

Shadow Coven

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Scholastic Press / New York

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Isabelle, S., author.

Title: Shadow coven / S. Isabelle.

Description: First edition. | New York : Scholastic Inc., 2023. | Series: The witchery ; book 2 | Audience: Ages 14 and up | Audience: Grades 10–12 | Summary: After defeating the wolves Jailah, Logan, Iris, and Thalia are ready to pursue their separate studies, but when witches start going missing, and Thalia is convinced her father is responsible, the coven is surrounded by magical and mundane threats and must work together to protect themselves and their magic.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022059707 (print) | LCCN 2022059708 (ebook) | ISBN 9781338758993 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781338759006 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Witches—Juvenile fiction. | Magic—Juvenile fiction. | Friendship—Juvenile fiction. | Schools—Juvenile fiction. | Fantasy. | Adventure stories. | CYAC: Witches—Fiction. | Magic—Fiction. | Friendship—Fiction. | Schools—Fiction. | Fantasy. | BISAC: YOUNG ADULT FICTION / Fantasy / Wizards & Witches | YOUNG ADULT FICTION / Paranormal, Occult & Supernatural | LCGFT: Witch fiction. | Fantasy fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.K554 Sh 2023 (print) | LCC PZ7.1.K554 (ebook) | DDC 813.6 [Fic]—dc23/eng/20221220

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 23 24 25 26 27

Printed in the U.S.A. 37

First edition, September 2023

Book design by Stephanie Yang

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May

As the young deathwitch stepped onto the dark sand, she took in a comforting scent. Fresh citrus fruits. Salty air. Long-spilled blood.

Home.

Sun Harbor sat on a little island in the Florida Keys. The land was covered in headstones, unmanaged and neglected, wrapped in cobwebs and cracks. It was a village whose only inhabitants lived underground. A bleedbay once, thriving on making shows of its tortured witches and their mundane collaborators, the very ones whose bodies now fed the earth. The early morning sun seeped through the heavy clouds, revealing bare trees and yellowed grass. Stony House waited in the distance, a once-glorious manor burdened by years of neglect, its dark paint and gray stone covered in vines. Smaller cottages surrounded it, all touched with the same decay. Like Haelsford, Sun Harbor had its own hex, but unlike the Swamp, the dark magic here felt like a hug to Iris Keaton-Foster.

“Miss?”

Iris, enchanted by the literal ghost town, had forgotten the boatman behind her.

“Thank you,” she said politely. “I’ll see you in a few days.”

While she took this trip yearly and should’ve long ago procured her own boat, or looked up a waterwitchery spell to make the lake solid enough to walk on, a sick little part of her relished the mundane’s expression as he looked upon a land he couldn’t truly see. He only saw a thick black fog and Iris’s back as she disappeared into it.

With every step Iris took toward the three-story home, the setting around it transformed. The grass twitched and straightened, growing a deep and vibrant green from dried husks. The garden bloomed, bearing roses, daisies, violets, fresh tomatoes, and a mango tree, its branches heavy with fruit. Looking at the house was like twisting a holographic card; one moment, it was as corroded as the rest of the island, and with a blink, it was restored to its old glory.

At the wrought iron gates, something dragged against Iris’s witchy senses. The house was already brimming with protection spells and death magic, but this sensation didn’t feel familiar to the necromancer who had served as architect for much of them. Not malicious, just . . . new.

The gates opened with a sharp creak. Witchy or not, only a Keaton or a Foster would be granted access, so Iris was doubly qualified. She entered Stony House and called out, “*Honey, I’m Home!*”

The door shut behind her. Iris took a deep, bracing breath as her magic did what it always did here. It *shrank*. Her witchery receded, leaving her feeling empty and spent, as if someone had dimmed the lights of her soul.

Groggy, like waking up from a nap that was only meant to be a few minutes long but had stretched into hours. She was still a witch, and this price she paid wouldn't change that, but when she crossed the threshold into her family home, she was essentially mundane.

Iris pushed back the thick red drapes and opened up all the windows. The morning light revealed an untouched living room, foyer, and kitchen. It had a bohemian feel, from the colorful rugs and comfy blue sofa to the modernist paintings of naked Black bodies on the wall. The walls themselves were painted dark orange, except for the kitchen, which was drenched in baby's breath blue. Her parents' old things were neatly arranged. Mortimer's beloved record player rested atop a table alongside a stack of anatomy and biology textbooks bearing his in-line scrawls and sticky tabs. A case of his pristine surgical tools glimmered in the corner, but as impressive as they were, her father's collection was not the one that drew the eye.

An entire wall showed off Sage Foster's collection of necromantic texts. Before she died, she'd dedicated her life to recovering the books and artifacts that had been bought, stolen, and traded by mundanes. The sight always took Iris's breath away. She touched the spine of a grimoire that her mother had been working on translating from its original Mandarin. Her fingers came away with dust on them. Out of habit, her hand twitched toward her wand. *Clean It Up* would do the trick, but she couldn't use her witchery here. It was part of the bargain her mother made to keep Stony House standing—and safe.

An apparition of a woman flickered in the den, across the living room, and in the kitchen, all at once. Images of a man flashed in reflections, his skin dark, his coils thick and just barely gray. He smiled wide on the surface

of a teapot, in the glass of a window, in the light bouncing off the mirror in the dining room. A gust of wind surrounded Iris, lifting her onto her feet and spinning her around. She giggled girlishly at the welcome.

Finally, Sage Foster settled at the top of the stairs. The woman was dressed in a deep purple cape with a large hood and long black gloves.

Iris swallowed thickly, blinking back fresh tears. “Hi, Mom.”

Her mother grinned wide. *“If you knew how much I missed you, little death.”*

Iris rubbed her eyes. “I missed you, too.”

Her mother smiled, then shouted, *“Mortimer!”*

The antique tuner on the lovely oak sideboard burst to life, filling the house with the sound of static, and then the classics—Motown, jazz, old-school hip-hop—as if someone were flipping through stations. The voice, like an old-timey radio announcer, cut through the noise. It said, *“Ain’t God good! My little heathen’s home!”*

Iris felt a warm wind caress her cheek and flow through her fresh brown-and-blond braids. “Hey, Dad,” she whispered, voice cracking. It felt so damn good to be somewhere where she was unequivocally loved for being herself and especially for being a deathwitch.

Across from her, Sage’s apparition sat in the armchair with three quick violent flashes, as if she were being projected and the film kept getting stuck.

Dread bloomed in the pit of Iris’s stomach. “Are you okay?”

“No—” Sage laughed and flickered, her words cut off. *“But you being here makes it better. It’s been harder and harder to take form without you, and even now . . .”* She gestured vaguely with her gloved hands.

“Does it hurt?” An odd thing to ask an apparition, but Iris didn’t know

how else to ask if her mother's spirit was pained in some mortal way. Sage's presence was abnormal by default, a consequence of skilled necromancy fed by Sage's own death wish, Iris's young magic, and a fraying thread between life and death. The fragility of it all was suddenly impossible for Iris to ignore.

Sage shook her head. "*It's more like exhaustion.*" She waved the words away. "*Now, get me up to date. Almost a senior, I'm so proud of you, Rissy!*"

From the radio, her father blared Kool & the Gang's "Celebration."

Sage rolled her eyes lightheartedly. "*How was your year?*"

Iris managed a nervous smile. She pulled a small book from her knapsack and placed it on the coffee table. *The Most Wicked Works of Olga Yara.*

Her mother's demeanor changed at the sight of it. Sage growled, inhuman and low. No one could mistake her for a mortal now, not with the inky-black aura spreading around her, or the way she slowly rose into the air, hovering above the seat. Iris felt her mother's emotions—anger, concern, confusion—pressing against her skin like steam. "*Tell me you did not cast from that book!*"

A bead of sweat dripped down her back. "I guess I should start from the beginning."

She told her mother of the last Haunting Season, how it began and how it ended. She spoke of her old friends Jailah and Thalia, and her new ones, Trent, Logan, and Beaumont, and the tethering that still perplexed her. And finally, she explained that against every rule of magic she knew, she'd resurrected the Wolf Boy and discovered the secrets of the Haunting Season. The Roddin Witch was Adelaide Strigwach, the architect of the curse, who had used Iris as a tool to bring back Theodore Bloom, the Wolf Boy.

When Iris was done, her mother's calm presence returned. She pulled back her hood. *"You've tethered a mundane boy."*

Iris wrinkled her brow. Of all she'd just said, that seemed like the wrong point to focus on. "Is that a thing? Tethering a mundane?"

A wisp of a man flashed in Iris's peripheral vision. The television turned on to static. *"Now just wait one damn minute. A boy? Did I hear that right?"*
"Mortimer."

The radio-announcer voice grew irritated. *"Well, if Rissy's got a boyfriend, I gotta shake his hand! Y'know, look that boy in the eye—"*

"And how in the hell do you plan on doing that?"

Groaning, Iris slunk down into the vintage couch. Spirit-parents could still be so embarrassing. "He's *not* my boyfriend," she muttered.

It's worse than that. He's my tether.

Before she could refute her father's teasing further, Sage's presence changed again. More than a flicker, it was as if Sage had been doused in a beam of red light, revealing a face writhing in pain.

Iris jumped to her feet. "Mom!"

From the stereo, a raspy voice growled her name. Iris turned, heart pounding. The dial spun back and forth, and her father's voice returned with laborious breaths, as if he'd been running, or *fighting*.

However useless, Iris pulled out her wand. "Dad? What was that?"

"Iris, what is it?"

Iris jolted to her mother. The apparition was back to, well, whatever *normal* was here. She examined her mother's face. "I just saw something. It was like you were screaming for help, or hurting somehow. And Dad's voice wasn't his own."

Sage stacked her shaking hands on her heart. She said nothing, but her gaze was angled to the now-quiet radio. Iris may not have been able to hear them, but she knew when her parents were talking in secrets the way that any child could. “Tell me what’s going on!” Iris demanded, hating how petulant she sounded.

Sage wrung her hands. *“Every year it gets harder. You know that, baby girl. We were never meant to be kept for this long. Just until you found your way with your magic. Until you knew enough about necromancy to put us to rest yourself.”*

Iris’s heart dropped at her mother’s tight voice. She didn’t like where this was going.

“It’s time we think about saying goodbye.”

Not yet, Iris thought sadly.

Sage was the last deathwitch she knew. There was no necromancer on the Mesmortes staff. Her courses were essentially history and theory—learning about death magic, but never truly practicing, not the way her mom had once done and had taught her. Not the way the Roddin Witch had spoken of. A sticky anger bloomed in Iris’s chest, but it wasn’t enough to keep the sadness at bay. Even after the betrayal, the blood, the violence, Iris was left distraught at losing Roddin and the Emporium.

She had tried looking for necromancers like herself, who’d been contacted by Death, or saved from the afterlife the way that she was. Being a necromancer might’ve made her special in Haelsford, but deathwitches had existed since the beginning of time. She couldn’t have been the only witch Death had spoken to or had spared.

The internet could be a perilous place to research witchery that wasn’t

the everyday things learned in a coven academy. First, there was the Witchery Web Safety Act, established after a rogue witch had posted his intentions to use magic to commit mass murder, a spell that not only promised death but also *worked*, unlike a lot of the dark magic drivel people posted for attention. Then there were the witch-obsessed hexeaters: mundanes who either pretended to be witchy or would pay good money to any witch who offered themselves up for dissection in misguided pursuits to become witches themselves.

Still, Iris had found a few interesting leads. There was a boy in Delhi who claimed he'd seen Death as well. Unlike Iris's vision of a great grim reaper, he'd seen a man dressed in red who spoke to him after he was almost crushed by a vendor cart a few summers ago. The boy's blog hadn't been updated since, and his contact form gave Iris an error message. But looking at his past posts, she could see that he was a true deathwitch. Between the silver pentagram on his wrist and the way he spoke of necromancy, his witchery didn't ring false.

Another necromancer, a ten-year-old in Jacmel who received her blessing early, vlogged of a man in dark glasses and a crooked top hat, who had taken her hand in her dreams and told her that she was bound for a higher purpose. The words turned Iris's spine into ice, and she knew for sure. Death approached necromancers around the world, appearing to them in different ways depending on their backgrounds or beliefs.

But this was a small comfort. With Adelaide either dead or disappeared and Sage passing on, who did Iris have to understand her death magic?

Her face warmed.

The closest living connection she had to her own necromancy was

Mathew Beaumont. A mundane. For once, she found herself wishing that he wasn't. She wished desperately that he was her true tether, the way Jailah and Vero once were. Two witches, their magic made to complement each other's.

Iris had . . . *other* wishes about Beaumont. Ones that she locked up tight, would never wear on her face, would rather die than admit.

"Iris?" her mother prodded gently. *"I don't want to frighten you, but my magic's running thin. You need to put us to rest before it's too late."*

"Too late?"

"A soul who overstays its welcome is a nasty sight. If you put us to rest now, we get to say goodbye together. You'll be eighteen in August. Still a child, yes, far from grown. But those are the terms. I don't want you to come back here and find us . . . gone. Or worse."

Sage's words were soft, but her expression was hard with urgency. Iris hadn't been in the Swamp with Trent when his mother appeared to him, but the way he spoke of the apparition worried her. Even if the Swamp's mind-altering hex was a part of it, the thought of her parents corrupting into horrors chilled Iris through.

A gentle breeze of her father's doing wrapped around her. Iris wanted to hold her parents, and to be held by them. "Before the end of summer. I'll put you both to rest."



Three days passed with the sweet laziness of early summer. Thalia had given Iris a handful of seeds to plant in the clearing behind the house, which quickly blossomed into fruits and veggies, their colors witchy vibrant. She'd packed snacks and frozen hot dogs, and made the Simmons family lemonade

recipe that left her teeth sticky with sweetness. Iris spent the mornings curled up on the couch under the quilt, flicking through her mother's collection of grimoires. The house was freezing at night, unlike every other house in the state, and while Iris could have lugged wood into the fireplace, she relished the cold. Knowing that it was a result of the ghosts, her spells, and Sage's magic left Iris comforted by the chill.

On her last day in Sun Harbor, there was no goodbye hug. Only a stuttering of the radio as it cut off, a slight chill against her cheek and the feeling of holding back tears. It was the last time she'd be home like this. In August, she would finally put her parents to rest. After that, she'd come to Stony House and find it lifeless. She missed them already.

"You'll be able to Call us like you Call any soul, baby," said Sage gently.

A short necromantic Call here and there wasn't the same, but Iris nodded, if only to reassure her mother.

When Iris stepped outside, her witchery burst into her chest like a kerosene-soaked match. She inhaled, relishing it, even if she didn't feel quite whole yet.

This time, when she reached for her wand, the magic in her blood thrummed.