

# BLACK THORN



You never forget  
your first love.

**J.T. GEISSINGER**

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR





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J.T. Geissinger



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New York



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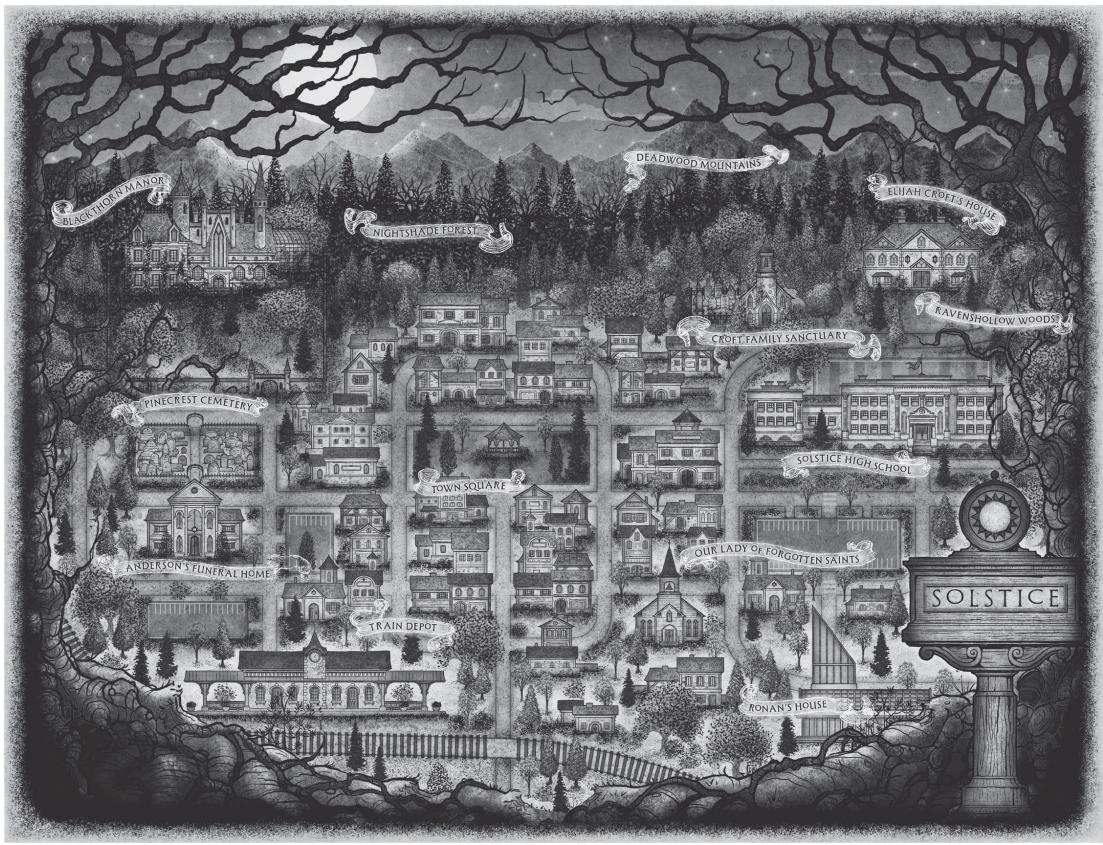
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*For Jay, the keeper of my darkest secrets*





*Blackthorn* is a gothic romance that contains dark themes and potentially disturbing content, including but not limited to graphic sex, noncon and dubcon sex, explicit language, possible harm to a child, human sacrifice, disturbing imagery, the occult, religion, violence, murder, horror, incest, blood, death, grief, and gore.

## PROLOGUE

If malevolence could be a place, it would be Blackthorn Manor.

Nestled in the tangled black woods beneath leaden skies filled with flocks of circling ravens stands the brooding, ancient house where I was born and raised. Though to call it a house is akin to calling hell a warm destination.

The truth is far more terrifying.

I fell in love in that house.

I nearly died there, too.

Now, as I'm rolled away on a stretcher with an oxygen mask strapped to my face, I watch Blackthorn burn to ruins, the gnarled trunks of the old trees that stand sentinel beside it painted red like streaks of primordial blood from reflections of the massive flames devouring it.

And I know at long last that I'm free of this place and the stranglehold it has always had over me.

Except for my dreams where Blackthorn and its ghosts will always find me, I'm finally free.

PART ONE

HOME SWEET HOME

**Hell is empty, and all the devils are here.**

—*The Tempest*

## ONE

# MAVEN

Solstice, Vermont, is a picturesque town nestled in the densely forested hills of New England. Like any small town in this part of the world, Solstice has its share of lore and legends. Hauntings, curses, unsolved mysteries, unexplained natural phenomena, they're as abundant here as maple trees.

It's to this place I now return, having fled twelve years ago after my mother's death.

Or murder. Depends on who you ask.

My daughter, Beatrix, stands beside me on the deserted train station platform, looking around with trepidation at the old-fashioned bronze lampposts, wooden benches, and small depot with its flaking white paint, peaked roof, and clock tower.

It's half past four on a gray October afternoon. The air is crisp and redolent with woodsmoke. The silence is broken only by the fading sound of the train as it chugs around a curve in the tracks. Then it's swallowed by the fog-shrouded forest, and we're alone.

The sense of having been transported back in time is palpable. So is the electrical crackle of my daughter's panic.

She's never been outside the city. I suffer a fleeting twinge of regret over that now, but I have good reasons for keeping her surrounded by skyscrapers and concrete.

The women in my family go feral if left in nature too long.

“Does this town have indoor plumbing?”

“Of course.”

“What about electricity? Cars?”

I take her hand in mine and squeeze it reassuringly. “I know it’s not Manhattan, sweetie. Give it a chance.”

“This place is like a creepy olden town from a horror movie. Those woods are probably full of escaped convicts. We could be hacked to pieces any minute.”

“It’s not creepy, it’s charming. You’ve been watching those crime documentaries again. We talked about that. It’s not good for your mental health.”

Shivering as she edges closer to me, she mutters, “Being chopped to bits wouldn’t be good for my mental health, either.”

Dry leaves skittering across our path, we walk across the platform and enter the depot. It’s deserted, too, which feels ominous. Then again, everything about this town started to feel ominous to me when my mother died, so I try not to read too much into it.

In the small parking lot in front of the depot, an ancient black Cadillac awaits, engine running. Ghostly white plumes of smoke from its exhaust pipe billow in the chilly fall air. When a man emerges from the driver’s seat, unfolding his long limbs like a spider rising from its web, Bea’s sharp intake of breath is audible.

I give her hand another reassuring squeeze. “That’s Quentin, the caretaker. I told you about him, remember? There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“You didn’t tell me he looked like a zombie.”

“He isn’t a zombie.”

She whispers, “Mom, he literally looks like he just rose from the dead. I’ve never seen a person that color in my life. He might as well be made of clay.”

“We don’t criticize people for their appearance. Be kind to him.”

I raise my hand in greeting to Quentin. He lumbers around the car to take our luggage.

Watching him, I understand why Bea’s startled.

Q is tall, stooped, thin as a rail, and has onyx eyes that gaze from under heavy brows with piercing intensity. He can stare for an unnaturally long time without blinking. His pale, parchment-thin skin stands in stark contrast to the severity of his antiquated black wool cloak, and his wispy white hair drifts around his skull like ethereal mist. His boots don’t have a right or a left, as he made them himself.

The way he moves suggests rigor mortis has set in.

I wonder for perhaps the millionth time how old he is, but Q has looked exactly the same since my earliest memory from childhood when he gazed seriously into my eyes as I handed him his birthday gift of a brilliant-green scarab beetle I’d dug from under a barberry bush in the garden.

He loves the creepy-crawly creatures of the earth as much as I do.

When he's finished loading our few bags into the trunk, Q opens the back door of the Caddy. Our eyes meet briefly before I duck inside the car, and though Q is nonspeaking and always has been, I don't need words to interpret his warning:

*Be careful. They already know you're here.*

But of course they would. The wealthy and powerful Crofts know everything that happens in this town, and they have for over three hundred years.

We make the trip to the house in silence. Bea keeps darting nervous glances at me, so I keep my expression impassive and hold up my head with a confidence I don't feel. With every mile that passes, the winch around my lungs squeezes tighter, until I'm breathing so shallowly, I'm lightheaded.

Then we drive through the rusty iron gates of Blackthorn Manor, and I lose my breath altogether.

My family's ancestral home looms at the end of a long, rutted dirt driveway choked with weeds. As much a part of the forest as the centuries of dense undergrowth and towering trees that surround it, the brooding stone structure is cloaked in ivy and surrounded by a tangle of native shrubs and uncontrolled bracken.

The house isn't one structure, but many structures built over hundreds of years in a stubborn patchwork quilt of styles that lend it a chaotic, unsettled appearance. Part Medieval fortress, part Gothic mansion, and part rustic ruin, it defies easy categorization, much like its generations of inhabitants.

An architectural Frankenstein's monster, the place seems to radiate a sense of foreboding, as though it guards secrets best left undisturbed.

The only modern additions are the large greenhouse at the back of the property, which holds all kinds of delicate herbs and plants that can't survive the harsh New England winters, and a covered garage for the car.

Beyond lies the dark and menacing primeval woods, an overgrown wilderness the local children never venture into, terrified by tales from their parents of all the strange creatures that roam its twisted paths.

Spotting the house, Bea sits upright in her seat. "Is that where you grew up?"

"Yes."

After a moment, she says quietly, "It looks like it's haunted."

I meet Q's dark gaze in the rearview mirror. Then I look back at the house and suppress a shiver.

Home sweet home.

Where all the hungry goblins of my past lie in wait for my return.

I slide my hand into my coat pocket, run my fingertips along the smooth lines of the pistol nestled there, and remind myself to keep breathing.