

# WITCHLINGS

HOUSE OF ELEPHANTS



*New York Times* bestselling author

**CLARIBEL A. ORTEGA**

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FOR PETER, A TRUE FRIEND AND  
A STORYTELLER. I LOOK FORWARD  
TO THE DAY WHEN OUR BOOKS  
SHARE A SHELF.





## CHAPTER ONE

### HAPPY BIRTHDAY, VALLEY

**IT HAPPENED BY CHANCE**, thirteen years ago, that all three Witchlings were born in the month of All Hallows Eve. Seven was born on the final day of October, just as the final leaf fell from the final tree in the Cursed Forest. Thorn was born on the warmest day of autumn that year, the sun so bright and reluctant to set that witches forwent their warmer cloaks. The first to be born, the oldest of the three Witchlings, was Valley Pepperhorn. And today she would turn thirteen years old.

Or at least, she was supposed to. Seven Salazar wasn't sure if you still got a year older if you had been turned into stone, but she and Thorn Laroux were determined to celebrate Valley Pepperhorn's thirteenth either way.

It had been six long months since the Golden Frog Games, when the hexers upended the Twelve Towns. Four stone statues, the victims of Lotus Evenstar and an unknown accomplice, remained in Ravenskill's Bluewing Infirmary like some gruesome monument, while Lotus

herself awaited sentencing in the Tombs. They were no closer to a cure, the archaic magic snaking ever closer to the hexed witches' hearts. If that happened . . . they'd be stone forever. But that couldn't be Valley's fate. Seven would die herself first.

Seven stood in front of the rows of flowers at Valley's feet. Ever since the hexings, witches from all over the Twelve Towns had come to pay tribute to the stone witches—the name they'd come up with in the *Squawking Crow*. Valley had been moved into a separate room on an elevated platform, both because of the vast number of flowers other Spares brought every day and because, more than once, witches had tried to vandalize or smash her statue.

"Here, I'll clear a path," Seven said as she flicked her wrist and the flowers parted for them. Seven's magic had continued to bloom in disquieting ways. Powerful wordless spells, magic above her level, the ability to conjure from thin air, all things no Spare had ever been able to do. Until Seven Nightshade Salazar.

Soon they were looking up at Valley: three Witchlings, three best friends, standing together as they were always meant to, but twisted by the cruel hand of destiny. Even in their most harrowing moments, they had never imagined things would turn out like this.

"I wonder if she can still hear us," Seven pondered aloud.

"She can." Thorn pushed her jet-black hair behind one ear, her brow furrowed in defiance. Her hair had gotten longer, almost to her shoulders, and she'd added a pink

streak the same color as Valley's hair in tribute to her friend.

"Yeah, you're right." Seven smiled softly. "She can definitely hear us."

She knew better than to push back when it came to Valley and Thorn. Thorn had been having a hard time ever since the games. She wasn't sleeping well, she was forgetting to eat, and she had become more than a bit obsessed with Valley. One summer night as they sat on the roof outside Seven's bedroom window, looking at the stars, Thorn had told her that the pain in her heart brought her back to the most wretched moment of her life—losing Valley had reminded her of losing her twin brother, Petal.

"Maybe for now, you can just take it one day at a time," Seven had said. "You can focus on that accelerated costura program, right?"

"I don't deserve it. I shouldn't be happy. Not when Valley is like that," Thorn had said.

Dr. Blackwood had called it "survivor's guilt" when Seven spoke to him about it. Thorn kept losing the people she loved most, and she thought it was somehow her fault. Seven didn't know what to say or do, so she just stayed by her side. She really hoped that was enough.

"It's too cold in here," Thorn said, unwrapping a carefully tied bundle of fabric.

She got up slowly, as if her bones ached. Without a word, Seven flicked her wrist and sent Thorn levitating a few toadstools off the ground until she was level with Valley. More magic she shouldn't be able to do. Thorn

draped Valley's shoulders in a beautiful glittering scarf she'd made for her.

"This will help if you're cold," Thorn said softly, before reaching out to touch Valley's cheek and then pulling back. Seven helped her float back down gently. They sat side by side, looking up at Valley's stone form. Her face was frozen in the same expression of determination she'd had when she'd thrown herself in front of Seven, saving her and becoming a statue in her place. The only difference from that night was the scarf and a small bracelet clasped around her wrist—from Valley's girlfriend, Graves Shadowmend.

A pang of white-hot pain rushed over Seven as she remembered the horrible night. Some days the guilt was so strong, she felt it might consume her. They had stopped Lotus, but her accomplice was still on the loose and it had left Seven uneasy. Finding a cure for Valley and the other victims was their top priority, sure, but finding the other hexer was too—before something like this happened again.

"We're trying hard to bring you back, Val," Thorn said, her eyes filling with tears.

Seven nodded and slid her hand over Thorn's.

"Happy birthday, Valley," Seven said.

"Happy birthday," Thorn said, her voice hitching on a sob. She turned her head and buried it in Seven's shoulder, and Seven just let her cry, patting her head with her free hand, her own face wet with tears. Turning thirteen in the Twelve Towns was supposed to be special,



important. Like the quinces of the humdrum world. It wasn't supposed to be like *this*. In the distance, Seven heard the unmistakable sound of Nightbeast cubs growling cutely, and it calmed her erratic breathing a bit.

Seven reached into her cloak pocket and pulled out a small parcel containing mini bizcochos—cream-filled sponge cakes with light pink frosting that fizzled when you ate them, which she knew were Thorn's favorite. They were still warm from the oven, and she had spent hours and caused a disastrous mess in the kitchen making them, but they had turned out . . . sort of okay.

"Do you want some?" Seven asked hopefully.

Thorn looked up, her eyes red and her face puffy. "Are those bizcochos?"

"Erm . . . they're supposed to be?" Seven smirked and Thorn gave the smallest of smiles. It felt like breathing fresh air again to see her friend smile.

Thorn took one of the misshapen cakes and ate it in three bites.

"When's the last time you ate?" Seven asked.

Thorn shrugged. "I don't know. I think yesterday."

Seven handed her another cake, and Thorn ate this one as well. Good. Now, if Seven could only find a way to make her sleep a full night, they'd be getting somewhere.

"We're gonna be late," Seven said once all the cakes were gone. Thorn wiped her tears and nodded.

"Let's go." Thorn got up and held her hand out for her friend. As they walked away, Seven turned to look at Valley one more time. Perhaps it was a trick of the light,

but she could've sworn her friend's expression had changed—that it was just as sad and hopeless as theirs.

Seven and Thorn walked out of the Bluewing Infirmary and into the crisp fall evening. Seven could see the eyes of her raccoons glowing in the dark, and then slipping away into the shadows as she entered the busy part of town. Ravenskill was filled with the buzz of energy that always came on this night, the night of the Black Moon Ceremony. Normally, it was much later in the month, but for whatever reason it had come early this year, leaving Sybell the Oracle perplexed.

“The magic in this town is topsy-turvy, I swear,” they had said as they recounted their discovery to Seven over tea one evening. The Stars had told them when the ceremony was to take place, and despite Sybell demanding an explanation from their celestial ancestors, the Stars did not explain themselves to anyone. They just did as they saw fit.

Seven was just grateful for the heads-up about the ceremony, because the two Witchlings had made a vow that when the new Spares were sorted, they would be there to welcome them.

Every year, Spares hung their heads in shame as they walked away from downtown Ravenskill. As their friends and fellow witches celebrated by taking their very first broom flights, they spent the night alone and afraid for their future. Seven remembered it well: looking up into the skylights of her attic bedroom on the night of her own Black Moon Ceremony, as witches flew overhead among

the stars, her face tear streaked and red. She could not change the unfairness, the cruelty, of being cast away as a Spare, but she could do something else—prove to Spares that there was *hope*.

After all, hadn't she and Thorn done great things? Hadn't Valley shown bravery and friendship deserving of honor and celebration? Hadn't Thorn overcome her greatest fear and fought alongside the Nightbeast? Hadn't Seven shown that a Spare could be powerful, an *Uncle* only second to the Gran, even if that power was secretly monstrous? If the adults in this town wouldn't recognize that Spares were worthy of love too, then Seven and Thorn would be the ones to show the Spares they were just as important and capable, just as much a part of Ravenskill, as any other witch.

"I've never seen so many witches at the Black Moon Ceremony," said Thorn as they made their way to the gathering. The streets were decorated in twinkling lights and enormous floral arrangements in vases so fancy Seven felt they looked a bit out of place in their town. Ravenskill was a beautiful place—a friendly town, as their official motto suggested—but it had never been extravagant.

As part of her costura training, Thorn had been assigned to help design the decorations around town, and particularly in the Ravenskill Theater. Gold ribbons were threaded through the weeping willows like plaits of long, flowing hair. Twelve soapstone columns erected along the path to the ceremony were embellished with intricate

carvings of Ravenskillian history. Enchanted orbs above each column lit up the pathway, washing the town in a warm amber glow. Witches sat on ancient-looking benches made of twirling, twisted ore, and birdhouses adorned with gems hung from the trees. The birds fluttered in and out, singing friendly songs about Seven as they did.

“It’s not the normal style, but it *is* beautiful,” Seven said, waving at a cooing pigeon.

Thorn shrugged. “They gave us the strict direction to stick to olden days decor; it’s all this kind of Hill style. They’re making a fuss this year because the town is famous.”

*Not the town.* Us, Seven thought. Their Black Moon Ceremony had become infamous. Books about them were sold in stores and a special documentary, *Stupendous Spares: Heroes? Or Menaces?*, had even been made for the telecast. Guides on how to avoid your coven circle not closing and on avoiding the impossible task—all inspired by Seven, Valley, and Thorn’s dilemma last year—were also particularly popular, with advice like “Smile through it all, no matter what!” and “Better a Spare than a humdrum, after all!” There were even Stupendous Spares pins and posters in the gift shops around town. Embarrassing.

“My my, the town is quite busy tonight, isn’t it?” observed Edgar Allan Toad from her pocket.

“If it gets too loud, let me know. I’ll put a quieting spell on your habitat,” Seven said.

“Pfft. I’m not that old yet. I can handle a little ruckus,” Edgar said.

“Hmm, you’re *pretty* old . . .”

“Did you know toads have performed hexes before? Deadly ones. Quite interesting.”

Seven put her hands up in surrender. She wondered if that was true.

“What’s he saying?” Thorn asked.

“You don’t wanna know,” Seven said with a scared little laugh.

As they approached the theater, eyes followed their every move, something Seven had become *somewhat* accustomed to. In the year since their own ceremony, the one constant had been witches staring and gossiping about them.

“Spares this way! This way, all Spares!” A Gran’s Guard dressed head to toe in golden armor ushered Spares through a separate line, leading them toward the far end of the square.

“Come on, we’re on the balcony,” Thorn said, grabbing Seven’s hand and walking up to the outside seating overlooking the town square. Seven looked back at the line of Spares—they’d barely be able to see from their designated area, while she and Thorn sat overlooking the whole event. It stirred something in her, an uneasy feeling taking hold of her heart.

They fought their way through the throngs of witches and emerged on the airy balcony, where Seven’s parents, Fox and Talis, along with her ever-growing baby brother, Beefy, were already sitting with Thorn’s family. Valley’s mother, Quill, would normally be with them, but she hadn’t been out much lately. Not because she was

ashamed . . . but because she was *busy*. And Seven and Thorn knew all too well what she was busy with. Pixel Gibbons, a Spare—and a Laroux family friend who worked at Mrs. Laroux’s boutique as an assistant—also sat with them, happily fussing over a cooing Beefy. She still wore her hair in her signature cropped cut, but now, unlike when she was employed by the butt-toad Dimblewit family, her clothing was beautiful and she had the healthy glow provided by good meals and rest.

As Seven looked around, she noticed that in one shrouded corner of the square, a cluster of witches stood motionless. They wore head-to-toe black and gray, veils covering their faces. They had begun appearing around town a few weeks after the Golden Frog Games in the spring, some sort of cult, everyone said. Seven wasn’t sure who they were or what they wanted aside from the anti-Spare pamphlets they were always scattering around town, but she did know one thing: They frightened her.

“I was starting to worry,” Fox said as Seven slid into her seat.

“We were just visiting Val,” Seven said. Fox kissed the top of her head and took her hand as they waited. Normally, Fox didn’t worry so much. Ever since Valley’s stonification though, the girls’ parents had been on edge. Understandably so.

“Pictures!” A witch on a broom glided through the night air toward them. A long green cape floated behind her, a small witch’s reporter hat, embroidered with little felt cameras and stars, tipped on her head. She was holding

a completely see-through camera as she hovered right in front of the balcony. They all smiled, Seven throwing her arm around Thorn's shoulder as the witch snapped a few pictures, then nodded.

"You can buy copies at the *Squawking Crow* offices!" she called out as she flew toward the night's Witchlings to take pictures. Seven wondered suddenly, her heart giving the smallest flutter of excitement, if Tiordan Whisperbrew was in the crowd. If they were . . . maybe Seven could finally meet her lifelong idol.

"Beefy, no!" Fox said as the giant toddler picked up one of the crystal candelabras at the far end of the balcony.

"I hope these are, oof, insured," Talis said as he wrested the crystal candelabra from Beefy's grip.

"Aw, butt-toad," Beefy said, pouting. It was his new favorite word.

Fox shot him a look and Beefy blushed. "Sowy, Mommy."

"Come, Beef," Seven said, and her baby brother toddled over and sat down beside her. Beefy was only two, but he was already the size of a five-year-old Witchling. At this rate, he'd be taller than their parents soon.

Just as Talis wiped the sweat from his forehead, the Gran emerged and the crowd below them went silent. It was time to begin.

"Welcome to the Black Moon Ceremony!" said the Gran, to cheers and applause. A petrifying crash of thunder erupted in the sky, and everyone jumped and yelled out in collective surprise. Seven Salazar should've known then that everything was about to go very, very wrong.

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