

“Chelsea Iversen’s magical debut is a story for the ages.”

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# THE WITCHES

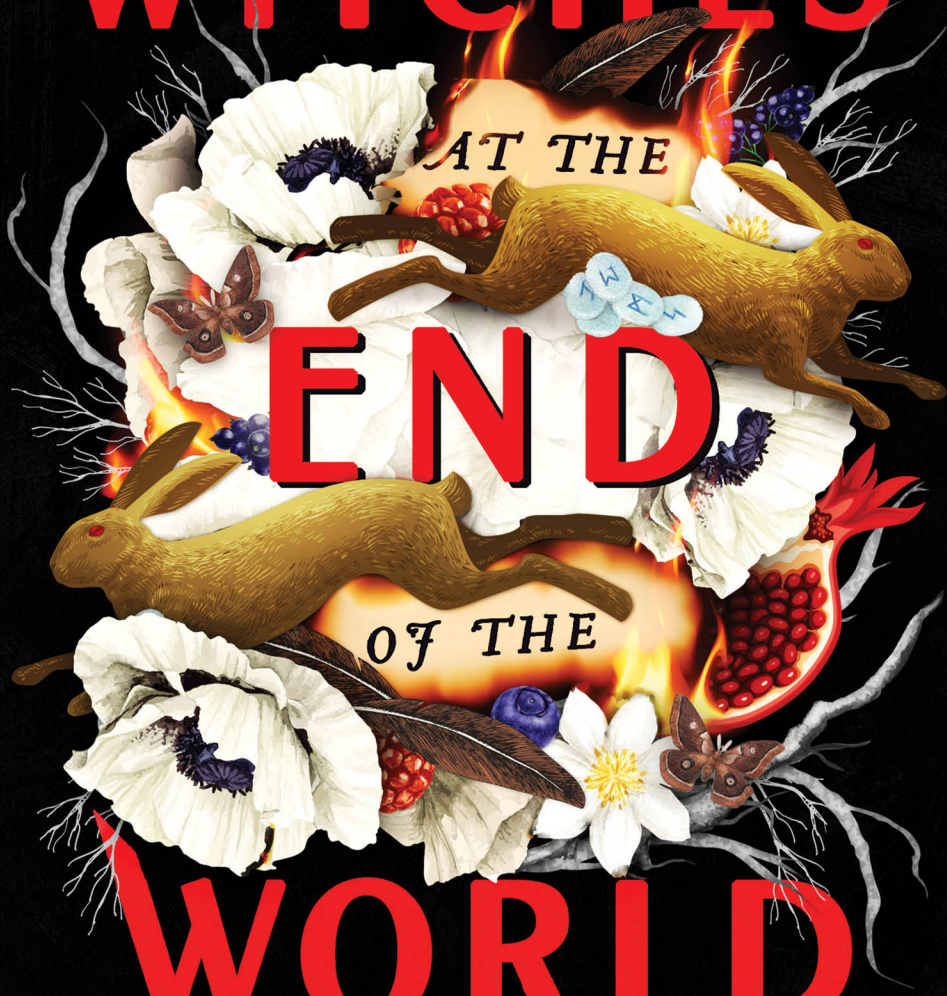
AT THE

END

OF THE

# WORLD

CHELSEA IVERSEN



THE  
**WITCHES**  
*AT THE*  
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*OF THE*  
**WORLD**

**CHELSEA IVERSEN**



FINNMARK, NORWAY  
AUTUMN, 1677





# Minna

**F**or the living, death is a scar.

It's always there, a raised bump just above the surface of your skin. You run your finger over it once in a while, when you're not thinking, and the pain of how it got there comes searing back. When the person you loved died a cold, normal death, I guess the scar is a sad reminder.

But when the person you love burned at the stake, that scar is something much more powerful.

That's why Mormor's death surprises me so much. Until now, I thought dying was all torture and fire and screams. At least I thought that was how it was for witches. It never occurred to me that a witch could die peacefully in her sleep.

But overnight, death came tiptoeing into our little hut hidden away in the birchwood—a neighbor we didn't invite but who arrived anyway, even through all our protections and enchantments.

There was no fire. There were no bone-shattering screams, no eyes like ice against the flames. Death came quietly, with no pain. Kaija and I made sure of that.

When death comes for me eventually, I know I won't be so lucky. It will come for me the way it did for Mamma.

The clouds are gray, and the sun is hiding, maybe out of respect. Maybe out of fear. Mormor will soon be on her way up there, and she can be wild when she wants to be. The birch trees around us flicker a burning orange. We bury her with her head facing north, and I do most of the work, though Kaija makes it look like she's helping.

She's lost in thought as I finish covering the grave and then kneel on the soft scrub, wipe my hands on my skirt, and pull what we need from my belt: the knife, the jet-black feather, and the rune stone. I'm sure she's sad, but there is magic to do, a soul to take care of.

My skin lights up with the itch now. The witch inside knows what's coming, and she's delighted. But this little bit of soul magic is nothing compared to what I need her for later. I scratch at my wrist to keep her quiet for now.

Kaija stands next to me, and I get the sense she doesn't know what to do. I glare up at her until she notices I'm on the ground, ready to do the ritual. She blinks, then pulls out her own rune stone and her own raven feather.

I finally catch her eye and try to hand her the knife. She shakes her head, something pleading on her face. Of course, she doesn't want to do it. I knew she wouldn't, but I thought maybe because it was Mormor, she might find the strength in her somewhere.

I palm the hilt of the knife. It's warm from my body, and I know the shape of it as well as I know the shape of anything. I press the sharp end to my left shoulder.

Taking your own blood should happen in one swift motion—a dig and swipe—if you do it right.

Right away, I feel the liquid trickling down my arm. We must work quickly now. I made the cut, but I won't be putting it onto Kaija's rune stone. She can do that herself. Really, she should put her own blood on

there—the more witch blood, the better is what I think—but we only need mine.

We smear our stones, and the shapes carved on them soak up the blood. Both are the same: a straight line scratched down the center, a point like a thorn out to the right, and a line shooting out from where they meet. Kneeling beside me, Kaija closes her eyes and lays the feather next to the stones. Then she takes a dried and crumbling flower from her hair and puts that down, too.

I close my eyes because I know it's time for the *galdr*.

Sometimes the *galdr* comes out as a scream, sometimes as a song. When Kaija says it now, it's a whisper. "Rise now and fly, soul to meet sky." The words soothe the witch in me. She's happy, as always, to be steeped in magic. "Ride Odin's flight in spellfire light."

But the way Kaija says the *galdr*, so quiet and sad, irritates me. It's not right for Mormor, who was tough and short-tempered and pushy. She was everything. Our teacher. Our savior. Our captor. And now she's gone. Not *gone*, gone. Her soul is on its way up to dance and sing. On some bone-chilling night, she'll light the sky with an acrid green, a blood red, or a wild blue just when we think the dark is going to swallow us whole. So, yes, she deserves more than my sister's tempered magic. Mormor always was more witch than whisper.

I think Kaija will say more, but she doesn't. There's a moment of quiet, and again, I get the sense that she doesn't know what to do now. My sister may be hesitant, but I am not.

I know exactly what I'm going to do once the sun goes down and the shadows come out. It's all I can think about now that the ritual is done and Mormor's soul is journeying to where it needs to be. It feels like the next step, and I don't know if it's because this ritual just feels so small, too small for a powerful witch like Mormor, or if it's the fire that's been burning inside me for as long as I can remember, finally about to be freed.

After darkness falls, I won't wait around to let death take everything. Not again. I plan to make it come.

The itch is already scratching against the inside of my fingers. The witch in me is clawing at my skin. She wants freedom, and I'm prepared to give it to her because I want revenge. It's the kind of revenge Mormor wanted but never let herself have. Her death leaves a bitter taste on my tongue. Despite all this time, she was never the same. Nothing could ever be the same. They took her spirit—our world—and burned it all to the ground.

It's why I still have a scar. It's why the witch inside me is always near the surface of my skin. Scalding. A reminder of what must be done. And now that Mormor is gone, I can finally do this. I can do it for her.

Beneath my knees, the earth crunches from the lack of rain. The clouds darken and twist anyway, as if preparing. Snow will come soon, and then it won't leave for a long time.

Kaija looks into the distance, and I follow her gaze to see two reindeer grazing, antlers dark against the gray sky beyond. They move together without acknowledging each other, soundless and unconcerned. I wonder if Mormor brought them here for us, her last dying spell.

Kaija watches the animals for too long, then wanders back toward the hut. I seethe. I keep still, to try and contain my magic just a little longer.

Before turning away from the grave, I look one last time at the magic that will send our grandmother's soul to dance in the sky with her ancestors. I notice that my rune stone looks upside down at this angle: its thorn facing left, and its straight line facing right.

The rune positioned like that is not a good sign at all, but I don't bother to fix it. There's a hare to butcher, and it's time to light the fire.



“What do we do now?” I ask the question later, with the flames crackling between us. I only ask because Kaija's been wearing that helpless

expression all day, and it's really getting under my skin. It's also a perfectly practical question. We're just two now, not three anymore. What will happen tomorrow and the next day and the next? Everything will be different.

It's hard to look at the fire and not see Mormor. My sister and I would have been cinders if not for her. Mormor did what she could to make sure Kaija and I survived. She taught us the runes, the spells, the *galdr*, the hunting. Living out here in these woods, it was freedom, but a kind of hidden freedom. Mormor taught us how to stay both free and safe.

It was just like her to bring us here. She found the wildest place she could find—an isolated birchwood on a fell where the villagers would never seek us out. Not even the local Sami people passed through here on their way to the lake lands for the winter.

For so long, this little fell, with its twisted trees, scarred from wind and rain, has been for us alone. My sister, Mormor, and me.

But I'm not one for sentimental thoughts.

As I wait for Kaija to respond to my question, I shove meat into my mouth and chew loudly.

I see Mamma in the fire, too. Not that I can remember her face. I have only snippets of that day and really nothing before. But I stare into the fire anyway, watching it whip around in the mounting wind, thinking about flames and all they can destroy in the hands of humans.

I bite down hard and catch my tongue. I taste the hot blood swelling in my mouth and gasp instinctively. When the villagers burned Mamma, most of what I felt was senseless pain, which doesn't leave room for much else. But it's been thirteen years since then, and now Mormor is gone, too, and there's just a blistering hole where she should be. That faraway village along the coast can keep its laughter, its *tørrfisk* suppers, its soft linen beds. Kaija and I have power. We are witches. Their fire can't reach us here.



But ours can reach them.

I swallow the chewed meat, taking my own blood down with it.

"I'm going to live in the village." Kaija says it so quietly that I barely hear her over my own chewing. All is silent for a few moments except the flames in the wind. "The village," she says again, and now I know I'm not imagining things. "I have to go."

I can't move. Can't think. Can't even breathe. A hunk of meat falls out of my fingers and onto the ground. The fire snaps.

"Will you come?"

I can't see anything in the darkness beyond our small ring of light. But it's all there. Our home, built with earth and birch and bare hands, cobbled-together wood for a door. Our hares from yesterday with their eyes black and lifeless, swaying in the night air between two spindly trees. Our herbs and stones and staves for witching.

As I look out toward the darkness, I feel it in my bones. It's desperate and cold, but it's ours.

In the village, they gather and gossip. They go to kirke; they pray. They don't do anything to change the world. They just accept it as it is. That's what Mormor used to tell us about the villagers. And it was exactly what they can't understand about witching, she said.

Witching means harnessing something they don't think can be harnessed. Only their god can do that. But Mormor never accepted their god into her heart, not really. Nor did her mother, nor her mother before that. I come from a long line of resolute witches, and our powers stretch back to before memory itself, so I know where I stand. But I guess Kaija doesn't care about that.

She's always been too delicate for life in the wild anyway.

My sister doesn't know how much Mormor used to bury her rage for Kaija's sake. They seemed to focus on protections and healing when they were together, nothing more powerful than that. But when Mormor and I were alone under the silver moon, I got to see the wild

witch. I watched as she screamed, tore at her white hair, and cast spells worse than those Mamma had been accused of. She never wanted Kaija to see any of that, but she didn't mind if I did. Maybe she recognized the wildness inside me, too.

She knew what kind of witch I was, even then.

But on the days after Mormor cast her hexes, we would catch Kaija weaving snow-white poppies into crowns to guard against hunger or charming petals to bury under west-leaning birch trees for protection. That's when Mormor would suddenly break. She would see my sister's hands doing that tender kind of magic and sob later as she reversed her dark spells, begging for forgiveness—forgiveness from whom, she never said.

I could never understand why she would reverse a spell that would satiate her deepest desires. If a curse could make the witch inside happy, why deny her? But Mormor never let a single curse last for more than a few hours. Her tenderness held her back. A tenderness she shared with Kaija. But tenderness never helped anyone survive, did it? It was Mormor's fierceness that kept us alive. I know that now.

Kaija is looking at me over the fire. Her eyes are pleading. I know what she wants me to say, and I'm so disgusted, I could laugh.

After everything, I could never imagine wanting to return to the village. I can't imagine seeing their pale, sunken faces or looking into the eyes of the murderers who burned mothers just so they could sleep more soundly. What about the sleeps of daughters? Do they ever think of that? Of course they don't. That is why we are here and they are there.

The heat inside me has been simmering for years. It was stoked whenever Mormor spoke of Mamma. I felt it burn hot every time Mormor flinched from a fire, even if its flames were the small tame, everyday kind, meant only for cooking.

When I look across at my sister, I can tell she's starting to lose hope in me. I can imagine the people of the village—their faces twisted,

voices terrifying and shrill—and I can't believe she doesn't imagine them, too. I don't remember what happened that day, but I have the proof burned into my hand.

I know what it feels like to hate people so much, all you want is to watch them burn until they're no more than a pile of black ash at your feet. And I'm no fool. I know this makes me like them. But there's one distinct difference between us. They don't know I still exist and that I hold a torch for the life they wrenched from us. They don't know my true power.

I swallow a final time. Without giving Kaija the satisfaction of a response, I stand and walk into the darkness.

# Kaija

I catch myself sighing again. It's only because as soon as Minna disappears beyond the fire's glow, I realize what she's going to do.

She's going to do magic, of course. I could see it written on her face. I'd seen it all day, in fact, but when she looked at me across those flames as I broke the news to her, something seemed to go wild inside her. I could see the magic already edging its way to the surface of her skin. It was obvious from the tiny white scratches on her hands this afternoon. She was doing her best to control it, and so I suppose I was the one who pushed her over. She was not happy to hear the news. Nothing could have been plainer than that. And I truly am sorry for it, but I had to tell her. She thinks I don't know my own mind, but I do. This is how it must be.

My own magic is minimal these days, and I think Minna has noticed. The truth is I've been so focused on figuring out how to reach the village, I haven't wanted to do much else. I knew I was meant to leave when the rune stones divined it weeks ago, but I have felt it in my heart for as long as I can remember. Seeing it in the stones made it real, and that's when I began to prepare.

Over these past weeks, I've kept this all to myself, of course. Mormor was sick with the slow, blameless illness of old age, which meant we had many tasks to ensure she was comfortable and at peace, and Minna and I still had to live. There isn't much rest out here in the wild. Despite all that, I think I've kept this decision so close to my heart most of all because I knew how Minna would react. Well, at least I knew her response wouldn't be pleasant, that she wouldn't make it easy. In truth, I understand her frustration. We've been together all these years, hiding away from the village we fled. But it has been too long—two sisters and their mormor, shutting out the world, strapped to this isolated place, hiding from dark memories and even darker futures.

I stand and leave the flames, just as Minna did, but I go in the opposite direction. I clutch the folds of my skirt and duck into our little hut. I don't need to use magic in here. Besides, I can't rely on magic anymore. If I'm to stay safe where I'm going, there will be none of that. I'll have to erase it from my very heart. I will pack and go over my route out of these woods using only my wit. That and the map I created from what Mormor has told me about the Sami settlement, which I know is only a couple of days' walk away, down along the coast. All in all, it should get me far enough. Mormor taught us how to be savvy, how to stay hidden and only leave this birchwood when we desperately needed supplies. I don't know if she'd think this was desperate enough, but I suppose she might understand. Because I had to, I learned how to trap a rabbit and skin it. Because it was necessary, I learned how to stalk an elk. But this knife-wielding life doesn't fit me, not really. I have hated every hunt, every splatter of blood, every second of ravenous hunger that's had me diving into my food like an animal. Being alone out here, fending for ourselves like this—I can't imagine doing it one more day.

I take out a small basket I made of birch bark and hope it's not too rough-looking for where I'm going, but I know it is. Inside it, I place a large handful of dried bilberries, making sure to leave most of them for

Minna. She will need them. I know her fury will be insatiable once she discovers me gone in the morning. I plan to wait until she falls asleep and then creep out as quietly as I can. I just hope she doesn't wake up. I won't be able to handle a long stormy goodbye, which is the only reason I've decided to leave tonight. Besides, I know she'll eventually understand why I've left, and I hope—I pray—she decides to follow.

Mamma used to tell me she knew the difference between Minna and me right away. *You both made trouble for me.* She would laugh as she mindlessly ran her fingers over my hair. I was born more than four weeks late, growing at a leisurely pace that worried my parents, but my sister sprang into the world two months early and as stubborn as they come. My heart breaks when I think of my little sister and how she'll be without me, pacing around our small hut, brewing pain in her heart, and stoking the fires of her rage. It's true—she'll be devastated to be left on her own, but she won't sulk about it. She'll get on with things, her anger at me fueling her daily activities. The thought of it makes me lean up against the wall for a moment. She and I have been out here together through thirteen icy winters. Through Mormor's stories and our own stumbles, we learned to sing the galdr correctly and carve our runes just right. This will be the end of all that, and I don't know how she'll cope without me. I hope she won't let the hate and darkness burn straight through her. But I can't stay here one more moment, or I may die from the loneliness.

I say I haven't been doing much magic lately, but in a sense, I suppose that's not true. I divined all this from the runes. I spilled the small carved stones twice to make sure I was reading them right, and each time they foretold a journey toward comfort, toward community, toward the sea. Although, even without the runes, I still would have known. I've felt a strong pull toward the village since the day we left. I missed my friends. I missed the smell of the sea, the squawk of the gulls. I missed the simple comfort of a solid roof and a family underneath

it. Mamma would have wanted this for me—and for Minna, too, I suspect—though the thought of us splitting up would surely not have been her preference. She would have wanted us to be protected, certainly, and I know that’s why Mormor brought us out here all those years ago. But Mamma would have wanted us to be a part of something, too. A life in the village was the life she chose for herself, after all, even though she was full of magic she couldn’t use. And that is the life I want for myself, too. I want what she nearly had. And now that Mormor is gone, I finally feel like I have a choice. She would have never allowed me to go back while she was alive. Her rage burned as hot as Minna’s sometimes, and though neither of them suspected it, I followed them out into the night to watch the curses Mormor spit at the sky. That was when I would do the gentle protective spells most of all. It was to remind myself there was another way, to remind Mormor that there was safety in goodness, too.

I flatten a piece of birch bark against my knee and scribble out a note for my sister. I desperately wanted Minna to say yes when I asked her to come. I thought about that moment many times. She could find a life in the village, too. We could be the long-lost nieces of Mormor’s cousin Tilde, escape this ruggedness, and finally find some ease. We’ve put in our fair share of hard years out here alone, and I’m already twenty-three; Minna, nineteen. It’s past time. But even before I asked my sister, I could see her ice-blue eyes swimming with magic, and I already knew what she’d say. I sigh again. I know where her hatred has grown from. That day was probably one of her first memories. If I remembered the village like that, I would be swimming in my own confused emotions, too. It’s no wonder pain and fear burn so violently in her heart. I would say I should have realized it about her before, but I know who she is and how she feels. I have always known. Perhaps that’s why I kept my desire to leave a secret from her and Mormor. But I finally feel free to follow my heart. I cannot wait around for Minna

because I know she won't listen to my pleading. She will only dig her heels in deeper if I ask her again. And yet I must go back. I have never wanted anything more.

I smooth the front of my skirt. If telling her was a knife in my dear sister's hide, following through will be a deep butcher's cut. When she discovers me gone, Minna will doubtless be hurt and scared, caught in the snare but not yet dead, and so will I, if I'm honest with myself. I am well aware of the pain I am inflicting on us both. But I'm not an animal, and there is no trap here. I am a woman, and so is my sister. Which means we will recover. Which means no one will make a meal of us. We will be wounded, maybe, but weren't we already?

There are more pelts outside, hidden under a leafy pile, ready for me to take them. I have been collecting them without her noticing, which has been difficult. I have also been drying bilberries and herbs for her, enough to last her a few months if she's frugal, and I have tied sixteen new snares—twelve for her, four for me—and hidden them underneath my sleeping pelt.

I prepare everything as quickly as I can, and then I grab Mamma's shoes. I've not kept them a secret, but I have kept them for thirteen years, never far from where I sleep, so I could wear them for this exact occasion. I slip them on. They fit perfectly, but I knew they would since I've tried them on about a thousand times, always imagining Mamma walking down village lanes. I can't recall her ever actually wearing them, but I know she kept them just outside the door to the house in the summer and just inside it during the winter. These are the little things I can remember, and they're the kinds of things my heart aches to have for itself.

I can hear a storm brewing outside the hut's brittle walls. I hope it won't be too bad. Minna still hasn't come back. I don't always understand her desire to change things with magic. Sometimes I want to shake her and tell her to just let some things be. But maybe magic is



just deeper in her than it is in me. Maybe I'm not cut out to be a witch, not a real one, with all that wild power. My skin tingles when magic is around, just as Mormor said it should, but I don't always like the tingle. It reminds me of Mamma so much, it burns sometimes.

I love my sister dearly, I think as I sit and wait, pretending to ready myself for sleep. She and Mormor have been everything to me these past thirteen years. Minna and I have grown up together in this quiet, lonely birchwood, and that kind of survival forges a bond that can't be easily broken by something as weak as distance. And, of course, she and I are sisters, which is the strongest bond of all. Mormor reminded us of that every day.

And yet. There's the look of Minna when she's got magic rising inside her and even when she doesn't. The anger is always bubbling right up near the surface. When she lets it out, it sears, even cuts sometimes. I know she doesn't mean it, but she's difficult to be around for too long.

So, as much as I yearn for a new life in the village, a less proud part of me simply wants to be free of this, I suppose. To be free of her.

I check outside once more and am rewarded with a wild gust of wind that sends my hair spiraling up. No sign of Minna, and it's getting late. Rain will be here soon, but it doesn't matter. The pull is strong, and it's calling me away. How can I wait for Minna to fall asleep if Minna doesn't come back? I realize now that I cannot.

I truly do hope she will join me one day. I wish I could say goodbye, but I know it would only make things worse. After making a loose braid of my hair, I leave the note, along with a little crown adorned with dried white flowers, on Minna's pelt. Then I grab my bag and basket, leave as much shame and sorrow inside the hut as I can, and disappear into the night.