

Prologue



March 1965

Ursula was twelve years old when her mother asked her to murder a man.

Child, I need you to make me something.

Ursula's eyes lit up behind her thick glasses, the desperation in them palpable. Her brown hair was braided on each side, her purple cotton dress simple. Outside their rambling Queen Anne mansion, a Minnesota spring wind taunted the oak trees, slapping their leaves against the grand house. The air smelled of metal and storm. The earth had been rumbling for days, and everyone in Faith Falls knew what that meant, either from experience or from story: the snakes were coming.

Every few decades, on a timeline known only to the snakes, an early spring blew into Faith Falls, hot and jittery. Shortly after, the U.S. Geological Survey in Mounds View would measure unusual Richter readings in the area. Then, like clockwork, tens of thousands of red-lined garters would unravel from a great, underground writhing ball and slither topside, devouring every small creature that crossed their paths. Locals saw it as a quarter-century inconvenience that didn't outweigh the bucolic charm of their river town. Scientists called it an anomaly. The superstitious worried that the town had been built on sacred Ojibwe burial grounds.

Ursula had felt the recent temblors and heard the whispers about the snakes' return. But what was happening outside of the Queen Anne didn't matter. Her world had narrowed to this single chance to earn her mother's love.

What do you need me to make?

Poison.

For a rat?

Yes. A big one. But the poison can't have any taste, or the animal won't drink it. Can you do it?

Ursula worshipped her mother back then. Velda didn't reciprocate. Instead, she would joke over Sanka and cigarettes that the fairies must have switched her real daughter for plain, thick-waisted Ursula, with her glasses and hair as straight as a bone, a plain lump next to her mother's grace and style. Ursula was always within hearing distance. She would look down at herself and know her mother was right.

But here, finally, was the moment Ursula had been preparing for her whole life: Velda *needed* her. Her heart smiled. She would make the most glorious poison for the rat, and Velda would realize that she wasn't a mistake. She flew to the kitchen and set a pot of water on the gas stove to simmer. Racing to her room after that, she rifled through the pouches of herbs she'd been collecting since she'd cut her knee on a river rock six years earlier.

Her parents had kicked her out of the house that day, first her dad, and then when she went to ask Velda if she could help with anything, her mom. Velda was hugely pregnant with the twins, uncomfortable as a grounded moon.

You're always underfoot. Go find something to do. I don't want to see you again until it's dark.

Ursula had started to cry, her fingers kneading the hem of her paisley dress, before she remembered that both habits made Velda angry. She wiped her face and straightened her clothes. The day was hot. She decided to go swimming.

She played her favorite game, the one where she pretended to be a fish with a whole school of friends. Some of the imaginary fish were six years old, like her. Others were older but still played close. Her pretend friends enjoyed the rainbow feel of cool water on hot skin, just like her.

She was smiling when the rock sliced her foot.

She paddled to shore, stepping tenderly on her bleeding heel as she reached the bank. That's when she spotted it: the horsetail lining the river's edge had morphed from its normal green to a bright, pulsing blue.

Her mouth dry, she plucked some, smelled it, rubbed it in her hands and then—moving quickly before she changed her mind—shredded a bit and dropped it into her wound. The bleeding slowed and then stopped. On her walk home, every plant that could help her shone the same bright blue—willow bark for the pain, juniper berries for an antiseptic wash. She giggled as she skipped along the dirt road, gathering all the blue-washed herbs in the pockets of her summer dress.

Over the next six years, she discovered that with practice, she didn't need to be experiencing the pain to identify which herbs would heal it. She began haunting the library, devouring the botany books. The more she learned, the more she collected plants and seeds against future possibilities.

Velda may have noticed, but she'd never spoken of it.

Until today.

Ursula's breath was shallow as she pawed through her repository for a special plant, one that was a sedative in small doses. She spotted the labeled packet: *conium maculutam*. She'd discovered the weed in a ditch last July and harvested, dried, boiled, and condensed it until it was a deadly brown paste, never imagining she'd have a use for it so soon. She also snatched an envelope of lavender to disguise the bitter, carrotty taste of the hemlock.

Back in the kitchen, she dipped an eyedropper into the now-boiling water, withdrew three globules, and squirted them into a spoon. Then she dropped the pea-sized pasteball of hemlock into the hot liquid, followed by a sprinkle of powdered lavender and a touch of honey. The blood galloped through her veins as she mixed the concoction with a toothpick, stirring until it was a quarter teaspoon of murky liquid the consistency of maple syrup. When it was complete, she poured it into a blue glass bottle.

Here. She handed the mixture to her mother, her expression a muddle of triumph and shyness. *Pour it over cheese, or in a dish of milk, and put it near the rat's nest.*

Velda accepted the spoon, her eyes glittering with tears. She'd sent the now six-year-old twins to spend the day and night at a friend's house. The left side of her face was a swollen tapestry of yellows and blues. Her left arm was in a sling. Her right arm shook as it held the spoon.

Mom?

He watches you sleep, you know.

Ursula tipped her head, one braid falling over her shoulder. She pushed her glasses up her nose out of habit. Her expression turned to slapshock when Velda tipped the contents of the spoon into Ursula's father's favorite beer glass, the one embossed with a 12-point buck on its side.

Mom? No response. *Mom!*

Go to your room.

It had never in her life occurred to Ursula to stand up to Velda. Why would a bug argue with the sun? So she stumbled out of the kitchen and cowered behind her bedroom door, every nerve so tender that she was sure she'd been skinned. She tried to lean into the door, to become part of it, to absorb the comfort she'd always felt inside the Queen Anne erected by her grandparents. Outside, the fierce wind screamed. She'd be cleaning up branches tomorrow. She wished the storm would break already.

He wasn't a great father, Ursula recognized that. Some days he was a savage, other days loving, but overall, he'd been as distant as Velda, until lately, when he'd begun paying attention to Ursula, telling her she was pretty, asking her about her day and pulling her onto his lap, even though she was more woman than girl. The new attention tasted like stolen candy. She loved to hear him say nice things in his slow drawl, sweet and lazy like Mississippi honey. What did Velda mean that he watched her sleep?

When the front door slammed, Ursula jumped, pressing her ear against the rough wood of her door. The sounds that assaulted her were not new: crashing, yelling. A popping sound. Velda's cry. Then the worst sound of all: quiet.

The silence shook her bones. When she couldn't stand it any longer, she snuck downstairs. Her father was at the kitchen table drinking beer from his favorite glass, the one that held the poison. He scowled at her, his face handsome and angry, his chin three days past a shave. Her mother was seated across from him, bleeding from her nose. Ursula dropped next to her. She reached toward Velda, yanked her hand back, and then rested it on her mother's knee. Velda leaned into her.

Side by side, they watched him grimace and swallow his beer, muttering about *goddamn women, should have known better* before opening another. The hiss of that second cap popping would be a sound Ursula could forever after call up at will.

The end was not pretty. Before the second glass emptied, he knew. His eyes bulged, and they landed on Velda.

Why? The single word was raw, the straight letters a plate for his fury.

Ursula didn't think her mom was going to answer. She didn't know if she'd hear her even if she did, so loud was the bloodthumping in her ears.

You're a snake, Velda finally said.

To Ursula's eternal surprise, her father laughed. The sound was horrible, torn from his throat and bile-soaked. And then he lunged, but not at Velda. He came for Ursula.

The hemlock had robbed him of grace, but he managed to reach her, a hand to her throat. He pressed his nose to hers, his breath a bitter cloud, his eyes growing milky with the poison. She screamed, and he tightened his grip.

You did this to me you goddamn little witch, didn't you?

She was too scared to breathe. Her heart skipped, and the urine trickled out of her. He squeezed harder.

You'll pay for this, he said, his eyes now the yellow of pus. A fit of wet coughing overtook him, but he didn't loosen his grip or break his stare. His spittle flew, each drop landing on Ursula's face, sizzling her flesh. *I'll come back. I will never stop walking this earth, and every time the snakes rise, I'll be here to take the power away from every one of you goddamn witches. You will never have a better man than me, not one of you Catalain women down the line.*

Not one good man.

Thick coughing rattled him again, this time with such power that he fell to his knees, releasing Ursula. She sucked in a great gasping breath. Her heart restarted. She began to cry. The terror of what was happening exploded her, and then the loss of hope emptied her. This could not be fixed.

Velda stood to the side. She lit a cigarette, her hands shaking. *Take it back, Henry Tanager*, she said through the acrid smoke. She could not seem to locate her mouth with the cigarette.

His laugh was dark and empty. *Take the poison back*, he said, collapsing onto his stomach. He clawed toward the phone, but it was clear he wouldn't make it. The skin of his hands was shriveling, revealing the rigid angles of his finger bones. His voice was wet and loose. *I will take your power when the snakes rise. Your children will pay for this, and their children.*

Take it back! Velda screamed. Her smoking cigarette dropped to the ground.

I will return to make you pay. Not one of you can stop me. The poison was eating him, devouring his flesh, leaving skeleton and hair.

He tried to stand, lunging at the phone, but his body was overcome by spasms, and he fell back to the floor. By the time he vomited, he was paralyzed from the waist down. He yelled, but his words were gone and it was the incoherent roar of a terrified animal. Velda led catatonic Ursula into the living room and closed the door behind them. Out of sight of her dying father, Ursula became aware of the cold urine soaking her underpants.

When his screams took on a pleading tone, his garbled voice escaping in rasping gurgles, Velda led Ursula outdoors to the banks of the Rum River immediately behind the Queen Anne. The air was preternaturally warm, but the wind had died down, leaving behind a path of stripped

leaves and twigs. The storm had never broken. Ursula and Velda walked side by side, not touching, the dying branches crunching underfoot.

Velda finally spoke. *He was the only man who ever saw through my charms. I loved him for it, married him six weeks after we met and was pregnant with you two weeks after that.*

Ursula was empty—of feelings, words, light—so she remained quiet.

You know what this means, right? With him gone, we can finally move out of that damned house. It was your grandparents'. Your father insisted we live there. I never wanted to. The place has always carried a curse, if you ask me. It's a mausoleum. She laughed without humor and lit another cigarette.

Ursula knew the gorgeous Queen Anne held secrets and prayers. It was the only consistent comfort she'd ever had, the only home she'd ever known. She loved it. Overhead, a blue moon appeared. Bats swished through the evening ink. The air smelled of wild roses. The world hadn't stopped along with her father's heart. How could that be?

Then the ground began to rumble underfoot with such force that Ursula was thrown against her mother. It wasn't until the earth began to swell as if giving birth that Ursula realized what was happening. Her mouth fell open. The soil was pulsing, rising, leaves and branches rolling down the sides of earth split with the force of labor.

And then, it burst forth.

It was a ball of snakes, at first disoriented, then unraveling and lunging away from their birthing. Ursula screamed until her throat was raw. Velda simply watched, letting the snakes run over her feet like water. Eventually, she told Ursula it was time to return to the house.

If Ursula had ever fought for anything in her life, it would have been in that moment. As much as she wanted to escape the snakes, she didn't want to witness her father's corpse, to smell

his vomit, to feel the stone of his body, but she could have recovered from even that. What was causing white hot terror in her was the thought that he wouldn't be dead. *I will take your power when the snakes rise.* He would be waiting for them, a rotting zombie with a bottle of poisoned beer in one hand and an accusing finger leading the other.

No. Ursula's voice was quiet, almost erased by the sussorous snakesong.

What?

I don't want to go back. Please. What if he's not really dead?

Don't be stupid. And don't ever tell a soul about today. Family doesn't tell on family.

Sharing a secret makes it worse. Do you understand?

The words branded themselves across the back of Ursula's eyes. *It's our secret. Don't ever tell a soul.* She accepted it as fact.

When they returned, Henry Tanager was sprawled on his back on the cracked linoleum of the kitchen floor, his lifeless eyes open and staring at Ursula, his body nothing more than skin-coated bones. A distant part of her, the murky animal motor that kept her heart beating and her breath going when everything else was shutting down, took note: she was a girl who had crafted the poison used to murder her own father.

Fate and time worked desperately to craft a bubble where this didn't have to be the end of Ursula's self-love. If, in that moment, Velda had acted, had in any way stepped out of her own misery to comfort her daughter, to take responsibility, to explain, Ursula could have worked her way back to herself.

Instead, Velda turned away from her husband's death stare to call the police from the wall phone, wailing into the mouthpiece, throwing herself into the role of unexpected widow as completely as she had any other character in her life, as only Velda could do. She left Ursula to

soak in the iciness of her father's lifeless gaze, and just like that, any intimacy mother and daughter had developed that day was severed. That golden thread that joined Ursula to her mother was the same strand that connected Ursula's heart to her body.

Snip.

I'll be back.