


"A richly woven tale of magic and murder and vengeance. This book kept me up all night! One of the best stories I've read all year." —Shea Ernshaw,
New York Times bestselling author of *The Wicked Deep*



THE BITTERWINE OATH

HANNAH WEST

T H E
BITTERWINE
OATH

HANNAH WEST

HOLIDAY HOUSE NEW YORK

Copyright © 2020 by Hannah West

All Rights Reserved

HOLIDAY HOUSE is registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.

Printed and bound in TK at TK.

www.holidayhouse.com

First Edition

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: West, Hannah, author.

Title: The bitterwine oath / by Hannah West.

Description: First edition. | New York : Holiday House, 2020. | Audience: Ages 14–up.

Audience: Grades 10–12. | Summary: Can eighteen-year-old Natalie and her great-great-grandmother's magical sisterhood end the cycle of violence in Natalie's small Texas town?

Identifiers: LCCN 2019055102 | ISBN 9780823445479 (hardcover)

Subjects: CYAC: Magic—Fiction. | Witchcraft—Fiction.

Supernatural—Fiction. | Texas—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.W4368 Bi 2020 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019055102>

ISBN: 978-0-8234-4547-9 (hardcover)

*For everyone who feels at home in the spooky woods,
the dusty library, and all other places where magic
seems most likely to show itself*



Lillian Pickard

I did not regret befriending Malachi Rivers until the night we invoked her magic to seek revenge.

Four of us sat in a circle on the floor of an abandoned cabin in the Piney Woods, twine looped around our girlish wrists, binding us together. A grimoire lay open upon tender sprigs of herbs and bones of woodland creatures. Segments of text had been violently crossed out and revisions crammed into the margins.

Malachi Rivers was indeed that powerful; her edits and improvisations increased the potency of every charm, hex, curse, and conjuration.

Until that fateful night in the summer of 1921, our foursome, led by Malachi, had performed harmless magic for entertainment and empowerment. Dorothy Hawkins, Johanna Mead, and I revered Malachi's magic and wanted to participate. While we were bound together, we could channel it. The powerless could become powerful.

We called ourselves "Pagans of the Pines" in a spirit of cheeky rebellion. The magic had been a girlhood game to me, the grimoire nothing more than a mass-produced, curious collectible pilfered from the parlor of my cosmopolitan aunt.

But everything changed that night. Childish rebellion turned to sinister retribution.

Dorothy, Johanna, and Malachi had endured trials I could not fathom.

Malachi's father was controlling and oppressive. Johanna Mead's abusive father and uncle had beaten the boy she loved nearly to death out of a twisted sense of protectiveness. A lynch mob had murdered Dorothy Hawkins's older brother over a false accusation that he had attempted to murder a white man. Her sharecropper father had lost his land, and the family relied on charity from their church to scrape by.

Now that Malachi had nearly mastered her magic of earth, bone, and blood, the three of them wanted to claim vengeance commensurate to their suffering.

We did not mean to kill. Malachi concocted a curse that would reveal the deep evil within the hearts of the men who had wronged them, so that society would no longer accept, respect, or enable their dark deeds. Malachi had spoken the curse over the Communion wine in the sanctuary of her father's church. We watched her, witnessed her slender body rocking with power, her wrists and hands trembling. She dusted the wine with herbs, dipped her fingers into the chalice, and painted her mark on the white cloth of the Communion table—the mark we had created to represent the three elements from which she drew her power.

"The Devil's supper," I recall her whispering in the candlelight.

We returned to our consecrated ground—the cabin nestled in a forgotten forest glade—to finish our work. We would use magic to lure the men to Communion at the witching hour. They would drink the cursed wine, and their darkness would be known to all.

But as soon as we split the flesh of our fingertips and dripped blood over our preparations, I felt Malachi's magic spinning out of control, like a toy top whirling fast enough to lift off the ground and bounce about unpredictably. The other girls' anger fueled it, giving it a will of its own.

I was afraid. I wanted to stop it. But our hands were already bound, and to break the bond before our work was complete would be far more dangerous than even the darkest conjuration.

I have undoubtedly lost many a reader already with my earnest talk of magic. But I have no other pen with which to write this biography.

Any tale about Malachi that excludes magic is not about Malachi at all.

Excerpt from *Pagans of the Pines: The Untold Story of Malachi Rivers*, published 1968

ONE



Natalie Colter

— PRESENT DAY —

ONE MONTH AND TEN DAYS UNTIL THE CLAIMING

The first day of my last summer in San Solano was clammy than a fever. The sun baked the mud from last night's storm like clay in a kiln as my best friend and I ran the trail we'd forged between our two houses.

"You're falling behind, regional champ!" Lindsey Valenzuela taunted over her shoulder.

Ambition gnawed at my tired muscles and I pushed myself harder. In a few short months, I'd be a college freshman distance runner with everything to prove. I couldn't afford a lethargic summer.

My toe caught on a divot in the rough terrain and I fell, earning stinging scrapes along my palms and elbows.

Lindsey doubled back to offer me a hand, her shadow stretching over me. "You okay?"

I accepted the help and unstuck my sweaty tank top from my skin. "No offense, but when did you get faster than me?"

"It's my green juice." She slapped her bicep, way too perky for having just covered three miles in the heat. "You should try it."

"No way. It smells like toxic waste."



"Your call." Lindsey swiped caramel-highlighted dark hairs from her dewy face and grinned. "I'll just keep handing you your ass."

As I brushed dirt off my legs, a lazy wind carried perfume from clusters of pale honeysuckles, and with it, a stench of rot. I wrinkled my nose and palmed sweat from my eyes, searching the overgrown grasses. Behind a barbed-wire fence marking private pastureland, I found a bovine ribcage the size of a barrel. Scavengers had ripped away most of the meat, but flaps of decaying flesh remained.

"Gross," Lindsey said, following my look of disgust.

Like every other East Texas town, San Solano was hotter than the Devil's crack by the end of May, and the carcass reeked. But I ventured a step into chigger-ridden grasses to get a closer look.

"Nat, don't get too close!" Lindsey said.

"There's no head." I was almost relieved by the lack of a bulging tongue and hollow eye sockets. "Isn't that weird?"

"It's probably mounted in a steakhouse."

"That's an Angus farm," I said, pointing. "Why would anyone mount a cow with no horns?"

I expected to see my curiosity mirrored in her molasses-brown eyes. But she shrugged and flicked a mosquito from her patterned neon running shorts. "You're the one whose dad's a vet. I don't know anything about cows." She caught up to my insinuation and flashed me a sideways look of suspicion. "You'd better not be getting superstitious on me."

Retying my dirty-blond hair in a ponytail, I crossed back through the patches of Indian paintbrush. "I'm not saying I think the Malachians are still around or anything."

"Good."

"But don't you think it's a little unsettling?"

"It's just a dead cow!" Lindsey cried. "This town is on the verge of hysteria."

An overstatement, but San Solano was undeniably on edge. The sheriff's department had sent deputies to our classes the week before finals to

hook their thumbs in their belts and lecture us against getting too rowdy this summer. “Stay away from Calvary Baptist unless you’re attending a service,” they’d warned, “and don’t stir up trouble at the cabin in the woods. No trespassing means no trespassing.”

They asked us to inform them of anything “unusual.” We knew what they meant: books of curses, assortments of herbs and animal bones, or the symbol that had become shorthand for cult activity in San Solano.

But they warned us not to panic if we saw something suspicious. The most likely culprits would be local teens like us pulling pranks, or tourists who were overly fascinated with the town’s violent past. Plenty of their kind would descend on San Solano in the coming days.

Maybe the police would succeed in discouraging the late-night dares and the rumors threatening to whip the town into a frenzy. But nothing would stop the curious gazes that burned the back of my neck. Nothing would stop the calls from journalists that made my mom unplug our outdated landline and forced my dad to add “veterinary business only” to his contact page.

As the only living descendants of Malachi Rivers, we were the hot ticket in town this summer.

“The twins want to meet us at Sawmill,” Lindsey said, checking her phone. “Can we detour? I’m hungry.”

I glanced back at the headless carcass, wondering how Lindsey could summon an appetite right now. But I decided to drop it. I could picture the sheriff teasing me for calling to report dead livestock in a pasture. He’d been my dad’s best friend since their middle school days.

We hit the trail again. I couldn’t shake the sense that Lindsey was pacing herself to avoid leaving me in the dust. A healthy sense of competition had been the foundation of our friendship ever since we’d borrowed our teacher’s stopwatch to race across the monkey bars during third-grade recess.

I wanted to snap at her for going easy on me. I was too *fast* for her to go easy on me.

She was barely panting by the time we stepped off the trail into an overgrown meadow and crossed the country highway to Sawmill, our town's famously ramshackle barbecue joint.

The Dixon twins waited for us at a picnic table outside. The hot metal bench burned my bare thighs as I plopped down next to Abbie with my sweet tea and pulled pork sandwich. She smelled like freshly applied sunscreen, but her round, ivory face seemed to only get pinker as the sun bore down on us.

"Y'all want to do a group trip to Toledo Bend after church this Sunday?" her sister Faith asked, bending the brim of her ball cap to shade her equally sensitive face. Her button nose was still peeling from the last sunburn. "Or will you be too busy training like overachieving dorks?"

"Y'all are begging to get massacred out on those trails," Abbie added before either of us could answer.

"Technically that would be murder, not a massacre," I pointed out. "And we're not boys, so we're safe. Which is pretty ironic."

"Come on, people!" Lindsey smacked her palm on the table, rattling the condiments. "No one could ever prove that Malachi and her friends killed those dudes, and even the copycat murderers would be old by now, if they're still alive. Nothing is going to happen."

She was right about the first two things, and probably right about the third. Malachi Rivers and three other girls had faced trial for fatally poisoning a dozen men—including Malachi's father—with Communion wine in a church sanctuary in July of 1921. The motive was there, but the conclusive evidence was not. Though the men had clearly partaken of the wine just before they died, the police found that it didn't contain any identifiable toxic substances. The girls were acquitted.

Malachi had been the leader of the group, and thus the unanswered questions had circled back to her. She'd tried to make a normal life for herself after the trial, but she disappeared permanently just a handful of years later, leaving a husband and young son—my great grandfather—without a word.

And then a second massacre happened exactly fifty years after the first.

The twelve victims were, once again, all male. Unlike the first time, they were mostly young, in their teens and twenties, and hadn't committed any heinous offenses, as far as anyone knew. And unlike the first time, there was evidence of a struggle in the sanctuary: bruises and lacerations on the victims' wrists suggesting they'd been held against their will, several broken bones between them, plus destruction of church property. The actual cause of the deaths was still unknown; forensic testing proved beyond a doubt the wine contained nothing but harmless herbs.

The cases were more like kissing cousins than identical twins. Due to the discrepancies, investigators labeled the second massacre a copycat crime. And even though Malachi had been legally declared innocent, it was clear the copycats had been inspired by the rumors of her magic. Thus, the investigators lumped the events together and dubbed them the "Malachian Massacres." Both remained unsolved.

And now, the semicentennial anniversary of the massacres was creeping closer.

The town's unspoken questions had been like keepsakes tucked away in the attic. *Did* Malachi and her three friends have something to do with the deaths of the men who had traumatized them in 1921? Who had mimicked the massacre in 1971?

And most importantly, were the fanatics out there today? Would the people who revered Malachi's legacy strike again?

As if reading my thoughts, Abbie spoke up in a voice that would have paired well with a flashlight and a campfire. "Maybe the Malachians have been recruiting in secret this whole time. Maybe someone we know is one of them. It's kind of interesting to imagine—"

"Interesting?" Lindsey cut her off, instantly serious. "Real people died, Abbie."

"I know that, Lindsey," Abbie retorted. She rolled her blue eyes and

jabbed at her potato salad. “Our great-great uncle died in the first massacre. He was a jerk and he deserved it, but it’s not a joke to me.”

The glare in Lindsey’s chocolate-brown eyes melted away. “Anyway, Nat would know if the Malachians were still active.”

“How would I know?” I asked, devouring a bite of my messy sandwich. I’d always been interested in the massacres from a historical standpoint, but I wasn’t obsessed or anything.

“Because they would try to recruit you,” Lindsey explained, as though it were obvious. “They believed Malachi Rivers could do magic, and you’re related to her. Has anyone ever tried to drag you out to the woods for a creepy ritual or anything?”

“No.”

“Then the cult is dead,” Lindsey declared. She arched her dark brows at Abbie and slurped the last of her Dr Pepper.

“All the more reason to have some fun,” Abbie said. “We know we’re not in any real danger.”

Faith had been studying her split ends, but she flicked her ash-brown braid over her shoulder and planted her elbows on the table. “Everyone’s talked this topic to death. Are y’all in for the lake trip? With the usual crew?”

“And Levi,” Abbie added. “He’s back in town.”

I’d already spotted the weathered blue pickup in the Langford family’s driveway, but hearing his name made a pang pinch between my ribs.

Lindsey eyed me sidelong as I swilled my tea and crushed ice between my teeth. Only she knew what had happened between Levi and me before he left last August.

He’d been slated to start his freshman year at college in Dallas when his father had died suddenly of an aneurysm. Levi’s mom and sister had hoped he would defer for a semester. But he didn’t. He’d left.

And since finding his letter in my mailbox on the morning he’d driven away, I hadn’t heard from him once.

That letter had been a stoic farewell, its careful words the cool cobalt of distance and forgetting.

“Did you hear Levi got two of his poems published in, like, a prestigious poetry review?” Faith asked. “Mrs. Langford was bragging on him at the potluck last Sunday.”

“Good for him,” Lindsey chirped, saving me from having to reply.

“So are y’all coming?” Faith pressed.

Lindsey fiddled with the fitness watch that left subtle tan lines on her golden-brown wrist, waiting for me to say yes before she accepted the invitation. I could tell Levi’s homecoming had already raised her hackles, but she didn’t need to worry about me wasting any energy on him.

“Yeah, sounds fun,” I said. I only had one summer to soak up time with people I’d miss—people who’d miss me back.

The twins drove me home first, past acres upon acres of pines and meadows. When we jostled over the gravel driveway toward my family’s yellow farmhouse and the guesthouse my dad had converted into a veterinary office, Maverick and Ranger, our cattle dogs, scrambled from the front porch to greet me.

“See you at graduation!” Abbie sang out the window. I waved and scratched the dogs’ mottled gray-and-black coats before checking the mail, finding graduation cards from relatives and a hefty packet of summer training and nutrition tips from my future coach.

But when I shut the squealing mailbox, I noticed something odd at the base of the nearest fence post: a smooth stone with a neat engraving. I bent to scoop it up.

My mouth went dry as I traced my thumb over each familiar component of the design. A triangle pointing down with a horizontal line through the bottom third. *Earth*.

Two diagonal lines crossing through the triangle. *Bone*.

A smear of dried, dark red at the center. *Blood*.

It was the Malachian mark.

TWO



Fear caressed my vertebrae, one by one.

A staggered procession of identical talismans followed the fence posts in both directions, stretching out as far as I could see.

It had to be a hoax, right? Probably the boys' track team. A few weeks ago, we'd stolen all their car tires during practice and devised a scavenger hunt that took them hours. Capitalizing on the massacre anniversary to retaliate was wicked, but admittedly clever.

I imagined the boys meticulously carving each symbol, mixing corn syrup and food coloring to add that macabre touch of fake blood. I admired their dedication. Still, I couldn't leave the stones for someone else to find. Even my level-headed parents might get upset. They had let the local news interview us for a profile, hoping to get ahead of the publicity, but they were tired of the attention and disruption. My dad might mention the talismans to the sheriff, and then one of these idiot boys would get in trouble. I didn't want that to happen.

Jamming the envelopes back in the mailbox, I made a basket out of the hem of my tank top and started collecting the stones. Maverick and Ranger loped ahead of me to follow the scent of cow patties, their twitching noses

as purposeful as divining rods. By the time I had amassed a pile, I dabbed my temples and stared down the road. How many more could there be? The boys' most elaborate prank so far had involved wearing masks to scare us during fall cross-country practice.

I studied the engraving again. The lines were careful, precise. Other than the copper-red smear at the center, each stone was identical to the last. This had taken time, skill, maybe even special tools.

The sputter of an approaching engine startled me. I looked up to see a rusty blue pickup slow to a stop on the road.

I dropped my collection of stones, watching them tumble to the grass underfoot. My heart clambered up my throat as though trying to escape the inevitable. But I tightened my wilting ponytail and put on a smile.

To my surprise, Levi Langford didn't just shout hello and drive by. He pulled over into the grass on the side of the road, got out, and rounded his truck to greet me.

It had been so long since I'd seen him that I couldn't help looking him over. He was redheaded, tall, and broad-shouldered. Fine lashes fringed his deep-set hazel eyes. Full, almost pouty lips softened the angles of his square, clean-shaven jaw, and a pale dusting of freckles across his ruddy complexion made him look utterly guileless.

"Nat Colter," he said, sliding his arm around me in a polite hug. If he minded my sweat, he didn't show it—and if he'd seen me collecting rocks, he didn't acknowledge it.

"Levi Langford. Good to have you back."

"It's good to be home."

A few feet of distance rematerialized between us. He tucked his hands in his pockets and the veins in his arms swelled beneath the sleeves of his gray tee. Whatever else I thought of him, those arms were the Lord's work.

"What are your plans this summer?" I asked, wondering if they included staying longer than a few days. He hadn't even come home for Christmas.

“Nothing exciting. Cutting lawns and helping my mom around the house. What about you?”

“Babysitting again and volunteering with the Heritage Festival.”

“Interesting year to be a part of that,” he said, furrows manifesting on his freckled forehead.

“Interesting year to live in San Solano at all,” I replied. I nearly brought up the talismans just to have something to talk about, to squirm out of the awkward silence I could see coming from a mile away.

But he patched over it quickly. “Congrats! I heard you swept regionals and took fifth at state in two events. You’re heading to Louisiana in the fall, right?”

“That’s right. I heard you had a couple poems published.”

“Yeah,” he said, but didn’t elaborate. Instead, he deflected. “What are you majoring in?”

“History. I either want to teach or be a library archivist.”

“Ah, that makes sense,” he said. He looked down at his shoes while I watched the sun droop like a ripe apricot.

Eventually, he cleared his throat. “I’m sorry if I gave you whiplash. Before I left. I know it must have felt . . . abrupt.”

The straightforward apology threw me off. By the most generous estimate, our romance had lasted less than a minute.

One encounter. One kiss.

It happened at his going-away party. We’d been standing in Maggie Arthur’s garden, swathed in the fragrance of flowers and fresh-cut grass. The secret kiss had tasted like a pinch of salt in clear water as the tiniest beads of sweat had found their way into our mouths.

A perfect storm of raw emotions and attraction. That’s all it was. I hadn’t allowed myself to feel anything else. That brief encounter didn’t *warrant* feelings.

But his apology broke the levee I hadn’t even realized I’d built. At once, I recalled every succulent detail, the sudden charge of intensity that came like a crack of white lightning, the way it felt to rake my fingers through his shock

of red hair. How it had taken him leaning down *and* me standing on tiptoe for him to kiss me good and proper. Hold the proper.

My voice shook a little as I said, "I know you were going through a lot with your dad passing away. I didn't expect..." I trailed off with a dismissive wave.

"I'm still sorry," he said.

"It's okay."

He cleared his throat. "Do you want a ride home?"

Glancing back, I realized I'd walked farther down the road than I'd thought. My family owned thirty acres. The crickets had started to trill their twilight tune, and I didn't want to be out alone after dark. I hummed my indecision and finished with, "Sure, thanks."

"Sorry it's a mess," Levi said as he opened the door for me. I climbed onto his cracked leather bench seat. A pair of work boots caked in mud took up my legroom, and a travel mug in the cup holder smelled of strong, black coffee.

"Do you want to bring the dogs?" he asked, circling the truck to unlatch the tailgate.

I leaned out the window and whistled. Maverick and Ranger cocked their heads, their ears standing upright, and bolted back from our next-door neighbor's pastureland.

I almost propped my feet on the dash before I remembered that Levi and I weren't that comfortable with each other. We'd always belonged to the same big friend group. We'd both run track and cross-country. I'd tutored his younger sister, Emmy, for a history exam. Mr. Langford would have been my senior English teacher if he hadn't passed away.

But over the years, I'd noticed Levi avoiding me. He would fall quiet when I joined a conversation and wander away soon after, letting just enough time pass to prevent seeming rude.

Our mutual friends remained oblivious to this dynamic, especially the twins. They'd grown up in church with Levi, attending all the same summer camps and Bible studies. They wouldn't believe that I could live a couple miles

away from Levi, know everyone he knew, and never once hold a one-on-one conversation with him. It was statistically impossible.

And yet the kiss had been our first-ever private encounter. Even then, only a garden trellis had separated us from the other party guests.

I could think of just one explanation for Levi acting so slippery, however unreasonable it seemed: the history between our families.

Levi was Lillian Pickard's great-great grandson. Lillian was one of the four San Solano girls who had been tried for the 1921 murders of twelve men in the sanctuary of Calvary Baptist. In the late sixties, she had published a tell-all book detailing her friendship with Malachi Rivers, rambling in awe about Malachi's supernatural powers. Instead of dismissing Lillian's account entirely, the public deemed her silly and gullible—and therefore innocent.

But then the copycat massacre occurred three years after the publication of Lillian's book. The same people who had laughed her off began to blame her for sparking the secret fanaticism that resulted in a dozen more murders. Despite her narrative's unreliability, the book grew popular thanks to the assumption that it inspired dark deeds.

Personally, I was more interested in the historical facts that could be gleaned from the heaps of nonsense—the details about Malachi's past that couldn't be found in public records. In my eyes, the book gave meat and marrow to the hollow bones of a mysterious legend.

It was a riveting read. Even my late grandmother—Malachi's granddaughter—had owned a first edition of Lillian's book, bound in a faded dust jacket. I'd read it cover-to-cover more times than I could count, but Grandma Kerry had never spoken much about the massacres.

And she had never associated with the descendants of Lillian Pickard.

But that resentment had ended with Grandma Kerry and went unreciprocated. My parents were friendly with everybody. Maggie Arthur, Grandma Kerry's contemporary and another descendant of Lillian Pickard, was a family friend. She was the one who had encouraged me to volunteer for the Treasures

of Texas Heritage Festival. Her granddaughter, Kate, had provided me with three full summers of well-paid work babysitting her daughter.

In other words, Levi had no reason to care about old interfamily drama.

But why else would he have avoided me all this time?

After slamming the tailgate shut, Levi hunkered in the driver's seat and turned the air vents toward me. A solicitous Southern gentleman.

"I bet your mom and sister are happy to have you back for the summer." I caught a glimpse of my untamed hair in the side mirror and frowned.

"They are," he said, his voice a low rumble. "Happy to put me to work, too. Apparently ten months is plenty of time for an old house to fall apart."

As we crept down the road, Levi rested his elbow on the window frame, frowning into the distance. It had to be difficult coming home after what happened. Maybe up in Dallas, he'd found a way to ignore his grief, stuff it in a closet with his San Solano Wolves track tees, become a new person who could pretend not to feel pain.

I remembered the strained expression he'd worn at the going-away party, just shy of a month after his dad's passing. I'd thought his mom cruel for making him suffer through the whole affair, the lemonade sips and the small talk. She seemed to have already cried herself dry, but Levi looked, in the politest way possible, like he would rather be anywhere else.

I couldn't stand to watch him like that, in the throes of grief, enduring countless pats on the back and stale questions about his future. So I braved the August heat, carrying my plate of strawberry cobbler out to the garden. I took refuge behind a trellis thick with trumpet vines. And then Levi appeared. When he noticed me there, sweating like a sinner in church, I thought he'd either paste on a stiff smile or continue his quest for solitude.

But he did neither. Instead, he gave me a thoughtful look.

"Sorry," I said abruptly, like I'd intruded on him changing in his bedroom. "You're safe here. No small talk needed. I'll go back and say I never saw you. Better yet, that I've never heard of you."

That earned a laugh. “No, you don’t have to go. Let’s hide here for a minute.”

It surprised me that he would cast his lot with mine. He stared down at his big hands with their freckled knuckles. “It feels like my mom is punishing me for going to college. She’s not going to let me leave without an embarrassing parade.”

“She just wants to show you off,” I said, not quite sure why I was defending her. “SMU is a good school.”

“She wanted me to defer until next semester. I get it. There’s so much to take care of here . . . sorting through Dad’s things . . .” His hazel eyes met mine, their pulsating pupils ringed with fern green and lustrous amber. “But I’m afraid if I don’t leave now, I’ll never go. I’ll convince myself to stay.”

I chewed on my bottom lip. What did this grieving boy need right now? No more idle chitchat or claps on the shoulder.

“I think the hardest part is the regret,” I heard myself say. “My grandma always wanted to share her sage advice with me, and sometimes I just brushed her off. But when she could barely hold a lucid conversation, I missed her ‘teachable moments.’” I laughed softly, fending off the ache of tears. “Is there anything you regret?”

His lips parted in surprise, and then a ghost of a smile tugged at their corners. “No one’s asked me that,” he said, turning toward me and tangling the fingers of one hand high in the trellis. The stance made one lean line of his torso.

“Sorry,” I repeated, shaking my head like a fly had flown into my ear. “I shouldn’t have—”

“No, I’m glad you asked,” he said. “I don’t regret anything. The only thing I’d regret is missing out on opportunities he’d want me to take.”

I smiled a half smile. “Then you’re doing the right thing.”

Something intense passed between us then. Our eyes locked. The taut silence felt as charged as an electric field. I realized with equal astonishment and certainty that he wanted to kiss me, and I stepped closer with no fear of

embarrassment, no fear that I'd misinterpreted. My chin tilted upward. He leaned down slowly, reading in my eyes the answer to his unspoken question.

When his lips connected with mine, soft and unfamiliar, euphoria rushed through my veins. The cobbler slid off my plate onto the grass. *Why* he was kissing me, I couldn't say. But it was sudden and sure, wild and surreal.

He pulled away to study my face, to confirm that I wanted it as much as my lips implied. I answered by dropping my paper plate, standing on my toes, and gripping the solidness of his shoulders through the sweaty cotton shirt. I could sense turmoil inside him, tight in his muscles. His hands moved earnestly, streaming through my hair.

My only thought was *wow*.

We overheard his mom ask someone where he'd gone. Instead of startling apart, we took our time letting the kiss taper off, his thumb brushing over the apple of my cheek. We stared at each other before he said, "I guess I should get back."

I nodded.

He left.

Now, as I sat in his passenger seat, that moment felt like a fever dream. If Levi hadn't just apologized, I'd think I was as delusional as poor Lillian Pickard.

His tires kicked up chalky dust as we turned onto my driveway. I couldn't decide whether I was relieved or disappointed that our time together had ended so soon.

"Are you coming to Toledo Bend on Sunday?" I asked.

"Yeah, I think I will." He got out, opened the tailgate to release the dogs, and met me on the passenger side.

"Thanks for the ride," I said.

"Any time."

Levi Langford's truck rattled over my driveway as the sun sank over the fields.

I had to wonder if that sound, like the kiss, would be a just-this-once thing.

THREE



The screen door banged shut behind me.

“Don’t look!” my mom called, peeking her perfectly coiffed blond head out from the living room. Jodi Colter couldn’t even pop into the nearest gas station without a quick hair tease. “I’m wrapping your presents.”

“Not looking,” I said, shielding my eyes as I traipsed over the creaky hardwood toward my room, but there would be no surprises. Mom insisted on wrapping the dorm supplies we’d picked out together, including the four shopping bags of school-spirit merch she’d hoarded for me. At her insistence, she and I even had matching gold-and-purple Tigers sweatshirts. My future roommate would run for the hills.

“Make sure there’s space on the camera for pictures tomorrow!” Mom called after me.

“I forbid you to take more than a hundred,” I called back.

She muttered something akin to “We’ll see about that” as I closed my bedroom door. I grabbed the backpack I’d tossed at the foot of my bed after school, digging through graded papers—As in history and English, low Bs in science and math—to find my cap and gown, still wrapped in plastic.

Outside my window, night eclipsed the pink-and-lavender sky. Growing up in a town that was notorious for its unexplained tragedies, I couldn't help but fear the dark. The half-serious superstitions had baked frightful fantasies into my imagination. Secret terrors seemed to cluster in the shadows of particular places.

One time, during a sleepover, I'd snuck into the hollow sanctuary of Calvary Baptist at night to touch the lectern on a dare. The Dixon twins were friends with the daughter of the church handyman, and they'd stolen the keys so we could play the most thrilling game of truth-or-dare in San Solano history. The fear I'd felt as I tiptoed between the pews was so primal that I'd barely brushed the lectern with my fingertips before forsaking my dignity and sprinting back to the others, who giggled nervously from the foyer.

The same fear set upon me any time my friends and I went looking for thrills by driving down the road that dead-ended near the cabin in the woods, the place where Malachi, Lillian, Dorothy, and Johanna had gathered a hundred years ago.

Legends of the magical clearing predated even the old cabin that sat on it—but since Malachi had come along, those legends of that strangely hallowed ground had been subjected to a century of gruesome embellishment. According to town lore, in the weeks leading up to the copy-cat massacre, blood-drenched talismans made of bones, twigs, and twine had dangled from the trees, and remains of mutilated animals had been scattered on the ground. The cabin itself, where the girls had supposedly conjured evil, took on a fetid—one might dare say, sulfuric—smell. That was one of the campiest claims, and I couldn't help rolling my eyes every time I heard it.

But it got campier. Some professed to see a blond girl in the woods, wearing a gown stained with blood from the waist down—Malachi in her baptismal robe. We had the town's recollection of the particularly eventful Easter Sunday service in 1918 to thank for that imagery. Malachi's father, Reverend

Rivers, had resolved to baptize her in hopes that a public profession of faith would help curb her wild behavior. But when Malachi surfaced, the water in the baptistery filled with blood, and Malachi cackled. The entire congregation witnessed it. Some called it a young girl's lark that had gone too far. Others believed it to be the work of a demonic spirit that had possessed her. Now it was widely believed to be an incident of mass hysteria and collective false memory.

I flicked on my desk lamp and shut the blinds as if to put these thoughts to bed. But I found myself drawn to the bookshelf in the corner.

Amid historical novels and dense biographies, Lillian's book looked lean and unassuming. It was my grandmother's first edition. The worn paper jacket was matte black with the silhouette of a pine forest in a sickly hunter green. The outdated, all-caps title always felt like it was screaming at my eyes.

After briefly riffling through the pages, I reshelfed it. As a kid, I'd scoured every word and studied the Malachian mark for hidden meanings beyond what Lillian described, fantasizing that I might be the one to find a secret clue and solve the murders. That morbid fascination—okay, maybe it *had* been an obsession at one point—could easily engulf me again.

I didn't need to dredge up fear like dragging a lake for a body that had already wasted to particles. Nothing would come of this anniversary. Nothing. And then everything could go back to normal.

Leaving my sweaty clothes in a pile on my bathroom floor, I stepped into the shower and closed my eyes. The water soothed the scrapes from my fall.

Now that I was alone, the reckoning I'd been dreading since last August finally came. I had to face the fact that the kiss with Levi wasn't just a delectable memory that would dissolve if I dwelled on it for too long. Levi wasn't ephemeral, like the last ounce of my grandma's discontinued perfume in the vial on her dresser, which I feared to open in case the memory of her essence should evaporate forever.

He was here. In town. For the summer.

And he was *sorry*.

I wouldn't read into his apology. I would *not*.

I skulked back to my room, changed into sleep boxers and a tee, and started typing a group text to Lindsey and the twins about the talismans. But actually seeing the words raised fine hairs on my forearms, so I erased the text and sat crisscross to blow-dry my hair in front of my closet mirror. I'd barely gotten started when I noticed that *Pagans of the Pines* was sticking out from the top bookshelf as if someone had pulled it to try to access a secret room.

Through a cascade of dirty-blond strands, I glared at the reflection of the book, feeling oddly powerful, half expecting it to fall off the shelf or fly and hit the wall. It didn't. It remained there until I pushed it flush with the others, turned off the lights, and fell asleep to an orchestra of crickets and katydids.



I woke with a strangled gasp.

Something was clotting my throat, choking me. It tasted like dirt. My helpless, fraught fingers encircled the column of my neck. My pulse thrummed like hummingbird wings.

Not this again.

I coughed out the obstruction. It was too dark to see what it was, but as I clutched blindly at the substance on my sheets, clumps of damp soil molded to my grasp. I smelled a cool, earthy aroma, and felt tangling roots sift through my fingers like a freshly turned grave.

I climbed out of bed and stumbled toward my lamp.

There was no dirt on my sheets. But a gritty residue remained on my tongue.

Sometimes, I dreamed that a bloodstain bloomed across my ceiling. Drops would splash onto my forehead, rhythmic and incessant. Other times, my bones strained in their sockets, like some force was trying to dislocate them.

All my life, I'd had these dreams. They'd gotten more frequent and more vivid since I'd become a teenager. Grandma Kerry had somehow always known about them, even when my parents had no idea. Usually, she was already awake, waiting for me. Sometimes, she was standing over my bed. I used to tell myself that she must have heard me gasping and thrashing in my sleep, but in hindsight, I had to admit it seemed like strange, inexplicable intuition.

After she was gone, I started trying to rationalize the dreams. *You pushed yourself too hard in the heat today*, I thought now. *You're having some kind of retroactive heat stroke that's making you hallucinate.*

But the excuse didn't work this time. I needed Grandma Kerry.

I grabbed my pillow and raced my fear down the hall.

I didn't feel safe again until I had shut myself in her old room and leaped onto the creaky bed. I bumped my head on the regal, imposing headboard as I nestled under the covers, but I didn't care. I felt safe.

Here, nothing could hurt me.



Morning came. I knew that the episode last night had been nothing more than a dream. That's all they ever were. But none of the dreams had ever felt so real.

Rubbing my eyes, I kicked my bare feet over the side of the bed and planted them on the rug. This was a guest room now, but we hadn't changed much except for the bedding, and we'd packed away the outdated lace doilies and dorky kid pictures of my dad. Everything else was familiar, including the vanity tray on the dresser that held Grandma Kerry's old jewelry and a creased picture of Grandpa Willie—items that had helped anchor her to a sense of self when she had started to drift. She came to live with us after accidentally burning down the house where she'd lived with Grandpa Willie for decades by leaving a pot unattended on the stove.

At the vanity tray, I brushed her perfume bottle and plucked her understated twisted vine wedding band from a porcelain dish.

“Nat, are you up, baby?” Mom called from down the hall. “It’s graduation day!”

Startled, I dropped the ring. It bounced with a bright *ding* across the wood planks and onto the rug, settling somewhere under the bed.

“I’m up!” I called back. I glanced at the clock and realized I had to be gussied up and on the courthouse lawn in less than an hour. I dropped to all fours, saw a glint of gold, and flattened myself to retrieve it. With the ring safely in my grasp, I wriggled back out from under the bed, rucking up the border of the rug—which revealed a deep trench carved into the wood floor.

Sitting back on my heels, I traced my finger along the rough path.

A lump formed in my throat. Curiosity overpowered any sense of urgency. Frowning, I stood up, replaced the ring, and shoved the bed frame aside. When I flung away the rug, I gasped.

The symbol of the cult spanned the space under the bed, frenzied and furious. Unlike the neat lines on the stones, it seemed to have been carved in haste, maybe even in a state of mania.

Like pressing a tender bruise, I let a horrible memory play through my thoughts. Grandma Kerry’s mental decline had been inconsistent, lurching, riddled with bouts of confusion and embarrassment at her confusion, which caused her to sink into silence. But there had been a few episodes of paranoia and something her doctor had called “catastrophic reactions.” One in particular had given my parents no choice but to hire a live-in caregiver.

On that day, Grandma Kerry woke up wild-eyed, the gray hair that was still tinged with youthful blond mussed from sleep—or sleeplessness. She had charged into the kitchen and seized my wrists in her surprisingly strong grip while I was preparing to leave for school. Blood streamed down her arm from her elbow, dripping onto her robin’s egg blue nightgown.

“I can see them,” she said. “I can smell them. They’re growing stronger. It will happen again.”

Dad had sat her down at the table in the breakfast nook and tried to calm her, pressing a cloth to her wound. But she erupted like a madwoman, screaming that he would never understand and how lucky he was for that. My mom whipped out her phone to call an ambulance as she ushered me away from the scene.

Now I stared at a smear of dark brown on the wood planks in her bedroom, right at the heart of the mark. Blood.

Having witnessed the determination in her stormy eyes and the sinew behind her grip, I wondered if she had spent that sleepless night secretly carving this mark and covering it up.

Dad couldn’t find out about this. No one could. I would protect him from the pain for as long as possible, and I would protect what was left of my grandmother’s dignity.

But haunting questions needled me: Was there any chance that the paranoia, the warning, and the mark weren’t just the workings of a broken mind?

Was there any chance that Grandma Kerry had known more about her own grandmother than she’d let on?

And most crucially, was there any chance that twelve more people would die?

EXCERPT:

PAGANS OF THE PINES:
THE UNTOLD STORY OF
MALACHI RIVERS



Lillian Pickard. 1968

In 1905 Simeon Rivers, a sawmill worker, founded Calvary Baptist Church in San Solano, Texas. His mission was to subvert the liberalism of other protestant churches in the area. As a staunch Fundamentalist Baptist, Simeon was far from popular, but he was a hardworking, resourceful man with a measure of charisma. He purchased an acre of land for twenty-five dollars and built a church.

At the time of its establishment, Simeon and his wife Ruth had a four-year-old son named Malachi. Ruth was pregnant with their second child. They lived in a small parish house beside the church. But after Simeon had preached only a handful of services, a violent storm blew through town and demolished both structures. Ruth and Malachi were struck by debris. Ruth and her unborn child survived. The boy did not.

Grieving their beloved son and their church challenged Ruth and Simeon in different ways. Simeon, determined to honor God's calling upon his life, raised funds to rebuild. Ruth clung to the promise of her unborn child,

certain that God would give her another son upon whom she could bestow the name Malachi in honor of her firstborn.

To her dismay, the second child was a girl. Ruth detached from her daughter but had been calling her Malachi for months. She had no heart to change the name. Simeon attempted to convince his wife to choose any other, but the power of Ruth's maternal grief swayed him. He wanted her to heal.

But Ruth did not heal. Since Malachi's brother had been so young when he died, Ruth mounted him on a pedestal. He was an icon of unattainable innocence and perfection who had not been afforded the chance to develop his own distinguishable traits and flaws. Every time the younger Malachi misbehaved, as children do, she was called sinful. She could never measure up to her God-fearing brother.

As Malachi grew, she developed strange powers. When she was six years old, her mother mentioned her hope of conceiving another child. Malachi screamed until Ruth's ears bled. After that, Ruth was afflicted with prolonged, heavy bleeding of a womanly nature. She often read aloud the Biblical tale of the bleeding woman who touched the hem of Jesus' robe and was healed. But Ruth was not blessed with another child, nor was her hemorrhaging resolved.

Still, every day, she prayed that the Lord would heal her.

Moreover, she prayed that the Lord would forgive her for bringing to life an abomination.

FOUR



Natalie Colter

ONE MONTH AND NINE DAYS UNTIL THE CLAIMING

I did my best to forget about the Malachian mark. But I couldn't forget about Grandma Kerry on graduation day. When she'd fallen ill, I'd realized she wouldn't live long enough to attend this ceremony, or any special occasions beyond. That didn't make it easier.

While I contended with the stubborn zipper on my graduation gown, Mom sped like a stunt driver toward the limestone courthouse at the center of historic downtown. Dad braced himself, slamming nonexistent brakes from the passenger seat as Victorian and Craftsman homes streaked past.

Downtown San Solano was the kind of place outsiders would call "quaint" and "charming" if they hadn't already found other words to describe our town—namely, "creepy" and "cursed." Venerable oaks provided verdant shade, and pretty, old churches of sundry denominations postured on almost every corner. The town square had a bakery, an art gallery, a hardware store owned by the twins' family, and a beloved diner with self-serve coffee that tasted like brake fluid. As one of the oldest settlements in the state, San Solano played host to countless historical landmarks, one being

the intersection of the El Camino Real de los Tejas trail with the ruins of an eighteenth-century Spanish mission.

And the most famous landmark? On a quiet, shady street, Calvary Baptist Church loomed large over the town's reputation, the cross atop its gothic tower casting a long shadow on the jade lawn. The cabin in the clearing where Malachi supposedly performed dark magic was ominous in its own right, but it was tucked away in the woods, down a dead-end road on the outskirts of town. The church where the deaths occurred presided over our daily lives and refused to be forgotten.

We were nearly late to the ceremony, and I found my place in line right as the graduates began filing into rows of white chairs. Every paper program had already been repurposed into a fan; San Solano High insisted on holding graduation outdoors come hell or high water. When my row stood and shuffled forward to wait by the stage, I searched for Levi amid the sea of oscillating programs. A few of his close friends were graduating, and I wouldn't be surprised if he'd come. Before I could spot him, I found Lindsey in the back row, gray circles hanging under her eyes. I cocked my head, wordlessly checking on her. She smiled and waved.

My name thudded over the sound system, surprising me. I crossed the stage and filed back to my seat with my diploma in hand.

After the ceremony I found Lindsey's family immediately. Abuela Sofia showered me with hugs and kisses. Lindsey's mom, Camila, tucked a strand of Lindsey's long hair behind her ear, doting on her in Spanish. Even after three years of classes, I could only catch a few phrases.

Camila glanced at me and then asked Lindsey a question. Lindsey responded sternly, "Todavía no, pero ya pronto."

Not yet, but soon.

Before I could puzzle over Lindsey's answer to the question I hadn't understood, I noticed a jagged trio of cuts slashing across her outer forearm. A nasty, purple-black bruise spilled around each mark like blotted ink.

“What is that?” I demanded.

Her eyes widened. “You can see that?”

“It’s kind of hard to miss.”

Lindsey scowled at the wound. “Um...I thought I covered it with makeup.”

“Makeup? You’d need latex prosthetic skin. What happened?”

She shrugged back into her gown, covering the marks. “Um...my cousin Juliana’s Yorkipoo scratched me.”

“*That* was from a Yorkipoo?”

“I think she had a violent reaction to my nondesigner jeans.” Lindsey laughed too loudly at her own joke, told at the expense of her wealthy “influencer” cousin from Los Angeles. “You should watch out. She’s carrying the little demon around in her purse.”

Nerves and humor? That combination only meant one thing when it came to Lindsey Maria Valenzuela: she was lying.

But I didn’t have time to call her out. I saw my dad’s square face and broad smile in the crowd. Mom swooped in and went full paparazzi. My cheeks were cramping by the time I managed to steal a moment alone with Lindsey and the twins to tell them about the talismans in my yard the day before.

“And Lindsey thought *I* had a morbid sense of humor,” Abbie said when I finished.

Lindsey didn’t retort. Her sun-kissed brown face went ashen.

“I bet it was Grayson’s idea,” Faith said, glowering at a mop of sun-bleached hair in the crowd.

“Did...did anything else happen?” Lindsey asked me.

I swallowed a sudden bout of nausea. I couldn’t bring myself to tell them about the mark under my grandma’s bed. “No,” I replied.

Lindsey nodded, satisfied.

“We have to get revenge on those idiots,” Abbie whispered.

"We should forge unacceptance letters from their colleges," Faith suggested, giddy. "We'll say there was a mistake with their applications and that they've been put on a waiting list."

"Or we could kidnap them and take them to a ritual," Abbie said, a dangerous spark in her eyes.

"I just want to relax this summer, so count me out," Lindsey said.

Abbie blew her a raspberry. "Ya boring, Lindsey."

"At least I don't have to stage a fake animal sacrifice to have fun. I've got to go hang out with my cousins or they'll be pissed that they came all this way. Heads up, Juliana is coming to the lake with us tomorrow."

Abbie groaned. "She's so rude!"

"She thinks *you're* rude," Faith countered. The three of them wandered off, bickering, and my eyes immediately drew to Levi. A six-foot-two, handsome redhead would be hard for anyone to miss, even in a crowd. Our eyes met from a distance and my nerves jittered like a june bug hitting a porch light.

A slim approaching figure with shoulder-length brunette hair intercepted my gaze: Kate Wilder. Her sage-green eyes met mine and she flashed a smile that emanated more Southern charm than a debutante ball.

Kate's four-year-old daughter, Avery, released her mother's hand to squeeze my waist. I staggered with her weight and grinned. She had green eyes like Kate's, magnified by flexible prescription glasses.

"We couldn't be prouder of you, Nat," Kate said, her drawl thick enough to shame maple syrup. "You're off to bigger places and better things."

"But I still have a whole summer with this little wildling," I tousled Avery's curly cowlick until she lost interest in me and crouched to inspect a ladybug.

"Speaking of that, what would you think of cutting your hours, with a raise to make up for it?" Kate asked. "It's your last summer here and you're already helping out with the Heritage Festival."

“Are you sure?”

She dismissed my protest with a wave of her slender hand. “The festival staff needs all the help they can get. We’re expecting a record number of visitors this year.”

“That whole dark tourism thing is really taking off,” I grumbled. “But won’t that leave you high and dry with Avery?” Kate’s husband held a demanding corporate job, she worked full-time at the chamber of commerce, and Avery’s preschool program had already let out for the summer.

“I was talking to Emmy Langford at the potluck last Sunday, and it turns out she’s looking for her first summer job,” Kate said. “I thought she could take two of your days each week. She doesn’t have her license yet, but Levi can drive her to and from our house. Grandma Maggie would be thrilled to hear you’re freed up to help with the festival.”

“That works for me,” I said. “It’ll be nice to add more to my résumé than ‘facilitated microwaving of dinosaur-shaped chicken nuggets.’”

Kate laughed. “Perfect. I’ll let Emmy know that you’re—Levi Langford!” she cried, turning several heads in addition to his. “I don’t believe my eyes!”

Levi sidled over, endearingly bashful. Kate’s grandma and Levi’s late grandma were cousins, both granddaughters of Lillian Pickard. In a small town like ours, people didn’t try to keep track of the math beyond third cousins and simply “claimed kin.” Levi greeted Kate first and lifted Avery up in a forklift maneuver that earned a yelp of delight from her and accentuated his forearms. Then he turned to me. “Hey! Congratulations, Nat.”

“Thanks,” I replied. I expected something cleverer to follow that, but I drew a blank.

Bless Kate, a perfect stranger to awkward silences. “Tell me you’ll stop by Grandma Maggie’s soon,” she said to Levi. “She’s pleased as punch that you’re back in town. Are you doing lawns this summer?”

“Yes ma’am,” Levi answered.

“Good. She says you’re the only one who keeps the cuttings out of her garden beds.”

“Tell her I’ll swing by this week,” Levi said.

Kate winked at him and took Avery’s hand. “See you at the party, Nat,” she said, and left us alone.

Once again, divine intervention saved me from floundering. Grayson Scott sprinted over in a blur of golden-tan, gangly limbs and blond hair to wrap Levi in a bear hug. “What’s up, Natty Light?” he asked me.

“You’d think the mastermind behind the creepy talismans in my yard would have thought of a better nickname by now.”

“Talismans?” Grayson repeated the word like he was trying out a new SAT vocabulary term. Even allowing for sarcasm, *mastermind* might have been a stretch.

Bryce Hayward joined us, his thick-framed glasses fogged from the humidity. “What talismans?” he asked, removing the lenses to clean them on his tie.

I folded my arms. “Nice prank. Y’all are lucky my parents didn’t find them first.”

Grayson and Bryce shared a look, more confused than conspiratorial. “We haven’t done anything yet,” Bryce said. He replaced his glasses and regarded me with keen, serious brown eyes.

“Sure,” I said.

“No, really,” he insisted. “We were thinking of getting you back during the lake trip.”

Grayson whacked Bryce’s shoulder. “Dude! Now they know to expect it.”

“Sorry,” Bryce said, digging his phone out of his pocket. “But I found something creepy, too. Or my cat found it.” He showed me his screen and swiped through pictures of a translucent sachet filled with herbs and tied with twine. A dainty metal charm depicting the Malachian mark dangled from the knot. “I don’t know where he got it. Milo is an indoor cat.”

“So that was somewhere in your house,” I concluded.

Bryce frowned. “It’s creepier when you say it out loud. My mom wanted to tell the police, but I convinced her not to. Now I’m wondering if you and I both should.”

Levi stuffed his hands in his pockets, sighed restlessly, and mumbled something about saying hi to a former teacher before leaving us. That boy was weird about goodbyes.

“Are you still freaking out about that thing Milo found?” Vanessa Wallace appeared, hooked an arm around Bryce’s waist, and flashed a teasing smile up at her boyfriend. Just clearing five feet, she had to tilt her head back at nearly a right angle to look up at him.

“I’m not freaking out,” Bryce said. “We’re only talking about it because Nat found talismans with the mark at her house.”

Vanessa’s sable-black curls bounced as she shook her head. “You’re so gullible.” She gestured at me. “The track girls did it.”

I snorted. “I don’t have this good of a poker face.”

Vanessa shrugged. Like Levi and me, she was a descendant of one of the four original Pagans of the Pines—the great-great-granddaughter of Dorothy Hawkins. But it was different for her. Dorothy Hawkins had moved on with her life. She worked as a maid for the few local families willing to accept her help, married a quiet man, and distanced herself from Malachi. Johanna Mead had relocated and reportedly changed her name. Lillian had continued to live comfortably, pouring herself into her social life and community service, only jeopardizing her recovered reputation when she decided to spill everything onto the page.

Malachi, on the other hand, remained a puzzle. And for some reason, people looked to my family to solve her.

Judging by the carving on my grandmother’s floor, maybe they weren’t too far off the mark.

The mark. Vanessa was a talented artist, a well-known prodigy in San

Solano. With such a careful hand, she could easily have engraved those perfectly identical talismans. But for what reason? She wasn't interested in our petty prank wars. She had her own crew. She was friendly and easygoing, but we all knew she only hung out with the track team because of Bryce.

"Come on, we're supposed to eat lunch with my fam," Vanessa said, tugging Bryce along. Judging by her blasé expression, she wasn't concerned about the cult fever.

"So, it really wasn't you?" I asked Bryce and Grayson.

"I swear." Bryce said as Vanessa herded him away.

"Swear to God," Grayson added.

I didn't want to be convinced. I didn't want to see a kaleidoscope of dark possibilities or think about my family being in danger.

But I couldn't help it. I believed them.