

WITCHLINGS

Author of GHOST SQUAD

CLARIBEL A. ORTEGA



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TO ANYONE WHO HAS EVER
FELT THEY DIDN'T BELONG.
THIS ONE'S FOR YOU.



*In the darkness of the woods
Listen, listen well—
Every little noise you hear
Might be the thing that dwells:
Crunching leaves, a subtle breeze
Or a monster as it breathes.
Now! The monster's hunting you—
It is too late,
We've let him loose.
Lock the windows, shut the lights,
Wrap your little ones up tight.
Hang the rue and heed the bells,
Beware, beware
The Thing that dwells.*

—“*The Ballad of the Nightbeast*,” from *The Twelve
Town's Book of Folksong*



CHAPTER ONE

ANYTHING BUT A SPARE

IT WAS THE NIGHT of the Black Moon Ceremony, and the very last thing Seven Salazar wanted was to be a Spare witch. Now that she was twelve, she'd be placed in her coven, but like every ceremony before, tonight three witches would be left over: *Spare*s. Nobody ever wanted to be a Spare. Seven had done everything she could think of: studied for her C.A.T. exams, attended every witching social event she could fit on her calendar. She'd even joined the toad racing team and gotten stuck with the slowest, crankiest toad of the lot. At least his name, Edgar Allan Toad, *sort of* made up for it. But only sort of.

It wasn't like Seven *had* to do all those things either. Everyone in her year got to participate in the Black Moon Ceremony, of course, but it was a long-standing belief among Witchlings that the harder you studied and

worked, the more likely you were to get into one of the *cool* covens.

Seven tied her combat boots and slipped on her oversized purple hoodie before securing her pointy hat on her curly hair with some pins. They'd give her a giant black ceremonial robe when she got to the town square, but it was thin and the night was cold. She didn't want to freeze her buns off. She shot a quick text to her best friend, Poppy, telling her how excited she was for tonight.

"Duh," Poppy wrote back. "And me too! Can't wait to be coven sisters!"

Seven smiled at the message as she walked into the kitchen, where her mother, Fox, was putting the celebration cake in the fridge to cool.

"Sev, you've got your amulet, right?" Fox wiped her slender fingers on her apron and let down her curly red hair.

"It's only the whole point of tonight, Mom," Seven said, holding up the amulet that hung around her neck. Later that night, it would light up with the same color as the other witches in her coven. *Please, please let it turn purple.* The color of House Hyacinth, the coven Seven and Poppy had dreamed of being placed into for, oh, just about all their lives.

"Remember, things will work out okay, no matter what happens tonight," Fox said.

"Easy for you to say," grumbled Seven, looking at the bright aquamarine pendant that hung from the necklace Fox

always wore. The blue stone signified House of Stars, one of the most popular covens.

Seven would have a much better chance of achieving her biggest dream, becoming a witching-world-famous journalist, if she was in one of the powerful covens, like her mom. It was pretty much the opposite of being a Spare. Because being a Spare meant your destiny and magic didn't match up with anyone else's. Being a Spare meant you didn't belong. And Seven wanted desperately to belong.

As Fox moved around the kitchen, the moonlight hit her pendant and seemed to adorn everything around her with shimmering stars. Seven used to wonder if her mother had gotten her name because of her red hair, which she always thought looked lovely with her deep brown skin and freckled face. Seven looked more like her dad, tawny-brown skin and dark curls. But now she knew it was more likely that her mother had been named Fox because of how cunning she was. In their world, the Twelve Towns, a child's name was a prophecy, passed down from a grandmother or the Town Gran, their leader. Seven had no idea what her name meant, not yet anyway. But like any name given in Ravenskill, one day its meaning would be discovered. It was just a matter of time.

Seven began tapping drumbeats on the closest object, trying to match the beat of her fluttering heart.

"You're still nervous about being a Spare?" Seven's father,

Talis, asked, strolling into the room. He was carrying her baby brother, Braucherei, who everyone affectionately called Beefy, because of both his roundness and his unusual strength. He was also unusually tall for his age, already three toadstools long, when Seven had only been two when she was a baby. Beefy pulled on his father's ear, and Talis cringed; the baby's grip could be painful. Seven rubbed her scalp, war flashbacks of Beefy pulling on her curly hair coming back to her.

"I'm not just nervous, Dad. I'm *freaking out*. What if I didn't do enough, or what if the magic gets fudged somehow, or"—Seven dropped her voice to an ominous whisper—"I get placed with Valley?"

Valley Pepperhorn was the literal *worst*. Valley had been bullying Seven for as long as she could remember. Putting weird things in her rucksack, hiding Edgar Allan Toad before a race, or giving dirty looks to Seven and Poppy. She was mean, scary, and came from one of the families on the Hill. They were the wealthiest witches in town and thought they ran everything. Well, they sort of *did* run everything, actually. The only witches they couldn't go up against were the Town Gran and Uncle.

"The chances of that happening are not high, but even if it does, any witch can be a friend if you just give them a chance," her mother said.

Seven held back a snort. Seven was almost positive Valley was a cuco or, at the very least, part gremlin. Her parents

didn't see the way Valley snapped at their professors and didn't seem to care about her schoolwork or how she was always on her own doing sneaky, probably terrible, things. Sometimes, when Seven thought about it, when she thought what her life would be like without Poppy and without her family, she felt almost sad for Valley, who had no friends and the scariest parents ever. But then Valley would do another awful thing and Seven wouldn't feel so bad for her anymore.

None of it would matter after tonight anyway, Seven reminded herself, because once she and Poppy were placed in House Hyacinth, she wouldn't have to deal with Valley ever again.

In all the past Ravenskillian Black Moon Ceremonies she'd researched in preparation, not one showed an example of best friends sorted into different covens. Tiordan Whisperbrew, the famous, coolest reporter of all time and Seven's idol, was sorted into House Hyacinth right alongside their best friend and now owner of the *Squawking Crow* newspaper, Inkpen Killian. They were a dynamic duo, and Seven looked forward to her and Poppy following in their footsteps.

"Come on, then. It's almost midnight, and the Gran will hex us if we're late." Talis grunted as he placed Beefy in his stroller. The baby swung his legs and cooed happily as he was strapped in. When he was done, Talis kneeled down in front of Seven.

"A hug for good luck?" he asked, and Seven smiled as her

dad pulled her into a warm embrace. Talis, short for Talisman, had always been lucky. Seven pinched his cheeks before a test for an extra boost. A brilliant blue pendant hung from his neck, the same color as her mother's. It's how her parents had met, after all: They'd been placed in the same coven as kids.

"No matter what happens tonight, we're all proud of you," said Talis.

Seven scrunched her face at him. "Even Beefy?"

Talis laughed. "Especially Beefy. He has no idea what's going on, but he's still proud of you too. Let's go."

The town square was just across the cemetery, under a bridge and past the Bruised Apple Bookshop, which had been recently taken over by a new family in town. A shadow dashed across the night, and Seven jumped, clutching her mother's arm.

"It was only a rabbit," Fox said softly.

Seven laughed nervously. "I knew that."

She did not know that.

There had been sightings lately. Sightings of a monstuo called the Nightbeast, a giant wolf that ate Witchlings. Or at least that was the rumor at Seven's school. Her teachers had assured them those were all rumors, but she had noticed the older witches around town had begun enchanting their garden gates with stay-away spells, hanging rue from their trellises and above their doors, and panicking on the Ravenskill message boards. All signs that a creature lurked near.

Seven had walked this way to town a thousand times, many times on her own. Tonight, she was grateful to have her family with her on the cold, dark path. Even if it *had* only been a rabbit.

The Salazars arrived just as the other families were gathering around the cascading fountain at the center of town. Lanterns hung from trees around the square in groups of five to symbolize the incoming covens. The light cast a warm orange glow on everything it touched and left a few corners cloaked in shadow.

Poppy and her mother were there—they waved at Seven as she took her place in the circle around the fountain, and Seven felt a surge of happiness. Her oldest friend ran over to her, and it seemed everyone’s eyes followed her. Poppy had always been the more popular of the two of them: cheerful and optimistic to Seven’s anxious determination. But they had always gotten along.

“Seven, I didn’t sleep at all, not one wink,” Poppy said breathlessly.

“Me either. I feel like my eyeballs are gonna explode,” Seven said.

Poppy laughed.

“Cake at my place after,” said Seven.

“Pineapple?” Poppy raised an eyebrow.

“Of course,” Seven said, and smiled. Pineapple-jam cake was her favorite, and her family’s recipe was famous.

The crowd began to shuffle uneasily. It was almost time. “No matter what,” Poppy said hurriedly, “we stay friends. No matter what coven we’re in, deal?” She held her pinkie out for their best-friend swear.

“Deal.” Seven linked her pinkie with Poppy’s, and they swayed their arms to and fro three times. The pair of Witchlings devolved into laughter, the excitement of the ceremony too much to contain.

They hugged, and Poppy ran back to her parents.

The Town Uncle, second-in-command to the Gran, walked around handing each Witchling a long black robe. He was the most powerful witch in Ravenskill after the Gran. Town Grans got their powers from the Stars, while Town Uncles got their powers from nature, and could even speak to animals. The Uncle was charged not only with being the Gran’s right hand in everything she did, but also in being the liaison for and caretaker of all the animals of Ravenskill—an immensely important job indeed. He wore the customary special-occasion robe of the Uncle, adorned with trees and various animals enchanted to scuttle about the fabric, and, of course, the bluebird brooch he received when he became Uncle.

“Here you go, Seven Salazar, correct?” the Uncle asked when he reached Seven.

“Yep.” Seven took the folded black robe as the Uncle crouched down to coo at Beefy.

“Oh my, look at his fat little feet!” the Uncle said sweetly. Just then, Beefy grabbed the Uncle’s furry green hat and began to chew on it.

“So sorry,” said Seven, pulling the hat, not without a struggle, from Beefy’s grip and handing it back to the Uncle. The Uncle just laughed and moved on to the next Witchling. Talis and Fox retreated to the outer circles with Beefy in tow, giving Seven an encouraging smile and snapping pictures as they joined the other parents.

The ceremony was about to begin.

Seven slipped into her robe, taking deep breaths and softly chanting, “*Not a Spare, not a Spare, not a Spare,*” as if it were a lifesaving spell.

“Sorry!” Someone bumped into Seven from behind and nearly knocked her into the fountain, which was now lit up with a deep green glow.

“Careful,” Seven said, straightening up to face the girl who’d bumped her. It was someone she’d never seen before. “The Gran is watching us.”

The Gran had arrived and was standing on a floating platform at the center of the fountain, water splashing just below her feet. Though it was dark and foggy, she seemed to eye each of them carefully, and Seven swore she could see inside her brain. Like most everyone else, the Gran was dressed in all black, but the fabric of the Gran’s long black coat was enchanted to look like the night sky. She was

famous for her coat which held magical objects and changed color like the sky. The most brilliant of the visions was the stars and moon spinning around each other in a glittering sky, an ode to the Gran's real name, Knox—an ancient word that meant *night*. From under her pointy hat fell a cascade of gray braids that she always had done in the colder months, her tight curls loose and flowing whenever it was warm out.

“I’m Thorn,” said the girl next to Seven.

Seven gave her the side-eye, taking in her straight, short black hair and bangs, her round, pale face and flush red lips. She was much shorter than Seven, petite in every way. Even her feet were small; her shoes looked like they were less than half a toadstool long. Despite the darkness, she could see her eyes were a deep, dark blue. There were tiny pins, like the kind seamstresses use to hold fabric in place, stuck to her hat. It was interesting her name was Thorn since she sort of looked like a rose and was also being a real pain in the buns.

“You must be the new girl,” Seven said.

Thorn nodded so quickly, her witch's hat almost flew off.

“I’m pretty nervous,” said Thorn.

Seven sighed. “Seven Salazar, hi. I think we might be starting soon.”

“Right, right,” Thorn said, and locked her lips up, throwing away the key.

A few moments passed in silence.

“Nice to meet you, by the way. Which coven are you hoping to be placed in?” whispered Thorn, almost immediately forgetting her locked mouth.

Mercifully, the Gran raised her arms then and the crowd went silent, saving Seven from having to fib and say whatever she got would be a blessing. From the moment they began their magical training, they were told, and told again and again, that their coven was their destiny, and that being ungrateful for fate’s gifts would curse them with bad luck. Or even worse than bad luck: If you truly didn’t accept your given house, then you couldn’t be sealed with your coven during the ceremony. They’d stay Witchlings. But that hadn’t happened in many years.

“Tonight marks the two hundred and fifth Black Moon Ceremony in the town of Ravenskill,” the Gran began to say.

Everyone clapped politely. Across from Seven’s line of vision stood Valley’s parents. They wore expensive-looking coats with sharp lines and leather gloves. They stood rigid, looking in Valley’s direction intently. After each one of the Gran’s proclamations, while everyone else cheered loudly, they barely clapped, as if this was the most boring event in the world. Valley looked miserable, but then again, she always did. She stood opposite Seven in the circle of Witchlings, scowling, her hair tucked behind her ears and her hat sitting haphazardly on her head.

“I am so, so, so nervous,” whispered Thorn again.

Seven had to force herself not to move away. Instead,

through clenched teeth, she warned, “Stop talking, or I’m going to hex you to be my toad’s wife.”

That shut her up, at least for now.

“And now,” exclaimed the Gran, “for the reason we’re all gathered here tonight. The forming of the covens.”

Where before there was a low murmur of noise throughout the square, now everything was deadily quiet.

“Witchlings, prepare your amulets!”

With a collective ruffle of fabric, the twenty-eight Witchlings pulled out their crystal amulets, which hung from black cords around their necks, and held them in front of their faces.

“Now, intone the spell with me.”

All at once, voices rose, reciting the Black Moon Song they’d known all their lives but were not allowed to sing aloud till this night. Seven’s heart fluttered as she began:

*A coven is five
In death and in life,
To believe
To protect
Never doubt
Or neglect.
Bound with our magic
Before the Black Moon
Bound by a circle*

*For no circle
Spells doom.*

As the final words left their lips, purple smoke snaked from their mouths to dance in the center of the circle, right above the Gran's head. Then, with a flick of her wand, she sent the smoke careening back and straight into the amulets, which began to whirl and vibrate. Seven's amulet spun wildly, and she closed her eyes, begging one final time for the thing she'd begged for whenever she thought of this night: *Please let it turn purple*. All around her, covens began to form. Five amulets turned the bright aqua color of her parents' coven.

"House of Stars," said the Gran. "Brilliant, beautiful, generous to all."

The Witchlings squealed and ran off together, holding hands in their own circle. They would be a new wing, a five-witch coven, part of the larger Grand House of Stars now.

Another group got a deep black the color of obsidian for Moth House.

"Mysterious, morbid, dependable friends," intoned the Gran to enormous cheers from the crowd, including a group of parents who looked like they had died last week. Moth House was the creepiest coven. Their black lipstick and pale makeup *was* pretty cool, Seven could admit. Seven was a bit surprised that Valley hadn't been sorted into Moth House, but it was probably the dependable friend part.

Witchlings embraced and joined their new covens happily, and all the while, Seven waited, eyeing Poppy anxiously. Next, the Witchlings for the emerald-colored Frog House (focused, frugal, truthful to the last) were placed. And now there were only two covens left to form before the Spares. There would be three Spares tonight, Seven knew. Valley being a Spare would make sense, since she was always falling behind in all her classes and had zero friends. There were a few kids from her class, ones who never fit in, who Seven could see being sorted into the Spare coven.

A girl named Starlight whooped when her amulet began to glow purple. *This is it*, thought Seven. House Hyacinth. *Her* house.

Next came a boy named Cane, which Seven knew was short for Hurricane. Seven and Poppy looked at each other, and Seven had to hold back a giggle, excited for their amulets to go purple.

A girl she recognized from her class, one who always ignored her and whose name she couldn't remember, was chosen—and then her best friend was too.

Seven's heart gave an awful lurch as the two friends looked at each other with delight. There was only one spot left. She glanced down at her own dull amulet, then over at *her* best friend: Poppy's amulet was a vibrant purple.

Poppy's face dropped as she looked at Seven, all their plans of being coven sisters unraveling. She quickly corrected

herself, giving Seven a light smile and turning away to join her new coven. Seven knew that Poppy couldn't betray her assignment. Even one misgiving about what coven you were placed in could spell disaster—could prevent your coven from closing.

That didn't make it hurt any less.

“House Hyacinth!” said the Gran. “Valiant, virtuous, powerful in all things!”

House Hyacinth got the loudest cheers yet, and the awful truth truly sank in.

No, no, no! This couldn't be happening! Seven was supposed to be with Poppy; that's how they'd always planned it: Best friends were supposed to be placed together. So why weren't they? *Okay, Seven, just breathe.* At least there was another coven left. Seven would be in the Goose House coven. Seven focused, taking deep calming breaths and trying not to fidget, as a beautiful pearl color filled one amulet, then another.

A fourth Witchling entered the Goose coven, and there was only one more amulet to go. Seven held her breath . . . but when the last amulet lit up a shimmering white, it wasn't hers.

“Goose House!” said the Gran. “Clever, chaotic . . . mostly good!”

The happy squeals of the other covens turned to whispers and sighs of relief, Seven thought with a cringe. They were all happy—happy not to be her. Shame washed over Seven, and

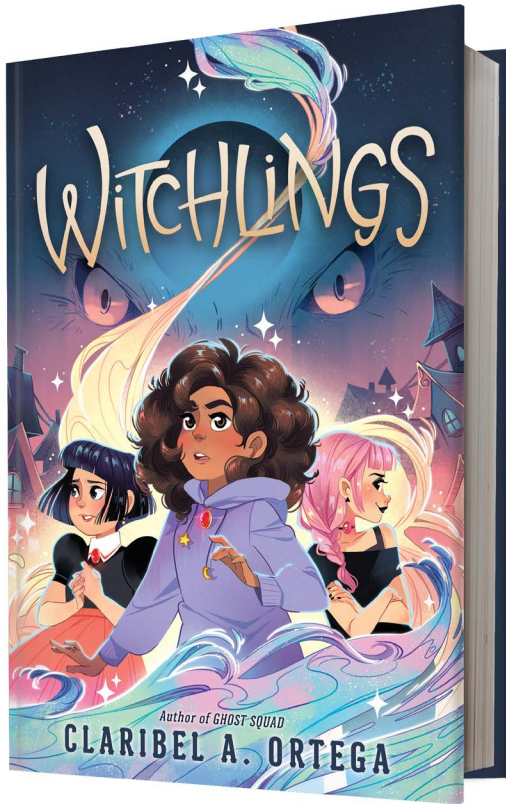
she was glad for the cover of night so no one would see how bright pink her face turned when she was embarrassed.

Seven's amulet filled with the muddy red color of the Spare coven, and she shut her eyes tight, wishing that she could just disappear. Her stomach felt sour, like she'd eaten something rotten, but at least she was keeping her tears at bay. Seven's eyes flew open as she realized she was too caught up in her own panic to notice who was left with her, who shared the shame of being left for last. She followed the red glow from her amulet to the one right next to her, to Thorn. Panicked, she scanned the circle until she spotted the unmistakable red glow coming from . . . Valley. Valley Pepperhorn's amulet shone a bright red, and a happy sneer crossed her face.

Not Valley, anyone but Valley. Even her toad would be better than that, but this was her awful reality.

Just three misfit witches, a red glow all around them, and the unmistakable truth that Seven was a Spare.

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