

CHAPTER I



No one remembered the books but her. That was the first sentence in *The Book of Briars*.

Ilya bristled when she first read that line because she knew the “her” mentioned in the passage was not *her* and felt the line had been a nasty, underhanded swipe from the writer at Ilya’s own failing memory. It was cruel. But waiting for new pages, waiting to know what would happen next, had been even crueler. The writer had not written in nearly two months—a still, late, sweltering summer without a single click of a typewriter key from the fourth floor. And Ilya desperately needed to know what happened next. But the room in the tower of the old, dark house was quiet. The typewriter keys remained untapped. So Ilya wandered the dark and waited for more of the book—a book through which the writer had promised the truth, the truth she could no longer remember. Ilya resented the “her” from the story, hated her unseen. The “her” who hated the very same memory that Ilya was so desperate to recall. Ilya waited for the writer to finish, season after season, longing for the appropriate autumn, the one that began the book. The autumn that would begin everything.

The whole of Ilya's existence was in service to the writer. Tending the home fires, washing the cracked dishes, mopping the creaking floors, caring for the caretaker, and caring for herself. It might have all seemed like self-preservation, but instead was solely in service to the writer, and the books. *Not books. Singular, wasn't it?* Book.

Ilya could see the first leaves begin their fade to fire from the kitchen window. The thick air of summer was still holding on, but autumn's fingers had begun to wind around the sticky ebbs of heat, tugging the late season to other ends of the world. Ilya's withered hands made quick work of the dirty dishes, rinsing them and drying them with a rag. She took up the last plate and stopped to look at the half-dissolved pattern painted on its chipped surface—purple vines spiraling toward a rose at the center. *Who used this plate?*

She couldn't remember. Was it her? The caretaker? Memories were getting harder and harder to hold on to. It wasn't just her age that was slowly eating away at her once-sharp and now failing mind. Memories had always been hard to keep here in this place. Ilya opened a cabinet door with thin, tapered fingers that were stained at the tips, like a cluster of gray-white fountain pens smudged with ink. The cupboards had buckled over the years, some had started pulling away from the wall, leaning out and over, as if they were falling asleep. She put the dishes away and noticed summer light bleeding in through the rotting plaster at the back of the cabinets. The shreds of cobweb tucked inside billowed in the air like dress hems. *That's where the memories went. Through the cracks, into the gray outside.* She watched the gossamer threads flutter for a while. A small cup sat dust-covered in the back of the cabinet. Porcelain, with a ring of ducklings circling it, eternally following their mother duck as she in turn followed them. *Had there once been children here?* Perhaps belonging to the writer? Hadn't she cared for them, then sent them out over the water as they, one by one, grew too big to stay? *Yes, there had been children.*

But now the house was quiet. Once grand, it was now a decom-

posing Victorian monster filled with dim corners and shiny-dark floors that peeled off to winding halls and countless, cluttered, unused rooms. Rooms with floors that moaned without footsteps, where morning fog entered freely and settled into the moth-plucked sofas and cracked plaster. It all felt dark, wet, and exposed. If the house hadn't been completely forgotten by the outside world it would've long been condemned and destroyed. The back wall of the kitchen was almost completely gone and what remained was crumbling brick peeking out of plaster like broken bone, covered over with hastily hammered-up fence pickets. Vines crept through the slats, coming to see what inside was like. *What happened to that wall?*

Ilya's fountain pen fingers scribbled along the edges of the broken wall like she was worrying a scar. Someone had scrawled a message near the broken edge.

1998—a storm passed over the house.

That's right. Screaming wind and stinging rain, but also dust and debris. She had written the message herself. A storm had feasted on the house, and the house, being far removed, and Ilya, being old even twenty years ago if she was right about how much time had passed, had resigned that this was how she and the house and the writer would live. There was no choice really. One would have an idea or a plan to do something about it, to repair it, and this place would take those thoughts of plans, like it did with the past, and scatter them in the underbrush, or in the black water beyond the trees.

Upstairs, a typewriter key clicked. Another. Every key struck with labored choice. Ilya scurried to the sitting room and listened. A shiver ran through her thin frame, a smile in her eyes, disconnected from her grim lips. She decided a fire was in order. *A fire to celebrate new pages and the end of summer.* She fed the mouth of a deep and crooked hearth, expertly setting a flame. Ilya could feel the autumn chill coming before anyone else. Autumn carried cold, and the ghosts of memories lost.

Her large, round eyes reflected the growing firelight. When she blinked back the heat, the lids crept slowly over the wet orbs, dreading the journey ahead of them. Her skin was thin, a glazed window hinting at the interior, blue veins and bones and thin ribbons of muscle. A beached creature from the deep sea. Translucent, alien, weak-looking. But there was hidden, unused strength in her long, lean body. The lone contrast to her pale skin were the faded numbers etched into her forearm. Marks of a war long gone, but not entirely forgotten. She'd been fortified in the depths that eventually bore her here, to this house, and she was strong. *How did we get here? The caretaker, the writer, and me?*

This was a question she asked herself every day. Ilya slid into a hard, wooden chair by the fire, fountain pen fingers intertwined in her lap, and there she waited while the writer worked.

The light of early evening peeked through the windows, casting stretched-out shadows of bare tree limbs, like a trick in a carnival haunted house. The writer was spent, having churned out dozens of new pages in a fever of productivity. Ilya shut the tower room door behind her as quietly as she could, the stack of fresh pages in hand. She shuffled down the four flights of stairs, devouring the new work with her orb eyes, finishing them by the light of the fire she'd built. When she was done, she held them to her chest. Tears rimmed the edges of her lids as she rocked the pages in her arms. *This autumn.* The story, while still unfinished, had been uncurled just enough in the new passages that Ilya finally knew what she had to do. Where this all was leading. Like kindling, the pages had set a fire in her old, cold body.

She shuffled the typed pages into a neat stack and took them to the dining room, adding them to stacks of other pages on the long, warped table, each chapter pinned under a gray stone. The pages she had collected season after season. She took a moment, staring down at the rows of stacks, the paper edges rippled from age and humidity, fluttering in the ever-present draft. She looked down at the book that was slowly being conjured over the course of years, as

if she were peering over the edge of a cliff—*The Book of Briars* being born.

This autumn. Today is the day she would clean the plate, light the fire, and walk to the boat. Just like the first chapter always said. She took a breath, then began moving stones aside, collecting stacks of pages until she held a chunk of the book in her hands. Just the right chapters to begin, to set events in motion.

In the study, Ilya sat at a small desk and copied an address from a notebook to an envelope, then she slathered the corner with old stamps. She slid the pages into the large envelope, along with other smaller envelopes, then moved to the front hall, where she shrugged on a patched canvas coat. She yanked the jammed front door open and marched out against the cool evening.

The old gray house stood at the end of a small, densely treed island, which itself sat at the heart of a forgotten, rock-shored lake. The island's shape was irregular. Deep, black inlets and thick, fingerlike jetties. Paths that once crisscrossed the island had long been consumed by plant life and mostly vanished. But Ilya moved along them by instinct, muscle memory, pushing through the deep vegetation to the other side of the island. The sky was dim and frosted. Autumn. She moved quickly from the ornate, rotting house, peeking back to see the pair of leaded windows that had been thrown open on the fourth-floor tower until the foliage of the island hid them again.

Ilya ducked under a branch, swiping aside a silver necklace that hung from it. The trees, bushes, and overgrown paths on the island were littered with old, worn artifacts. Scarves and watches, rings and keys, pens and bottles, and mirrors and books. The deep green foliage encrusted with gold, silver, and colors both deep and long-faded. Most of the objects were brushed aside and piled up at the edges of the paths, or into the underbrush, but there were newly arrived trinkets that Ilya kicked aside as she moved to the other end of the island with purpose. She disregarded the objects as nuisance,

not as treasure. It was as if they had washed onto the island from places unknown, like sea glass.

She approached a man at a clearing in the center of the island, on his knees, picking the last berries from the throng of tangled, thorn-ridden bushes that stood between them. "The caretaker," Ilya called him. She couldn't remember his name. Names didn't matter here. They were the first to go, names, carried over the black water, into the fog. The berries were delicate and their skins split between the man's thick, rending fingertips, staining them purple-black. Like Ilya's. But his fingers were blunt and gnarled like the rest of him. He stood, wiping his hands on his dark canvas pants. He was broadly built, and tall, even though his body was warped as if he were always standing in a narrow doorway only he could see. To the unfamiliar he may have seemed disabled, broken. Like an old oak that had succumbed to weather or disease. But Ilya knew better. She feared the caretaker because she knew his power. She didn't remember how she knew, but a kernel of fear in the back of her mind rattled as she looked up at him. Somewhere she imagined that his dense crookedness was caused by rigid, angry ropes of muscle that had been held clenched for so long that the pressure had turned them to stone.

He watched her over the thorn bushes with icy, impatient eyes, awaiting instruction. Ilya nodded to him, raised the envelope from under her coat. He wiped his hands on his pants and lumbered around the crop of bushes, following behind her as she continued across the island, like her towering, crooked shadow. He too had waited for the day in early autumn that the book foretold. Not because it meant anything to him, but because she had told him what he'd have to do when it *was* time. Where he'd have to go.

The bird. Ilya looked up and noticed the fat crow sitting in a tree off a ways, hopping from branch to branch, following the pair to the edge of the island, its black-bead eyes trained on her. Its broken beak clacking as it barked at them in strangely human tones. The caretaker picked up a stone from the path and chucked it at the

bird, barely missing it. *Just like the pages told her he would, on the right day.*

The lush greenery and looming trees ended at the gravel and rock-strewn shore that surrounded the island. Ilya and the caretaker arrived at a small green boat which had been lashed tight around a tree trunk with rope. She could see the far shore across the black lake, ensconced in fog. The caretaker waded into the water, then slammed one booted foot into the boat. Ilya pulled the envelope out of her coat and left it on the boat's bench, weighing it down with a stone. She stepped back onto the shore as the caretaker crouched his crooked frame down into the boat and, taking up the oars, began to row away from the island. She watched him lurch across the black water, his eyes on her, through the fog, until he, the boat, and the chunk of manuscript, had vanished.

This was the beginning. How it all would start. The Book of Briars told her so.

She glanced down, and under the water, beyond the reflection of the gray sky and the shadows of gnarled branches, Ilya saw the edge of an old wooden sign, half submerged in silt. Its ornately carved border barely visible. *What was it that the sign said?*

She saw the fat crow watching her from a branch in the water's mirror. It squawked a throaty squawk at her, took off, circled once, then disappeared into the fog where the caretaker had vanished.

Ilya pulled her coat tighter around her neck and made her way back through the dense woods, to the old gray house. A shiver of autumn wind spun across the lake, through the trees, carrying with it what smelled like spice and dew. *Memories she almost knew.* Ilya half remembered something she'd forgotten. Only for a moment, before the memory left her and lost itself somewhere on the island like an old trinket. The ghost of a memory. The sign in the water, how it used to hang from a post at a dock. A dock that had buckled in the long-ago storm. She remembered the sign's forest green letters and gold-foil border. And for a moment she remembered the words—WELCOME TO NEITHERNOR.