TONIGHT, I BLEED

The Witches of Halstett:
Book Two



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LOTHIAN

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Chapter One



My father died tonight.

He died instead of me.

I wish he'd died alone.

As a thorn witch, the stench of scorched flesh has filled my nights at the coven burnings for years, but tonight, the meaning is changed. When the Gilded set fire to the Resistance temple, they burned to destroy. Those who died will not return. Even thorns can't break the second rule of Death—tonight, too many witches burned to walk alone. Already, the Gilded hunt Death for stray Resistance members. Anyone with any sense will flee into the Horizon.

Our group of survivors is quiet now, scattered around a cave open on one side to the sea. A cool breeze brushes away the sweetness of burnt flesh and replaces it with salt air, but I've healed so many wounds, the scent clings stubbornly to my skin. It's dark outside, but the softness of night is lifting. The line of the horizon turns a bluish sort of grey out across the sea, illuminating empty-eyed piles of discarded Resistance masks. Witches huddle around ember-spelled fires burning on bare granite, and guards watch the rock-wall door for signs that others made it out.

In a pause between the injured needing my attention, I lean back

against the cave wall and listen. Questions whisper around us. The same questions over and over again:

Who died so we might live? Who lived so the Warden might rise?

Who burned while we remain whole?

No one has the answers.

The aftermath of the Warden's attack was a chaos of muffled screams and terrified questions. The fear and confusion settled into horrified acceptance around the same time Dante admitted the last survivors.

Then the reports of the dead began to trickle in.

Still, we watch. We wait. We pray that the next knock will bring better news.

We're all of us unsure who to mourn, but the Resistance already turns toward revenge. I see it in Dante's strained expression, in a storm witch's eyes as he comforts a friend, the tense shoulders of a guard staring grimly out to sea. I sense it in the set of Malin's shoulders as he watches me and in the slight press of Alice's shoulder against mine.

The need for retribution unites us. Beneath the numbness protecting my emotions, I feel it too, sharp as a scab torn off before a wound fully heals. My father gave up his lifeline to forge the Sorcerer's knife, and the Warden stole it away as he's stolen everything I care about. Friends, family, lovers—my free will—nothing is sacred when it comes to the Warden and his immortality, and each fresh slice into the fabric of my family bleeds as painfully as the first.

There's no news of Mother or Ella. Surely, if they'd survived, they'd have found us by now. Only Mila is accounted for. The last I saw Beatrice, she was surrounded by Gilded fire with the Sorcerer's knife clenched in her hand. Evelyn, Sybil, and Gail faced the attack at her side. I should have been with them, and I left them alone. Guilt sits uncomfortably beside my fear, and no amount of healing

will silence the nagging voice inside my head insisting that I could have done more. I should have fought Dante when he dragged me away, stayed behind until everyone was safe or shared their fate. If I'd burned with the other witches tied to the Sorcerer's knife, maybe I could have brought them home.

I've worked my way through almost every survivor in our cave, healed until my fingers are sticky with ash and there's blood under my nails. If I don't focus, the fear of who I might have lost will drown me.

If I don't keep busy, I will break or I will rage. And I can afford neither. There will be a time for tears, a time for anger. But first, we need to get through the night.

So, I brace myself as Dante nods stiffly at Malin and sends over the next group of injured, ignore the deepening ache of magic in my chest, and rest my hands on the lifeline of a witch with dark hair whose face I don't recognise. A gash scrawls across one shoulder and his shirt is torn. Chips of stone pierce his flesh. And I heal.

And I heal.

And I heal.

I leave no marks, no burns to identify a Resistance member in the Colligerate hallways or incriminate a hidden witch in Halstett's city streets. I ease splinters of rock from skin, set snapped bones, and soothe smoke-damaged lungs. What I was forced to learn in the Gilded's cells is finally put to good use. But I cannot save them all. Some are too far gone by the time they are brought to me. Some have no lifelines left to hold.

How long will it take for my work to be undone? Bones will be rebroken, scars remade before the sun slinks back beneath the earth. How long before the Warden knows of our involvement, Malin and Alice and me?

It seems impossible that he already does not.

Magic aches in my chest, and my hope dies a little more each time I rest my hands on a new lifeline that doesn't belong to my family or friends. I wish I could slip into Death, burn and cross the veil and search for their lifelines in the grey desert dunes. Death will be filled with the chaos of the Resistance's defeat. If Ella is caught in that with no crystal anchoring her, she'll never make it to the Horizon. If the Gilded are hunting… Panic wells and I swallow it down, past the lump in my throat.

I glance up at Malin beside me. Pale ash clings to his dark curls and a black scorch mark covers one side of his neck. His jaw twitches as I ask again, "When can we cross?" Each lull between patients, I've asked the same.

The cave wall grinds open and a Resistance messenger slips through the crack before it shuts. Malin gives my question half his attention. "The Gilded hunt in Death until dawn."

I sit back on my heels. The sun's nearly up. When the Gilded return, the Thorn Coven will be ordered to heal the veil, and then, we'll never make it across without notice. "We're nearly out of time," I mutter.

Malin offers again, "I'll go."

"Then I won't know where you are either," I reply. "And tonight will be too late."

"Don't cross." Alice's voice wavers, and I'm not sure if she's talking to Malin or me. Her visions have been shifting all night. "We need you here."

Malin looks first at Alice, then at me. "As soon as I can, I'll find out what happened to them. Everyone."

I bite my tongue, frustrated, and watch Mila.

Aaron, the newly recovered Gilded boy, hasn't left her side. He leans against the wall close by, watching over her with one finger tapping the golden hilt of his sword. She's been on the other side of the cave all night working triage in a team of Resistance witches. A

tide witch charmed water compresses for burns, a storm witch circulated the air around an ember witch cauterising wounds, and Mila stitched skin with a needle and thread. An efficiency to their system suggested they've worked together—like this—before.

Now the worst of the wounded are healed, she sits with her head in her hands, red curls lit by moonlight and escaping from her hastily pinned bun. My sister is exhausted. Her shift skirts are torn off at her knees, jagged and uneven as if she hacked at them with a knife, but she seems unharmed. Uninjured. How she escaped the temple massacre without so much as a scorch mark is beyond me. She's safe. Here. That's all that matters.

"Penny," Alice says quietly, pulling me out of my thoughts. My name sounds insubstantial, and her doubt threatens to unravel both of us. She shifts so her knees are tucked up to her chest, bare toes flat against the stone like pearls peeping out beneath her skirts, and presses an enamelled mug of water we've been sharing into my hand. "You should rest," Alice says.

I take the mug and examine a chip in the black enamel with one fingernail. I wish I could rest, but I don't dare. "Not yet," I reply. "They still need me."

"I need you," she says. Alice's dark irises shine like midnight, smoke clings to her skin, and in the dark her hair glows white like a fresh page in a book not yet written. Shadows gather in the lines of her gilding, butterfly wings around her eyes glittering in the magical firelight. "Everything is tangled. I can't see, Penny. I can't see what happens next. I didn't see this."

"I know," I tell her. If Alice can't see, what hope is there for the rest of us? I lean into her so the warmth of her shoulder seeps through our dresses, and sip at the cold water gratefully. It washes away the taste of ash and soothes the lump in my throat. "You're hurt, Alice. Let me help you? Please."

"Not yet," Alice echoes my earlier answer and closes her eyes. Her lashes flutter as if she's dreaming. She rubs her neck absently and winces when she catches a burn on her jaw with her fingernail. So far, she's refused to let me heal her injuries. She's as stubborn as Malin, both putting the needs of others before their own.

Across the cave, the rock-wall door rumbles open. A low ember-flame torch highlights the exhaustion on Dante's brow as he readies the next huddle of people to send out into the tunnels. For the last hour, Dante's been ordering survivors out the door at intervals that won't attract attention. As night fades, the intervals are closer, the groups smaller. I cradle the cup of water and watch him inspect each person, checking every blemish and burn has been wiped clean before they're allowed to leave. Not a singed eyebrow will be permitted to give us away.

Dante claps a guard on the shoulder and turns toward us, and Malin leans down to ask Alice, "How long before they check your rooms?"

I'm sick of that question. It rattles Alice every time he asks. Her shoulder tenses against mine and her hands clench together in her lap. "A while…I think." Her fingers flex and resume their dance, tracing twisted visions on smoke-suffused skirts. I hate seeing her so afraid. I've never seen her scared, not really, not until last night. Alice's shock as the temple doors flew open is engraved behind my eyelids. Every time I blink I see her fear, and it's all I can do not to gather her in my arms and hold her against me.

"Malin…" Alice begins and falters.

He softens at her distress and brushes a thumb against a dark smudge on her brow as if trying to erase it. When he pulls away, it's still there, a curve of ash above her left eye. "We'll work it out."

She turns dark eyes up to his, searching for answers even Malin can't give. Their eyes lock and something passes between them that

shuts me out completely. A pinprick of jealousy stabs between my ribs, and I stare at the blood drying into the creases of my knuckles. I'm exhausted. Imagining things.

"It will settle," Malin says gently to Alice. "It did before."

I frown, confused; Alice's visions have been steady since I met her, and Malin was trapped in Death before that, but Alice seems to understand exactly what he means. She exhales and her lips curve into a tiny smile. "It did."

Malin straightens away from us, squaring up to meet Dante's approach, and I whisper to Alice, "What was that about?"

"Before, when you arrived in Halstett," Alice says. "Everything tangled then. It's tangled now."

"Maybe that's all this is," I murmur as Dante's boots stamp to a halt beside us, a pair of bare witch feet behind him. "You said before that the threads of my future make your visions hazy."

"Maybe," Alice replies, but she doesn't sound sure, and I think her smile was for Malin's benefit. He's been distracted all night by whatever his issue is with Dante.

Dante saved me from the inferno, his relief when we found Alice alive and unhurt was palpable, but he was disappointed to find Malin unharmed beyond a burned hand and a wound on one cheek. Tension has sparked between the two men all night, some past argument shoved aside and simmering.

"How many injured left to heal?" Malin demands of Dante, curt and sharp. They're the same height, eyeball to eyeball, and there's a challenge to Dante's authority in Malin's question.

Dante's top lip curls as he answers in military-clipped tones, "Four. Minor injuries. If you need to leave, we'll manage."

Both men look to Alice for an answer. "Soon," she says. "Soon, but not yet."

"Right." Dante's eyes are tight. There's blood on his hands and

a stiffness to one knee that makes him subtly shift his weight to compensate.

"You're hurt?" My question feels gritty like sand and tickles a cough in my throat.

"I'm fine," Dante replies abruptly.

He's as stubborn as Malin. I raise an eyebrow. "You're clearly not fine."

Dante ignores Malin's low grumble and drops to a crouch so no one else can hear. "Maybe. But you, Penelope Albright, are not touching my lifeline." He glances at my hands, straightens, and stalks away to round up the last of the wounded, leaving a storm witch with a broken wrist behind and Malin glaring after him.

"What's his problem?" I ask Alice under my breath.

Alice gives me a faint smile. "He's seen what you can do with lifelines."

I'm not sure I believe her. All I've done in front of Dante is help people. I bite my lip and heal the storm witch without speaking, unsettled by Dante's tone and the way Malin's hands clench and unclench with a rhythmic anger I feel deep in my chest. Even Alice is tense beside me, her gaze flitting from Malin, to Dante, to me like a butterfly in flight. I heal the next three witches Dante brings over, quietly resting my fingers on their lifelines and knitting their flesh and bones together. Making them whole even as the drain on my magic aches down my spine.

Our magic.

Malin's power bolsters mine with a depth that prickles my veins. Magic ebbs and flows between us along our joined lifeline. Mostly, it's gentle enough, but when I work I feel Malin holding back, stopping it surging against my constraints like ice melt off the mountains in spring. Beyond his restraints, I sense a bottomless dark. A pit of magic without an end. If I think about it too long . . . what we could

be together, Malin and I . . . what we could do with so much power . . . It's almost more terrifying than the Sorcerer's knife in the Warden's control.

And even together, Malin and I are not enough to stand against the man who moulded us into what we have become. The temple inferno proved that. The Warden and his Gilded army are too strong and too many to defeat.

The last injured Resistance member rises to her feet and offers us an uneasy half bow. There's a clean line of new brown skin on her elbow where a moment ago it was charred down to the bone. "Summon the dark," she says in way of thanks.

I blink at her helplessly. Lost in my own thoughts, I was barely aware of her and the healing. I need to stop. I need to sleep. Alice is right, I should rest, but the minute we leave this cave, we have to face what happens next. Reality is about to hit us in the face.

When I don't return the Resistance pledge, Malin answers for me, "Surrender the light."

I hate those words. I'd scowl, but Dante throws a glance of undiluted scorn at Malin for speaking on my behalf, and his contempt doesn't need feeding. Especially not right as Malin drops his guard. He's staring after the woman walking away, his brow furrowed, bottom lip dimpled between his teeth. A curl of dark hair is stuck to the cut on his cheekbone, and I long to heal him too. His hands are burned. The skin around one knuckle flexes and splits as he inspects his fingers.

He doesn't flinch at the pain, but his eyes are heavy when he turns to me. Gone is the sarcastic Lord of the Manor. Behind his calm facade, Malin is as shaken as the rest of us. "I should have seen this coming." His lips twist, and I want to reassure him as he reassured Alice. "Every step that brought us here, every move, every cruelty, the Warden's gloated over every single one. That he didn't this time . . . There were no signs. Nothing. If I've lost his trust . . ."

Malin's unease is as unsettling as Alice's fear of the future. He's always been so sure, always known what to do next. "You're still breathing," I offer, but it's a pale comfort. "He trusts you enough to let you live."

"Or I'm more use to him alive than dead," Malin says. He runs his fingers through his hair and cups the back of his neck where the gold is branded into his skin. The Warden's spire insignia is marked up Malin's spine, a reminder of the last time he had a use for Malin and kept him alive in Death.

Alice cocks her head a little to one side. "Someone told him—they betrayed us. Took our plans to the Warden's ears and hid it from my sight." She pauses as if she's listening to the quiet and blinks. Her tiny smile smooths the worry from Malin's expression more than my feeble attempt at reassurance. "A thorn witch gave us up," she finishes.

Malin's frown reforms, digs deeper between his brows. "We can't win this."

He sounds so defeated, I want to yank Alice to her feet and run, beg Malin to come with us. But the Warden sees all inside Halstett, and Death is more hospitable than the barren wastelands outside the walls. There's nowhere to go, nowhere to hide.

Instead, I force myself to look away to where Aaron sits beside Mila, who's pouring tea from a tin kettle. It seems impossible that the boy whose gilding ceremony I assisted Grandmother with is drinking tea with my sister. One of my hopes was realised tonight—the gilding really can be undone. Witches trapped behind the Warden's gold masks can be healed, their souls reconnected to their bodies, their brutalised lifelines made whole. But I thought they'd need me. Clearly, I underestimated Mila and Tobias, or had an overinflated sense of my own importance.

Mila's eyes shine too bright and she swipes the heels of her hands across her cheeks. She's worrying about Mother and Ella. Our cousin Carlotta. Evelyn. Oh, Holy Dark Mother. So many friends were in

the firing line tonight. She says something to Aaron and pats his forearm in an oddly intimate gesture. He gives her shoulder a gentle squeeze, and I wonder what part my sister played in anchoring his soul back inside his body.

If they set Aaron free, how many Gilded could we return to themselves before the end begins again? Would it be enough? We need a legion to stand against the Warden's Gilded armies, but if we stole his army from under his nose and bolstered our Resistance numbers before the Warden makes his next move…

Aaron flexes one shoulder as he scans the cave. He catches me watching, and the lingering effects of my own gilding claw into my mind. Our eyes meet. My thoughts crumble. The ungilded half of his mouth smiles. Instinctively, I drop my gaze and rub my palms against my skirts.

As dawn fully breaks, silvering the low-slung clouds, I stare at my fingers, soot-black and stained with blood. I've worked too many healings, touched too many lifelines, and the memory of each clings in sticky layers to my skin. I shove my emotions aside. We can't hide here much longer. Last night might not have been our end, but it wasn't the Warden's either.

We've done worse than fail. The Warden's goal is still the same: immortality. He means to seal the veil between Life and Death, and we gave him the tool he needs to do it. We forged the knife and handed it to our enemy. If the Warden cuts his lifeline free of the veil, the dead will be trapped beside the living. Unable to cross, they'll twist into fog-wraiths.

The Colligerate walls will hold them out for a while, the Gilded will protect the Warden, but the city will fall and Death will be a distant dream for us all.

The time allotted to our wound licking has been spent. Now we need to rise.

And I have no idea how, when it seems impossible to even stand up.

A wave of nausea hits deep in my stomach, and Alice's fingers clench on my wrist, nails digging into my skin where it's sore from the gold cuff. She yanks me to my feet and turns to Malin without releasing her hold on me. The gold mask around her eyes stands out ghastly yellow as the colour fades from her cheeks. "They're coming."

She seems so small beside him, delicate like a dandelion seed. Malin talks more gently to her than I've ever heard him speak to me. "Easy, Alice. They won't hurt you, not again. It will all work out, I promise."

He's promised that before. I didn't believe him then. I definitely don't believe him now. I ask carefully, "What about our rooms? Can we get there without being caught?"

"Too late," she says and squeezes her eyes shut, dark lashes fanning against pale cheeks. When she opens them, they're still a little too wide, her irises too dark, but something behind them has shifted, settled, and her voice is steadier. "They're in my room. Right by my loom. They can't see us, but I see them."

"Malin's rooms," I offer shakily. "Can we go there?"

Malin nods grimly. "If they haven't checked already."

"They haven't," Alice says. "Not yet." Her nail twitches on my skin, fingers dancing even in her panic.

"Do you think…" Malin falls silent as Dante wheels to face us, breaking away from the witch he was speaking to; he shoves a note at her and gestures at the rock wall exit. She waves her hands in emphasis, and Dante snaps an order. Malin says firmly to me, "You need a bath."

"A bath!" I sound incredulous. "I want a bath as much as the next person, but—"

Malin interrupts, "You're covered in soot, Alice the same. The instant the Gilded set eyes on you, they'll know where you've been."

"What about you?" I ask.

Malin flexes his burned fingers. "I can deal with a few Gilded." He shoves me gently toward the magical rock wall and presses his hand against Alice's back, shepherding her in the same direction.

Alice says, "Not just Gilded."

"The Warden?" I ask, and she nods. "He won't catch us, Alice. He won't." I'm not sure if I'm trying to convince her or myself.

Teeth gritted, Dante slaps a palm against the wall as we approach, activating the ore spell woven into the rock. Magic sparkles along quartz veins, flaring away from his hand, and the door grates open. Dank air hits us. The thin light of a far-away torch does nothing to lift the below-ground darkness.

Dante blocks our exit, feet apart, arms folded. He speaks roughly to Malin: "They've located more survivors deeper in the tunnels."

"Who?" I ask.

Dante addresses Malin over my head as if I didn't speak. "The Gilded have returned."

I slip free of Alice's hold on my wrist, frustrated. "Dante, who survived? Have they found Bea or the others? Ella and Mother? Tobias? Clair?"

Dante ignores me. "The Warden's ordered a headcount and locked down the Colligerate. Get out and get your alibis straight. She has to be untouchable—if the Warden doubts her, we're lost."

Malin replies coldly, "Penny is my concern, not yours."

Dante smiles. "Yet, you left her behind in the temple." He moves aside, standing back to clear our escape.

I want to hit them both. I duck away from Malin and square up to Dante. He looks down at me in mild surprise, and I snarl at him, "You'll wish *you* left me behind in the temple if you don't tell me who they found!"

"No one important," Dante replies.

"Is anyone hurt?" I glare at him, and he shakes his head dismissively. If someone dies because they won't let me help…Dante's opinion of who's important is irrelevant, but there's a note in his hand, names written upside down. I snatch for it, but Dante waves it out of reach. "Shit!" I swear and lunge for Dante again, but Malin wraps one arm around my waist, pulling me away and stopping me picking a fight we have no time for. Dante grins and tucks the note in his shirt pocket.

"Stop," Malin hisses as I try to twist free. "Dante's a prick. He's trying to get a rise out of you."

"Ella's missing. If anything happens to her because he can't answer a simple question…"

Malin huffs quietly. "If he lets anything happen to Ella, I'll help you kill him, Pen. But if we're caught up in the fallout of this, there'll be nothing left of us by the time the Warden's finished."

"Fine," I mutter, admitting defeat, but I look back as we hurry away, reluctant to leave Mila behind. Never look back, I know the rules as well as the next witch, but I don't know when I'll see her again. I don't know if she'll be alive when I do—if I'll be in control of myself and my magic.

Fear hits me square in the centre of my chest as Dante catches Mila around the waist, stopping her running after me. But she snatches the note from Dante's pocket and grins as she skims it. Her shout follows us into the shadows. "Tobias survived."

Hope shines through my fear. Tobias would never let Ella fall. If he survived, then so did she.