

## Where Nineteen Stood

This wasn't going to end well. I could already tell. But, did anyone listen to me? Of course not. Camping out at Procter's Ledge on Halloween night was, apparently, a great idea. Truly, what more could a girl want?

Procter's Ledge was the site of the nineteen hangings that occurred during the Salem Witch Trials... not that anyone cared to think about that detail anymore. I live in Salem, Massachusetts, the one and only. The town loved pretending its past was pretty and perfect, something that could be squeezed into museum plaques and souvenir shops. The witch trials had been erased back in 1693, curses weren't real, and no one had been dragged through the streets for decades. Still, there were nights where cold air chilled us to the bone, and history felt like a looming weight on our backs.

Seems like so long ago, but you would be surprised by the amount of people that still believe that witches are hiding in plain sight. Sightings happen all the time, whether it's of a screeching black cat or a demented witch flying away on her broomstick. The sane of us have learned to block that all out, however.

Camping out at night, in Salem of all places, couldn't possibly sound appealing. But, of course, I was dragged along. Embry, my little sister, wanted us all to go to Mr. Crowe's corner shop to buy supplies, as if we were setting off to hunt down some ancient beast. All it was supposed to be was a simple night out. In the middle of nowhere. Nothing to worry about.

"Violet come on! Eliza is already there!" Embry shouted as she ran down the bumpy streets of our small town.

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” I murmured under my breath. I was in no rush, I could promise her that.

Eliza was my best friend, and had been for the past seventeen years. We had been together since we were babies, mainly because our moms were best friends since they were our age. With her blonde curls and warm skin, and my straight black hair and pale complexion, we were two halves of a whole.

I took in the crisp, comforting air as I walked into Salem's best store. Made of crumbling brown bricks and decorated with Autumn leaves, Mr. Crowe's had everything we could ever want. From ten different kinds of coffee, to every genre of literature, to fresh new truck tires, we had grown up within its aisles.

“VIOLET!” I heard Eliza sing my name from the cash register as I ran up to hug her.

“I am so happy to see you. It’s been so long! How was New York?” I said as I hugged my best friend.

“It was amazing. I wish you could’ve been there with me! There were a million photo opportunities you would’ve killed for,” Eliza said as she thanked Mr. Crowe and grabbed all the supplies she had just bought. “Are you ready for tonight?”

“Not at all. I have a really bad feeling about this, but there’s no way I’m letting you guys go alone. I don’t know why Embry has her heart set on this when there’s so many things we could do instead,” I sighed as I shook my head and called for my sister to walk out of the store with us.

“I know, trust me I’d rather be curled up on my couch with a bag of candy and the perfect movie. But, it is Embry’s birthday. I feel bad enough that her special day and Halloween are one

and the same. Maybe let's just let her have this?" Eliza said. She sees the best in everyone, especially when I see anything but it.

"Yeah, I guess you have a point. We'll all be together. It'll be fine," I said as I tried to convince myself into believing my own words.

The bell above Mr. Crowe's door chimed as we stepped outside into the cold, snapping air. Embry immediately darted ahead, talking about where we'd pitch tents and debating how many marshmallows she could stuff into a s'more.

That was when I nearly ran into Theo Ashcroft.

"Sorry!" I stupidly blurted out as I pushed strands of hair out of my face.

"Hey, Violet," he calmly said as a warm smile spread across his face.

"Hey," I sputtered hoping my voice sounded normal. I could feel Eliza suppressing a laugh next to me. I wanted to go home.

He glanced past me, taking in the huge bags Eliza was carrying in her arms. "You guys doing something fun?" he asked sheepishly and let out a little laugh. Light brown waves rustled down his tan forehead in the wind.

Embry spun around before I could answer. "We're camping out at Procter's Ledge!" she squealed excitedly as she clapped her small hands together. I couldn't even be mad at her for doing this; she was only turning eight.

Theo's expression shifted into muffled confusion. "On... Halloween?" he asked carefully.

I smacked my forehead. "See? This guy gets it," I said.

"I didn't say that!" he laughed a gorgeous laugh. "I think it sounds like an adventure! Terrifying, sure, but where's the fun in the ordinary?"

"Oh my gosh," I sighed.

Eliza laughed. “Hey, you’re welcome to join us! Safety in numbers.”

Theo hesitated. He glared at me before saying, “If that’s okay with you all.”

“Yeah, yeah of course it is,” I forced a smile as I glared at Eliza.

Theo fell into step beside me as we started our walk down to Procter’s Ledge. Our arms brushed, but neither of us moved away. I looked up at the gray windy sky and said a silent prayer, for more reasons than one.

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The trees pressed in close, their broken branches reaching towards the starry night sky. There were no gallows, no ropes, no bones, as there once had been before. Ordinary if you didn’t know better. But we did.

Embry was the first to break the eerie silence. “So this is it?” she said as she breathed fog into the cold night. “This is where it happened?”

I gathered what she was asking about. Nineteen names I had been forced to learn over the years flickered across my mind. I didn’t dare speak them out loud.

Theo dropped the sleeping bags onto the hard ground. “Okay, let’s set up before we freeze, or talk ourselves out of this.”

“I wouldn’t really mind the second option,” I breathed as I started to collect firewood.

Eliza knelt near Embry, helping her zip up her jacket. “You okay, birthday girl?” she asked gently.”

Embry nodded, her eyes a little too bright. She hadn’t stopped smiling since we arrived, like she has been waiting centuries for this moment. The wind played and lifted her brown hair, as if it wanted to pick her up and carry her away.

“I like it here! It feels familiar!” Embry squealed as Eliza shot me and Theo a concerned look.

I ignored the way her words settled in my chest. The fire took longer than it should have. The wood hissed, spitting sparks back at us. When it finally caught, the flames burned low and strange, providing no warmth. Embry sat cross-legged closest to it, her face illuminated golden. She watched the flames dance around as if they were telling her a secret story.

“I like fire,” she said suddenly.

Eliza quickly glanced at her. “Everyone likes fire, honey.”

“No,” Embry said softly. “I remember it. How it feels when it’s close. How it won’t hurt me.”

Theo stood. “Okay. That’s my cue to grab more wood,” he said casually, even though his eyes didn’t match his tone.

The wind rose as he disappeared, feeding the fire until sparks leapt upward like beautiful fireflies. One landed on Embry’s sleeve.

“Embry!” I screamed.

But, it didn’t burn. The ember sank into her fabric, leaving nothing behind. Embry smiled back at me.

“I think this is where I stop,” Embry whispered sweetly as she stood up and walked closer towards the fire. The flames rose higher. “I don’t belong here, Violet. But, you’ll be okay. You always are.”

“Eliza,” I said urgently. “Tell her to move.”

Eliza’s mouth opened, but no sound came out.

The fire surged.

I screamed.

For a split second, Embry was engulfed. Flames curled around her ankles, her hands, and lifted her hair like smoke. The fire collapsed inward with a sharp *whoomph*, sparks spiraling upwards in a blinding rush of light.

And Embry was gone.

Theo came running back. “What happened?” he demanded.

No one answered.

I dropped to my knees, hands sinking into the surrounding ash.

The wind moved through the trees, carrying the scent of smoke long after the fire was gone. In my heart, I knew, with terrible certainty, that my sister hadn't vanished.

She'd only stepped back into history, doing what Salem had taught her to do.