

Leaves rustled in the tree where Grandma Susannah hung. The hem of her brown peasant dress swayed with her legs as she swung backward, then forward, making the branch bow before the tip of her pointed boot hit the trunk. *Rustle. Creak. Tap.*

Vianna Roots sat in her old rusted Ford parked in the driveway, windows down from the pre-dawn drive, jaw clenched, focusing on her childhood home instead of the ghost of her twelfth great-grandmother that swayed in her peripheral vision. Her gut tightened, and she rubbed her eyes. No one could escape their family forever. That was truer for her than most, since she was the only one in her family who could see the dead. A gift she'd give anything to give back. Thanks, but no thanks.

Ten years had passed since climbing out her bedroom window in the middle of the night, and although she was no longer a teenager, the dark two-story house hadn't changed. The family home had passed down through their line since the 1700s, the numerous add-ons highlighted by mismatched windows of various sizes and shapes.

The crack in her windshield kept her focus as she avoided the inevitable. Her mother was dead and her burial scheduled for tomorrow—technically today since the sun was rising—making Vianna the last legacy witch in the Roots line. Which meant this house of horrors was now hers. She rubbed her palms against her thighs to chase away the goosebumps.

“Ghosts can't hurt you.” She was an adult now, one who faced her fears instead of jumping out of windows. She bounced her knee up and down.

Sleeping in her truck felt like a reasonable alternative to sleeping in the house. She could also just turn around and drive back to Boston, leave Salem in the past where it belonged and let

whatever or whoever deal with the haunted property. The forty bucks in her pocket wasn't enough for a hotel room and food, but it was enough for gas.

Her eyes veered from the cracked windshield back to the monstrosity of memories shaped like a house. With a sprawling wrap-around porch, large mullioned bay windows, charcoal shingles, and pointed steeples of varying roof heights, it was impossible not to notice. If she cleaned the place up, she'd make a buck, and it'd become someone else's haunted problem.

The shadows of branches reached across the lawn like fingers as sunlight spilled over the horizon. The vivid apparition of Grandma no longer swayed in the branches, leaving only the scent of mothballs and apples on the breeze. Ghosts had a habit of coming and going as they pleased.

Despite how much Vianna would rather skip the ceremony, that wasn't an option, so she needed to get ready. Inside the house was her only hope for proper ceremonial robes worn at a legacy witch's burial. Time to go inside.

When she shoved the rusted truck door open, it squeaked loud enough to announce her presence to the row of houses, each passed down through families of witches just like hers. This neighborhood was coven territory. Luckily, witches weren't known to be early risers, so gawking eyes wouldn't be watching from the windows. Not just yet, anyway.

The same web of cracks covered the pavement, and she reached into the truck bed for her worn duffel. As she did, a handle caught on the lip, and the nylon tore. Clothes spilled out in a heap, most of them managing to land in a sludge-filled crack in the driveway. She groaned and sighed at the moon.

She kicked the pile, and a T-shirt flew against her Ford. "Curse the goddess."

With a sigh of defeat, she bent to gather the meager pile that contained most of her belongings. A low rumble from behind made her freeze. There was no point in turning around because nothing would be there. As a child, she'd explained away the grumbles and moans as an old house shifting with age and weather, but planks of wood didn't growl. And they especially didn't lock doors or hide things when a child misbehaved. This time, however, she wasn't a child to be scolded.

"Hush," she grumbled back.

Piling her clothes into a heap on the ripped duffel, she used the ruined bag as a sling to carry the load and headed toward the front door. Stepping-stones led beneath a rusted archway covered in wisteria. The weeds that laced through the wrought-iron fence were the size of bushes, and her fingertips twitched at the urge to pull them. Instead, she shoved her hands into the pockets of her jean shorts.

A soft morning breeze sent goosebumps up her legs as she bound up the porch stairs. She tucked the ball of clothes against her stomach and pulled a rusted skeleton key from her pocket. When she slid the key into the old lock and tried to turn it, expecting the familiar *click*, the key wouldn't budge.

She grimaced and stepped back, leaving the stuck key in the lock. "You're not going to let me in?"

The house spat the key onto the weathered porch, where it landed with a fat *thwack* and she clenched her fists. Dropping her belongings at her feet, she kicked at the door. "Yeah, well, I don't want you either, but I'm all you've got."

Somewhere along twelve generations of Roots witches, the family familiar and demon had melded with the house. Now, because of nothing more than her birthright, Vianna possessed the passed-down heirloom. He seemed as pleased about the arrangement as she was.

She took a few deep breaths and started pacing the porch, considering her options, when her flip-flop caught on splintered wood. She stumbled forward, flinging her hand to the banister and lodging a sliver into her palm. Straightening herself, she tried to pull the wooden prick out of her skin, but it just wedged deeper. More deep breaths.

The porch swing blocked the main windows that lined the front of the house, so she went to the far edge of the porch and smeared a spot of dirt away from the edge of the window to see inside. The sitting room soaked up the rising sun, highlighting the same old-as-balls antique furniture she remembered from her childhood.

If the front door wouldn't budge, fine. She'd climb in through the window. Wedging her fingers beneath the seam of the frame, she yanked upward. Three of her fingernails cracked backward, and she yelped, bouncing on the balls of her feet and flapping her hands as if the movement would ease the pain.

"Mother of Satan," she yelled at the house. Yellow birds chirped their taunts from the trees and she glared at them before continuing her pacing.

"She'll be pissed if I show up at her funeral looking like this," she said to the family demon, motioning to her crumpled T-shirt with a coffee stain. The drive had been too early for dexterity. "You know if anyone can make you miserable from the grave, it's her." Familiars were demons, but Mother was Mother.

Her fingers caught in the tangles of her dark hair as she forced it into a knot on top of her head. There wasn't any time for games. She needed those ceremonial robes. She was getting inside. Now.

Something heavy smacked her between her shoulder blades, then plopped onto the wooden porch. She gave a sad little squeak and spun around, looking down at the black beady eyes of a dead bluebird. With a deep breath, she turned back toward the house. "Kinda predictable, don't you think?"

The possessed house had a standard set of antics that clearly hadn't changed in her absence. The ammunition varied; a bird, frog, or a mouse, and always spit from the rain gutters. With narrowed eyes, she stepped over the dead bird and marched toward the side gate. The back door had a latch problem and since nothing else about the place had changed, she was counting on consistency. In a hurry to act before the house caught on, she darted down the stairs and around to the side gate. Grabbing hold of the handle, she ran face-first into wood.

The house had jammed the gate door.

"Funny," she growled.

With a strong hip bump, the gate relented, and she burst into the backyard. Thick piles of mulch from seasons of neglect piled against the fence, and rose bushes drooped in a lopsided slant with wilted, unpruned heads. Mother never had been much of a gardener, making it Vianna's childhood job. But she didn't mind, because it was one of the few places she found peace and solitude.

She felt a sharp pang in her chest at the sight of the garden. The feeling had nothing to do with personal attachment; this was business. Real estate was worth more with a healthy

landscape. Grass crunched beneath her feet as she noticed the bare branches of the apple and cherry trees. Trumpet and creeper vines strangled the shed on the east side, patches of wilted sunflowers sprouted wherever they saw fit, and deep green berry vines overwhelmed the full west corner. Although unattended, life thrived.

A faint screech sounded only moments before a stream of water blasted her chest, then face, knocking her backward. She squealed and turned her back to the attack, knowing exactly where it was coming from. This wasn't her first impromptu outdoor shower from the hose cart that sat on the deck next to the faucet. She'd learned in her teens to tie a knot in the hose as a precaution.

“Really, no new tricks? This is the best you've got?”

Water pelted her back as she walked backwards, making her way up the porch steps. The stream ratcheted up her T-shirt and sent a waterfall of hair over her face. When she was close enough, she reached around, grabbed the hose, and yanked. With her foot on the squirming rubber snake, she cinched a knot, and the water stopped.

Her sigh came out as a wet raspberry. She wanted to be mad, and she was, but there was also a comfort in familiarity—even if it came from a demon house—though she'd never encourage him by saying the words aloud. She brushed wet strands of hair off her face then pulled open the patio screen door. The hinges splintered from the frame. The screen fell toward her as she half threw, half kicked it to the side, and it slipped to the porch with a crash.

Straightening, and refusing to make an even louder show for the neighbors, she pulled the suctioned wet shirt from her skin. With both hands on the knob, she lifted up and out, then

jiggled. When the lock didn't release, she bumped the door with her knee. *Click*. It slid open and a rank puff of air rolled out.

She waved her hand in front of her nose and choked back a cough.

"Your appearance mirrors horse dung." Grandma Susannah now stood in the kitchen with her arms folded over the cut noose that hung from her neck like a twisted fashion statement. A violet hue tinted her lips and matched the bruising around her neck.

Vianna wasn't sure how long her body had hung after they killed her, but she suspected overnight, and judging by the bluish-purple coloring, maybe during winter. "You're looking dead as ever, Grandmother."

"Your hair looks like an owl in an ivy bush." Grandma croaked like the old toads that burrowed into the garden beds. "And you're just as mouthy as when you left."

"Probably more so."

Vianna took a deep breath and stepped through the ghost, not surprised by the chill that raced over her skin. The kitchen looked exactly the same as the day she left. A large wooden block island sat in the middle of the room, with a small table and four mismatched chairs in the corner. An iron tea kettle with the same scratch down the side still sat on the stove, and, out of habit, she filled it in the sink and set it back on the burner.

"Retrieve your rubbish from the porch at once. I will not have you tarnishing the Roots family appearance for our neighbors to see. If you must be an ungrateful mess, do so in the privy of your own company," Grandma croaked from behind her.

Vianna went to the nearest window to let in some fresh air, but the paint-chipped frame behind the sink wouldn't budge. She smacked the edge with her fist, then gave it another good

shove, and it cracked open. The gasp of cool air wasn't enough to clear the cobwebs of memories, but it helped with the smell.

She shuffled around in the junk drawer filled with its namesake, pushing aside sticks of charcoal, crumpled sticky notes, garden twine, and an old pin cushion until she found a pair of tweezers for the splinter in her palm. Grandma Susannah clicked her tongue from the archway, but a lifetime of practice made ignoring ghosts second nature for Vianna.

After tugging the splinter from her palm, she turned and, this time, stepped around her grandmother then strode into the sitting room. Dust covered the antique furniture, and the worn spots on the red oriental rugs were just as she remembered them. Mother'd had a thing for antiques and she'd added a set of velvet wingback chairs and ornate table by the bay windows. A large gold fainting couch stretched over the main rug, kitty-cornered to Mother's embroidery chair, butted up close to the hearth.

Rows of framed black-and-white photos of witches past lined the fireplace mantel. Growing up, she'd always felt like they were watching her, and that feeling hadn't faded. With deep breaths, she counted to five and let her heart calm. Time wasn't frozen. She was no longer a child trapped in a demon house. Her blood-witch mother wasn't watching her, tapping a whipping rod against her palm in an even tempo. Vianna was a grown-ass woman. She'd built a new life for herself in Boston. The house may not have changed, but she had.

A shower and fresh clothes for the funeral were next, and those were upstairs. First, she unbolted the front door and scooped up her wrinkled belongings, keeping half her body in the house just in case the demon tried anything again. She used her hip to close the door and headed



upstairs, skipping over the third step out of habit because the creak always drew Mother's attention.

The hallway at the top of the stairs had four closed doors, but it was the porcelain doorknob at the end of the hall that stole her attention. As a child, Mother's room was forbidden, but rules died with their enforcer.

"You look daft when you gawk like that," Grandma said from beside her.

Vianna's legs felt like sacks of compost and her sandals sunk into the thick threads of the narrow rug with every dragged step. She shifted the bundle of clothes into one arm, then wiped her free palm against her shorts. The porcelain knob twisted easily, and the door swung open. Hot garlic flooded her senses. She gagged as she stumbled backward and dropped her clothes to the floor.

"Rotting hell," she barked between coughs.

"Garlic heals ailments, you worthless waste of good blood." Grandma said.

"Guess it didn't work out so well." She pressed the back of her hand beneath her nose. Mother had died of a heart attack in her sleep, and no amount of garlic was going to prevent that.

For once, it wasn't fear of her mother that made her hesitate, because Vianna knew Mother's ghost wouldn't be in the room. The freshly dead lacked the awareness to move beyond their corpse. Eventually they moved on to replaying their last moments in what Vianna called death cycles. Ghosts caught in their own death cycles made up a large chunk of what she saw when it came to paranormal activity. The rare ghosts who were aware of the living, or could haunt a place or object, were decades old.

Since Mother was a fresh ghost, she was safely tucked into the graveyard, for now. Of all the ghosts that roamed the world, her mother following her around was the only one that made her break out into a cold sweat. Preventing that outcome was her number one goal in life and the only thing that could have dragged her back to Salem.

Vianna marched across the room and yanked open the window. A gentle breeze brushed against her face and rustled loose strands of still-wet hair. She needed more than a slight breeze if she wanted to kick the stench. The house was ancient and didn't have central air, so Mother kept fans tucked into every bedroom closet. Vianna wrestled past the shoes and fallen clothes that cluttered the floor of the walk-in closet, retrieved the fan, and plugged it in by the door so the blades would suck air from the hallway and blow the repulsive odor out the open window.

There wouldn't be a scrap of cloth in the house that wasn't garlic-saturated. Sack-shaped gray dresses hung in the closet alongside long, dark robes. There'd be dozens of covens and crowds of witches all in the same velvet folds, and suddenly the idea of pretending to be one of them made her insides shrivel. She'd never joined a coven for good reason. Coven rules, traditions, this house, and mostly her mother were things she's promised herself to stay away from.

A garment stood out from the others, and her fingertips ran down the side seam of the red fabric. The dress was her size, sleeveless, high neck, and mid-calf. A final farewell to her mother in something so inappropriate felt right. She was different from the other witches, and everyone knew it. There was no point in pretending otherwise.

This afternoon, she'd face the entire witch community, but it was her mother's coven—the one she'd denied when she disappeared in the middle of the night—that struck fear

into all the others. The Original Blood Coven was the death squad, killers for hire. Would they want revenge for her defection? And if they didn't, would her mother's ghost? The dress crumpled in her fist as she pulled it from the hanger.

Blood-red was the perfect color.