

Prologue

THE GIRLS SHRIEK AND WRITHE ON THE floor of the meetinghouse, tearing their hair, their white aprons. Their screams are unearthly, like night sounds of prey as an owl swoops down, talons ripping through flesh as it carries some helpless thing off to its death. But the girls are alive, fully alive, and whatever is tearing at them can't be seen.

The room is shadowy, lit by firelight and guttering candles. Hard wooden benches, a sour odor of fear. The men wear dark clothing. They mutter and frown, passing judgment.

A woman leaps to her feet, wild-eyed. "She put a curse on my daughter!" she cries.

She's pointing directly at me.

The ground seems to shift underneath my feet. There's a swirling through darkness, and suddenly I am outdoors. Dusty planks turn into mud, rutted by wagon wheels, littered with straw. My wrists chafe in ropes. My hair has been hacked off

with shears, and my scalp feels raw and exposed. I'm ashamed of the way I must look, like a badly peeled egg. Torches flicker around me as townspeople poke me with sticks, kick at my hobbled ankles. When I lift my head, they draw back in fear. I hear the words "evil," "accursed." I hear someone hiss, "Die, witch!" They are talking about me, spreading lies.

The mob jostles me toward a stone bridge, where a creek widens into a pond. Its edges are muddy, surrounded by cattails and slime. I think of the things that might live in there — muskrats, water snakes, frogs — and my skin crawls. "Let us prove her guilt. Throw her in!" cries a man, and the crowd takes up the chant. "Throw her in, throw her in!"

The torchlight distorts their faces. They look like masks, angry and brutal. Only one person stands apart — a young man. In the slash of light flickering over his handsome face, I notice that one of his striking green eyes is split by a wedge of bright blue. He's looking right at me, and for a second I feel I can hear his unspoken thoughts.

We shall be together. No fear.

And then everything's water. I'm thrown through the surface. My body is surrounded by dark, icy water, above and below me. It soaks my heavy skirts, pulling me under. With hands and feet bound, I flail and thrash as the cold liquid fills my mouth and throat, sucking me down to the bottom. To death.

My eyes are wide open. Above me, a black fringe of tree-tops rims the night sky. Is the boy with the green-and-blue eyes still up there somewhere? His words echo inside my head. We shall be together. How? How can I not fear? Help me, I think. Whoever you are, come and get me.

My lungs burn. My limbs feel so heavy. I stare up at the full moon through water, deep water, struggling to reach him, unable to breathe. . . .