



THE
DEATHLY
GRIMM

A NOVEL



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PROLOGUE

BEFORE THE CURSE

The first snowfall of the season was a dangerous time for a ten-year-old girl to sleepwalk in the Forest Grimm. To her grandmother's knowledge, this was the only occasion Clara had ever walked while asleep. If it had been a habit, Marlène Thurn might have bolted the front door of their cottage shut or sent Clara to bed wearing a fur mantle, sheepskin boots, and woolen stockings.

As it was, the wisp of a girl was bare-legged, with only the linen of her nightgown to protect her from the bitter cold. Clara had fallen asleep curled up on a fleece in front of the kitchen hearth, and she looked so warm and contented that Marlène hadn't wanted to disturb her. The old woman had nodded off herself, her head tucked against a wing of an arm-chair mere inches away.

Clara's mother and father were dozing in another room, so when the snow swirled inside past the open door and tapped Marlène's shoulder with its frosty fingers, only she had awakened to find Clara missing.

Marlène searched the cottage to see if the child might be elsewhere, and when she wasn't, she grabbed a shawl from a peg, shoved her feet into slippers, and raced outside. She didn't dare wake anyone else. The Grimm wolf had been prowling around

these parts, and Marlène had a careful relationship with the creature.

Once a year, the old woman allowed the wolf to snatch one of her lambs for a meal—a sad loss for the family, but Marlène considered the beast’s feelings as well, and it must have been hard for a predator to be bonded to a shepherdess. It was only fair that the wolf reap some of the benefits, especially since Marlène had the ability to slip into its skin and possess its body at will.

Marlène considered doing so now. Would she be able to find Clara faster? But what if Clara’s father or their farmhand *did* awaken and bring weapons? If anyone killed the wolf, they would also unwittingly kill Marlène. She had a better chance of protecting Clara and the wolf as a woman.

No one knew about the bond Marlène shared with the animal that sealed their fates together. It was safer that way. When Marlène’s family of Anivoyantes had been massacred in a foreign land, she’d learned an unforgettable lesson: most people feared magic, especially when it presented itself as seers who wore the skins of wolves. Alone, she’d escaped to Grimm’s Hollow, and all she claimed to be now was a simple fortune-teller.

Following her granddaughter’s footprints in the snow, Marlène dashed past the herb garden, the north sheep pasture, the woven fence, the hedgerow, and beyond it, the frozen stream that divided her farmland from the Forest Grimm.

Her heart thumped when she spied large canine paw prints that merged with Clara’s tracks. She hastened, willing the wolf not to harm her only grandchild. But no amount of inward pleading could penetrate the wolf’s mind. Marlène’s bond didn’t include that ability.

At last, Marlène clapped eyes on Clara. Twenty feet away, the child stood in a moonlit clearing beside a lone aspen with only

six golden leaves clinging to its branches. If only there had been seven, they would have made a lucky number.

Clara's expression was distant, her gaze unfocused, her mind lost in a dream. Perhaps a nightmare. For that's how this moment felt to Marlène—because looming a few feet to Clara's left, opposite the skeletal aspen, stood the Grimm wolf.

The girl and the beast looked eerily disproportionate, Clara being smaller than other children her age, and the wolf twice as large as common breeds.

The old woman froze, as transfixed as Clara, unsure what to do. The Grimm wolf stared down at the girl, and while it didn't bare its fangs, the tip of its tail elevated slightly, indicating its uncertainty about the child. Perhaps it was trying to determine if she was a threat or a tasty midnight snack.

What must have confused the wolf most was the fleece Clara was holding—the same fleece she'd lain on by the hearth. It gave her all the more appearance of an offering come willingly from the Thurn sheep farm.

Marlène strained to breathe. She couldn't stop thinking about two fortune-telling cards she'd drawn over and over for Clara: the Midnight Forest for a forbidden choice, and the Fanged Creature for an untimely death. Clara's fate seemed to be playing out this very night.

No, it can't. Not yet.

"Adiah." Marlène spoke to the wolf, and it turned its great head. Marlène had never ascertained if the wolf knew the name she had given her. Wolves couldn't be domesticated like dogs. The only thing Marlène could trust was how the Grimm wolf had always tolerated her presence. They were halves of a strange whole even she couldn't comprehend fully after all these years. "Adiah, come to me."

The wolf didn't understand the command, but perhaps the primal gesture of Marlène's open hand might stir some buried instinct to press forward.

It didn't. The wolf looked away and fixed its large brown eyes on Clara again. Thankfully, the girl didn't return the stare directly, but if she were to awaken, she most certainly would, and the wolf would attack.

Marlène made herself look small, bowed her head, stooped her posture, and tentatively advanced five steps, cringing as the snow crunched beneath her slippers. On her sixth step, a low growl reverberated from the Grimm wolf. Marlène halted.

She knew what she must do—slip into the skin of the wolf. Doing so should be safe now. No one had followed her. No one would try to kill the beast.

Still, she hesitated. Marlène had never determined how quickly her spirit could leave her body and take possession of the wolf. Until now, she'd never had reason to time it. Could she shift fast enough to protect Clara? Any sudden movement might provoke the wolf.

The Grimm wolf growled again, throwing the sound at Marlène, as if it could sense her intentions. It curled back its lips and bared its fangs at Clara.

The girl's emerald eyes began to focus. Frown lines formed between her brows. She staggered, disoriented, and addressed the wolf: "I-I'm looking for the boy in the forest. He's very cold. I've brought him my fleece."

The Grimm wolf's jaws gaped wide. It snarled and lunged.

Clara screamed.

Marlène released her spirit. Her body collapsed. The world went black. Silent.

Then color and sound burst into her awareness. Her mind

raced to discern her new perspective. Blurring vision. Rushing cold. She hurtled through the air. A shriek pierced her eardrums.

She crashed into something and fell on all fours, stunned by her own massive size. She wasn't yet acclimated to the body of the wolf. Her open mouth pressed against flesh, where a pulse thundered. Clara's neck. Her jugular vein.

It took all of Marlène's willpower to prevent her jaws from snapping shut. She had no desire to kill her granddaughter, but her spirit was still fresh in the wolf, and the wolf had been in the midst of fulfilling its strongest animal instinct.

Marlène forced herself off the girl, who lay stunned and terror-stricken. Tears welled in Clara's eyes. Her body shook violently.

Marlène lowered her tail and flattened her ears, but Clara didn't understand the signs of submission. To make matters worse, no red rampion was growing nearby. If Marlène could have eaten some, she would have been given a human voice to speak soothing words.

Clara regained her composure and scrambled to her feet. She grabbed the fleece she'd dropped in the scuffle and darted her gaze to the forest. A look of confusion crossed her face. Was she remembering her dream?

Marlène backtracked to the trees surrounding the clearing, showing Clara she would leave her alone now. *Go home*, she thought. *There is no boy out in the cold. You are the only child who is freezing.*

Clara bit her lower lip, which was swiftly turning blue. Hesitating, she glanced about her again, and gasped. "Grandmère?"

Marlène cursed inwardly. She hadn't anticipated Clara seeing her human body, especially in its spiritless state—not breathing but mystically preserved, as if frozen in time.

Clara rushed over and shook her grandmother's lifeless arms. "Why won't you wake up?"

Marlène deliberated. If she pulled her spirit from the wolf, the beast would be free to attack again. Yet if she didn't, how long would Clara remain in the forest, worrying over her grandmother's body? If Marlène delayed much longer, Clara would catch her death out here. Her two-card fate could still come to pass tonight.

Marlène sprinted across the clearing, bolting toward what she knew lay a half mile in the distance—a deep ravine with sheer walls, difficult to climb, even with sharp claws.

Once she reached the edge, she skidded to a halt. She scouted for the best place to take a tumble, one that wouldn't kill the wolf—and her human self within it. She spied a promising path downward with fewer rocks and patches of soft moss peeking out from the snow.

Remember my one wish, she thought, a sort of prayer to the Book of Fortunes. She'd made that wish when she was twenty-five, a newcomer of two years to Grimm's Hollow and pregnant with the babe who would become Clara's mother. *Protect my bloodline*, she added, craving reassurance in case this ended badly.

Of course, the book wasn't there to give its answer, and even if it were, *Sortes Fortunae* may not have written a reply. No one dared to petition the book twice. Doing so would be tempting fate, which was most forbidden.

All Marlène could do was hope for the best as she threw herself into the ravine and pulled her spirit from the Grimm wolf.

Blackness overcame her again. When she regained consciousness, she felt as if she'd been sucked into a whirlpool, beaten against a riverbed, and spat out on hard, dry land. Through her bond, she felt the wolf's injuries. She'd wounded the poor creature viciously.

“Grandmère?” A fresh sob burst out of Clara, overflowing with relief. “I thought you were dead!”

“Oh, *ma petite chérie*.” Marlène sat up and held her granddaughter fiercely. “I fainted from seeing that wolf.”

“It was a *Grimm* wolf,” Clara said, shuddering.

“Indeed?” Marlène brushed snowflakes from Clara’s dark hair. Villagers in Grimm’s Hollow spoke of Grimm wolves as if there were many in these woods. But Adiah was the only wolf of her kind here. Bonded with Marlène, Adiah had followed her from their homeland to these forested mountains years ago. “However did you survive?”

“I don’t know.” Clara’s forehead puckered. “The wolf just ran away. I hope it didn’t go after the boy.”

“Boy?” Marlène recalled too late what Clara had murmured while sleepwalking.

“He’s traveling here, and his clothes aren’t warm enough. His father says they must hurry. Winter came too soon. I want to give him my fleece.”

“You are a sweet girl.” Marlène rubbed Clara’s arm. “But that was only a dream.”

“No, he’s real. I saw him yesterday before the snow started falling.”

“Yesterday? But you never left the cottage.”

“I saw him tonight, I mean. But for him it was yesterday.” Clara scratched her head. “It’s confusing.”

“I see.”

“His name is . . .” Clara sighed. “Well, I’ve forgotten it.”

“Ah, there’s the catch—the true sign of a dream. They are always missing pieces, you see.”

“But—”

“Come, now.” Marlène pushed her aching body to its feet and scooped up her granddaughter. She may have been old and sore,

but she had always remained strong. “I’m going to make us a nice pot of tea.” She didn’t mention all the strong herbs she planned to steep into it.

Clara needed to forget this night, Marlène determined. She was a curious child, one who had too many questions and sought answers at any cost. Marlène didn’t want her drawing any conclusions about the Grimm wolf, especially if they were true.

And so it was that Clara never remembered the one time she had sleepwalked as a child, nor the cause for her frostbitten toes, nor her first thoughts of a boy named Axel who was about to arrive in Grimm’s Hollow and change her life forever.

Fortuitously, he survived the bitter cold and never crossed paths with the Grimm wolf. At least not on that journey.

As for Marlène, although she was a seer, it wasn’t until many years later that she pieced together what Clara had accomplished that night. The dream Clara had while sleepwalking was, in fact, a vision. Not a vision of the future, like Marlène had when she read someone’s fortune, but a vision of the past.

This was the first demonstration of Clara’s gift—proof that some of the magic in Marlène’s bloodline had passed on. But even among Marlène’s slaughtered family, Clara’s gift was rare. Seers who could see into the past were known as Voyantes of the Bygone, and unlike Anivoyantes, they didn’t shift into animals. Still, magic was magic, and people were threatened the most by forms they understood the least.

Marlène wished Clara’s gift had never manifested. That way no one would have cause to endanger her life. Clara’s fate was already spelled out, but that didn’t mean her destiny should be encouraged.

As the years passed, Marlène’s only consolation was that Clara’s magic remained dormant. By and large, it stayed so until Clara’s two-card fate played out, even though Marlène hadn’t

foreseen everything that would precede and follow her granddaughter's death.

She didn't know the boy Clara had wished to warm with her fleece would grow up to fall in love with her. And when Clara died, he would use a spindle to plunge red rampion into her heart. It would give her back her life, and with it, greater access to her magic.

But Marlène still had cause to fear, for the fortune-telling cards revealed a new story for the girl, and Clara's flourishing magic would only make it more dangerous and heartbreaking.

A troubling fate also awaited Marlène, made all the more real now that Clara had her life back. Marlène began to understand how their destinies would tangle.

And Clara's destiny—Clara's life—was one Marlène swore to die protecting.



CHAPTER 1

SIX YEARS LATER

I stand outside the village meeting hall, perspiration soaking the linen of my day dress as I await the call to be admitted into the inquisition. I wish Grandmère were here. I could use her courage. Still ill and barely coherent, she's the only company I've had this week. The council hasn't allowed me to see any of my friends. They don't want us comparing and later corroborating one another's stories about what happened in the Forest Grimm.

Beside me, Karl Wagner, a middle-aged farmer, serves as my guard. Tan lines surround the wrinkles radiating from his eyes. He removes his straw hat and rubs the mark it left on his brow. "My Geraldine," he hisses, his voice warbling with grief. "Did you ever see her in the forest?"

My chest sinks. Since I've returned, he isn't the first person to ask about a Lost loved one. "I'm sorry. I didn't see many villagers." I won't tell him about the ones I found dead, most of them unrecognizable. The ones my mother killed.

What little light is left in Karl's eyes extinguishes.

"Perhaps your wife is still alive," I say. The old Clara would have sounded more hopeful. But this Clara, the Clara who killed her mother and brought back a book that couldn't break the curse, can only offer him weak reassurance.

One of the doors to the meeting hall cracks open. Karl turns his empty eyes on me. "It's time."

Before I can take a calming breath, the double doors open wide. It's a sweltering day, and the stench of sweat and wood polish hits me square in the face, along with the gazes of over fifty villagers sitting in the pews.

This must be what a bride feels like on her wedding day. Except if the aisle I'm about to walk down led to an altar, it would be for a slaughter.

No one will believe the truth. I can already see it in my best friend Henni's eyes, bloodshot from crying, and the look Axel gives me, strained with worry.

"Clara Thurn, come forward and take your seat," Herr Oswald, chairman of the governing council, commands. He smooths his thinning hair with bony fingers and indicates the chair, positioned to face the assembly. To its right sit the five members of the council.

I walk the aisle, feeling my doom descend, a strange sort of fear since I've been confronted by far more dangerous people in the forest.

Then why am I so afraid?

The chair is unforgivingly hard and wobbles as I shift to sit taller. *Look confident for Henni's sake.* This inquisition has, overall, been targeted at her. The gratitude first shown us when we returned from the forest was rescinded the moment Henni's one wish on the Book of Fortunes failed to break the curse on Grimm's Hollow.

It wasn't enough that we *partially* lifted the curse, the result of my one wish gone awry. Because of it, more rain falls. More crops flourish. But what everyone really wants is for their loved ones to return home from the forest. And for that, the curse must fully break.

Herr Oswald sits in the center of the councilors behind a long table. He dons a pair of wire-framed spectacles and peruses his notes. “Clara, since the day the curse fell three years ago, you and your friends, Axel Furst and Henrietta Dantzer, are the only people to ever enter and return from the Forest Grimm.”

“Aside from Ella Dantzer, Fiora Winther, and Fiora’s children, Hansel and Gretel,” I reply, spotting Ella and Fiora in the crowd. Ella is seated next to Henni, her hand over her sister’s, and Fiora is two rows behind. Hansel and Gretel appear to be absent, which is a relief. This is no occasion for children.

“True, true,” Herr Oswald concedes. “Although we consider them to be among the Lost, thankfully found, unlike you, Axel, and Henni. I believe we can agree you three were never Lost?”

I nod, not wanting to hash out how we actually became lost—though only lost in our travels, not Lost to ourselves. Being Lost like that changed Ella into Cinderella the poisoner, Fiora into Rapunzel with miles of strangling hair, and Hansel and Gretel into cannibalistic captors.

“Very well. Back to the matter at hand.” Herr Oswald’s voice is neither kind nor condescending. He can rule pragmatically as the closest person we have to a mayor. “Will you explain how you three accomplished the feat?”

“I can try.” I clear my throat, stalling. Henni and Axel have already been interrogated. How much would they have shared? “Before my mother went Lost, she made me a cape.”

Henni rounds her eyes. Axel shakes his head slightly. They didn’t share about the cape’s magic, then—how my mother dyed it with protective red rampion, which allowed me entrance to the forest. They achieved the same with a scarf and a kerchief I made from my cape.

“The cape is vibrant red, and I hoped my mother could find me

if I was wearing it,” I go on, improvising a new excuse. “Perhaps the forest let me enter because it sensed that connection to her. She had already been welcomed, when I had not been, not until then.”

“And how do you account for Henni and Axel being welcomed?” Herr Oswald asks.

“We traveled together, so perhaps the forest viewed us as an entity.”

Hazel Roth, a councilwoman, harrumphs, her frown accentuating her double chins.

“Isn’t that explanation a bit far-fetched?” Herr Oswald asks.

“Possibly.” I fold my hands in my lap to hold down my trembling knees. “I’m only speculating, sir. But my best guess is the forest finally wanted the Book of Fortunes to be found, so it gave us passage. It must have wanted all three of us to accomplish the task.”

Herr Oswald peers at the other council members, and as there are no more harrumphs among them, he moves on to his next points of interrogation: where I found the book, how we discovered the Lost Ones we brought home, and how we managed to come home at all.

I’m honest about the book’s location near a subterranean waterfall, as well as how we navigated the forest following rivers and streams. As for Ella, Fiora, and Hansel and Gretel, I share how we came upon them, but not how they tried to kill us and likely killed others. They’re innocent of any monstrosity triggered by the forest’s tainted magic.

“So you set out on your journey in search of your mother, Rosamund Thurn,” Herr Oswald continues. “How did that search end?”

I see myself as a ghost hovering over my own dead body, a terrible gash at my neck and blood blooming from the wound. “I

found her but couldn't save her." Axel's and Henni's expressions are pensive but supportive. I trust they haven't betrayed the killer my mother was, deadlier than any of the Lost we encountered. "She was living in an abandoned fortress and . . ." Axel nods at me. Henni's eyes well with fresh tears. ". . . it was unstable. It collapsed and buried her in the rubble."

Herr Oswald studies me for a drawn-out moment, his wiry brows lifted. "If that is true, child, you have our deepest condolences."

I sink a little in my chair. Perhaps I'll get out of this inquisition unscathed—and more importantly, my friends will.

"Now about the villagers you didn't come across. Are we to believe, of the sixty-seven villagers who have gone Lost, you only met with five?"

"The forest is vast, sir. A difficult place to survive in, even when you've been admitted. We barely had food to eat. Deer hid from us. Fish were scarcely found. Many villagers must have already . . ." I lock gazes with Karl Wagner. His face is haunted, devastated, a reflection of so many. Everyone has a Lost loved one. "They would have had great trouble staying alive."

"Yet you found no graves, no markers from other villagers who might have buried them?"

"No graves, sir."

"Nothing in the trees, then?" he prods, one eye squinting.

Why is he mentioning the trees? Someone must have revealed the truth about them. A quick glance at Henni confirms it was her. *Sorry*, she mouths, though she has no need to apologize. We weren't allowed to correspond, to decide what to share or keep secret.

Unfortunately, the more bizarre our stories are, the more unlikely the council is to believe the fundamental reason we're here: to explain why Henni couldn't break the curse.

“We did see faces in the trees,” I answer reluctantly. “It was as if the dead had been absorbed in them.”

A woman in the crowd gasps.

“But they could not be identified,” I rush on. “They might have been fallen soldiers, like in the legend.” The legend no one really believes in. A scary story shared when people gather around hearth fires and want a thrill. It speaks of a great battle that took place long ago, in which every dead soldier became a tree, and those trees became the forest.

I believe that story now.

Herr Oswald gives a small grunt. “That brings us to Henni’s wish ceremony.” My heart gives a hard thud. “You say the forest allowed you entrance because it wanted the Book of Fortunes to be found. One would therefore assume it wanted the curse to be broken. How do you explain why it wasn’t?”

Henni clasps her hands, as if in prayer. Axel leans forward, his elbows on his knees.

“I’m unsure how to answer, as I don’t know what Henni wished for.” This time my words are calculated. I’ve prepared myself for this line of inquiry, and I’ll begin by throwing a village law in the faces of the council: “Sharing what one wishes for is forbidden, after all. Henni would never tempt fate by breaking that rule, even for me.”

Herr Oswald knows as well as I do that she would have wished to break the curse. Henni’s too good-natured to do otherwise, being the only person of age in Grimm’s Hollow who hasn’t made her one wish, the only one the village can depend upon to end their suffering.

Herr Oswald levels a glare at me. “Very well, then, Clara. Recount for us what you witnessed that day.”

“Do you mean from the time *you* let me go behind the pavilion curtain to join Henni?” I answer, careful to keep my tone

courteous. This was another breaking of customs, and Herr Oswald was the one who allowed it.

His face reddens as the other council members grumble. “Continue,” he says past thinning lips.

“Henni was in a state of shock. She said she’d kept making her wish, but every time she opened the book for an answer, *Sortes Fortunae* kept turning to a spot where a page was missing. I saw for myself the remnants where it had been torn out.”

“Then you didn’t see any words on the page?” Herr Oswald squints one eye again, like he’s trying to hint at what someone else revealed.

Axel wouldn’t have said anything. He doesn’t even know what happened. I haven’t been allowed to speak with him. And Henni wouldn’t have exposed that I did something forbidden.

I made a second wish on *Sortes Fortunae*. Second wishes are unspoken of, unforgivable, the worst way a person can tempt fate. Nothing is more sacred than the Book of Fortunes, especially now that it’s finally back in Grimm’s Hollow.

But when I made my second wish, I wasn’t thinking about laws or blasphemy. I’d felt strangely bold and untouchable—even angry. I was someone who’d died and come back again, someone who’d killed her own mother, and I wasn’t going to allow the curse to remain unbroken because of a missing page. So that’s what I wished for:

I wish to know where your missing page is. The one meant for Henni.

“When I found Henni, no words were written in the book,” I answer carefully.

“And *after* you found her?”

I briefly close my eyes, and the magicked green ink of *Sortes Fortunae* seems to burn through my lids, a blazing reminder of the answer it wrote on a page that *wasn’t* missing:

*Only one page holds the secret to finally restoring peace.
Only one person is to blame for breaking it.
Both must be found, for one has the other,
And together they hide in the Forest Grimm.*

“The book made it clear that it wouldn’t give Henni an answer until the missing page was restored.”

Henni breaks into a coughing fit. Her eyes are overbright as she stabs me with a look that says I’ve confessed too much.

“And how exactly did the book make this clear?” Herr Oswald demands.

Henni coughs again. Herr Oswald motions for Karl Wagner. “Escort Miss Dantzer from the room.”

“I’ve told you already,” I reply, trying to stall him. “The book is missing a page. It’s simple enough to draw the conclusion that it needs to be whole to answer Henni.”

What I can’t explain, even to myself, is why the book answered *me*, though I believe in my bones that if I’d asked to break the curse, I would have been met with the same missing page.

I’m convinced the curse won’t be broken until the person who murdered Bren Zimmer is found and the page is returned. That’s what the riddle must mean. Whoever brought about the curse by using our sacred book to make a murderous wish to kill the prominent blacksmith of our village is in the forest with the missing page, and they need to be brought to justice.

Karl reaches Henni and prods her back.

“She isn’t leaving.” Ella clutches her sister’s hand. “Clara is the last one being questioned. Henni has every right to hear her testimony.”

Councilwoman Hazel Roth raises her double chins. “It is *we* who give permission to stay, and Henrietta’s time is up.”

Ella looks to her parents for help, but they urge her to let

Henni leave. I see the fear in their eyes. They don't want to make matters worse for their youngest daughter. I've been told Henni was questioned for three days. Shy Henni, sweet Henni, barely sixteen-years-old Henni, was relentlessly interrogated over something that wasn't her fault.

It's more than ridiculous; it's insulting. What does the council imagine her ulterior motive could be? Or any of ours? They're acting as though we returned to Grimm's Hollow, Book of Fortunes in hand, to bring our village into utter ruin.

Ella releases her sister's hand, and Henni rises. I ache to see how wilted she looks, especially when she'd grown so much bolder on our journey.

"She's done something to offend the book!" a woman calls. "Now the forest is angrier! I'll never see my son again!"

A man whips a finger at her. "She's made the curse worse!"

"What? No!" Henni blanches. "I *tried* to make a wish."

"She needs to be punished!" yells another man.

I jerk up from my chair. "She needs to be *protected*! She's the only one who can break the curse. No one else will come of age for another year."

More shouts erupt. More people cry for Henni to be reprimanded. They weep over their Lost Ones. They rage that Ella and Fiora, with her illegitimate children, have returned, but not anyone else. They see our coming back as a conspiracy. The unbroken curse is proof.

"Order, order!" Herr Oswald calls, but no one listens. Everyone is on their feet now. Karl struggles to escort Henni outside while villagers elbow closer. Fists clench. Spittle flies. Faces redden.

I bolt for Henni, but two council members hold me back while the others struggle to calm the assembly. I watch, open-mouthed, as the chaos intensifies. My once gentle neighbors,

farmers and craftsmen, millers and tradesmen, morph into a terrible mob. If only they could see themselves, the monsters they're becoming, worse than any Lost Ones.

"Stop! Please!" No one hears me. Not until I hurl my chair against the wall. "You're acting no better than murderers! Did you forget why our village was cursed in the first place? And that was due to one murderer. What do you think the forest will do if you all become killers?"

Heads lower. People shuffle back. Not everyone has the grace to look ashamed, but I've at least given them pause, and that brief time allows Karl to finish escorting Henni from the meeting hall. Ella and her parents swiftly follow. Axel weaves his way to me and pulls me into his arms. Only then do I realize I'm shaking and clawing at the rose-red strip of wool I wear around my wrist. My remembrance of my mother from the Tree of the Lost.

I can't have any more death on my hands.

Over Axel's shoulder, I take in the crowd through my blurred-hot eyes. If any of them *did* harm Henni, would I hold them as blameless as my mother? The curse drove her to madness until she was no longer Rosamund, but Briar Rose, a blood-sucking monster, the Fanged Creature my grandmother had foreseen in her cards.

I couldn't save her, but I can save this village. If I do, maybe I'll find some redemption. Maybe my mother will.

I *will* return to the forest. I'll discover the murderer. And I'll bring that person back—and with them, the missing page. I'll save Henni, and Henni will break the curse.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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