

WITCHLINGS



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CHAPTER ONE

ANYTHING BUT A SPARE

IT WAS THE NIGHT of the Black Moon Ceremony, and the very last thing Seven Salazar wanted was to be a Spare witch. Now that she was twelve, she'd be placed in her coven, but like every ceremony before, tonight three witches would be left over: *Spare*s. Nobody ever wanted to be a Spare. Seven had done everything she could think of: studied for her C.A.T. exams, attended every witching social event she could fit on her calendar. She'd even joined the toad racing team and gotten stuck with the slowest, crankiest toad of the lot. At least his name, Edgar Allan Toad, *sort of* made up for it. But only sort of.

It wasn't like Seven *had* to do all those things either. Everyone in her year got to participate in the Black Moon Ceremony, of course, but it was a long-standing belief among Witchlings that the harder you studied and

worked, the more likely you were to get into one of the *cool* covens.

Seven tied her combat boots and slipped on her oversized purple hoodie before securing her pointy hat on her curly hair with some pins. They'd give her a giant black ceremonial robe when she got to the town square, but it was thin and the night was cold. She didn't want to freeze her buns off. She shot a quick text to her best friend, Poppy, telling her how excited she was for tonight.

"Duh," Poppy wrote back. "And me too! Can't wait to be coven sisters!"

Seven smiled at the message as she walked into the kitchen, where her mother, Fox, was putting the celebration cake in the fridge to cool.

"Sev, you've got your amulet, right?" Fox wiped her slender fingers on her apron and let down her curly red hair.

"It's only the whole point of tonight, Mom," Seven said, holding up the amulet that hung around her neck. Later that night, it would light up with the same color as the other witches in her coven. *Please, please let it turn purple.* The color of House Hyacinth, the coven Seven and Poppy had dreamed of being placed into for, oh, just about all their lives.

"Remember, things will work out okay, no matter what happens tonight," Fox said.

"Easy for you to say," grumbled Seven, looking at the bright aquamarine pendant that hung from the necklace Fox

always wore. The blue stone signified House of Stars, one of the most popular covens.

Seven would have a much better chance of achieving her biggest dream, becoming a witching-world-famous journalist, if she was in one of the powerful covens, like her mom. It was pretty much the opposite of being a Spare. Because being a Spare meant your destiny and magic didn't match up with anyone else's. Being a Spare meant you didn't belong. And Seven wanted desperately to belong.

As Fox moved around the kitchen, the moonlight hit her pendant and seemed to adorn everything around her with shimmering stars. Seven used to wonder if her mother had gotten her name because of her red hair, which she always thought looked lovely with her deep brown skin and freckled face. Seven looked more like her dad, tawny-brown skin and dark curls. But now she knew it was more likely that her mother had been named Fox because of how cunning she was. In their world, the Twelve Towns, a child's name was a prophecy, passed down from a grandmother or the Town Gran, their leader. Seven had no idea what her name meant, not yet anyway. But like any name given in Ravenskill, one day its meaning would be discovered. It was just a matter of time.

Seven began tapping drumbeats on the closest object, trying to match the beat of her fluttering heart.

"You're still nervous about being a Spare?" Seven's father,

Talis, asked, strolling into the room. He was carrying her baby brother, Braucherei, who everyone affectionately called Beefy, because of both his roundness and his unusual strength. He was also unusually tall for his age, already three toadstools long, when Seven had only been two when she was a baby. Beefy pulled on his father's ear, and Talis cringed; the baby's grip could be painful. Seven rubbed her scalp, war flashbacks of Beefy pulling on her curly hair coming back to her.

"I'm not just nervous, Dad. I'm *freaking out*. What if I didn't do enough, or what if the magic gets fudged somehow, or"—Seven dropped her voice to an ominous whisper—"I get placed with Valley?"

Valley Pepperhorn was the literal *worst*. Valley had been bullying Seven for as long as she could remember. Putting weird things in her rucksack, hiding Edgar Allan Toad before a race, or giving dirty looks to Seven and Poppy. She was mean, scary, and came from one of the families on the Hill. They were the wealthiest witches in town and thought they ran everything. Well, they sort of *did* run everything, actually. The only witches they couldn't go up against were the Town Gran and Uncle.

"The chances of that happening are not high, but even if it does, any witch can be a friend if you just give them a chance," her mother said.

Seven held back a snort. Seven was almost positive Valley was a cuco or, at the very least, part gremlin. Her parents

didn't see the way Valley snapped at their professors and didn't seem to care about her schoolwork or how she was always on her own doing sneaky, probably terrible, things. Sometimes, when Seven thought about it, when she thought what her life would be like without Poppy and without her family, she felt almost sad for Valley, who had no friends and the scariest parents ever. But then Valley would do another awful thing and Seven wouldn't feel so bad for her anymore.

None of it would matter after tonight anyway, Seven reminded herself, because once she and Poppy were placed in House Hyacinth, she wouldn't have to deal with Valley ever again.

In all the past Ravenskillian Black Moon Ceremonies she'd researched in preparation, not one showed an example of best friends sorted into different covens. Tiordan Whisperbrew, the famous, coolest reporter of all time and Seven's idol, was sorted into House Hyacinth right alongside their best friend and now owner of the *Squawking Crow* newspaper, Inkpen Killian. They were a dynamic duo, and Seven looked forward to her and Poppy following in their footsteps.

"Come on, then. It's almost midnight, and the Gran will hex us if we're late." Talis grunted as he placed Beefy in his stroller. The baby swung his legs and cooed happily as he was strapped in. When he was done, Talis kneeled down in front of Seven.

"A hug for good luck?" he asked, and Seven smiled as her

dad pulled her into a warm embrace. Talis, short for Talisman, had always been lucky. Seven pinched his cheeks before a test for an extra boost. A brilliant blue pendant hung from his neck, the same color as her mother's. It's how her parents had met, after all: They'd been placed in the same coven as kids.

"No matter what happens tonight, we're all proud of you," said Talis.

Seven scrunched her face at him. "Even Beefy?"

Talis laughed. "Especially Beefy. He has no idea what's going on, but he's still proud of you too. Let's go."

The town square was just across the cemetery, under a bridge and past the Bruised Apple Bookshop, which had been recently taken over by a new family in town. A shadow dashed across the night, and Seven jumped, clutching her mother's arm.

"It was only a rabbit," Fox said softly.

Seven laughed nervously. "I knew that."

She did not know that.

There had been sightings lately. Sightings of a monstuo called the Nightbeast, a giant wolf that ate Witchlings. Or at least that was the rumor at Seven's school. Her teachers had assured them those were all rumors, but she had noticed the older witches around town had begun enchanting their garden gates with stay-away spells, hanging rue from their trellises and above their doors, and panicking on the Ravenskill message boards. All signs that a creature lurked near.

Seven had walked this way to town a thousand times, many times on her own. Tonight, she was grateful to have her family with her on the cold, dark path. Even if it *had* only been a rabbit.

The Salazars arrived just as the other families were gathering around the cascading fountain at the center of town. Lanterns hung from trees around the square in groups of five to symbolize the incoming covens. The light cast a warm orange glow on everything it touched and left a few corners cloaked in shadow.

Poppy and her mother were there—they waved at Seven as she took her place in the circle around the fountain, and Seven felt a surge of happiness. Her oldest friend ran over to her, and it seemed everyone’s eyes followed her. Poppy had always been the more popular of the two of them: cheerful and optimistic to Seven’s anxious determination. But they had always gotten along.

“Seven, I didn’t sleep at all, not one wink,” Poppy said breathlessly.

“Me either. I feel like my eyeballs are gonna explode,” Seven said.

Poppy laughed.

“Cake at my place after,” said Seven.

“Pineapple?” Poppy raised an eyebrow.

“Of course,” Seven said, and smiled. Pineapple-jam cake was her favorite, and her family’s recipe was famous.

The crowd began to shuffle uneasily. It was almost time. “No matter what,” Poppy said hurriedly, “we stay friends. No matter what coven we’re in, deal?” She held her pinkie out for their best-friend swear.

“Deal.” Seven linked her pinkie with Poppy’s, and they swayed their arms to and fro three times. The pair of Witchlings devolved into laughter, the excitement of the ceremony too much to contain.

They hugged, and Poppy ran back to her parents.

The Town Uncle, second-in-command to the Gran, walked around handing each Witchling a long black robe. He was the most powerful witch in Ravenskill after the Gran. Town Grans got their powers from the Stars, while Town Uncles got their powers from nature, and could even speak to animals. The Uncle was charged not only with being the Gran’s right hand in everything she did, but also in being the liaison for and caretaker of all the animals of Ravenskill—an immensely important job indeed. He wore the customary special-occasion robe of the Uncle, adorned with trees and various animals enchanted to scuttle about the fabric, and, of course, the bluebird brooch he received when he became Uncle.

“Here you go, Seven Salazar, correct?” the Uncle asked when he reached Seven.

“Yep.” Seven took the folded black robe as the Uncle crouched down to coo at Beefy.