

## THE SILENCE THAT ANSWERED BACK

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People say the fog here in the village moves on its own, as if some hidden mouth breathes it out across the marshes. I used to laugh at that – but not anymore. I don't laugh anymore. Especially since they started whispering my name around with that unpleasant caution, as though the word carried disease.

They call me *witch* now.

It's almost laughable. I can barely start a fire in my own home to keep warm. But truth bends easily when there is fear, and fear has been prominent in this place since little William Fisher vanished in the night and I was the last to see him. I simply told them I saw him wander towards the river. They only heard what they wanted: a woman who walks alone in the night, who keeps to herself, who keeps herbs hung up in the window for the sickness that plagues the village. A woman who therefore must be dangerous.

Tonight, they will come for me.

I can feel it through the tremors of the house – yes, it trembled. The walls and the floor know dread. The one lantern flickers in a strange but almost deliberate rhythm, as though warning me to run. Outside, the fog presses its pale self against the windows, smearing long smudges down the glass like fingers seeking entry.

The worst part is the silence between each footstep, carrying the suggestion something else moves with them. Which they believe I summoned.

If only they knew the truth. I've spent my whole life fearing the dark, not calling to it.

But as the footsteps get louder and louder and the fog creeps under the door, an idea rises. Icy, patient, unwanted.

What if the shadows have been speaking my name?

And what if, at last, they've arrived expecting an answer?