

# SPINDLEWOOD



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# THE NONBELIEVER

Lilac Black didn't believe in vampires.

Or werewolves.

Or fairies or pixies or sprites.

She didn't believe in Egyptian mummies returning to life on a quest for vengeance, although she agreed it was wrong for them to have been stolen from their tombs in the first place.

She didn't believe in the bogeyman or banshees, she found any apocalyptic scenario involving zombies unlikely, and she definitely did not believe in ghosts.

And she was right.

Except about that *last* thing.

Ghosts were real, but Lilac didn't know it. Yet.

Lilac was more interested in science and math than pondering any potential supernatural spirits. She had been born with black hair, gray eyes, and what her Uncle Bell called *an inquiring mind*. And Uncle Bell seemed quite pleased to have a child with an inquiring mind. When he didn't have an answer to Lilac's questions about the scientific nature of the universe, they would google it together, or head to the library, or ask someone who knew more.

Lilac was lucky her parental units were her uncles. Uncle Beau was her mom's brother, and Uncle Bell was his husband. They'd been in charge of Lilac since her mother had died, which had happened when Lilac was a baby. That doesn't become relevant in our story until later. What you need to know, for now, is Lilac didn't remember her mother . . . but she missed her anyway, sometimes.

And she knew even less about her father. Actually, she didn't even know who he was. Nobody knew for sure, because Lilac's mother hadn't told anyone his name before she died . . . and no one had ever stepped up to claim the title of "Lilac Black's dad." No, nobody knew at all.

But *I* know.

However, Lilac had two people she considered to be her parents, as I mentioned: her uncles.

Uncle Beau was tall and thin and always frowning. He

did something important for the Salem History Museum that required a briefcase.

Uncle Bell was short and fat and always smiling. He was a medium by profession, and held séances in the parlor that faced Essex Street, on the bottom floor of their old black house. Lilac had many times told Uncle Bell quite plainly she didn't believe in spirits or mediums, and that she knew the work he did with ghosts wasn't real. And that the ghosts weren't real, either.

"Oh you," Uncle Bell would always say, with a little half smile that Lilac chose to interpret as his way of letting on that *he* knew he was faking, even if he wouldn't admit it. "Why can't you just let me do my job?"

Together, with Grandma Violet, they all lived in relative harmony in the little city of Salem, Massachusetts, which was famous for murdering witches who weren't actually witches. Life was funny like that, in Lilac's opinion: a town that was all about witches and hadn't ever had any real witches, and an uncle who was all about ghosts but hadn't ever seen a real ghost.

All Lilac's curiosity led her to be a hardcore skeptic, and that skepticism was reinforced by the fact that she hadn't ever seen so much as a hint of magic or a whisper of a spirit. And why think about what *might* be? The supernatural was unlikely . . . and the real puzzles were

everywhere. After all, the world was full of mysteries yet to be solved. There were black holes (people didn't know what happened inside them), tardigrades (creatures that resisted conventional understanding), the nature of dark matter, and quantum gravity. And of course, famous disappearances: Like Amelia Earhart, a pilot who had *probably* been eaten by crabs but had *definitely* never been seen again after she tried to fly around the globe in 1937.

And Lilac might have continued forever in a little bubble of *rational knowledge* and *scientific facts*, if not for the séance her Uncle Bell held in the humid end of August before Lilac started eighth grade. That was the beginning of Lilac seeing the world as it was. The beginning of her belief in ghosts.

Not that she would ever *See* ghosts.

Except maybe under *one* specific circumstance. In a limited capacity.

But let me tell you about it.



## THE THREE ITEMS

That August in Salem was papery-dry in the mornings, jelly-wet in the evenings, and hot as an oven all the way through. Tourists drooped like melting ice cream as they trudged along the cobblestones on Essex Street. On the morning of Uncle Bell's Very Important Séance, the Black family ate at Calvin's Cafe, their favorite breakfast place, and found the state of the air-conditioning lamentable. Lilac slipped one of the branded Calvin's matchbooks into her dress pocket, as was tradition.

"For emergencies," Lilac said. Grandma Violet told her that her mother, Juniper, had hoarded Calvin's Cafe matches as a kid, and being able to imitate her in this one small way pleased Lilac enormously. It made her

feel close to her mother in a way that stories of her life never could.

Then Uncle Beau kissed Uncle Bell goodbye and went off to work, and the rest of them trudged back down the sweaty street toward home.

Lilac, wearing her favorite summer dress (lilac colored, of course, with black lace trim), had contemplated a cold swim in the bay . . . but she couldn't be bothered to move, so she spent the afternoon hanging around the downstairs parlor with a book while Uncle Bell and Grandma Violet got it ready for a *séance*.

(If you aren't familiar with the term, Oxford Languages says that a *séance* is "a meeting at which people attempt to make contact with the dead, especially through the agency of a medium." In this case, Uncle Bell was the medium.)

"Wow. You guys are pulling out all the stops, huh?" Lilac asked. They had brought out the candelabra and drawn the thick velvet curtains. The central air was blasting, and the room had taken on a chilly edge, despite the heat, which was why Lilac was in there to begin with. The Venetian mask that hung over the door—a souvenir from a long-ago family vacation—watched with blank-eyed solemnity as these preparations were made. It was now cold enough for Uncle Bell to light a fire in the green-tiled fireplace.

“The mayor and her husband are coming to this one, and they are bringing guests,” Grandma Violet said, as she arranged the heirloom candelabra on the séance table.

“Aha,” said Lilac, barely looking up from her copy of Plato’s *Euthyphro*. “Thus why you said it was a Very Important Séance.”

“It will be great publicity if it goes well,” Uncle Bell agreed, fussing over an antique piano shawl he kept draped over an equally antique armchair. “And the first bit of it going well is ambiance. Gotta *wow* them when they step into the chamber of Bell Boudreaux Montanez-Black, Medium.”

“Uh-huh,” Lilac said, turning a page.

“How is the tome, anyway?” Grandma Violet asked, glancing over as she fluffed up a vase of dried flowers.

“So boring,” Lilac said, closing the book with a snap. “*So* boring. And also some of their, um, their social practices in ancient Greece haven’t exactly aged well.”

That understatement made Uncle Bell snort and then giggle until his white-bleached curls shook on top of his cheerful head.

“Hmmmmmm,” said Grandma Violet, a little disapprovingly. “Is that appropriate reading for a little girl?”

“Probably not,” Uncle Bell said. “But *you* try to stop her.”

“Gram, I find *little girl* to be borderline offensive,” Lilac said. “I am three weeks out from my thirteenth birthday. I am *inches* away from being a teenager. Middle schoolers sing songs on the *bus* more inappropriate than a book by a guy who’s been dead for thousands of years.”

“That doesn’t exactly comfort me,” Grandma Violet said, and disappeared into the kitchen.

“Can I stay for the séance?” Lilac asked. The psychology of the whole thing was fascinating to her. How Uncle Bell convinced everyone that the spirits of the dead were present, and how his guests behaved, all over a thing that wasn’t even real, was interesting.

“Absolutely not,” Uncle Bell said. His face grew serious, but it was always a bit too sunshiny-sweet to look properly stern. “You don’t behave when I hold my séances, honey.”

“I swear I will!”

“You will not,” Uncle Bell said, putting his hands on his hips. “Last time I let you sit in, you started *laughing* when I summoned that poor lady’s aunt!”

“Please give me one more chance,” Lilac said. She did not know this was a crucial moment for her, a moment in her life that would change everything. All she knew was that it was hot and she was bored, and attending a séance

seemed like a better (and easier) diversion than getting a group of kids together to go night swimming at Winter Island.

“I don’t know,” Uncle Bell said. But he was obviously considering it. Honestly he was the most softhearted adult in the *world*, which was only counteracted by Uncle Beau being a total hardcase. “Do you promise not to snicker when I pass on a message from the deceased to their living loved ones?”

“A *made-up* message,” Lilac said.

“See? That’s exactly the attitude I’m talking about!” Uncle Bell replied.

“No attitude! None! I promise,” Lilac agreed.

“No little comments. That includes not making that incredulous *snorting* sound,” Uncle Bell said. “Can you manage that?”

“No visible or audible disbelief at all,” Lilac vowed, meaning it. “I swear.”

“Well . . . okay,” Uncle Bell said, and ruffled her long black hair affectionately. “Then you can sit next to me like a creepy little Victorian girl. It’s good for the ambiance. But if you do anything to make me look bad, you are permabanned from my séances. I *mean* it.”

“Giving in to her again?” Grandma Violet asked. She had returned with a wooden crate full of red taper

candles. She handed a bunch to Lilac, who started plugging them into the empty candelabra.

"I'm just made of softer stuff than you and your hard-hearted son," Uncle Bell said airily. Uncle Bell and Grandma Violet adored each other, but for some reason they showed it through constant teasing.

"Members of the Black family always fall in love with the mushiest sorts of people," Grandma Violet said, in an exaggerated tone of sorrow. "At least *you're* as stubborn as a proper member of the Black family should be, Lilac."

"I definitely am," Lilac agreed.

The sun set but it stayed nastily hot. Uncle Beau came home bright-eyed—at least as bright-eyed as he ever got—with victory after acquiring another historic artifact for the museum. (He had a knack for uncovering artifacts from the Salem Witch Trials that had been lost to time.)

"Celebratory pizza?" Lilac asked hopefully, after Uncle Beau detailed his triumph.

"I guess a celebratory pizza is in order," Uncle Beau said dryly. They ordered pizza.

After dinner Lilac joined Uncle Bell in the front parlor, where the fire crackled and the air was autumn-cold. When the outside buzzer buzzed, Lilac jumped to her feet and let the mayor and her husband in through

the heavy door etched with the words BELL BOUDREAUX MONTANEZ-BLACK, MEDIUM, along with four other well-dressed grown-ups who looked like they had never had a fun day in their lives.

“Good evening, Madam Mayor,” Uncle Bell said. He was doing his “spiritualism” voice, which was low and dramatic. “Please sit here. And you, sir, here. And you right there. Perfect. I am so glad all of you could be here this evening.”

Uncle Bell arranged it so the six adult guests were sitting on the far side of the big round séance table in a crescent moon shape. He sat on the opposite side with Lilac, a little bit removed from the others. The guests saw a solemn-eyed girl and her elaborately dressed uncle, backed by firelight and surrounded by dozens of red taper candles and gleaming crystals. In front of Uncle Bell on the table sat one very large pillar candle, as well as the same three things he brought to every séance ever:

1. An *athame*, which was a little ceremonial knife that Uncle Bell used for “piercing the veil between the worlds.” The athame had a black wooden handle with an ornate design inlaid into it—a mask, like the Greek masks of comedy and tragedy, only with a neutral expression and three eyes instead of two,

above the letters *SSoS*. Uncle Bell claimed he didn't know what the initials meant, and once Lilac had looked up various things the acronym could stand for. She had gotten results including: Single Source of Supply, Sustainable Stand-Off Security, and Silver Slipper Orchid Sellers (of Des Moines), none of which seemed like concepts or institutions that would have their own custom-engraved ceremonial daggers.

2. A small crystal dinner bell with a silver-plated handle. But the unusual thing was that the dinner bell had no clapper. It was empty inside, so the bell produced no sound when it was shaken or "rung."
3. A little heart-shaped golden locket on a black ribbon. In it was an old picture of Lilac and Uncle Beau. Uncle Bell never took the locket off, except for séances.

"I've been singing your praises all week, Bell," said the mayor. "What you told me about my Wanda was *truly* amazing. I've always thought all the spiritualists working in Salem were phonies, but you have changed my mind."

"Madam Mayor, I am so sorry that you've had bad experiences with the unscrupulous," Uncle Bell said, "but I am very glad that I'm able to help you. Nothing makes

me happier than being able to offer closure to the living and the dead. Except for my family, of course.”

Uncle Bell was not exactly a competent liar in his daily life. In fact, he was honest to a fault. So it always surprised Lilac—and surprised her afresh, now—that Uncle Bell was such a smooth liar when it came to his phony mediumship. His words had a ring of truth. It would have been terribly convincing to Lilac if she hadn’t known better.

Maybe Uncle Bell thought it was a public service: deluding other people into thinking there was an afterlife and that he was in touch with it to help them overcome their fear of death. Adults, Lilac thought, waste a ton of time being afraid to die when it was going to happen whether they were afraid of it or not.

Or maybe Uncle Bell really did believe it. He’d never outright admitted to Lilac that his powers were phony.

The simplest answer never occurred to Lilac at all: that her uncle was telling the truth.