



THE
BOOK OF
SPELLS
a private prequel

A NOVEL BY
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SIMON PULSE
New York London Toronto Sydney

A decorative rectangular frame with ornate, symmetrical scrollwork at each corner. The word "Changes" is written in a cursive script in the center of the frame.

Changes

Even at the tender age of sixteen, Elizabeth Williams was the rare girl who knew her mind. She knew she preferred summer to all other seasons. She knew she couldn't stand the pink-and-yellow floral wallpaper the decorator had chosen for her room. She knew that she would much rather spend time with her blustery, good-natured father than her ever-critical, humorless mother—though the company of either was difficult to come by. And she knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that going away to the Billings School for Girls was going to be the best thing that ever happened to her.

As she sat in the cushioned seat of her bay window overlooking sun-streaked Beacon Hill, she folded her dog-eared copy of *The Jungle* in her lap, making sure to keep her finger inside to hold her place. She placed her feet, new buckled shoes and all, up on the pink cushions and pressed her temple against the warm glass with a wistful sigh. It was September 1915, and Boston was experiencing an Indian

summer, with temperatures scorching the sidewalks and causing the new automobiles to sputter and die along the side of the roads. Eliza would have given anything to be back at the Cape Cod house, running along the shoreline in her bathing clothes, splashing in the waves, her swim cap forgotten and her dark hair tickling her shoulders. But instead, here she was, buttoned into a stiff, green cotton dress her mother had picked out for her, the wide, white collar itching her neck.

Any minute now, Maurice would bring the coach around and squire her off to the train station, where she and her maid, Renee, would board a train for Easton, Connecticut, and the Billings School. The moment she got to her room in Crenshaw House, she was going to change into her most comfortable linen dress, jam her floppy brown hat over her hair, and set out in search of the library. Because living at a school more than two hours away from home meant that her mother couldn't control her. Couldn't criticize her. Couldn't nitpick every little thing she wore, every book she read, every choice she made. Being away at school meant freedom.

Of course, Eliza's mother had other ideas. If her wishes came true, Billings would turn Eliza into a true lady. Eliza would catch herself a worthy husband, and she would return home by Christmas triumphantly engaged, just as her sister, May, had.

After two years at Billings, eighteen-year-old May was now an engaged woman—and to a Thackery, no less: George Thackery III of the Thackery tanning fortune. She'd come home in June, diamond ring and all, and was now officially their mother's favorite—though truly she had been that all along.

Suddenly the thick oak door of Eliza's private bedroom opened and in walked her mother, Rebecca Cornwall Williams. Her blond hair billowed like a cloud around her head and her stylish, ankle-length gray skirt tightened her steps. She wore a matching tassel-trimmed jacket over her dress, even in this ridiculous heat. The Williams pearls were, as always, clasped around her throat. As she entered, her eyes flicked over Eliza and her casual posture and flashed with exasperation. Eliza quickly sat up, smoothed her skirt, straightened her back, and attempted to tuck her book behind her.

"Hello, Mother," she said with the polished politeness that usually won over the elder Williams. "How are you this morning?"

Her mother's discerning blue eyes narrowed as she walked toward her daughter.

"Your sister and I are going to shop for wedding clothes. We've come to say our good-byes," she said formally.

Out in the hallway, May hovered, holding her tan leather gloves and new brimless hat at her waist. May's blond hair was pulled back in a stylish chignon, which complemented her milky skin and round, rosy cheeks. Garnets dangled from her delicate earlobes. She always looked elegant, even when she was destined only for a simple day of shopping.

Standing over Eliza, her mother leaned down and snatched the book right out from under Eliza's skirt.

"*The Jungle?*" she said, holding the book between her thumb and forefinger. "Elizabeth, you cannot be seen at Billings reading this sort of rot. Modern novels are not proper for a young lady. Especially not a Williams."

Eliza's gaze flicked to her sister, who quickly looked away. A few years ago, May would have defended Eliza's literary choices, but not anymore. For the millionth time Eliza wondered how May could have changed so much. When she'd gone away to school, she'd been adventurous, tomboyish, sometimes even brash. It was as if falling in love had turned her sister into a different person. If winning a diamond ring from a boy meant forgetting who she was, then Eliza was determined to die an old maid.

"Headmistress Almay has turned out some of the finest ladies of society, and I intend for you to be one of them," Eliza's mother continued.

What about what I intend? Eliza thought.

"And you won't be bringing this. I don't want the headmistress thinking she's got a daydreamer on her hands." Her mother turned and tossed Eliza's book into the crate near the door—the one piled with old toys and dresses meant for the hospital bazaar her mother was helping to plan.

Eliza looked down at the floor, her eyes aflame and full of tears. Then her mother did something quite unexpected. She clucked her tongue and ran her hands from Eliza's shoulders down her arms until they were firmly holding her hands. Eliza couldn't remember the last time her mother had touched her.

"Come, now. Let me look at you," her mother said.

Eliza raised her chin and looked her mother in the eye. The older woman tilted her head and looked Eliza over. She nudged a stray hair behind her daughter's ear, tucking it deftly into her updo. Then

she straightened the starched white collar on Eliza's traveling dress.

"This green really does bring out your eyes," she mused. "You are a true beauty, Eliza. Never underestimate yourself."

An unbearable thickness filled Eliza's throat. Part of her wanted to thank her mother for saying something so very kind, while another part of her wanted to shout that her entire life was not going to be built around her beauty—that she hoped to be known for something more. But neither sentiment left her tongue, and silence reigned in the warm, pink room.

"May. The book," her mother said suddenly, snapping her fingers.

Startled, May slipped a book from the hall table, where it had been hidden from view, and taking a step into the room, handed it to her mother.

"This is for you, Eliza," her mother said, holding the book out. "A going-away gift."

Silently, Eliza accepted the gorgeous, sandalwood leather book with both hands, relishing the weight of it. She opened the cover, her eyes falling on the thick parchment pages. They were blank. She looked up at her mother questioningly.

"Today is the beginning of a whole new life, Eliza," her mother said. "You're going to want to remember every moment . . . and I hope you'll remember home when you write in it as well."

Eliza hugged the book to her chest. "Thank you, Mother," she said.

"Now remember, May is one of Billings' most revered graduates," she said, her tone clipped once again. "You have a lot to live up to, Elizabeth. Don't disappoint me."

Then she leaned in and gave Eliza a brief, dry kiss on the forehead.

Eliza rolled her blue eyes as her mother shuffled back down the hall. Then she bent to pluck her book from the box, but froze as something caught her eye: May was still hovering in the hallway.

"May?" Eliza said. Usually her sister trailed her mother like the tail of a comet.

May looked furtively down the hall after their mother, then took a step toward Eliza's open door. There was something about her manner that set the tiny hairs on Eliza's neck on end.

"May, what is it?" Eliza asked, her pulse beginning to race.

"I just wanted to tell you . . . about Billings . . . about Crenshaw House," May whispered, leaning into the doorjamb. "Eliza . . . there's something you need to know."

"What?" Eliza asked, breathless. "What is it?"

"May Williams! I'm waiting!" their mother called from the foot of the stairs.

May started backward. "Oh, I must go."

Eliza grabbed her sister's wrist.

"May, please. I'm your sister. If there's something you need to tell me—"

May covered Eliza's hand with her own and looked up into her eyes. "Just promise me you'll be careful," she said earnestly, her blue eyes shining. "Promise me, Eliza, that you'll be safe."

Eliza blinked. "Of course, May. Of course I'll be safe. What could possibly harm me at a place like Billings?"

The sound of hurried footsteps on the stairs stopped them both.

Renee rushed into view, holding her skirts up, her eyes wide with terror—the sort of terror only Rebecca Williams could inspire in her servants.

“May! Your mother is fit to burst,” she said through her teeth. “Mind your manners and get downstairs now.”

A tortured noise sounded from the back of May’s throat. Then she quickly gave Eliza a kiss on the cheek, squeezing her hands tightly. “I love you, Eliza. Always remember that. No matter what happens.”

Then she released Eliza and was gone.

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An imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

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alloy**entertainment**

Produced by Alloy Entertainment
151 West 26th Street, New York, NY 10001

The text of this book was set in Filosofia.

Manufactured in the United States of America
2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

CIP Data is available from the Library of Congress.
ISBN-13 TK
ISBN-10 TK