

Praise for *Winterwood*

“A spellbinding tale of witchery, deadly secrets, and woods that hold grudges. *Winterwood* is immersive, atmospheric, and bewitching. I could feel the cold in my toes and the Walker magic swirling around me as I read.”

—STEPHANIE GARBER,
#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* AND INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
OF THE *CARAVAN* SERIES

“*Winterwood* casts a deliciously dark spell with a rich lineage of witches, secretive boys, and a sinister forest that will pull in any reader and never let them go.”

—MEGAN SHEPHERD,
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *GRIM LOVELIES*

“The beauty and mystery of the natural world infuse every moment in this lush, spellbinding story that weaves romance with witchcraft—a seductive, lyrical tale of lost boys, old legends and haunted woods.”

—LEXA HILLYER,
AUTHOR OF *SPINDLE FIRE*

“Mystery unwinds at an accelerating pace for the undersupervised teens, and the malicious, haunting Wicker Woods are lovingly characterized and as compelling as the formidable heroine. . . . A delectably immersive, eerie experience.”

—*KIRKUS REVIEWS*

Praise for *The Wicked Deep*

A *New York Times* Bestseller

Spring 18 Indie Next Pick

“*The Wicked Deep* is more than just a scary story, it is a tale with substance and depth, one of magic and curses, betrayal and revenge, but most importantly, it is a story about the redemptive power of love to make even the worst wrongs, right.”

—AMBER SMITH,

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE WAY I USED TO BE*

“*The Wicked Deep* has both teeth and heart. It’s a mystery and a ghost story and a love story, all woven together with evocative prose and unforgettable settings. This is the perfect book to curl up with on a rainy night, when the swirling mists and dancing shadows make the ghosts and magic leap off the pages. Prepare to be bewitched.”

—PAULA STOKES,

AUTHOR OF *LIARS, INC.* AND *GIRL AGAINST THE UNIVERSE*

“*The Wicked Deep* is eerie and enchanting. I was thoroughly under the spell of the Swan Sisters, and utterly captivated by Shea Ernshaw’s gorgeous, haunting debut.”

—JESSICA SPOTSWOOD,

AUTHOR OF THE CAHILL WITCH CHRONICLES AND EDITOR OF *TOIL & TROUBLE*

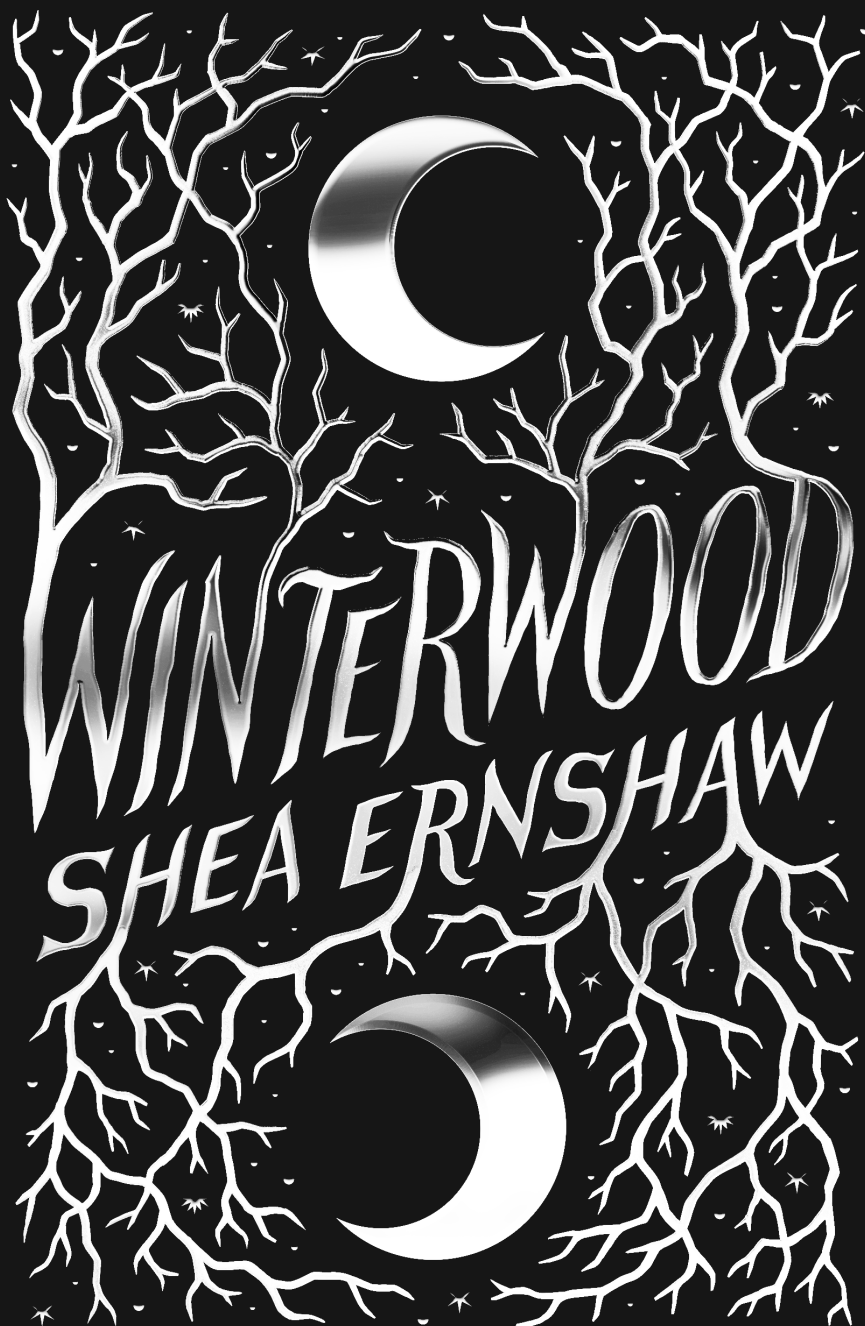
“A magical, haunted tale of the sea, spells, and secrets. *The Wicked Deep* will lure you in, ensnaring you in the twisted enchantment of true love and sacrifice. Beware!”

—S. M. PARKER,

AUTHOR OF *THE RATTLED BONES*

WINTERWOOD

ALSO BY SHEA ERNSHAW
The Wicked Deep



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To all those with wild hearts

*I do not think the forest would be so bright, nor the water so warm, nor
love so sweet, if there were no danger in the lakes.*

—C. S. Lewis



PROLOGUE

A boy went missing the night of the storm.
The night snow sailed down from the mountains and howled against the eaves of the old house as if through gritted teeth—cruel and baleful and full of bad omens not to be ignored.

The electricity flickered like Morse code. The temperature dropped so fast that trees cracked down their centers, sweet-smelling sap oozing to the surface like honey, before it too crystalized and froze. Snow spiraled down the chimney and gathered on the roof, until it was so deep it buried the mailbox at the end of the driveway, until I could no longer see Jackjaw Lake beyond my bedroom window.

Winter arrived in a single night.

By morning, Barrel Creek Road—the only road down the mountain—was snowed in. Blocked by an impassable wall of white.

The few of us who lived this deep in the woods, and those who were housed at the Jackjaw Camp for Wayward Boys on the far side of the lake, were trapped. Stuck in the rugged heart of the wilderness.

We just didn't know for how long.

Or that we wouldn't all make it out alive.



N*ever waste a full moon, Nora, even in winter,* my grandmother used to say.

We'd wander up the Black River under a midnight sky, following the constellations above us like a map I could trace with my fingertips—imprints of stardust on my skin. She would hum a melody from deep within her belly, gliding sure-footed across the frozen river to the other side.

Can you hear it? she'd ask. *The moon is whispering your secrets. It knows your darkest thoughts.* My grandmother was like that—strange and beautiful, with stories resting just behind her eyelids. Stories about moonlight and riddles and catastrophes. Dreadful tales. But bright, cheery ones too. Walking beside her, I mirrored each step she took into the wilderness, in awe of how swiftly she avoided stinging nettles and poison buckthorns. How her hands traced the bark of every tree we passed, knowing its age just by touch. She was a wonder—her chin always tilted to the sky, craving the anemic glow of moonlight against her olive skin, a storm always brewing along her edges.

But tonight, I walk without her, chasing that same moon up

SHEA ERNSHAW

the same dark, frozen river—hunting for lost things inside the cold, mournful forest.

Tree limbs sag and drip overhead. An owl hoots from a nearby spruce. And Fin and I slog deeper into the mountains, his wolf tail slashing above him, nose to the air, tracking some unknown scent to the far side of the riverbank.

Two weeks have passed since the storm blew over Jackjaw Lake. Two weeks since the snow fell and blocked the only road out of the mountains. Two weeks since the electricity popped and died.

And two weeks since a boy from the camp across the lake went missing.

A boy whose name I don't even know.

A boy who ran away or got lost or simply vanished like the low morning fog that rises up from the lake during autumn rainstorms. Who crept from his bunk inside one of the camp cabins and never returned. A victim of the winter cold. Of madness or desperation. Of these mountains that have a way of getting inside your head—playing tricks on those who dare to walk among the pines long after the sun has set.

These woods are wild and rugged and unkind.

They cannot be trusted.

Yet, this is where I walk: deep into the mountains. Where no others dare to go.

Because I am more darkness than girl. More winter shadows than August sunlight. *We are the daughters of the wood*, my grandmother would whisper.

So I push farther up the shore of the Black River, following the

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map made by the stars, just like she taught me. Just like all Walkers before me.

Until I reach *the place*.

The place where the line of trees breaks open to my right, where two steep ridges come together to form a narrow passage into a strange, dark forest to the east—a forest that is much older than the pines along the Black River. Trees that are bound in and closed off and separate from the rest.

The Wicker Woods.

A mound of rocks stands guard ahead of me: flat stones pulled up from the riverbed and stacked four feet high beside the entrance to the wood. It's a warning. A sign to turn back. *Only the foolish enter here*. Miners who panned for gold along the riverbank built the cairn to steer away those who would come later, those who might wander into this swath of land, unaware of the cruel dark that awaited them.

The rocks that mark the entrance have never toppled, never collapsed under the weight of snow or rain or autumn winds.

This is the border.

Only enter under a full moon, Grandma cautioned, eyes like watery pools dewing at the edges. Inside this hallowed wood, I will find lost items, but only beneath a full moon—when the forest sleeps, when the pale glow of moonlight lulls it into slumber—can I slip through unnoticed. Unharmed. *A sleeping forest will allow safe passage. But if it wakes, be prepared to run*.

Each month, when the swollen moon rises in the sky, I enter the Wicker Woods in search of lost things hidden among the green-ing branches and tucked at the base of trees. Lost sunglasses, rubber

flip-flops, cheap plastic earrings in the shape of watermelons and unicorns and crescent moons. Toe rings and promise rings given to girls by lovesick boys. The things that are lost at Jackjaw Lake in summers past are once again found in the woods. Appearing as if the forest is giving them back.

But sometimes, under a particularly lucky full moon, I find items much older—long forgotten things, whose owners fled these mountains a century ago. Silver locket and silver buttons and silver sewing notions. Toothbrushes made of bone, medicine bottles with labels long since worn away, cowboy boots and tin cans once filled with powdered milk and black coffee grounds. Watch fobs and doorknobs. And from time to time, I even find gold itself: crude coins hammered into a disc, gold nuggets tangled in moss, flakes that catch in my hair.

Lost things found.

By magic or maleficence, these things appear in the woods. Returned.

Fin sniffs the air, hesitant. And I draw in a breath, spinning the thin gold ring around my index finger. A habit. A way to summon the courage of my grandmother, who gave me the ring the night she died.

“I am Nora Walker,” I whisper.

Let the forest know your name. It had seemed stupid once—to speak aloud to the trees. But after you step into the dark and feel the cold pass through you—the trees swallowing all memory of light—you’ll tell the Wicker Woods all manner of secrets. Stories you’ve kept hidden inside the cage of your chest. Anything to lull the forest—to keep it in slumber.

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I pinch my eyes closed and step over the threshold, through the line of tall soldier trees standing guard, into the dark of the forest.

Into the Wicker Woods.



Nothing good lives here.

The air is cold and damp, and the dark makes it hard to see anything beyond your toes. But it always feels this way—each time colder and darker than the last. I breathe slowly and move forward, stepping carefully, deliberately, over fallen logs and dewdrop flowers frozen in place. In winter, these woods feel like a fairy tale suspended in time—the princess forgotten, the hero eaten whole by a noble fir goblin. The story ended, but no one remembered to burn the haunted forest to the ground.

I duck beneath an archway of thorny twigs and dead cypress vines. Keeping my gaze at my feet, I'm careful to never linger long on a single shadow, a thing skittering just beyond my vision—my mind will only make it worse. Twist it into something with horns and fangs and copper eyes.

The dead stir inside this ancient wood.

They claw their fingernails along the bark of hemlock trees, they wail up through the limbs, searching for the moonlight—for any sliver of the sky. But there is no light in this place. The Wicker Woods are where old, vengeful things lurk—things much older than time itself. Things you don't want to meet in the dark. *Get in. Get the hell out.*

Fin follows close at my heels, no longer leading the way—so close his footsteps match mine. Human shadow. Dog shadow.

I am a Walker, I remind myself when the thorn of fear begins to wedge itself along my spine, twisting between flesh and bone, prodding me to run. *I belong in these trees*. Even if I'm not as formidable as my grandmother or as fearless as my mom, the same blood swells through my veins. Black as tar. The blood that gives all Walkers our nightshade, our "shadow side." The part of us that is different—odd, uncommon. Grandma could slip into other people's dreams, and Mom can lull wild honeybees into sleep. But on nights like this, venturing into the cruelest part of the forest, I often feel terrifyingly ordinary and I wonder if the trees can sense it too: I am a girl barely able to call herself descended from witches.

Barely able to call myself a Walker.

Yet, I press forward, squinting through the dark and scanning the exposed roots poking up through the snow, searching for hidden things wedged among the lichen and rocks. Something shiny or sharp-cornered or rusted with time. Something man-made—something that's value is measured by weight.

We pass over a dried creek bed, and the wind changes direction from east to north. The temperature dips. An owl cries in the distance, and Fin stops beside me—nose twitching in the air. I touch his head gently, feeling the quick pace of his breathing.

He senses something.

I pause and listen for the snapping of branches underfoot, for the sounds of a wolf stalking through the trees, watching us. Hunting.

But a moth skims past my shoulder—white wings beating against the cold, flitting toward a sad, spiny-looking hemlock tree, leaving imprints of dust wherever it lands. It looks as if it's just come through a storm, wings torn at the edges. Shredded.

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A moth who's faced death. Who's seen it up close.

My heartbeat sinks into my toes and my eyelashes twitch, certain I'm not seeing it right. Just another trick of the woods.

But I know what it is—I've seen sketches of them before. I've even seen one pressed against the window while my grandmother coughed from her room down the hall, hands clasping the bedsheets. Blood in her throat.

A bone moth.

The worst kind. The bringer of portents and warnings, of omens that should never be ignored. *Of death.*

My fingers again touch the gold moonstone ring weighted heavy on my finger.

Every part of me that had felt brave, had felt the courage of my grandmother pulsing through me, vanishes. I squeeze my eyes closed, then open them again, but the moth is still there. Zigzagging among the trees. "We shouldn't be here," I whisper to Fin. *We need to run.*

I release my hand from Fin's head, and my heart scrapes against my ribs. I glance over my shoulder, down the narrow path we followed in. *Run, run, run!* my heart screams. I take a careful step back, away from the moth, not wanting to make a sound. But the moth circles overhead, bobbing quickly out over the trees—called forth by something. Back into the dark.

Relief settles through me—my heart sinking back into my chest—but then Fin breaks away from my side. He darts around a dead tree stump and into the brush, chasing after the moth. "No!" I shout—*too loud*, my voice echoing over the layer of snow and bouncing through the treetops. But Fin doesn't stop. He tears around a cluster of spiny aspens and vanishes into the dark. Gone.

Shit, shit, shit.

If it were anything else, a different kind of moth, or another wolf he will chase deep into the snowy mountains only to return home in a day or two, I'd let him go.

But a bone moth means something else—something cruel and wicked and bad—so I run after him.

I sprint around the clot of trees and follow him into the deepest part of the forest, past elms that grow at odd angles, down steep, jagged terrain I don't recognize—where my boots slip beneath me, where my hands press against tree trunks to propel me forward, and where each footstep sounds like thunder against the frozen ground. *I'm making too much noise. Too loud.* The woods will wake. But I don't slow down; I don't stop.

I lose sight of him beyond two fallen trees, and little stabs of pain cut through me. "Fin, please!" I call in a near hush, trying to keep my voice low while the sting of tears presses against my eyes, blurring my vision. Panic leaps into my throat and I want to scream, shout Fin's name louder, but I bite back the urge. No matter what, I can't wake the woods, or neither Fin nor I will make it out of here.

And then I see him: tail wagging, stopped a few yards away between a grove of hemlocks. My heart presses against my ribs.

He's led us farther into the Wicker Woods than I've ever been before. And the moth—frayed body, white wings with holes torn along the edges—flutters among the falling snowflakes, slow and mercurial, as if it were in no great hurry. It moves upward toward the sky, a speck of white among the black canopy of trees, and then vanishes into the dark forest to the north.

I step carefully toward Fin and touch his ear to keep him from

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running after it again. But he bares his teeth, growling. “Shhh,” I say softly.

His ears shift forward, his breathing quick as he sucks in bursts of air, and a low guttural growl rises up from deep within his chest.

Something’s out there.

A beast or shadow with hooked claws and grim pinhole eyes. A thing the forest keeps, a thing it hides—something I don’t want to see.

My fingers twitch, and dread rises up at the base of my throat. It tastes like ash. I hate this feeling building inside me. This awful fear. *I am a Walker*. I am the thing whispered about, the thing that conjures goose bumps and nightmares.

I swallow and stiffen my jaw into place, taking a step forward. The moth led us here. To something just beyond my vision. I scan the dark, looking for eyes—something blinking out from the trees.

But there’s nothing.

I shake my head and let out a breath, about to turn back to Fin, when my left foot thuds against something on the ground. Something hard.

I squint down at my feet, trying to focus in the dark.

A mound of snow. A coat sleeve, I think. The tip of a boot. A thing that doesn’t belong.

And then I see. *See*.

Hands.

There, lying beneath a dusting of snowfall, in the middle of the Wicker Woods, is a body.



Snowflakes have gathered on stiff eyelashes.

Eyes shuttered closed like two crescent moons. Pale lips parted open, waiting for the crows.

Even the air between the trees has gone still, a tomb, as if the body is an offering that shouldn't be disturbed.

I blink down at the corpse and a second passes, followed by another, my heart clawing silently upward into my windpipe. But no sound escapes my lips, no cry for help. I stare in stupefied inaction. My mind slows, my ears buzz—an odd *crackle crack* crack, as if a radio were pressed to my skull. I inch closer and the trees quiver overhead. For a second I wonder if the entire forest might snap at the roots and upend itself—trunks to the sky and treetops to the ground.

I've seen dead birds in the woods before, even a dead deer with the antlers still attached to the hollowed-out skull. But never anything like this. Never a human body.

Fin makes a low whine behind me. But I don't look back. I don't take my eyes off the corpse, like it might vanish if I look away.

I swallow and crouch down, my knees pressing into the snow. Eyes watering from the cold. But I need to know.

Is it him? The boy who went missing from the camp?

His face is covered by a dusting of snow, dark hair frozen in place. There are no injuries that I can see. No trauma, no blood. And he hasn't been here long, or he wouldn't be here at all. The dead don't last in the mountains, especially in winter. Birds pick apart what they can before the wolves close in, scattering the bones across miles of terrain, leaving barely an imprint of what once had been. The forest is efficient at death, a swift wiping away. No remains to bury or burn or mourn.

A soft wind stirs through the trees, blowing away the snow from

his forehead, his cheekbones, his pale lips. And the hairs along the base of my neck prick on end.

I lift my hand from the snow, my fingers hovering over his open palm, trembling, curious. *I shouldn't touch him*—but I lower my hand anyway. I want to feel the icy skin, the heaviness of death in his limbs.

My skin meets his.

But his hand isn't rigid or still. It twitches against my fingertips.

Not dead.

Still alive.

The boy's eyes flinch open—forest green, gray green, alive-green. He coughs at the same moment his fingers close around mine, gripping tightly.

I scream—a strangled sound, swallowed by the trees—but Fin immediately springs up next to me, tail raised, nose absorbing the boy's newly alive scent. I yank my arm away and try to stand, to scramble back, but my legs stumble beneath me and I fall backward onto the snow. *Run!* my spiking heartbeat yells. But before I can push myself up, the boy is rolling onto his side, coughing again, touching his face with his hands. Trying to breathe.

Alive. Not dead. Gasping for air, warm skin, grabbing my hand, kind-of-alive. My throat goes dry and my eyes refuse to blink. I'm certain he's not real. But he draws in deep, measured breaths between each cough, as if his lungs were full of water.

I sling my backpack off one shoulder and reach inside for the canteen of hot juniper tea. *It will save your life if you ever get lost*, my grandmother would say. *You can live off juniper tea for weeks.*

I hold the canteen out to him, and he lowers his hand from his

face, his eyes meeting mine. Dark sleepy eyes, deep heavy inhales making his chest rise and fall as if it's never known air before this moment.

He doesn't take the canteen, and I lean forward, drawing in a breath. "What's your name?" I ask, my voice broken.

His gaze roves the ground, then moves up to the sky, like he's searching for the answer—his name lost somewhere in the woods. Taken from him. Snatched while he slept.

His eyes settle back on me. "Oliver Huntsman."

"Are you from the boys' camp?"

An icy wind sails over us, kicking up a layer of snow. His mouth opens, searching for the words, and then he nods.

I found him.



The Jackjaw Camp for Wayward Boys is not an elite facility, not a place where the wealthy send their sons. It's a meager collection of cabins, a mess hall, and several neglected administration buildings—most of which were once the homes of early miners who panned the Black River for gold. Now it's a place where desperate parents send their headstrong boys to have their minds and hearts reshaped, to turn them into docile, obedient sons. The worst come here, the ones who have used up their last chances, their last *I'm sorrys*, their last detentions or visits to the principal's office. They come and they go. Each season a new batch—except for the few who spend their entire high school years at the camp. They learn how to survive in the woods, to make fire from flint, to sleep in the cold under the stars, to behave.

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Two weeks earlier, the morning after the snowstorm had rolled down from the mountains, I woke to find my house draped in snow. Ice coated the windows, the roof moaned from the weight, and the walls bowed inward as if nails were being pushed free from the wood. The radio had said we'd get twelve to eighteen inches of snow. We got nearly four feet—in a single night. I crawled from bed, the cold leeching up from the floorboards, and went outside into the snow.

The landscape had changed overnight.

I walked down to the lake's edge and found the forest dripping in white marshmallow fluff. But it wasn't quiet and still like most winter mornings. Voices echoed across the frozen lake, coming from the boys' camp. They shouted up into the trees. They stomped around in their heavy snow boots and sent birds screeching unhappily into the bleak morning sky.

"Morning!" Old Floyd Perkins called, waving a hand in the air as he trudged up the shore, head bowed away from the blowing wind, shoulders bent and stooped with time and age and gravity. When he reached me, he squinted as if he couldn't see me clearly—cataracts clouding his already failing vision. "A bad winter," he said, tilting his gaze upward, soft flakes falling over us. "But not as bad as some." Mr. Perkins has lived at Jackjaw Lake most of his life. He knew my grandmother when she was still alive, and he lives at the far south end of the lake in a small cabin beside the boathouse store that he runs during the summer months—renting out canoes and paddleboats and selling ice cream sandwiches to the tourists under the hot, wavy sun. And every morning, he walks the shore of the lake, his gait slow and labored, long arms swinging at his sides, arthritis creaking in his joints. Even in the snow, he makes his morning rounds.

“What’s happening over at the camp?” I asked.

“A boy went missing last night.” He rubbed a knuckled hand across the back of his neck, gray hair poking out from his wool cap. “Vanished from his bunk during the storm.”

I looked past him up the shore to the camp. A few boys were shoveling snow away from their cabin doorways, while most of the others moved up into the forest, calling out a name I couldn’t make out.

“Talked to one of the counselors,” Mr. Perkins continued, nodding grimly, considering the gravity of the situation. “Boy might’ve just run away, made it down the mountain before the snow fell last night.”

The wind roiled up from the surface of the frozen lake, and it made me shiver. “But they’re looking for him up in the woods.” I crossed my arms over my chest and nodded to the trees beyond the camp.

“They have to be sure he didn’t get lost, I suppose.” He raised one thick gray eyebrow, his gaze solemn. “But if that boy went up into those woods last night, there’s a good chance he won’t make it back out. And they’ll never find him.”

I understood what he meant. The snow was deep it continued to fall—any tracks would be long buried by now. And the boy himself might be buried as well. Even Fin would have a hard time tracking his scent in this.

“I hope he did run away,” I said. “I hope he made it down the road.” Because I knew the outcome if he hadn’t. Even though the boys at camp learn wilderness skills and how to build snow shelters in tree wells, I doubted any of them could really survive a night out in the cold. During a blizzard. On their own.

The lake creaked and snapped along the shore as the ice settled.

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And Mr. Perkins asked, “You lose power last night?” He glanced behind me up into the trees, where my home sat hidden in the pines.

I nodded. “You?”

“Yep,” he answered, then cleared his throat. “It’s going to be a while before that road clears. Before the power’s back on again.” He looked back at me, and the soft squint of his eyes and the wrinkles lining his brow made me think of my grandmother. “We’re on our own,” he said finally.

The only road down the mountain was blocked. And the nearest town of Fir Haven—a forty-five-minute drive—was too far away to walk. We were stuck.

Mr. Perkins tipped his head at me, a grave gesture, a certainty that this was going to be another tough winter, before continuing up the edge of the lake toward the marina. Toward the boathouse and his home.

I stood listening to the shouts of boys fanning out into the trees, the sky growing dark again, another storm settling over the lake. I knew how ruthless the forest could be, how unforgiving.

If a boy was lost out there, he likely wouldn’t survive the night.



It’s still dark—the deepest kind of dark. Winter dark.

The boy, Oliver Huntsman, follows me through the trees, stumbling over roots, coughing—gasping for air. He might not make it out of the Wicker Woods; he might drop dead in the snow behind me. He stops to lean against a tree, his body trembling, and I walk back to his side and wrap an arm around him. He is taller than I am and broad in the shoulders, but together we continue through the

dark. He smells like the forest, like green. And when we reach the border of the Wicker Woods, we step over the threshold and back out into the open.

I release my hold on him, and he bends forward, gripping his knees and gasping for air. His lungs make a strange *rasp* sound with each breath. He's spent too many nights alone out here, in the forest, in the cold. Where the creeping, crawling sounds of unknowable things rest just out of sight, and fear becomes a voice in the back of his mind—nagging and threading along sleepless thoughts. A person can go mad in these trees. Hatter mad.

Beside us, the sound of rushing water beneath the frozen surface of the Black River is both palliative and eerie. Oliver glances up at the night sky, his expression slack, in awe, as if he hasn't seen the stars in weeks.

"We need to keep moving," I say.

His body shakes, skin pale and muted. I need to get him inside, out of this snow and wind. Or the cold could still kill him.

I fold my arm around him again, hand against his ribs where I can feel the rise and fall of each breath, and we march downriver until Jackjaw Lake yawns open ahead of us—frozen solid out to its center.

"Where are we?" he asks, his voice thin, a crisp edge to each word.

"We're almost to my house," I tell him. And then because I think maybe he means something more—his memory blotted over—I add, "We're back at Jackjaw Lake."

He doesn't nod and his eyes don't shimmer with recognition. He has no memory of this place, no idea where he is.

"My house is close," I add. "I'll take you back to camp in the morning. Right now, we just need to get you warm." I'm not sure

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he'd make it another mile around the lake to the boys' camp. And the nearest hospital is an hour down a road that's snowed in. I have no other option but to take him home.

His hands tremble, his eyes skipping warily through the trees—as if he sees something in the dark. A trick of shadow and moonlight. But the woods surrounding Jackjaw Lake are safe and docile, not nearly as ancient as the Wicker Woods where I found him. These trees are young, harvested over the years for lumber, and the pines that loom over my home were saplings not long ago—still soft and green at their core. They have limbs that sway with the wind instead of moan and crack; they aren't old enough to hold grudges or memories. To grow hexes at their roots. Not like inside the Wicker Woods.

We reach the row of log cabins that dot the shore, and Fin trots ahead through the snow. “My house is just there,” I say, nodding up through the trees. Most of the cabins along the shore are summer homes, owned by people who only visit Jackjaw Lake when the weather warms and the lake thaws. But Mom and I have always been year-rounders, just like our ancestors before us. We remain at the lake through all the seasons, even the brutal ones—*especially* the brutal ones. Mom dislikes the tourists who come in summer, with their thumping music and fishing poles and beach towels. It grates on her. But the quiet of winter pacifies her—calms her racing, fidgety mind.

Our house is at the end of the row, closest to the mountains and the wilds of the forest beyond—tucked back in the woods. Hidden. And tonight, it sits dark, no lights humming inside, no sputtering of electricity through the walls—the power still out since the storm.

I stomp the snow from my boots and push open the heavy log door, letting the cold air rush inside. Fin brushes past my legs into

the living room, where he plops down on the rug beside the stove and begins chewing the snow from his paws. I drop my pack onto the faded olive-green sofa, its cushions sagging and slumped as if it were sinking into the wood floor.

“I’ll start a fire,” I say to Oliver, who still stands shivering in the entryway. Looking like a boy who’s near death. Whose eyes have the hollow stare of someone who can already see the other side, only inches away.

My grandmother would know the right herbs, the right words to whisper against his skin to warm the chill deep in his bones. To keep him rooted to this world before he slips into the next. But she’s not here, and I only know the tiniest of remedies, the barest of spells. Not enough to conjure real magic. I clench my jaw, feeling an old familiar ache: the burden of uselessness I carry inside my chest. I can’t help him, and I wish I could. I am a Walker whose grandmother died too soon and whose mother would rather forget what we really are.

I am as helpless as a girl by any other name.

I stoke the few embers that still glow among the ash, coaxing the fire back to life inside the old stove, while Oliver’s jade-green eyes sweep slowly over the house: the log walls, the rotted wood beams that sag overhead, the faded floral curtains that have the rich scent of sage that’s been burned thousands of times within the house to clear out the old stubborn spirits.

But Oliver’s eyes aren’t caught on the curtains or the thick walls. Instead, they flicker over the odd collection of items crowding every shelf and cobwebbed corner of the aged house. Old pocket watches and wire-rimmed glasses, hundreds of silver buttons in glass jars, delicately carved silver spoons, and silver candlesticks with wax still

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hardened at the base. An ornate gold-rimmed jewelry box with only dust kept safely inside.

All the things that we've found inside the Wicker Woods over the years, the things we didn't sell down in Fir Haven to a man named Leon who owns a rare antique shop. These are the things that mean something—that I can't part with. The ones that hide memories inside them, the stories they tell when you hold them in your palm.

Just like most of the Walker women before me, I am a finder of lost things.

And standing in the entryway is a boy named Oliver Huntsman. My latest found item.



Her hair is long and dark and braided down her back, like a river woven into knots.

I've heard about her, *the girl who lives across the lake*. The boys at camp say she can't be trusted. They say her shadow can be seen on the roof of her house during a full moon, casting dark magic into the ice-flecked sky. They say she is descended from these woods—that she is a Walker. And all Walkers are witches.

Her home sits hidden in the trees, a small gingerbread structure that smells of earth and sod and wood. A place that could easily lure Hansel and Gretel in with the promise of sweets, where they would likely meet their end inside these walls. *Just like I might*.

She moves through the living room with the ease of a bird, her footsteps hardly making a sound on the old wood floor, little puffs of dust rising up around her feet.

I'm standing inside the home of a witch.

"What happened?" I ask, trying to bend my fingers, but they're frozen in place—the cold running through me like tap water from a winter faucet, ice crystals forming at every joint. My thoughts keep skipping back and forth, rattled loose. Every memory is the

color of snow, too icy-white, too blinding and painful to see.

“I found you in the snow,” she answers, kneeling beside the woodstove. She moves swiftly, deftly, using her bare hands to add more logs to the flames. Never wincing away from the sparks that lick at her skin.

I move partway into the living room, my boots sliding across the floor, closer to the heat of the fire, and my eyes sway to the window, where snow is eddying against the glass, willing my mind to remember. *I woke in the woods. The shadow of a girl knelt over me. Her soft fingers touching my skin.* But it feels like days ago, the hours slow and dripping, thawing like the snow settled in my bones.

“What day is it?” I ask.

Flames ignite suddenly over the dry logs, sending out a burst of heat, and she gestures for me to sit on a small chair facing the fire. I do as she says, removing my hands from my coat pockets and holding them out toward the stove.

“Wednesday,” she answers, brown eyes flicking to mine only briefly. Like she’s afraid of what she’ll see in my gaze. Or she’s afraid of what I’ll see in hers.

My hands ache when I close them into fists, circulation returning to my skin in painful jolts. *Wednesday*, I think. But it means nothing. I should have asked the week, the month, the year even. My thoughts sputter slowly across synapses. I can’t recall the moments that led me here, that led me into that forest, lying on my back, snow falling in a slow, endless rhythm—burying me alive.

The girl walks into the kitchen and hums something under her breath, like she doesn’t think I can hear: a soft melody—a lullaby