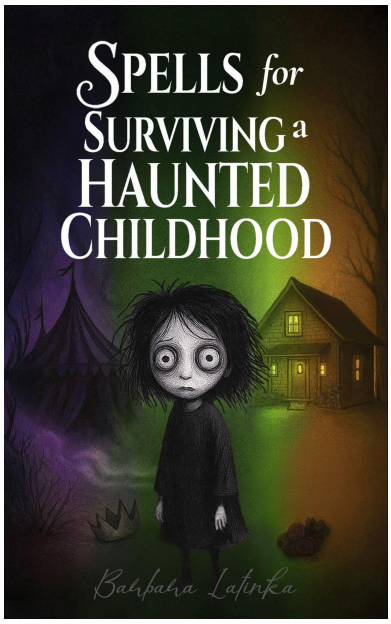


SPELLS FOR SURVIVING A HAUNTED CHILDHOOD

(Part One, Two and Three)

ADVANCE READER COPY

Not for Sale

CREATED BY: BARBARA LATINKA

Dear Reader,

Thank you for holding this book in your hands. You've been chosen to receive an early glimpse into something deeply personal and powerfully universal. My goal with this series was originally a way to heal my own personal traumas, and in turn, I think I've turned my tragedies into something inspiring and worthy of healing the world.

Spells for Surviving a Haunted Childhood isn't just a memoir-it's a survival guide stitched in story. These pages were written with raw truth, eerie magic, and a relentless belief in healing. Each chapter stands as a meditation-style spell, not only for my own survival, but for anyone who has ever carried the invisible weight of trauma.

I hope it resonates. I hope it lingers. Most of all, I hope it helps someone feel less alone.

With love and light,

-BARB

Follow The Magic

@hauntedchildhoodspells

spells@hauntedlight.com

www.HauntedLight.com

THE AUTHOR

Barbara Latinka is a first-time author, photographer, wife, and mother of three. For years, she carried this story in silence-until now. With a voice forged in survival, Barbara brings her truth to the page with honesty, grit, and empathy. When she's not behind the lens or with her family, she's writing words that turn wounds into spells and shadows into poetry.

This is her debut work-and the beginning of a longer spell in the making.

THE STORY

Spells for Surviving a Haunted Childhood is a poetic ‘grimoire’ three part series veiled in dark fairytales and metaphor. The collection is a poetic retelling of a childhood drenched in trauma, but woven by magic. Through a series of haunting and lyrical vignettes, Barbara Latinka shares what it means to grow up shadowed by the darkness, how to find magic in the normalcy and how survival sometimes looks like strange spells.

Told from the perspective of a child navigating pain she couldn’t name and an adult reclaiming her voice, this debut weaves eerie settings, symbolic talismans, and emotional depth into a genre-bending work of memoir and myth.

It is both a love letter and a lifeline-to the ones who made it out, and the ones still trying.

PART ONE



CHAPTER One

The Blizzard That Swallowed Me Whole

They say the storm came without warning.

But I remember the wind whispering secrets days before it ever howled. Maybe I should've listened harder.

I was three years old- small enough to still believe in fairytales, but old enough to know that sometimes the world can break itself without asking permission.

It happened in the winter of 1993, during the great blizzard that rocked the northeast. But to me, it wasn't just weather. It was a creature - a living thing made of ice and hunger, howling down from the mountains like it had an appetite for little girls who wandered too far.

And it found me.

I stepped outside when no one was watching. Maybe I wanted to taste the air, see if the snowflakes would catch on my tongue. Or maybe I thought the snow could carry me somewhere quieter than the house behind me - where everyone yelled like it was the only language we knew.

The snow fell fast, so thick the world disappeared.

Somewhere in the swirl, my red mitten - my favorite - slipped from my hand. I reached out for it, but the wind screamed like a thousand voices, carrying it farther, and farther, until it vanished in the white blur. It was the first thing I lost, but certainly not the last.

I took a few steps forward, calling out for the mitten like it might come back if I asked nicely. But my voice disappeared into the blizzard. The snow swallowed every sound. My feet sank with each step, the cold biting through the thin soles of my shoes, not fit for winter. I turned to look back at the house.

Panic bloomed in my chest. The quiet kind, tight and fast, like a bird flapping its wings behind my ribs. I couldn't see anything. Not the porch. Not the crooked light that buzzed and flickered above the front steps. Just white. I opened my mouth to yell for someone-*anyone*-but the wind stole the words before they left my lips.

My breath came faster. My legs trembled. The snow was up to my chest now, and it felt like the earth itself wanted to pull me under.

Then something changed.

The wind, so violent just a moment ago, softened. It didn't stop-it *shifted*. It began to swirl around me, gentle now, coaxing rather than cruel. I blinked through frozen lashes and watched as the snowflakes started to *dance* around me.

The panic loosened its grip. My breath slowed. I stood still, one less mitten and shivering, but... unafraid nonetheless. The storm didn't feel like a threat anymore. It felt like a curtain-like something sacred was hiding just behind it, waiting for me to be still enough to notice.

I reached out my hand again-not to try to catch the mitten this time, but to touch the wind itself.

And it touched me back.

At first, I wasn't scared. I just listened. The snow didn't fall - it spoke. It moved around me in slow, deliberate spirals, and I could feel something ancient and watching.

A chill brushed my neck, like breath from a mouth I couldn't see. It knew me. I didn't know how I knew that. I just did.

The chill knew my name.

I could hear it loud and clear. Echoing in my heart, calling out to me. Then, from the tree line, a shape appeared out of thin air.

It was just a shimmer at first - and then, a figure. Tall, wrapped in something

heavy that billowed like smoke. I could only see what appeared to be a large, dark cloud that stood out from the whiteout conditions. And it walked without footprints. It moved without sound.

But it was watching me.

Before I could try to move towards it to investigate further, a new sound cut through the storm - the sharp crunch of boots behind me. My uncle. I didn't even hear him coming. His arms wrapped around me suddenly, scooping me up from the snow like I was weightless. His chest was warm and fast-beating, his breath visible in panicked clouds.

"You scared us, little girl," he said, his voice rough in the cold. "Don't ever walk off in the snow like that again."

He turned toward the house and started carrying me back through the storm.

And that's when it happened.

I looked back over his shoulder - and I swear I saw something unexplainable disappear into thin air just beyond the trees.

I never told anyone. Because how do you explain that the storm wasn't the scariest part? It was being seen - truly seen - by something that shouldn't exist.

I didn't know what I saw, but it *saw* me.

Papaw stood in the doorway, his outline golden in the porch light. His arms were open, and his voice was calling me home. The storm raged, but in that moment, Papaw was bigger than the mountain, bigger than the fear. He wrapped me in a blanket and whispered something soft - a promise, maybe - that the cold wouldn't have me.

But I knew the truth.

The cold had seen me. And it had marked me. Not just the cold in the air, but the colder thing behind the trees.

The Chill That Knew My Name.

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Spell for Braving the Cold

Ingredients:

One red mitten (even if lost)
Three deep breaths of winter air
A golden thread - for warmth
The memory of a safe voice calling your name

Directions:

1. Close your eyes and breathe deep. Imagine the wind rushing in your ears.

2. Remember the feeling of being small, but not alone.

3. Say this:

“I remember the snow and the silence, and how it tried to take me.
But I was not swallowed. I was seen. I was found.
I carry warmth in my bones, passed down from hands that held me.
The cold does not get to have me. I belong to the light.”

Repeat until the snow stops falling inside your heart.



CHAPTER Two

The House With Too Many Eyes

Some houses don’t blink. They stare.

The family compound was stitched together like a crooked quilt - four houses scattered across the hills, all linked by blood and buried grudges.

The house I stayed in the most was the one that stared the hardest - Nanny and Papaw's house. Its windows always seemed to be watching, even when the curtains were drawn.

It smelled like mothballs, Aqua Net hairspray, and old rage - the kind of anger that got passed down like antique furniture. The air was heavy, too heavy for a four-year-old’s chest. I remember thinking the ceilings were low, not because of the architecture, but because the house was pressing in, like it was trying to shrink me down to nothing.

And then there were the dolls.

Nanny kept them in a cabinet in the living room, each behind a glass door that clicked shut like a tiny coffin lid. Rows of porcelain girls with ringlet curls, wide smiles, lace dresses.

Their painted eyes followed you when you moved. Some of them had teeth. I used to wonder if they whispered to each other when the room was dark - little secrets passed mouth to mouth, made of enamel and dust.

I always received a doll for Christmas, specifically from Nanny, even though they always creeped me out. But as quickly as it was unwrapped, it was taken

back and locked tight in her hutch with a key.

Nanny said they were valuable. “Don’t touch,” she snapped the first time she caught me looking. “Those are worth more than you are.”

I hadn’t even put a finger on the glass.

That day, she snapped at me in front of Papaw - the kind of venom you only spit when you forget a child still has ears. And a heart.

“She needs to go on home,” she hissed, not knowing or not caring that I was listening just around the corner. “Like a bruise that never heals. Always crying. Always whining about something. I didn’t take her to raise.”

Papaw had hushed her. Not with words, but with that deep, gravelly breath he took when he was angry.

It was the only time he seemed bigger than the house. He told Nanny I was to stay at their house tonight, my mom and dad were fighting again, and he didn’t want me in the middle of it. Nanny sighed in anguish and frustration.

That night, Papaw tucked me in with a kiss goodnight while Nanny silently disproved from the hallway. I usually slept on the couch at their house so I could watch TV, but tonight it was broken from the fight last week. Nanny threw a shoe and busted the screen.

As I laid in the eerie darkness of their home that night, the sound of Nanny’s voice ran in my ears. Am I a bother? Do I cry too much? The air turned colder than it had any right to be. I was covered in blankets, but still shivering through chattering teeth. I somehow fell asleep despite this sudden shiver.

I woke to the sound of the floorboards creaking - not like someone was walking, but like the house itself was settling into a new shape. The air felt strange. Thicker. Wet with silence. Something in the room had changed. I could feel it, like the way animals feel storms before they hit.

And there, on the lip of the hutch that had been empty just yesterday, sat a porcelain doll I’d never seen before. She wasn’t locked inside like the others. She was free.

She wasn’t one of Nanny’s.

She didn’t belong.

Tall. Pale. Dressed in a midnight blue gown with tiny black buttons down the front. Her eyes were glass - not painted - and they watched me like she knew things I hadn't learned yet.

Her lips were the color of dried blood, and a fine crack split her porcelain cheek like a secret trying to escape. Suddenly, her left eye dislodged and rolled onto the floor. The sound echoed through the room, spiking my heart rate and a trembling in my hands.

I didn't move.

I didn't dare.

Because I knew - the way you just know things in your bones - that it hadn't been placed there.

It had appeared.

And something else was in the room. Not just this ghostly doll that appeared like the wind.

In the farthest shadow, near the hall closet door, the air bent. Like heat waves rising off asphalt, but cold. A shape that shimmered without light. Feminine, long-limbed, and impossible to hold in place with your eyes.

The Chill That Knows My Name.

It didn't speak. But I felt it thinking. Watching. I knew this was the mysterious figure in the snow. I could hear the doll's porcelain limbs creaking faintly as if flexing for the first time in years.

And then, it was gone.

The dark figure melted into the wall. The doll stood still as stone. But I couldn't sleep. I pulled the covers over my head, whispering made-up spells to keep my breath warm.

The next morning, Papaw made scrambled eggs. The house pretended nothing had happened. But when I passed the hutch, the doll was there - her eye was still missing. It wasn't a dream after all.

Nanny's voice sliced through the room.

"What did you do?"

“I didn’t- I didn’t touch her,” I whispered.

“You’re a liar, just like your mother.”

Her words landed like hailstones. I could feel my face burn. She scooped up the doll like it was holy and turned her back to me.

That night, I heard her telling Papaw she was putting the “thing in the attic.”

But the missing eye? It was gone.

Not in the trash. Not on the floor. Not under the couch. Not tucked into the folds of the doll’s dress.

Just… vanished.

I didn’t realize it then - how pieces of my life were starting to go missing. I just remember feeling like something had changed. Like the doll wasn’t finished with me. Like her missing feature had opened something else - not just in porcelain, but in the world.

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Spell for When the Gaze Feels Too Heavy

Ingredients:

One blanket pulled tightly over your head
Three soft breaths to calm a racing heart
The sound of your own name, spoken kindly
A memory of someone who saw you without scorn

Directions:

1. Close your eyes and make your body small - not in fear, but in protection.

2. Picture a mirror that only shows the good parts.

3. Whisper:

“I am not a thing to be stared at.
I am not a doll or a burden or a mistake.
I am a child of light, even in rooms full of shadow.
You may watch me, but you will not break me.”

Repeat until the air feels safe again.



CHAPTER *Nine*

The Night The Clock Stopped Ticking

Grief doesn't whisper in a family like mine. It slams doors. It shatters glass. It digs its claws into whatever soft parts are left and drags them into the open.

My parents had been fighting more and more - not over anything specific, just the ache that grief leaves behind when it settles into the cracks of a home. Every missed look, every wrong word, became a spark. And our house was dry kindling.

I was in my room, trying to disappear - the way I always did when voices got sharp and syllables started to separate. I pressed my pillow over my ears, but the walls weren't thick enough to keep out the rising volume. Words like knives. Accusations hurled like stones. I waited for the quiet to return, like it always did. But this time, it didn't.

Instead, the silence broke differently. In a blood-curdling scream. I don't know why, but I wanted to see what caused this horrendous cry. I opened my bedroom door just as it happened.

As soon as the door swung open and I emerged, a sound rang out - *bang* - sharp and sudden, louder than any slammed door or dropped plate. Not a shout. Not a sob. A rupture. A *pop* that split the moment in half and echoed through my bones.

I stepped into the hallway, barefoot, heart thudding like a war drum. The air was thick - not with smoke, but with something worse. With the aftermath. My eyes scanned the living room too quickly, and then not fast enough.

There, to my right, on the carpet, was a weapon I had never seen before.

Still warm. Still humming with violence.

My father stood rigid, his chest heaving like it had forgotten how to breathe. My mother, on my left, was pale, her face slack with something deeper than fear. Her mouth was moving, but no sound came out. The words had died before they could form.

I had walked into the eye of something unholy - into the middle of grief with teeth. Whether it went off by accident or by intention didn't matter. It had been *brought out*. It had been *held*. It had been *ready* to shoot. And I had been just down the hall - a child orbiting the blast zone of two people too broken to protect what was left between them.

I didn't speak. I didn't cry. I just stood there - watching them examine my body like some alien creature. While I was watching the distance between them becoming permanent.

That night, I learned something awful:

Love can arm itself and sometimes, it aims without blinking.

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Christmas didn't feel like Christmas that year.

The tree stood crooked in the corner, a little bare on one side. The lights blinked unevenly, like they were trying to pretend nothing was wrong. There were gifts under the tree - not many, but enough for a child to believe, for one more year, that magic still came if you were good.

Mom made sure of that. She drained her savings, every last bit, just so we'd have something to open.

She smiled through gritted teeth, taking long sips from her toxic elixir between the wrapping paper tears. Dad sat stiff on the couch, barely looking up, his jaw locked like it hurt to speak.

It had been months, and no one talked about Papaw. Not really. Not out loud. His absence was too big to name - so we all just pretended it wasn't pressing down on the house, like snow on a sagging roof. It was our first Christmas without him, and the silence in his place made the room colder than it already was.

New Year's Eve felt like the end of something long before midnight struck.

Mom was in the kitchen, curling her hair in the microwave reflection, her drink can leaving a wet ring on the counter. She wore too much perfume and kept checking the clock. She wanted to go out. Dad didn't. He sat on the couch behind me, arms folded, remote in hand, flipping through channels without really watching, sulking over the money he'd lost gambling weeks prior.

I was on the floor between them, pretending to color in a book I didn't like, trying to disappear inside the lines.

"I told you I wanted to go out tonight," Mom said, loud enough for the whole house to hear. "It's New Year's. *Everyone* goes out on New Year's."

"You already went out," Dad muttered, not looking at her. "Spent all our money on Christmas like it'd magically fix something."

Her eyes flared. "*I* made Christmas happen. Who do you think paid for those presents? I used every last dime I had because you gambled away our Christmas. We almost didn't have one at all - because of you."

Dad finally turned his head. "Oh, please, you're far from perfect, Diana."

"No," she spat, "you made a choice. You gambled away Christmas. You gambled away all we had. I had to beg to keep the lights on."

"Don't act like you're so clean. You're a twelve pack in and it's not even ten o'clock."

I could feel the heat rising in the room. The kind that made your skin prickle. Like lightning was about to strike.

Mom slammed her can down on the counter, foam spilling onto her sleeve. "You wanna talk about clean? Let's talk about your *lies*. About how you were 'working on the road' for weeks at a time while I was at home with two kids and no heat!"

Dad stood. "I work to survive, not to drink it all away."

"You? Survive?" she laughed bitterly. "You sit on that couch like a corpse and expect everyone to call it living."

They spat back and forth for what felt like forever.

“I lost my father too - years ago, and I’m just fine, you need to get over it. Stop being so sensitive!” Dad snapped.

Silence hit like thunder.

That’s when I knew - they weren’t just fighting each other. They were battling their grief. And I was stuck in the middle of it, cross-legged on the stained carpet, gripping a crayon like it could protect me.

“I want to go out,” Mom said, her voice brittle now. “I want one night to feel like a person again.”

“And who’s supposed to watch *her*?” Dad growled, gesturing towards me, pretending not to listen.

“You’re already planted on the couch,” she shot back. “Just stay there and keep an eye on her.”

“I’m not your babysitter.”

“You’re right. You’re her father. Now act like it.”

He stared at her. She glared back.

And then he turned.

Walked right past me - I could smell his cologne and frustration.

“Where are you going?” she shouted as if she were offended.

“I’m done.”

The door slammed. A car engine turned over. And just like that, the house changed shape.

I sat there a long time, until the heat from the argument cooled into silence. Mom slammed her bedroom door as I sat in the same place I was sitting when my dad walked out the door. I didn’t budge. Maybe this was a bad dream?

After an uncomfortably long silence, I grabbed my coat and jelly sandals then ran through the cold to Nanny’s house, feet crunching over old ice, lungs burning deep.

I banged on the door like I was being chased. My brother answered, taller now, already looking like a teenager. It had been a few days since I had seen him last. And longer than that since I spoke to him last.

“Dad left!” I said. “He’s gone.”

He looked at me - really looked - and then shook his head.

“Stop crying. You don’t know what you’re talking about. Go home.”

Then came the slam. Not just the door, but the feeling of it echoing down into my chest. I stood there a moment longer, breathing in the cold, hoping he might open it again.

He didn’t.

The porch light didn’t flicker. No footsteps followed. Just the echo of rejection and a winter wind that didn’t care I was seven.

I stood there, frozen - not just from the cold, but from the knowing. That bone-deep knowing that nobody was coming. Not now. Maybe not ever.

And then I felt it.

Not a hand. Not a voice. Just the presence - the familiar hush that slipped into the spaces others left behind. The Darkness.

It didn’t frighten me this time. It wrapped around me like a heavy coat, like warm breath on icy skin. It didn’t speak, didn’t need to. It understood.

When the world went silent, it was the thing that remained. Not the parents. Not the brother. Not the house.

Just me.
And the Darkness.
Like we’d known each other a long, long time.

It didn’t lead or follow. It walked beside me, step for step, down that cracked sidewalk, with the moonlit sky pressing low. We didn’t speak. We didn’t have to. My feet knew the way. And so did it.

When I reached the front door, I turned the knob with shaking hands and stepped back into a home that no longer felt like one. The furniture sat where

it always had. My crayons are still on the floor. But I could feel it in my bones; *everything* was different.

Everything stood as it always had, except the golden clock on the entryway table. It had stopped working precisely at midnight. Midnight on New Year's Eve. Frozen in time.

Like an omen that stepping into the New Year without my family was an impossible task. I glanced up from the broken clock to realize the entire room felt frozen in time, much like the broken clock that once ticked so loudly and gave this house a heartbeat.

My whole world had stopped in this instant. The ground was crumbling beneath me. I knew this was the beginning of the end. The end of my family. Regardless of the fractures that existed, this family was still mine, still worth holding on to, still worth preserving.

But was I the only one who saw this? Was I the only one who cared enough to desperately hold these broken pieces together?

The Darkness lingered by the doorway as I slipped off my shoes. Dripping from the ice that clung to them.

And I felt - just for a moment - not alone.
Not safe, but known.
Not warm, but held.

My parents had been married for eighteen years. And tonight, it all unraveled in a single event. Right before my very eyes.

This home was falling apart. But the house was still standing.

And now, so was I.

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Spell for When Time Stands Too Still

Ingredients:

One crayon - clutched too tightly
A slammed door still ringing in your ears
A porch light that never flickered back on
A clock stuck on midnight

Directions:

1. Sit in the quiet after the storm - not to silence it, but to hear what's left behind.

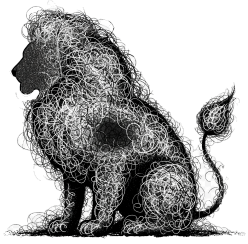
2. Hold the crayon in your palm. Let it remind you: even small things can leave marks.

3. Close your eyes and picture the ticking clock. Say the words:

> "Even when the hands won't move,
> Even when no one opens the door,
> Even when love leaves the room -
> I remain."

4. Breathe. In through what was lost. Out through what you're becoming.

Repeat when you need to remember that you didn't vanish with them.



CHAPTER Fourteen

The Circus at the End of the World

She was already dressed when I woke up. Her hair curled, red lipstick applied with shaky precision. She smelled like poisonous elixir masked in cheap perfume, and she called me "baby" in that sing-song way she did when she wanted something.

“We’re gonna have some fun today,” she said. “The circus is in town.”

I blinked at her from the couch, where I couldn’t believe what I was hearing, still dressed in yesterday’s clothes. For just a second, the word ‘circus’ felt like a bright thing in my chest.

Mom had won twenty bucks on a scratch-off ticket. She waved it like a golden ticket, declaring that she was finally going to do something nice for us. Something magical. She said I deserved it - for being “such a good girl”

But then the story shifted.

After a quick, hushed phone call, she said she was going without me-just for a little while. She’ll come back later tonight and we’ll have the time of our lives. She had someone to meet and I was too little to tag along. “You wouldn’t enjoy it anyway,” she said. “It’s going to just be grown ups talking, boring stuff, I’ll come back to pick you up tonight for all the fun stuff. Don’t worry, baby.”

I nodded even though my throat closed. I watched her apply one more coat of mascara in the hallway mirror. She looked excited, flushed like someone on the edge of adventure.

She left with a flippant kiss on my forehead and the word ‘circus’ echoing like a song I wasn’t allowed to hear.

She walked out into the night, heels clicking, smoke trailing behind her. I was left with silence and a buzzing television.

I didn’t sleep much that night.

Instead, I sat by the window. I tried to imagine the circus: the smells of popcorn and sawdust, the shimmer of lights reflecting off sequins, the echo of laughter and trumpets and roaring lions. I traced out tents in my imagination, drew fire-breathers and trapeze artists flying high in the air.

I made my own circus out of dust bunnies and flashlight shadows. My stuffed animals watched from the couch, lined up like ticket holders. I did the voices. I played every part just right.

I never saw the circus that day. I wasn’t ever meant to. It was hers alone - one more place I could imagine but never step into. I was already asleep on the couch when she stumbled in the door.

When she returned, she smelled like burnt sugar and stale lies. Her cheeks were flushed, and her lipstick had bled outside the lines.

“Too magical to describe,” she slurred, kicking off her shoes.

So I imagined harder.

Because if I didn’t, I’d have nothing.

Mamaw called the next morning. Said she was checking in and that she’d try to visit soon. She always sounded warm, like a fire burning on a cold night, even through the phone.

I wish she were the one who had taken me when Dad left.

She always smelled comforting. She folded her towels neatly. She looked people in the eye and was the exact opposite of the chaos I was learning to live inside.

But I didn’t live with her. I lived with Mom, weekdays mostly. Dad had me on weekends, a split carved quietly after the holidays.

Sometimes, when it got quiet enough to hear my own heart, I turned the

television on just to listen to the 90's TV moms who smiled too often and said things like, “Dinner’s ready!” or cared about the problems their children were facing and stood by them as they found resolution to today’s newest problem, together. Something I had never experienced for myself.

I imagined they were talking to me.

I was walking towards my bedroom door when a glance into the disgusting kitchen suddenly caught my eye. The chipped coffee cup had sat forgotten on the counter. It had belonged to Papaw once, then Dad. It made its way through time like a survivor. I held it once, felt its weight, its story. But no one else seemed to notice. I grabbed it and hid it deep within my closet, safe from sight.

That night, I pressed it to my cheek. It was cold.

And in the far corner of my closet, just past the flicker of the television, the darkness stirred.

Bigger now.

Bolder.

It didn’t whisper.

It watched. Like it had before.

Waiting.

Because it knew something even bigger and darker was waiting just around the corner.

-

Spell for When No One Is Coming to Save You

Ingredients:

One chipped coffee cup that still remembers warmth
A blanket pulled over your shoulders like a knight's cape
The glow of a flashlight under the covers
Three deep breaths taken while no one is looking
Your truest wish, a tiny whisper only the dust bunnies can hear

Directions:

1. Find a quiet corner - a closet works best, especially one that smells like old wood and kept secrets.

2. Turn off every light except the one you made yourself - a flashlight, a TV screen left glowing, a night light shaped like a star.

3. Whisper to your stuffed animals. Line them up like witnesses. Give them names. Let them cheer for you.

4. Close your eyes and build your own circus - from dust, from shadows, from all the glittering things they said you were too small to understand. Imagine lions roaring just for you. Imagine music that never lies. Imagine someone clapping just because you're brave.

5. Sit cross-legged, holding the chipped coffee cup in your palms. Feel its weight. Let it anchor you.

6. Now take three deep breaths. Inhale like you're breathing in magic. Exhale like you're letting go of every lie they told you about being unworthy of love.

7. Hold your breath for one heartbeat more - just long enough to feel the silence. Just long enough to know *you're still here*.

Touch your hand to your heart. Speak these words softly, like a vow only the dark can hear:

> *"I am not nothing. I am not invisible. I am the whole show; the stars applaud me.*
> *I will keep building magic from broken things.*
> *Even if no one claps, I will still dance."*

Now open your eyes. If the darkness is still there, let it stay. Let it watch.

The circus belongs to you now.

PART TWO



CHAPTER Seven

The House Built on Eggshells

Raven's nest looked like it had been halfway swallowed by time and then forgotten. From the outside, it resembled something pieced together from leftovers - beige siding stained with rust, a patchy roof, a porch held up by uneven cinder blocks. Like a project someone started with hope but lost steam halfway through. Like the American Dream never got its final coat of paint.

Inside, it was even more hollow.

The floors slanted at strange angles, like they were tired of standing up straight. Light switches didn't always work. The walls bore the ghosts of picture frames that had once been there but were taken down - maybe after a fight, maybe before one. The kitchen counter had a drawer that stuck. There was noise, constant noise - the television, footsteps, arguments echoing down thin hallways like they had nowhere else to go. Loud sounds constantly filled her house.

Raven said the other trailers and buildings across the yard were her relatives - cousins, aunts, people she didn't always name. The setup reminded me of where I was born. But this wasn't exactly the same. That place had tension, but this place had rules. Rules no one said out loud. Rules you could *feel*. Unlike the toxic feminine energy that plagued my family compound, this energy didn't feel the same, more masculine. More present. Rule number one?

Don't upset her father.

He was a thick man with slow, deliberate movements - the kind of man who didn't have to yell to make his presence known. But he *did* yell. When he was angry, the air turned to glass. Every sound he made felt like a threat, even if you couldn't understand the words. He ran the house like a general, not a father. And every child inside it was a soldier.

Raven didn't take it lying down. She fought back with words that cut like razors. I watched her argue with her siblings - not with tears, but with a fire so old it must've been born inside her. When they made snide comments about her weight or the way she dressed, she fired back like it was a reflex. A dance she knew by heart.

I saw her strength and her sorrow, woven together like barbed wire. That was how she survived.

One night, I stayed over. We were watching TV in her bedroom, both of us trying to forget the world outside the door, when it started.

The yelling.

At first, it was just a rumble - voices rising in the living room, her father's tone loud enough to cut through the unfinished plywood walls. Then came the sharp clang of something breaking, the kind of sound that makes your bones tense before your brain can even register it. Screaming. Slamming. The house shook with violence, not just in volume but in *intent*. You could *feel* the storm.

Raven didn't even flinch. She picked up the remote and cranked the volume on the TV. *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* filled the room with laugh tracks and spells. I glanced at her. Her eyes were fixed forward, but her jaw was clenched.

This wasn't new. This was just *Tuesday*.

And then I saw it.

The Darkness.

Not behind *me*, but beside *us*.

It didn't slink in through the closet or crawl beneath the bed. It stepped into the room like it had always been invited. Like it had *lived* here too.

Raven saw it. I *know* she did.

Her eyes flickered - not with fear, but recognition. She didn't ask what it was. She didn't need to. She just scooted a little closer to me on the mattress and handed me the popcorn bowl.

We didn't talk about it.

We just sat there, two girls pretending the world outside the bedroom wasn't on fire, watching a show about magic and wishing we could cast our way out of this place.

And in that quiet pact, I realized something I'd never dared believe before:

I wasn't the only one haunted by the darkness.

_

Spell for When You’re Not the One Hurting This Time

Ingredients:
A flickering television
One friend who understands too much, too young
Popcorn, never burnt
A room with the door closed
The sound of something breaking in the other room

Directions:
1. Sit shoulder to shoulder.

2. Don’t ask questions you already know the answers to.

3. Turn the TV up until it drowns out the storm.

4. When the Darkness enters, don’t flinch. Just offer it a seat.

5. Hold your breath. Hold your friend’s hand. Hold your own heart steady.

> “This time the pain isn’t mine.
> But I still feel it.
> I still *see* it.
> I will sit here and bear witness.
> I will not run.
> I will not speak.
> I will survive.
> We both will.”



CHAPTER Fourteen

Party For One

By then, I had a reputation. Too wild. Too much trouble for anyone to love properly. Police flashlights had become porchlight replacements, and the sound of a knock after midnight made my stomach clench before my name was even called.

I was failing every class worth passing. I couldn't tell you what books we read that year. But I could tell you exactly how long it took my tears to dry after five weeks of absences in a row. None of my 'friends' asked why. No one reached out to check in.

At home, silence grew like mold on the walls. Dad stopped asking where I'd been. Stopped caring about the hour or the boys or the makeup smeared under my eyes. He stopped coming home altogether some nights. I'd wake up in an empty house and wonder if I was still a daughter, or just a roommate who cost him too much to keep.

And maybe that's why I ended up in that boy's room. Maybe that's why I mistook attention for affection. A text message for tenderness. The way he said '*hey*' with a crooked smile like he knew how it felt to be overlooked.

I followed him without thinking. It was a house I didn't know, on a street I'd never driven down before. He opened the door like it was an invitation to something warm. But it was anything but inviting.

The lock clicked behind me before I could reconsider. The room was small. The bed was left unmade. And his smile changed shape in an instant.

I laughed it off at first and tried to play it cool. Until his hands stopped asking.

I *hate* feeling trapped.

He pinned me with his weight, not his body, but his certainty - like he'd done this before. Like 'no' meant nothing to him unless it came from someone who mattered. And he didn't think of me as one of those people.

But I fought back. Swift and furiously. I called on powers inside my soul I hadn't seen in years..

And the darkness gladly answered.

It flooded the room, thick and heavy. Not the kind that paralyzes. The kind that moves, *fast*. The kind that wraps around your ribs and reminds you where your power lives. My arm moved on its own. My knee connected. Then I heard a sound come out of him that made me feel, for the first time in years, *strong*.

I didn't stay to watch him cry; I didn't need to. I was already gone, sprinting into the night back to my car barefoot, bruised, breathless, but *alive*.

But the loneliness didn't stay behind with that boy. It clung to me like smoke. Thick. Inescapable.

I crawled back into my bed that night, fully clothed, shaking from the inside out. And I realized something no one had told me - something more terrifying than any locked door.

Loneliness doesn't always look like silence.

Sometimes it screams.
Sometimes it walks beside you, laughs at your jokes, pretends to be your friend.
Sometimes it puts its hand on your knee and calls you pretty.
Sometimes it slams the lock shut while you smile nervously.
Sometimes it lives inside you so long you forget what it's like to feel anything else.

I wanted to reach out, but my arms felt too heavy. I wanted to scream, but my throat was full of every time I hadn't been believed before.

I just wanted to be held. But all I had was the darkness.

So I let it crawl into bed beside me. I let it drape itself over my chest like a blanket, press its forehead to mine, and hum something low, something ancient. I fell asleep to the sound of my own heart still beating.

Lonely, yes.

But still here.

--

Spell for When the Loneliness Overwhelms You

Ingredients:
One breath you didn't think you could take
The sound of your own heartbeat in an empty room
A name you stopped saying out loud
A blanket that smells like the last place you felt safe
The Darkness (only if it volunteers)

Directions:

1. Sit where the silence is thickest.

2. Place your hand on your chest. Feel it. That's proof. You're still here.

3. Whisper your name once, then again. As if someone else needs to know it.

4. Let the tears come. Don't fight them. They are the water in which your strength learns to swim.

5. Close your eyes and imagine arms around you - not his, not hers, but yours. Strong. Unmoving. Forgiving.

> *"I am not empty.*
> *I am not forgotten.*
> *I am not the things they did to me."*

7. Let the darkness curl beside you, not to haunt - but to guard.

Sleep, if you can. Breathe, if you must. But promise yourself: this is not the end of your story.



CHAPTER Twenty

Reflection (Staring Through Me)

Moving in with Ian felt like a dream. Not the kind with fairy-tale endings, but the kind you whisper into your pillow at night and beg to come true. Normalcy.

The space smelled like secondhand furniture, cheap candles, and liberation. My name on a mailbox. My key in the door. My silence. My rules. My little corner of the world where no one yelled through walls or lied through their teeth.

No Reta.
No rules.
No more potions.

I flushed the ‘fix-all elixir’ bottles down the drain like symbolic cleansing - like I could start again if I just willed it hard enough. I know they can work great for some people. I’m not like some people. I was done living in a fog. I wanted to breathe again. I was ready to really breathe again.

I am okay now.

Or so I told myself.

The apartment was small, but it was ours. The floors creaked. The windows leaked. But it felt like the safest place I'd been - in a long, long time.

If life's taught me one thing so far, it's that dreams can turn - quickly. And sometimes, they rot from the inside out.

It started with one friend coming over. Then another. Then a few more. Shortly, it was strangers who never even knocked. Faces that didn't ask if it was okay to sit down or crash on the couch.

Ian called them "hangouts," but I knew that word. I'd seen what it covered before, in a life I'd left long behind me. The tension in the air when a door closed behind someone. The fast slide of the hand. The loud music. The long nights. And soon, it wasn't just them.

It was me. I was floating again, slipping into the fog. Not falling - just drifting, willingly.

I told myself I had control.
I told myself I could stop anytime.
It was just to take the edge off.
But control is a slippery thing when you're on a tilted slate.

The dream started crumbling in the places I tried hardest not to look. Ian quit his third job in five months; he said the streets were easier. One day, someone stole from him - money he didn't even have to lose. But guess who covered it? Me.

Just like I covered the rent, the groceries, and upheld the endless parade of chaos that marched through our living room every night.

I started to see it all happening again. The pattern. The cycle. Only this time, it wasn't happening *to* me. This time, I'd let it in. I'd been feeding it. I'd built the walls around it and let it couch surf. I didn't want to admit it - that the boy I'd trusted to help me escape had simply handed me a prettier prison of illusions.

I was at work the day it hit me. Hard.

I'd slipped into the bathroom, just a quick break. Just a moment to myself. And there I was, leaning over the sink, the mirror clouded with fluorescent guilt.

For the first time in years, I looked. Really looked at my reflection. And what I saw...Wasn't *just* me.

At first, I thought it was a trick of the light. Maybe my eyes were adjusting. But my reflection moved - slow, deliberate - while I stood completely still - but trembling in my own skin. She reached up and began to remove something. It was the black cardigan. The one I hadn't realized I was still wearing.

The cardigan of Darkness - soft and familiar. Always there when I needed something to blame. The one I'd been wearing for years without knowing it. Woven from trauma. Threaded with lies. Fastened with secrets and survival.

She peeled it off like old skin, like a secret finally confessed.
And underneath... she looked like someone I hadn't seen since I was small.

A healthier, more vibrant me. She looked *happy*.

She turned, looked into my eyes, and leapt - right through the mirror, straight into something else.

That's when I saw it. A sudden rush. A vision of a life that didn't hurt. A life where stars aligned like never before. Where mornings didn't start with chaos and nights didn't end in the fog. Where the girl who had always wanted to have a mother got to *be* a mother - safe, full of love, and nothing like the women who came before her.

But I realized something else at that moment. If I kept going down this road, I'd *never* get there.

If I didn't turn back *now*, I'd lose the chance *forever*.

I'd lose her. I'd lose *this*.

I stood in that bathroom for what felt like hours. Breathing. Staring aimlessly, but deep in thought. I needed a way out. A new way. So I began collecting my bricks. Not the burdens, not the ones some had stacked against me. Not the ones others threw at me. But the pieces of me I still had left - the strong parts. The quiet parts, the parts that refused to die.

And I began to build.

Not a house.

But a path.

Toward the light.

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Spell For When You Make It Out Alive - Just Barely

Ingredients:
One scar that doesn't hurt anymore
A map folded too many times
A name you reclaimed
One ounce of belief - hard-earned and holy

Directions:

1. Light a candle with your own fire. The kind from inside your heart.

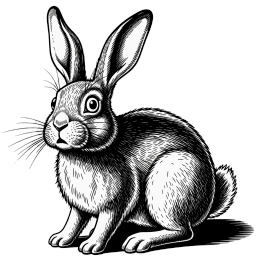
2. Place your palm over your chest. Feel your heartbeat. Breathe.

3. Speak aloud:

> "I was built to break,
> But I didn't.
> Instead, I choose to rise.
> This is not the end.
> This is the moment I begin."

Repeat until you feel the warmth of your own fire again.

PART THREE



CHAPTER *Four*

Pulled From A Hat, Left In A Trap

It was as if she'd vanished behind a curtain. Graduation came and went, and the woman who'd once spun sugar lies at a circus booth was gone again, evaporated like morning fog in July. No warning. No goodbye. Just a phone number that stopped working one day.

I tried to tell myself it was for the best. That whatever spell we had cast over each other had finally unraveled. But some part of me still watched the shadows, still flinched at the sound of her name. I had always believed in the illusion that one day my mom would wake from the fog and want me, that's when she'll need me, and I'll be here, ready to receive the love I always wanted from not just *a* mother. *My* mother.

Months passed, I was doing good, staying focused on my goals, and I was beginning to breathe steady when the phone rang. I didn't recognize the number, but something in my bones did. I answered before logic had a chance to intervene.

It was her.

"Baby," she whispered, like the word itself was a lifeline, "I need your help."

She said she was done with the man she'd run off to the circus with. Done with the powdery escape spells that made the pain disappear. Done being a ghost in my life. She wanted to come back, to be real, to be a mother - for once. And like a child watching a magician pull a rabbit from a top hat, I believed it was possible.

I made calls like prayers. Arranged a bed at a center that had room for the lost and broken. I found her a place to live after she got better, a clean start, no mirrors on the walls, and no smoke in the air. All she had to do was show up. It took everything I had mentally and financially, but if the prize was her love-was her presence-then I'd pay it. Gladly.

She picked a date. I was to drive back down south, to the same house I had once left behind like a haunted dollhouse full of cracked memories and too many locked doors. Once I picked her up, we were to head back north and drive her to the rehabilitation hospital down the road from my house.

I just needed to pick her up unnoticed and deliver her to safety. A disappearing act - in reverse.

But when I arrived, no one was home. I was met with only silence.

The house looked worse than I remembered it-peeling paint like flaking skin. A broken porch light, dangling by a thread, that looked like it hadn't been turned on in years. The ghosts hadn't left. I wasn't so sure that they ever would. A house with this much history has too many skeletons in the closet. The house was empty, but it didn't feel abandoned - more like it was holding its breath. Like it was on to something I wasn't made privy to. I knocked. I called. I waited. I sat in the driveway for over four hours, each one sinking deeper into dread.

I checked her usual haunts. The gas station with the broken vending machine. The bar that served more demons than it did drinks. Still, nothing. Four hours of hoping in the same driveway I once sprinted down barefoot, heart splintering with each tick of the clock.

Just as the sun began to retreat behind the trees, casting the driveway in that purplish light that feels neither safe nor sacred, headlights flooded my rearview mirror. A car pulled in behind me. My heart sank. She's *finally* here. Before I realized it, another car pulled in beside me. Then another. Then more. Sirens blasting with sound, doors slamming, boots on gravel. Cars labeled 'County Sheriff's Office' and 'TBI' were surrounding me.

I didn't even have time to process it before the demands came pouring in.

“Hands where I can see them!”

“Get out of the car!”

“Don’t move!”

Their voices were sharp and booming, like thunder in a valley. I raised my hands. My body remembered what it meant to obey authority figures without hesitation or question. My knees hit the ground. The gravel bit back hard and unforgiving. They patted me down in a way that made my skin crawl, searched the car like a mob of mad men, and started rifling through my purse like they were looking for gold.

Eventually, someone let me speak. I told them the truth. That I was here *for* her.

The officer’s face shifted, not with concern but something closer to pity. Or maybe cruel amusement. He didn’t realize I was her daughter at first. “She played you, honey,” he said, flat as an old penny. “You were just a well-timed distraction.”

Hope is the worst kind of bait, and she played me for a fool.

Turns out she wasn’t running from her carnie husband or her potions. She was running from the law. They told me my mother had been under investigation for months, and she must have caught wind of the coming storm.

That must have been when she decided to send up a flare - me. Probably a dirty cop who tipped her off. He told me that the house, the crumbling tomb we were standing outside of, was a nesting place for substances I won’t name - not because I don’t know them, but because I refuse to give them more power.

While half the county’s finest cornered me like a rabbit in a trap, she vanished again - this time for good. No curtain call. No encore. Just a puff of smoke where a mother was supposed to be.

And a girl who still wanted to believe in *magic*.

Spell for When It’s Time to Shatter the Illusion

Ingredients:

One mirror, hand-held or heart-sized
A truth you've been avoiding
Three deep breaths you forgot you were holding
A surface strong enough to catch what breaks

Directions:

1. Hold the mirror in both hands and let it see you - all of you, even the parts that flinch.

2. Speak the truth aloud. No embroidery, no softness. Just the truth, raw and whole.

3. Press your reflection gently with your thumb. Ask: “Was any of this ever real?”

4. If the answer echoes, it’s time. Shatter inside your mind, carefully. (A whisper will do, even if the glass stays intact.)

> “What I saw was never the truth.
> What I believed was never the whole story.
> Let the illusion fall like glass -
> Not to hurt me,
> But to free me.”

Repeat when you're ready to finally hold what’s real.



CHAPTER Nineteen

The Woman I Was Destined To Meet

The universe has always known me better than I knew myself.

Time and time again, it swept in like a gentle wind, nudging me toward new beginnings. A seed blown loose from its tree-carried far, cracked open by loss and rain, only to bloom in unexpected soil. That's what I've been doing all along. Blooming. Even in the dark. Especially in the dark.

The things I lost along the way-people, innocence, illusions-were real. And the grief that followed carved out space in me so wide, so deep, it sometimes felt unbearable. But the universe has this quiet way of filling what's been hollowed. With proof. With moments. With my husband. And my girls.

I was living life, struggling to prove my self worth. Life was a whirlwind of to-do lists I conquered daily and I played the role of mom like it was a part I was always destined to play.

Only not a role I was born into. This character took time to build, time to curate, and rehearse in the mirror.

On the outside, I was successful by all accounts. But in moments of sadness, anger, frustration, doubt, worry, conflict - it was there. Lurking in the shadows. Standing there. Judging. My small, but still very present, dark passenger.

Each of my encounters with new motherhood woke a new part of me that nudged me to do better. To be better. To give better.

To move on and stop letting the past weigh so heavy - but no matter how hard I tried, it still aches like a festering wound that will never heal.

Hopelessness started to creep its way back into my life.

Ivy's birth had cracked something even deeper open. That my anxiety wasn't just a phase-it was a pattern. A tether around my chest. A whisper that never left me alone.

I confided in a close friend, and she told me about a wonderful therapist she knows from her many years of being a foster mom - dealing first hand with kids who have gone through childhood trauma. She gave me her number and told me to call. And after a few nights lying awake, counting heartbeats and imaginary disasters, I did.

Her name was Donna. She didn't flinch when I cried.

She had a voice like wind through tall grass-soft, but certain-and a presence like fallen snow: gentle but steady. She wore bold accessories and a lifetime of knowing in her eyes. The kind of woman who made you feel safe just by sitting across from you.

From the very first session, Donna didn't try to fix me. She didn't offer me the 'latest and greatest fix-all' magical elixir that other therapists and doctors have pushed down my throat in the past.

She helped me remember I was never broken.

We began unpacking the invisible luggage I had carried my entire life. The loneliness. The constant scanning of rooms for danger. The feeling of being too much and not enough, wrapped in one anxious, tightly wound package.

She explained *childhood PTSD* like a language I already spoke, but no one had ever taught me how to read.

She explained to me that I have lived through complex, prolonged trauma. Unlike a car accident or a medical diagnosis, this trauma stuck around. This trauma latched, and this trauma shaped the way my brain works because of the age it began. My very survival was shaped to conform to my trauma.

She said, “What you’ve been calling anxiety is your brain still trying to keep you safe. You were raised in survival mode. And you survived. That’s not weakness. That’s brilliance.”

She helped me trace my habits:

Why I never said what I really felt.

Why I always laughed when I was hurting.

Why I got nervous in crowds and scanned for the exit signs.

Why I flinched at every closed cabinet door.

Why certain smells would send me into a depression for days.

Why I read people like maps and shaped myself to fit their expectations.

“These aren’t flaws,” she said. “These were tools. Armor. Your brilliance made them.

But perhaps the most important thing Donna taught me was this:

The mother I had been searching for was never going to come. But that didn’t mean I would live motherless. Because she was already here.

Inside of me.

The mother I needed was in the way I held Ivy when she cried.

In the way I tucked Violet in twice-just to make sure.

In the way I listened to Scarlet’s hopes and dreams.

Maybe that’s why I parent the way I do. Not out of fear, but out of knowing. I know what it’s like to grow up unguarded - to be the child no one looked for, the one who walked through shadows alone and learned too early how to build armor from silence.

I wasn't protected, so now I overprotect. I watch the world with both eyes open, scanning for danger so my children never have to. I hold them a little tighter, ask one more question, double-check the locks, and memorize every friend's last name and street address.

And while the world might label it anxiety, I call it a spell - one I cast every day to keep them safe from the ghosts that once swallowed me whole.

Because when you've lived through what I have, you don't leave anything to chance. I carry the weight of all the things no one stopped, all the cries no one answered, all the nights I wasn't missed.

My children will never wonder if someone's coming for them. They will never have to whisper their hurt into the dark. I am the parent I needed - the one who shows up, who believes them, who pays attention. And if that makes me too much for this world, so be it. I wasn't raised by tenderness, but my children will be.

I didn't just need to become a mother to my daughters. I needed to become a mother to her - the little girl still hiding inside me, the one I had tried so hard to outrun life.

The one who sat silently through the chaos. Who bit her tongue until it bled. Who learned to disappear into corners, into politeness, into apologies. She had been waiting all these years for someone-anyone-to see her. To sit beside her. To finally say the words she had needed more than air:

"You did good, kid. You made it."

And now, finally, someone did.

Me.

She had survived fires no child should have to walk through. Not once, but over and over again.

She had crossed those long, unlit nights when no one came to check on her.

She had endured hands that never held, eyes that never softened.

She walked barefoot through emotional glass and didn't even wince-because

no one had ever taught her it was okay to say "ouch."

She kept going even when her knees buckled, even when the world convinced her that her pain wasn't real, that her voice didn't matter.

She had become her own lantern, her own anchor, her own guide through each passing storm. And still, she carried me here. With no map. No compass. Only instinct. *And hope*.

She deserved more than silence. She deserved more than survival. She deserved to be held**.** So I stopped trying to silence her voice.

I was finally ready to let her speak.
–

Spell for Returning to Your True Self

(A sensory spell inspired by Donna)

Sight: Find one thing around you that is soft. Let your eyes land there. Stay.

Touch: Place one hand over your heart, the other on your belly. Feel the warmth of your own body holding you.

Sound: Close your eyes. Listen. Even to the quiet. Even to your own breath. Especially to your own breath.

Smell: Inhale deeply. Whether it's laundry soap, rain-soaked air, or the faint scent of your skin-take it in.

Taste: Place something sweet or soothing on your tongue-tea, honey, or nothing at all. Taste and remember: this body, your body, deserves kindness.

Speak: Whisper something nice about yourself in the universe, and believe it.

Repeat when you just don't feel like yourself anymore.

-Thank you for stepping into the shadows with me.-

Dear Friend,

If these words moved you, haunted you, or reminded you of your own resilience, I'd be honored if you'd share your thoughts - with your audience, your platform, or even just one person who might need this story like a spell in their pocket.

Your voice can help this book find the people it's meant for. Whose ears and hearts need it most.

If you'd like to connect for an interview, podcast appearance, or collaboration, I'd love to hear from you.

-BARB

Follow The Magic



@hauntedchildhoodspells

spells@hauntedlight.com

www.HauntedLight.com