



## CHAPTER ONE

After they found the third body that year, Justin Hawthorne knelt in his backyard and prepared to hear his future.

His sister, May, dealt the Deck of Omens facedown on the grass between them. The all-seeing eyes on the backs of the five cards stared emptily at the canopy of leaves above. Justin's skin prickled as he studied their irises—white like the eyes of the dead.

He hadn't seen the latest body, but the remains of the corpses spat out by the Gray always looked the same. Eyes bleached the color of milk. The rib cage inverted, bones slicing through bloated skin like antlers rising from the body's back.

"I don't have to ask the cards." May's voice didn't lend itself well to gentleness, but she was trying. Justin hadn't asked for a reading since he failed his ritual. She knew how much it had cost him to ask now.

Because it should've been him commanding the Deck of Omens. Him wielding his family's abilities and protecting their town.

Yet he was helpless. A rotten branch on a healthy tree.

The Gray had grown bolder this year, luring victim after victim into its world, where the Beast hungrily awaited its prey.

Justin had believed, foolishly, that he would be able to stop it when he came into his powers.

But he had no powers. And now another man was dead.

Justin wouldn't sit idly by as others died. Powers or not, he was still a Hawthorne. He would find a way to keep Four Paths safe.

His fate lay in the cards.

"Show me," he said, gripping May's hands.

May shut her eyes. A moment later, he felt her familiar presence in his mind—sharp, clear tendrils of intention snaking through his thoughts. He knew she was feeling more than seeing, letting his past and present inform the patterns May could predict in his future.

She pulled away after a few seconds, exhaling softly, her eyes fluttering open.

"They're ready," she said hoarsely, turning the cards over so the all-seeing eyes gazed at ground instead of sky. Justin had barely glanced at the individual cards when his sister hissed with displeasure.

"What . . . ?" A slice of fragmented sunlight turned the glass medallion around May's neck from dull red to flaming crimson as she leaned forward, like a wound opening across her pale throat.

May had read his future dozens of times over the years, for fun, for practice. He had never seen her look so shaken.

His gaze darted to the spread of cards between them.

The Eight of Branches was centered, of course. Justin's card, painted with the familiar art of a young boy perched on a tree stump, a bundle of sticks in his arms. He hadn't noticed until he was older that there were roots wrapped around the boy's legs, tethering him to his seat.

It only took him a second to understand May's distress. Her card, the Seven of Branches, always sat at his left. But this time, it wasn't in the reading at all. Instead, a card he'd never seen before was nestled beside his. The art was sharp and vivid: a figure standing in the Gray, ringed by trees. Its right hand was shrouded in shadow.

Its left hand had been stripped down to the skeleton.

The "Founders' Lullaby" rang through Justin's mind. *Branches and stones, daggers and—*

"Bones," May said flatly, pressing the edge of her polished fingernail against the wood. Her hand was trembling. "It shouldn't—I must've..." But she trailed off. Even a panicked May would never admit that her mastery of the Deck of Omens was lacking.

"We both know you don't make mistakes." Justin couldn't tear his eyes from the card. "So tell me what it means."

"Fine." May snatched her fingers away. "You'll find a way to help the town. But the process is muddled. Here you've got the Knotted Root, a series of choices with no good outcomes. Pair that with the Shield and it looks like you'll be trying to mediate, as usual. Probably the Three of Daggers's fault, because Isaac is always screwing up somehow—"

"You can't pretend it's not there." The card between them almost seemed to glow, even in the shade. Flesh and bone entwined, a braided line between the living and the dead. "May. Tell me."

May bundled the cards together with a single practiced flick of her wrists. She shuffled them into the rest of the deck as she gazed over Justin's shoulder. Her light blue eyes were still locked on the trees behind him when she spoke again.

“It’s the Saunders family.” May rose to her feet. “They’re coming back, and I’m telling Mom, and you’re not telling anyone. Not even Isaac.”

“Wait!” Justin scrambled after her, but May was fast when she wanted to be. Her fingers were already wrapped around the handle of the back door. “What does any of this have to do with me helping Four Paths?”

May’s pink headband was askew. For his sister, that was disheveled, but she didn’t even seem to notice. “I’m not completely sure I understand,” she said. “But you’ll have a chance to make a real change in Four Paths once they’re here.”

This time, Justin let her go.

He stayed in the courtyard for a long while, staring at the hawthorn tree that rose behind him, its gnarled branches stretching across the gabled roofs of his family home like grasping fingers.

For the first time in his life, there would be a real member of every founding family in Four Paths.

He would be a part of that. He would have a chance to change things, to help.

Justin believed this. He had to.

The Deck of Omens had told him so, and unlike the Hawthornes who used it, the Deck of Omens couldn’t lie.

\* \* \*

*Two Weeks Later*

It was a single strand of turquoise hair that made Violet Saunders come undone. She was fiddling with her sheet music binder when

she caught sight of it, sprouting like a seedling from the space between her seat and the cup holder.

Violet's hands froze on the binder, clammy sweat collecting on the navy-blue plastic. She couldn't concentrate on the highway rolling past the Porsche's windows, or her fingerings for Schumann's Abegg Variations, op. 1. Her enthusiasm for the piano piece was gone.

One by one, her fingers unpeeled themselves from the binder's edge. Her left hand was creeping toward the hair like a pale, veiny tarantula when her mother silenced her Bluetooth headset.

"You okay?" she asked Violet. "You look queasy."

Violet jerked back her hand. She cranked down the Schumann blasting through her earbuds, trying to hide her surprise—it was the first time her mother had spoken to her in over an hour. "I'm just a little carsick."

Juniper Saunders considered this, tilting her head. The headset on her ear blinked, casting blue light onto her cartilage-piercing scars. They were the last lingering reminder of a version of Violet's mother that was long extinct. "Let me know if you need to vomit," she said. "I'll pull over."

Being the target of Juniper's concern made Violet's stomach clench. Her mother hadn't said a thing when Violet quit her piano lessons. But then, she'd barely seemed to notice when Violet painted her bedroom dark red the morning of an open house, either; or after the funeral, when she'd hacked off every bit of hair below her collarbones in a sloppy bob. Yet somehow, Juniper had noticed her distress in the middle of a conference call.

It made no sense, but then, Violet's mother had never made any sense to her at all.

“It’s not that bad.” Violet raked a nail across the edge of the binder. “The carsickness situation, I mean. I am decidedly pre-puke.”

Juniper’s headset blinked again. “Do you mind if I get back to this conference call, then? The London office is having a meltdown, and they need me to talk the developers down before things go nuclear.”

“Of course,” said Violet. “I can’t be responsible for that kind of damage.”

“I suggest curbing the attitude once we get to Four Paths.”

Violet slid the volume up until Schumann blasted through her earbuds again. She knew every phrase, every pause, every fingering—the recording was her playing, after all. “I guess that means I’ll have to get it all out in the car.”

Juniper rolled her eyes and started talking again, something about a bug in the software her company was developing. Violet tuned her out and sank down in her seat.

Four Paths. The place her mother had grown up, not that she ever talked about it. Juniper never talked about anything—why she’d been so insistent Violet and her sister have her last name, not their father’s; why she’d left town after high school and never come back. Not even when her parents died. Not even when her sister, an aunt Violet had never met, started to get sick.

The thought of sisters made Violet sink farther. There was no way they’d be driving back to Four Paths right now if her family hadn’t had a nuclear meltdown of its own.

A giant cargo truck roared up on the right side of the Porsche. Violet’s heartbeat rammed against the back of her throat as the truck’s massive container blocked her field of vision. She’d been out on the road countless times in the five months since Rosie’s

accident, but trucks like this one still left a cocktail of nausea and fury brewing in her stomach.

She forced her gaze away from the offending vehicle, but then, of course, the hair was still there. Mocking her. Violet stopped her practice recording, put the music binder on her lap, and snatched the strand of turquoise out of its hiding spot.

It was heavier than Violet had expected. As she lifted the hair up, she realized this was because it had been tangled up with the clasp of a thin silver bracelet, which had been wedged between the cup holder and the edge of the car seat. Violet's fingers moved over the filigree rose attached to the bracelet as Juniper continued barking orders into her headset.

The funny thing about grief was that once Violet got past the first few weeks, where she relearned how to sleep and eat and breathe, it was almost harder to function. There were protocols for handling funeral arrangements and overly caring neighbors and therapy. But nothing in all the empty platitudes and well-meaning advice told her what to do when you found your dead sister's jewelry in a car, months after the rest of her things had been boxed away.

It wasn't even a piece of jewelry Rosie had liked. In fact, Violet had a distinct memory of the way her sister's lip had curled when she'd opened up the box at her sixteenth birthday party. It was a gift from a great-aunt on her father's side of the family who hadn't seen Rosie and Violet since they were little, who only had a cursory understanding of what teenagers were and how they functioned.

"A rose? Really?" Rosie had said later, when they were in her room, examining the heap of clothes and odd art projects Rosie had received from her friends. "How basic. I mean, I'll wear it to

be polite, but it's like one of those necklaces girls wear that have their names on them. Like a dog tag."

Violet agreed with her like she always did, deriding the gift, but she remembered thinking at the time that even though the bracelet wasn't really Rosie's style, at least their great-aunt had tried to connect to them. Juniper hadn't kept in contact with any of their dad's family after he died, and Violet relished every clue about them she could get.

Now she stared at the filigree rose, slightly tarnished from its time in cup holder purgatory.

*Oh, what the hell.* Violet opened the clasp and tucked the hair into her binder. Then she fastened the bracelet around her wrist, turning the rose until it covered the purple veins that threaded up toward her palm.

It was a cheesy thing to do. Rosie probably would've hated it. But as they turned off the highway, Violet felt a little less alone.

The Porsche turned onto a series of increasingly empty side roads, the landscape changing from the busy highway to well-tended farmlands. The farms bled into foliage, and soon the car was surrounded by trees crowding together at the edge of the asphalt, their branches backlit by the early afternoon sunlight. Violet stared out the windshield at a landscape swathed in deep, green-tinted shadows as the music in her ears switched from Schumann to Bach to Chopin.

Something in the trees drew Violet's attention. The definition of the trunks, the vibrancy of the leaves, pulled her focus so thoroughly away from the road and the sky that the branches might as well have been waving in front of the Porsche.

Finally, they turned off onto a winding, badly paved pathway.



A sign dangled from an overhanging branch on rusted chains, welcoming them to Four Paths, New York, in scorched black letters.

“They’ve still got the sign.” A half chuckle escaped Juniper’s lips. “You’d think they would’ve replaced it with something a little more professional by now.”

Violet tugged her ear buds out. “This has been here since you were in high school?”

“It’s been here for as long as I can remember.”

This was the first piece of information Juniper had ever voluntarily offered about Four Paths. Violet’s throat swelled with a lifetime of unanswered questions as the Porsche rambled past a series of worn-down houses. Reddish-brown bells hung beside every front door, sometimes one or two, sometimes close to a dozen. The wind tossed the bells back and forth, but Violet heard no sound, even when she rolled down her window.

She peered at them, trying to get a closer look, but the car moved on into what had to be the main part of town, if only because the ramshackle houses had turned into ramshackle buildings.

There was no such thing as a chain store here, only a small collection of shops ripped out of a black-and-white photograph. Violet identified the building on the corner as a general store from the peeling gold letters emblazoned across its front. There was a secondhand clothing shop, a dive bar, a grocery store, a public library with a sloping gabled roof. People loitered in front of a fifties-style diner, tossing cigarette butts onto the pavement. Their heads snapped to attention as the Porsche rolled past them.

Although they’d only left Westchester County five hours ago, Violet felt as if she had been beamed onto an alien planet.

Juniper pointed out the town hall, which was gorgeous and imposing and utterly out of place among its shabbier brethren. The forest spread out wide behind it; stray branches snaked across either side of the roof, reaching for one another. Back in Ossining, Violet's hometown, every tree had felt like an interloper, sprouting stubbornly from loose gravel or growing in fenced-in little boxes on the street. But here, it was the buildings that didn't belong; they merely interrupted the woods.

The only place the trees were absent was a small field behind the town hall. A lone building stood between the meadow and the trees, some distance back from the main road. There was a symbol she didn't recognize on the door: a circle with four lines extending through it, not quite touching in the center, like a target.

"Is that a church?" asked Violet, examining the way the scalloped marble embedded into the front of the building arched up into a point at the top.

Juniper shook her head. "Four Paths doesn't have churches. It's a mausoleum. Around here, everyone is cremated and buried underground. This serves as a memorial for everyone."

"Creepy," Violet muttered.

Juniper shrugged. "It's efficient."

But Violet couldn't shake her unease at the thought of a town with no church and no graveyard.

After the field, there was another small street of stores; then Main Street receded to houses once more.

"Wait." Violet turned around to stare. The town hall disappeared behind a waving branch. "That's it?"

"That's it."

They were in the thick of the woods now, the car barreling

through a tunnel of greenery. Violet tried to take a picture on her phone, but the branches kept coming out blurry.

The Porsche broke through the line of trees. Violet squinted against the sudden assault of sunlight streaming through the windshield. She was still blinking away dark spots when the building before them came into view.

“This is our house?” she asked, and maybe her mother said something, and maybe she didn’t. Violet was too focused on the house to care.

It looked the way things do in dreams, ragged and unpredictable and slightly askew. Walls of reddish-brown stone rose above the trees before dividing into three spires, each adorned with a point of corroding iron.

Violet wasn’t even sure if the car was parked as she grasped for the door handle and tumbled out onto the driveway. There had been a garden surrounding the house once, but it was hopelessly overgrown now. Violet reached the end of the driveway and clambered up the moss-encrusted stairs to the front porch.

“I’m amazed the place is still standing,” said Juniper. “It’s structurally unsound, you know.”

“It’s perfect.” Violet stared at the honest-to-goodness brass knocker hanging on the door. Her wonder abated as she considered how much Rosie would’ve loved this place. It was exactly the kind of house they’d dreamed of moving into. A creaky old manor where Rosie would paint murals on the walls and Violet would play piano all day, and the neighborhood kids would think they were witches. Violet tried to shake those thoughts away as she thumped the knocker against the door. But they stayed anyway, like the grief always did, like a thin film across her skin that left her cocooned in her own body.

The door swung open, revealing a white woman at least a head shorter than Violet, with frizzy hair and a dress knitted from crimson yarn. In her face Violet saw a funhouse-mirror version of her mother; a Juniper who let her gray streaks grow out, who would rather go barefoot than wear heels.

“Daria,” said Juniper. “It’s us.”

The woman—Aunt Daria—tilted her head. “Solicitors don’t get inside privileges.”

She slammed the door shut with an impressive amount of vigor for someone so small. Violet jolted back from the knocker, startled. When her mother told her Daria was sick, she’d pictured someone bedridden and frail. Not this.

“Daria!” Juniper yanked on the doorknob, to no avail. “This isn’t funny. Open up!”

“Is she all right?” said Violet softly, staring at a bit of red yarn stuck in the door hinges. There had been no spark of recognition in Daria’s eyes. Not even for her own sister.

Juniper turned, her hand still clenched around the doorknob. A bit of hair had sprung free from her bun and frizzed across her forehead.

“No, she’s not.” Her voice was sharp, coiled. “She has early-onset dementia. The doctors wanted to put her in a home. That’s why we’re here.”

The silver rose pressed on Violet’s wrist, cool and heavy against her rising pulse. “You didn’t think to explain that before we got here?”

Juniper frowned. “I told you she was sick.”

The vague puzzlement on her mother’s face was the same expression she’d worn at Rosie’s funeral. Juniper had handled the

entire thing with careful, practiced ease; she'd even picked the coffin out on her lunch break at work, where she had neglected to take a single day off. Her mother sat through the services, her face slack with polite disinterest that didn't go away even when they were standing beside the grave. Violet had fought the urge to push her into the ground along with the coffin, but ultimately, common sense had won. Besides, Rosie deserved better company.

As Violet stared at her now, she saw that trying to make Juniper realize she was hurt would be a waste of time. If Rosie's death five months ago couldn't make her pay attention to the daughter she had left, nothing ever would.

"Unbelievable," Juniper muttered. She'd already moved her focus away from Violet, her heels clicking as she paced from pillar to pillar. "We came all this way . . . can't just make us sit out here . . ."

"Can too!" called a hoarse voice, slightly muffled behind one of the house's side windows.

Violet leaned off the edge of the porch. Daria's wrinkled face was pressed against the glass. Which gave her an idea.

She was down the rotting steps in seconds, the slight heels on her boots sinking into the grass as she stomped through the garden.

"What are you doing?" Juniper called after her.

Violet ignored her mother and hurried to the backyard, where the grass sloped down into a tree-lined hill. From this vantage point, the topmost spire of the house impaled the sinking sun on its iron point.

The back door was much less ostentatious than the front. Violet wondered if it had been some kind of servants' entrance.

Although the doorknob didn't give when she turned it, the dirty windowpane was already spiderwebbed with cracks. Violet gazed back out at the yard, considering it for a moment.

She'd only seen it for the first time minutes ago, yet she couldn't deny that she felt a strange sort of kinship with the place.

Her whole life, it had only been her and Rosie and Juniper, her father a hazy half memory, pieced together from a few short anecdotes and precious pictures, the Saunders family nothing but a mystery.

This house was proof that there was more to her family than that.

Violet tore her eyes from the trees and checked the most common hiding places she could think of, until she unearthed a spare key under a planter full of dead flowers.

The key was rusted and filthy, but it fit the lock. A few seconds later, she was striding through the ground floor of her new home. It was a musty place, full of dark, echoing rooms that looked virtually unused. A row of taxidermies lined the walls of the main hallway. Violet shuddered as her hand accidentally brushed against a passel of mounted birds.

She caught sight of crinkled red yarn and frizzy hair sticking out from behind a couch in what was probably the living room. Violet sighed and walked on until she reached the sun-drenched foyer.

When she swung the front door open, her mother was leaning against the porch railing, scowling.

"Thank god." Juniper hurried inside. "I swear, this place has always hated me."

Violet trailed after Juniper, stopping when her mother paused at the half-open door to the living room. Daria was visible now,

her knees drawn up to her chest, the dress spilling across her front like a woolly bloodstain. Her hands were embedded in her wiry hair. Saunders hair—Violet had heard her mother call it that multiple times, always sounding annoyed, like their distant Scottish ancestors were to blame for all their problems.

Juniper placed a hand on Violet's shoulder. Violet stiffened—she couldn't remember the last time her mother had touched her. Even before Rosie's accident, there had always been several inches of deliberate space between them. "I'll handle my sister. You can start unloading the U-Haul."

There was something soft in her mother's voice, almost apologetic. It was worse than polite disinterest, the same way her talking to Violet in the car was worse than ignoring her. Because it meant Juniper could care about her if she wanted to.

Violet shrugged out of her mother's grip. "Fine."

She pretended to walk to the front door but turned back after a few paces, watching her mother kneel beside Daria. Indistinct words echoed through the foyer. Although Violet couldn't make them out, she heard the underlying notes of rage and regret.

Daria braced her hand against Juniper's shoulder—to support herself or push her sister away, Violet didn't know. They rose together, a four-legged beast backlit by the sun streaming through the picture windows. Their figures blurred into shadowed, indistinct silhouettes, and, as Violet squinted into the hazy light, she could've sworn she saw a flash of turquoise hair behind their heads.