

Chapter One

The Letter

Once upon a time, in a village haunted by secrets, the fog never quite lifted.

Even on the sunniest mornings, it clung to the cobblestones like something alive, curling into window cracks and seeping into teacups left unattended. The villagers of Blackwood Hollow had long stopped commenting on the strange mist — they had other things to worry about. Things like unexplained dreams, vanished livestock, and the occasional echo of a woman's laughter in the woods.

It had been sixty years since the burning, though no one spoke of it aloud. Not in the inn. Not in the church. Not even in the privacy of their homes, where the walls seemed to lean in just a little too close when secrets were whispered.

Mara Whitlow didn't believe in curses.

She believed in ink, in records, in things that could be filed and stamped and neatly placed into wooden drawers. As the village scribe, she had made it her business to unearth the truth beneath folklore — to separate the facts from the convenient fiction. So when she was tasked with cataloguing the old parish records stored in the chapel's mouldy basement, she grumbled only a little and brought three candles, two quills, and one very stale biscuit.

The basement groaned as she stepped inside, the heavy wooden door sighing shut behind her. Dust tickled her nose. Shelves leaned like drunkards. The only light came from her candles, casting flickering shadows on the walls — one of which looked eerily like a hunched woman.

"I don't have time for ghosts today," Mara muttered, setting down her satchel.



Hours passed as she worked, flipping through brittle pages, recording births and deaths, tracing the fading ink of ancient marriages. It was dull work, but safe. Predictable. That is, until her hand brushed the back of a cabinet, and felt something that didn't belong.

A tiny curl of wax.

She blinked and reached into the shadows, fingers brushing against parchment - thick and crinkled, sealed with black wax. The air shifted, colder suddenly. Mara held her breath.

The letter wasn't listed in any of the indexes. It had no date. No name. Just a warning, scrawled on the outside in the same jagged hand that had cursed the town's memory:

"This is not for you."

Mara stared at it. She knew, in that way all people know when they're about to make a Very Bad Decision, that opening it would be foolish. Dangerous. Maybe even fatal.

But curiosity is a sharp, unkind thing.

And Mara, despite all her logic, all her training, was still a child of Blackwood Hollow.

She peeled the wax seal off with a trembling hand - and the candle flames went out.

Suddenly, there was darkness.

Mara let out a gasp and scrambled backward, still clutching the letter in her hand. The candles had been snuffed out all at once, as if swallowed by the air itself. She was plunged into pitch black, her breath loud in her ears.

Then came movement.

Not the usual creaks of old timber. Not the scamper of mice. These were footsteps. Barefoot. Small. Quick. Running across the stone floor of the basement.

Her heart thudded against her ribs. She turned toward the sound, though her eyes could see nothing. It echoed strangely, as if the walls had pulled back or the room had grown larger. Her fingers fumbled across the table until they found the strap of her satchel.

Somewhere far off in the dark, a giggle rang out. High-pitched. Thin. It came from the farthest corner of the basement, the place she had not yet dared to search. The place where the shelves leaned the most and the floorboards looked soft with rot. The giggle faded into silence.

Then came the whisper.

Right by her ear.

"Do you know what they did to us?"

Mara jolted upright, knocking over the rickety chair. The sound of it hitting the ground cracked through the silence like a whip. She grabbed her satchel with both hands and ran for the stairs, stumbling over unseen boxes and uneven stones.

The stairs felt wrong. Longer than before. The wood beneath her feet groaned like something waking from sleep.

Her hand found the doorknob. She shoved it hard, half-expecting it to resist, but it opened easily. Too easily. She tumbled out into the chapel hall.

Outside, the village square stood in eerie stillness. No people. No wind. The fog was thicker than before, curling low around the stones and wrapping around the doorposts like vines. The air was heavy and damp.

In her hand, the letter pulsed.



That night, Mara dreamed of black trees and red thread. But it wasn't just a dream. It was a place - too vivid to be imagined, too wrong to be real.

She stood barefoot on cold earth, under a sky that shimmered like oil on water. The trees loomed tall and thin, their bark bleeding sap that glowed faintly red. The branches moved even though there was no wind, creaking in rhythm with something deeper. Something breathing.

The ground was soft, too soft - like walking on forgotten graves. Thread crisscrossed between the trunks, red as veins, pulsing faintly. Some of it was tangled around her wrists, though she hadn't noticed it until she tried to move.

A lullaby echoed through the trees. Slow, wrong. Sung in a voice that rasped like someone trying to remember how to breathe.

At the centre of the grove stood a child. He was barefoot, his back turned, his grey skin stretched tight like paper that had been burned and smoothed out again. His hair hung in stringy tufts, and his arms dangled too long by his sides.

Mara's voice cracked when she spoke. "Are you lost?"



The child twitched. Slowly, he turned - not his body, just his head, in a way no neck should allow. One eye, impossibly large, glistened with a blackness that seemed to go on forever.

His mouth was a torn line. When he smiled, it opened wider than it should have.

"Found you", he whispered. The lullaby stopped.

Mara's feet were suddenly bound by the red thread, pulling tighter, slicing skin.

From the trees, dozens of eyes opened, blinking sideways. Watching.

Mara woke up screaming, tangled in her sheets, her skin cold and damp with sweat. She could still hear the final note of the lullaby echoing in her skull, like it had followed her out.



She burned the letter the next morning.

Or tried to.

The parchment blackened but didn't curl. Instead, the flames receded, almost afraid. Then the ink began to move - bleeding out of the words, curling into shapes across the page. It spelled her name.

She dropped it.

By midday, the birds had stopped singing.

By nightfall, her cat was gone.

And outside her window, something small and pale stood watching.

Humming.

Chapter Two

The search for knowledge

It began with rot.

First the milk - fresh in the morning, sour before noon. Then the bread. Then the bellflowers in the churchyard, curling into themselves like burnt paper. Mara heard whispers about a child screaming at her own reflection. About the butcher's dog that now barked at walls. About the chapel bell ringing at midnight, though no one had pulled the rope.

The curse was spreading.

Mara had stayed silent. Told no one about the letter. Not even Rowan, who had been her friend since they were children sneaking honey cakes from the village pantry. But after the dream, after a mark bloomed dark and sharp across her shoulder like a bruise in the shape of a root, spreading, she knew she couldn't face it alone.

In her desperation, she sought out Alder.

The hedge-witch lived on the edge of the woods in a lopsided cottage that smelled of ash and iron. Alder was blind, with eyes like clouded glass marbles, but she saw more than most. When Mara handed her the letter, Alder didn't touch it. She smelled it.

And recoiled.

"You should be dead already" Alder rasped. "You opened it. Fool child."

Mara swallowed. "Can it be undone?"

"Undone?" Alder laughed, dry as fallen leaves. "You think it's a knot to untie? This is bloodcraft. Soulwork. The thing bound by that letter isn't a ghost - it's hungry."

It had a name, once. Elira. A girl who'd lived in Blackwood Hollow long ago, and died badly.

Alder told the story like it was bone memory. Elira had struck a blood pact to trap something ancient in the woods - something that fed on stories, on voices, on memory. Her body was the seal. Her death the binding. But blood calls to blood.

And Mara had woken it up.

The village began to turn.

People spoke less. Shadows grew longer. Mirrors began to warp - not visibly, not enough to notice at first, but enough that reflections lagged half a second behind. Enough that people stopped looking.

Mara confided in Rowan. He didn't laugh. He didn't run. He said, "Then let's find out who Elira really was."

They searched the chapel records, and when that turned up nothing but pages that smelled too strongly of smoke, they broke into the locked archives beneath the sacristy. There, they found it - an old trial document, warped with water and something else. Elira had been accused of witchcraft. She was seventeen. She didn't scream when they burned her.

Her last words were scratched into the page: I will be the story they cannot silence.

Mara and Rowan went to the grove where it had happened. The place from her dream. The trees stood too tall. The red thread hung loose now, fluttering like ribbons. And the birds, so many birds, perched upside-down, heads turned toward the earth, their eyes sewn shut.

Mara's mouth tasted of ash.

The child, Thorn, was waiting.

He appeared between the trees like smoke between ribs. Not fully seen, only guessed. A silhouette with too many joints. He hummed the lullaby again, slower this time, dragging the notes like claws.

"Why me?" Mara whispered.

Thorn tilted his head. "Because you read me. Like a story."

He reached for her hand, and at his touch, the world peeled back.

She saw Elira crawling from the earth. Her skin was blackened, her eyes missing, her mouth moving in a silent litany. The same cursed words Mara had read. Dirt clung to her limbs like the grave was trying to hold her down. But Elira kept coming.

Mara screamed. The sound cracked through the vision, which shattered like glass. She stumbled, choking, and began to fall.

Strong arms caught her. A voice called her name. It sounded like Rowan, but far away.

Then, silence.



When she woke, she was in Rowan's arms. The air was cool and damp, and her cottage stood just ahead, its windows glowing faintly in the moonlight.

Something lay on the doorstep.

The letter.

Sealed once again, as if it had never been touched.

Chapter Three

It ends now

Mara woke with the lingering taste of ashes in her mouth. The mark on her shoulder had deepened overnight, now an angry, jagged line that seemed to pulse with a life of its own. She touched it lightly, feeling a tingle in her fingertips as if something inside her were shifting.

The village had become... wrong. The rotting of the land, the whispers in the woods, and the hollow echoes of things unsaid filled the air like a constant buzz. Every moment since the letter had passed felt like walking on the edge of a precipice, knowing something dreadful was looming just beneath the surface.



It was early morning when Rowan arrived at her door, his expression tight, his eyes more hollow than usual. He held a piece of parchment, crumpled at the edges. "You need to see this," he said, his voice low.

Mara took the paper. It was an old record from the chapel, one she had never come across during her search. The ink was faded, but the words were unmistakable:

The Council of Elders has sealed the Wellspring with blood. The curse is bound. Elira's sacrifice ensures it will never return.

A chill swept over her as she read the words. She had always thought the council were just stern bureaucrats, self-important but ultimately harmless. But this - this was fanaticism masked as righteousness.

"They weren't protecting the village," Mara whispered. "They were hiding something."

Rowan nodded grimly. "They were religious zealots, Mara. Convinced they could earn forgiveness - not through repentance, but through blood. They invented a creature, said it lived in the woods. Said it needed sacrifice. Said those who disobeyed or questioned were damned - unless they were purged."

"They murdered people," Mara said, the words like gravel in her mouth.

"They murdered dissenters," Rowan corrected. "Anyone who refused to kneel. Anyone who spoke out against their rituals. They weren't saving anyone. They were silencing them."

"And Elira?"

Rowan looked away. "She was seventeen. A healer. A real witch - but a kind one. She tended the sick, helped the crops grow, calmed nightmares. People trusted her more than the council. And that made her dangerous."

"She spoke out," Mara said, already knowing.

"She called them liars. Exposed their stories for what they were: fiction. And when others started listening, started questioning, the council panicked. Said they had one final ritual. Said they would destroy the beast once and for all."

Mara's stomach churned. "So they made her the final sacrifice."

"In the weeks before her death, they kept her imprisoned," Rowan said. "They thought she was broken. But she wasn't. She was furious. Heartbroken. And before they dragged her to the stake, she wrote the letter - her last spell, her last act of defiance. She hid it where only someone seeking the truth would find it."

"She cursed them," Mara murmured.

"She cursed the lie," Rowan corrected. "And the village built on it."

They set out for the chapel, fog curling thick around their ankles. Inside, the air was damp and heavy with mildew. At the altar, a cracked stone slab marked the entrance to the Wellspring - a pit of forgotten souls and broken promises.

Mara knelt by the stone, fingertips brushing faded inscriptions. The language was unfamiliar, but the weight of it pressed on her mind like a stone. She could feel the pull of it - hungry, ancient, wrong.

The air changed.

A voice slithered through the chapel, low and hollow.

"You woke me."

The words pressed against her skull like claws. She staggered back, heart pounding.

"You... woke... me."

The chapel doors slammed shut. The stone slab cracked open with a shuddering groan.

From the pit, a shadow rose - tall, long-limbed, oozing with dark energy. Its form shifted, flickered, pulsed with a life that wasn't life. It was Thorn.

Not the boy. Not anymore.

He turned toward her, his grin too wide, too full of teeth.

"Now... it's time," he whispered. "Come home."

Mara backed away, eyes wide. "Rowan!"

"There's still a way," he said, voice trembling. "The Ashthorn Rite. An old ritual. It could bind him. Maybe even end this for good."

"But?"

"It takes something. From you. From your blood."

Mara stared at the shadow looming before her.

"You can't outrun me," Thorn hissed. "You never could."

Mara looked at Rowan, her voice like steel. "We end this. Now."

Thorn stepped forward, his form twitching with wrongness, the grin stretched wider than before.

Rowan grabbed her arm. "We have to move. We're not ready for this."

The chapel shook as Thorn reached toward them. The cracked slab yawned wider, spitting out heat and a smell like scorched bone.

They ran.

Mara didn't look back. The doors burst open before them, the fog clawing at their legs as they stumbled into the night. Behind them, the chapel howled with something ancient and furious.

They didn't stop until the trees swallowed them.

They collapsed in a thicket near the old path. Rowan's chest heaved. "The Rite. We can still use it. We just need to get to the grove."

She stood. Her voice was quiet now, but steady. "No more running."

Chapter Four

A sacrifice

The woods were not silent anymore.

As Mara stepped into the forest heart, the trees bent toward her, whispering in voices that did not belong to the living. The sky churned, clouds boiling as the last remnants of the village's protection crumbled.

She carried the letter in her hand, now blackened and brittle but pulsing with heat. The mark on her shoulder had spread across her back, veins like thorny roots reaching toward her heart.

Rowan followed behind, clutching the book that held the Ashthorn Rite. "Are you sure?" he asked one final time.

Mara didn't answer. She knew this wouldn't be a binding. It would be a reckoning.

In the centre of the grove, the trees formed a perfect circle. At its heart, the earth had cracked open - the Wellspring, no longer sealed. It vomited fire and shadows, and from within it rose Thorn.

But he was no longer the boy at the edge of her vision. He was vast now - a shifting mass of limbs and mouths, some screaming, some silent. Faces flickered across his body - men, women, children - twisted in agony, all speaking at once through him.

"You read the letter," Thorn said, his voice now layered with dozens of others. "You woke us."

Mara's breath caught. "You're not just him."

"I am all of them."

The letter had not just been a curse. It had been a wish.

In her final hours, imprisoned and betrayed, Elira had written not just of truth - but of justice. She had called upon the spirits of those murdered, those silenced by the council. She had wished for them to have their final say.

But she had not foreseen what vengeance would become when left to fester in darkness.

Thorn was their fury, unbound. He was the scream of the drowned, the fire of the burned, the choking gasp of the silenced. He was pain turned to purpose. But he had no eyes.

He could not see.

He could not tell who was guilty.

"I only wanted them to speak," came Elira's voice, distant and broken, rising from within him.

"But they screamed," Mara said, tears slipping down her cheeks.

The Ashthorn Rite required sacrifice. But not voice. Not blood.

It required clarity.

Mara stepped into the circle. Her hands did not shake. She held the letter up, then lowered it slowly. "You were never meant to be blind," she said. "You were meant to see the truth."

Thorn's form wavered. "What are you offering me?"

"My eyes," she said. "So you can finally see."

He moved like mist and shadow, drifting forward. There was no reverence in his approach, no gratitude. Only hunger.

"Good," he said, with a terrible eagerness. "I want to see everything."

He lunged.

With claws cold as death and shaking with greed, Thorn gripped Mara's face. His fingers sank into her skull like roots finding soil. Pain lanced through her, raw and immediate, as he tore her eyes from her.

She screamed - a sound Thorn didn't flinch from.

He took her eyes for himself, greedy and triumphant.

And then he saw.

He saw.

He saw the innocent faces twisted in terror. He saw the blood on hands that never held a weapon. He saw the children, the outcasts, the gentle-hearted, all consumed by his blind wrath. He saw what he had become.

Thorn staggered back.

A wind burst through the grove like a howl.

Thorn reeled, his mass convulsing, faces contorting as sight flooded into him for the first time. He screamed, and it was no longer anger, but sorrow. Deep, guttural, human sorrow.

The trees shook. The pit hissed and cracked.

The letter burned black in Mara's hand and screamed as it turned to ash.

And Thorn, all of him, began to dissolve, like smoke at sunrise.

"Thank you," he whispered. "For the eyes."

And then he was gone.

The grove stilled. The Wellspring closed.

Mara collapsed.

When Rowan reached her, she was bloodied, blind, and silent. But alive.

Later, they would say she had survived the curse. But Mara knew better. The curse had never been the letter. It had been the lie.

THE END