

To all the women whose rights are debated
like theory and fears are treated like weakness.
Let your fear fuel you, and fight like hell.

Southern women are known for their
hospitality and honey-laced words.

Southern witches are not.

Down in the South, where the temperature
is closer to that of hell, one would expect the
witchcraft to be just as sinister.

Chapter One

Lucille

*If a rat runs across your path,
you will be prosperous soon.*

1870

Witchcraft didn't always require such a sacrifice. I usually only pricked my finger to get a few drops of blood. But, after months of the craft not working for me, I was willing to try anything. I touched the metal blade to the flesh of my palm and stretched my fingers wide. The sharp tip sliced into the taut skin as I dragged it across. My breath caught at the burning trail of pain it left behind.

Blood bubbled up and spilled over, staining the surrounding skin. I extended my shaking palm over the mixture of turpentine, herbs, and the severed rat's tail on the ground before me. Blood trickled from the wound as I squeezed my sweaty fingers. It dripped onto the small pile and ran through the crevices between ingredients, making a dark, almost black puddle in the dirt.

An unusual wind cut through the humidity of the Alabama summer heat. The corn stalks swayed around me and bent at such an angle I worried they might break. The cicadas' and bullfrogs' screams screeched louder, then went silent altogether. Eerily silent.

I sucked in a breath. This was it. This *had* to be it. The craft would work for me again. I had gathered everything it required: The Spirit, The Sacrifice, and The Superstition.

Without my permission, an image flashed in my mind. A lifeless body lying in my arms, caused by my own hands. By my own craft. My chest constricted, squeezing and twisting until no air remained. And just like that, the strange wind ceased. The wildlife resumed their usual cacophony of sounds. Stifling humidity returned with a vengeance and suffocated any excitement, and fear, that stirred in my belly.

I couldn't stay out here any longer lest someone notice my absence. Disassembling the pile before me, I wiped my blood-caked hands on my britches and threw the rat tail into the maze of corn stalks. With my boot, I rubbed the rest into the dirt, leaving no trace of what I'd done—or at least what I used to be able to do before that night. This had been the third time since then that I had tried to use the craft. Each time had been the same. What if it was gone for good?

My stomach sank as bells rang in the distance, and the faint sound of my name floated through the thick air.

"Shit." I scrambled to my feet. If Ma were here, she would've washed my mouth out, even now as an adult, to hear me use such language—though she'd whispered it under her breath plenty of times.

Sharp leaves scraped my skin, making small, bloody cuts as I ran through rows of corn. I barely felt them against my flesh, toughened over the years, like the hard shell of a boll weevil. As I burst through the last of the stalks my body collided with another. We both toppled to the ground. The sweet smell of the hay Marlow had been carrying filled the air. It floated like golden snow around us before scattering across the ground. If remnants of nature hadn't already covered my britches, they surely did now.

"Sorry, Miss Rockwell. I didn't see ya comin'," Marlow said as she collected as much of the fallen hay as possible.

THE SOUTHERN SORORITY OF SUPERSTITIOUS WITCHES

"It was my fault. And I've told you, call me Lucille." I helped her gather hay as I got to my feet. "You need to bundle it tighter. It won't come loose as easily that way."

Marlow nodded as her posture went rigid. "I'm sorry, Ma'am. I'll be sure to do that next time."

"You've only been here for a few weeks." I shrugged. "It took me years to get the hang of it."

Marlow slumped, relaxing, but only slightly. "I'm not sure Mr. Rockwell feels the same." She squinted at the sun as she balanced the bundle of hay against her hip like a child.

Whether from having her own or raising a mistress's, I wasn't sure. I snorted. "Pa doesn't feel many things."

Many things aside from dissatisfaction and anger.

He'd scoured the town and papers for months, searching for a more "suitable" worker to replace our last farmhand, whose name I could not force myself to even think anymore. I wasn't sure what had outraged him more: my actions that had led to needing a new farmhand or that the only one available within our budget was a woman.

"If you say so, Miss Ro—Lucille." Marlow wiped sweat from her forehead with her free hand and fanned herself. "You feel that wind earlier? Somethin' wasn't right about it. It's the middle of September. Ain't no wind ever do like that in the middle of September around here." She looked at the sky with scrunched eyebrows, bringing her free hand up to block the sun from her face.

I glanced around, acting as if I didn't know what she was talking about. I didn't need any more attention on my wrongdoings than what I'd already caused. "Must be a breeze coming from up north."

The bells repeated, as did the call of my name, louder this time.

Marlow looked toward the call. "There's a carriage out front. A suitor for ya, Miss?"

I wrinkled my nose. "I should hope not."

Marlow's thick, black eyebrows shot up into her hairline. "No men in town good enough for ya?"

I shook my head, then spat on the ground. The wet mucus beaded, refusing to mix with the red dirt around it. Its efforts were useless. The scorching heat would soon force it to evaporate into the thick, humid air either way.

"None I'd trust to pour piss out of a boot with the instructions written on the heel." I didn't mention I had once trusted a man, trusted him with much more than piss and a boot.

"Well, you're gonna have to trust a man some time or other. That's the only way this world works." Marlow adjusted the bundle of hay on her hip. Then, as if realizing she might have spoken out of turn, she nodded quickly. "Good day to ya, Miss Lucille."

She spun. The back of her neck glistened with sweat in the harsh sun as she returned to her tasks.

"Not in my world. Not anymore," I retorted.

Marlow was already gone, though. I frowned, but I couldn't be angry at the young farmhand. She'd surely experienced such a world in which men were the barrier we had to work through to accomplish even the smallest of feats. Or they were the force that plowed through us like a scythe during harvest season. Which is why I was determined not to let that world be my own.

I ran at the sound of my name again, heavier, angrier, demanding my presence. I sprinted around the old barn and through the cow pasture. The rancid scent hung thick in the air, made worse by roasting in the scorching sun. I didn't wrinkle my nose or hold my breath. I'd smelled it my whole life.

Roosters and hens crowed as I passed their coops, either asking for food or begging not to be food; I couldn't tell which.

Over the hill, a horse-drawn carriage gleamed in the sunlight. Its shiny, new exterior looked out of place beside our small farmhouse. Chipped paint, missing shingles, and half-fallen shutters appeared even more improper when reflected off the carriage's spotless black paint.

I slowed my pace as I neared our front porch, wiping dirt from my attire. I wrapped the cut on my palm with a hair ribbon. It helped

THE SOUTHERN SORORITY OF SUPERSTITIOUS WITCHES

me more that way than for its intended purpose, especially since I'd chopped my wheat-colored hair to my ears. Pa hadn't taken well to that either.

The wooden steps groaned beneath me as I bounded toward the front door. It burst open before I got to it, swinging hard and banging against the siding. The unfamiliar scent of musky cologne hit my nose. It certainly wasn't Pa's. He only wore the scents of manure, sweat, and alcohol. The latter more frequent since he returned from war.

"Lucille." Pa's dull blue eyes met mine with disapproval.

I wish I didn't see so much of myself in them; wished my eyes weren't almost identical.

"Where were you? What have you been doing?" He scanned the yard as if it showcased my latest transgression.

"Nothing. I was busy with my chores."

He squinted, no doubt wondering if he could trust anything that came out of my mouth. But what other choice did he have?

"You have a visitor," he grunted.

A visitor for me and not Pa? That must've ruffled his feathers. Even with that pleasant thought, it was still a surprise. Had I done something wrong that someone came to complain about? It wouldn't be the first time. And certainly not the last.

He opened the door wider before I could ask questions. A rather high-cotton-looking gentleman stood in the middle of our parlor, making the small space even smaller. Clearly, he wasn't from around here. Or if he was, he must have been able to afford more food than most from the strained look of his buttons barely hanging on by their gold thread.

Pa cleared his throat, and I jerked my head up. My lack of manners would earn me a scolding later, though the man had been staring at me, too, no doubt not used to seeing a woman in britches. I crossed my ankles in front of me and attempted my best curtsy, like a newborn calf stumbling to gain footing.

"Lucille Rockwell . . . Sir." I forced a smile.

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Rockwell. I'm Headmaster Sullivan from Brimham University." He reached forward with his meaty hand and snatched mine up. He pulled it in for a kiss, but grimaced at the sweat and dirt that layered my skin and opted for a pat instead.

"From Brimham University?" I slid my hand out of his grip.

Someone from the university was here to see *me*?

He repeated the university's name, more slowly this time, clearly misinterpreting my question as a lack of understanding. "I have an important opportunity I would like to discuss with you." He wiped his hands on his gold-threaded handkerchief as if he were wiping away the scarlet fever.

"Headmaster Sullivan, can I offer you a glass of iced sweet tea? Our maid makes the finest in the South," Pa interjected, never able to go too long without the conversation revolving around him.

I fought back a sigh.

He always drew attention to our maid, wanting everyone to know that the Rockwells could afford such luxuries. However, he wasn't wrong about Nina's talent for brewing the best beverages. She made tea so sweet one could practically taste the Southern hospitality infused within it. We could barely afford her, but we'd be damned if we didn't have Nina here to make tea when the weather outside felt like that of hell. No matter what it cost us.

Headmaster Sullivan accepted the offer. We all sat around the small parlor while glasses clinked in the kitchen. The space was modest, with exposed wood and forced ornamentation. Ma had always said the front of the house was meant for entertaining, but these rooms had rarely been used for it.

Unable to hold in my curiosity any longer, I blurted, "What's the nature of this opportunity?"

"Lucille, don't hasten the gentleman," Pa reprimanded, leaning forward in his armchair across from us. He still wore his mud-covered gaiters and, from the smell wafting from them, manure.

I bit my tongue, tasting copper.

Headmaster Sullivan cleared his throat. "Well, young . . ." His eyes roamed over my britches once more. ". . . lady, this opportunity is a once-in-a-lifetime endeavor. I thought it could never be done, but it seems the board of trustees thought otherwise."

His eyes grazed over Nina as she reached across to set his sweet tea on the small table in front of us. Before it could connect with the dark mahogany wood, the headmaster grabbed the already sweating beverage, lingering when their skin touched. Nina yanked her hand away from his as soon as the glass was in his beefy grip. He chugged half its contents in one gulp and wiped condensation from his thick upper lip.

Patience had never been a virtue of mine. My mind raced through the possibilities of his alleged "once-in-a-lifetime opportunity." I had sent applications to attend Brimham on a whim many times. Nothing had ever come from it before. I certainly didn't expect the headmaster himself to show up on our farm because of it now.

If it wasn't about the applications, it had better not be an invitation to some society ball they were hosting for women to meet eligible bachelors. That thought alone made me want to crow my head off like a hen being taken to the slaughterhouse. I might even throw my drink on him if it weren't such an atrocious waste of sweet tea.

The headmaster finally spoke. "Now, this is just a trial period of sorts, but for the first time in the state of Alabama, the university would like to offer women admission into Brimham University. Your application was chosen as one of only ten women selected. We wouldn't normally choose an applicant with such few prior academic credits. However, this is a rather unique situation and, thus, requires rather different criteria."

His voice droned on, fading to a dull hum. They accepted my application? Blood pounded in my ears from my fluttering heart. I could get a legitimate higher education, not just the podunk education I'd gotten at the schoolhouse when I was a girl. Though, I'd hardly even gotten

that, since Pa's farm became a priority over anything else years ago, even before the war. I wouldn't know how to read if it weren't for . . . the previous farmhand. But I had dreamed of such a thing my whole life. Ma always said knowledge meant power, and power meant freedom, though she had never gotten either and had paid the price for it. I wouldn't end up like her. I had to get out of this memory-infested farm.

"You're inviting me to get a degree?" My voice dripped with disbelief.

Pa grunted before Headmaster Sullivan could respond. I hadn't told him I'd applied. He wouldn't have approved, and, from his squinted eyes burning holes in me now, he still didn't. My heart faltered like a moth with a broken wing.

"Lucille works here on the farm. Even though we Rockwells have plenty of servants—" Pa puffed out his chest, "—her help is still required."

The headmaster rubbed his fingers over his peach fuzz mustache beaded with sweat. I looked from one man to the other, hating how my future hung between them—an invisible tug-of-war with the fragile thread of my fate.

I readied myself to argue my case, but Headmaster Sullivan spoke up first. "Many of our students are from quite prestigious families. If your daughter were to marry one of them, I'd imagine that would inject a good amount of new monetary flow into your farm."

I clenched my fist. Of course, that would be the headmaster's selling point. Not my education. No, that wasn't nearly as important as money.

Pa's unimpressed expression didn't falter. He only grunted once more.

I opened my mouth to speak, but the headmaster beat me to it again.

"Not to mention their union would more than likely lead to an offspring, possibly an heir for your land." Headmaster Sullivan picked lint off his shoulder that I was sure wasn't there, as if he weren't talking about me as one would about breeding cattle.

THE SOUTHERN SORORITY OF SUPERSTITIOUS WITCHES

Pa's eyebrows raised. Of course, he only cared about the possibility of what I could give him. What my *body* could give him. Pa looked me over like he was trying to tell a pile of fertilizer from plain ole shit. The corners of his mouth turned down. He undoubtedly remembered my last chance of procuring a spouse and its unfortunate demise.

"No man of prestige would marry her. This endeavor would be pointless."

I jumped up from the couch like a spring coiled tight with tension. "That's not—"

Headmaster Sullivan raised his hand, stopping me. I snapped my jaw shut, clenching hard enough to rattle my teeth.

"Well, I can see when my company is no longer welcome. I'll take my leave." He made a show of pushing himself off the couch.

My heart dropped into the pit of my stomach as he picked up his gold-tipped cane from the floor.

"I must hurry off to the Hamiltons' farm. I need to finalize my roster before sundown to secure a spot in the next newspaper print." Headmaster Sullivan straightened his hat, eyeing Pa.

"Newspaper print?" Pa shot from his seat. "For the Hamiltons?"

The headmaster continued to gather his things as if unaware of the interest he piqued or of the rivalry the two farms had. "Yes. Didn't I mention earlier that the paper would publish the candidates for this program? As well as their families and family businesses?" His lips curled upward around his words. He knew the meat he was dangling in front of the coyote's face.

"I don't believe you mentioned it," Pa said, no doubt picturing his farm on the pages of the newspaper instead of the Hamiltons', the attention it would gain. "On second thought, I think my Lucille would love to attend your university."

My mouth went dry as it fell open. If only the headmaster had mentioned the newsprint and the Hamiltons earlier.

Recovering, I asked again, "I'll get a degree?"

“Well, now, like I said, it’s just a trial run for one semester and only the most general courses. We wouldn’t want to overwhelm your mind too quickly.” The headmaster smirked at Pa.

They both laughed.

Hilarious.

I clenched the sweating glass in my hand more tightly. My fingertips ached to be ripped open and spill blood for the craft. As I drank my sweet tea, I imagined the delight at watching their hands burn or the blood drain from their faces as they lost consciousness. Though, if my earlier failed attempt was any indicator, I doubted my crafting would work anyway, even if I could get away with it. Instead the two men sealed the deal of my future with a handshake, greedy smiles wrinkling their cheeks.

The cold beverage couldn’t possibly extinguish the familiar rage from their belittlement and all-too-common view of women’s incapable minds. Along with the last drops of the gold liquid, I swallowed down the words that threatened to spill over my tongue. They would only get me in trouble and result in another beating.

Or another death.

I certainly didn’t need either. Thankfully, the cool liquid combined with my excitement for what was to come and coated my rage with honey and ice.