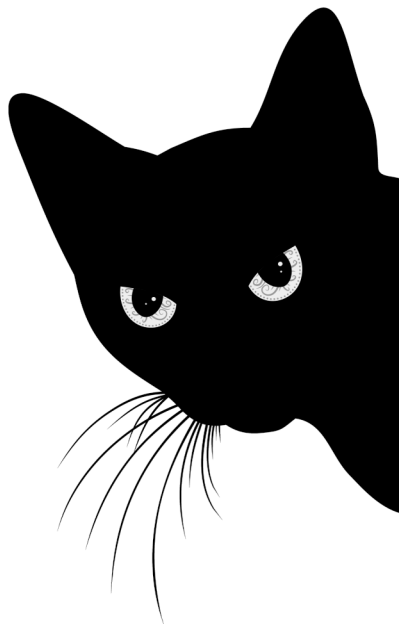


# PROLOGUE

SEPTEMBER



*SATURDAY 1:13AM*

**H**er headlamp illuminating the way, the college student trudged to the campfire circle and dumped another armful of sticks and leaves.

Satisfied with the pile, she rested on a boulder, her breath visible in the chilly air as she retrieved a bottle of water. To her right, an Adirondack 46er loomed. Above, a cloudless sky of stars twinkled, no city to drown their light.

Easier to try this at the nature preserve back on campus, but even at this late hour that risked awkward encounters with pot-smoking art majors or insomniac townies.

From her overstuffed green-and-gold backpack, she retrieved half a dozen copies of the college newspaper. She crumpled the pages, placing them strategically amongst the branches, then marinated the heap with charcoal lighter fluid.

She struck a match and tossed it. Orange flames erupted, blinding her for a second, enveloping her in a wave of heat. The hypnotizing fire reminded her of summer camping trips with her father. *Should have brought marshmallows.*

Her phone chimed. Five minutes until the new moon.

She pulled out the shrink-wrapped lamb chops, on sale for \$9.99 per

pound at Price Chopper. The student wouldn't, couldn't, sacrifice a living animal for the power she craved. Even the thought of touching raw meat filled her disgust. She slipped on a pair of latex gloves liberated from biology lab, then tossed the chops into the flames.

The scent of burning meat filled the air. She hoped to finish before any bears or wolves arrived.

She retrieved the blue textbook, turning to the marked page. Squinting at the diagram, then the sky, she oriented herself, zeroing in on Orion's Belt. A couple of moon widths to the east, she located Alpha Monocerotis.

Of course, that wasn't what the Picts called the star two millennia ago when they ruled what today is Scotland. No one knew their name for it. Almost all their knowledge had been lost. One scrap that survived: their high priestesses worshipped this star for luck.

No bars on her phone. Not a problem. The student pulled the folded printout from her pocket, silently rehearsing the spell. There wasn't a person alive who could reconstruct the enchantment the way the Picts originally spoke it. Her new friends on the dark web assured her that Modern English would work fine, as long as it rhymed.

The past few weeks, she experimented with charms and simple conjuring. Enough to prove to herself that magic was real, and she possessed the power to wield it.

The phone beeped. *Now.*

She stood before the fire, hand raised to the sky, pointing at the faint red star.

The paper rippled in the wind. She focused on the magic, emptying her mind of all other thoughts.

As she recited the words, all feeling receded, as if her consciousness left her physical form behind, merging with the fire, the star, the spell.

*Goddesses of the Night, hear my plea  
Bring Success and Prosperity  
My offering to you, a favored sheep  
A promise to you, I will always keep*

*To my endeavors great and small  
I call upon you, one and all*

*With a whisper soft and a heart so true  
I conjure Fortune to come anew*

*Bring me riches, bring me fame  
And banish all my doubts and shame  
I summon the forces of Star and Sky  
To grant me Destiny that cannot die*

*By my will and desire so strong  
This Magic now shall not go wrong  
Bringing Luck to my life at last  
So mote it be, this Spell is cast.*

She became aware: clothes sticking to her sweat-drenched body, mouth dry, hair plastered to her head, heart pounding. She stumbled to the boulder, resting, regaining her strength.

An owl screeched in the darkness. Good sign? Owls were supposed to be magical. Or was that some Harry Potter nonsense?

The owl quieted. No crickets at this altitude. No sound but the wind and faint jet engines as red-and-green navigation lights hurried across the sky.

The student didn't look or feel different. No supernatural power coursing through her veins. No enhanced perceptions allowing her to observe a secret world. No ethereal light enveloping her.

How anticlimactic. What do you expect for \$9.99 per pound?

No way to know if she cast the spell correctly.

No way to test if the magic was working.

No way to tell if this ceremony was a big waste of time.

Not waiting for any predators that caught the scent of the sacrifice, she doused the flames with three bottles of water, then buried the ashes with her collapsible shovel.

*Only you can prevent forest fires.*

She scoured the area, gathering any trash.

*Leave no trace.*

She slipped the pack on her back and began the four-mile hike to the trailhead. She stifled a yawn. At least it was downhill.

Thirty minutes on the trail and her mind was numb. Legs on auto. Step, step, step. Leaves crunching in her feet. Another three miles to go. All she wanted was to get back to her dorm, make a cup of hot cocoa, and crawl into bed.

*Gack!* A spider web across the trail on her face, in her mouth. She spit and raised a hand as the toe of her hiking boot caught a root. She pitched forward, losing her balance, falling toward the sharp rocks on this section of the trail. Arms flailing, she couldn't stop herself. In the darkness, her hand grabbed a branch, wrenching her shoulder, but arresting her fall.

The student righted herself, let out a deep breath, her palm scraped and scratched. Need to be careful. Could have broken a leg or worse. Been stranded with no way to call for help. And no one knew she was up here. Pretty lucky.

A smile spread across her face.

*Pretty lucky.*

"It works!" she shouted into the night.





# CHAPTER 1

OCTOBER



*WEDNESDAY 3:55PM*

**D**arla Jaggard's calves burned as she dashed up the concrete steps two at a time. The air was unusually warm for early autumn in upstate New York, and perspiration trickled down her back. Behind her, three trim figures in shiny green-and-gold warm-up suits, carrying matching gym bags, struggled to keep pace.

"Last one to the top is a rotten egg!" With a burst of speed, Darla, her honey-blond hair secured with red ribbons, pulled away from the others. Two older brothers and a beauty queen mother made life a contest for as long as she could remember.

Descending students, coeds with a glare in their eyes, boys twisting their necks to watch, hustled to one side for fear of being run over.

Darla reached the top, tossed her bag, planted her feet, and launched into a backflip. Knees tucked tight to her body, she spun like a pinwheel and nailed a perfect landing. Flashing the smile of an Olympic champion gracing a box of breakfast cereal, she raised her arms in a *V* and announced, "I win." Her green eyes grew wide, and a frown replaced her smile. "You split the group!" She pointed an accusing finger at Cassie McGlaughlin.

Cassie, a dark-haired freshman and last of the four girls, slowed as she

approached the top step and dropped her bag. "What are you talking about?" She leaned over, hands on knees, catching her breath.

"You ran up the other side." Darla pointed to the rusty metal railing dividing the steps. "The three of us were on this side."

Darla sneered and crossed her arms. The other two girls, Talia and Veronica, flanked Darla, striking identical poses hands on their hips, auburn hair pulled back, hazel eyes narrowed, and lips pressed into thin lines.

"And?" Cassie arched an eyebrow.

Darla let out an exaggerated sigh. "Everyone knows that's bad luck. Worse than taking a selfie with a black cat. Who knows what could happen? We might not get a bid for Dallas or lose a sponsor." Her eyes sparkled as she concocted the solution. "Unless you go back down and run up our side." She made a walking motion with her fingers.

Talia and Veronica nodded in simultaneous agreement, as if Darla's brain controlled both girls' actions.

Clouds darkened the sky, and a few scattered raindrops fell.

"Where do you come up with all these nutty ideas?" Cassie shook her head, "You're all delusional, and we're late. Coach isn't going to be happy." She picked up her gym bag. "If you think it's such a big deal, why don't you and the *Olsen twins* run back down and come up my side?" She stuck out her tongue, turned, and disappeared through the glass double doors of the gymnasium.

Darla's face reddened. "Sometimes she can be such a b—"



Inside the poorly lit gymnasium, a single faded banner hung from the rafters: Van Buren University Men's Basketball — 1947 Presidential Conference Champions. The ancient air-conditioning system rattled loudly as if to announce it wasn't dead, while circulating muggy air filled with the scent of bubble gum, cherry lip gloss, and sweat.

Marcus Reed, six-four with dark, curly hair, stood on the ratty black safety mat covering a third of the basketball court. He supported Cassie with a muscular arm and a sturdy hand. With a plastic smile, she leaned forward and raised her right leg, her body contorting into a capital *T*. She



counted five, her body becoming more unsteady with each number. As she shakily returned to an upright position, Marcus's arm collapsed. Cassie tumbled through the air, but Marcus recovered, grunting as she landed in his arms.

Nearby, twenty-five other cheerleaders in T-shirts and shorts practiced tosses, leaps, and flips. A few girls stretched on the mat, gossiping or scrolling through phones. Heavy rain pounded the gymnasium roof. A couple guys placed buckets to catch the water dripping from the ceiling.

Coach Erica Nightlinger, her mousy brown hair pulled back in a perpetual ponytail, observed her squad. Perhaps half the boys were on performance enhancers, while a third of the girls could have eating disorders. She hadn't specifically encouraged her team to endanger their health through drugs and starvation, but she did turn a blind eye. According to the rumblings from the Athletic Department, this was her last year unless she brought home a championship. If she couldn't transform this third-rate cheer team into a contender, Nightlinger would be back to teaching dance in strip malls to uncoordinated tweens and their helicopter mothers.

"Okay, let's bring it in. Stragglers too!" She waved at the three late arrivals running penalty laps around the perimeter.

The team assembled on the mat in a semi-circle facing Nightlinger.

"It's less than a month until Nationals. We can't let up now. No matter how hard you're trying, no matter how sore, how tired, you can always give more. Here's proof." She held up her left hand to display a gold championship ring. "I wear this ring every day to remind myself of what I've accomplished. You can achieve this, too, if you make the commitment."

The truth was that Nightlinger bought the ring off eBay. The year that Lyndon Johnson State won the National Championship, she was on academic probation. Too many late nights at Smokey Joe's combined with eight a.m. Intro to Statistics.

She raised her hand over head. "Do you want this?"

"Yes!" the squad replied in chorus.

"Again, louder. Do you want this?"

"Yes!" The answer echoed throughout the gym.

"Better! And if necessary, I'll put myself in there. And you know I will."

That elicited a round of nervous laughter from the squad. Within a pound or two of her cheer weight, Nightlinger would insert herself into the

practices when the squad floundered. In moments of desperation, she would concoct schemes where she assumed the identity of one of the girls, placing herself on the squad when they competed at Nationals.

“Circle up.” The coach made a clockwise motion with her arm.

The squad formed a ring, their right hands touching in the center. “One, two, three! Statesmen!”

“Let’s do this.” Nightlinger pointed at her squad. “Arms straight and no boring faces.”

The cheerleaders struck poses and displayed a series of winks, open mouths, and dropped jaws.

Nightlinger pressed play on the ancient boombox, and static crackled at maximum volume. Cheerleaders covered their ears. She fiddled with the device for a few moments before giving up. “Who’s got a phone with the playlist that I can borrow?”

A brunette tossed her iPhone to the coach. Nightlinger hooked up the phone to the sound system and pressed play. High-energy techno-jazz boomed from the sound system, echoing throughout the gym.

Girls leapt, spun, and bounced into back flips. Marcus and another boy locked their wrists to form a basket. Cassie hopped into the basket, steadying herself on their shoulders. Two spotters placed their hands under the others. With a mighty effort, the four propelled her twenty feet into the air.

At the apex, Cassie split her legs, touching her toes. She descended toward waiting arms. A deafening roar of thunder filled the gymnasium, and the lights flickered. In the momentary darkness, her foot collided with someone’s head, redirecting her fall. Marcus scrambled to catch her, but Cassie slammed to the floor, eating mat.

The rest of the team continued performing basket catches, rewinds, and liberties. The routine slowly came to a standstill as the squad realized something was amiss. Cassie lay motionless on the mat.

“Why is everybody stopping?” Nightlinger threw up her hands. “McGlaughlin, you go down like that in Dallas, you better not lie there. You get hurt, you roll off.”

The squad made a half-hearted attempt to pick up the performance while Cassie remained unmoving. Nightlinger blew her whistle and killed the music. She walked over and knelt by Cassie, who had managed

to sit up. The girl moved her jaw, wheezing, but no words were forthcoming.

Nightlinger placed a hand on the cheerleader's shoulder. "Take it easy. You got the wind knocked out of you." She shouted at her team, "Everyone, you have two minutes. Grab a drink!"

A variety of water bottles, electrolyte replacements, and energy drinks were retrieved from gym bags and guzzled.

Cassie gasped until her breathing returned to normal. A blank look crossed her face. "What happened, did I fall?"

Nightlinger looked around at the squad. "Anyone see? Did she hit her head?" The question was met by shrugs and stares. She pointed an accusing finger at Marcus. "You should have caught her. You're better than that."

Marcus shrugged. "But Coach, the lights went out."

"But Coach, the lights went out," Nightlinger mocked. "We've been rehearsing this routine for weeks. You should be able to do it blindfolded." She dismissed Marcus with a wave of her hand. "Rokozny." The coach pointed at a strawberry-blonde stunter. "Go find a trainer."

The girl scampered off through a side entrance.

*Ridiculous, thought Nightlinger. The basketball team gets three trainers and God knows how many assistants, for half as many athletes, while I get less than nothing for the most dangerous sport on campus. Someday, we're going to get sued. And I'll be there to say 'I told you so.' If I'm not fired first.*

"I'll watch her, Coach." Marcus offered Cassie a hand and lifted her to her feet. "Lean on me." Even using Marcus for support, Cassie wobbled. "I have an idea." He reached behind her knees and hefted her up.

Secure in his arms, Cassie locked her hands around Marcus's neck, pulled their faces closer, and gazed into his sky-blue eyes. "My hero."

Nightlinger observed the goofy grins on both their faces. Last thing her team needed was romantic complications sparking jealousy among the rest of the squad, then the harsh feelings between Cassie and Marcus after the inevitable break-up. The coach would stop this budding flirtation before it destroyed her team. She followed Marcus across the court to the bleachers.

He gently placed Cassie in the first row, then sat next to her and held her hand. "Okay?"

"Yeah, I think so." Cassie squeezed his hand. Music again filled the

gym, and the cheerleaders resumed their routine. "You should probably join the squad."

"Nah, I've got to keep an eye on our number one flyer."

"Uh, uh." Nightlinger pointed at Marcus. "You need to get in there. And no more mistakes."

"Okay." Marcus squeezed Cassie's hand once more, then jogged over to the other cheerleaders and resumed his place in the routine.

"You're going to be okay." Nightlinger sat next to Cassie. "Here comes help."

Skip Stetter, one of the basketball team trainers, jogged across the court. He wore a green VBU polo and khakis. In his right hand, he carried a med kit. He knelt next to Cassie and pulled a laminated 8.5" x 11" sheet from his bag.

"What happened, did I fall?" Cassie said again.

Skip searched for the concussion protocols on the sheet.

"Don't you know what to do?" Nightlinger stared at Skip.

Skip stared at the instructions. "This is very technical. I don't want to get it wrong."

"What happened, did I fall?"

"She keeps asking the same thing," Nightlinger slumped her shoulders. "She got the wind knocked out of her. No one's sure if she hit her head or what."

"Just let me do this." Skip grabbed Cassie's wrist, felt for a pulse, and checked his watch. "Fifty-two beats per minute. An athlete's heart." He released her wrist. "I'm going to ask you a few questions. Can you tell me your name?"

"Cassie." Her tone implied everyone should know it.

"Very good, Cassie. And do you know what day of the week it is?"

"It's Wednesday." She squinted at him. "Why?"

"These are the questions on the sheet. And where are you?"

She sighed. "Van Buren U. In the gym."

"Very good. Three for three."

"Is she going to be all right?" Nightlinger leaned forward trying to read the sheet in Skip's hands.

"Have to check a few more things." Skip reached into his bag for a penlight and aimed the beam into Cassie's brown eyes. Her pupils shrank

to the size of pinheads. "Cassie, I want you to follow the light with your eyes while keeping your head still." He motioned the pen to the left, then back to the right.

Cassie's eyes didn't move. She stared straight ahead.

He leaned closer. "Cassie, can you hear me?"

"What happened, did I fall?"

Skip waved the pen in front of her face. "I want you to follow the light with your eyes."

"What light? Everything just went black." Her body shuddered. "I can't see!"

He clicked off the penlight. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure! How could I not be?" she screamed, then broke into tears.

Nightlinger wrapped her arms around Cassie in a tight hug. "Everything's going to be okay," she whispered.

Skip pulled out his phone. "I better call 9-1-1."