



# CHAPTER ONE

A year after I (almost) died

The manor echoes as I walk along its hallways. It sounds like a tomb – and I would know.

I stop at every room, checking to make sure I haven't left anything behind. Not the furniture or the paintings; not the grand piano I never had the patience to learn to play. All those things are long gone, either sold or dragged out of here by the movers. No, what I'm doing is cataloguing, mapping every corner of every room in the place I grew up. Fixing it all in my memory like I'm sealing it in wax. Thorn Manor, the home of my parents, and all the Thorns who came before.

Here is my parents' room, with the wallpaper covered in songbirds, and the big bay window where Mom used to spend Sundays reading because she said it had the best light.

Here is Dad's office, which was always officially off-limits, though he kept a box of my favourite candies in the top drawer of his big walnut desk for whenever I snuck in

to see him. The room is an empty box now, with only faint impressions on the blue walls where Dad's nineties grunge posters used to hang.

Here is Grandpa's study, where his green wingback chair sat next to that dark oak fireplace. The scent of pipe smoke and apples still clings to this room, like he's become a part of it. Mom would've said it's his ghost, '*And there's always room for one more in Thorn Manor.*'

Uncle Ty and Carolyn's room still has a few boxes left inside – the last items they'll be bringing to the new cottage. It's almost time for the three of us to leave. We're the last in a long line of Thorns to live in this house, and after today I'll never set foot inside it again. Which sucks balls, actually.

I move on, more quickly now. There are moments when I think I hear another set of footsteps following at my heels, see a second shadow stretching out next to mine in the corner of my eye. But it's only the creaking floorboards. Only the slant of the late-afternoon light.

'*Are you sure?*' I can almost see Mom's smile, teasing but not, and shake my head. There are no ghosts here, even if I sometimes wish there were.

The west wing was mostly shut up after Grandpa passed, so I don't linger there. I go down the galleried staircase and into the lounge, the sunroom, the library. The breakfast room (where nobody has ever eaten breakfast, as far as I can remember) leading out to the orangery Uncle Ty uses – *used* – as his art studio. The floor still carries faint smears of paint, too long embedded to be

removed by simple cleaning. Shit for the new owners to deal with, I guess.

I finish with the kitchen. I'm about to pass through and head back up to my room when my eyes land on the cellar door. I know I should go down there, too, to complete my final tour of this place. It's the only room that will still be full – the racks of Thorn's Blood Apple Sour were sold by special arrangement along with the house.

But it's the one room in the manor I hate. Always have.

I turn and head back upstairs.

There's only one box left in my room, sitting like a little lost boat in the middle of the window seat. It holds all my art supplies and sketchbooks. I go to pick it up, glancing out of the window as I do. My room looks out over the blood-apple orchard – the source of Thorn's Blood Apple Sour, and all the money it took to build this place. In the centre of it stands the peaked roof of the old pavilion, and seeing it reminds me that I still have one last important task to do before I leave.

Beyond the orchard, I can see the flowing form of the river as it rushes to meet Burden Bridge, which sits right at the point where the river tumbles into a sixty-foot waterfall.

There's someone on the bridge.

Burden Bridge is on our land – ours for the next few hours, at least – so it's not some dog walker admiring the view. My skin prickles in warning, like it always does when I think I see someone out there.

*Is it . . . ?*

My breath catches, and I lean closer to the window. But it's not who I think it is, only Uncle Ty. He's leaning against the waist-high guard rail that's attached to the low stone wall of the bridge, just staring out into the rising mist.

Propping the box on my hip, I give a stoic nod to my room, then head downstairs and outside to where Bessie waits. Bessie is my old-as-dirt Nissan, once green but now a faded colour I can only call 'sludge'. The back seat is already packed to the ceiling, so I put this last box on the front passenger seat, then crunch my way down the gravel path to the orchard.

I stand on a stepladder in the pavilion, paint roller in hand. I've taken off my ever-present black gloves for this – hard to paint with them on – and the last throes of winter stealing in through the windows make the scars on my palms ache. I flex them out, one hand then the other. The pink criss-cross lines brighten to red as I do, but there's no chance of them tearing open now. A year is plenty long enough for a body to knit itself whole.

The wall facing me is covered in painted images, all bleeding together like a sleeve of tattoos. They are the bad memories, of the crash that changed everything, and what came after. The ones Dr Ehrenfeld suggested I write in a journal, as if that would scratch them out of my head somehow. But I've never been much of a writer. I take after Uncle Ty that way. Art is our thing. So I painted my memories on the walls inside the pavilion, because who the hell would ever see it but me? Except now some rando has

bought my home, and I don't want a stranger stumbling across this little slice of my heart-matter.

I carried a can of black paint down here yesterday, meaning to cover over the mural. But I still wasn't ready to let go. Now I have no choice.

For a moment, I think I hear something. A voice? I peer through the window, even though it's pointless. The orchard is dense, dense, dense – grown wild as it raged against the disease that took hold last year. I still smell the blood apples, even though the branches are black and bare-knuckled now. The blight hit at the same time as a freak cold snap last May, leaving the trees covered in perfect ghost apples, the little icy cases showing where the fruit had once been.

A shout rings out from somewhere nearby – sharp and curse-shaped, though I can't make out the words. It's Uncle Ty. And I remember where I last saw him: leaning against the low wall of the bridge.

*Shit.*

My paint roller falls to the floor. I jump down from the ladder, and run. The tangle of low-hanging branches claws at me as I force my way through. Finally, I clear the orchard. As I sprint for the bridge, I hear Uncle Ty again, fogging the air around him with curses.

I skid to a stop. He's fine. Drunk, I think, but fine.

One summer, when Uncle Ty was seventeen, he had some friends from school over to the manor. I remember sneaking around watching them, these teenagers who seemed so grown up to seven-year-old me. They took a

couple of bottles from Grandpa's collection in the cellar and went outside to get wasted where Grandpa wouldn't see. I watched from an upstairs window for a while, too shy to go outside and be told to get lost, but quickly got bored. They were just boys. But Uncle Ty came running in a while later, yelling that one of his friends, Jerome, had fallen from the bridge, and could Grandpa come quickly . . .

It didn't matter how quickly Grandpa came. Even then, I knew there was no way for someone to survive a fall from Burden Bridge.

The guard rail was added to the low stone wall of the bridge the next day, and Uncle Ty never brought anyone back to the manor after that. Not until Carolyn, his wife. But I do see him down here sometimes, talking to the mist, and wonder if he's whispering his burdens so the water will take them, like the old legend says, or if he's really talking to Jerome.

I cross the bridge to where Uncle Ty still leans against the guard rail. Burden Bridge hums under my feet, rattled by the power of the waterfall beneath it.

The dark mop of Uncle Ty's hair hangs forward as he hunches into the cold. Dad used to tease him that he looked like a surly teenager when he did that, and I can kind of see it. Uncle Ty is twenty-seven – almost ten years older than me – but he looks barely out of his teens. Maybe it's because he's short and slender, like he still has some growing left to do. But everyone in our family fits that mould. People around here don't call us 'Bloody' Thorns because we're brawlers. We're just not the kind of people you want to

piss off. At least my parents weren't, nor Grandpa before that.

'Uncle Ty?' I say it loudly to be heard over the waterfall, but not so loud as to startle him. I don't want to be the reason he falls.

He startles anyway, but his clear eyes tell me he isn't as drunk as I thought. 'Ava? Oh, I dropped my . . . dropped something over the waterfall.' He gestures vaguely.

I'm pretty sure I know what that *something* is. He's been drinking a lot over the past few days, even for him. And I know from personal experience that the water vapour on the bridge makes a bottle get slippery real quick.

'Hoping the water'll wash away your burdens?' I say, only half joking. He shrugs.

I doubt ditching a liquor bottle off the bridge is going to fix anything for Uncle Ty. I lean against the rail next to him.

'Remember when you brought me here and taught me how to spit?' I demonstrate, making it arc so it doesn't get swallowed by the waterfall until it hits the basin below.

'You've been practising.' Uncle Ty sounds mildly impressed. He never could hold on to a bad mood for long. 'Anyway, I was only passing on the lesson your dad gave me.'

'That was right before you left for college, wasn't it?' I say, a smile inching onto my face. 'The next time you came home, you had artistic sideburns and a Boston twang, and insisted everyone call you *Tyler*.'

He groans. 'Don't remind me.'



‘Tyler was too good to spit with his favourite niece. Tyler wore Oxfords. Tyler thought he was capable of growing a moustache.’

Uncle Ty laughs. *Good*. ‘Dad told me he’d seen more hair on a side of bacon. He actually followed me up to the bathroom to make sure I shaved it off.’

Grandpa was never shy with his opinions.

‘You done staring into the abyss now?’ I push away from the rail and cross my arms faux-impatiently. Uncle Ty stands up, salutes me, for some goddamn reason, and turns to head back towards the manor. But as he passes me, liquor-breath trailing behind him, I spot something moving between the trees at the far side of the bridge.

‘Ava? I thought you came to corral me back inside?’

‘Yeah, I’m coming ...’ I scan the shadows a moment longer, but there’s nothing there.

## CHAPTER TWO

It's an hour later, the daylight already fading, when we're finally ready to drive away from the manor for the last time. Carolyn and Uncle Ty rumble away down the driveway in his sports car. Bessie waits patiently for me, stacked to the roof.

The manor's windows are all dark and hollow, its stately architecture lost in the twilight like a memory already grown hazy. It feels so wrong to be leaving like this. I'm not ready. But there's no choice – I know that. After Mom and Dad died, it turned out the family distillery was in really bad financial shape. Uncle Ty and Carolyn tried their best to save it, but we ended up having to sell the manor.

The old mill cottage Carolyn rented for us isn't far, though. If you look south from Burden Bridge, you can see the rounded wall of the mill butting up against the riverbank a half-mile or so downstream.

Carolyn gives a cheerful toot of the horn as they reach the iron gates at the end of the driveway. Even without seeing her, I know she's wearing a determined smile as she steers the car out onto the lane leading up to Red Road.

She won't look back. It's not her style. Uncle Ty probably won't, either, but that'll be because he can't face it.

I climb into Bessie and give the usual murmured *hail Lucifer* when she fires up on the first try. As I pass through the iron gates onto the lane, I stop. The new owners will drive through these same gates when they move in tomorrow. I try to picture it – picture *them* – but I can't.

A light blinks on and off in one of the cottages facing me across the lane. It flashes on–off again three more times in quick succession. Then I see it: hanging from the window is a home-made banner bearing the words **BYE, BITCH!** And grinning above it is my best friend – best guy friend, at least – Ford. I shake my head and open the car window.

'You're an asshole!' I yell up at him. I get an elaborate bow in reply before he disappears from view. But Ford's jackassery works its magic, like always. I'm smiling as I close the car window, shutting out the cold, and follow Carolyn and Uncle Ty to our new home.

There's a sign on Red Road marking the western town limits. On this side, it says 'NOW LEAVING BURDEN FALLS – come back soon!' It also tells you it has a population of 9,504, and shows a dark-haired girl with her back turned, gazing at the majestic waterfall. There's no reason to think the girl is dead, but everyone here knows it. She's like the unofficial town mascot.

I turn towards the centre of town, watching the sign grow smaller in my rear-view mirror. If you picture Burden Falls as a face viewed from above, the manor

forms the left eye, with Red Road arcing just above it like an eyebrow. It connects onto River Road running south (the nose, if you will) and I follow it down and turn off past the gas station where I work some evenings and most weekends, and into the grin of tiny cottages beneath it. The one farthest left is the old mill cottage – now ours.

Carolyn and Uncle Ty have already gone inside by the time I park out front. I've seen the cottage before, but only from the outside. I think some part of me was still clinging to the idea that if I ignored it the move from the manor might not happen. *La-la-la*, etc.

The cottage is vaguely square, but then there's the round tower of the old mill at the riverbank, and at some point the two buildings were joined together to create a garage in between. But the cottage is cute, with its poky little windows already blazing with warm light. I grab my box of art supplies and head inside.

The front door is rounded at the top, as if hobbits live here.

'Hello?'

There's no answer, but I can hear muffled voices drifting down the narrow stairs, so I head up. Three doors lead off the landing, two of them open. One is a bathroom. The other is a large closet, I assume, because there's no bed, just a stack of boxes labelled as Carolyn's clothes.

'There you are!' I turn to find Carolyn standing behind me in the doorway of the third room. 'I was starting to think you'd gotten lost,' she teases.

Beyond her, Uncle Ty is making up the bed in there.

‘Where should I put my stuff?’ I ask, nodding at the box I’m kind of struggling with at this point.

‘Here, let me show you your room.’ Carolyn takes the box from me easily and heads down the stairs. ‘I think you’re going to love it!’

I follow Carolyn out of the kitchen, through that weird garage extension, and into the round building of the mill. The space has been divided into two half-moons. The first is full of boxes, but the second half is apparently my bedroom. Inside, it’s cold and smells like fresh paint.

It’s . . . nice. I mean the mill’s got to be well over a century old, just like the manor, which kind of makes it feel like home. And there’s a tiny window, round like the porthole of a ship, which looks out over the river. It whistles faintly where a draught sneaks in through a crack in the old window frame.

The bed is already made up for me, and they’ve painted the walls a calm, dusty blue, just like my old bedroom at the manor. Carolyn sets the box down on my desk by the window.

‘It’s bigger than that dingy little room upstairs,’ she says, ‘and it has its own bathroom, so you won’t have to fight with Ty over who gets to shower first in the morning. Plus, if you wanted to, say, sneak in and out late at night, you could do that without waking Ty or me.’ Carolyn winks and nudges me. ‘Do you love it?’

‘Sure. It’s great.’

Her face falls. ‘Oh no, you hate it, don’t you? Damn it, Ty told me I should run it by you. But I wanted it to be a

surprise – a space that’s all your own. I thought it’d be one nice thing at the end of a tough day.’ She picks up the box she just put on the desk, looking thoroughly bummed. ‘Sorry, I’ll get you moved upstairs right away.’

‘No, Carolyn, honestly – this is perfect,’ I insist, taking the box and setting it back down. I hate that I just sounded like such an ungrateful brat after everything Carolyn has had to organize and get done today. I think shiny, happy thoughts, trying to funnel even five per cent Carolyn-ness onto my face. ‘I’m just tired, so my brain isn’t keeping up with everything.’

She pauses, studying me. ‘Are you sure? Because we can get you set up in the little room next to ours, no problem . . .’

‘I’m fine in here, really. I love it. I promise.’

Uncle Ty is quiet over dinner. He glares at the fast-emptying pizza box like it’s to blame for where we are. But pepperoni never did anyone dirty.

‘It’s weird thinking about strangers in the manor, huh?’ I say, aiming for sympathetic rather than salt-in-the-woundy. Carolyn’s knife and fork (because she’s the only one of the three of us who eats pizza that way) clatter down onto her plate.

‘Ty, seriously? You still haven’t told her?’

I almost choke on a giant mouthful of pizza. ‘Told me what?’ The half-chewed pizza lodges uncertainly in my gut, waiting for bad news to land on top of it. Maybe I was too hasty with my pepperoni endorsement.

Uncle Ty takes a deep breath, cuts Carolyn a put-upon side-eye, then turns to me. ‘I meant to tell you this sooner, but there never seemed to be a good time, and you’ve already had such a lot to deal with this year.’

Shit. This is *definitely* not going to be good news. Uncle Ty sounds like he’s rehearsed this a hundred times in the mirror.

‘Spit it out, Ty,’ Carolyn urges softly. ‘Can’t you see you’re freaking her out?’

He sighs. ‘Madoc Miller bought the manor. He’s moving his family in tomorrow.’

Something wet hits my cheek, and I vaguely register that I’ve dropped my pizza slice onto the table, splattering tomato sauce everywhere. ‘You . . . sold the manor . . . to Madoc Miller?’

It’s a joke – a totally sick, unfunny joke. There’s no way Uncle Ty is actually telling me he sold our home to the guy who killed my parents. Who damn near killed *me*.

But he doesn’t crease up into a *gotcha* grin like I expect. Uncle Ty just spreads his palms. Then, probably realizing that isn’t helping – what with the fact that *my* palms are covered in scars thanks to Madoc Miller – he laces his fingers together in front of him.

‘We only had one offer on the table.’

‘I don’t believe you,’ I say, looking at Carolyn for backup. She just sighs and reaches out across the table like she’s going to touch my hand, but then I see she’s holding out a napkin for the pizza sauce. I ignore it. ‘There’s no way you’d sell the manor to him.’

Even if Uncle Ty overlooked the fact that our family and the Millers have been at each other's throats for generations, there's no way he'd take money from Madoc Miller after the crash. It's blood money.

'I didn't have a choice, OK?' Uncle Ty shoves away from the table, grabbing the last slice of pizza and his car keys. 'I'm going out.'

'Where are you –'

Carolyn's question is cut off by the slamming of the front door.

'I'm really sorry, Ava,' she says after a long, awkward moment. 'But Ty's right – he didn't have a choice. The bank would've seized everything if we hadn't sold when we did.'

Somewhere in my mind, I know Carolyn must be right. There's no way Uncle Ty would've sold it to that man unless there was no other option. But I'm still reeling, imagining him and his smug wife and their two venomous offspring *in our home*.

Carolyn takes a deep breath, then grabs a glass of apple juice and one of my favourite chilled coffees from the refrigerator.

'At least *we* can toast our new home, right?' she says, raising her glass. There's a fragile note in her voice, and I know I can't take this out on her. I can't really take it out on Uncle Ty, either. This is just the kind of outrageously unfair shit that happens to us now.

'Home sweet home,' I say flatly, and drink.

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Despite how tired I am, I don't sleep well later that night. The river is a constant whisper outside my window. Whenever I think about it, it makes me want to pee. And I have the dream again – the memory, I guess – about the crash. I feel it: the impact, the fear. Crawling, alone, from the wreckage. Seeing Madoc Miller standing next to his barely scratched car.

At around 1 a.m. something shrieks upstairs in the rafters of the mill, jolting me awake. For a moment, I have no idea where I am, or what the screaming was, but it slowly clicks into place.

I'm at the cottage. There's no axe murder being carried out nearby. It's just a barn owl – probably the same one I used to see around the manor grounds sometimes.

And my parents are still gone.

I let out a choked sound, trying not to let it turn into outright sobbing. Gradually, my breathing evens out. A screeching owl is as familiar to me as the creaking floorboards of my old home, or the random cold spots that seemed to spring from nowhere in the manor – those little things that might give my heart a quick jolt, but are nothing sinister, really, even if Mom would always arch a knowing eyebrow and declare the place haunted. But she'd grown up listening to the superstitious rumours about Burden Falls. I've lived in the manor my whole life, and its creaks and mutterings – and, yes, occasional screeches – are just part of its charm.

Looks like the old mill has charm, too.

I drag myself out of bed and climb the rickety ladder up to the floor above mine. The light from my phone casts

eerie shadows as I shine it around the loft space, but the damn bird is nowhere to be seen. Everything is silent and still.

My foot lands on something crunchy. I recoil, thinking it must be a cockroach, but it's actually an owl pellet.

Owl pellets are what the owl pukes up after it's eaten some small creature. It usually contains all the bits it has no use for – bones, fur, that kind of stuff. This pellet is old, dried to a white crust, and where it's crumbled apart under my foot I see a perfect little skull. I lean closer, shining my light on it. I think it's from a mouse at first, but then I notice the teeth. They're pointed, with elongated fangs. A weasel's skull, maybe.

It's pretty cool, though. Or it would be if finding it hadn't involved getting dried owl puke between my toes. I'll come back in the morning and see if I can clean up the bones. Might look good on my windowsill.

After dealing with the foot mess, I go back to my room. I know I won't sleep, though. I'm too on edge. Instead, I sit at my desk, doodling on a sketchpad. But my gaze keeps being drawn back to the window, and the silvery line of the river winding north to the waterfall, and Burden Bridge, and the manor.

Home.

Except it's not home, anymore. No lights shine from the manor house. It's barely a smudge against the distant landscape. For a moment, I swear I see something on Burden Bridge; it's only a speck from this far away, but I think there's someone crossing the bridge, heading towards

the manor. I lean closer, my breath lightly misting the window.

*Is it her?*

I reach up to clear it with my sleeve, but the figure is gone.

## CHAPTER THREE

My friend Daphne works at the Pump’N’Go with me most weekends. It’s a gas station, if you were wondering, despite its name making it sound like Fuckboy HQ. Maybe that’s why some of our customers act like assholes.

Daphne’s dad drops her off in his squad car in the front lot, probably on his way to work. Officer Chavez gives a little *whoop* on the siren as she opens the gas-station door, just like he always does, then roars with laughter when Daphne yelps in fright. She stomps inside, shaking her head. Her deep-brown skin is flushed, and not just from the cold.

‘He gets me Every. Single. Time,’ she groans as she takes up her spot next to me behind the counter. I know she doesn’t really mind her dad’s pranks. Daphne and her dad are super close, the way I was with mine. ‘It’s totally his fault I just stepped in that puddle. Look at the state of my favourite boots!’

I look down at the tan leather slouch boots, and yeah, they’re fucked.

But, in fairness to Daphne’s dad, *all* her boots are her favourites. I’m smart enough not to point this out, though.

Daphne's big on upcycling clothes she finds in thrift stores and online. She puts together mixed-retro outfits that shouldn't work, but weirdly do. Today, for example, she's wearing a 1960s orange shift dress, red Cheshire cat wool tights, and her beloved tan boots. Her hair is in fresh two-strand twists, held back by a green silk scarf. She also makes all her own jewellery, and today has on three necklaces that I happen to know started out as parts of an egg timer, a ukulele and a lamp. Dressed all in black next to her, with my batwing eyeliner and chipped black nails, I know I look every inch the pasty, white goth I am.

The Pump'N'Go is pretty hectic this morning, with no fewer than three whole customers stopping by in the hour after opening. It almost justifies having two cashiers.

'How was your first night in the new house?' Daphne asks between customers. She and Carla – the third member of our little triad, and Daphne's girlfriend – already checked in with me last night on our group chat, so they know about the Millers buying the manor. They were both suitably outraged on my behalf.

'It was –' My words are cut off by the jangle of the bell above the shop door. Liam Walsh, a college student who works part-time at the public library on River Road, stomps the worst of the snow off his boots as he walks in. He's a tall, wiry white guy with too-neat hair that makes him look younger than he is. Liam nods hello when he sees me.

I've been spending a lot of time in the library lately. Specifically since we had our Wi-Fi cut off at the manor,

though I've never told Liam that's the reason. I don't know him well, but I get the feeling he'd be sneery about it.

Liam picks up a candy bar and a newspaper from the stand and places them on the counter.

'Heard you had to move out of the manor,' he says. I feel my jaw clench. But I'm not surprised he knows. The people of Burden Falls are probably all gossiping about my family's fall from financial grace. 'That must suck.'

'Yep.'

'What's your new place like? It's not far from here, right?'

'It's OK,' I say. I'm not trying to be frosty, but I also don't want to talk about it. 'Can I get you anything else?' I ask, and throw in a smile that makes Daphne wince, so I guess it doesn't give off the friendly vibe I was going for.

When Liam leaves, I find Daphne staring after him, eyes narrowed.

'What's that look for?'

She shakes her head. 'Something about that guy gives me the squicks.'

We've been friends for over a year now, and this is the first time I'm hearing about 'squicks'. Still, it's not hard to guess what Daphne means by it. She's wearing the same look she gets whenever some sleazy straight guy learns she has a girlfriend and asks if he can 'watch'. As far as I'm concerned, that's a green light to throat-punch, but Daphne manages to tear most of them down with just a look. It's truly impressive. She says she inherited it from her witchy ancestor – specifically one of the Red Road Witches, a

group of women who fled Massachusetts during the witch trials. Five of them made it all the way to Burden Falls and settled here, and one of them was a Black woman named Dorcas Dane – or, as Daphne refers to her, Grandma Dorcas.

Personally, I think Daphne’s withering look is entirely her own. And pretty much everyone in Burden Falls says they’re descended from a Red Road Witch.

‘Anyway, I know what’ll cheer you up. Let me give you a reading.’ She whips out her tarot cards. ‘You haven’t let me read for you in ages.’

I slump onto the counter, big drama. But that just puts me eye to eye with her tarot cards.

The deck itself is really cool in my very biased opinion. I made the cards for Daphne as a gift for her birthday last November, right after she started getting interested in tarot. I hand-illustrated each one, using the jewel tones I know she loves, and the four corners of every card have evil eyes on them. An evil eye is drawn in concentric circles: the black pupil, the blue iris, the white outer and the dark blue outline. It almost looks like a target, or a tool for hypnotizing someone.

To me, asking a deck of creepy cards for guidance always feels like shaking a wasp’s nest and expecting to get honey out of it. After the first few times I drew the cards and produced spreads that could only be summarized as ‘DEATH DESTRUCTION EVERYWHERE YOU’RE GONNA DIE HORRIBLY’, I decided to hard-pass on all future readings.

‘Shuffle, and ask your question,’ Daphne says hopefully, ignoring my scowl. ‘Come *on*. You know you’re not *actually* cursed.’

‘Tell that to every other person in this town,’ I grumble.

The rumours about my family run thick in Burden Falls. The curse is apparently tied to the waterfall, and the awful luck we Thorns seem to be having – especially considering what happened to my parents. I don’t believe in curses, though. I’m pretty sure most of the bad turns my life has taken are because of Madoc Miller. If I looked back through my family history, I could probably pin all episodes of shitness on one Miller or another. They have a long-standing tradition of being assholes.

‘So that’s a yes?’ Daphne says, nudging the tarot deck towards me.

Before I can reiterate my *hell, no*, the shop door opens. Carla stands in the doorway, brushing off snow.

‘Hey, villainesses.’

The greeting is a new one. Last week Daphne and I were ‘she-devils’, although I think Carla also includes herself in the names she gives us. I have a horrible feeling she’s hoping one of them will catch on, and we’ll be like an emo version of the Plastics.

Carla is a strong supporter of boyfriend jeans and rock-band hoodies, and she wears different coloured contacts almost every day. Today’s hoodie is a washed-out thrift-store find featuring the album cover of some nineties band called The Flies. Her naturally blue eyes are currently black and violet (one of each) and her hair is bleached



white-blond with a buzzed undercut, which she's wearing screwed up into two high knots like a punky Minnie Mouse.

'You won't *believe* what I've had to put up with at home this morning.' Carla advances towards us like it's somehow our fault, then switches gears as she leans over the counter to kiss Daphne.

'Is Corey still trying to learn to play the glockenspiel?' I ask, pretending not to see the dopey grin they share.

Carla's expression turns thunderous again. 'He's switched to violin.'

Her younger brother, Corey, is not as smart as his about-to-be-valedictorian sister. He's convinced he's secretly a musical prodigy – he just needs to find the right instrument. I think Corey's gone through eight or nine different ones just in the past year. It hasn't exactly made it easy for Carla to study at home, or to keep her already short-fuse temper. But her dads refuse to 'stifle Corey's self-expression' or whatever. If I were them, I'd intervene before Carla resorts to stifling Corey's self-expression with a pillow over his face.

Carla glances down at the counter and sees the tarot deck. 'Oh no . . .'

Daphne turns on her most winning smile. 'The only way I'll get better at reading is if you two let me practise.'

'That's a no from me,' Carla says firmly. 'Ask Corinne. She's into that shit.' Corinne is Daphne's cousin, and drives both Daphne and Carla to school most mornings. And she is actually *into that shit*, as Carla so bluntly put it.

Tarot is one of the few things Carla and I actually agree about, though our reasons are different. Carla is a stone-cold sceptic about anything she can't measure or explain or . . . I don't know . . . math away somehow. I just think the cards need an attitude adjustment.

'What's got you looking like such a joy-vacuum, anyway?' Carla says, turning on me with narrowed eyes. 'Are you sulking about your birthday again?'

I find 'joy-vacuum' harsh, even by Carla's standards, but she's not entirely wrong about my birthday. 'I'm not sulking,' I say. 'I'm just not having a birthday is all.'

'But it's your eighteenth!' Daphne protests, like that makes a difference.

'I just had to move out of my home, I have no money and – *my parents are dead* – 'I don't really feel like celebrating.' But Daphne isn't about to let it go. I shoot Carla a killing look for bringing it up, though I suspect she did it to distract Daphne from the tarot.

'We'll arrange a *danse*,' Daphne insists, and I groan. 'You won't have to do anything but show up and have a good time.'

*Danses macabres* have become a tradition in Burden Falls. Ever since Covid, when we couldn't all gather inside, kids at Burden Falls High arrange a *danse macabre* to mark big events like a death, or occasionally a birthday if the kid is popular. *Danses* are masked parties, usually held somewhere outdoors like the woods or the cemetery, where we all get dressed up like it's Halloween, only fancier. How else do you party in a mask?

‘Can you please *not*?’ I say, grateful when my phone pings with a message, ending the conversation. It’s from Ford, who I also rage-texted last night to tell him about the Millers invading my old home. Damn, I still can’t believe Uncle Ty sold it to them.

**Ford:** Millers are on the move. Four trucks so far.

My throat tightens. The Millers are actually moving into my home. My *old* home.

**Ava:** Are the twins there yet?

Dominic and Freya Miller aren’t actually twins, but everyone calls them that because Freya – who is allegedly some kind of genius, though I’ve never seen any evidence of it – got bumped up to the same year as her brother when they moved to Burden Falls High last year, right before the crash. Unfortunately, that puts them both in my class, so I get a faceful of Miller nearly every damn day.

Daphne, Carla and I have a certain level of notoriety at school, but the Miller twins’ clique are like celebrities.

The four of them – Dominic and Freya, plus two other guys from school called Mateo Medel and Casper Jones – star in *Haunted Heartland*, a cheesy online series that’s basically a *Most Haunted* rip-off. They post videos of themselves all running through abandoned buildings and screaming into wells and shutting each other inside dark rooms. It’s fake as hell, yet somehow they have over a

million followers across a bunch of different platforms, and get offers for acting and modelling work and all kinds of stuff because of it. Dominic and Freya's parents also run a movie-location scouting business, and the twins act like that makes them Hollywood insiders or something.

Ford's reply comes through:

**Ford:** Saw Freya, no Dominic yet.

**Ava:** Which room is she in?

I immediately want to claw the message back from the ether. I don't want to know if the viper will be sleeping in my old room. But, when Ford replies, it's to say he doesn't know. Of course he doesn't – he'd need a super-telescopic lens to see through the manor windows from his bedroom.

**Ford:** Mom's making me take over a pie. Come hang at mine later and I'll give a full report.

That's so typical of Ford's mom. Ms Sutter would offer the Dark Lord himself a slice of pie if he showed up at her door. But I wish she'd rein in the niceness just a smidge where the Millers are concerned.

I wonder what Ford will find when he gets there with his pie. The place is bound to be crammed full of tacky furniture. I mean, their last house in Burden Falls was a nice red-brick Victorian, which they ruined by taking out the feature bay windows and putting in ground-to-rafter

tinted glass, like an ugly grey stripe obscuring all the character of the house. That tells you all you need to know about their taste. I got a good (virtual) tour of the place after the Miller twins threw a New Year's Eve party there and basically livestreamed the whole night.

How long have the Miller twins known they'd be moving into the manor? Before I did, that's for damn sure. I'm surprised they haven't taken the opportunity to rub it in my face at school. Although there's still plenty of time for that, I guess.

I picture Freya in my room now, overseeing some minions while they paint the walls gold. And then ice-cold dread washes through me.

Painting . . .

*Shit!*

I forgot to finish painting over the mural in the pavilion. My whole gory personal history is laid out on its walls. If the Millers see it, they'll think I've lost my mind. Not only that, but they'll probably do one of their gross little online ghost stories about it, and let the whole world see inside my head.

No. I can't let them do that.

I need to go back.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Uncle Ty is watching *Jeopardy!* when I get back to the cottage after my shift. I pop my head into the living room.

*'This South African city has the nickname Jacaranda City.'*

'What is Cape Town?' Uncle Ty says, eyes still glued to the screen, even though he must've heard me come in.

'What is Pretoria, actually.'

Now he does glance up. 'Oh yeah?' His smirk says he thinks I'm wrong, but it also tells me he's forgotten all about storming out after yesterday's bombshell. At least one of us has.

*'What is Pretoria?'* the contestant says.

*'That is correct!'*

I turn to go, and Uncle Ty laughs and throws a cushion at the back of my head. 'Hey, are you home for dinner? I'm making risotto.'

I pause. It's been quite a while since Uncle Ty bothered to cook, and he's phenomenal at it.

'How come?' I ask warily.

‘To make up for last night’s shitty revelation,’ he says. I guess he hasn’t forgotten. ‘I’m sorry it came out that way.’

I nod. I’m still mad about the situation, but it’s shitty for all of us, not just me. ‘Sure, I’ll force down some of your awful risotto. But I’ll go hang out at Ford’s after dinner, if that’s OK?’

‘I’m not your boss.’ Uncle Ty waves me away, his focus already recaptured by the quiz.

I tell myself it’s a nice evening to be out walking, the ground crisp with frost, and the stars overhead seeming ten times brighter than normal. Truthfully, it’s cold as balls, and I’d much rather be driving, but Bessie didn’t want to play tonight. I probably need the walk after wolfing two helpings of Uncle Ty’s risotto, anyway.

The path along the river’s edge is the most direct route back home – to the manor, I mean. It follows the river a half-mile or so, then cuts away and joins the road uphill to the lane where Thorn Manor and Ford’s house sit.

I reach an oak tree with an evil eye carved into its trunk, the carving grown shallow and faint with age. This tree marks a point where the river widens round three enormous rocks known as Copper Bell Dam. It’s hard to say whether the rocks were placed there intentionally to slow the water’s course or just dumped by a glacier passing through, but the dam looks like it’s been here since the dawn of time. You feel like you’ve stepped into something not quite real at the dam, as if passing the carved tree takes you through some invisible barrier.

It's a shadowy place, even in summer when the sun is shining. Now, with the crackle of frost trying to settle in the trees, something about it sets my teeth on edge. Like I'm not alone, except there isn't anyone else nearby. I'm sure I'm just imagining another set of footsteps echoing mine, or maybe it's the sound bouncing from the rocks or the water, but I find my steps quickening all the same.

They say the Red Road Witches used to gather here to cast spells over the water, ringing their copper bells to keep evil at bay. Some people still hang bells from the tree branches leaning out over the water, and carve evil-eye symbols onto their trunks, like the one I just passed.

But there are hundreds of eyes in Burden Falls – carved into almost any markable surface. There was even one inside the manor, hidden away in a dark corner of the cellar. I have no idea how the eye-carving started, but pretty much everyone does it. You stop noticing them after a while.

I hurry on along the bank until I have to veer away from the river, then make the trek uphill to where the manor sits. I shake out my hands as I trudge the last few yards to Ford's house. The scars on my palms sing a sharp protest at the movement.

Ford's cottage sits right across the lane from the manor's east gate, and I'm glad when I reach it and see the lights shining out from the windows.

'Ava, love!' Ford's mom answers my knock at the door as if we haven't seen each other in years.

'Hi, Ms Sutter. How's it going?'