

THE
SUN
AND THE
STARMAKER

RACHEL GRIFFIN

New York Times bestselling author of *The Nature of Witches*

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Also by Rachel Griffin

The Nature of Witches

Wild Is the Witch

Bring Me Your Midnight

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For Mom,

*who taught me at a very young age that the best evenings are the ones
spent with a book. ♥*

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Prologue

Star-Crossed

Deep in the mountains of the Lost Range, in a small village on the tallest peak, a young girl was listening to a bedtime story. It was a story she had heard many times before, and yet when her parents tucked her in and she pulled her blankets close, it was always the tale of the Sun and the Starmaker that Aurora Finch wished to hear.

“There once was a village so far north that most considered it the top of the world,” her mother began, brushing a piece of long brown hair from Aurora’s face. “Or rather, they surely would have, had they known of its existence. But as very few did, the village was rarely considered at all.

“The Sun had always held a fondness for it, though. Nestled in the snow-covered mountains, the small village was the northernmost point her light could still reach year-round, and she thought it an intriguing curiosity that it was so far removed from the rest of the world.

“One day, the ground beneath the village began to shake, and the Sun watched in dismay as the plates of the Earth moved past each other. The gently sloped mountain that held the village cracked and broke, and steep rocky peaks rose up, taller than anyone had ever seen. So violent was the quake that the Sun could hear the terrible groaning of the Earth from her perch in the sky, a powerful, frightening sound that lasted longer than it took to read a child a bedtime story.” Aurora’s mother paused, winking at her. “As

the mountain rose higher, so did the village, moving up and up and up until finally, the shaking stopped.

“The Sun tried to find the village, but a great cloud of dust hung in the air, blocking her view. Impatience ate away at her as she waited for the sky to clear, anxious to learn the fate of the small village at the top of the world.

“Days passed, then weeks, and finally, the dust settled.

“The Sun searched frantically for the village, surveying vast swaths of land, but she could not find it, not even a trace. Then, impossibly, she heard it.

“At first, she did not believe the sounds were real, sure she was making them up to ease her sorrow. But what had started as indistinct noise soon clarified into undeniable cries. The Sun tried to follow them, but still she could not find the source, and she realized with utter heartbreak that the movement of the Earth had shifted the village beyond her reach, surrounding it in jagged peaks that she could not rise above.

“The village had survived, but it was now shadowed in eternal darkness.”

Aurora’s favorite part of the story was approaching, and she turned to her sister, smiling in anticipation, but Elsie was already fast asleep. Aurora couldn’t believe her sister could sleep through so thrilling a tale, and she turned back to her mother, eager for her to continue.

“As hard as she tried, the Sun could not rise high enough to see the village, could not find her way over the severe peaks, and so she did the only thing she could do: she made herself human so she could go see the village for herself. And perhaps so she could say goodbye, for she knew it could not survive without her light.

“Her time was limited, of course, as the rest of the world needed her, but she knew she would be unable to let go of the village until she saw it one final time.

“When the Sun arrived on the mountain, she was wholly unprepared for what she found. The absence of light had created a colder cold than the village had ever known, and a deadly frost had begun to form. Plants and animals, dwellings and humans were covered in a frozen white film as if they were statues made of cloudy ice. The Sun was horrified, and she went from person to animal to plant, trying to save whatever she could. Whoever she could.

“It was then that she met a man who was doing the same, and he offered her his assistance.

“He taught her the burial rituals of the mountain and cried for each and every lost life, and she cried with him, a deeply human experience that moved her to her very core. They saved lives as well. The Sun was able to heal using the warmth within her, and slowly, the cries ebbed as more and more of the village recovered.

“The days were long and the work endless, but the Sun enjoyed the man’s company, and the man enjoyed hers. He answered the Sun’s questions about the villagers, such as how they spent their time at night when the Sun was on the other side of the world, and he taught her what it meant to share a meal and share a kiss and share a bed. And as they shared those things, they fell deeply in love.

“Finite time was particularly cruel when one found oneself in love.”

Aurora’s mother paused, looking behind her at Papa, absolute adoration in her eyes. They shared a moment that eight-year-old Aurora could not

understand, and she tugged at her mother's sleeve, impatient for the story to continue.

"Okay, okay," her mother said, laughing. "The Sun had come to the village to say goodbye, but what she had found—resilience and beauty and love—were things she could not let perish. And so she spent her remaining time with her lover crafting a plan that would save not only him but his entire village.

"It was hasty and preposterous to be sure, a plan she wasn't even certain was possible, but there is nothing quite like a woman desperate with love.

"When her time was up, the Sun took the man to the glacier at the edge of the village and created a lamppost using the magic within her. It rose up before them, a shimmering gold that glowed even in darkness, tall and sturdy and lasting. The lantern at the top of the post contained a glimmering hook that could hold only one thing: sunlight.

"Are you ready?' the Sun asked, heartbreak straining her beautiful voice.

"I am not ready to live without you,' the man replied, his eyes rimmed in red. 'But I will do what I must to save my home, and every moment of every day, I will love you.'

"The Sun slowly reached out her hands. The man took them, and she held on tight.

"I thought I saw the world before, but I was wrong.' She paused. 'I see it now.' She was the Sun, illuminating everything, but for the first time in her very long existence, someone had cast their light on her, and she shone brighter for it.

“‘I owe my life—and my home—to you. Thank you.’ The man’s voice cracked, and the Sun nodded because she did not trust herself to speak.

“The Sun kissed him, gentle and slow, and when a tear fell down her cheek and touched her lips, she pulled away and closed her eyes. She whispered incantations that stirred the power within her, heat and light tangling around each other, held together with magic. The Sun knew she was taking a risk, that they both were—she could very well incinerate him if she made the slightest error—but they had agreed that this was his best chance at living.

“The Sun met the gaze of her lover once more. She paused for a single beat of her heart, committing every line of his face to memory: the angle of his jaw and the curve of his lips and the crinkle of his eyes. She thought he was the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen. Then, all at once, she sent her magic into him, flooding his bloodstream with her light, forming an unbreakable connection between them. He did not cry out when the heat found him. Instead he kept his eyes on the Sun, whispering his own sort of spell, one of devotion and sacrifice and a love that could span the whole universe.

“The Sun felt the enchantment take hold, and the man who had once been mortal now held her heart within him. His life stretched out before him, year after year after year, his body no longer aging. The mountain was his responsibility now. He would call to the Sun every morning, pull her light into the village, and though they could not be together, they would feel each other’s presence.

“The Sun held on to him as tightly as she could, even once the spell was done. She held on because the thought of letting go was unbearable. She knew that one day, many years hence, she would lose him entirely; true immortality could not exist in a human, not even one with her magic, and after he had lived a very long life, his body would be given to the mountain to fight the Frost. Then she would choose someone new to call her light each

day. She had promised the man that his home would survive even in his absence, and it was a promise she would keep.

“They held each other for several breaths, and before the Sun ascended back into the sky, she kissed the man one last time as tears of gold fell down her face. Leaving him was the hardest thing she had ever done, but she would feel him in the mornings, pulling her light toward him, and that would be enough. It would have to be.

“The Sun wept as she was pulled away from him, clinging to his hands as she returned to the heavens, his fingers finally free of hers. She reached toward him, frantic for one more touch, but there was too great a distance between them, and she was met only with the frigid air. As she was dragged through the vast emptiness, she kept her eyes on his until he was no longer a man but rather a distant point of light in an otherwise dark void.

“The villagers came to call him Starmaker, but he thought of himself simply as hers.

“And so it was.

“He was hers, and though an astronomical amount of space had come between them, she was his.” Aurora’s mother smiled. “The end.”

There were tears in Aurora’s eyes, and she blinked them away, reminding herself to breathe. She loved the lore of the mountain, and yet it knocked the breath straight out of her every time she heard it. Her parents took turns kissing her on the forehead, and then they quietly slipped down from the loft, not giving a second thought to the unsettled look on their daughter’s face.

Bedtime stories were harmless, after all. Nothing like, say, a sharp rock or an open flame, both clear threats to a young child. But cuts could close and

burns could heal, and if they were minor enough, they could be entirely forgotten in a few days' time.

Not a story, though.

A story could weave its way into one's mind, growing roots so vast and wide it could infiltrate one's entire being, making it impossible to weed out. A simple story could turn into a great fear or a lifelong dream or a deep wound.

It could turn into anything, really.

Perhaps, then, a bedtime story was not so harmless after all, and one ought to be mindful of the stories one told.

The end, Aurora's mother had said, but it wasn't the end for Aurora. In fact, it was much more like a beginning.

1

Grave Circumstances

Three days before her wedding, Aurora Finch rose early to visit the grave of a man she'd never met. She slipped out of the small stone cottage while the rest of her family slept, a dying fire in the hearth providing the only light. She found her thick wool cloak on its hook, put on her gloves, and silently pushed through the door.

The biting cold hit her instantly, stinging her skin, and she pulled her hood up over her head. The Starmaker had yet to pull in the light for the day, and Aurora held a small lantern that illuminated the space in front of her. Her boots crunched through the snow, and she tugged her cloak tighter around her as she made her way to the outskirts of the village.

Aurora quickened her steps, hoping to be far away by the time her family woke, not wanting them to know where she was going. Especially her sister. Elsie had been touched by the Frost a fortnight ago, and though she wasn't getting worse, she wasn't healing as she should. Aurora had assured Elsie that there was nothing to worry about and that she would soon recover, but there was an awful feeling in the pit of her stomach warning her that Elsie's condition was dire.

Aurora had known the Frost was a threat since she was old enough to read. Perhaps even longer. Their home was closest to the peaks, tucked right against the face of the mountain, and not even the Starmaker could angle the light enough to reach them. There was sufficient magic in the land for them to survive, but the absence of sunlight meant that the Frost was a constant threat, and it had come for Elsie first.

Every night since, Aurora had dreamt of the way her sister had screamed. Every night since, Aurora had woken in a cold sweat she could feel deep in her bones. She wanted to postpone her wedding until Elsie was well, but Elsie wouldn't hear of it. And though Mama would never say it, Aurora knew she was depending upon the glare line that would form between their home and Farren's as soon as the wedding took place. They all were.

The lines were a gift from the Sun, a magical connection between the two homes a couple came from as well as their new home together. They magnified the magic in the land, and every couple received one as a wedding present. And because of the location of their home, Aurora's family was truly dependent upon the glare.

Living in total darkness did have its advantages, though. They had the most land of any family on the mountain, and over time, they had learned to tend it well. Aurora had been fascinated by mirrors since she was a girl, and she'd realized at an early age that if she set up enough mirrors to reflect sunlight onto their land, they could put their fields to use. They could grow certain crops and even sell the surplus at the market.

Aurora had collected mirrors ever since, large and small, rusted and cracked; it didn't matter what they looked like so long as they could reflect what they saw. The Finches' closest neighbors were in the path of the light, and they let Aurora's family lease a sliver of their land for their mirrors. Over time, Aurora had put more than one hundred to use, all reflecting precious light onto her otherwise shadowed land.