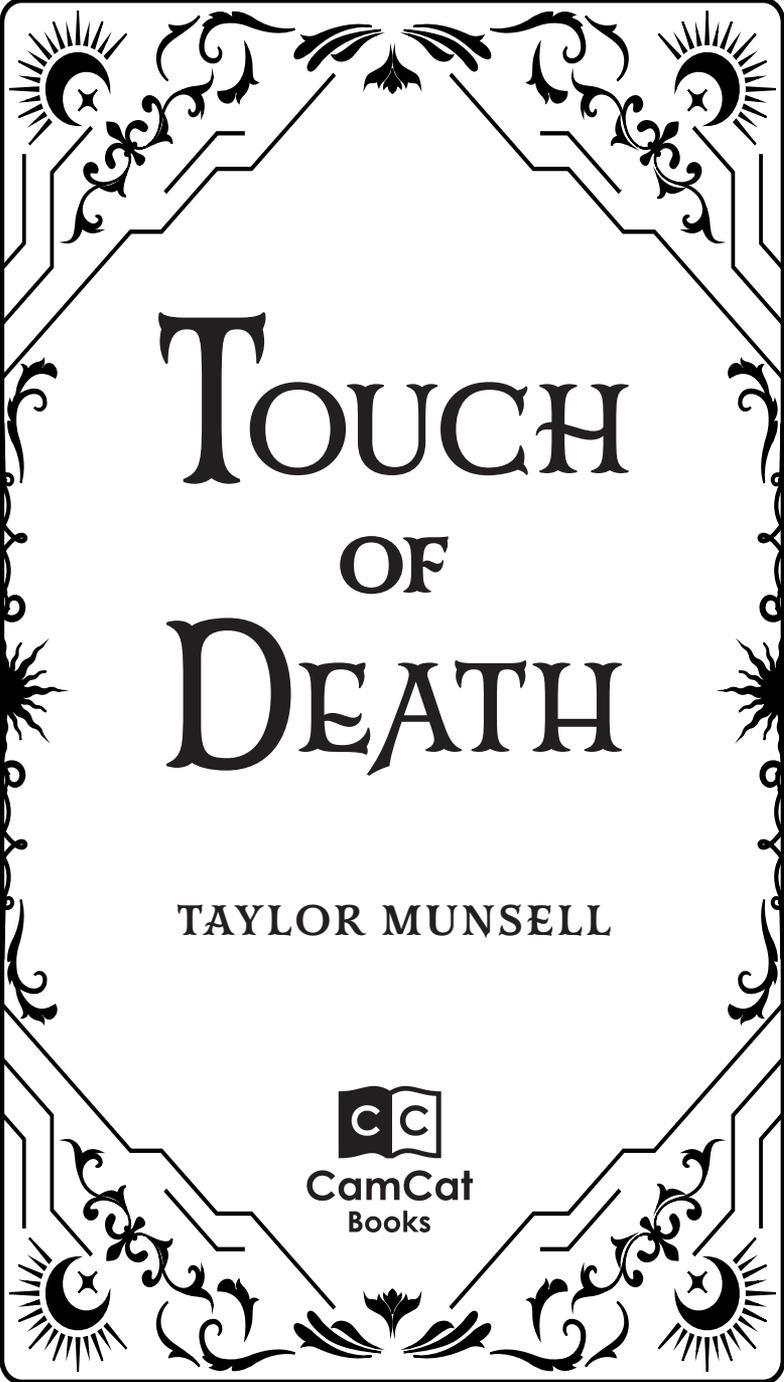




TAYLOR MUNSELL

TOUCH OF DEATH

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FOR CHARLOTTE & OLIVIA

ALWAYS FOLLOW YOUR DREAMS





C H A P T E R

1

BLOOD DOESN'T SCARE ME. That's not the reason for the tremor in my hands.

There are things far worse than a little blood.

"I can't believe you're making me do this," I grumble, kicking the toe of my boot against the gym floor.

"I'm not making you do anything." Felix bumps me with his broad shoulder. "I simply suggested you should go through the blood drive. It's expected."

My snort earns a narrowing of his brown eyes. Expected. I don't know how a blood drive honors the memory of a student, but he's right: every person in the school is "doing their part."

"But that doesn't mean I have to like it." I reach up to fiddle with the peridot crystal pendant at my neck. If nothing else, maybe it'll actually shield my emotions today. "I should have asked Gran to make me a draft to calm my nerves."

Though, I'm not sure even Gran, the most powerful witch in the coven, could make a draft strong enough for that. She wouldn't try if she knew I was only doing this to say I need to go to bed earlier to recover and get out of the coven meeting tonight.

Felix lowers his voice. "We can leave."

I shake my head. "We've already been seen. Time to be a big girl." And we're next. The line of students waiting to donate blood still stretches behind us, but any second now Felix and I will be whisked away to one of the portable beds now lining the school gymnasium.

"Your call." Felix shrugs. "Anyway, no harm can really come from it."

Not true.

I glance around the gym. Every light is on, but they aren't really bright enough. The stench of stale sweat hangs in the air, mingling with the too-strong smell of antiseptic.

A shudder courses through me as I try, and fail, not to think about what that antiseptic smell is covering up. Blood might not scare me, but it's still not my favorite.

At least there are no unwelcome guests so far. Although they aren't visible, I feel them pressing in on me, trying to make me see them. I tug on the hem of my glove, more out of habit than anything. They're one of my favorite pairs: the black lace is almost as smooth as the silk that lines them. If I have to wear gloves, might as well make a statement.

"They'll be wearing gloves, too," Felix says gently. "They won't touch you."

Nodding, I hope I seem more confident than I feel.

"Felix Davies," another junior girl calls. Her sleek black ponytail falls to her mid-back. She's dressed in scrubs, so she must be in the school's nursing program. Her dark eyes move to find Felix grinning at her. Color floods her beige skin.

Felix has that effect on most girls—and boys—to be honest. Between his warm brown skin, easy smile, and dark, inviting eyes, he can charm anyone.

Except me. Just thinking about it gives me the creeps. He's basically the big brother I never had.

"Come with me," she stammers. Poor girl.

"Georgiana Colburn?" an unfamiliar voice calls.

"George," I say reflexively. Felix glances back and gives me a thumbs up.

The nurse and owner of the unfamiliar voice smiles at me, her eyes only momentarily snagging on my blue hair.

"Right this way, young lady," the nurse says as she escorts me down the row of beds. I glance back, trying to catch Felix's eyes, but he's busy charming his student nurse while she gets him settled.

I follow my nurse to an empty bed, palms slick with sweat inside my gloves as I sit down. The crinkling of the paper lining the bed as I adjust makes me cringe.

As the nurse works, my mind races, trying to think of any spell or incantation, anything that would make this situation less daunting, but I come up with nothing. For being a witch in a coven so connected to death, an event with so much blood should send power coursing through me, especially considering my specific gifts. But I got nothing. Maybe I should actually pay attention in my magic lessons.

I hear the snap of gloves, a tear, and then the smell of alcohol burns my nose. In a few swift movements, she is tapping on my wrapped arm, looking for a vein. The nurse notices the way my whole body tenses as she touches me.

"Take a deep breath," she says, probably thinking I'm nervous of the needle, not that her skin might touch mine and I'll wind up experiencing her death. Even with her gloves on, I don't feel safe.

A hiss escapes my lips as the needle slides in.

“Good girl.” She adjusts the blood bag before pulling off her gloves and tossing them in one of the bins along the center of the room. The blood drains from my face at the sight of her bare skin. “You’re all set. I’ll be back to check on you in a little while.”

She heads to another student down the row, leaving me alone. After almost a lifetime of dealing with it, I’ve gotten quite good at avoiding touching. Gloves, covered skin, even the attitude is all another way to keep me safe.

Still, the occasional slip happens. Someone will pat my cheek or catch my arm, their fingers grazing the skin between my glove and sleeve, and I’ll slip into experiencing their death. Just the thought makes me shudder.

The bed to my left is empty, but the poor kid in the bed to my right looks like he’s trying to scoot as far away from me as possible. My attitude might work a little too well in keeping people away.

It still hurts my feelings, even after all these years. I wish I could tell my classmates that I don’t want to get near them either. The encounter is always worse for me than it is for them.

My eyes find Felix, and he flashes me a grin, just as cool as ever. His poor student nurse is still standing by him, black ponytail bouncing as she talks.

I scan the rest of the gym. My gaze catches on a girl with dark skin and tight curls. She smiles and gives a little wave. I stare back at her as my brain tries to process if she meant the wave for me.

It’s possible. She’s a witch, too, and with Gran as the coven’s Supreme, she’d know who I am. She’s new, only moving here a couple of weeks ago for the beginning of the school year. I rack my brain trying to remember why she moved here. Something about a divorce, I think. Intercoven marriages can be tricky, especially when the spouses have two different magics. Almost every witch ends up in the coven that’s not ours. Death witches make other witches kind of jumpy. Ridiculous, but true.

I realize I've let my mind wander too long, but the boy on her left catches her attention before I can decide to wave back.

Closing my eyes, I lean against the headrest, trying not to think of ways to kill Felix for talking me into this. I know he meant well, but still. It's not like he has to worry about the risks. Ghosts don't appear to him if he lets his guard down. My breathing and the squeaking of shoes on the gym floor fill my ears. A heavy feeling settles on me, raising the hairs on my arms. Someone's watching me.

"Why hasn't anyone come to see me yet?" an all-too-familiar voice asks from beside me.

Shit.

Guess the crystal isn't going to work today. With the way my magic has been acting up as my ascension closes in, I shouldn't be surprised. I squeeze my eyes shut tighter, but I can still feel her beside me.

Of all the gifts the Goddess could bless us with, being a medium isn't a common one among magic wielders, but it's not unheard of, especially among death witches. Gran would always spew something about embracing the cycle of life and how their presence is an honor. But she never had a ghost appear behind her in the mirror when she was brushing her teeth. When I was little, it would terrify me when the occasional ghost showed up. As I got older, it became more of a nuisance than anything else.

"Hey, are you okay? You look a little pale. Well, paler than usual."

I'm sure she does, too. Maybe if I don't respond, she'll go away.

"Isn't your name Georgia or something?"

Guess not. "Georgiana—but my friends call me George." Well, friend.

"Whatever. Why did that nurse help you first? I was here before you."

I peel one eye open. Sure enough, Jen's lounging on the empty bed, bubblegum-pink bicycle helmet in her lap. Her complexion is

more translucent than golden now, but there's no mistaking her. I've put a lot of time into trying to decide what would make this less weird. At least they never look gruesome, just a slightly less corporeal version of themselves.

I think I would have died the first time I saw one if they were the horrific-looking ghosts from horror movies. I can't think of a way ghosts could be normal, but it always creeps me out when they're carrying the items they died with. If there's a reason some do and some don't, I'm not aware of it. Though, I've never been inclined to ask one.

"I don't know, Jen. Maybe she likes me better." Not the nicest thing to say.

But Jen wasn't the nicest either.

She eyes me, sucking her teeth before speaking. "You know my name?"

"Obviously."

Everyone knows her name. If they didn't before, they sure do by now. In the three weeks since the accident, she's become more popular than ever. This is the Jennifer Monroe Memorial Blood Drive after all.

She preens and shifts on the bed.

"Makes sense." She looks at me again. "You look a little sweaty."

Brushing my damp bangs from my forehead, I mumble a yes before glancing back at Felix. The grin is gone, and concern now creases his brow.

"I'm fine," I mouth to him. He nods, looking unconvinced. I can't blame him. While I've been dealing with this most of my life, he's only seen me interact a few times. Normally, I can ignore them. Unless I'm under duress, like when blood is flowing from a needle in my arm into a bag.

Jen follows my gaze. "You're always hanging around him. Are you two, like, a thing?"

I snort, forgetting I'm trying not to look like I'm talking to myself. The boy on the bed to my right scoots a little farther away. "No."

"Dumb question. You aren't his type." She scoffs, dragging her eyes from my blue hair to my Doc Martens.

"I'm sure that's it," I say through gritted teeth. I have to remind myself that she's been through a lot.

Jen pulls her long blond hair over her shoulder before leaning back, the paper remaining smooth beneath her. "I hope they hurry up soon. I'm supposed to meet Jason tonight."

I don't respond. I'd prefer to avoid being the one to tell her she won't be meeting Jason tonight. Or any other night.

"Hey," Jen says as Cathy comes to check my bag.

"You okay, sweetie?" Cathy asks as I cringe. I nod. "Hmm. Well, you should be done soon. Yell if you need anything." She smiles before turning away.

"Um, I need something!" Jen calls after her. Cathy doesn't turn around. "Unbelievable! She just completely ignored me."

As much as I don't want to be the one to tell her what's happening, I can never bear when they're in this state of confusion.

"Jen?" Might as well get this over with. "What's in your lap?"

Jen watches the nurse another moment before looking at the helmet. "My bike helmet." She runs a finger along the large crack on the side. "How'd this get here?" she breathes.

Don't make me be the one to say it.

"Weird. I don't know why I have this. I don't ride my bike to school."

Only to her boyfriend's house at night. She's still looking at her helmet, confusion crinkling her perfect skin.

I hate this part. I hate when they don't know. I hate having to be the one to tell them.

"Hey Jen." I dig into my back pocket for the flyer and awkwardly unfold it with one hand. "Can you come here and read this for me?"

“Can you not read?” she snarks, not looking at me.

I take a deep breath and remind myself, again, that she’s been through a lot. “I’m a little woozy. Please?” The last word grates along my nerves.

“Fine.” She hops up from the bed. Her hands grip her helmet as she comes up beside me.

“Why do you have a flyer with my picture on it?” Her pert nose wrinkles in disgust.

“Just read the paper.” I sigh, bracing myself.

So many emotions flit across her beautiful face: confusion, anger, grief, before settling on denial. Her emotions clang through me.

“This can’t be for me.” She glances around the gymnasium at our classmates gathered there.

“It is.”

Hazel eyes lift to meet mine. It’s not lost on me that I may be the only one to ever look into those eyes again.

“But why am I here then?” Her words are barely a whisper. I tense as realization dawns and her gaze drops to the cracked helmet in her hand.

Her jaw slackens as her wave of despair crashes into me.

And then she’s gone, unable to hold on to her form in her anguish. It’s always the same.

She didn’t even know my name before today, but a tear still rolls down my cheek. And then Felix is interrupting his bubbly young nurse, trying to get up and come to me. He knows something’s wrong now. I won’t be able to convince him otherwise.

My eyes find them, the others lurking on the outskirts of the gym. The ones who have been with me since the beginning and the ones who have joined along the way. I feel them—their grief and rage and despair—as they linger in my peripherals. They’re a part of me.

I wonder if Jen will join them.



C H A P T E R

2

AS SOON AS THE NURSE pulls the needle from my arm, I'm off the bed and leaving the blood drive, completely ignoring her as she scolds me about needing to take it easy.

Felix is hot on my heels as I try to put distance between myself and the gym. Maybe if I walk fast enough, the ghosts will stay in there for now. Not likely, but a girl can dream.

"What happened?" Felix calls after me.

"Nothing." I don't look back as I stomp down the hallway.

"Did someone touch you?"

"No." Thank the Goddess for that. "I told you: it was nothing."

"It didn't look like nothing." Felix's long legs help him easily keep up with me. The hallways are empty since most students are in the courtyard before school starts or at the blood drive.

"What do you know? You couldn't see her." I mean it like a joke, but my words sound brittle even to my ears.

“George, the comedian.” Felix grabs my elbow to stop me. He lets go when I wince and nods at my arm, at the bandage under my sleeve. “I’m sorry, I forgot.”

“It’s fine.”

I take a deep breath through my nose.

“It was Jen,” I say with a whoosh.

“Monroe?”

“One and the same.”

“Is she still here?” Felix glances around.

“No, she couldn’t hold on to her form.” I don’t tell him that there are still spirits lurking on the outskirts of my vision. My hope that they would stay in the gym was obviously in vain.

His lips pull into a thin line. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have made you do that.”

“You didn’t force me to do it. Just suggested. Besides, you didn’t know that would happen.”

“You told me it was a possibility.”

“I did.”

“I should have listened.”

“Yes, you should have.” There’s jest in my voice this time, but the pain doesn’t leave Felix’s face. “Oh, come on, Felix. I’m used to it.”

He flinches. I can’t blame him. No sixteen-year-old should be used to seeing ghosts. Even ones who are death witches.

“Buy you an ice cream after practice?” he asks.

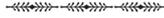
“Trying to assuage your guilt with bribes?”

“Maybe.” His shoulder lifts in a lopsided shrug.

“I accept.”

“Hoped you would. Don’t be late.” Felix is already turning down the hall. Most of us would use giving blood as a reason to skip class. Felix, on the other hand, insisted we do it before school so we didn’t miss anything. At least Gran won’t suspect anything when I tell her I need to rest instead of going to the coven meeting.

“I never am,” I say, watching him go before heading to my first class of the day.



THE AP HISTORY classroom is humming with excitement as I slide into my desk. The desk next to me is still empty, the other witch from my coven—I remember now her name is Trixie—still at the blood drive. I feel a twinge of guilt that she’s been sitting next to me for a week, and today was the first time I noticed her. I’d like to say it’s because she never made an effort, but that’s not exactly true either. My eyes flick to the empty desk as I try to convince myself I’m not a total asshole for ignoring someone less than three feet away from me.

My phone vibrates, stirring me from my self-loathing.

FELIX: im starving. ☺

GEORGE: big baby.

GEORGE: you should have eaten. class hasn’t even started.

I can picture him sitting in his AP Physics class, acting like the world is ending because he hasn’t had second breakfast yet.

The final bell rings. Mr. Whitaker’s desk is empty; the sub is probably running late for the day.

I’m watching the three bubbles as Felix types when a voice startles me. I jump and the phone almost slips from my gloved fingers.

“You look like you didn’t sleep at all.” Jen leans forward, propping her chin in her hands. She’s sitting in Trixie’s empty desk.

The seat in front of me is empty, but Steve, the senior two seats up, turns around to see what startled me. When he sees nothing, he rolls his eyes before turning around. I refuse to engage. No one else can see her, so no one will know I’m ignoring her.

“I know you can hear me.” Jen leans over to wave a hand in front of my face. “Yoo-hoo, earth to George.”

I don't know why I continue wearing this peridot. It obviously has no impact on the ghosts of high school girls.

"Go away." It comes out as a mumbled growl since I'm trying not to move my lips.

"Huh?" Steve turns around again.

"Nothing. I didn't say anything," I blurt.

"Of course you didn't." He turns back around.

The seconds tick by, the class growing more anxious as no one enters the room.

"Where's the old guy who's usually in here?" Jen asks.

I shoot her a glare from the corner of my eye. She doesn't notice. Of course, Jen wouldn't know who Mr. Whitaker is. She wasn't in his class, so he wasn't important enough to be on her radar.

I'm just texting Felix to ask what happens if the teacher doesn't show, when the door opens.

"Oh, he's—" Jen starts. I pop my head up, glancing at the now empty seat. She's gone. That was abrupt.

I turn to see what she was looking at.

My mouth drops open.

A young man strolls in. His shiny black hair is swept to one side of his inviting face. Thick, black-rimmed glasses are perched on his nose and a tan satchel is tucked under his arm.

The room is instantly silent at his presence.

He glances at the still empty desk before turning to look at us, a smile spreading across his face. I swear I hear sighs throughout the classroom.

He's almost painfully handsome.

"Holy shit," Krista mutters behind me. She was Jen's best friend and is one of the most popular girls in school. If even she is star-struck, he must be as good looking as I think he is.

"Is Mr. Whitaker not here?" he asks, voice smooth.

No one answers him.

His smile doesn't falter as he spots the only open desk in the room: the one in front of me. He walks toward it with confidence, sliding into the seat as every set of eyes in the room watches him.

If he's thrown off by the amount of attention he's getting, he doesn't let on. He's only saved from the stares of the class by the opening of the door and the second shock for the day.

Mr. Whitaker shuffles into the room, not glancing at the class until he plops into the chair behind his desk.

"I thought he died," Krista mumbles behind me.

I would have too if I didn't see the people who have actually died on the reg.

Mr. Whitaker lets out a hacking cough that hurts my chest just listening to it before he finally looks up. He scans the room, his gaze landing on the now occupied seat in front of me.

"Class, we have a new addition. Some of you may remember my grandson, Silas. He'll be staying with me this school year."

"There's no way," Krista says. She leans forward to whisper at me. Normally she ignores my existence, but apparently she can't keep her revelation to herself. "That's Snotty Silas. I don't know what he did, but he got hot."

I squint at the back of his head as if that would help me see any kind of resemblance to the skinny kid with oversized glasses and a constantly running nose to the boy who even I can admit is attractive, now sitting in front of me. He moved with his parents when we were all still in elementary school, never to be heard from again. Until now, it seems.

Mr. Whitaker soldiers on, oblivious to the whispers spreading like wildfire in the room. "I was out retrieving him from his parents' house in Seattle. But now I am back. Where did you leave off?"

No one else is paying attention, too busy trying to check out Silas without openly staring. Mr. Whitaker spreads the papers around on his desk, still waiting for an answer. I shift in my seat

before clearing my throat. Might as well be the scapegoat. “The Civil War.”

Mr. Whitaker harrumphs. I guess that’s his version of thank you. “As George said, let’s open our textbooks to page forty-seven.”

That’s it. No other introduction, no other explanation as to his absence or the arrival of his grandson. He just dives into the lesson as the rest of us sit and blink at him.

My phone buzzes.

FELIX: Whitaker is back? A new student? What is today?!?

GEORGE: a thursday.

GEORGE: wait, how do you know? you’re not even in this class.

Three dots pop up as I wait for his response. I look up to find Mr. Whitaker writing on the whiteboard. Silas watches him. Although his hair is still in that I just woke up like this style, the hairline on the back of his neck is cut with precision.

Gooseflesh prickles my skin.

FELIX: Krista texted me. apparently he’s beautiful.

Turning around, I see Krista has her phone in her hand and is typing away furiously.

“What?” she mouths as I turn back around.

GEORGE: news spreads fast.

FELIX: we’ve got to stay entertained somehow.

FELIX: what’s his story? where’s he from? why’s he here?

I flick my eyes to Mr. Whitaker, but he’s just reading from the textbook page. His voice is so calm and soothing, I’m sure the class would be falling asleep if it weren’t for the excitement of a new student.

Trixie’s arrival already got the town whispering. In a small town, one new student is an event. Two, especially in the same grade, is unheard of.

Silas looks fully alert, like he’s hanging on every word Mr. Whitaker is saying. I didn’t know anyone could be that interested in

his lectures. The old man seems to barely register that students are in the room.

His clothes, though stylish, almost look like he popped out of the wrong decade. It could be purposeful, but his pants are just a little too high and his cardigan looks like something Felix's grandpa would have worn.

But the more I look at him, the less sure I am about my feeling. Maybe I'm just overreacting, still on edge after the blood drive.

FELIX: ???

GEORGE: IDK. He didn't say much.

FELIX: Weird.

It certainly is.

FELIX: Wait, Snotty Silas?

It's been a decade since he left, but he still hasn't been able to shake the nickname.

GEORGE: one and the same.

FELIX: Now I'm really curious.

GEORGE: what's new? we'll talk later.

FELIX: ☹

The rest of the class continues in the same way, with Mr. Whitaker reading the remainder of the chapter out loud before assigning the short response questions at the end of the chapter for homework. He gives us the rest of the class to work on the responses, and the sound of pencils scribbling is mixed with the whispers of students.

And for whatever reason, Jen never reappeared.



C H A P T E R

3

THE HALLWAYS ARE EMPTY SINCE everyone is still in class as I exit the bathroom. I usually only go to the bathroom during class. No nosey glances or gossip that way. And no one to bump into, literally. My black lace gloves are tucked into my back pocket. I've never much liked wearing gloves; it's more of a necessary evil than a comfort. Still, I feel naked without them, too exposed. But I refuse to put them on before my hands are fully dry.

Unfortunately, the bathroom was out of paper towels again, so I'm stuck wiping my damp hands on my pants as I leave.

As the bathroom door swings shut behind me, I take a step forward and my foot slips out from under me. My arms fling out, intent on stopping my tumble.

A hand reaches out, catching mine on the descent. The heat of bare skin soaks into mine and there's only a moment of panic, my brain trying to find a way out of this, before I fall in a new way . . .



SHE LOOKS OUT of place in this too bright room, the blue of her hair like a shining halo. Her teeth are bared, those emerald eyes shining with a feral rage.

“Big mistake,” she growls.

I can’t help but smile. I love a girl with spunk.

A scream erupts from her throat as she launches at me in a tear of blue. She slams into me, the full weight of her slight frame toppling us to the floor. I barely have time to draw a breath before her knife sinks into my shoulder.

I didn’t even see her grab one. She moved so fast.

Pain erupts as the blade slices deeper, black dots flooding my vision.

Now, I’m the one screaming.

Is this it? Is this how I go?

At the hand of a seventeen-year-old girl?

I try to shove her off, but she’s like a woman possessed. She rips the knife from my shoulder. She straddles me as she raises the knife again, this time with both hands gripping the handle, and sinks it in.

Again.

And again.

The pain is unbearable, muddying my thoughts. There are so many explanations I have, but now, all I can think about is getting her off, making her stop.

I try to push again, but my arm fails me. I’m just so tired.

My struggles don’t faze her.

She’s coated in my blood. A vision in crimson. It spatters her face, coats her stomach, slicks her hands, but still, she keeps stabbing.

She’s screaming words, my blood flinging into her mouth with reckless abandon.

Is this what it feels like? Is this death?

Is it finally my time?

I try to cough but a wheezing sound escapes as something warm drips down my chin.

She sinks the knife in again. I feel it as it pierces my lungs, my heart. Pain pounds through my chest.

Tears are tracking down her beautiful, bloodstained face. Clean streaks between the gore.

“Go. To. Hell,” she says through clenched teeth.

Darkness seeps around my vision, so I can only see her face as I—



MY EYES FLY open, my breath coming in heaving gasps. I can't get enough air into my lungs. My throat squeezes tighter.

His face is above me, concern furrowing his brow.

Blood thrums through my body, thundering in my ears.

“It's George, isn't it? Are you all right?” Silas asks. I barely hear him through the buzzing. He reaches for my elbow.

It all comes back to me: my fall, his hand reaching out to catch me. He must have lowered me to the ground when I slipped into his death, because that's where I find myself. I scurry back, shoving my hands behind me to scoot away. Sweat coats my palms, and they slip out from under me. My elbow slams into the tile. I keep pushing.

I can't touch him again. I won't go through that again.

Whatever that was, I never want it to happen again.

As if I'm back in the vision, I feel the slide of the knife through my ribs. Hot blood sliding down my side, filling my lungs. The taste of copper.

Not real. Not real. Not real.

I close my eyes, but the image of my blood-slicked form is seared into the back of my eyelids. My eyes fly open.

“Are you okay? You passed out.” His tone is concerned, but there's something in his face, almost like he's assessing me.

Tears flood my lashes. My head is shaking. He moves forward again.

“Fine,” I choke out, pushing away from him again. My whole body trembles, adrenaline, fear, and confusion sparking too many connections in my brain. I need to leave. Now. I can’t stay here.

“You don’t look fine. We should get you to the nurse.” Silas reaches for me again.

The sound that comes out of me sounds more animal than human. He pauses.

“I’m fine. Really. Happens all the time.” I’ve repeated this so many times it actually feels natural.

Silas is still eyeing me. He doesn’t seem afraid like most people are. There’s concern etched into his features, which makes this whole thing worse. My stomach rolls as I feel his blood on my skin again. I need to get out of here. I need to find Felix.

Desperately, I try to remember how to walk. I can’t think of anything but his blood slicking my hands.

I choke on a sob.

Anything. I need to think of anything other than the knife sinking deeper. Anything other than the feel of the blade as it split my, his, chest.

“I don’t think you are.” His gaze is piercing. “You look pale.”

“I’m fine.” I start to stand, and he reaches for me again when I stumble. I dance from his grip, almost collapsing to the ground again. “Fine,” I say, backing away from him. I mutter one more “fine” before turning on a heel and sprinting from him.



THE CHILL OF the day rips through my lungs in heaving gasps. I texted Felix as soon as I burst from the hallway. My fingers were shaking so much that I could barely type out the three letters.

GEORGE: SOS.

He knew what that meant and was already rushing across the parking lot before I had even made it to his car, probably using his Felix charm to get a hall pass. Felix has me propped against his Jeep, another item in a long string of “forgive me for not being around” gifts from his parents, his face inches from mine.

“George, look at me. Take a breath,” Felix says, gripping my shoulders.

My hair spills from my ponytail, sticking to the wet streaks on my face as I continue to shake my head.

“No, no, no, no, no, no,” I hear myself muttering, but it’s like someone very far away is speaking.

The dead coalesce all around us, their curiosity barely overpowered by my emotions. They’re crowding the deserted parking lot. I see them through my tears. Jen’s in front, but she doesn’t come any closer. None of them do.

But since Felix arrived, I haven’t been able to say the words, to tell him what I saw.

What I felt myself do.

“George!” I can hear the panic in his voice now.

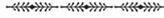
“No, no, no, no, no,” I keep muttering, mascara tears tracking down my cheeks. There’s a ringing in my ears, drowning him out so the only other thing I hear is the sound of the knife as it broke through bone, the splattering of blood as I lift my hand again.

Felix’s fingers dig into my arms over my sleeves. I’m drowning in the memory, the blood that filled my lungs, Silas’s lungs. Felix shakes me. I can’t stop crying. My breath comes in short bursts. I can’t take a full breath. Black spots speckle my vision.

Warmth spreads through my skin as Felix’s hands touch either side of my face . . .



“GOODNIGHT, MY DEAR,” I hear as I close my eyes, sleep calling to me. My breath evens, slowing to a steady rhythm. I wonder . . .



EASE FLOODS THROUGH my body as I open my eyes, but pure rage quickly follows it. My hands collide with Felix’s chest, and I shove him away from me with all of my strength. Despite our considerable height difference and blood loss, my anger must bolster me because he lets out an oomph as he stumbles backward.

“What. The. Hell. Felix!” I yell.

He’s never touched me without permission before. Never. It is a violation of everything that makes us, us.

“I’m sorry!” He’s rubbing his chest.

Good. I hope it hurts.

“I didn’t know what to do. I’ve never seen you like that. You were hyperventilating.” When I say nothing, he continues. “I panicked. George, I’m sorry.”

My eyes search his face, rage draining as quickly as it flooded me. “Don’t do it again,” I mutter, a sudden exhaustion weighing on me. I slide down the side of the Jeep to sit leaning against the tire.

He crouches in front of me. “I won’t. Why are you out here?”

I’m not sure how to answer that.

The sun’s shifted behind the clouds, and I shiver, not just from the cold.

My jacket’s still inside. And my backpack. Both still next to my desk in class. I don’t think I can bring myself to go in, so I just rub my arms for warmth.

I suck in one shaky breath. Exhale. Another less shaky breath. “I touched Silas.”

Felix sighs, moving to sit next to me. He brings up his knees, resting his forearms on them.

“I’m sorry,” he says. And it’s empathy, not pity, in his words. “I can’t imagine how hard it is.”

I take a shuddering breath. Hard doesn’t begin to describe it. I usually have an . . . adverse reaction when I experience a death. But I’ve never had anything like this.

“Is it soon?” Felix asks, sympathy slipping into his words. Of course that’s the most logical reason for how upset I am. The real reason is so much worse.

I lift my glasses on top of my head and swipe the tears from my cheeks. My fingers come away black and my mind registers that my hands are still bare. My gloves are still tucked into my back pocket. I pull them out and tug them on. My carelessness with them today has already cost me too much.

“No,” I say. “Well, I don’t know.” The thought makes my stomach churn. Figuring out when it happens would be mean reliving the vision. I can’t do that. My hair was still blue, and the fury in my eyes is something I hope to never see again. Whatever led up to this, it wasn’t premeditated. It was out of anger.

“Then what happened, George?” Felix’s voice wavers, his concern deepening into fear. “I have never seen you this shook up.”

A part of me doesn’t want to tell him. He’s my best friend and one of the only people who looks at me with no judgment. He’ll never look at me that way again. There’s no sensible way to say what I’m about to say that doesn’t make me sound like a monster.

Maybe I am the monster.

“It was me,” I whisper.

“What was you? Wait, it was your death?” Felix’s brown skin turns ashen.

I shake my head. “It’s worse than that.” Inhale. Exhale. Another tear slips free. “It was me,” I say again. “I—” Another breath. “I killed him.” My eyes fall to the asphalt. I watch Felix’s shoes, unable to look him in the eyes.

When the silence stretches on, I finally look up. Felix's lips are pulled into a thin line, the charm that usually oozes from him replaced with something that feels like pain.

"Felix?" I say when I can't take his silence any longer.

"It must be a mistake."

"You know it isn't." Felix knows, better than most, what these visions mean. Once a death is written, it cannot be changed.

"When?"

"I don't know. Soon? I was a little overwhelmed by what was actually happening, but I looked the same, I think."

"Why?" he asks.

I'm grateful he doesn't ask how I saw myself in the vision. I'm definitely not ready to explain that.

He pushes up, pacing in front of me. I watch him for a bit, grateful for the distraction of his movement before I clamber to my feet.

"What are you thinking?" I'm flooded with the fear that he'll want nothing to do with me. I am a murderer, after all.

Murderess? Soon to be murderess? Murderess in training?

Shut up, brain.

"We have to tell your gran," he says, still pacing.

It was my first thought too, but as I try to put distance between myself and what I saw, I realize I don't want anyone else to know. Even Gran. "Absolutely not."

"Who else will know what to do?"

"There's nothing to do, Felix. It can't be changed." It's the mantra I've lived my whole life by. There was a time, when I was younger, when I would try to stop the deaths by telling people they were coming. It didn't matter, though. Death always came.

"That's bullshit and you know it."

His words startle me. Felix almost never curses. As much as I'd like him to be right in this moment, I think the alternative might be worse.

“Felix, if it could be changed, I would know that by now. And if this is how we find out . . .” I can’t bring myself to say the rest. If this is how we find out death can be changed, then how many deaths have I been responsible for by just letting them happen?

He cuts me off. “You’ve done nothing yet. No one can be convicted before a crime has been committed.” His fists are clenched, knuckles shining white, as he keeps pacing.

“Felix—”

“Are you accepting it?” He whirls to me, stopping his pacing. The look on his face is wild, frantic.

“No, of course not, I just—” I try to take a deep breath, but the tightness in my chest hasn’t eased. Instead, I pull my hair into a messy bun. Felix watches me the entire time, eyes searching my face for answers I can’t give him. “I just don’t want to think about it.”

“Ignoring it is your plan?” Felix presses. He’s tense, muscles poised to move. He may be about to run away, or throw me over his shoulder and spirit me from here. It could go either way.

“Ignoring it is one hundred percent my plan.” Anything to never have to think about my face covered in blood or the scent of iron in the air. A shudder runs through me. I look down to my hands then up at the ghosts hanging around the edge of my vision. My magic, it’s been acting up with my coming ascension. I’ve been seeing more ghosts than usual, maybe I’ll see irregular visions too.

Felix opens his mouth to speak, but I hold up my hand to stop him. “For now. I can’t think past what just happened.”

“I still think you need something more substantial,” Felix mutters.

I sigh. “Fine. I’ll avoid him and hope I never am in that place, wherever it was, to kill him.” As the words leave my lips, I hear how ridiculous that sounds. I don’t know when or where that . . . event . . . took place, so there’s no way I can stop it. What’s more terrifying though, is I don’t know the *why*. I would imagine it would have to

be something truly terrible to make me consider killing someone, especially in the brutal way I felt. There must be a reason, but I'm not sure I want to find out the answer to that question.

Prison. I'm going to prison. They aren't going to let me wear gloves in there, and there is no personal space. That's where I'll die, surrounded by criminals and drowning in living their deaths.

"We're telling your gran. Now. Get in the truck." Felix's voice pulls me from my thoughts. This is the side of Felix I never see. The commanding, take-charge Felix, who gets things done. It's why he's the captain of the football team, not the quarterback, even as a junior. But he doesn't use that voice with me.

"What? You can't miss class. We have a quiz in English." The fact he's suggesting skipping class is somehow scarier than what I just saw.

"And we both know our grades will be none the worse for a missing quiz. Mr. Edwards will forgive us. Get in the truck, Georgiana."

I narrow my now swollen eyes. He knows I hate when he calls me that. "You're a bully."

"And you're a bull," he says, opening the door for me. "Let's go. Gran will write me a note. No one will question it. Even outside the coven, that woman is terrifying."

Rolling my shoulders back, I plant my feet.

"No."

"Stop being stubborn."

"I'm not being stubborn. I don't think telling Gran right now is the right thing. It just happened. Maybe I overreacted."

"What? Do you think there's a better reaction to seeing yourself murder someone?"

I rub my chest, the slide of the knife too fresh in my brain. Felix knows I see death when I touch someone, but he doesn't know I also experience it as the person dying, that I feel their pain as it happens. That's a little tidbit I've chosen to keep to myself.

“No, but you know how Gran is. She worries enough about my magic and the ghosts that trail me.” I swing my arm to motion to the ghosts. Although Felix can’t see them, at least now he’ll know they’re there. They’re still pressing in around me, but I’m too tired to push them away. Jen’s here too, her despair weighing on me more than the others. “And with everything going on in the coven, I don’t want to worry her.”

“What’s going on in the coven?” Felix asks.

Shit. Separation of witch and Felix is the motto I’ve lived by for years—I’m not muddying those waters now. Explaining my theory about my magic wouldn’t be worth it yet. I need to think more.

“Nothing, just drama, nothing to worry about. Felix, let’s go back inside, finish the day, and forget this ever happened.” He opens his mouth to speak but I cut him off. “Fine, not forget it ever happened, but drop it for now.”

“Avoidance isn’t always the solution.”

“Here, we disagree. Look, I’m not avoiding it, I just don’t know what that was, and I would like to lean into the hope that I’m not a murderer by taking a step back.”

“I’m not letting this go,” he says, but he steps away from the Jeep.

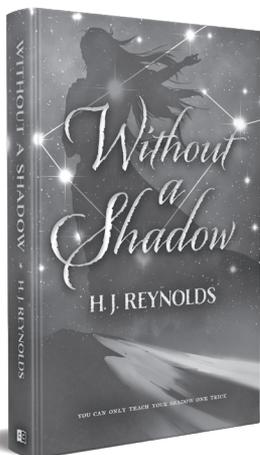
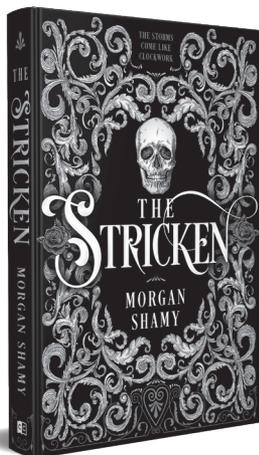
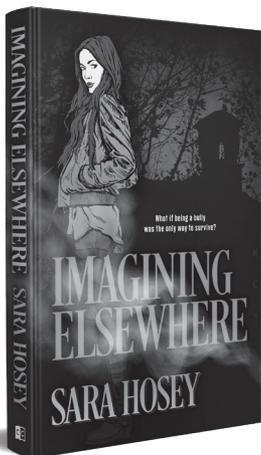
“I know you’re not. We can talk about it again after school.” Or never would be my preference, but I keep that bit to myself.

Felix hesitates. He doesn’t want to let the subject drop. He also knows if he pushes me too much, he’ll get nowhere. Finally, he nods. “Meet me right here after practice.”

“Fine.”



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DEATH IS PERMANENT. EVEN IF IT HASN'T HAPPENED YET.

WITH JUST A TOUCH, George experiences a person's future death. High school is hard enough, but sixteen-year-old death witch Georgiana "George" Colburn can't seem to catch a break. Even Jen's ghost, the recently deceased popular girl who ignored George in life, won't leave her alone. George is convinced her life can't get any worse. That is until she bumps into the new student and witnesses his death at her hand.

When a coven mate, Trixie, offers to help her with her magic, George finds herself with a new friend and crush, but she knows even if she found the courage to ask her out, a relationship is impossible: she'd never be able to touch her. With the help of her friends, George must face her fears and learn to embrace her powers to unlock the secrets of her magic before blood stains her hands.



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