

## CHAPTER ONE



Temple comes to camp alone because a crowd makes it difficult to go corpse hunting.

Her fingers ache around the wooden shovel, and pattering droplets hit her ears as light rain slicks over her back. She's losing steam. Her feet trip over themselves as she weaves through the pines.

Her dad's confession echoes in her mind over and over:

*"You asked."*

*"Of course I did it."*

*"Why don't you dig up her body and find out for yourself?"*

Damn. She can't have nothin' good.

She recalls staring back at her dad blankly. Hoping he'd crack a smile. His chapped lips splitting and bleeding before he guffawed like *You should have seen your face!*

Her dad didn't used to be like that, but he's changed since prison. Maybe he developed a sense of humor. The serial killer thing hadn't worked out for him; no harm in switching things up.

But apparently asking her dad to develop a personality overnight is asking for too much.

Temple slows her steps on the path as she finally reaches the Midpoint Tree. The branches twist and curl all the way up, reaching

the canopy of the woods coated in thick, dark leaves. The rough leaves of the kudzu ruffle against her ankles as she hoists the shovel over her head once again.

A chickadee chirps overhead, waiting for her to get on with it. It clearly doesn't understand inner turmoil.

And honestly, she shouldn't be wasting so much time on it. She needs to hurry up—before she gets caught. She didn't want to believe her dad when he confessed, but she's here now. In the thick of the woods, ankles out. Sap-sticky and ready to bury a shovel deep into the soil.

This camp is private property. No one can see her here.

Temple puts her whole back into the first swing down. Her gloves grate against her palms as her hands tremble, even with her windbreaker beneath her raincoat.

*You know the drill*, she tells herself. Ain't nothin' to do but wait for the chime of the "coins." That's not what they are, but she's called them so since childhood.

She dug around the woods as a kid, too. Whenever she found a coin, she knew she was close to something. Something ivory, curving deep among the roots of the Midpoint Tree. She could climb to the highest branch that would hold her, yank the thinnest branch like a sword.

But Temple had perfect sight. She could make out the ivory, no matter how far she was.

The white smoothness was something dirty, something smelly. Something bloody that she was never supposed to find.

"But it doesn't matter." This time Temple speaks aloud, shaking off those rancid feelings that remembering always gave her. "Because you're supposed to find it this time."

What else would her dad expect, after telling her "*I chopped her head off.*"

Temple puts everything in it as she swings the shovel down.  
Closes her eyes.

Opens them again when she sees her dad's face.

*Clink!*

The sound of metal on metal makes Temple pause, her muscles going rigid. The finches beatbox over her head, finding no reason to hold their breath like Temple does. She leans down to the ground, pressing her hands into the damp soil. It squishes at her fingertips and lodges underneath her nails in thick globs. She presses through.

A second later, her fingers wrap around something cool—actually, quite freezing—and she pulls the iron charm out of the soil and thick, entwined roots. A solid disk, about the size of a medallion.  
A coin.

Branded iron.

That's what the coins are really called. The only time she's ever heard them referred to like that was in the courtroom. It's heavy. The design on the metal is intricately curling, with woven diamonds that twist around the edge of the coin.

It makes a weird symbol in the center—almost like a crudely drawn tree—overrun with snakes and leaves that Temple thinks is way overkill. Her dad didn't have style, but he killed with the Versace of brands.

Temple pockets the little disk, heart pounding in her chest.

*"You asked."*

She was onto something now.

*"Of course I did it."*

So the confession wasn't bullshit.

*"Why don't you dig up her body and find out for yourself?"*

Temple slams the shovel into the ground with a metallic thud, her fingers clenching around the bar as she groans. Rain drips into her eyes, filtering through her eyelashes. The October air is crisp. Chilly.

Another slam into the soil.

*“You asked.”* She never fucking asked. She never wanted to know.

Her windbreaker flutters in the breeze. She dumps another pile of dirt to the side. The coin weighs heavily in her pocket.

*Thunk!*

Her mind goes blank.

There’s the sound of the light rain. The thuds of her shovel. The hiss of squirrels dashing through the bushes. The swish of synthetic material as her jacket sleeves rub against her stomach.

Temple digs until her arms hurt.

*Crunch.*

She freezes.

The heavy metal of the shovel head stops on something—not hard or solid, just . . . different. It’s been hours of searching like this. Temple’s big enough to admit to herself that desperation’s only fifteen minutes away.

She looks at the walls of the hole she’s dug so far—the top just above her waist. Then she looks downward to the base of the hole, where her feet are crooked over the uneven dirt. Her eyes run over the varied browns in the soil that has and hasn’t soaked up rain to a patch of black. Her heart skips a beat.

Burlap—just what gets any teenage girl going.

With renewed strength, Temple clears what she can from around the bag. Her jacket’s drenched with the light rain and her sweat.

The blackened bag is buried deep, but Temple knows it well. Burlap’s somewhat of a staple for her dad. Temple crouches down, running her hands over the fabric and enjoying the rough feel on her palm.

“He wasn’t lying,” she says aloud. Anticipation hums through her veins, along with a thicker, tougher feeling. A feeling like flesh, like mush rushing in and out of her throat. She’s not afraid of

crying; she's afraid of screaming. It rocks through her so fast, she sways and drops her shovel.

The metal hits the bag, and it huffs. Rustles. *Splat*.

Temple takes a step back, her brow furrowing. That sound isn't right.

It's not like Temple would brag about it, but she knows the sound a corpse makes when something heavy falls into its slop. When the bones of the skeleton crack. She doesn't have any choice *but* to know . . . so what the fuck?

With no longer hesitant fingers, Temple grips onto the sides of the bag and braces herself. The body might just be bones at this point. The vinyl lining could hide the reality of the inside. It could be half-molten, decomposing and filled with writhing maggots by now. The smell alone could take her out.

She rips the bag open, nails easily snapping the threads before the cloth pulls back completely. It's no longer in good condition after years of wear.

The scent is faded, delicate. It's much like old meat, like rotten, spoiled flesh—but it's subtle.

Still thick though.

She gags, but only once as she stands to full height and glares down inside the bag.

The low light of the woods hits the inside, and she finds piles of white paper flutter in the gentle wind, fragile and covered with smudged ink scrawls. The rain lets up a little, sending Temple shivering.

Nothing.

She grabs one of the sheets, and it crumbles in her hand. The writing is illegible, chicken scratch even more shameful than her dad's. But there's nothing there. No body.

No skeleton. No flesh.

Not even parts of it.

“Fuck!” Temple swears aloud. The echo bounces back to her, along with the obnoxious chirp of robins.

The body bag is empty.

And her mother’s corpse is nowhere to be seen.