

THE WINE WITCH

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G. SMITH

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47NORTH

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THE
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CHAPTER ONE

Her eyes rested above the waterline as a moth struggled inside her mouth. She blinked to force the wings past her tongue, and a curious revulsion followed. The strangeness of it filtered through her toad brain until she settled on the opinion that it was best to avoid the wispy, yellow-winged ones in the future.

Unperturbed, she propelled herself into the murky shallows to nestle among the reeds. As her body absorbed the late-season sun sieving through the half-naked trees, she let her eyelids relax. But with the sun's energy came new hunger. She swiped a forelimb across her mouth and considered hunting for snails along the mud bank when a second peculiarity pricked her instinct. Shapes and colors intensified in her vision, and not merely by a seasonal trick of the light. A brown leaf fluttered onto a ripple of black water. A silver fish with pink gills nibbled at an insect just beneath the surface. A dragonfly zipped across the pond, a blaze of neon green.

Her toad brain latched on to the insect's emerald color and held it in its cortex like an amulet even as her nostrils filled with the sudden stink of fish slime and putrid muck. How had she not noticed the stagnant, vile smell of the shallows before? A muddy chill needled her leathery skin, prodding her to back out of the foul water.

The skin. It was time to shed again.

The shudder began involuntarily, as it had once a week since her toad memory began. Her body writhed, compelled by an uncontrollable urge as the outer layer of skin stretched and lifted, sloughing loose from feet, back, and tender belly. Tugging and twisting with her forelimbs, she pulled the spent casing over her head like a woman removing a sheer nightgown. Then she gathered the wad of skin in her mouth and began to swallow. Yes, she

must always remember to do that, though the reason flickered just outside her grasp.

She blinked hard, maneuvering the skin deeper into the gullet, when a queer stirring in the bones halted her midswallow. Her insides churned and tumbled, and she coughed the skin back up. A lacerating sting, like claws tearing into flesh, gripped her hunched back. Panic ignited her instincts. *Jump! Back to the water before Old Fox takes another toe with his teeth!* But then her other mind, the one that had been wrapped and tucked away like a jewel deep within her subconscious, snapped awake. The hidden emerald of intelligence recognized the pain for the sign of hope that it was. It had her hold steady even as a fissure opened along her spine, agony nearly splitting her in two.

Splayed toes dug into the mud as four phalanges morphed into five, elongating joint by joint. A human face pressed beneath the speckled skin, forcing the toadish nostrils and mouth to tear and peel away. The metamorphosis accelerated. Shoulders, arms, and stomach grew. Brown hair, slick with a sort of birth slime, coiled down her back. She gasped for air, filled her lungs, and opened her eyes to the world, reborn.

Still squatting in the mud, she wiggled her fingers, testing, then dared to hold them in the sacred pose as if cradling the face of Knowledge itself. Warmth engulfed her. Consciousness reignited. The bonds of the curse disintegrated.

Elena.

The name flashed in her mind so quickly she thought it a phantom whisper. Then memory flooded in. She was Elena, disciple of the All Knowing and daughter of the Chanceaux Valley. And she was free.

As her body woke from torpor, muddy hands trailed over breasts, ribs, and stomach, assuring all was normal—until warm flesh turned pond-water cold beneath her touch. She dared look down, and a strangled scream caught in her throat. Giant speckled legs with webbed feet clung on in horrid stubbornness. She kicked and thrashed, and yet they remained grotesquely fused to her body.

“What demon spell is this?” she cried. But when panic failed her, she took a steadying breath and let her mind meditate on the problem as she always had.

The powerful alkaloids secreted through the skin had eroded the curse over time. Perhaps all she needed was one last jolt to complete the change.

Mastering her revulsion, she picked up the spit-up toad skin and stuffed it onto the back of her tongue. The toxic residue tasted of rotted reed grass and bitter herbs, but as the sun haloed in her vision and the poison danced in her blood, she gave thanks to the All Knowing for teaching her well the ways of magic.

After one last agonizing moment, her transformation was complete. Long legs, weak but willing, held her when she stood, so she tipped her face toward the daylight stars to calculate the distance home. Naked, but no longer at the mercy of the sun for warmth, she walked out of the marshland with the hot pulse of revenge beating beneath her breastbone.

CHAPTER TWO

Elena slipped the flimsy shoe back on her right foot and swore to make a fur coat out of the first fox to cross her path. She would never be able to grow that toe back, no matter how many concoctions she came up with. Not even Grand-Mère in her prime could work that magic. If only she had a little Saint-John's-wort or mallow leaf with her, she could at least make a salve to soothe the blisters brought on by covering so many miles in another person's shoes. Oh, to be tucked away in the storeroom again with her tincture bottles, powder jars, and dried herbs and flowers tied up with string. But she supposed all that was gone. She'd have to start again. The thought exhausted her.

Her magic had atrophied, of that she was certain. Manipulating the goatherd's eyesight had been more difficult than it should have been. A quick pinch of ground-up chicory seed blown in the herder's face was all that was needed to fog the memory of encountering a naked woman emerging from the woods, but it had left her shaky and unsure. And though she'd found a half round of cheese in one of the pockets, she debated the wisdom of not having waited longer for someone more suitably dressed to pass by on the road. Now she regretted how the stolen coat smelled of dung, and without the proper undergarments—some things were best left on the roadside—the goatherd's woolen skirt chafed against her tender new skin. But she was nearly home, and she could bear any suffering if it meant she'd soon walk through the front gate of Château Renard and be greeted by the healing hands of Grand-Mère.

If her moon reckoning was correct, it had just turned November, time of the frost moon. And four days since she'd awoken from the curse. But what was the date? Had it been a year? Two? Certainly she hadn't been gone a decade. Though her magic swam weak and watery in her veins, she

did not feel the heavy stack of time against her spine. Her hair showed no gray, her legs were lean and strong enough to run, and her teeth did not pain her. If she was right about the time, *he* should still be alive. She thanked the All Knowing for letting her break the curse before he had the chance to meet a kind death by natural causes.

The prospect of revenge buoyed her again to her feet. As she walked, she filled her pockets with dried hawthorn berries, shriveled seedpods, and damp moss. A twist of shriveled celandine leaves, frost-hardy flower heads, the bark off a willow tree—she knew how to mix and grind them all into healing powders. She knew, too, as she sniffed the hardened seedpods of a dried foxglove, the deadly combinations that were possible. Potions that could drop a man to his knees with his heart exploding inside. She'd felt the murderous impulse when she awoke from the curse, but the desire seethed in her veins now that her fingertips caressed the components that would make it possible.

With thoughts of poison rooted in her mind, she bent to pluck a fringed mushroom off a rotting log when a whiff of smoldering grapevine snaked through the air. Despite her dark thoughts, she lifted her head and smiled. She'd caught the scent of home.

Elena ran in her ill-fitting shoes until she came to the crest of the hill. There the trees thinned, the sky spread open, and the rolling hills of Château Renard revealed themselves in the valley below. From afar, nothing looked amiss in the vineyard. It gave her the courage she needed to move closer.

Neat rows of blackened vines, old and twisted like the capable hands of Grand-Mère, greeted her midhill. The winter pruning had begun. Three men worked the field with their *brouettes*, smoke rising from the char cans where they burned the clippings from last year's growth. The ashes, rich in nutrients, would be spread on the ground to feed the roots through winter in the great cycle of life and death. She walked between the vine rows, her fingers brushing the newly clipped edges, the rough skin of the vines as familiar as her own.

"May I share your fire?" she asked of the first worker she encountered, a clean-shaven man with round wire-rimmed glasses and wearing a gray wool flat cap. He startled as if she'd materialized out of the smoke. "I've been walking for hours. My fingers are chilled to the bone." She was cold, but more importantly she needed information before approaching the house.

“Where did you come from?”

She stretched her hands over the smoldering fire. She didn't recognize the man staring back at her or the others who craned their necks to see her better. Where was Antonio? Margareta? These faces were all new. “Is Ariella Gardin still the matron of Château Renard?” she asked.

“She lives here, yes,” the man said, unaware of how he'd eased her fears, “but if you're looking for work, we won't be hiring again until the spring.”

She was almost charmed by the man's ignorance. Though given the state of her appearance, she could hardly blame him for his prejudice. She glanced up at the clouds, tapping into her intuition. “You're lucky if you've got an hour before snowfall. Mind you keep those coals stirred so the fire doesn't go out on you.”

The man blinked back in awkward silence as she gave her hands a final rub over the coals. With a shrug of her coat she walked toward the house. It was a full minute before the men's whispers of *sorcière* started up behind her and the snip of the *secateurs* resumed against the vines.



Elena stared at the grand old house as a shiver frosted the secret places inside her. The house, stately with six bedrooms, though certainly no mansion, was showing its age. The roof was missing three tiles above the door, and a sizable crack had opened in the stonework beside the front window. Houses settled and shifted over time, of course, but how much time?

Her knock went unanswered, so she tried the door handle. It resisted as if she were a stranger. There was much reacquainting to be done, she reflected, before slipping through the hedgerow to try the kitchen.

Peering through the back window, she spied an elderly woman in a black high-collared dress standing at the counter. The woman's long hair was pinned up at the sides so that silver curls trellised down her elegant neck. She hesitated, a cup of flour poised unsteadily in her hand, before shaking her head and tipping it into a porcelain mixing bowl. Tears threatened to spill at the sight of Grand-Mère, but Elena quickly dried her lashes with her sleeve and tapped on the door.

“You can leave the eggs on the step, Adela,” the old woman said without looking up from her work. “The money is under the pot of geraniums.”

Elena opened the door a tentative crack. “You never used to encourage geraniums over the winter. You called them tedious.”

Ariella Gardin, grande dame of one of the oldest and most renowned vineyards in the Chanceaux Valley, turned in alarm, a pitcher of milk gripped in her hand. “Who’s there?”

Elena pushed the hair out of her face and took a step closer. “It’s me.”

The pitcher shattered on the tile, splashing milk the length of the terracotta floor and soaking their shoes.

Grand-Mère squinted back as if she stared at an apparition. “It can’t be.” Skirting the puddle of spilled milk, she reached for Elena’s hand. The old woman studied the lines of Elena’s palm, breathed in the scent of her hair, and then rubbed thumb and fingers together in the space over her head to check for enchantments. Elena endured it all happily.

“It really is you.” The old woman held her hands in the sacred pose to thank the All Knowing before embracing her. “I always knew you’d return someday.”

“How did you know when I scarcely knew myself?”

Her mentor waved her inside and shut the door. “The All Knowing always favored you.”

Elena disagreed about which shadow had been cast over her at birth, but she held her tongue.

Stepping into the kitchen again after so long, she felt a tinge of strangeness, as if she were a guest. She blamed it on the unusual scents swirling among the familiar—the hint of men’s pomade, the turpentine of boot polish, and the slightly musty odor of leather-bound books mingling beneath the homey smells of bread and cheese and Grand-Mère’s lavender soap. Change was to be expected, but it only added to her unsettled feeling that more time had gone by than she knew.

The old woman pressed her hands to her cheeks in hopeless exasperation as she looked at the mess on the floor. She reached for a cloth and knelt to mop up the milk and slivers of broken porcelain. Before Elena could protest, the old woman sliced her finger on the first sharp edge she touched.

“Let me do that,” Elena said, kneeling. “I’ve startled you. I should have sent a dove to warn you I was coming.”

“Just clumsy old age.” Grand-Mère surrendered the dishcloth. “Mind yourself. Milk and blood together are a bad omen.”

At the prompt, a familiar childhood rhyme floated up in her mind. “Mud and silk, blood and milk, never the twain should meet.”

“For if they do.”

“Bad luck to you.”

“’Tis the Devil you’ll greet.” The old woman finished the rhyme and sucked at the drop of blood on her fingertip.

“I remember your lessons well, Grand-Mère.”

The old woman peered at her before removing her finger from her mouth. “I wasn’t sure I’d live long enough to hear anyone call me that again.”

They were not truly related, yet Elena’s connection to Grand-Mère often felt stronger than the bond of blood, held together by the terroir and magic of the work they did in the vineyard. They bowed their heads together, touching foreheads over the milk, as they often had when she was still a girl.

“I felt a quiver in my left hand when I got out of bed this morning,” Grand-Mère said. “I had no idea it was you I’d sensed. It’s been so long I thought it was just the change in the weather.”

Elena squeezed the dishrag, bracing herself. “How long?”

The old woman thought about it as she stood and dumped the broken shards in the rubbish bin. “Has to be seven years now.” Then she turned and squared her shoulders as if finding her own courage. “Where have you been all this time?”

Seven years!

Her heart gave a little kick at the news. She’d never dreamed she’d spent seven winters in that fetid pond, eating moths and slugs to survive. “It was a curse. I only just got free.”

“This whole time? I thought maybe you’d . . . started over somewhere else.”

“It was meant to be permanent.” Her eyebrows pinched together. “Only someone neglected to study their poisons. They miscalculated the counteractive potency of bufotoxins when self-ingested over time.”

“A *permanent* curse?” Grand-Mère drew her hand to her heart. “Good heavens, are you sure?”

Elena dumped the wet rag in the sink and took a seat at the kitchen table. Feeling safe for the first time in years, she described her ordeal, including how she’d held on to just enough of her wits to remember to eat the poison-laced skin every day and not gag it back up, even as the curse tried to swallow her memory of being human. While she spoke, Grand-Mère prepared her a simple meal of bread, cheese, and wine.

“A toad?” Grand-Mère was incredulous as she set the plate down in front of Elena. She took the chair opposite, a hand pressed to her cheek. “It’s been an age since that sort of transmutation was practiced. Who could have done such a thing?”

“Bastien. Who else?”

“Bastien?” The old woman’s mouth fell open. “But you were going to be married. You were going to—”

“We had a fight.” Elena’s face flushed with shame. “Once he slipped the ring on my finger, he made demands.”

“Demands?”

Elena buried her face in her hands. “He said as his wife I’d be obligated to serve him. That it wasn’t my place to refuse.”

“Marriage is always a compromise. Often more for the woman, I admit, but—”

“He understood *nothing* about me. He knew I was a vine witch, that I had obligations of my own to uphold, that I couldn’t just fulfill his every whim. I’d finally mastered my first exceptional vintage, and he expected me to set all that aside to serve his dreams. The ambition and greed in that man! How could I have been so wrong about him?”

Grand-Mère shrugged diplomatically. “He always did have grand plans.”

“I told him I’d rather be a happy spinster than his miserable wife and threw his ring back at him.”

Grand-Mère bent her ear forward, as if she hadn’t heard correctly. “You broke off the engagement?”

“I had no choice,” she said, reaching for the glass of wine. It had been seven years since she’d held a glass in her hand or sniffed the silky bouquet of Château Renard’s pinot noir. She gave the wine a swirl and held it to her nose, needing its cleansing power more than ever. “He doesn’t like being

told no, even when he's wrong. And he cannot abide being made to look like a fool. Not by a woman. I'm convinced it's why he paid some fly-by-night Fay to spellbind me and keep me silent. He must have." She exhaled at the weight of the implication. "Whoever the witch was, she blindsided me in the road just before I reached home. I'd stopped to slip into the shadow world to see how he was faring. She attacked while my sight was focused elsewhere for the briefest of moments. That 'no' cost me everything."

The old woman massaged her temples, as if she suffered from the sudden onset of a headache. "Could have been one of the Charlatan clan. They usually stay north in the city, but they'll do work for hire. Crude lot they are, too, and more cunning than one might give them credit for," she added, rubbing her eyes to be free of the pain. "And not the sort to study how a curse might be weakened by ingesting one's own toxic skin. Which toads are naturally wont to do."

Elena shuddered at the thought of the warty, poisonous skin sliding down the back of her throat. She took a sip of the wine to chase the memory from her mouth, but if she was looking for relief she was vividly disappointed. None of the musky hues of spice and rose petals the Renard vineyard was famous for hit her palate. It was all chalk and mushrooms. An off bottle?

Then a worse thought hit her as she swallowed. What if there was nothing wrong with the wine? What if her senses had been permanently disfigured by the curse? She'd kill him twice.

She lifted her glass in silent panic to study the wine's opacity against the light. She was still forming her fear into words when the back door opened and the worker whose *brouette* she'd shared walked inside. A wet wind followed, billowing the curtains and spitting snowflakes onto the floor tiles. The man shut the door and brushed his wet cap against his trousers before hanging it on the peg on the wall. His brusque entrance had her set aside the sour wine as well as her growing alarm.

The worker halted and apologized for interrupting as he dried the snow off his glasses using his shirttail. He snuck a glance at her while he polished the lenses, and she couldn't help but notice the fine features of his face—the proud brow that tightened in thought, the geometric planes of the cheeks, and a jawline taut from firm self-confidence.

Grand-Mère hastily stood. “This is Elena Boureau. I’m sure I’ve mentioned her before.” She hurried back to her mixing bowl at the counter and began measuring more flour. “Elena, this is Monsieur Jean-Paul Martel. He’s—”

“Yes, we spoke briefly in the field. You must be the new foreman.”

“Something like that.” He slipped his glasses back on and then pressed his fist under his nose. His less than discreet gesture suggested he’d picked up on the scent of goat dung saturating the hem of her coat. “A pleasure to meet you, Mademoiselle Boureau,” he said curtly, then in a more polite tone added, “I’ll let you return to entertaining your guest, Ariella. Let me know when supper is ready.”

Once he left, Elena watched Grand-Mère fret over having no more milk in the icebox. With the taste of bad wine still souring her thoughts, she asked, “Have you grown so desperate for good help that workers now have the run of the main house?”

“Jean-Paul isn’t just a worker.” Grand-Mère’s elbows moved up and down as she worked water into the dough for biscuits. “He likes to eat promptly at five o’clock so he can go out and walk the fields one more time before dark.”

“Why didn’t you tell him who I am?”

The old woman paused to glance at the swirling snow as a gust of wind whipped against the window. Her shoulders fell and her body stilled, as if she could no longer bear to hold them up. “I’ve made a terrible mess of everything.”

She looked to the sky as if it might offer absolution and then confessed all that had gone wrong. The last five seasons at the vineyard had been failures. Either the grapes had been pinched from searing drought or the rain delayed the pickers so the crop spoiled with mold. In the last harvest, dark speckles marred the grape skins, tainting the wine with the taste of burnt cork. And there was nothing Grand-Mère could do, because her mind and magic had begun to fail.

It was little things at first. Forgetting to add a bit of bone to the soil on the full moon, neglecting to hang the bell-charms inside the vine canopy to warn of searing wind, or whispering the wrong words of protection when the cool air dipped toward freezing, leaving the grapes to fend for themselves. Grand-Mère waved it all away as she spoke, as if thoughts of growing old pained her. It bruised her ego to admit her vulnerability, but she

knew the vineyard had suffered because of her failing powers. It wasn't long before successive poor vintages caused sales to drop, and people began to whisper that Château Renard had lost its way.

Failure to protect the vineyard alone was a disgrace to a vine witch as renowned as Madame Gardin. But the worst thing she'd done to bring ruin to Château Renard was neglecting to pay her taxes. Nature could bend and accommodate a flaw, but the government would have its due. Château Renard, one of the original houses to produce wine in the valley, had found itself three years behind in taxes with no money in the coffer to pay it.

"They threatened to seize the property," Grand-Mère said with a sigh. "Suggested I sell and save what I could of the Renard reputation."

The news was as bitter as the wine. And none of it made any sense. The vineyard had been passed down from one generation to the next for more than two hundred years. Its reputation was built on a history of excellence, a blessed rich terroir, and the steady fostering of dedicated vine witches. "It must be some kind of mistake. A misunderstanding," Elena said, unwilling to believe. "Grand-Père set plenty of money aside to weather a bad year or two."

"I don't like admitting how badly I mismanaged things without your help. I thought I still had the touch, but it seems my brain is as withered as a dried-up old apple."

"Surely you must have been sent notices about the taxes?"

"Well, yes. And I know I paid *some* money. But it was never enough, according to the statements. The whole thing had the smell of rot to it," she said, shaking her head. "Especially when Bastien came around to present an offer on the property."

"He showed his face here? After what he did?" Elena nearly drew blood as her clenched fingers dug into her palms. "He tried to buy Château Renard?"

"He's been buying failed vineyards all over the valley the past couple of years. It wasn't long before he showed up here with cash in one hand and a bottle of wine in the other. *His* wine." Grand-Mère snorted. "It was a very short meeting."

Elena could do nothing but shake her head. Everything that man did led to greed and betrayal. And now he'd tried to buy the very place where her heart, blood, and soul were sewn to the soil. If there was one piece of hope she could hold on to, it was that he'd failed to steal Château Renard.

Elena slid her arm around Grand-Mère's shoulders to comfort her. "It's not too late. Now that I'm home again we can fix this. We'll raise the money somehow."

"No, you don't understand. I sold Château Renard."

"Sold? But that's not possible. To whom?"

"To me," said Jean-Paul as he stood in the doorway holding a bottle of wine and two extra glasses.