See, that’s one thing I could never do. I can’t see spirits...but you can.”

Elijah tries to step out of the circle, but he can’t cross the line. He struggles against it. *He’s trapped.*

“And if you can’t see them, you can’t do spells on them. You must know where a spirit is in order for it to work.” She says this part slowly and deliberately.

So I'm the Mather she chose because I can see spirits? My tiny happiness from knowing that Elijah's okay disappears. She heard me talking to him in the foyer. She even invited me out for a celebratory dinner. *It's my fault.*

Vivian faces the circle. She fidgets in a way I've never seen before, like a nervous girl. "I *am* sorry I kept you in limbo for so long, my little bird. I hope you'll forgive me."

Elijah's face stiffens. She glides back to the table.

I walk toward him. "I'm so sorry," I whisper.

"It should be me apologizing to you," he replies, and his eyes contain a deep sadness.

I reach my hand out, and it passes easily through the circle's invisible boundary. *It must only trap spirits.* My fingers touch his.

"Give me your hands," Vivian commands from behind me.

I glance over my shoulder; she holds a slender rope. *Not good.*

"Run, Samantha. Get out of here," Elijah pleads.

He doesn't understand. I mouth the words "I can't."

Vivian touches my back and pain slides down my legs. I scream and pull away from her.

"Hands!" she repeats.

This time, I listen. She yanks at the rope as she wraps it around my wrists, tying my hands behind my back. The rope's pressure makes my palm bleed less, and the warm liquid stops running down my fingers.

"Get on the stool." Her eyes linger on the circle before she walks back to the table.

My heart pounds so hard that I fear it'll break free of my chest. I step into the circle and onto the first rung of the stool, trying to balance without my hands. Vivian bends down behind the table and grabs the edge of an old gray wool blanket. Elijah helps me steady myself.

"Left pocket," I whisper to him as Vivian drags the blanket toward the circle.

He pulls the small potion bottle out of my hoodie. I lift my right foot

onto the top of the stool, and he supports me as I take the final step.

Vivian turns to face us. She mumbles something, and the noose slips itself over my head. The rope is rough against my neck. My hair sticks to my sweaty face and I spit it out of my mouth. I look at the lumpy blanket, and my stomach churns.

“Turn fully toward her,” Elijah says. “Do not let her see your hands.”

I adjust myself so that my arms are hidden. Only Elijah and the Descendants can see them.

“I will catch you,” Elijah says.

I swallow. Hanging is one of the worst things I can imagine.

She stirs her large bowl as Elijah loosens the rope around my wrists. Not so much that it comes off, but enough so I can slip it off. He places the inside-out potion bottle in my uncut hand.

She takes one final look at me, challenging me to change my mind. I no longer have to imagine how those people in the Witch Trials felt looking down at their friends who had accused them. People they had known their entire lives. “How could you?” I ask, and my voice wavers.

She flicks her fingers, and the stool flies backward and out of the circle. My body drops downward at a dizzying speed, and the rope scrapes against my neck, burning my skin. Elijah’s arms wrap around my thighs before my full weight hangs from the noose. I cough and sputter.

“Relax, Samantha, or you will not be able to breathe! If I lift you any higher, she will know I am supporting you and she will hurt you. Please, stop fighting. Please!”

I gasp for breath, but it comes out as more of a wheeze.

“Samantha!” Susannah’s voice yells from behind me.

Vivian stares at the blanket and begins to chant. “Life and death a circle make. What’s alive must wither, and what’s dead shall wake.” Elijah flickers. His grip loosens ever so slightly, and the rope tightens around my neck.

She repeats her words. The third time, I actually understand them. *Reverse life and death? Wait.* Does that mean the spell might work on

her, too? If I can get my hands on it, I can use it against her.

She cuts her own finger and lets her blood mix with mine. Then she pours our blood into the larger bowl with the rest of the potion. Elijah flickers more dramatically.

“I fear that I cannot hold you much longer,” he says, straining.

The wool blanket starts vibrating next to us, and then its corners fly open. From inside it, a skeleton sits straight up. I want to close my eyes, but they refuse to do anything other than watch the whole horrible thing play out. I gag and the rope cuts into my skin. There are gasps of surprise from the Descendants, behind me.

“How dare you!” Elijah says.

The skeleton moves toward Elijah as though Vivian’s controlling it with strings. It fits itself into his body and wraps around me where his arms are supporting my weight. Vivian’s smile vanishes when she realizes where Elijah actually is. Her nails gouge the table.

There’s no time left. I slip the rope off my wrists, and the fibers prick my open cut. I pop the top off the tiny bottle containing the inside-out spell.

Vivian lifts the bowl of potion she’s been mixing over Elijah’s journal. She allows three drops to fall on the leather. Nothing happens.

“Now,” I whisper, and drop the rope. Elijah and his skeleton lift my head out of the noose.

She puts down the bowl and stares at the journal like it betrayed her. I’m on the floor in one swift movement and running toward her with the bottle of potion. She lifts the journal cover, and the protection knot falls out. Her mouth opens.

“You!” she shrieks, throwing her hand in the air and making a fist.

Whatever spell she’s using makes my heart tighten and burn like it’s being ripped out of my chest. I scream and force myself to keep moving through the intense pain.

“You’ll suffer before you die!” she yells.

It takes every molecule of my will to lunge forward and fling the open bottle at her. My movements are jerky, and the bottle spins in the

air, spraying us both. She gasps as the potion hits her skin, and she drops her hand. The pain in my chest subsides. I suck air into my aching lungs.

She mutters spells at a dizzying rate as her hair turns white and her skin wrinkles. In a matter of seconds, the inside-out spell strips the youth from her entirely. She becomes a seventy-year-old version of herself. I focus on her spell bowl. I'm at the table in two strides. I reach for it, but she's faster and pulls it away.

"No!" I yell, searching for something to use against her. I grab the protection knot and Elijah's journal in one hand. And in my other, I take a lit candle. I hold it near the journal so that the flames almost touch the old pages. It all happens so fast that for a couple of seconds there's complete silence while we assess each other.

One of her hands makes circular movements over her face. Streaks of brown return to her hair, and her skin is younger in places. But the transformation's only partial, like our spells are fighting each other.

"I had no idea you could make a spell like this," she says. "I guess I have those nitwits to thank." She looks confused. One of her partially wrinkled hands flies to cover her mouth. "Why did I say that? What is this? What did you do to me?" Her voice is muffled through her fingers.

"What did *I* do to *you*? You're my goddamn stepmother and you want to hang me!" It feels worse saying it out loud, as though it makes it more real somehow. I try to focus on the fact that she doesn't look like my Vivian. Some part of me wants to believe she isn't.

We face each other from opposite sides of the table, her with the potion, and me with the journal and the candle. We both have something the other wants.

Her eyes are piercing and defiant. For the first time since the physical transformation, she reminds me of my Vivian. "And you want to kill me with my own spell."

The truth of her words stuns me. "Yes, I do. Oh, holy hell. Why did I say that out loud? No! The truth serum's messing with me, too."

"You will give me that journal one way or the other." She points a

finger at me, and my arm holding the journal moves toward her.

I clench the protection knot and focus. “Not if I can use this protection knot.” I pull backward and bring my hand to a stop. “This spell blows. It’s supposed to tell me your plans, not have me tell you mine.”

The room’s silent. Not even the Descendants make a noise. I glance at them. “Lined up in a row, you remind me of the group hangings at the Trials. Wait.” I shift my focus back to Vivian. “You brought four of them. Why not one or two?” I bite my tongue to stop from talking. I realize I’ve overlooked something. “You’ve been the one killing them for centuries, haven’t you? Just like you did in the sixteen hundreds.”

“Yes.”

“Why?” I blurt out. “They were the victims.”

“They all need to go. The Trials killed my Elijah. I’m erasing them.” She stamps her bare foot and mumbles under her breath.

My thoughts tumble over each other and out my mouth. “The pattern of deaths. You try to kill us all every time you think you’ve perfected the spell to bring him back, don’t you? Maybe it’s even part of the spell. No wonder all my relatives are dead. But how did you know Elijah would be in Salem?” I ask, half angry with her and half with myself for not being able to shut up.

“The moment you found Abigail’s letters I knew he would come back to chase you off.”

My eyes widen. “You were using me as bait.”

She grinds her teeth together in frustration. “I knew that if I threw those clothes out of your armoire, you would eventually find the letters. I also knew he would hate you for being a Mather. A dark shadow staying in his sister’s old room.”

“It worked. He did hate me.” I narrow my eyes, an expression I learned from her. “But he also hates you.”

She screams low in her throat. “Enough!” She points a finger at me. “Burn!” The flame from the candle redirects itself toward my body.

It singes my cut hand and I lose my grip on the candle. It falls to the floor, putting itself out. I pull the journal toward my chest.

“The knife!” yells Alice. I scan the table, looking for it.

I glance at Vivian, but she doesn’t advance. Instead, she reaches her hand out and Alice’s body starts twitching. Alice screams in agony. Her knees buckle under her.

“She’s going to fall! Stop!” I yell at Vivian. I abandon the idea of the knife and run to Alice, whose back arches unnaturally. I slip the protection knot into her boot. Slowly her body relaxes and she regains her balance, but the look of horror remains in her eyes.

“You continue to choose them over me!” Vivian says behind me.

What does she mean? Before I can turn around, my neck tilts backward. My body flies to the ground and slams down so hard that all the wind whooshes out of my lungs. I gasp for air as my body slides across the wooden boards. A spell pulls me by my hair toward her. I brace the journal with one hand and my other hand clenches my hair.

I come to a stop and my head smacks into the ground. My waist is exactly on the circle line, pain radiating down my neck and along my spine. I attempt to stand but can’t. It’s as though I’m stapled to the floor.

Elijah bends down and brushes the hair back from my sticky face. His eyes are demanding. “You cannot stay in this circle or she will kill you. I told you once you are powerful. You need to focus.”

Tears blur my vision. I don’t know what he thinks I can do—I just barely learned how to cast a spell a few hours ago. I try to lift my head, but it’s no use. I’m not changing things or bringing peace, like he thinks I am. *And I’m not more powerful than she is.* “I gave Alice my protection knot.” My voice is raspy from hanging. He flickers.

Vivian carries the bowl of potion. Her bottom lip quivers as she watches him sitting next to me. “You think she’s innocent? Well, she’s not! We’re alike, she and I. We both kill to get what we want!” Her eyes are wild.

We’re alike. Her words ring in my ears—*We both kill to get what we want.* How am I better than Cotton? I tried to kill her.

“I vowed never to speak to you again,” Elijah says to her, struggling to talk while under her spell. “Do you know why?”

She leans close to him, as though she can only barely make out his words.

“Everything beautiful in you died centuries ago,” he continues. “Now you live to crush and abuse. How many people have you killed? All the spells in the world cannot make you beautiful again.”

She stiffens. “I’m doing this all for you.”

He shakes his head. “No, you are doing this to control me. I will give you a chance now to do the right thing. The only one I will ever give you. If you stop hurting these girls, I will stay here with you and do as you want. But if you continue, and you harm Samantha further, I will do more than despise you. I will forget you entirely.”

She pauses. “That’s the problem, Elijah. You can’t do what I want.” Her voice wavers. “You look at her the way you once looked at me. You love this girl.”

Heat seeps into my battered cheeks. She grips the bowl of potion until her knuckles turn white, waiting for Elijah to deny it. A tear runs down her cheek. She steps toward me. More of her hair turns brown, and her skin gets younger. My spell’s wearing off. She holds the bowl above the journal on my chest and spills a few drops onto it.

Some of my life force is yanked out of my chest. My mouth opens, and I wheeze. Elijah flickers violently. The blood she poured on the journal lifts into the air and swirls around him, attaching itself to his skeleton. He falls to the floor, his head near mine. He grabs on to his arm where the blood is forming veins and grits his teeth.

“I will make you remember how you once felt about me,” Vivian says through her tears. “I will erase her from your memory.”

“You cannot cover truth with lies,” he says, his voice pained. He tries to stand, but his new body won’t support him.

She makes sure she has my attention and points at Alice. The pendant I put in her boot flies out and onto the floor, rendering it useless. “I’m sick of your protection spells. How will you protect your father when you’re dead?”

Protection spell on my dad? I never put a spell on my dad. Did I? Elijah tries to say something, but his voice is too strained.

“I always wondered if it was my fault. If the spell I killed your mother with somehow gave you these abilities.” She pours a couple more drops of the potion on the journal.

My mother. My heartbeat slows. I barely have the energy to resist. My life is slipping away.

“But when you’re gone, I’ll make sure Charles suffers.”

“No!” I scream.

An awful expression takes over her face. “When the police find you here, all evidence will point to you. I’ll explain to your father how you lost your mind, how you killed these girls and took your own life. Before he dies, he’ll think you’re a monster.”

She’s going to take everything from me. Vivian curls her hand into a claw, and the Descendants squirm with pain.

“Please stop,” Mary pleads.

Susannah whimpers. Above my head the noose dangles like in my visions. All my visions are coming true. I cut my cheek, Susannah will hang, and Vivian is the crow. Standing up for the Descendants wasn’t enough. And if I give up now, I’m no better than any of the Salem townspeople back in the sixteen hundreds. *No. I refuse to die like this.*

Determination pulses through me and I push against her spell to lift myself off the floor. My veins bulge. I concentrate on my neck and head, pulling them with all my might. They lift an inch. Then another inch. Elijah’s journal falls off my chest and onto the floor.

She watches me, genuinely confused. “Why is your face doing that? Who’s helping you?” Her words are fast and jumbled.

I push again, harder. It’s like the strings that make up her spell and secure me to the ground are snapping. I sit up. She drops her hand and lifts the bowl. I fling the journal out of the circle before another drop hits it. It slides near the fireplace.

Her eyes widen. “Cotton!”

She sees Cotton when she looks at me? I force myself out of the circle and immediately feel stronger. I run for the journal. She mutters a few words and my knees give out, hitting the floor with a bang.

“No,” I say definitively, and use my hands to force myself back into a standing position.

The journal lifts into the air. I grab it as it whizzes past my head. It tugs against my hands, but I maintain my grip. She shrieks behind me, and her feet pound against the wood floor. I run for the fireplace.

I take only two strides before her nails scrape down my neck and pull at my shirt, choking my already sore throat. I throw the journal toward the fire, and it lands on one of the burning logs. We fall to the ground, her weight on my back. As my chin smacks onto the floorboards, the edges of the old pages catch fire. The taste of blood fills my mouth.

She pushes herself up, using my body as leverage to propel herself forward. I grab her dress and she comes toppling down again. She tries to stand, but I jump on her. I get one knee on either side of her waist and use her neck to smack her head into the floor.

She spits out a spell. Hot pain runs up my arms like they are being dipped in boiling water, and I lose my grip. Her hands shove me backward and I hit the floor. She moves toward the journal again, pulls it out of the logs, and tries to pat out the flames with her hands. But it's already fully alight, and burn marks appear on her palms.

I jump to my feet as the pain in my arms subsides. She frantically chants spells at the journal. I grab a heavy iron forked poker from an old set of fireplace tools and swing it. It connects with her head and she falls backward with a loud thud. A trickle of blood runs down her forehead.

I step over her, and her eyes meet mine. She brings her palm to her head and looks at the blood on her fingers. I lift the forked tool to hit her again.

“Cotton,” she says once more, only with less force this time.

I freeze. The poker hangs above her in midair, ready to strike. *What did she say before?* We're alike, both killing to get what we want. My big plan turned out to be hunting and killing a witch. Beating her with a pitchfork. I thought I was breaking the pattern of the Trials, and here I am repeating it. And like Cotton three hundred years ago, I believe

I'm eliminating evil.

A small smile forms on Vivian's lips.

"Hit her!" demands Lizzie.

I'm not Lizzie. I can't kill her. And if I do, I'll be continuing the curse. The poker lifts in the air, but it's not me doing it. Cotton stirs inside of me. *Maybe that inside-out spell had more consequences than I realized.*

"No," I say to myself as Cotton makes my arm take aim.

Vivian looks like she's won something. Susannah's stool flies out from under her. She drops. The rope makes a horrible snapping sound as it straightens and the beam creaks under her weight.

"Put this down!" I yell at Cotton as Susannah chokes. "I need to help her!" My legs won't move—Cotton and I are fighting for control over them.

"She has been killing our family for centuries—we must put an end to this," I say in a voice I don't recognize. It's a hybrid of Cotton and me, like we're both speaking at the same time.

"Sam, help her, please." Mary's voice is so thick with sobs it's hard to understand her. Mary's stool drops. *Snap, creak.*

Fear and helplessness swirl around me like a black fog as I watch Susannah and Mary hang. I fight my own body, but it won't budge. "They're going to die!" I plead with Cotton.

"Then stop this woman," he answers with my mouth.

Vivian's eyes sparkle with interest.

"You're not letting me," I say with such heaviness that I almost give way to my grief. "Don't you get it? She wants me to repeat the Trials. Prove that I'm like you."

"They can't breathe, Sam." Alice's voice is surprisingly even. She's inching her stool toward Susannah so that Susannah can get her leg onto it. She's actually *doing* something. That is, until her stool flies out from under her. *Snap, scream.*

Vivian gloats and lifts her head off the ground. Blood drips into her brown waves.

“Kill her, Sam!” Lizzie shrieks. “She hurt my brother and your father. My *brother*, the one person I could rely on!” Her voice wavers as her deep sadness falls out of her like water from a broken vase.

Vivian shrugs, and Lizzie’s stool drops, too. *Snap*.

Four girls hanging, the deaths of countless others, and my dad’s safety all hovering before me like a rainstorm in the distance.

“I *will* save them,” I say to Vivian, searching myself for every ounce of courage to follow through on my words.

Susannah rotates toward me on her rope, her hair falling into her face. Tears stream down her bright red cheeks. *You believed in me, Susannah. Elijah believed in me.* I close my eyes and tears seep through my eyelashes.

When I open my eyes again, I concentrate on the wood beam that holds the ropes. *I need to break it.* It’s the only way to get them all down at once. I stand a little straighter, fighting my urge to give in to the blinding panic and the gasps of suffocation that fill the room. I picture breaking the beam in the center, splintering the wood. I throw all my terror and frustration at it, punching it with my mind. I gather every ounce of strength I have left and direct it at that old piece of wood. There’s a small creak. My heart makes one deafening thud. *Is it working?*

Vivian turns toward the Descendants, then looks at me like a cat looks at a mouse. I push harder, faster. I hit the beam with my thoughts. There’s a cracking sound, like the beam is holding too much weight. It buckles downward a bit. A force flings me backward a few feet.

Vivian stands. “I guess you *are* my daughter in some ways.”

Her words tear at my most inner self. I use my grief to direct my energy more aggressively. There’s a loud splintering sound, and the girls tumble to the ground gasping and coughing.

Vivian frowns.

I stare at her with more confidence. “It was Cotton’s fault he didn’t stop you three centuries ago. And I won’t make that mistake again. But I won’t do it by killing you,” I say with our hybrid voice, and I can feel

Cotton considering my words.

She twists her fingers, and it's as though a thousand needles are pricking me over and over. I want to tear my own skin off.

"Kill me? I was just a girl. He went off and had a life, wrote books about it. I had no life. Everything I had was taken from me." Her words feel raw and new, like she never wanted to admit them.

I fight to keep my thoughts clear with Cotton in my head. "That power and importance you thought you had by hanging witches was a delusion. You weren't rooting out evil. You and Cotton were misguided bullies, crushing the dreams and the lives of the people around you." As I speak, Cotton stops fighting me. He loosens his grip on my body and the stiffness slips away.

"After everything I've done for you...You have no loyalty!"

Everything she's done for me? That's how she sees it? To my surprise, it's Cotton who answers her. "I'm truly sorry for all of your pain. But I'm not the cause of it anymore. You are." Now it's me considering his words.

A high-pitched noise comes from her throat, and the forked poker lifts into the air above my head. I reach my hand toward it. It stops mid-swing. We stare at each other, both struggling to control the tool, both determined.

"Look at us. We're all trapped together, making the same mistakes over and over. You were right; we're not that different. I'm not good the way I once imagined. And you're not purely evil." For the first time, Cotton and I answer together.

The poker falls with a clang. She throws an arm in the direction of the Descendants, still bound and struggling to catch their breath on the ground. "They took your hair, and I sent them a warning with those pastries. They wrote *PSYCHO* on your locker, threw a rock through your window, and turned the damn town against you. So I gave them a rash. I showed them there were consequences."

What is she saying? Is she trying to tell me she did these awful things because of me? "You killed people."

"I was the *only* one defending you! I gave you the choice not to die,

to help me. To kill them instead. And after everything I've done for you, you still turn on me. No one ever chooses me. Not you, not Charles, not Elijah!"

This is about her being chosen? My heart thumps. It's just like when she killed Abigail. She couldn't handle not having the top spot in Elijah's life. Everything spins. She lunges for me, knocking me backward. We hit the floor hard, her weight on my chest. My back screams in pain from the impact. I grab her wrists before her nails make it to my face. She struggles to get out of my grasp but doesn't seem to have the energy. Her face contorts and her body heaves in exhaustion.

She turns her head toward Elijah. "I have nothing anymore. I have no one." Tears mix with the blood on her face.

I've never seen weakness from Vivian, or any sign of vulnerability. I don't know how to process it.

"You took the last person who cared about me," she says with the weight of three-hundred-year-old longing. She elbows me in the ribs, her wrists still in my hands.

I grunt from the blow, and my aching body begs for the struggle to finish.

"Ann...nothing is going to change unless you make different choices," Elijah says, using her real name.

She whimpers and her face collapses on my chest. Her breathing is heavy and her shoulders shake lightly. I lie still, unsure what to do. I let go of her wrists. Her fingers curl into my hoodie next to her cheeks. She makes no effort to lift her face as she cries into my bloody shirt.

My skin tingles, and the air around me stirs. Cotton's arms lift out of my own and he pulls himself from my body until he stands, looking down at us. His clothes are antiquated, like in my visions of him, and his posture is straight. There's pride showing in the lines of his face that reminds me of my dad.

Vivian doesn't seem to notice but instead pushes brown waves back from her damp cheeks. Something deeply hidden in me stirs, like a small candle at the end of a long hallway, and I bite my lip. I wrap my

arms around her. *She's so small.* All this time, I thought she was the big one with all the power. I had no idea how breakable she was.

My own chest lifts a little. "All my life, bad things have happened to the people around me." I don't know how to ask what I want to ask, and I hope she understands.

"They deserved it," she says. *That's just like Vivian. No apology.*

My bottom lip quivers. She killed John when he attacked me, and planned on killing the rest of them. Who knows what she was up to during my childhood, all those birthdays that ended with someone getting hurt? I'm even seeing the girl that tripped on the stairs at my fifth-grade graduation in a different light. It's so sick and misguided. And she was doing it for me, in a way. Or doing it to isolate me so that I would need her more. We're no good together. Maybe we never were. But some part of me is still heartbroken.

I rest my cheek on her head, and a tear runs into her blood-streaked hair.

She chokes a little. "My bird," she says in barely a whisper.

Her fingers uncurl from my hoodie and air pushes out of her lips. Her body becomes dead weight in my arms. I sit slowly, holding on to her. Her arms fall limply, and I support her head in the crook of my arm.

"It is finished," Cotton says gently. "You broke the curse."

I shake my head. "I don't know how."

He bends down beside me, slipping his arms under Vivian's back and knees. "A curse is just a cycle, which may only exist because people want it to. We all played our roles. For centuries we have been making the same choices we did during the Trials, hurting and blaming each other. There is no real power gained by harming others."

Cotton lifts Vivian off me, and I feel so odd letting her go. I push myself up onto wobbly legs. From the Descendants' bodies, four women rise. The original accused witches of Salem. They look at the young Descendants and help the girls untie their hands from behind their backs. The older women glow faintly.

Cotton looks from them to me. "All these many years, I thought I

knew witches better than anyone. You can imagine my surprise to find one in my own family. Not the wretched being I once studied in my books, but a lovely young woman. You see, 'witch' is merely a title. It is not the title that is inherently bad but the people who decide what that title means."

"How do you mean?" I ask.

"If a man fears dogs, he may beat one with a stick when he sees it. As is the nature of all creatures, that dog will bite him. And then he may tell everyone that he was right about dogs, that they are evil. But I ask you, who is at fault in this scenario, the man or the dog?"

"The man," I say.

"Now picture this story again, only with two men."

"Funny thing is," I say, "dogs are friendlier and more loyal than men."

He smiles. "You will grow to be a powerful woman, Samantha. There is much to come that you will struggle against. And many scenarios where it may seem easy and tempting to dominate. Do not use your power the way that I did, labeling and damning others."

"I won't," I say, nodding at him. "I promise."

The body in Cotton's arms hums. Out of it comes Vivian's spirit as a girl in her late teens. She jumps from Cotton's arms and lands on the ground with all the grace and pep of a dancer. She briefly examines Cotton holding the lifeless body before walking straight to Elijah.

She sweeps her foot from side to side, pushing away the red powder on the floor and breaking her own circle. There's a loud crackling in the air and the bones and blood fall out of Elijah, tumbling to the ground. He now stands easily and approaches her.

"Yes," he says, nodding. He doesn't look angry. She must have said something, but I didn't hear it.

She returns to me and Cotton. She kisses her former self on the cheek and smiles, making her eyes tilt even more. The anger has left her, and her young face begins to glow. Cotton's and the accused witches' faces do, too. The Descendants and I squint against the light that now consumes the room. Then all at once it's gone, and they fade

into nothingness.

“Elijah!” My voice catches in my burning throat. I turn fully around, but he’s not there. I fix my gaze on the circle where we were trapped, too afraid to move, to even think he might have gone with them. My breath is shallow.

He blinks back in right next to me. I suck in air, and it trembles on the edge of a sob. Elijah reveals a cloth in his hand. His eyes roam my many injuries by the light of the fireplace.

“We need to stop the bleeding,” he says, gently lifting my cut hand.

He applies pressure to the fabric he places over my wound. For a few seconds we’re both silent. He ties the cloth tightly and makes a neat knot.

“She said your name. Right before she died.” My voice is barely louder than a whisper.

He nods.

“Was what she said true?”

He cradles my bandaged hand in his own, and I wonder if my heart will explode. “That I love you...Yes. Easily. You are strong and stubborn. You risk everything for the people you love. And more important, you are kind to the ones you do not.” He nods toward Lizzie, who is trying to steady her breathing.

I can’t find the right words, so I reach out with my uncut hand. I touch his lips with the tips of my fingers, and he kisses them. He places my palm on his chest and leans forward. His face is close to mine, and he ever so gently tilts my chin up.

His lips move toward mine inch by inch, and the world is filled only with the solidness of him under my fingers. Our lips tease each other and our mouths move together. He runs his hand along my cheek and down my neck. Our tongues touch, and I push harder. He pulls me by my lower back into him, his arms enfolding me.

His mouth releases mine, but his eyes are hungry and longing dances on his lips. “If only I were alive.”

“I don’t care that you’re a spirit.”

“You must live your life, Samantha,” he says, but holds me, still.

Dread slithers into the warm space of our touching bodies. My words fight me on their way out. “You can’t leave.”

“I think it would be better for you if I did.”

My heart ping-pongs in my chest like a caged bird. I shake my head, unsure how to keep myself from drowning us both in my emotions. “I don’t want to do this without you.”

“You have already done it.”

“But I’m in love with you.” My voice teeters like a kitten before her eyes are open.

The front door to the house flies open, and I jump backward, breaking our embrace. Jaxon stands in the doorway, panting from running through the woods. *He came to help me after everything I did to him?*

His eyes land on me like a gavel on wood. “Sam?” Jaxon runs toward me, stopping short when he sees the blood that streaks my clothes and skin. He wraps his arms around me. His heart beats forcefully against my shoulder.

Elijah looks at us and smiles. *No!* I want to yell at him. I can tell what he’s thinking. That I’m safe, that this is how it should be.

“I’m okay.” My voice is raspy.

Jaxon pulls back. “You look anything but okay.” He scans my beat-up body.

“Jaxon, will you give me a minute?” I ask, my eyes fixed on Elijah. “And will you call for help?”

He nods, but steps away reluctantly. He moves toward the Descendants as they rub their wrists and check their wounds.

I grab on to Elijah with all my might. “Please, don’t go,” I whisper. “I barely had any time with you. We only had one floor picnic.”

He holds my face in his hand and tickles my ear with his breath. “And I enjoyed it immensely.”

I press my cheek into his. *This can’t be goodbye.* How could I ever tell him what he means to me? I wouldn’t know where to start.

The air next to us shimmers. A faint breeze billows the ashes from the fire and flickers the flames. A beautiful girl with long dark hair appears.

She wears the same content smile she did in her painting. “Abigail...,” I whisper. My arms slip from Elijah’s body.

He turns toward her, tension vanishing from places on his face I never noticed it was hiding. Immediately, he seems lighter, freer. *I can’t take this moment away from him.* I can’t plead with him to stay. I would have to be the most selfish person in the world. I pull both my arms into my chest, trying to shield myself from the heartache that has started there.

“My sweet brother,” she says, her voice ethereal and surprisingly playful.

He takes her small hand in his. “How long I have waited to see you.”

“In three hundred years, not one haircut,” she teases.

He smiles, dimples and all. “I was not born with your natural beauty. I will make a better effort.”

“Beauty, my eye. You were prettier than half the girls in town,” she replies, and I’m now sure that they’re repeating familiar banter.

Their shared look is intoxicating. They’re bonded in a way that I’ve never experienced.

Abigail shifts her gaze to me. She has the same intense gray eyes Elijah does. Without warning, she reaches her delicate arms toward me. Warmth fills me as she holds on to my shoulders. “The witch of Salem.” There’s silence for a long moment. She leans close to my ear and whispers, “Your father just woke up, Samantha.”

My cracked heart tries to leap out of my chest, breaking the tenuous hold I had on it. I immediately start sobbing. All the tension and heartache I’ve felt for the past four months pours out of me. I have wanted this more than I ever wanted anything in the world. And now that it’s real, I can’t breathe. Elijah gently touches my face, intercepting my stream of tears.

He mouths “I will always love you,” and disappears with Abigail. I sob harder. I don’t know whether to collapse or jump for joy. My body

probably couldn't stand either.

"Sam?" Jaxon asks in a worried tone, slipping his phone back into his pocket.

"My dad's awake," I say through my staggered breaths.

Jaxon walks toward me. My upset about Elijah and my happiness about my dad mix together in a confusing way.

I wipe tears away from my cheeks. "I'm sorry I put you to sleep with that spell. I really am."

Jaxon shakes his head. "You always threatened to knock me out. I guess I should have expected it."

"How did you wake up from it?" I ask as Susannah comes to my side.

He pulls my grandmother's pendant out of his pocket. "I woke up and this was on my chest."

Elijah! He knew Jaxon would come here to help. I almost can't take this.

"You should be happy you slept through this," Mary says as she stands.

Alice nods, free from her usual ice. "You get to show up at the end, Jaxon, and look cool for having discovered us."

"I wish I could've been here to help," Jaxon says.

"Nah, better to let the girls handle it," says Susannah in her raspy voice, and the girls laugh. She slips her delicate hand into mine.

Jaxon examines the room and spots the bones, the blood splattered on the floor, and the noose. "Was someone hanged?"

It's Lizzie who answers. "All of us. If it wasn't for Sam, we'd be dead."

"The crow woman?" Jaxon asks me. "Where is she?"

"Gone. Very much gone." *She died in my arms*, I think, but I don't say it.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

Black-Eyed Susan

I take the last couple of stairs slowly, one foot at a time. With each movement, my bandaged body protests. The smell of French toast and eggs motivates me to attempt a faster pace. Pans clink and clatter.

I step through the arched doorway of the kitchen, and Jaxon and his mother turn, with matching Meriwether smiles on their faces.

Jaxon puts down a plate of biscuits and approaches me. “Sam, you’re not supposed to get out of bed.”

“And how do you propose I pee, then?” I ask, breathing in the scent of delicious freshly brewed coffee.

Jaxon smirks. “I could carry you.”

“Yeah, fat chance that’s gonna happen.”

Mrs. Meriwether comes to inspect me. “I’ll run you a hot bath after breakfast and make another poultice. We’ll get you feeling shipshape in no time.”

I smile at the fitting expression. “Thanks, Mrs. Meriwether.”

“Why don’t we all head into the dining room,” Mrs. Meriwether proposes as she scoops fresh whipped cream into a bowl.

“Need help, Sam?” Jaxon asks.

“If you keep treating me like I’m helpless, I will bop you,” I reply with a smile that hurts my face.

“Now that you can do spells, I guess I better be careful.”

Mrs. Meriwether grins at us. I follow them down the hall to the dining room and stop dead in my tracks. I’ve never seen so much food, and it is a thing of beauty.

“There are four place settings,” I say to Mrs. Meriwether as she puts down her bowls of strawberries and whipped cream.

“Yes, dear. Your father will be joining us.” She winks.

I grab a nearby chair for support. “He’s coming here already?” They wouldn’t even let me speak to my dad these past couple of days. They kept saying they didn’t understand how he could recover so quickly, and they wanted to run more tests. *I guess broken spells don’t act the same way real illnesses do.*

“He cannot wait to see you.” Her smile is kind. Jaxon beams.

Tears form droplets on my eyelashes, and I put my hand over my mouth. I turn around and head for the back door.

“You okay, Sam?” Jaxon runs after me.

“Yeah! I just need to get something.”

I run through the grass, stray leaves crunching under my feet. I forget my aches as I enter my house and head for the kitchen. I open the cabinet and push the front cups aside. I pull down the #1 DAD mug. He won’t have his coffee without it.

I swing the back door open again, anticipation fueling my steps, and stop. A single freshly cut black-eyed Susan rests on the doormat. I search the porch, but no one’s there. I smile. *Elijah.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Cotton Mather was the third generation of Mathers in America, and I'm the twelfth. I've known this since I was a kid, not because we have the same last name and he's in history textbooks, but because my grandmother Claire Mather told me so. Gram walked me through her house, telling me stories of presidents, forbidden love, and inventions. I recognized my own eyes in my ancestors' paintings and appreciated their humor from their letters. History isn't some distant remembrance in my family; it has a pulse.

My relatives have done everything from fighting in the Revolutionary War to surviving the *Titanic*. They're a colorful and diverse group who definitely made their mark on American history. But Cotton was always a point of controversy. Even when my father was a kid and studied the Salem Witch Trials in school, the other kids gave him a hard time for his last name.

I was always so curious about this infamous man and the reactions he got out of people, even three hundred years later. So I started doing some research. And what I found was surprising—Cotton was *way* more complex than I had ever imagined. He fought for implementing smallpox inoculations, he wrote America's first true-crime book, he conducted one of the first experiments in plant hybridization, and he was instrumental in founding Yale. Many writers after him looked to his books as a record of early American Puritan culture.

Nothing about Cotton was straightforward. Historians argue about his role in the Witch Trials. But that's not just because of Cotton's complexity. It's because the Witch Trials were a perfect storm. And the further I dug into the mysterious circumstances surrounding them, the more I wanted to know. So I went to Salem and began poking around.

One of the first things I did there was go to a bookstore and order an

out-of-print book about my relatives. When I arrived at the address, it wasn't a shop like I was expecting, but an old house filled with books. I wrote my name on the order form, and the woman raised her eyebrows and said, "Mather...that isn't a popular name around here." I wasn't offended; I was completely intrigued. No one had ever reacted that way to my last name before. Was I a historical villain of sorts in Salem, if nowhere else?

I knew then that visiting wasn't enough. I wanted to actually spend a few nights and get a real feel for the place. I walked along cobblestone streets with black houses, took tours, and got goose bumps hearing all the (sometimes creepy) historical stories. But what I wasn't prepared for was the bed-and-breakfast I chose to stay in. It was a converted old mansion with winding hallways and staircases that stopped and started at random. Beautiful, no doubt. But when I found my room, I couldn't help but feel like something was off.

I kept looking over my shoulder (and under my bed). I went all the way back down to the reception desk and asked if there was any chance the place was haunted. The woman at the desk nodded and said, "Definitely." Then she told me how scared she was to lock the place up at night by herself. She said to look in the guest books if I wanted to know about the ghosts. Everything in me told me not to. But of course, I just couldn't help myself. It was page after page of people waking up to screams, rocking chairs rocking by themselves, and messages written on the steamed mirrors after showers. People traveled from all over the world to stay in this haunted inn, and I had accidentally and unknowingly booked a room there.

I flipped. I'm a huge scaredy-cat. I slept—if you could call it that—the entire night with one eye open and the light on. But what I learned the more time I spent in Salem was that almost everywhere you went there was a haunted house, a curse, or a graveyard. People didn't ask you *if* you believed in ghosts, but instead *when* was the last time you saw one. After a few days, I was utterly charmed by the mysterious history of the town and the secrets that were hidden there. So I wrote a book.

With this story I really wanted to highlight some of the fascinating

historical personalities I found in Salem and give them another chance to have a voice. A lot (but not all) of the history in this book is accurate. If there's a better explanation for the hanging location than Sidney Perley's essay "Where the Salem 'Witches' Were Hanged," I haven't found it. However, the causes of the Salem Witch Trials are more complicated than I can tackle in this fictional narrative. But that's okay, because this story wasn't only written to revisit history. It was written to be learned from and to specifically show the parallel between hanging a witch in Salem and modern-day bullying.

To understand more about what led up to the Salem Witch Trials, it's important to consider what we know and how we know it. Then we should examine the lens through which we view the events. Otherwise, it becomes super easy to shake a finger at history while shouting, "You're all nuts, and your clothes look uncomfortable!"

While addressing the causes of the Salem Witch Trials in my book, I definitely took some artistic liberties. My character Ann, for instance, is only loosely based on Ann Putnam, Jr., who was twelve years old when the accusations started and not the teenager I made her in this story. The black house in the woods is imaginary, but there *was* an actual house that belonged to John Symonds's relatives (which is quoted in Perley's essay and Sam's grandmother's journal) from which it was possible to see the hanging location. Unfortunately, this house no longer exists. Also, Cotton's writings and his role in the Trials themselves are way more involved than what I could capture here. However, there are many real landmarks from old and modern Salem in this story that are worth visiting and exploring.

Even though not all of the historical sites still stand and some information was lost over time, the lessons of the Trials remain relevant. On a basic level, social uncertainty and fear created an unstable emotional environment that allowed things to spiral out of control in Puritan Salem. Some citizens were singled out and made an example of by powerful groups that the community both admired and feared. And once the community supported an accusation of witchcraft, it became nearly impossible for the accused to escape conviction—and punishment.

Where once witchcraft accusations were the norm, bullying has taken its place. And just as during the Trials, it's not always the usual suspects who get bullied; it can happen to anyone for any reason. But the only way it happens is if the community supports it. Group agreement and group silence are equally as deadly. The moment someone speaks up, it's possible to stop that cycle. It's not the easiest thing to do, but greatness is never without risk. And there is nothing greater in the whole world than kindness—kindness to someone being bullied, kindness to a stranger, kindness to an injured animal. Every act counts.

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