

Season of the Witch

A PREQUEL NOVEL BY SARAH REES BRENNAN

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For Kelly Link, sinnamon roll and definite forbidden word, who always knows how to find strange beauty. Hail Satan.

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Whatever you can do or dream you can do, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it. Begin it now. —attributed to Goethe

SOMETHING WICKED

We saw the girl at the edge of the woods in early September. Her red sports car was parked under the trees, and she was wearing a green coat. She looked like a car advertisement that might convince any boy he wanted to buy.

I'm not too bad myself. My aunt Hilda tells me I'm cute as a bug's ear, and she genuinely believes bugs are adorable. I would've mentally congratulated the girl on being airbrushed by Mother Nature and walked on without another glance—if my boyfriend hadn't been giving her so many.

Harvey was walking me home from school. We'd been hurrying before he caught sight of the girl, because the wind was rising. One gust of wind curled around us now like an invisible whip. I watched the first leaves fall from the trees in a sudden bright, beautiful flurry of green. They glistened in the air like a rain of emeralds, and I felt a sudden pang. Summer was so close to ending.

A blanket of thick gray clouds had rolled over the treetops. Greendale was lost to sun and in shadow. Night was coming early.

I nudged Harvey and tried to keep my voice light. "She's hot, but it's freezing out here."

"Hey, she's nothing compared to you," said Harvey. "Nice car, though."

"Sure, you were looking at the car."

"I was!" Harvey protested. "'Brina!"

The wind tugged insistently on my jacket as I ran through the new-fallen leaves, as if there were ghosts trying to get my attention. Harvey chased after me, still protesting and laughing. We left the girl in green behind us.

Harvey, Roz, Susie, and I became besties on our very first day of school, in the way kids do: strangers at first bell and soul mates by lunchtime. People said that a boy would stop wanting girls as playmates, and we would lose Harvey as we grew up. We never did.

I've loved Harvey my whole life, and I've had a crush on him almost as long. He was my first kiss, and I've never wanted another. I remember going on a school expedition through the Greendale woods and finding an abandoned well by a stream. Harvey was so excited by the discovery, he sat on the bank of the stream and sketched a picture of the well at once. I sneaked a look at his dark head bowed over the pages of his sketchbook and wished for him. But I didn't have a coin to throw in the well, and when I tried to throw a pebble in, I missed.

It was winter when Harvey asked me if I wanted to go to the movies. I showed up and was shocked and thrilled to find it was just the two of us. I was so excited, I still have no idea what happened in that movie. All I remember is the brush of our hands as we both reached for the popcorn. Such a simple, silly thing, but the touch felt electric. He reached out and twined my salty fingers with his own, and I thought, *This is how witches burn*.

My most vivid memory of the night is when he walked me home, leaned in, and kissed me at my gate. I closed my eyes, and the kiss was soft, and I was surprised that the whole apple orchard did not transform into blooming red roses.

From then on, Harvey and I held hands in school, he walked me home every day, and we went on dates. But I never brought up the issue of whether we were official-official, boyfriend-girlfriend. Other people call him my boyfriend, but I never have ... not yet.

I'm afraid to lose what we already have. My family keeps telling me that it can't last.

And I'm afraid he doesn't feel the same way I do.

I know Harvey likes me. I know he would never hurt me. But I want his heart to pound at the sight of me, as if someone is demanding entry to his soul. And I wonder if he settled for something safe and familiar. The girl next door, not the forever girl.

Sometimes I want him to look at me as if I'm magic.

I am half magic, after all.

Harvey left me at my gate with a kiss, as usual. He's come in to say hello occasionally, of course, but I keep my friends and my family apart. I shut the door and moved toward the delicious sugary smell floating through the hall.

"Possum, you're home," Aunt Hilda called out from the kitchen. "I'm making jam! It has all your favorite things from the garden—strawberries, blackberries, squirrel's eyeballs—"

"No!" I exclaimed. "Aunt Hilda! We've spoken about this!"

I stopped in the kitchen doorway and regarded my aunt with horror and betrayal. She stood at our black cast-iron stove, mixing jam the color of blood in a pot the size of a stove. She wore a pink apron that read KISS THE COOK!

She blinked at me. "It's delicious, you'll see."

"I'm sure I'll see," I said. "The question is, will the jam?"

Aunt Hilda's mild, sweet face became mildly and sweetly perplexed.

My family don't really understand about mortal palates. When I was young, Aunt Zelda would deliver long, fruitless lectures on how nutritious worms are, and how there are young witches starving in Switzerland.

Aunt Hilda, who is much more easygoing than Aunt Zelda, has always accepted my silly mortal ways with a shrug. She walked over to me and gave my hair an affectionate tug with the hand not holding the red-stained wooden spoon. "My fussy girl. You never want to eat anything that's good for you. Maybe after you come into your full power, things will be different."

Even in my cozy kitchen, the warm air laced with sugar, I felt a chill. "Maybe."

Aunt Hilda beamed at me. "I can hardly believe your sixteenth birthday is almost here. It seems like only the other day when your aunt Zelda and I delivered you. You looked so cute all covered in blood and mucus, and your placenta was deli—"

"Please stop."

"Aw, are you embarrassed?"

"Um, more grossed out."

"It was a beautiful and special moment. Your poor dear mother wanted to have you in a hospital. Can you imagine?" Aunt Hilda shuddered. "Hospitals are unsanitary. I would never let you near one of those awful places. From the very start, you were my best girl, and I promised myself I'd take care of you. Now look at you. My baby, all grown up and ready to sign away your soul to Satan!"

Aunt Hilda pinched my cheek and turned back to her jam. She was humming as if there was no more charming idea in the world.

This was my family: fond of me, even fonder of embarrassing me, constantly fussing over what I ate and strict about my lessons, always wanting the best for me and expecting so much of me.

Not so different from any other family—except for the dedication to the Dark Lord.

Aunt Hilda's humming died away. "All's very quiet here. Your aunt Zelda is off on a consultation with Father Blackwood, so it's just the three of us for dinner. How is your beau?"

"He's not officially my boyfriend," I said. "Or my beau, I guess, but he's fine."

"That's good," Hilda said dreamily. "He's a sweet boy. I worry about Harvey and that brother of his. In a house with no mother, where a cold man rules, a child pays."

The thought of Harvey was usually a comfort, but not today.

I cleared my throat. "Where's Ambrose?"

"Oh, your cousin is up on the roof," said Aunt Hilda. "You know how Ambrose loves a summer storm."

I climbed out through the attic to find my cousin.

The sky was black with night and the air wild with leaves. Ambrose stood on the very edge of our sloping roof, dancing and singing to the last wind of summer. There was a cobra wrapped around his waist, its domed head in the place where a belt buckle would be, its golden eyes shining like jewels. He was holding a second cobra like a microphone, the scaly tail wrapped around his wrist. He sang right into its fanged open mouth as he swayed and spun as if the slope of the roof and our gutter was a dance floor. Ambrose danced with the leaves, danced with the winds, danced with the whole night. Leaves whirled down all around him like confetti, and the wind hissed like a thousand more snakes.

I cupped my hands around my mouth and called: "I've heard the term *snake-hipped*, but this is ridiculous!"

My cousin turned, and with his turn the high winds died away from our house. The illusion of the cobras faded away to nothing. Ambrose dropped me a wink.

"I embrace the figurative," he replied. "Literally. Welcome home, Sabrina. How's the wicked outside world?"

When I was little, I always used to ask why Cousin Ambrose couldn't come out and play with me in the woods. Aunt Hilda

explained to my uncomprehending six-year-old self that he was trapped in the house because he was being punished.

"Know that his punishment was unfair, Sabrina, and we must love him all the more to make up for that," she'd told me. "It's natural when you're full of youthful exuberance to play little tricks like teasing girls, crashing carriages, drowning sailors, burning cities, ending civilizations, and so forth and so on. Boys will be boys."

It was years before I found out what he'd actually done.

Aunt Hilda has always been indulgent with Ambrose. She's not his mom, he's a very distant cousin, but Aunt Hilda moved to England and raised him when he was young and needed someone. The two of them lived together there for so long that almost a century later, Aunt Hilda still has an English accent. I can picture her coming to care for a tiny Ambrose, magical and filled with maternal care, descending from above like a satanic Mary Poppins.

The spell confining Ambrose to our house has been in place for decades longer than I've been alive. He's always been here for me, haunting the house like a friendly ghost. When I was little, he was the ideal playmate, making my dolls move by themselves and my toys whiz about the room. Now that I'm older, he's like my big and ever-so-slightly bad brother, willing to gossip about boys with me all day long. Or girls, if I ever wanted. It doesn't matter to Ambrose. I shrugged and walked carefully down the slope of the roof to stand beside him. "The world's pretty much as always."

"Really? From all I hear, seems like the world is changing. Climate change, warlock rights' activists... sounds horrible." Ambrose's voice was wistful. "I wish I could see it for myself."

"Cheer up. Our town's pretty much as always. Nothing changes in Greendale."

Ambrose hummed noncommittally. "What's worrying you?"

"Nothing."

"You can't lie to me, Sabrina, I know you far too well. Also," Ambrose said blandly, "I put a spell on you so that if you lie to me, your nose will turn purple."

"You're joking!"

Ambrose grinned. "Am I? Guess we'll see. But for now, tell me your troubles. Unleash every bee in your bonnet. Cousin Ambrose is all ears."

I hesitated. From our rooftop, I could see almost our whole small town, surrounded by trees. The woods stretch on so far, dark and deep. I shivered, and Ambrose put an arm around me.

"Is it your dark baptism? Is it your mortal friends? Wait, no. I bet it's Harvey."

There was an edge to my voice. "What makes you think it's Harvey?"

Ambrose's arm tightened around my shoulders. "Wild guess. I'm wild, and I'm always guessing. And I know how much you like him. Mind you, I'm not saying I understand the attraction. Personally, I prefer my golden boys slightly tarnished."

I poked him in the side. Ambrose laughed.

"So, what's with your boy? Is he in an artistic sorrowful phase? Sweet Satan in a ball gown, I hope he hasn't started calling you his muse."

I thought it over before I answered. There was a worn air about Harvey sometimes, as if he cared too much and had to bear too much.

"He's sad sometimes. His dad and his brother both work in the mines, and his dad keeps pushing him to take some shifts down there too. His dad talks a lot about the family business and the family legacy, but Harvey doesn't want to be trapped down there in the dark."

"Good news, Harvey, mining is a dying industry!" said Ambrose. His voice more thoughtful, he added: "Though things don't stay dead in our town."

"We saw—I feel so dumb saying this, but we saw a really beautiful girl at the edge of the woods. I wondered if Harvey thought she was better-looking than me."

"Impossible," Ambrose said. "Ridiculous. Wait, did you get a picture of this gorgeous specimen? Show me, and I'll tell you the truth, trust me. Well...you can't trust me. But show me anyway."

I pushed my cousin away. "Thanks very much. You're so helpful."

We both sat down on the slope of the roof. Ambrose stretched out his legs. I hugged my knees.

"You think he might be faithless?" asked Ambrose. "I'll cast a spell on him so it feels like his wandering eyes are melting."

"No! Ambrose, you wouldn't!"

I twisted around and glared at him. In Ambrose's dark eyes there was a darker glint for a moment, but the shadow passed.

"Of course not, I'm joking. I'd just do a hilarious and ultimately harmless spell, because I'm a sweetheart. Don't I look like a sweetheart?"

I raised an eyebrow. Ambrose grinned. I made a throatcutting gesture with my thumb, and Ambrose pressed a hand to his heart as if deeply wounded.

"I guess...I just wish I could be sure of him," I said. "I always wanted to find a great love, like Mom and Dad did. But to have a great love, the other person has to love you back."

My mother was a mortal, and my father was one of the most powerful warlocks in Greendale. I can't imagine how much he must have loved her, to marry her and have me.

"There's a spell for that, you know. Do you have some of Harvey's hair?"

"No, I do not have his hair! And no, *Ambrose*, I do not want to cast a *love spell* on *my man* and *one of my best friends since childhood*, like a *total creep*, thanks for asking."

I spoke in my most severe and Aunt Zelda-ish tones. Ambrose waved a hand in an airy gesture. Leaves fluttered toward him, as if they were butterflies that might alight in his palm.

"I didn't mean a love spell. I'm not a big fan of them myself. They make everything too easy, and I like a challenge. You and I are so cute, Sabrina, anyone suggesting a love spell would be insulting us. But there is a spell that might open his eyes to how wonderful you are. Teenage boys can be so blind. Trust me, I know. I was one."

I could do it. I can do simple spells. My aunts and Ambrose are always ready to help me. Since I was little, they taught me everything they could about the world of magic: I learned Latin and incantations when I was tiny, performed rites to win good luck and find lost things, grew up with the knowledge I must beware of demons and beseech the aid of friendly spirits. I learned the properties of plants in the woods, and which to add to potions and concoctions. But no matter how much I study, they tell me it's nothing to the lessons I'll learn after my dark baptism, when I start going to the Academy of Unseen Arts.

"It's tempting," I admitted.

"Temptations often are."

If I did the spell Ambrose suggested, I could be sure of him. I liked the idea of Harvey gazing at me, wide-eyed, forgetting everything else in the world. I didn't have much time, but I could be sure of him in the time we had left. I banished the private vision with an effort.

"I don't know," I said at last. "Casting a spell on Harvey, for nothing but my own benefit—it doesn't seem right."

"As you wish. You're such a good girl," Ambrose said. "Sometimes I wonder how you're ever going to make a wicked witch."

"Yeah," I whispered to the wind, too softly for even Ambrose to hear. "Me too."

Ambrose stood, dusting dead leaves and traces of glittering snakeskin off his black jeans. "Well. The hour grows late, and I must attend to the late Mrs. Portman, who awaits me in the embalming room."

Our family runs a funeral home. Even witches need to make a living.

Ambrose stooped and tapped my jaw lightly. When I lifted my chin, he gave me a bright smile. "Cheer up, Sabrina. And let me know if you change your mind about the spell."

I nodded, and stayed up on the roof with the storm and my thoughts. The word *late* keeps ringing in my ears. *The hour* grows late. The late Mrs. Portman. Late might be the most terrifying word I know.

Late summer. Only a few more weeks, and then it will be too late.

My whole life, I've known that when I turned sixteen I would go through my dark baptism, write my name in the book, and enter the Academy of Unseen Arts as a full-fledged witch. When I was a kid, I thought that day would never come. I was so impatient to fulfill the destiny my parents always wanted for me, to make my aunts proud, to be a true witch.

My birthday is Halloween, and summer is already coming to an end. I didn't consider, back then, that embracing my destiny as a witch would mean turning my back on my mortal life. Now it's all I can think of: losing my friends, losing Harvey, even losing math class at Baxter High. Every day, I feel like the world I know is slipping a little further out of my grip.

Yet I still love magic. I love the feel of power building in my veins and the idea of having more. I love the click when a spell goes perfectly right as much as I hate the thought of disappointing my family.

It's an impossible choice, and soon I have to make it. I never thought of that when I was a child daydreaming about magic, or when Harvey leaned in and kissed me by my gate.

I guess a part of me still believed that day would never come.

I spent so long thinking the future was forever away. I'm not ready for it to be now.

WHAT HAPPENS IN THE DARK

e are the weird woods; we are the trees who have turned silver beneath a thousand moons; we are the whisper that runs through the dead leaves. We are the trees witches were hanged from. The hanging trees bear witness, and the soil that drank witches' blood can come alive. There are nights the woods bear witness to love, and nights we bear witness to death.

The girl in green that the young half witch saw was waiting for a boy. He came to her at last, through the storm. Many pairs embrace amid our trees, but they did not. Lovers' meetings often end in lovers' quarrels.

"I'm telling you to leave this one-horse town and come with me," she urged. "I'm going to LA. I'll be a star."

The boy smiled a small, rueful smile; his eyes on the

ground. "Isn't that what everybody says when they head for LA? That they're going to be a star. Just once, I'd like to hear someone say they were going to LA to be a waiter."

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"At least I'll be something," she snapped. "What are you going to be, if you stay here? Are you going to be a loser your whole life?"

The boy lifted his eyes and stared at her for a long moment. "Guess I will," he said at last.

He turned and walked away, hands in his pockets. She called out after him, her voice raised in imperious, furious command. He didn't answer.

She was too angry to get back in the car. She plunged into the woods and the wind. Her bright green coat billowed behind her as she went; her hood fell from her shining hair, and the wind turned our branches into long fingers that reached to snag her clothes and claws that raked over skin. She strayed from the path and got lost in our woods. It's so easy to get lost in our woods.

She stumbled into a little clearing, where a bright stream ran. We could have warned her. But we didn't.

The stream shone like a silver chain laid down upon the earth. The howling gale did not ruffle the surface of the waters.

The girl advanced, frowning in puzzlement, and then in the silver, mirrorlike waters she saw her own reflection. She did not see the scratches on her face, or her wild hair. In the mirror of

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the waters, she had the glamour that only a stranger can possess. She saw someone who was all shining surface, someone who could make you believe the beautiful lie of perfection was true. Someone to be seen once and never forgotten.

She forgot the wind, and the woods, and the world. She saw only herself. She heard only the siren song.

This is the glory you have been waiting for. You were born for this. All you must do is reach out and take it. You were always meant to be special, beautiful, unique; only you deserve to be given this gift, only you, only you—

When the hands reached for her from the waters, the girl stretched out her own hands eagerly for an embrace.

The river swallowed her, green coat and all, with one gulp. The brief struggle barely disturbed those calm, silver waters. Then the girl was gone.

In the living world, the last words spoken about her were She's nothing compared to you. It's not an epitaph anyone would want, but that hardly matters.

Now that lost girl is nothing at all: nothing but an echo of a sigh, dying among summer leaves. Leaving behind an echo is tradition. Our woods are full of echoes.

People spend their whole lives waiting for something to begin, and instead they come to an ending.

Well, you can't complain about endings. Everybody gets one.