



CHAPTER 1
DELPHA

THERE WAS A SWEET SPOT IN DELPHA MCGILL'S week, between the hustle of school and the hard work during the weekend, that had no floors to sweep, no leaky faucets to tighten, no homework to riddle, and no lawn to mow. It was her time, and she fully intended to spend it in a blissful expanse of quiet, working on a secret whittling project in her bedroom. *Finally*. She started up the staircase in the hall, taking two steps at a time, careful to avoid the bad spots in the wood. A leaky roof meant rotted steps, and fixing shingles wasn't something she'd worked up the courage to tackle yet.

"Delpha, darlin'?"

Delpha winced at her mama's voice, her fingers clutching the worn bannister. A crack in the ceiling blinked out a tear that splattered

her nose as she froze in place. *She can't know you're fixin' to make a wand*, Delpha reminded herself. *She can't read minds*. “Yes, ma'am?”

“Go into Mamaw's closet and bring out the three flower garden quilts. Careful not to get 'em dirty, please.”

Delpha's stomach instantly churned. She had avoided her grandmother's room since Mamaw passed away a month ago, even though they needed the space.

It wasn't the smell. It wasn't even the sad memories. It was the *quiet*. Mama knew danged well why Delpha didn't want to go in. Delpha had enough depressing empty spots in her life, and ignoring this new one seemed like a good idea, no matter what Mama's bedside copy of *Embracing Loss* claimed. “Do I have to?”

“Yes, and you'd best watch your tone! Thank you, darlin'.”

Delpha sighed, then held her breath and darted into the shadowy room, rushing past the empty bed and her grandmother's walker to the closet. She scowled. Her mother planned to sell the quilts to the Hearn family's Appalachian Culture Museum near downtown Howler's Hollow, where tourists would coo over the intricate stitchwork and fork over their cash. Mama had put it off for days, and Delpha had secretly hoped she wouldn't go through with it. It was like they were trading a part of her grandmother away. But she and Mama needed the money to keep the lights on, especially after paying for the funeral.

Just get it done, Delpha told herself. *Don't overthink it*. She yanked the string for the closet light and stood on her tiptoes, reaching for a stack of folded quilts. As she eased them from the shelf, something heavy and brown slid off the top of the stack and clocked her senseless, right across the forehead.

Delpha lay dazed on the wooden floorboards for a moment, constellations swirling before her eyes. A tender spot throbbed just above her hairline. She muttered dark things under her breath and pushed herself upright. *What was that?*

"Delpha?" her mother called. "Everything all right in there, baby girl?"

"Yeah, fine," Delpha replied. She reached up and tested the tender spot. A furious bump the size of a sparrow's egg greeted her fingertips. "Be even better if Mama would use her healing magic for once," Delpha muttered to herself. But that was out of the question. Magic was strictly forbidden in the McGill household, bruises or not. It had been ever since her mama's siblings had been killed decades ago in a spell gone bad. Delpha's grandmother had whispered muddled stories to Delpha about "the old witchin' days" sometimes when Mama wasn't listening.

But Mamaw was gone now. People got old. They got dementia and died, even old witches. If there was one thing in the world reliable as rain, it was that everybody left eventually. Delpha breathed

deep, feeling the tight clamp of sadness in her chest. It was just her and Mama.

Presently, she twisted around this way and that to find what had fallen on her head. Cracked with age, a thick leather book lay splayed open beside her like a bird shot from the sky, mid-flight. Delpha's brows furrowed. She squatted and gathered it together, her tight boot-laces creaking. Flipping it right side up, her heart jittered in her chest.

In neat letters, tooled into the leather cover, were the words *Macgeil Booke o' Spelles*. Delpha blinked in disbelief.

"You had it all along, Mamaw, you old devil," Delpha whispered. She'd spent dozens of afternoons combing her grandmother's bookshelves when she was little, looking for her family's book of spells, curiosity burning a hole in her. Magic had sounded exciting. Forbidden magic had been even more tempting. She'd even sneaked up to scour the moth-riddled attic once, though the rafters of the old cabin were as unstable and off-limits as McGill magic. And now the spellbook was here, in her lap. Leave it to crafty Mamaw to put it somewhere casual, knowing Delpha would never look any place so boring.

The book called to her now, and every atom of Delpha's body thrummed back in response. This book knew her. She knew *it*, too. It lived in late-night arguments between her grandmother and Mama, atop the laps of grim, sharp-eyed old crones in yellowed family photographs, and—most powerfully—in the lonely corners of Delpha's

own imagination. Passed down from firstborn to firstborn, the book kept record of the homemade charms and hexes of cousins, aunties, and sisters across several centuries. Delpha's long fingers trembled as they traced the binding.

The McGill spellbook.

"Delpha? If we don't carry those quilts to the Hearn's museum soon, it'll close! Shake a leg!"

Quiet as a deer, Delpha slid a threadbare pillowcase from the linen trunk and nestled the spellbook inside it. She gripped it in her hands a few seconds, wishing she could read it *right then*.

If she could study magic on the sly, things might start looking up for her and Mama. Maybe Delpha could fix things up around the house with magic. Maybe there were even spells for money! They might have plenty, for once.

"Comin', Mama."

The weight of Delpha's secret tugged at her gut, promising to rearrange her life nine ways to Sunday if she'd let it. Delpha slid the wrapped book back onto the shelf and cracked her knuckles. "I'll be back later tonight," she promised the book in a low voice.

She gathered the quilts up neatly, then hurried out to Mama's rusty old Buick.