



YASMINE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

GALENORN

WITCH'S WEB

A Paranormal
Women's Fiction
Novel



A MOONSHADOW BAY NOVEL

WITCH'S WEB

MOONSHADOW BAY

BOOK 8

YASMINE GALENORN



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WITCH'S WEB

A Moonshadow Bay Novel

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CONTENTS

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Welcome to Witch's Web](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Playlist](#)

[Biography](#)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Welcome back to January Jaxson's world—the world of Moonshadow Bay.

Thanks to my usual crew: Samwise, my husband, Andria and Jennifer—without their help, I'd be swamped. To the women who have helped me find my way in indie, you're all great, and thank you to everyone. To my wonderful cover artist, Ravven, for the beautiful work she's done. Thanks to my beloved niece Jade Fyrenis and my best friend Carol Shannon, two of the most remarkable and magickal women I know.

Also, my love to my furbles, who keep me happy. My heart is over the rainbow with my Rainbow Girls, and here in the present with our current babies. My most reverent devotion to Mielikki, Tapio, Ukko, Rauni, and Brighid, my spiritual guardians and guides. My love and reverence to Herne, and Cernunnos, and to the Fae, who still rule the wild places of this world. And a nod to the Wild Hunt, which runs deep in my magick, as well as in my fiction.

You can find me through my website at Galenorn.com and be sure to sign up for my [newsletter](#) to keep updated on all my latest releases and to access the VIP section of my website, which has all sorts of perks on it! You can find my advice on writing, discussions about the books, and general ramblings on my [YouTube Channel](#) and my [blog](#). If you liked this book, I'd be grateful if you'd leave a review—it helps more than you can think.

Brightest Blessings,

~The Painted Panther~

~Yasmine Galenorn~

WELCOME TO WITCH'S WEB

At Conjure Ink, we're about to head out on a hunt for Bigfoot. Hank's gathered evidence that points to a likely spot up on Mount Baker. But when our crew goes out on a week-long camping trip searching for the elusive creature, we get far more than we bargained for. And what begins as a simple expedition turns into a fight for survival in the depths of the Cascade wilderness.

Reading Order for the Moonshadow Bay Series:

- Book 1: Starlight Web
- Book 2: Midnight Web
- Book 3: Conjure Web
- Book 4: Harvest Web
- Book 5: Shadow Web
- Book 6: Weaver's Web
- Book 7: Crystal Web
- Book 8: Witch's Web
- Book 9: Cursed Web (forthcoming)

CHAPTER ONE

I stared at myself in the mirror. “It’s all right. Everything will be okay. Tonight, everything’s going to go smoothly and I won’t make a fool of myself. I refuse to embarrass Rowan or Killian.”

Even as I said the words, I wasn’t sure how much I believed them. I wasn’t usually this nervous, but tonight I was being inducted into the Royal Order of the Wand and Sword—a prestigious witchblood organization that ran adjunctly to the Crown Magika. It wasn’t part of the paramilitary side of things, but it was ancient—started thousands of years ago by some of the first witchblood families to rise to prominence.

I wasn’t exactly sure how I felt about joining, but Rowan—my grandmother—was a longtime member and she wanted me to belong. So I decided to humor her, and when she pointed out it was a good way to establish connections with some of the more powerful members of the witchblood community in the area, it made more sense.

Killian was going with me. Even though he was a wolf shifter he would be allowed to attend events since we were engaged, although he wouldn’t be allowed into regular meetings. Once we were actually married, he’d be able to

apply for adjunct membership to attend all the balls and parties.

I studied the dresses I had bought for the occasion. I usually was good about making up my mind, but at the store, I couldn't decide between two that looked like they might fit the occasion. One was a cobalt blue sleeveless gown with a square neckline and an empire waist. It was pretty, dotted with tiny crystal beads, but it didn't feel like me now that I had it hanging in my closet. It still had its tags on, so I could return it if I decided not to wear it. I had bought it because it seemed like a dress one might wear to a fancy ball, but now, I wasn't all that excited over it.

The other, I liked a lot, but I wasn't sure if it was appropriate for the occasion. It wasn't a full-length gown, but tea length. Plum purple, it was a retro-1950s swing style in chiffon. With cap sleeves and a sweetheart neckline, it cinched in at the waist with a side-sash, and flared into a swing skirt. The style was much more "me" and I knew I'd be more comfortable in it, but I wasn't sure it was fancy enough.

"The hell with it," I said, hanging the blue one in my closet where it would be safe from stray cat hair. "I'm going to be comfortable. If I don't fit, then so be it."

I could dress it up by taking the sash off and adding a silver belt, topping it with a silver and black shawl. I'd wear a pair of strappy silver sandals with three-inch platform heels, and a flowing hair style.

Relieved that I'd made up my mind, I dug out a silver clutch. Finally, with nothing left to do but bathe and dress, I went downstairs to eat lunch. Why my nerves were so on edge confounded me, but they were, and I was certain that frozen pizza and another latte would solve that.



THE PIZZA WAS PERSONAL SIZE, THANK GODS, OR I WOULD have eaten every slice and bloated myself up. As I finished off the last piece, my phone rang. I glanced at the caller ID. It was Ari, my best friend.

“Hey, woman, what’s up? I haven’t heard from you in a couple weeks.” I missed hanging out with Ari, but given her marriage and my engagement and the fact that both of us worked demanding jobs, we weren’t able to catch up as often as we wanted.

“I know. It’s wedding season and I’m slammed. But I wanted to see if you were free on Sunday. I have something I need to talk about—nothing regarding us, so don’t worry—but I need you to be my sounding board. I can’t hear myself think.”

She sounded preoccupied. We’d both recently had run-ins with the Mothman and I wondered if it was still affecting her memory. She’d had several memory lapses since then, and though Dr. Fairsight told her that it was nothing to worry about, I knew Ari was concerned.

“Are you all right? I can make time this afternoon if it’s—”

“No, not an emergency, so don’t worry over me. It’s nothing about Meagan’s health, either. It’s just...something to do with my family has come up and I’m not sure exactly how to approach it. I’m not even sure what to think about it. And on a situation like this, I want an outside opinion. Meagan’s too close to the subject, given she’s my wife. Sunday would be best for me, if you have some time you can spare.”

I chewed on my inner cheek. I could hear the worry in her voice, but if she said it wasn't an emergency, I believed her. "Sunday's fine, I think. Let me grab my date book. Can I call you back in a couple of minutes? I'm just finishing up lunch. I just ate an entire personal-size pizza and I could eat two more, I'm so nervous."

"That's right! Tonight's the Witch's Ball."

"Yes, and I've finally decided what to wear, regardless of whether it's considered proper attire. All right, give me a couple and I'll ring you right back." I punched the end talk button, carried my dishes to the sink, rinsed them and put them in the dishwasher, then headed to my office.

As I settled at my desk and opened my planner, I noticed that tomorrow was the new moon. I was planning to perform a spell then, to uncover a secret that was driving me nuts, but I'd think about that later. I called Ari back.

"Sunday's clear. The only thing I need to do is pack for the camping trip. If you can come over in the afternoon, you can help me." I dreaded packing. Though I was looking forward to the camping trip on one level, I was also nervous. I wasn't the camping type. And I had no idea of what to pack. Although Tad, my boss, had promised to bring all the tents and gear, so at least we didn't have to worry about any of that.

"How about two P.M.? Would that work?"

"That's fine." I penciled her in at two, smiling.

"Remember when we were kids and all we had to do was run over and knock on each other's door and say, 'Want to go play?' Those were easier days, for sure."

"I remember," Ari said with a laugh. "Adulting is hard. But at least we live in the same town again. I missed you all

those years you were married to Ellison and living in Seattle.”

“I missed me too,” I said. “You think he’s behaving himself? The cops would tell me if they let him go free from house arrest, wouldn’t they? Considering he attacked me?”

“I would think so. But maybe you should call the cops and ask them.”

“I’ll think about it,” I said. “See you Sunday!”

“Good luck at the ball, Cinderella. Just don’t leave your glass slipper on the stairs.”

“I’ve already got a prince, I don’t need another,” I said with a laugh. “My love to Meagan.”

“Give Killian a smooch from me.” Ari hung up.

I sighed and glanced at the clock. Killian would be home by six-thirty. The ball started at eight. It was two-fifteen now. I had taken the day off to prepare, and now I wished I hadn’t. I glanced outside. It was a balmy sixty-four degrees and partially overcast, a typical June day for western Washington. Deciding to occupy myself by washing a couple loads of laundry and cleaning the kitchen, I gritted my teeth and dove in.



I HAD JUST FINISHED BATHING WHEN KILLIAN ARRIVED HOME, bringing his plastic-covered tux with him. I gave him a quick kiss before he went to jump in the shower and wash his hair.

“Go, now. And can you groom your beard? It’s getting a bit...” I blurted out, then winced. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—”

Killian had been growing a beard. It had reached a length that was a little beyond my comfort level, but since it was his face and his beard, I hadn't said much about it until now. But tonight was important to me and my mouth was working faster than my brain.

“A little too ZZ Top?” he asked with a grin. Killian was a moderately tall man—around six feet, with wheaten hair that fell to his shoulder blades in a tangle of curls. He was stocky, muscled and strong, and he had the most gorgeous green eyes that matched my own. He was far older chronologically than I was, given he was a shifter and had been born on May 8, 1900, but we were close in age in other ways.

“Yeah, thanks. I didn't mean to criticize—”

“No problem. I just wanted to try it out for a while. But Star, one of Mrs. Jefferson's cats, decided that my beard was a feather toy today and almost gave me a close shave with her claws. I had already planned on going back to a close beard and mustache.” He pulled me into his arms and gave me a long kiss, his beard and mustache tickling my face. Then he let go and stripped out of his clothes. Killian was a veterinarian, and I loved that about him. It had been my experience that men who loved animals tended to be good hearted in general.

As he headed into the shower, I sent a silent thank-you to Star and wished her many happy playtimes. It was far better for someone to make up their own mind rather than be cajoled by their mate on matters of personal grooming.

I toweled off and settled down at my vanity, using my detangling brush to brush out my hair. My own hair was back to being raven black—its original color. I'd asked Ari to dye it back a couple weeks ago, and she had added highlights of blue and purple to make it resemble a raven or a crow. I pulled out

my blow dryer and, after drying my hair, gathered back layers on both sides into a braid that would hang atop the rest of the length. I fastened the top with the antique silver hair barrette that Killian had bought for me. It was beautiful and ornate, and looked like it belonged in some period piece like *Downton Abbey*. Only I didn't have a lady's maid to do my hair for me.

After styling my hair, I applied my makeup. I went for blues and purples—a heavy runway eye, and a blackberry lip lacquer. The look suited me. I'd had my nails done a few days before with gel polish, and had chosen black with glitter to resemble stars against the night sky.

As I was dressing, Killian came out of the shower. I stared at him, wondering if we had time for a quickie. He was hot. He had scars from all the animals he had tried to help, and a scar along his cheek from his brow down to near his mouth that gave him a roguish look. At one time, he'd been trying to help a lynx, and it had slashed at him before he managed to calm it down. The scars had healed well, but were still visible. He might be a wolf shifter, but he had a feline feel to him, though he was extremely pack-oriented.

Every time I saw him naked, I wanted to jump his bones. He was as good and attentive a lover as Ellison had been bad and derisive. Killian made me feel desirable. I never felt like he was looking at another woman, comparing me to her. Oh, we both noticed attractive people, but my jealousies had faded during the past year and a half we'd been together.

“You checking out my junk, lady?” he asked, laughing, wagging his cock at me.

I grinned. “Don't I always? You've got the best junk around. I just wish we had time before the ball, but we don't.”

“We could skip it and stay home,” he said, but I knew he was joking. Killian knew how important tonight was for me, and he’d even been the one to suggest he wear a tux after Rowan had warned him that it was a formal affair. But he could have begged out of it, given he was a shifter and not witchblood.

I walked over to him and turned around. “Zip me, please?”

He slowly zipped my dress, pausing to press his lips to the nape of my neck. I started to lean back into his arms with my back against his chest, but he stopped me.

“I’m still damp. You don’t want your dress spotted with water. By the way, that looks good on you. I like it.” He finished toweling off, used my blow dryer to dry his hair back into a curly mane, then started to dress.

“Thanks,” I said, sitting on the edge of the bed so I could buckle my sandals. I was a size sixteen now—I’d barely been able to keep my body at a 14 while I was with Ellison and he never let me forget that I didn’t fit his idea of the ideal wife. But my body seemed comfortable at a size 16 and I was settling in, my weight evening out at this point.

I was also going to the gym a couple times a week to get into better shape. I didn’t care if I lost weight, I just wanted to be fit and healthy enough to run a mile without getting winded and to go hiking without my knees complaining. I was also taking a tai chi class in preparation for a beginner’s karate class. I wanted to learn some martial arts because several times now, my job had proven dangerous enough for me to learn how to defend myself on a physical level as well as a magical one.

“So, how long does this shindig last?” Killian slid into his boxers and then his slacks. He zipped them up halfway,

stopping to put on his shirt and tuck it in. The tux looked good on him, even if it did look out of place. He slid on a low-cut vest over his shirt, buttoning it up. I held out his jacket and he slid his arms into the sleeves. He straightened the peak lapels and looked as dapper as I had ever seen him. A pair of cap-toed shoes, a black bow tie, and silver cufflinks completed the look.

“Am I ready for the ball?” he asked, spinning.

I nodded. “You look mighty fine, Mr. O’Connell. Again, thank you for going with me. I honestly don’t know what to expect, but whatever it is, I hope we don’t end up regretting this. Rowan said we should be fine. Just steer clear of politics, especially on the local level.” I draped my shawl around my shoulders and picked up my clutch. “All right, I guess I’m ready.”

We headed downstairs, where we fed Xi and Klaus before leaving, and then out to Killian’s Expedition. As we eased out of the driveway, I once again hoped this wasn’t a mistake.

CHAPTER TWO

The Bellagimo Dance Hall was lit up like it was New Year's. Litha—Summer Solstice—was on the twenty-first, but the gala was tonight—the sixteenth—to make it easier on those who had to work during the week. Members came from all around the area, since the Royal Order of the Wand and Sword's next nearest branch was way down in Seattle. Our division was smaller than Seattle's, given the size of the metropolitan area down south, but we still had a sizable membership. Rowan had told me that it was standing at forty-five, and that was only the actual members. The number of witchblood in our area was far higher.

A valet waited to take the car and Killian handed over his keys, frowning. After the young man drove off, he whispered to me, "I don't trust valet parking services."

"I think they're bonded," I whispered back. "Your car will be all right."

"I know, but..." He trailed off as another car drove up and Rowan got out of the driver's side. She was alone. She handed her keys to another valet, who handed her the ticket stub.

"No Tarvish?" I asked, glancing around.

My paternal grandmother was getting it on with a Funtime demon named Tarvish. He was the only one of his kind,

having been created as a thought form in a Dungeons and Dragons game. I had accidentally downloaded him into my computer, where he had escaped into our reality. He wasn't a bad demon. In fact, he was funny and cute in his own *Hellboy*-type way. But if we tried to send him back, he would cease to exist and none of us wanted that. My grandmother took him home with her and they had developed an odd but romantic relationship.

“I don't think the rest of the members would be keen on me bringing a demon to the ball. Not even one created as a thought form. Also, Tarvish took one look at tuxedos online and that sealed that. He's out in my garden this evening, enjoying the baseball game on the laptop.” She grinned, showing no angst over having left her boyfriend behind.

“Baseball? He's into baseball now?” I stared at her. Tarvish loved kittens and cookies and crossword puzzles. Now, he was adding baseball to the mix?

“Apparently so much so that he wants to form a league here in Moonshadow Bay. I told him fine, but they can't practice in my yard. I don't need anybody running roughshod over my flowers or herbs, or breaking any windows.”

Rowan had been around during the founding of Moonshadow Bay and I had recently learned she may have had a crush on my maternal great-grandmother, but I wasn't sure and I decided I wasn't going to ask. My lineage was already odd enough. I didn't want to confuse matters with potential facts that might make everything even weirder.

Killian offered an arm to each of us. “Allow me to escort both of you in?”

“My, you are a silver-tongued wolf, aren't you?” Rowan said, grinning. “January, you found a keeper. Don't go doing

anything you'll regret."

"I don't plan on it," I said.

The Bellagimo Dance Hall was basically a massive space with a stage that was rented out to anybody who wanted a place to hold a reception, gala, or other such party. A number of wedding couples booked it for their reception.

"Well, they outdid themselves this year," Rowan said, looking around.

The dance floor was spotless, highly polished light oak. Twenty tables were spread around the room, hugging the edges. The tables were covered by a teal blue cloth, and vases filled with silver, white, and purple roses along with sprigs of maidenhair fern adorned each table. To the far right was a long buffet with dishes and silverware on one end. The goblets were already on the table—three per person. From the looks of the couples who had already been to the buffet, the goblets were for white wine, red wine, and water, respectively.

"When do we eat?" Killian asked, sniffing the air. "The spread smells good, I'll give them that."

Now that he mentioned it, I took a deep breath, setting off my salivary glands. The air smelled of roast beef and gravy, savory lasagna, and yeasty rolls. The buffet held everything I could hope for, and the dessert table—near the main buffet—was loaded as well with cakes and cookies and what appeared to be a massive trifle.

"Oh gods, I want to eat," I said, staring at the food. "I had frozen pizza for lunch but that's gone the way of the buffalo."

"Bison are making a comeback," Killian said. "Good meat. Lean and hearty."

“Bison, schmishon. Give me some lasagna now!” I laughed, glancing around to see who else was here that I might know. But I recognized no one except the top three officers of the Witches Guild. And I wasn’t exactly on their friends list. I’d have to say hello before the night was over, but until pressed, I decided to avoid eye contact so as not to encourage them to come over.

Rowan noticed my behavior. “Stop that. You’re being childish,” she chided. “You know perfectly well that there’s no way in hell this event could happen without the help of Marnie Brolen. I know you two don’t like each other, but tonight you *will* be polite.”

I glanced at Killian, who was unsuccessfully trying to repress a smile. I elbowed him lightly in the side.

“Stop that.” To Rowan, I said, “All right. I’ll behave.” I broke loose from Killian’s arm and walked forward as gracefully as I could, extending my arm. “Marnie, how lovely to see you.”

She gave me the once-over and nodded. “January, I heard that you’re being inducted to the Order tonight. Congratulations. Granted, this should have happened when you were eighteen—but then, your mother would have to have joined and she refused her position here. But that’s in the past. I’m glad to see you’re taking your proper place with us now.”

I forced myself to continue smiling. Marnie Brolen had a stick up her butt, but I would be polite. She was a powerful witch with a lot of connections, and she ran the Witches Guild, of which I was a junior member. I had loved my mother, and was sure she had reasons for the things she did, but right now I found myself wishing she had played with others better.

“Yes, well, I’m not sure why my mother chose the path she did, but as you know, there’s no real way I can find out now that she’s *dead*.” Actually, there was, but I wasn’t going to start discussing the Ladies with Marnie. The women in my family had an edge when it came to spirit guides, although sometimes it could be a pain in the ass.

When they died, most of the women who descended from Colleen Fletcher—my great-grandmother—became spirit guides who watched over the younger women in our lineage. I had been an only child, but I sometimes wondered about my cousins and whether I had any female relatives who also had a familial spirit guide. My own was my great-aunt Esmara, who had shown herself to me when I returned home to Moonshadow Bay. She had informed me that my mother couldn’t speak to me until she settled into her death state, but that she—Esmara—would guide me through the rest of my life.

My aunt Teran’s Lady was her aunt Prue. Teran was seventy-one, and she lived a few blocks away from me. I adored her and we hung out together, though we had vastly different personalities.

Marnie remained stoic, though I detected a faint gleam of guilt in her eyes. “Your mother was a good woman. I don’t mean to besmirch her name in any way, January. But I am glad you decided to join us. We can use strong women in the organization, and I think you’ll find it helpful as you go along. I hope you enjoy the festivities.” She turned back to her husband, murmured something, and they moved along.

I turned back to Rowan. “Happy? I said hello.”

But I couldn’t be too upset. The very fact that Marnie and I had made it through an interaction without arguing was a

victory for both of us.

Rowan just shook her head. “Oh, girl, never change. You’re one of a kind.”

“I second that,” Killian said. “So, what’s the order of business?”

“We should eat first,” Rowan said, pointing at the buffet. “Then they’ll induct the new members, and then dancing and a midnight ritual. It’s mostly symbolic given the actual ritual will be in the park on the actual Solstice, but we always try to honor the holidays at the Witch’s Ball.”

“I’ll be gone on the Solstice,” I said. “We’ll be up on Mount Baker, in the Lilac Grove campground hunting for Bigfoot.”

“I pray you don’t find him,” Rowan muttered. “I still think you should talk Tad out of the trip. It’s not safe and regardless of what creatures you have already encountered. From what I know of sasquatch, you do *not* want to run into him.”

“Hey, we took on Mothman.” I grinned at her.

“But did you *win*?” Rowan asked, pointedly.

“Well, no...not really.” I shrugged. “But we aren’t out to capture Bigfoot. Unless we’re talking about on film. Mothman was looking to harm the community from what we could tell. And we learned a valuable lesson. Some foes you cannot defeat and you just have to hope they go away. Luckily, he did. Bigfoot’s not hurting us. We’re gathering information as opposed to taking him on.”

“Well, make sure you don’t make an enemy out of him. As far as Mothman goes, I hope he never returns to Moonshadow Bay. However, given both you and Ari—as well as a couple

other people—were marked, well...we can't be sure of the future regarding him." Rowan frowned, worrying her lip.

When my grandmother was worried, it scared me. She was able to take on most anything. One of the most powerful witches I'd met, Rowan Firesong lived up to her name and reputation. I was glad she was on my side.

"Okay, let's put work and monsters aside and enjoy the evening."

I looked around the tables until I found the place cards for Killian and me. Rowan was seated at another table. I draped my shawl over the back of the chair and Killian escorted me to the buffet, where we filled our plates. My stomach rumbled, but I restrained myself from piling my plate high like I normally would. While I'd never attended one of these galas before, I could tell we were on formal etiquette alert, and I didn't want to embarrass my grandmother.

I stuck to roast beef, some lasagna, a roll, and some sauteed mushrooms. The salads I ignored. I wasn't a salad-type gal. I liked my food substantial. Meat and potatoes, and plenty of pizza. As I carried my plate to the table, I saw that we had two other members sitting with us—a woman who looked around twenty-five, and a man who looked somewhere in his thirties.

"Hi, I'm January," I said, sitting down. "January Jaxson. My fiancé Killian will be joining us in a moment."

The young woman gave me a bright smile. "Leslie Stovewater, pleased to meet you." She nodded. "This is my husband, Bill. Are you a new member?"

I nodded. "I'm being inducted tonight."

“Same here. Both Bill and I are becoming members. We’re from Portland, but I never managed to join the local guild there. So I decided when we moved up to Moonshadow Bay that we should join. My mother is irritated enough that it’s taken me this long.” She laughed. “Parents, right?”

I smiled. I had lost my parents two years ago—the anniversary was coming up, and it was hard to face, but it wasn’t as difficult as it had been the year before. They had died in a car crash. Six months later, after my divorce to my scumbag ex was final, I decided to move back to Moonshadow Bay and live in my childhood home. It was the best decision I ever made. I had met Killian—who had moved in next door right around the same time—and we had instantly hit it off.

Killian joined us and I introduced him. He shook Bill’s hand and settled down next to me. “The food smells wonderful. I hope it tastes as good,” he said. “So, Bill, Leslie, what do you do?”

“I’m a dentist,” Bill said.

Immediately, as they smiled, I could tell. They had the whitest, straightest teeth I’d ever seen. It had been awhile since I’d been to the dentist and I wasn’t looking forward to it, but I decided to ask Bill for his card.

“I work with patients who are afraid or who’ve had dental trauma, mostly,” he said as he handed me a business card. “So, if you know of anybody, send them my way. I’ve got great references.”

“Of course, and that helps. I’m not petrified of the dentist, but it’s not something I’m comfortable with, either.” I tucked his card into my purse and dove into the lasagna.

“I’m a lawyer,” Leslie said. “I handle civil issues, mostly, although I won’t take a frivolous case. I detest stupid lawsuits.” She wrinkled her nose. Leslie had dark brown hair, cut into a euro-bob, and she looked athletic, although not swimsuit-calendar thin. She had a sturdy build and a melodious voice and I got a strong, earthy vibe off her.

She buttered a roll and bit into it. “What about you two? You said you’re engaged? Congratulations!”

“Thanks,” I said. “I’m a writer. I work for the Conjure Ink website as a paranormal investigator. Killian’s a vet, and one of the best, so if you have any pets, feel free to call on his services.”

Killian laughed. “She thinks I’m the best, but I’m actually just...well, I’m good at what I do, but I love animals and that’s why I went into the business.”

“We have a Great Dane,” Leslie said. “Oscar’s his name. Give us one of your cards. Also, do you know of any good dog walkers in Moonshadow Bay? We could use someone who could swing by and walk Oscar once a day.”

“I do. Call me on Monday and I can email you some names. Wait, I won’t be in the office Monday. But I can email you the names, if you like.” Killian took down both their emails and we all fell to our dinners.

I was about to ask why they had moved to Moonshadow Bay when a woman wearing a pale gray chiffon ballgown walked over to the microphone on the stage. The band stopped playing, and she tapped the microphone.

“Welcome to the Midsummer Witch’s Ball. We’re so glad all of you could make it tonight, and we hope that the past quarter has been kind to you. As you know, I’m Celinda

Wilcox and I'm the events coordinator for the Moonshadow Bay division of the Royal Order of the Wand and Sword, and I'm delighted to see so many of our members. Tonight, I'm happy to announce that we have three new members to induct into our organization. So, if Leslie and William Stovewater and January Jaxson will come up on stage, we'll get started."

Feeling self-conscious, I headed to the stage. Bill and Leslie climbed the steps on the side and joined Celinda, standing to her left. As I approached her, she motioned for me to stand to her right. Rowan had prepped me for what was going to happen, so at least I wasn't going in unprepared.

Celinda took out a beautiful stylized silver dagger and held it up. "We are working in a Circle that was cast and cleansed before the doors opened. January Jaxson, please approach." She held the dagger out, point first.

I stepped forward and she raised the dagger to point between my breasts, heart level. I took a deep breath and the material of my dress brushed the tip of the dagger.

"January K. Jaxson, listen well and heed my words. The Royal Order of the Wand and Sword bids you enter the heart of its membership. We welcome you into our order. But be you advised, 'tis better to fall on the tip of my dagger than to enter unwillingly, or to break your vows that you are about to make. Do you understand?"

"I do." I shivered as a prickle of energy swept over my body from the dagger. Celinda was a powerful witch. Either that or she was drawing on the others who were here.

"I ask you: Do you willingly swear to keep secret all that you learn at these meetings, under the eyes of the gods, unless lives under law depend on it?"

I thought about the wording for a moment. “I do so swear.”

“I ask you: Do you willingly swear to lend aid to your fellow members, should you have the power and means to do so?”

“I do so swear.” I took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“Do you willingly swear to uphold the laws of the Court Magika and to offer fealty to the Crown Magika and our most gracious Queen Heliesa and her court?”

Again, I gave her a slight nod. “I do so swear.”

“Then, given you have answered and bound yourself to the three vows of fealty, and given that you are both the granddaughter of Rowan Firesong and the great-granddaughter of Colleen Fletcher, I induct you, January Jaxson, into the Royal Order of the Wand and Sword. This is a lifetime position unless you break your vows of fealty, or otherwise dishonor the Order. From this day forward, you are one of us.”

She tapped me on the shoulders with the dagger—first the left, then the right, and the top of my head. As she touched the tip of the dagger to my crown chakra, a jolt ran through me, weaving me tight into the Order, binding me by magic and vow to the organization.

I brought my hands together in front of my heart and bowed as Celinda leaned forward to kiss my forehead.

“Welcome, and Blessed Be,” Celinda said, and everyone in the room echoed her.

“Blessed Be,” I said, resuming my place.

She turned to Bill and Leslie, repeating the same ritual with both of them. When it came time to welcome them in, I

joined in the chant. All in all, the inductions took barely fifteen minutes, and we were then allowed to return to our table.

“Well then, it’s time to party,” Celinda said. “Please, eat, drink, and dance. For those who wish to stay after for the Litha ritual, we’ll be holding it at the top of midnight. Now, welcome our new members and enjoy yourselves. And remember, our regular meetings will resume in September, on the third Saturday of the month at three P.M. in the Royal Grange Hall.”

As the room swept up in conversation again, I turned to Killian.

“That wasn’t so bad,” I said.

“No, it was far less formal than I thought it would be.” He glanced around. “Where’s Rowan?”

“She’s at the main table. She’s one of the founding members of this division,” I said. I glanced over at Bill and Leslie’s side of the table. They were on the floor dancing. I was about to suggest to Killian that we do the same when two people I didn’t know approached the table. It was an older woman with gray hair, and she was accompanied by a man around her age. They paused by the table.

“We wanted to welcome you to the membership, dear,” the woman said. “But where are my manners? I’m Irene Bessel and this is my husband Gareth.” Her gaze rested on Killian and she frowned.

“Thank you,” I said, standing. Killian stood, too. “This is my fiancé, Killian O’Connell.”

The warm smile froze in place. The shift in energy was so drastic it could have hit me over the head and knocked me out.

“Mr. O’Connell, how nice to meet you. We don’t often see *wolf shifters* at our meetings.”

First faux pas. Unless asked, it was usually considered rude to point out someone’s heritage, especially with the disdain apparent in her voice. Second faux pas: as Killian stretched out his hand to Gareth, Gareth pretended not to see it.

“Well, we won’t keep you from your dinner,” the man said, giving me a faint nod. “Welcome to the Order, and we look forward to seeing *you* at our meetings.”

I blinked as they moved on. I was seldom struck speechless, but right now the only thing I could do was sputter. Killian sat down, pulling me along with him. I slammed into my chair, turning to him, flustered.

“I’m so sorry—I can’t believe they acted like that.” I glanced over to where they were now dancing, trying to decide whether to head over and give them a dressing down. “I…”

“You stay right where you are. I can read your face and the last thing you need to do is to create a scene. You just got inducted into this organization. Do you want to get thrown out on the same night?”

“I don’t care,” I said, anger replacing my shock. “They were rude as fuck to you—”

“They’re old money, old magic. You know the rift between shifters and witches has been around for ages—especially wolf shifters. Most wolf shifters hate magic, although I am firmly in the camp that believes that’s because shifters tend to fear its power.” He jabbed at a shrimp on his plate. “Honestly, I expected this to happen tonight.”

“And you still agreed to come with me? I’m amazed.” I stared at him.

“They’re *one* couple. I’m sure a few others share their prejudice, but that doesn’t mean that everyone in this joint’s going to hate me for what I am. You can’t please everybody, January. You know that, and you also know that it’s useless to try.”

I let out a shaky breath. “Well...yeah, but...”

“But nothing. Come on, finish your dinner. The food’s excellent. And then we can dance.” He leaned forward, tackling his roast beef. After a moment, I joined him and we tucked away our dinners like starving survivors just off the ocean.



ROWAN CAUGHT UP TO US AFTER THE SECOND DANCE. THE first one went well, and I tried to relax and have fun, but after the second, as we were walking past a table toward ours, I heard someone making a crack about “filthy wolves” and it took everything I had to ignore them and pass by.

Killian placed his hand on my back, which calmed me down a little bit, and whispered, “Let it go.”

Gritting my teeth, I nodded. “All right, but we’re leaving.”

“You shouldn’t leave this early, given you’re a new member,” he said.

“Maybe not, but I can tell you this: I’m rethinking my membership right now.”

“What did I hear?” Rowan strode over to our table. “I’m sorry I wasn’t able to get away until now. I was talking

business with a couple of the other members.” She sat down, leaning back in her chair. She looked wonderful tonight—wearing an orange suit—a long skirt that flowed to her ankles, and a matching blazer. She stood out, but in a good way.

“I was just telling Killian that I’m already rethinking my membership. He’s been insulted twice now because he’s a wolf shifter, and I’m a little jaded on the whole group already.” I leaned forward. “How could you let me bring him if they’re just going to insult my fiancé? And how could you think I’d want to belong to an organization with these sorts of standards?”

“Have you given thought to the idea that the best way to change a structure is from the inside? And the Royal Order of the Wand and Sword can open a lot of doors for you, January. Killian’s a big boy and he can stand up for himself.” She flashed a smile at Killian.

“He’s my fiancé and he’s been insulted by bigots.” I was starting to raise my voice.

“Watch your volume,” Rowan said. “You don’t want to make enemies of these people. They can do great works for the town and the world, but some of them are—much like some of the old-school vamps—a product of their upbringing and times. I’m not making excuses for their rudeness. I’m just warning you that you aren’t dealing with your average run-of-the-mill witchblood here. The men and women who belong to ROWS wield very real power, and very real strength.”

I stared at her. I knew my grandmother was pragmatic, but this surprised me. “You’re sticking up for their bigotry?”

“No, I’m sticking up for what this organization does. The good far outweighs the few bad apples within, and eventually they get weeded out. You’re young and rash still. You have to

learn that idealism doesn't always feed the poor and it doesn't always help the underdog. If you ask a hundred starry-eyed activists to feed a thousand starving people, they may mean well but unless they can raise the money soon enough, some of the hungry may die. Ask one rich snob whom you know donates because it looks good on their 'record' and promise to mention the money came from them—well, it isn't romantic, but it puts the food on the table.”

I started to protest but Killian shook his head. “She’s right. The people here have money, and while some of them may be assholes, they’ll help out because it makes them look good. In some cases—such as starving people or, say, hurricane or flood victims? The ends justify the means. Rowan knows this organization can open doors you may need in the future. And not all of the folks here have been acting crappy to me.”

As if to prove his point, another couple came over and Rowan introduced them to us. Drake and Mandy Evansteen seemed perfectly poised and extremely friendly.

Reluctantly, I tried to relax and enjoy the rest of the evening.

CHAPTER THREE

*B*y the time we got home, I was in a better mood. Only one other person acted like a jackass to Killian, at least that I knew of, and even then, the guy had been drunk. But I always remembered the credo that whatever you said or did when you were drunk was an extension of who you truly were. Nobody who was really nice acted like an asshole when they were drunk.

“So, I’m glad you went,” Killian said at the door.

“Aren’t you coming in?” I asked.

“I’ll be over in a few. I want to change clothes and I have a special garment bag I keep this tux in. It was expensive and—no offense to Xi or Klaus—but I really don’t want to get cat fuzz all over it.” He grinned, leaning forward to kiss me. “I’ll be back in fifteen minutes.”

“Bring chips, if you have them,” I said. “I ran out.”

“I think I have some barbecued potato chips. Will that work?”

“Anything in a pinch,” I said, unlocking my door. As he headed down the porch steps and toward the gate that separated our properties, I slipped inside and turned on the light. Directly ahead was the coat closet, and to my left was

the entrance to the living room. I wasn't about to hang my shawl in the closet—it went in a special drawer of shawls and scarves in my dresser.

As I climbed the stairs, Esmara showed up on the landing. *Well, what did you think?*

“I think they're a bunch of pretentious assholes, to be honest. Well, not all of them, but the group reeks of prestige and privilege.” I passed by her on the landing and she turned to follow me. I had gotten over the disconcerting feel of seeing and talking to ghosts, though the nasty ones still freaked me out.

Esmara was dressed in a yellow frock that looked very turn of the century circa 1900. She had been born in 1907. Though, when I asked her about what it was like to live back then, she was rather vague. *Time becomes a construct rather than a reality when you cross through the doorway from life to death*, she had said. While my great-grandmother's journal had dates in it, I wasn't altogether sure how valid some of them were.

When you're born into money and/or power, it becomes part of your persona. The people you're talking about grew up knowing they were entitled. You can fault them for their bigotry, but you can't blame them for knowing they can pull rank. The truth is, they can.

“It's such a caste system, though,” I said.

The world is built on caste systems. Theoretically, yes, no one is better than anybody else, but in the practicality of our society it breaks down. Humans—and Otherkin—are mortal and fallible. And those fallibilities bring with them the problems of rank. I guarantee you that the wolf shifter packs have their own caste system and you'd be low on the totem poll there.

“I know, but Killian and I can look beyond things like that. Why can’t everybody else?” I knew I was preaching to the choir, and I knew that I was spouting off an idealist’s view of the world, but sometimes the injustice just rattled me.

Esmara laughed. *Oh, January, some days your spectacles are so rose-colored it makes me want to shake you. But I understand your frustration. Other than the problematic people, how did it go?*

“It was fine. We did meet a few really nice couples who I think I could invite over to dinner. And Rowan is right. The organization can—and does—a great deal of charity work. I guess I can work within those boundaries, but if anybody comes after Killian and starts ragging on me—or him—I refuse to keep my mouth shut.”

I folded my shawl and tucked it into the drawer, then dropped on the bed and unbuckled my sandals. My feet hurt—the shoes were new and I’d barely broken them in. In fact, I wasn’t sure if they were going to be worth keeping. I had some heels that were fine. I could walk in them all day and they were still comfortable. But these, I wasn’t so sure about.

I set them in the closet, then unzipped my dress and stepped out of it, hanging it up and tucking it away on the “good clothes” side of the rod.

“Did my great-grandmother belong to the order?” I asked.

Esmara was sitting in the chair next to the bed. It always seemed odd, to see her there, sitting primly on a chair, especially when I could see the chair through her. Well, to some degree. Most ghosts were somewhat transparent. When they weren’t, it was a danger sign. The more corporeal the ghost, chances were they could control physical objects more

easily and if they were prone to violence, that made them especially dangerous.

Esmara smiled and leaned back, crossing her legs. *My mother helped found the Moonshadow Bay division, so yes. And back in Ireland, she belonged to the local division there. As you know, your family is bound to power. Ellen ó Broin—Ellen O'Brien, later—was one of the most powerful witches to be born in thousands of years, back in Ireland. I never met her. Given the curse, she died before I was born, but my mother used to tell us girls stories about her and about how strict and stern she was. She once stopped a powerful storm that was coming in from the sea, so they say. She stood up to it and turned it away.*

I stared at Esmara. “Do you believe it’s true? It’s one thing to affect the weather, but to command storms—that would take exceptional power.”

The way my mother told it to me, yes. I do. But given her temperament, I shudder to think what she would have been like if she had lived into today. Esmara paused. *I think I hear Killian downstairs. I’ll talk to you later.* She stood and stretched. *Oh, by the way, your mother sends her love.*

“Tell her I miss her, and I love her. And if you can, ask her why she refused to join the Order?” I waved as Esmara faded from sight. As I unbraided my hair and removed my makeup, Killian entered the room. He looked at me with hungry eyes.

“You look good enough to eat,” he said, a twinkle in his eye.

“You care to give it a try?” I asked, slowly standing and sauntering over to the bed. I was tired and frustrated, but I knew what would cure the latter.

He stripped off his T-shirt and tossed it on the floor, then unbuckled his belt and kicked off his jeans in seconds flat. As he landed on the bed and patted the covers next to him, I turned on my MP3 player and chose the “Sexy-As-Hell” playlist I had created, then slid onto the bed next to him.

“What do you want tonight?” he whispered, running his fingers up my arm.

Killian had been willing to explore my kinky side that I’d kept repressed until I met him. I wasn’t full on BDSM, but I liked being tied up and fucked sometimes, and he liked spanking me when I was feeling into it, and together we had slowly worked our way into our non-vanilla sides at a pace that was comfortable to us both. I knew my boundaries, and he knew his, and we had agreed to respect those without question. But that left a lot of room for our loveplay, and I was thoroughly enjoying the sexual side of our relationship.

“Tell me what to do,” I whispered. “I want you to be in charge tonight.” Whether it was because I still felt upset about what had happened at the dance, or whether I just needed someone else to take over, I didn’t know, but I wanted him to take control.

“Then stand up and let me look at you. Hold your head up, shoulders back, boobs out and proud.” He motioned for me to stand by the side of the bed.

I did, laughing. “My boobs may be proud, but gravity’s at play, love.”

“Gravity schmavity, I love your boobs.” He grunted as he sat on the side of the bed, staring up at me, slowly grasping his cock in his fist. I knew what he wanted, and I knew it was one thing he sometimes had a hard time asking for.

“Do you want to tit-fuck me?” I asked, my voice low.

He nodded, coloring ever so slightly. I pulled a low chair over and—because I was just who I was—laid a towel on it, then sat down. That put my breasts at the perfect height for him. I rubbed them with lotion so they were slick and he straddled my legs, moving close enough for me to press my breasts around his cock. I pushed them together so they held it tight, and he moaned and began to thrust, his cock gliding between them. I let out a soft murmur of my own, looking down at his dick—so hard and thick—as it slid up and down between my breasts. I pressed them tighter together, making him work harder, and he braced his hands on my shoulders, letting out a soft groan of pleasure.

My nipples stiffened and as I held my breasts tight, I used my index fingers and thumbs to pinch them, letting out another soft moan. Killian looked down and his eyes grew wider as he watched. He slowly withdrew, his cock engorged to its hardest, and he pointed to the bed.

In a husky voice, he said, “Lay down on your back and spread your legs.”

I sprawled across the bed, my legs wide, knees bent, as he leaned between my thighs and began to lick my clit, swirling his tongue around in circles, inflaming my senses. My bits felt as swollen as his cock, and as he worried me with his tongue, I grabbed the covers with my hands, clutching them tightly as though they could keep me from losing control.

Everything in sex was about control—about losing control, about giving up control, about mastering someone else till you yourself were lost to the play. As Killian tongued me, swirling from side to side, I murmured and closed my eyes. I fought to remain focused, but the feel of his lips and tongue on me were

more than I could handle and I let out a whimper, wanting more—wanting him inside me. I wanted him to dive into me, to fill me up from the inside, to stretch me as wide as he could and force me to squirm beneath him.

“Please, please, I want you inside,” I whimpered, thrashing as he held tight to my hips and dove in again, eating me out a second time.

“Not until you come. I want you to come and then come again. Scream my name while you’re coming.” He leaned up, his eyes shining, and I could see the wolf behind him. He had taken on alpha mode, and it was his duty to drive me wild, his will to see me lose control because of his attention. He buried his face in my pussy again and my clit burned, on fire from the bath he was giving me. Then, he increased the pressure and I felt myself losing what tenuous control I had left as I spiraled toward orgasm. My breath quickened. Pulse racing, I was slick I could barely stand it. The ache between my legs increased and all I could think was how much I wanted him inside me.

“Take me, please,” I begged.

“Not yet, my love.” He rose, his finger still working me as he fastened his lips onto one of my breasts and began to suck and gently tug my nipple with his teeth.

“I need you, I need you inside,” I pleaded, almost crying because the ache was bone-deep, so feral that I felt like I would turn into a snarling bitch. “Make me yours, *please*.”

He lifted his head, his eyes shining. His wolf self was fully engaged, present in everything but body. “You’re mine. You’re my alpha bitch, my woman. *Say it*.”

“I’m your alpha bitch. I’m your woman,” I gasped out, trying to thrust against his hand as he worked my clit with his

fingers, rubbing so hard I thought I was about to lose my mind.

“You want my cock inside you?” he said. “Tell me how bad you want me.”

“I want you inside, so deep that I can’t feel anything else. Plow me, fuck me!” I couldn’t keep my voice down any longer. I shouted, echoing through the room.

“Do you like my cock? You like sucking my cock?”

“Yes,” I said, as he pressed hard against my clit, holding it tight, then he gave one slight shift so it set off another ripple of sparks through me. “I love your cock in my mouth.”

“You like riding my cock?”

“Yes, I love riding you!”

“You promise my cock is the only one you’ll ever let inside you? I’m the only one you’ll let fuck you? *I’m your man, your wolf, your master!*” He rose above me, poised between my legs.

“Yes, you’re my master. You’re my wolf!”

I reached up, desperate. At that moment, he plunged, driving deep, penetrating every fold with his thick, pulsing rod. I screamed as he drove himself up to the hilt, holding me fast with his body. And then, he began to move, to grind his hips against me. I matched his movements, letting out a sharp moan and grasping him around his back, my nails scratching his skin, not sharp enough to cut him but deep enough so that he knew he was mine.

We thrashed, our sweat soaking the covers, as he rolled, holding me tightly so that I was on top. I braced my hands against his, and now I set the pace, riding my wolf shifter,

sliding down his shaft and then pulling away again. At one point, he took hold of my hips, holding me so that I couldn't move, pinning me to him. He laughed as I tried to swivel my hips, all the while his cock pulsing inside me.

And then, I felt myself rising, once again nearing the peak. I let out a muffled scream and arched my back as he began to thrust hard and furious, rolling me over yet again so I was beneath him and he had the leverage to plunge himself deep inside me, again and again.

“Ah...ah...” I lost my words, sounds taking over as I let go of control and came again and again, the orgasm rippling through me like concentric waves on a pond. I came so hard that I couldn't tell whether I was screaming, and the briefest thought raced through my mind that I hoped nobody would hear me and think I was being murdered.

But before I could continue down that path, Killian stiffened in my arms and he let out a roar, coming so hard that I could barely hold onto him, and then—with one last thrust, he fell into my arms, thoroughly spent.



WE BOTH NEEDED A SHOWER. I PLANNED ON CHANGING THE sheets, too. While we hadn't sullied them, they were still soaked in sweat and I didn't fancy sleeping in damp, sticky sheets.

We stopped long enough to put on shower caps, and then, in the shower, he lathered me up, soaping my breasts, my stomach, sliding the washcloth between my legs. I let him bathe me—I knew that he enjoyed it—and to tell the truth, so

did I. We didn't talk, just laughed and kissed, and made sure we were squeaky clean.

Finally finished, we padded back to the bedroom as we dried off. I grabbed clean sheets out of the linen closet while Killian stripped off the old ones, and together we had changed out the bedding in less than five minutes. I opened the window.

"It's muggy," I said.

"Yeah, it is. You think we're gearing up for a thunderstorm?"

"I wouldn't be surprised. I just hope it's clear for the camping trip. I don't look forward to roughing it in the rain." The window overlooked the backyard, and from there, I could see the Mystic Wood, which bordered my property. There was no one on either side who could see into my backyard window, so I leaned against the sill, staring through the mesh screen. I had screens installed on all the windows so that Xi and Klaus wouldn't accidentally escape. The thought of them getting out filled me with panic.

"I have to admit, I'm looking forward to getting away for a little while. It's been a long time since I went camping. But I *don't* look forward to hunting for Bigfoot." Killian shifted as Xi and Klaus bounded up on the bed. I returned to bed and Xi snuggled next to me. Klaus began playing with Killian's toes. Xi was a tortie and Klaus was a black tuxedo boy.

Xi yawned and lazily reached out to grab my thumb and gnaw on it. *Don't go away. Don't leave us*, she said.

I glanced down at her. "Baby girl, we'll be back. We're going to the forest for a week but we'll be home after. And

Aunt Teran will look after you. She'll be here twice a day to stay with you and play with you and feed you."

"Xi worried?" Killian asked.

I nodded. "She knows we're going on vacation and I think she's afraid we won't come back."

Killian reached across me and scratched her behind the ears. "Tell her I love her, too."

I know he does, Xi said. You promise you'll come back?

"I promise. Never fear about that."

Satisfied, she curled up and went to sleep. Before long, Klaus had curled up beside her and they were both snoring.

"Have you ever gone camping up at Mount Baker?" I asked.

Killian shook his head. "No, but I'm excited to see what's up there. I'm just looking forward to getting away. I love my job, but it's high stress and we've had a run of old pets coming in to pass over. It wears on me sometimes."

I nodded. "I can imagine. You know, if we're going to have a winter wedding, we need to start planning it. I'm going dress shopping after we get back from the mountains. We need to talk about color themes and venues and all of that."

"I'm happy with whatever you want," Killian said. "Just point me to the altar and I'll be good. I *would* like the cake to be chocolate, but other than that, hey, I'm amenable. Just don't ask Val to the wedding, please? I'd like to leave him off the guest list."

"As you wish, my lord." I laughed. "We'll hold the wedding during the day and that way he won't be able to come at all."

Val Slater was a vampire who had developed a weird... *crush* wasn't the word for it, and neither was *obsession*... *fascination* with me. We had familial ties back in time that were uncomfortable, given his grandfather had been responsible for hiring the witch who cursed my great-great-grandmother. But Val was always needling Killian, just trying to push him a little over the edge.

"I promise," I whispered. "Val won't be on the guest list."

"Good." Killian glanced at his phone. "We'd better get some sleep. It's past two."

"Tomorrow's the new moon and I have some spellwork to do. I also need to go over to Teran's place to talk to her about the cats," I said, sliding under the covers.

"I promised to give Tarvish a hand with your grandmother's tree trimming project," Killian said. He set the alarm for nine and before long, the cats, Killian, and I were all deep asleep.

CHAPTER FOUR

*B*y the time I dressed and went downstairs, Killian was making breakfast. He pointed to a latte on the counter, then went back to scrambling eggs and watching the sausage in the other pan. The aroma of fresh cinnamon rolls drifted out of the oven. Well, fresh as in “fresh out of the box and into the oven to heat up.”

“Made you a triple-shot caramel iced latte, just the way you like it,” he said.

“Thank you.” I kissed him, wrapping my arms around his waist, then grabbed the cup. “Have you fed the cats yet?”

“Done. They’ve eaten and are somewhere sleeping off their food coma.” He glanced in the oven. “Breakfast in five minutes. Do you want to eat on the back porch?”

My house had a wraparound porch. The back was screened in and big enough that we could have a full-scale party on it without feeling cramped. The kitchen door was open, though the inner screen door was closed. For June, it was surprisingly warm. Usually, our temperatures in June ranged in the low sixties, but the thermometer hanging in the window read 66, and the sky was clear.

“That sounds lovely. Should I set the table or do we just want to—”

“I’ll bring our plates out. We can come back for seconds if we want. You go on out.”

I stepped outside, and—after closing the screen door behind me—set my latte on the table. Crossing to the second screen door—the one leading to the steps going down into the backyard—I stared out at the world.



SO, I’M JANUARY JAXSON, AND I’M A WITCH—WITCHBLOOD by birth. For nearly twenty years of my life, I lived with a man whom I should have just left in the dust from the start. But we all make mistakes, and mine just cost me two decades of my life. After he dumped me for a trophy wife, stealing my half of the business that I had mostly created for our lives together, I moved back to Moonshadow Bay, one of the shadow towns of the world.

The shadow towns are towns that exist on the edges of the Veil, or of other realms, and are mostly inhabited by Otherkin. Oh, the world knows all about those of us who aren’t human—the witchblood and shifters and vampires and so forth. But in the shadow towns, we’re free to be who we are without worrying about retaliation or without having to constantly explain ourselves to others.

My house stands on a half acre of land, and had been my childhood home. When my parents died, I took over. I renovated the house to my tastes, and now I can’t imagine living anywhere else. So what if I discovered a hidden room hiding a deadly secret my parents had been keeping? What house *doesn’t* come without a few actual skeletons in the closet? But my home is comfortable. It borders on the Mystic Wood, which surrounds most of Moonshadow Bay. Strange

creatures and forces inhabit the woodland, but if you give the forest its due respect, chances are you'll come out alive.

Most of the land around my house is in the backyard—a long swath of grass and raised beds. The entire lot is surrounded by trees of all sorts, and every time I gaze out over the vibrant scene, I'm reminded of why I love western Washington so much. Everything here feels alive. Even in the dead of winter, there's a power to this land that will not be denied.

So yes, two years ago, my parents died and a few months later, I returned to Moonshadow Bay, and I don't think I'll ever want to live anywhere else. Especially since I'm going to marry Killian. My life hasn't been easy, and it still isn't, but I'm happy, and content with the direction I'm heading.



“HERE YOU GO,” KILLIAN SAID, SETTING THE PLATE OF EGGS and sausages in front of me. A big, fat cinnamon roll, dotted with raisins and oozing with icing, sat on the edge.

I leaned in. Everything smelled so good. As Killian settled in with his own food and coffee, his phone rang. He glanced at it, then answered. “Hey sis, what’s up?”

I stopped eating. Tally, his sister, was heavily pregnant with twin girls and due in less than a month. We always took her calls, just in case it was go-time.

“What? Really? How far apart are the contractions?” He straightened up, looking concerned. “Is Les with you?”

Les was Tally’s husband. He had been a shaman’s apprentice for their Pack and now he was working as a life

coach/counselor here in Moonshadow Bay. Since their parents couldn't afford to help, Killian, his brother Darryn, and the shaman had joined together to lend them the down payment for their house when they moved here from Carbonado, a small town near Mount Rainier. Killian's parents weren't poor, but both held jobs they loved but that didn't bring them a great deal of money. It had taken Tally and Les several months to find a house they liked that they could afford, but now they were settled in, apparently just in time.

“Good,” Killian said. “When should we come to the hospital?” He waited. “All right, we'll see you later.” He tucked his phone away.

“Well?”

“They're headed to the hospital. It could be Braxton-Hicks contractions. Even shifters have them. But she'll call to let me know. I'm going to be an uncle and you're going to be an auntie!” He beamed. Killian and I had decided we didn't want children of our own, but I knew he was looking forward to playing uncle.

“If she does have them, do you want to stay home tomorrow? I can't—this is a work thing, but you aren't under any obligation to go.” I picked up my cinnamon roll, pulling it apart to eat. My tastebuds rejoiced over the heavy cinnamon flavor.

“No, I'll go. If it's for real, our mother and my aunt Letty will be coming to stay for several weeks until Tally gets her strength back. It's tradition in the Pack to take the pressure off the new mother. Extended family and all that.” He shrugged, shoveling a fork of scrambled eggs in his mouth.

“I don't think I've ever heard you mention an aunt before,” I said, glancing at the screen. A bumblebee as fat as my thumb

was trying to get in. “Sorry, dude, no flowers in here. Go the other way.”

Killian laughed. “Now you can talk to the bees?”

I rolled my eyes. “No, but I love bumblebees. They’re so fat and fuzzy. I wish we could pet them.”

“I don’t recommend trying,” he said. “Aunt Letty is my mother’s sister. She’s...she reminds me of Rowan. She always scared the hell out of my siblings and me when we were kids. As sweet as my mother is, Aunt Letty is...shall we say... *imposing*. But she gets things done.”

I wasn’t sure I wanted to meet her, but said nothing. I felt a little sorry for Tally, though. “Well, I hope she goes easy on your sister. Having a baby is hard enough. Having twins? Double the pain.”

“Double the fun, too. At least when they get older.” He glanced at his watch. “Okay, I promised to meet Tarvish in half an hour. I need to get a move on. But you finish your latte.” He paused, then asked, “What are you going to do today?”

“I’m going to muck around in the garden, and then thought I might go down by the bay...run some errands. I also have a new moon ritual to do. I’m casting a spell. I’m so frustrated over not being able to find Gretchen Wyre that I decided I might as well try a Reveal spell. The new moon is the perfect time for uncovering secrets.”

Gretchen Wyre was a powerful witch who was several hundred years old. She had been hired to cast a hex on the women in my family—one that ensured we all died young. I knew she was still alive and we needed to find her in order to break that hex. Otherwise, Aunt Teran and I would end up

among the other victims. Given Teran was seventy-one, and I was now forty-two, we were pushing the limits. Witchblood lived a long time, but few of the women in our family had made it past ninety.

“Sounds good to me. I hope it works.” He stood, offering to take my plate. I handed it to him and watched as he headed through the door. I finished off my latte, then stretched. The gardening tools were in a standalone shed I’d recently bought, near the bottom of the steps. I also left a can of sunscreen spray there, given how often I forgot to put it on before going out. So I sprayed myself down before I plunked on my straw gardening hat and—basket of tools in hand—headed over to the raised vegetable beds.

The seedlings were doing well. I pulled the clear plastic tarping away. It was warm enough now to leave them open to the sky, and the forecast was calling for light showers but no downpours for the next two weeks. Hopefully, they were right.

I folded the tarp back and clipped it to the main frame that Killian had built for me. That way, if we did get heavy rain, I could easily cover them up again. The raised beds were high enough so that I could easily reach them without straining my back. They were built out of stone and mortar, and would last far longer than wood.

I checked on the lettuce and carrots. They were coming along great. In fact, we’d have lettuce to harvest when we got back from camping. I watered them, and then moved on to check on the tomatoes, cucumbers, cantaloupe, and pumpkins. Everything was looking good. So were the fruit trees that bordered my yard, scattered amid the cedar, fir, juniper, spruce, maple, and the rest. The buds had set and I’d have apples and peaches, cherries, and plums this year.

Finished with watering and a little bit of weeding, I headed toward the border of the Mystic Wood, looking for any sign of Rebecca. An imp, she had been in the woodland since I was a child. In fact, she'd tried to kill me when I was little, but now I was more powerful than she was and we had developed a grudging respect for one another. I brought her out Killian's barbecued ribs every now and then, in hopes of getting her to leave the local fauna alone, and she in turn gave me what information she could whenever something strange showed up.

I had asked Killian to build me a bench just outside the wood, and now I sat down, watching the foliage for anything that might be coming my way. As I did, I could feel the pull of the forest. My aunt Teran had pledged me to an earth goddess when I was young, to protect me from a deadly shadow man. I had no clue about that fact until I returned to Moonshadow Bay. Once I knew, I had re-dedicated myself willingly, as an adult. My magic had its foundation in the earth element, and with the spirit world, so I chose to honor what my aunt had started all those years earlier.

"Druantia," I whispered, speaking to my goddess. "Would you help me? I'm trying to find where Gretchen is and I need to find her. Give me the insight I seek in order to fulfill my quest."

I always felt odd, talking to the gods. It didn't feel right to address them like I might talk to one of my friends, but neither did it feel right to interject a bunch of "thees" and "thous" like I was living in the eighteenth century.

"What are you looking for?"

The voice startled me, but I recognized it as Rebecca's. I waited till she emerged from behind a huckleberry bush. She

never set foot out of the woodland that I knew, had never stood on my lawn, but she belonged here, as much as the forest itself.

“Hey, Rebecca, how are you on this lovely morning?” I felt like chatting, even to an imp.

She looked like a golden blond, eight-year-old girl, but her eyes were cunning and her teeth sharp. Her chin was stained with something red, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to know what. She grinned at me in a most disconcerting way.

“I’m well. I just found rabbit for breakfast.” She wiped her chin with the hem of her dress. “Who were you talking to?”

I tried not to grimace. After all, rabbit was better than some of the things she might find to eat. “My goddess. I’m trying to find out some information and having a hard time of it. I was just asking her for guidance.”

“What do you want to know?” Rebecca primly sat on a log just inside the boundaries of the Mystic Wood, staring at me. She never blinked. At first I had found her stare eerie, but now I was used to it.

“I’m looking for a witch who cast a curse on my family long ago, back when my great-great-grandmother was alive. I need to undo the curse, but I can’t find the witch.” I wasn’t sure why I was telling her all of this. For one thing, imps were notoriously dangerous. For another, the fact that I knew and talked to her didn’t mean she was a friend. But I was trying to listen to my instinct more, and my instinct told me I could safely talk about the issue to her.

“Where is she supposed to be?”

“Well, she was in Ireland when she cast the spell, but that was several hundred years ago.”

“The Mystic Wood knows all sorts of secrets. You should cast a spell in here. The forest might know,” Rebecca said.

I blinked. I hadn’t thought of casting my Reveal spell inside the forest. It made a sort of sense, actually. “I might just do that. I think I’ll cast it later tonight. Thank you for the idea.”

“You bring me ribs. It’s an exchange.” She shrugged again, as though the deal had been set.

“I’ll bring you some more soon. By the way, I’ll be gone for a week. Keep an eye on the woodland. And don’t go in my house,” I added.

She grinned again, then, her teeth sparkling like needles. “I never go inside houses. The forest is my home. Houses remind me of tombs.” And on that cryptic note, she turned and sashayed down the trail.



AS I HEADED TOWARD TOWN, I THOUGHT OVER MY LIST. I needed to buy a birthday card for Caitlin—one of my coworkers. Her birthday was on Monday, shortly before the Solstice. We’d be on our camping trip, and she had liked the idea of celebrating her birthday out in the forest.

Estranged from her family—a group of bobcat shifters—and Pride, she had backed out of an arranged marriage and disgraced herself with them. They had expelled her from their ranks, so she was all alone in the world. But she was happier than if she had knuckled under to peer pressure and married a man she didn’t love.

I had poked around and, in my own nosy way, had managed to find out that she was dying to attend the Women of IT conference—a high-tech conference aimed toward women IT workers. No men were allowed, and the sexism found in the male-dominated technology world was absent. All the speakers were women—both cis and trans—and the environment was set up to be a place of safety for the attendees.

Tad and I had gone in on the conference fees and hotel costs for her. He had given her a week off and paid for the hotel, and I had bought the ticket for her to attend. Wren and Hank had chipped in, so it was from all of us. Wren was bringing a cake with her, and we'd be having one of Caitlin's favorite dinners—a crab boil. Luckily, her birthday was our first camping day, so the shellfish would all still be fresh.

I came to the first of my stops and parked in front of the UPS store. I needed to ship off a package to my grandmother Nonny. I was still waiting on something she sent me over a month ago, but it was too big to travel via plane, and would take six to twelve weeks via cargo ship. It was barely six weeks since she told me about it, so I didn't expect it to show up for a while yet.

But I had promised to send her a copy of her mother's journal—not exactly a book of shadows, but close—and I'd finally scanned it all. I still hadn't read through it all, given there were hundreds of entries, but I wanted Nonny to have it now, given the curse. Nonny had outlived a number of her sisters, as well as my mother—her daughter—and I didn't want to chance losing her before she got to read Colleen's journal.

I dashed in, paid for the shipping—which was amazingly expensive, but then again—Ireland—and dashed back out to my car. Then I stopped to pick up some drycleaning. I'd managed to spill wax on my ritual dress and I wanted it clean for the next meeting of the Crystal Cauldron, which would be on the Vine Moon—the full moon in July. I examined the skirt and they had managed to get the wax out without leaving a single spot. Satisfied, I paid and ran back to my car.

I glanced at my list. Next on the list was Darcy's Household Repair. The old cuckoo clock in my living room had stopped working, so I had taken it in for repair a week ago, and Darcy—the owner of the shop—had apparently fixed it. Darcy, a middle-aged man, a coyote shifter, wrapped it in bubble wrap for the trip home.

“If I were you, I'd get on the *Antiques Road Show*,” he said. “I'll bet you anything that your clock is worth a pretty penny. When I opened it up, I found the inscription and date by the original clockmaker. We're talking over a hundred years old.”

I stared at him. “You mean it wasn't just made in China?”

“Not at all. In fact, the clockmaker was rather well known, and he was from the Black Forest in Germany. His name was Hans Friedrichsen, and he was considered a genius of woodcarving. Where did you get this?”

I took the clock, staring at it beneath the layers of bubble wrap. “It was my father's. I'm not sure when or where he got it. It was in the house from the time I was born, I do know that. I can ask my aunt. She might know. Or my grandmother. I suppose that I shouldn't drop it, right?”

“Every clock Friedrichsen made was considered one of a kind. There isn't another like it in the world.” He winked at

me as I thanked him.

Where had my father run across this clock? It had to already been an antique when he was a boy, so maybe from his adoptive parents? Rowan had given him to the Jaxsons to keep him safe given some of her rather infamous past exploits, and he had died, never knowing she was his mother.

I could contact them. They had moved to Scotland before I was born and I occasionally received presents from them as I was growing up, but I had no clue if they were still alive. In fact, I wondered if they knew that my father had died. It occurred to me I should find out whatever happened to them and let them know. They had treated my father, Trevor, like their own child and had loved him dearly.

“Cripes, I should have thought of this before,” I muttered to myself.

Give yourself leeway, Esmara said, suddenly showing up beside me. You were in a state of shock, and by the time you came out of it, you were in the middle of a nasty divorce, and then you moved back to Moonshadow Bay and everything snowballed from there.

I kept from jumping—I didn’t want to explain to Darcy that my great-aunt’s ghost had just appeared beside me—and paid him, then left the shop. As soon as I was in the car, I texted myself to contact my lawyer and see if he could find the Jaxson’s so we could notify them of my father’s death. Then, I set out to the next errand.

Three shops and errands later—all rather boring—I parked down by the bay.

Moonshadow Bay was on Bellingham Bay, and the downtown park overlooked the ferry docks. The ferry led to

Nimah Rock, an island a few miles off the coastline, that had long been associated with one pleasant afternoon in my childhood. But now it was also filled with memories of a nasty encounter with a rogue vampire.

Killian and I had spent Valentine's Day weekend there, but it had turned out to be more frightening than relaxing. I wanted to go back and explore the island during better weather, and hopefully this time we wouldn't be facing ghosts and vampires and missing people.

The sun shone down from overhead. The temperature had crept up to sixty-eight, but large puffy clouds were beginning to creep in, and against the intense blue, they looked like massive mounds of cotton. I shaded my eyes as I gazed into the sky, away from the sun. I loved these kinds of days where it wasn't too warm, but it was still nice enough to walk around without a sweater, and where the breeze off the Salish Sea came sweeping in, bringing with it the scent of brine and seaweed. It was bracing, strengthening in its own way.

I leaned on the railing, overlooking the shore below. Most of the shores in western Washington were filled with rocks and pebbles strewn across the sand, and the tide swept up, carrying tidbits of seaweed and bracken, and stray branches of driftwood. The shores here were dangerous—during rough weather, the tides brought in entire logs of driftwood that had been bouncing around in the Puget Sound, stripped free from their bark, weathered by the lapping of the waves.

There was a path to one side, leading down to the water's edge. The shoreline wound along the bay, parallel to the town. The steps going down were wide and shallow, with a firm railing, making it easy to walk down to the shoreline. To one side was a ramp that made the shore handicapped accessible,

though I couldn't see a wheelchair maneuvering through the rocky sand that easily. But at least the access was there, and disabled pedestrians could access the benches on the concrete slab. The benches were made of concrete, as well. Given the tide covered them when it came in, the concrete weathered better than metal or wood. But the tide was currently out, and the shoreline accessible.

Posted signs warned pedestrians to return to the top of the stairs during incoming tides, to avoid being caught by the water. I glanced at the indicator that offered the tide tables. We were at low tide, so I was fine for now.

I walked over to one of the benches, gratified to see that it had dried out from the last time it was underwater. I settled myself, staring at the rippling currents.

The Salish Sea was intricate, a series of channels and bays leading to the open ocean. Including the Straits of Georgia, the Strait of Juan de Fuca, Puget Sound, and other fingerlings of water, it had been first named by Bert Webber, an environmental professor, who thought to combine all the various waterways under an umbrella name, and the "Salish Sea" had picked up in usage. What it amounted to was that the region's waterways were all interdependent on one another, for both environmental and marine health.

I loved the smells of the decaying seaweed, and of the sea life—the barnacles clinging to the rocks, the clams plucked up by the gulls and plundered for food, all woven together with the scent of sand and sea. It smelled like home in a way I couldn't imagine any place other than the coastline of western Washington smelling. Those new to the area took awhile to acclimatize to the scents, but those of us who were born here counted the heady aromas as old friends we grew up with.

I stared out at the water. The harbor seals were out, playing and fishing for dinner, some floating on their backs, others diving below the surface. One of them headed toward the shore and lingered on the edge of the water, staring at me. There was a strong sense of intelligence behind those eyes and something inside whispered, “Selkie.”

“Hello!” I called, waving.

The seal stared at me for a moment, then wiggled its flipper at me. I knew from watching nature shows that they had once walked the land with legs, but when they went back to the water, their legs evolved into flippers again.

“You a selkie?” I asked.

Again, the seal waggled its flipper at me, then turned and plunged back into the water, heading back to its pod. I smiled, thinking how lucky I was to live where I did.

“They like to play,” a voice from behind said.

I jumped, then turned around.

The Gull Catcher stood there, and then he walked over and sat down on the bench opposite me, staring out at the water. “I go flying when I can. Someday, I won’t come back. Someday, I’ll just keep on flying and go out to the ocean, following the ships.”

I wasn’t sure what to say. The PTSD-battered veteran had long ago left his reason behind. He was followed by a chain of spirits—men, women, and children he had killed during his years in the military. They haunted him, and, at times, I thought he could control his ghosts, but I wasn’t positive and I didn’t want to ask. He was otherworldly, and seemed to see things others couldn’t. He recognized that I was a marked woman. The shadow man who had attempted to attack me

when I was young had marked me, but Druantia countered him.

Finally, I decided to delicately feel my way into his world. “You’ve been to hell and back in the wars, haven’t you?”

He looked at me, almost directly, then looked away again. “Hell is paved with beauty and blood. It’s not a place for the uninitiated. It’s not a place for those who haven’t tasted dark wine. I went to war when I was very young and it became a haven. When you’re used to explosions, the silence is terrifying.”

I sucked in a deep breath. “I suppose it would be.”

“I still hear the gunfire in my head, and the bombs dropping. The music drowns out my thoughts, for which I’m grateful.” He stood again, looking out the water. “Yes, one day, I’ll fly out and just keep going until I find peace.”

Then, without another word, he turned and left.

I sat for a few moments, idly turning over his words in my mind. I had a feeling if anybody spent too much time around the Gull Catcher, they’d come out the worse for wear. He wove webs with his words, and could catch the unwary with them, rolling them up to feed on later.

After a minute, I opened my purse and pulled out a bottle of sage spray. I’d begun carrying it with me wherever I went, just for times like these. I sprayed myself down with it, grateful to feel the sticky energy slide away, dislodged by the purification of the sage.

After I felt clear-headed again, I began to walk down the beach, cautious on the slick pebbles so that I didn’t slip or turn an ankle. Once I was by the water’s edge, I knelt and pulled out an empty bottle from my purse. It held about four ounces,

so I dipped it into the water, then screwed the lid on tight. I needed bay water—it would add strength to my Reveal spell.

Tucking the bottle carefully into my purse so that it wouldn't spill—I put it in an empty sandwich bag and zipped it shut, just in case—I took another deep breath of the heady air, then turned and made my way back up the shore, back up the steps, and to the parking lot.

I turned once again, staring out over the water. There was something so magical about the ocean, and she always called me. I might be rooted in the earth, and grounded in between the world of the living and the world of spirits, but the Ocean Mother eclipsed them all. Her force was more powerful than all the others combined. She roared out her strength, wearing away coastlines, weathering down mountains into ravines and canyons. She sank the mightiest of ships, and when her sirens sang, it was impossible to turn away.

Yes, I loved the water, and was called by her waves. As usual, when I was by the edge of the water, a part of me wanted to be a mermaid, or a siren, so I could live my life exploring her depths.

Finally, pulling myself away, I headed back to my car, refreshed and replenished by the energy of the water.

CHAPTER FIVE

*B*y the time I arrived home and put everything away, Killian had returned from Rowan's house. He had tanned up a little, and he also had a nasty bruise on his forearm.

"What happened there?" I asked, pointing out the bruise.

"I accidentally got in the way of a two by four that Tarvish was carrying. He's not the most graceful of demons, I'll say that for him, but his heart's in the right place. He and your grandmother seem to be enjoying each other's company, although they did get in an argument over where the dog house should go." He rolled his eyes.

"*Dog house?* Rowan's getting a dog?"

"No, apparently *Tarvish* is getting a dog. A pug. A fat little pug named Wesley, whose owner died. Wesley likes cats, so there aren't any problems there, but Wesley also is a slobbery mess of wrinkles and farts. Rowan doesn't seem too happy about the situation." Killian was trying to keep a straight face, but not succeeding very well.

"I don't know quite what to say about that. Wesley doesn't sound like the kind of housemate my grandmother would normally welcome. I've never once heard her say she wants a dog. Tarvish had to have wheedled her into it. Why did she agree?"

Killian shrugged. “She likes Tarvish. Wesley needs a home. Tarvish likes Wesley. You do the math.” He paused, then added, “Oh, by the way. I got a text from Tally. It *was* Braxton-Hicks contractions. She’s back at home, resting. Not quite time yet.”

“Well, I’m glad she won’t be having them while we’re gone. At least, I hope she doesn’t.”

Killian opened up the refrigerator, but I tapped him on the shoulder.

“Go wash up. I’ll make lunch.” I glanced at the clock. It was two P.M. and my stomach was rumbling. I had thought about stopping on the way home for burgers, but we had plenty of leftover spaghetti in the fridge.

I pulled out the leftovers, along with a bag of salad. Pouring the salad into a bowl, I added diced tomatoes, then popped the PlasticServe container with the spaghetti into the microwave and set it for four minutes. I was setting the table with plates and glasses for lemonade when my phone rang. I glanced at the caller ID. It was Nerium, from the Crystal Cauldron—the coven my grandmother ran that I was part of.

“Hey, what’s up?” I asked, setting the phone to speaker.

“You wanted some diced mandrake root, right?” she asked. Nerium was the gothiest goth chick I’d ever known.

“Right. I have a mandrake root but it’s whole and I have no intention of cutting it up.”

“I found some in my herb closet. Shall I drop it by while I’m out this afternoon?” Her voice was pleasant enough, if a bit on the raspy side.

“Please. And thanks. I just didn’t have time to stop at the magic shop this morning.”

“It’s closed right now, so it wouldn’t have done you any good. Lisette and Sira went to Paris for a vacation.” Nerium added, “I wonder what Paris is like.”

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” I said. “I’ve never been to France. Actually, I’ve never been out of the country except to Canada. I don’t know how I’d fare in France. I don’t think I’m refined enough.”

Nerium laughed at that. “And you think I am? I doubt either one of us would be welcomed with open arms. But hey, at least we belong here, right?” She sounded particularly jovial, surprising me since she was usually surly and dour. But she was also a powerful witch and I liked her, in a gloomy sort of way.

“I’ll see you later, then. I should be here. If for some reason I don’t hear the door, just leave the mandrake in my porch package box.” I had a box on the front porch with a sign on it for delivery men to leave smaller parcels in it. That kept the weather and animals from destroying them. We chatted for a couple more minutes and then I finished setting the table. The spaghetti was done by the time Killian returned from washing up.

“Well, I think the Gull Catcher is drifting farther and farther away from reality. He was talking about flying out to sea and not coming back.” I dug into my food, my stomach rumbling. “I’m thinking about contacting the police to do wellness checks on him. Though I doubt that would help. After all, he’s not sick. He’s just...”

“He’ll never come back, love,” Killian said. “He’s been lost so long in that fog of his, in the trauma, that he’ll never come out of it and live a normal life. I’d just let him be. Let him decide for himself what he needs. Nobody can walk his

path, nobody can know what is ultimately right for him except, well, himself. Just because he's deep into PTSD doesn't mean he doesn't realize where he's at."

I thought about it for a moment. "I suppose you're right. The Gull Catcher seems aware of his instability. He's more than aware of the other worlds that touch his own. Maybe I just... maybe I'm just afraid of ever being in that state myself. I would want people to try to help me out—help me find my life again."

Killian reached across the table to take my hand. "I'm afraid those chances are long gone for him. The Gull Catcher is a product of long periods spent in war zones, of killing people because he was told to. He kept going back. Some men are addicted to war, like some are addicted to money. They need that rush of adrenaline. They wear themselves out and all that remains are the ashes of who they could have been. For some it means they're considered heroes. And for others, like the Gull Catcher, it means they're broken."

He finished his lunch. "I'm going in to the clinic for the rest of the afternoon since I'll be out all next week. I'll be home around seven. When are you casting your spell?"

"I suppose around that time, so I won't see you until tomorrow morning, most likely. I don't know how long it will take. Did you still want to sleep here tonight?"

He shook his head. "I don't want to interrupt you. And I might as well take care of things at my house. I need to clean out the refrigerator and take a dust mop to the floors. I'll just sleep there, all alone, with no sexy woman to share my bed." He groaned and dramatically mimed a swoon.

"Go on with you," I said, laughing. "We both know you won't die of loneliness in one night. Tomorrow morning you

want to do our grocery shopping for the camping trip? I have no clue of how or what to cook over a fire, and you have lots of experience that way.” Even though Tad promised he was bringing the food, I didn’t want to chance being caught without something that was good as well as edible.

“All right, you talked me into it. But I expect you to eat every bite I serve you. No complaining about the food.” He stretched, carrying our plates over to the sink. Then he kissed me and headed out the back door.

I rinsed up, placing the dishes in the dishwasher, and had just finished when the doorbell rang. Wiping my hands off, I answered the door. Nerium stood there, plastic bag in hand. I invited her in but she shook her head.

“I can’t stay. My sister’s waiting for me. It’s our mother’s birthday and we’re taking her out to lunch,” she said. She reminded me of Wednesday Addams, but in a sexy, less angry way.

“Have fun. Thank you!” I waved as she headed back to her car.

After closing the door, I decided to start prepping the spell for the evening. I headed down to the basement to my ritual space. I hadn’t even *known* we had a basement during my childhood and teen years. My parents had blocked it off—for good reason—and I had only discovered it when I started renovations. I had learned a lot about my parents during that time.

After locking the outside doors, I made sure Xi and Klaus weren’t following me, and then headed downstairs, shutting the trap door behind me. *Yes*, the door to my ritual room was a trap door, though I had thought about renovating so I could put

in a regular door and not feel like I was either in Kansas with a root cellar, or like I lived in a wannabe dungeon.

I tossed the mandrake on the workbench, then placed the bottle of water from the bay beside it. Next, I needed to figure out what exactly I wanted to do. My goal was to discover the whereabouts of Gretchen Wyre, but in order to do that I had to first break through any spells she might have cast to prevent being found.

Then I needed to set up a locator—sort of a magical GPS. That would lead me to her whereabouts, or at least give me a good idea of where to look. I was deciding which route to take—there were several Reveal spells that I could use—when it occurred to me that I should invoke my goddess. Since Druantia was a goddess of earth and the forest, maybe Rebecca was right—I might be able to give the spell a little oomph by bringing the Mystic Wood into it.

I cut out a circle of black cloth and laid it on the bench. I would create the charm, then cast the Circle out in the Mystic Wood to charge it. I sorted through the jars of herbs, searching for bay leaf, dandelion root, and dock root, along with several others. Finally, pulling a half-dozen jars off the shelves, I measured out the amounts I needed, adding them to the center of the material along with the mandrake.

Atop the herbs, I added a piece of clear quartz, a small spike of smoky quartz, a chunk of tiger's eye, a small polished piece of hematite, and then I took out a bottle of magical oil called Clear Sight and counted out seven drops onto the crystals. I wrote out Gretchen's name on a piece of paper with Dragon's Blood ink—an ink made out of a tree resin—then I pricked my finger with a sterile razorblade and dropped three drops of blood on everything. I gathered up the sides of the

cloth and wound them together, tying them with a white ribbon.

I was ready to cast the spell. At least, the components were ready.



AT EIGHT P.M., I DECIDED TO DRESS IN MY RITUAL GOWN AND head out to the Mystic Wood. It was still light enough to see—sunset wasn't until quarter after nine. Of course, it was darker inside the forest where the trees blotted out the light, but I'd be able to see long enough to perform the ritual.

Upstairs, Xi sat on the bed as I changed. *Don't go out there. It's not safe.*

“I know it isn't, little one, but a lot of things in life aren't safe. The Mystic Wood will give a lot of juice to the spell, and I need all I can get. It's an important spell—not just one for fun. I need the answers, as soon as I can find them.”

She mewed uneasily and settled down next to me, reaching a paw toward me.

I reached out with my hand and gently stroked her head. “I'll be careful, I promise. If anything feels off, I'll leave. But this is really important. My health—eventually—depends on it. Aunt Teran's too.”

Xi stopped mewing and just stared at me. *Don't go too far into the forest. Please.*

“I promise I won't. Just inside. Okay?” I finished dressing. Xi situated herself on the kitty condo overlooking the backyard and stared at the forest as I gathered up my ritual gear and headed for the stairs.



THE MYSTIC WOOD WAS AS DEADLY AS IT WAS ENCHANTED,
but mostly for the unaware.

I had played in the shadow of the wood since I was a child. Ari and I had run through the labyrinth of trees, knowing that we were breaking the rules. But together, we never got hurt. Rebecca watched us from a distance, but she only came after me when I was alone. I had grown up viewing the woodland like I might a snake: it was beautiful and seductive, but I never, ever forgot that snakes could be deadly.

Now, as I approached the trail leading into the Mystic Wood, my breath quickened. Xi was afraid for me, but I took control of my fear. I was an adult and I generally knew what I was doing. Unfortunately, I also knew that there were bigger and stronger things in this forest than me, and I had to stay alert and not fall into complacency.

I reached the trailhead and glanced up at the trees. They glimmered with a faint glow, their auras illuminated by a green halo of light. Most people couldn't see it, but even the most headblind person could feel it once they stepped under the cover of the trees.

The power of the Mystic Wood was immense and surrounded the town. Most shadow towns had their own copses, thickets, and meadows so imbued with energy that they took on a life of their own. The forests were alive and sentient, a hive mind of all that went on within their borders.

I stopped at the trailhead and bent my knee, pausing for a second to show I meant no harm, then entered the shadow of

the wood. The light from the setting sun filtered through the forest, casting an orange sheen over everything it touched.

As I looked around at the lush vegetation, the drone of bees after the last pollen of the day and the *crick* of crickets set up white noise. The Mystic Wood abounded with the noises of small animals and other creatures that came out to play during the dusk.

I had seen everything from foxes to coyotes in the wood, and every now and then reports came in of a bobcat or mountain lion or bear that made its way through the forest. The bird population was bursting with woodpeckers and crows, hawks and owls, grosbeak and finches and Steller's jays—just about any bird you could find in this part of the state had made its way into the Mystic Wood.

The air hung heavy with the scent of the warm summer day, as the first hints of cool air crept in for the night. Except during extreme heat waves—which luckily didn't happen too often—the nights here were still cool, usually in the sixties and sometimes down into the fifties. The chill gave an extra edge to the Mystic Wood, along with the goose bumps I got from the energy surrounding me.

Somewhere, in the thick of the wood, buried deep, was a trunk with the body of a man in it. My great-grandmother Colleen and my grandmother Rowan had hidden it.

He had been a killer, a child killer, and they made sure that he never touched another girl. Unfortunately, one of his victims was a great aunt of mine. Lara had been barely ten when he took her life.

I often wanted to look for the trunk, to find it and bring it to light, but I didn't want to put my grandmother through that since she was still alive. I didn't want her to have to explain

what happened. Chances were no one but me would know, given I had read the information in my great-grandmother's journal, but you never knew what fortune had in store for you. And I didn't want to be the catalyst for Rowan having to face something horrible from her past. Not when it had been the right thing to do, regardless of what the law might think.

I passed a small creek—a trickle, really—narrow and running low. It was bordered on both sides by skunk cabbage, with long glossy leaves and yellow flowers that gave off a noxious smell. Ferns interlaced the skunk cabbage, waist high and brilliant green. And alongside the creek, huckleberry bushes were blossoming out. Huckleberries made the best jam and the Pacific Northwest was famous for them.

I took a deep breath, gagging on the skunk cabbage, but the smell of cedar and earth crowded it out. As I wandered along the trail, drowsy energy surrounded me, lulling me into a mild trance.

The faerie rings were out, the fly agaric, bright red with white spots. I knew better than to touch them. For one thing they belonged to the Fae, and for another, they could be poisonous if you weren't careful.

It wasn't until I saw something move near one of the trees that I realized I had been lulled into a trance and had traveled deeper into the Mystic Wood than I wanted to. I waited to see what was over by the massive fir tree. A moment later, one of the Woodlings stepped out from behind the fir.

The Woodling was female. I could tell because of the breast-like mounds on her chest. The Woodlings looked like trees, their bodies made of pliable branches—like willow wands—twisted together into a bipedal form.

Their hair consisted of long streamers, ivy and vines trailing down their back. It was as if a sculptor had chosen to sculpt a semi-human form out of a tree, giving it almond-shaped eyes that glowed with green light, and bowed lips that might have been rose petals. They had features like us, and yet they were so alien that they felt like they came from another world.

The Woodlings came from the world of Fae, and they were the servants of the Tuatha de Dannan, controlled by the glittering folk. Everything I had heard about the Fae made me nervous—they could be cruel and they were as far from human as the Woodlings were.

In fact, the Woodlings seemed to be gentle creatures of nature, children of Druantia, my goddess. I had met them a couple times before, on an earlier case, and I had not forgotten how magical they felt. In some ways, they were more like us than the Fae.

I held still, not wanting to startle her. I wasn't sure what to say. I knew that the Woodlings could understand English, and some of them could speak the language.

The Woodling stood there, staring at me, her eyes glittering with light. She looked around, as if searching to see if I was alone, and then crossed her arms, leaning against the tree so that it looked like they were almost one.

“You are the witch,” she said. “What business do you have here?”

I decided that sometimes truth was the safest route. “I come to cast a spell. I seek to use the energy of the Mystic Wood to bind it.”

“You are braver than most. Or more foolish. Perhaps, a combination. I advise you to go no farther into the wood this

evening. There are creatures about who would just love to taste the blood of a witch. And others who are far more dangerous and would cause you far more pain. Cast your spell, and then be gone. I will keep watch for you.”

Not wanting to look a gift horse in the mouth, but feeling wary, I asked, “Why are you helping me?”

“Some of those who are deeper within the wood, those who would have you for sport, are enemies of mine. I thwart them whenever I can.” She let out a low laugh. “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.” She was telling the truth. I could sense it.

“Very well. Bright blessings.” I knelt and, careful to keep outside the faerie ring, I dug a deep hole with a trowel that I had brought. I placed my bundle of herbs within and then covered it over, scattering leaves over the top.

Standing, I pulled out my dagger and figured out which direction was north.

“I cast the Circle around once in the name of Druantia, mighty goddess of the earth. I cast the Circle around twice in the name of the Horned Lord, her consort. And I cast the Circle around thrice in the name of the Maiden, Mother, and Crone, the very essence of all goddesshood. Let nothing unwelcome enter within. So Mote It Be.”

After I finished casting the Circle, I called the elements and then got on my knees. The Woodling said nothing, simply watching.

“Druantia, Lady of the Earth, Sovereign Mother of the Land, hear my plea. Reveal to me that which I need to know. Open up the gates so that I might see. Bring to me the

information that I seek. Open the gates and portals that hide my quarry. Thank you, and Blesséd Be.”

As I stood, the energy shifted. The spell was working—or at least it had been set in motion. The next moment, the Woodling stopped.

“Someone is coming, and you *do not* want to meet them. The Children of the Gods parade tonight. If you are here, they will sweep you up with them.” She pointed her long, branchlike arm. “Run now. Run back to safety. The Mystic Wood is not your home.”

I didn’t pause to ask questions. If there was one thing I’d learned, when somebody said “run”...*run*. I grabbed up my bag of tools and turned, racing back along the trail. As I ran, I could feel another shift in energy. What had felt pleasant and magical and drowsy now took on a darker energy—a dangerous, glittering sensation. The Tuatha de Danann were out and about, the Fae. And the Woodling was right—I really *didn’t* want to meet them in their natural element.

Winded, I headed for the trailhead. Rebecca was standing there, waving me on, her eyes wide and worried.

“Hurry, out of the wood—now!”

I didn’t stop to talk, just jumped across the threshold that divided the Mystic Wood from my backyard. Instantly, the energy settled around me. But when I looked back at the woodland, it was lit up like a Yule tree.

I stared at it for a moment, a sudden pull to return creeping over me. But I squelched it—the Fae were notorious for luring people in. With a wave to Rebecca, I jogged back to my porch, climbing the stairs before I looked back again. The woodland was alive, and I could sense something going on out there.

Deciding I didn't want to know what it was, I headed back inside, confident that my spell would work and that I'd find out where Gretchen lived.

CHAPTER SIX

On Sunday, Killian came over for breakfast, and we made a fruit salad and sausage cheese muffins for breakfast. It was a beautiful morning, cool but with clear skies. We ate on the back porch and, as we lingered over our breakfast, I told him what had happened in the Mystic Wood.

“I never expected to see another Woodling—I mean, I knew it could happen, but it was quite a surprise. She warned me to get out, though. I gather the Tuatha de Dannan were coming through. I’m growing more curious about the Fae. They seem like terrifying creatures from what I’ve heard of them.” I bit into my sausage muffin, leaning back in my chair.

“Do you think your spell worked? How will you know?” Killian asked.

“I suppose I’ll know when and if Gretchen’s information shows up. Spells aren’t guaranteed and neither are the certainty of the results. Sometimes, a spell won’t work and you’ll never know why. Sometimes it won’t work and you see that if it had, something bad would have happened. There are some spells that work and we never find out how. Magic’s a crapshoot, but witchblood families...since we can manipulate energy and events, we have a better chance of our magic working than someone without magical powers would.”

Killian finished off his first muffin. “I don’t know if I could manage the uncertainty of being witchblood. Shifters—we know that when we transform, we turn into our animal selves. When we want to turn back, we do. Unless something weird happens, it’s a given. How do you live with so much uncertainty?”

I laughed. “Life is uncertain. Would I like to know if my spells took hold and worked? Of course, but the chances of knowing everything in this world are minuscule and I stopped trying a long time ago. I didn’t know what was going to happen when I moved back to Moonshadow Bay, but my intuition told me to. And it had to be better than dealing with Ellison.”

“Speaking of your demented ex, how’s that going? Is he abiding by house arrest?” Killian’s look changed and I knew that if Ellison so much as extended one pinky finger my way, Killian would pay him a painful visit. It actually felt good to know that someone had my back. And my front. And every inch of me.

“Last I heard, all was going okay. I’m sure they’d let me know if he broke the terms of his confinement. I might give them a call when we get back from the camping trip. I almost hope he does so that they’ll have a reason to shove him in prison. He could rot there, for all I care.”

I stared out over the backyard. The Mystic Wood seemed oddly quiet this morning, and it was almost difficult to believe that it had been *the* magical hot spot of the night. But even as I let my gaze dwell on the massive thicket, I began to see shifting patterns in the leaves, enough to tell me the energies were still there—and very real.

“One day, I want to go spend the night in the wood,” I said, softly. I didn’t want anything to overhear me. But I couldn’t escape either Killian’s ears or Esmara’s.

What are you talking about? You want to get yourself abducted or killed? The Children of the Gods are out in force right now—it’s nearing Litha and they’ll be filling the wood during Midsummer. Girl, you should have your head examined! Esmara sounded ready to thunk me upside the head and, not for the first time, I was relieved she was a spirit. She appeared in front of me, her hands on her hips, scowling.

Killian couldn’t see or hear Esmara, but he was giving me the same look she was. “Are you crazy? You can’t be that daft!”

“*Daft?* Are we turning British?” I grinned. “I know, I know. I didn’t say I was *planning* on it. Just that I wanted to see what would happen.”

“With you it’s often one and the same. Anyway, don’t you dare, and if you do—you tell me ahead of time so I can work up a posse to protect you. I know you think you’re strong, but January, love, there are a lot of creatures out there that could snap you like a twig. And not all of them are supernatural. We get bears visiting, and mountain lions.”

“And coyotes, oh my!” I gave in, laughing. “Oh, all right. I’ll shelve the idea for now. We’re going to be roughing it enough as it is. I haven’t been camping in a long time. I’m not exactly looking forward to it. What should I bring? Tad’s bringing all the necessary gear, but I don’t know what to bring in terms of clothes or toiletries.”

Killian let out a laugh. “Bring layers so you can dress warm or cool. Even though we’re into June, it’s going to be downright cold at night, especially up on a mountain made up

of glaciers. Toilet paper—you can never have too much. Plastic bags to carry out...remains, unless we're staying at a rest stop or campground with restrooms.”

“What about burying it?” I asked.

“Can't. Rules prohibit it. We have to carry it out if we don't have a restroom to use. Also think about anything you want to eat that Tad might forget. A brush and hair ties. Washcloth, towel, plenty of extra socks and underwear. Magical tools and supplies. An extra pair of shoes—hiking boots and sneakers, unless they haven't been broken in. Never wear new hiking boots out on an actual camping trip until you've had the chance to break them in.”

I had bought my boots a month before when I realized that I wasn't going to get out of the trip, and had worn them enough to get used to them. They weren't my choice for footwear, but they would be incredibly helpful out in the woods. Especially if we had to go hunting through the brush.

“What happens if we find sasquatch?” Killian asked.

“We take pictures, try to make contact...”

He rolled his eyes. “Yeah, *that's* going to work. I suggest you be ready to run if we cross his path. I've run into him, remember. He wasn't in the mood to chat.”

I sucked in a deep breath. “Yeah, I know. Honestly, I think Hank's been working on some method of communication. He's studied Bigfoot ever since he was young, and he had encounters, too, remember. Anyway, it's his pet project, so I'm thinking that he's got to have some sort of plan. I guess we just assumed—”

“Okay, then. Well, Hank seems like he's got a good head on his shoulders, so here's hoping.” Killian crossed his fingers

and laughed.

I stared at him, at the smile on his face, at his lips that were the perfect thickness, that fit gently over mine. His eyes were bright and I realized that I trusted him to the core. I trusted that he wasn't going to hurt me. That he meant everything he said. That he loved me.

Without a thought, I leaped out of my chair and dashed around the table, sitting on his lap and kissing him before he could say anything. His arms wrapped around my waist and he kissed me back, nibbling on my lips, his scent heady and intoxicating.

After a moment, we came up for air.

“What prompted that?” he asked.

“I love you. I love you and I'm so happy that we're getting married. I needed space and time. You gave that to me, without questions, without nagging me. I think what I really needed was the knowledge that you'd respect my request. That you wouldn't pressure me.”

He shifted me till I was straddling his lap. “I will never push you to do something you don't want to, not unless it's going to save your life. I love you, January. I've never met another woman quite so perfect for me. I can't wait to marry you.” He paused. “Question, and I'm okay either way: do you want to take my last name?”

I licked my lips. “I've thought about this,” I said. “I think...I want to keep mine. It's who I am. When I marry you, I'm not losing my identity, just adding to it. We could hyphenate, if you like—”

He shook his head. “I'm good with you keeping your name. Hyphenation is fine, but it gets a little tricky at times.

And Jaxson-O'Connell is a long last name. I don't think I'd want to change my last name, either, so we'll just settle that right now."

"We should start making wedding plans. All we have is the date right now. We need to start thinking about a venue, and I need to go dress shopping. What colors we want—"

"As I told you, you create the wedding of your dreams and I'm good with it. As long as I'm standing there at the altar waiting for you, I'll be happy. Though I would like my family's crest somewhere in the decorations." He poked me gently in the ribs. "You okay with that?"

I dipped my head, unable to stop smiling. "Get a copy of it to me and we'll work it into a banner or something. I don't think my family has one—though maybe Great-grandmother Colleen and Great-grandpa Brian did. If so, we could have both. One house binding to another. And we should create our own. Even though we're not having children, it would be a wonderful thing to do."

"I like it. All right, I'm going shopping. Text me your list. After that, I promised to see a couple patients this afternoon who can't really wait a week. I'll be home around six."

"Ari's coming over at two, so it will give her and me a chance to catch up while I pack." Giving Killian another long, passionate kiss, I then finished breakfast and we carried our plates in. I gave one last look at the forest, thinking that it seemed so oddly quiet after the night before.



PROMPTLY AT TWO, ARI WAS AT THE DOOR. I LET HER IN. IT had been too long. Our lives had diverged more than either of

us wanted to admit, but that didn't mean we weren't still best friends, and that we weren't both happy.

Ari held up a bag. "I come bearing gifts. I not only brought muffins, but I brought a camping gift for you." She handed me the sack. It had the Ziegler logo on it—a sporting goods store for shifters. While Ari was also witchblood, she shopped everywhere.

I opened the sack and pulled out not only a box of muffins, but a multi-tool. "Gee, I didn't have one of these," I said, staring at it. I had no idea what a multi-tool did, but my guess was a number of things.

"It's especially good if you get trapped inside the car when it goes over the side into a river. It can break the windshield or side windows so you can get out. It's also a can opener, a knife, a pair of scissors, a screwdriver, and...I can't remember what else, but I know it has other functions. You keep it in your glove compartment."

She grinned, her short red pixie cut looking adorable. Ari was a hairstylist and she changed her hair as often as I changed my mind. She was the best in town and the only one I allowed to touch my own hair, especially with a bottle of dye.

"Well, that actually sounds practical and like a great safety tool."

She gave me a long, painstakingly patient look. "You're going after Bigfoot. What do you expect? For me to give you a tape of the Natural Wonders of the World flute music?"

I snorted. "Okay, yeah. Good point. So, what have you been up to? Meagan feeding you enough?"

Ari was married to the girl who had made our lives hell in high school—Mean Meg, we had called her. A cheerleader

who had married the quarterback from high school, Meagan Lopez was a bear shifter. But the day before their sixteenth anniversary, she had left her ex and came out as gay. Her family pretty much disowned her. She got her divorce and then she and Ari started hanging out and before they realized it, they fell in love.

They were both active members of the WA Rainbow Pride—an organization of LGBTQTIA+ Otherkin. She and Ari had gotten married, and they were living in Ari's house while they looked for one that suited both of their needs.

“Meagan's feeding me just fine,” Ari said, laughing. “You know I'm small-boned.”

She was right. Ari was a size 2 on a bloated day. She was petite, small-boned, and looked like she fit in with the waif movement in the model community. Except she was far shorter than any regular model.

“Yeah, yeah, remind me again about how you can eat anything you want.” I motioned for her to follow me upstairs. “Come help me decide what layers I need for a week-long camping trip.”

“Have you ever been camping that long?” Ari said, sweeping up the box with the muffins and following me up the stairs.

“No. I've never been camping more than two days. So, this will be an experience. At least Killian will be there with me. I'm pretty sure Caitlin and Hank are good at roughing it, and Tad—well—I wouldn't place bets that he'll be lost. Wren's been an outdoor type all her life, I gather.” I settled on the bed and crossed my legs, choosing a chocolate chip muffin. “Yum. So, how's life been with you and Meagan?”

She stared at her muffin intently. I knew what that expression meant.

“Uh oh, are you two having trouble?”

After a moment, she shook her head. “No, Meagan and I are fine, even with all the crap that went down around the Mothman. But something else has come up that I wanted to talk to you about. Meagan and I are taking a trip this week, too. We’re going down to California to visit my sister, because it involves her as well.”

She was hesitant in a way that concerned me. Something had happened and she really wasn’t sure about what to do or say.

“Tell me,” I said. “What’s going on?”

Ari sighed and put her muffin down. “Okay, here’s the thing. I got a call from Terameth Lake the other day.”

“From your parents?” Ari’s folks had moved to Terameth Lake, another shadow town up near Mount Rainier. Killian’s parents and brother lived near there, as well.

“No, but it concerns them, as well. Or rather, my mother.” Ari looked up and by her expression, I immediately jumped on the first thing that crossed my mind.

“Is she sick? Are you...is there...”

“No, Mom’s okay. So’s my father. But here’s the thing. I got a call from a guy named Colton Hansen. He’s witchblood and a writer.” She gave me a helpless shrug. “And he’s my half-brother.”

I hesitated, trying to piece together the jigsaw in my mind. “But...your parents were never married before—*oh hell. Affair?*”

Ari shook her head. “No. Apparently before my mother married my father, she got pregnant from another guy and she put the baby up for adoption. He managed to trace down his lineage, and it led right to us. He’s talked to Mom a couple times, I gather. Dad knows about him, too. But neither I nor Nena have met him. Meagan and I are headed down to meet her so she and I can talk over what we think, before we talk to Mom about it.” She bit her lip, ducking her head.

“I take it this news isn’t...you aren’t happy about it?” I wasn’t sure what the problem was. It wasn’t like Ari’s mother had cheated on her husband—she’d been a teenager, she’d made a mistake and ended up doing what she thought best.

Ari stood, pacing the room. “I don’t know how I feel. It’s always been the four of us—Mom, Dad, Nena, and me. Our parents were always so honest with us. But now, if they kept this secret all these years, what else are they keeping secret? What else have they kept from us?”

While I heard what Ari was saying, I got the distinct feeling that there was more to it than that. She was upset and she wasn’t being honest with herself or with me.

“So, is he a creep?”

“On the contrary, he’s an environmentalist, he works with light and fire. He’s a writer and before that, he worked for the Department of Natural Resources. He’s not married and he even volunteers at the Terameth Lake Youth Center. He’s... *good*. He even has a sister—his adoptive sister—who has special needs. She has EDS—Ehlers-Danlos syndrome.”

“For a surprise brother, he sounds perfect. I’m not quite catching what the problem is, to be honest.” I wanted to be a good friend—sympathetic—but I had to have something to go on.

“I don’t want to share my mother!” Ari blurted out. She blushed, turning beet red. “There, I said it. I don’t want a stranger coming in, upsetting the balance. My folks, my sister, and I are all in a good space now. We’ve had our issues over the years—you know that, but now...everything feels wonderful. We talk, we laugh, we enjoy each other’s company, we get along. They love Meagan. I just feel that if another person comes into the fold, so to speak, it will upset the balance and leave us...who knows where?”

And there it was: fear. Fear of this stranger changing her family’s dynamics.

“I know I shouldn’t be saying all this, but I can’t help it. I don’t want a new brother—even a half-brother. And...I’m pissed that Mom gave him away. If she could just give away her child, she could have done that to Nena or me. Why didn’t she? How did marriage change everything so much that she felt okay about giving Colton away but kept us? I don’t know. I’m just...” And here the tears started to pour. She leaned forward, cradling her head in her hands.

I wasn’t sure what to say. I had enough family secrets of my own to last a lifetime, but I wondered—how would I have felt if I found out I had a half-sister or brother? Technically, Rowan gave my father away but she was always around to keep an eye on him from a distance, and she did it to protect him. It didn’t sound like that was the case with this Colton.

“How does Nena feel about this?” Ari’s sister had a good head on her shoulders. If she could maintain her equilibrium, then maybe a visit with Ari would help matters.

“She’s stunned, too. She doesn’t know what to think. We’re going to sort things out together. Meagan has my back,

regardless of what I decide.” Ari accepted the box of tissues I handed her and wiped her eyes. “What would you do?”

“I have no clue. I honestly don’t. I’ve never had siblings so I’m kind of clueless on this problem. What do you want to do? What feels right?”

Ari sighed. “I guess my sister and I need to come to a consensus and then talk to our parents. Maybe I’m being too analytical about it. I don’t like giving into fear.”

“Fear’s a complex emotion. We all approach it differently, but in the end, we can’t run away from problems. I guess, sometimes you just have to stare it down.” I honestly didn’t know what to tell her. I didn’t know what sibling dynamics were like. In some ways, I would love to have a brother or sister—it always seemed like it would make life easier.

“Yeah, I guess. You’re right. Nena and I will talk it over and figure out the best way to handle it. She’s good at things like this.” She paused. “So, how goes the search for Gretchen?”

I shrugged. “Speaking of fear...this whole thing has been weighing on my shoulders ever since I found out about it. I’m terrified I’ll lose Aunt Teran before we can find that bitch of a witch.”

Ari sighed and blowed her nose. “I’m sorry. I know your life and Teran’s life depends on this.”

“Oh, you have no reason to be sorry, and I can use the distraction. I’m about to go out hunting Bigfoot. Maybe he’ll decide to eat me and solve all my problems,” I said with a laugh. “I guess I shouldn’t joke about that, but sometimes you have to laugh or you’ll scream.”

“You said you were casting a spell to uncover Wyre’s whereabouts. How did that go?”

“Weird.” I told her about the night before, along with seeing the Woodling. “The thing with the Fae? I wanted to stay and see what they looked like. It wasn’t logical—I knew that. I knew it was dangerous, but I just... I wanted so badly to stay and see them ride by.” I shrugged. “Sometimes I think I have a death wish.”

“I don’t think it’s that,” she said, sobering. “The Fae are known for their powers of persuasion. They can lure you in with their glamour. You need to be careful. You live on the border between worlds. The Mystic Wood—”

“The Mystic Wood surrounds this entire town. We all live between the worlds here,” I said.

“Oh, speaking of living between the worlds, remember Peggin from Whisper Hollow?” Ari asked.

I nodded. She had been a delight—spunky, sexy in a retro curvy way, and yet she was hard-nosed to the bone. The woman carried a gun in her purse and had managed to escape the Lady of the Lake over in Whisper Hollow—a feat seldom accomplished. I wanted to visit there at some point, not only to meet the spirit shaman who lived there, but to get a feel for the shadow town. It was on the dark side of the woods. Some shadow towns were lighter—like Terameth Lake, even though it had its own dangers. Some were more enchanted like Moonshadow Bay. And others lived on the edge of the Veil and were deadly no matter which way you looked—like Whisper Hollow.

“Right, I remember her. How is she?”

Peggin and Ari had met during a vacation Ari took over on the peninsula, and she had visited here during the time I first encountered the Woodlings.

“Well, her friend Mariana—the bear shifter who was marked by the Lady of Crescent Lake? She’s actually moving here. She could use people to welcome her in. She’s never lived elsewhere than Whisper Hollow, but now if she stays, chances are the Lady will lure her in and drag her into the lake. She’ll be here next week.”

“Well, that’s good. I’m glad she’s getting out. Can the Lady reach her here, though?” I had seen one denizen of Whisper Hollow before, though in truth, he could travel anywhere. He was the front man for the Morrígan, a goddess of battle and death, frenzy and madness. The Crow Man had shown up in one of my visions when I met Druantia.

“I don’t know how far the Lady’s reach extends. Would the creatures who live in the Mystic Wood keep her out? Are there territorial issues with the shadow towns? I wonder if anybody knows.” Ari shrugged. “It’s a good question, though.”

“I can ask Tad. His parents were born there and left before he was born. Apparently, Tad’s father was marked by the Lady, as well, and they were afraid that Tad might inherit the mark.” The more I heard about Whisper Hollow, the more curious I became. There was something about the energy every time I thought of the town that sent a shiver through me.

“Okay, well, why don’t you throw her a welcome to Moonshadow Bay party?” I asked. “That would give all our friends a chance to meet her.”

“I’d like to, but could we use your house? Meagan’s in the middle of painting and re-papering the living and dining rooms. We decided we’re not going to sell. My house—our

house now—works for us, so we’re going to refurbish it to make it feel new.” She flashed me her best puppy-dog grin, the one I never could resist.

“You doofus, of course I’ll host it for you. But *you* take care of the invitations and food, all right?” I snorted. “I’m hosting Thanksgiving again this year, remember?”

“Deal,” Ari said. “I’ll get busy on the plans while I’m in California. I can make calls to the caterers from there.” She unwound her legs and stretched. “So, are you sure about this camping trip? It’s not that...Bigfoot is...” She paused. “We have no idea what he is or what he’ll do. Does Hank know what he’s getting everybody into?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’m leery myself, but it’s part of the job. Do you have a bad feeling about this?”

“Yeah,” she said, biting her lip. “Do you remember what the Mothman felt like? I still don’t remember a lot about the experience, but I remember that feeling—a sense of alienness, of walking on a tightrope over an abyss. That same feeling creeps up when you talk about this trip.”

I stood, walking over to the window to stare out at the Mystic Wood. “I know what you mean. I’ve been nervous ever since we finalized the trip. But I can’t plead out of it. This is my job, and I take it seriously. Hank’s been there for me, and he’s...this obsession of his will drive him nuts if we don’t do something about it. Maybe this trip will satisfy his hunger. Maybe he’ll be able to let it go after this.”

Ari joined me, leaning on the window sill. She stared at the forest. “Remember when we were kids and ran around in the forest, ignoring our parents’ warnings?”

“We could have been killed so easily. Rebecca was strong enough and we were weak enough that she could have taken one of us out. And then the darker creatures in there were even more dangerous. I guess when you’re born in a shadow town, you have to learn when to take a risk and when to turn away.” I watched as the aura of the forest flared. Even now, during the sun-splashed afternoon, I could see the energy ebb and flare.

“The forest is awake,” I said. “It’s so...alive.”

Ari nodded. “I can feel it from here. Do you think your spell will work?”

“I don’t know. I think either I amped it up by burying it in the Mystic Wood, or I killed the chance. I guess I’ll find out when...well, if something happens. Meanwhile, help me pack. If Bigfoot comes rushing into camp, the least I can do is look good.”

“If you survive,” Ari muttered. “Make me one promise.”

“What’s that?”

“If he does show up, you’ll listen to your gut. If your gut says run, you *run*—never mind about anything else. If your gut says get the fuck out of there, you turn tail and do everything you can to survive.” She turned to me, not a smile in sight.

Unsettled because Ari’s premonitions were usually spot on, I promised her that I’d do my best to come back in one piece.

CHAPTER SEVEN

*M*onday morning, I knelt to talk to Xi and Klaus. “Aunt Teran’s going to take care of you while I’m gone. I’ll be back—don’t worry, but it will be a little while. Several sleeps, but not too long. She’ll make sure you’re safe and fed and loved.”

Be careful, Xi said. You have a shadow on your back and I can’t stop it.

I wondered if she was talking about the fact that I had been marked by the shadow man, and the Mothman, or if this was something new. Or were they all mixed up together?

“Just know I’ll be home as soon as I can. Aunt Teran will make sure you’re okay. I love you—both of you very much.” Klaus didn’t understand me that well, but Xi assured me that he felt the tone of my voice. She rubbed against my hand, and I picked her up and hugged her tightly. “I love you so much, little one,” I whispered. “You be good, okay?”

She purred back her answer.

Promptly at six A.M.—an ungodly time—Killian and I hopped in his SUV. Aunt Teran stood by the door, waving as we pulled out of the driveway and headed up I-5 to the turnoff that would take us to the Mount Baker National Forest and the Lilac Grove campground.

One of the things I loved about this area was that it hadn't yet been overdeveloped, like so many areas near Seattle. It was still wild terrain, and as powerful as Mount Rainier was, Mount Baker had her own powers. Once known as "Koma Kulshan" by the native tribes—white sentinel—Mount Baker possessed several craters, some of which were considered inactive, and others of which still steamed. While there weren't nearly as many people in jeopardy as there were near Mount Rainier, the threat of eruptions and lahars still cast a shadow over the area.

The entire chain of Cascade volcanoes were young blood, in geological time, and their hormones were vibrant and alive. That energy spread through the land, infusing the trees and soil, the foliage and rocks, even the fauna with their strength.

We sped along I-5 to Bellingham, which was about ten miles away, then turned off onto Highway 542. As we headed east, the energy began to grow. We passed through Deming, then the highway turned northeast again, and we drove through Welcome. We reached Kendall, where the highway split. To the north, the road turned into Highway 547. We turned east again, staying on 542 as we passed through Maple Falls, then Warnick and finally, we pulled into Glacier—the last outpost before we entered the park. Beyond Glacier, we'd be at the mercy of the mountains.

People vanished every year in the national parks, but up here, where the terrain was still wild and where the forests and massive mountain peaks ruled, it was easy to lose your way.

I stared out the window at the massive timber as we sped past. Reaching toward the sky like long, gnarled fingers, the fir trunks rose so high we had to crook our necks to see their tops. They swayed in the breeze and, during windstorms, I knew

they whipped as if in a wild dance. Now and then one would break and fall, toppling to the ground, taking out power lines, houses, and cars.

What a way to go, I thought. *Looking up to see a tree falling toward you*. Even being in a car offered little safety. People were crushed every year by falling trees during the November windstorms that swept through western Washington.

“What are you thinking about?” Killian asked. “You seem a world away.”

“Lost in thought,” I said after a moment. “Thinking about the land here, about the spirits that inhabit this region. Not ghosts, but the actual spirits of the land. I wonder if this trip is a mistake. Maybe we should just leave Bigfoot in peace. He’s been here since before the white settlers came in. The Native American legends of him are legion. Do we have the right to chase him down and root him out?”

“I don’t know,” Killian said. “I also think this trip’s a mistake, you know that. But I’m not letting you go out there on your own.” He paused, then said, “But what about the other creatures you chase down at Conjure Ink? What about the Mothman, or the Woodlings? Do you have the right to intervene in their activities?”

“When they touch our lives, the answer is a resounding yes. But...I don’t know. I’m torn. My ethics and my scientific curiosity are at odds. For example, when the archeologists discover hidden tombs—like those of Egypt. How do we balance our need to understand the past, with the beliefs of those who lived and died then? We desecrate their tombs by opening them, by sifting through their remains. Where do the rights of the past end and ours begin? You can’t just go dig up

graves here in America, especially with Native remains. Not now, anyway. You can't sell artifacts at a sideshow carnival. I'm not saying we're wrong for exploring and charting the past, because to avoid the mistakes of the past, we have to understand what happened. But *when* do we dig too deep?"

The questions had been bothering me since childhood, actually. I loved learning about the past, especially how ancient cultures lived. And yet...and yet...part of me always felt uncomfortable when a new tomb was opened, when a new burial site was brought to light.

"Deep thoughts for a bright day," Killian said. "I don't have an answer for any of your questions. And it's complicated by so many varying cultures in this world—human, Otherkin, and...other. For example, the Fae control the Woodlings, correct?"

I nodded. "Yes, they use them. And the gods don't intervene."

"So, the Fae enslave the Woodlings against their will. Should we put an end to it? We outlawed slavery in our country in the 1800s—at least on the surface. But you know it still exists. Migrant workers are often treated no better than slave labor. They do the work that nobody here wants to do for minimum wage. They're kept in check by fear of being discovered by ICE. You know a lot of those farmers would turn them in if they demanded decent wages. They're willing to sidestep the law when they can pay slave wages. They don't give a damn about the workers who get sick off the pesticides or through overwork."

I nodded. There were so many gray areas that when I tried to think about it all, it gave me a headache. "The world is fucked up in so many ways."

“Yes, but it’s also beautiful. There *are* good people in this world, people who care, who are trying to make a difference. If you only look at the problems, we’ll get so overwhelmed that we’d never be able to move. We’d freeze. But take one issue at a time, break it down into manageable steps, and we have something to work with.”

Killian was definitely an optimist compared to me. I wouldn’t classify myself as a pessimist, but I was a realist and sometimes the overwhelm got to me. Some days I just had to turn away from the questions that haunted me and live my life.

“Okay, you’re right. Let’s see...applying this to Bigfoot. Well, we’re not out to capture him. Not physically. We basically want proof that he’s out here. There’s some marginal proof, but nothing absolutely definitive. We’re looking for pictures, to record sounds.” I shrugged. “If we can understand him, maybe we can communicate. Find out who...*what*...he is. Find out where he came from. There are a lot of theories right now.”

Killian gestured to a fruit stand advertising fresh fruit and juice. “Stop to stretch?”

“Sounds good.”

We pulled in. They had samples of the apple cider there and it was so good that I bought several gallons, a couple for the campout and several to take home. We also bought some fresh peaches and berries, and they had fresh eggs and bacon.

“This will be good for breakfast. That’s one thing about camping out—it gives you an appetite,” Killian said.

We made use of the restrooms. Then, after walking around for another few minutes, we returned to the SUV and headed out again. It would take another forty minutes to an hour to

reach the campground, which was off of a two-lane rough road in the park.

We were making good time—we'd managed to avoid rush hour traffic back in town. Out here, there wasn't much traffic. Before long, we arrived at the entrance to the park, and after that, we came to the turn off leading to the Lilac Grove campground.

The two-lane road was paved in theory, but pitted and bumpy where tree roots rose up beneath the asphalt. Still, taking the road at thirty miles an hour, it was only about six minutes before we arrived at the gates of the campground. Tad had reserved the biggest camping spot, and we slowed down to ten miles per hour—as required by the signs—until we came to the spot.

Lilac Grove was big, and our campsite alone had room for ten vehicles, along with an RV hookup. I recognized Tad's Jeep, but blinked when I saw the monster RV sitting there. Then again, we'd need juice for our computers and gear, and room to store everything. Tad waved us in and Killian rolled down his window.

“Pick a spot. Hank, Wren, and Caitlin came in the RV, while I drove the Jeep. I have the tents and all necessary gear.” Tad, my boss who was almost a decade younger than me, beamed. “The weather's supposed to be warm and clear this week, at least the first couple days. There's a chance for rain on Wednesday but it's only a 40 percent chance. Why don't you pick out what you need and get set up?”

Tad was setting out a couple grills and a portable camp stove with four burners. It looked like we wouldn't have to roast potatoes on a stick over the fire. Relieved, I headed toward the RV.

Inside, we found a stack of gear labeled “January and Killian.” By the look of things, the others were already getting set up.

As we carried our things out of the RV, a rush of cool air blew past, filled with the scent of summer in the forest. I inhaled deeply, held it in my lungs, then slowly exhaled. Maybe this wouldn’t be so bad. It was nice to be out of the city, even though Moonshadow Bay was actually a small town and wild in its own way.

Killian began setting up the tent—which was more than a bubble on the ground. It was actually big enough to stand up in, and reminded me of a yurt. I started to help him but Tad shooed me away.

“I’ll help. You go have a look around.” He waved me off.

“Where are the others?” I asked.

“Caitlin and Wren went on a nature walk,” he said. “Hank’s just patrolling the perimeters of the campsite, checking out the lay of the land.”

I nodded. “I’m glad Wren came. She needs a break. She’s been so stressed over Walter and frankly, I don’t know if I could hold up as much as she has. She’s an incredible woman.”

“She is,” Tad said, helping Killian raise the inner pole. They locked it into place and started on the outer spokes.

“Do you know how Walter is doing? I never know what exactly to ask, and I don’t want to stress her out any more than necessary.”

I was worried about Wren. Her husband had recently been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. It was progressing more rapidly than the doctors had predicted it would. While he was

still able to handle a number of his activities on his own, he had started to fall due to weakness, he was exhausted, and he was starting to have some cognitive issues. Wren couldn't leave him alone and she had hired help to stay with him while she came on the trip. He had wanted her to take a break, and she needed it.

“I don't know,” Tad said, shaking his head. “Not great. I'm worried that without round-the-clock help, their lives are both going to suffer.” He gave me a grave look. “I'm looking into ways to procure her some help without her realizing that I'm behind it. She doesn't want charity, but she can't afford home health care on her own. If I raised her salary to what she would need, she'd see right through me. I've given her a raise and increased their health insurance, but there are so many things they need. They've managed some renovations to accommodate Walter's disability but I'm afraid there's so much more that needs done before they're fully situated.”

“New house?” I asked. “Sell theirs and buy something that works better for them?”

“Wren's tied to that piece of land. Her mother gave it to her many years ago, and her family has magical ties to it. I'm not sure how or what, but...” He set down his hammer. “I'll figure out something, but it takes a cagey mind to outwit Wren.”

I nodded, then wandered over to the forest next to our campground, placing a hand against one of the trees. The energy rushed through me. The forest was wild and untamed, magical in its own right, but it wasn't like the Mystic Wood. Out here, the woods were enchanted by rights of their very existence. The Mystic Wood and other thickets like it were

usually places where a land deva had buried itself deep and sprouted the woodland around it.

As I knelt in the shade of the fir and leaned back against it, the worries of the world seemed to drain away, to soak into the soil to be cleansed and recycled anew. There was a rhythm to the forest—a heartbeat from the core of the earth that rose to surround me. And in that heartbeat, that web of life, I sensed Druantia watching over me. She was part of all woodlands, part of all forests that were bright and beautiful and untamed.

“Hey,” I said, my voice barely a whisper. “I can sense you. You’re here.”

I’m everywhere there are stands of wildwood. Everywhere the grass grows through the concrete, where the roots break the asphalt. I’m everywhere that the earth burgeons out, whether in abundance or against all odds. I am part of the cycle, part of the whole, part of the Eternal Return. Druantia is my name, and Gaia is my core. I am one arm of the Great Earth Mother.

And then, I caught a glimpse of a vision of a massive green woman with a round belly and full breasts hanging low, with hair that trailed in streamers of ivy, trillium, and red vine maple.

She was sitting cross-legged, and her pregnant belly was the earth itself. Her arms protected her child, and along her arms and legs and everywhere her naked skin showed, dark swirls and labyrinths twisted and turned, creating a knotwork of tattoos across her entire body. Within those swirls, runes glowed and glistened with both sunlight and moonlight.

“You are the Great Mother,” I whispered.

I am of the Great Mother. I am her, and yet only partly her. I am Druantia as well, and I walk the paths of the magical forest. There are others who lurk in the shadows of the ancient wood, and those who flit about on the currents of sunlight. There are still others who dance under the rain, and who carry the snows in their step. We are all part of the Great Mother, we avatars of the planet, and we are sovereign in our rights.

I was about to ask her about the other gods when a crow cawed loudly, startling me out of my trance. I glanced over at the parking lot and saw that Wren and Caitlin had returned. Hank was on their tail. Sighing, wishing I could drift in that energy forever, I stood, dusted off the seat of my jeans, and headed back to the parking lot.



BY NOON, WE WERE COMPLETELY SET UP. WREN WAS STANDING on the edge of the campground, wearing a long gauze skirt and a cardigan over a peasant blouse. She had on sneakers and leggings, and her hair was pulled back in a messy braid. She stared up at the trees, watching a crow who was gazing over the campground. Wren was witchblood, and she had a special connection with birds. She could talk to them, and could tell when the weather was changing or if there was danger around when they passed information back and forth.

Caitlin sat on the log next to me. “I’m glad she could make it. She needs this.”

“She does. But she watches over Walter because she loves him, not just because she has to. That makes a big difference. When you share someone’s life, that’s the way it should be.”

I thought back to Ellison. If I had developed a disability, he would have dumped me like a load of bricks. There would have been no watching out for me. But Killian...I knew in my gut that if I was injured or developed some chronic condition, he would be there for me. And I'd be there for him.

“Yeah, I know. Wren and Walter have a bond that I've never quite seen before. He's quiet, you know. He kind of lives in his own world. The MS has been difficult for him because he was such a physical guy. But now, he's going to have to dig deep and bring out some of his other talents. He can't wield a hammer anymore, not given the rate the MS is progressing. This is a rough time, for both of them.” Caitlin let out a sigh.

“Yeah, I feel for her.”

I watched Wren, sensing the tension that surrounded her like a cloak. And then, the crow in the tree took wing and flew down to land at her feet. The crow let out a long caw, and Wren knelt, holding out her hand. The crow fluttered its wings and landed on her hand as she slowly stood up, holding it out in front of her.

“Look at that,” Caitlin said. “Can you believe that?”

“Yeah, I can. I've seen some remarkable things in this life of mine. Wren's practically part bird.” I studied the way she handled the bird, and whispered to it. We couldn't hear what she was saying, but the bird was listening.

“She sure seems it.” Caitlin shaded her eyes as a shaft of sunlight spilled over us. “Was she a hippie? I know she's older than both of us and between the Birkenstocks and the gauzy clothes...”

“Wren may dress like a flower child of the sixties, but she's left the classification of 'hippie' in the dust. The hippies

loved nature, yes, and they were a movement with some wonderful goals, but they fell apart for a number of reasons. You can't live in a constant state of idealism and make it in this world. Ideal is a wonderful concept, and so is utopia, but perfection doesn't exist. It never has, and it never will. And we have to learn how to reconcile the ability to effect change with what's possible. One person's utopia is another person's hell, and vice versa."

I had long ago learned that the ideals of black and white were a myth. There was a small margin of dark and light on either end, with a massive gray area in between. And even in that gray area, there were delineations.

After a pause, Caitlin asked, "So you think Walter will make it through this?"

I hesitated, listening to my instinct. "Yes, he will. He'll be changed—there's no way around that, but he'll live and they'll adapt and learn to thrive again." I wasn't sure where my surety was coming from, but I knew—absolutely knew—that they'd be all right. They would change, their lives would never be the same, but they would struggle through and come out stronger.

A moment later, I turned to Caitlin and, glancing back at the fire where Tad, Hank, and Killian were grilling burgers and hot dogs, said, "So...you and Tad?" I knew they were attracted to each other, and I'd been prodding them together the past few months, hoping they would make what I thought would be a great connection.

"Don't go there," Caitlin said. "You know that we're both leery of ruining our friendship and our working together."

"All right, but you should consider it. I'm just saying..." I told her about Peggin's friend Mariana. "She's moving here. Save the next couple weekends for Ari's party."

“That will be interesting. Tad’s scared to death of Whisper Hollow. He really believes that if he goes over there, he’ll be trapped by the Lady and drowned.” Caitlin inspected her fingernails.

“He might. Hard to tell what happens over there. It’s a dangerous place. I told Ari I’d host the party if she does all the planning and shopping.” I looked up as Killian shouted that lunch was ready. “Come on. The men are back from the mighty hunt with their burgers and dogs.”

She laughed. As we stood, Wren turned. She joined us as we headed back to the picnic tables. “The birds are uneasy. They say that the Forest Beast has been through here recently, and he’s been watching everyone who has come and gone. I think they’re talking about sasquatch.”

“It sounds like it,” I said. “Are they afraid of him?”

Wren nodded. “*Awed* is one word, and *afraid* is another. They view him as some sort of forest spirit who holds sway over the land, and they also view him as a dangerous chaotic force. It’s almost as though they see him as an elemental rather than an actual creature. When I see some of the images from their minds, I believe it. He can uproot small trees with one arm and toss them around like Tinker Toys.”

“I guess we’d best be cautious and remain alert, then.” As we settled in at the picnic table and Killian carried over the tray of burgers and dogs, I wondered what the hell we were getting ourselves into. I wasn’t keen on finding out.

CHAPTER EIGHT

*A*s we ate lunch, Wren told the others what she had picked up from the birds. Tad had brought along a delightful contraption that was like a tent made of netting that was big enough to cover the picnic table, tall enough to stand up in, and it kept the bees and other bugs from flying in to bother our dinner.

Everything tasted so good that I began to think people were right about campfire food. It did taste better cooked over an open flame.

“So, what’s the plan for this week?” I asked after the first round of burgers and hot dogs.

“Sasquatch has been spotted around the area, due northeast. The road to Lilac Grove continues to Lupine Loop, a circular trail wide enough for one vehicle with a few turnoffs. There’s a parking lot about a mile and a half in, and from there, you can hike in to camp in the back country.”

“Okay, so he’s been spotted there?” Tad asked.

“Yeah. A couple recently was camping up there, about a mile in from the center of the loop. That night, they heard sounds outside, loud growls. They built up the fire and went to bed.” Hank pulled out his tablet and brought up his notes.

“The fire will usually scare off cougars and bears,” he continued. “Something woke them during the night by attacking the tent and they got up to check it out. They thought they saw something and shot at it—open carry is allowed, as long as you abide by all state rules, but firing the gun in the park isn’t. I do know they caught sight of a large figure lurking behind a tree. Seven feet tall at least, bipedal, and bulky.”

“Bigfoot?”

“That’s what it sounds like. The creature ran away, probably because of the light. Afraid of what the rangers might say—and of the creature returning—they took off, leaving most of their camping gear there. They decided to just eat the costs.”

“Idiots. You don’t shoot at something when you don’t know what you’re facing. If that had been someone playing a hoax, they could have murdered them.” I couldn’t stand clueless people. “So, now what?”

“I figure we head out for the campground at first light. We’ll drive up around to the center of the loop, then hike in to their campsite. It’s only a couple of miles or so in. That’s not too bad.”

Two miles of hiking in and two back didn’t sound so bad.

“Why are we waiting for daybreak? It’s only noon,” Caitlin said.

“Because we want to make certain all our gear is charged. We’ll take my Jeep and Killian’s SUV, and carry extra batteries. Besides, we need one night to chill and celebrate your birthday.” Tad stretched and looked around. “Mount Rainier is wild and perhaps the deadlier mountain, but Mount

Baker is more secretive. There are nooks and crannies in this wilderness that seldom see humans.”

I wandered over to the edge of the camping spot. He was right. Mount Rainier had many dangers, but Mount Baker kept her secrets to herself. Both were dormant and both could erupt at any given time. They tossed and turned under their dark slumbers.

But Tad was right—the potential to hide here was greater, and it felt like the forest didn’t welcome humans as much as Rainier did. This was a forest for the wildlife and the hidden denizens who called it home, more than for humans or Otherkin.

I reached out, seeking a signature of anything that might be near our campsite. A gust of wind raced by and I thought I could hear laughter—manic and gleeful rather than lighthearted. There was a touch of the feel that I sensed in the Mystic Wood, a kinship between the two.

“Esmara, are you here?”

I waited for a moment, then was startled to see her appear beside me. I was used to seeing her, but she was usually a lot more translucent, like a fading memory. She looked nearly corporeal here. She turned to me, her eyes wide.

This is a cross-quarters place, she said. I’ve encountered them before, but not often.

“What’s a cross-quarters? Is that like a crossroads?” I was aware the others were watching me, but they all knew about Esmara and I figured that at least Killian would figure out who I was talking to.

Yes, in a way it is, but there’s a different feel to this. More than one world intersects here. There are a number of doors

here, not just access to the spirit world. Dimensions meet here, and entities can cross over easily. Be cautious, January. This reminds me so much of the Mystic Wood that it's eerie.

“Wait here a moment, please,” I said, then turned to the others. “Esmara just told me this is a multi-dimensional crossroads. She says—and I was feeling this before—that the forest here reminds her of the Mystic Wood in many ways.”

“It should,” Hank said.

“Why?” Killian asked him, finishing his last hot dog.

Tad and Wren started to clean up. We didn't dare leave food around because of the potential of bears wandering through, so the men were getting ready to hoist the coolers of food up to hang over a tree limb at the edge of the camp. If a bear did come, it would give us time to get prepared.

“Because the first trees from the Mystic Wood came from this area.” Hank sat down on a tree stump near the firepit. “Do you know the history of the Mystic Wood and how it came to be?”

I shook my head, as did Killian and Tad.

“I've heard some of the legends,” Wren said, looking grave. “It's not a pleasant story.”

“My Pride—well, my ex-Pride—has its own tales but I think they mirror the other stories,” Caitlin said.

Hank let out a sigh. “Long ago, the tribes of the area lived in peace with some of the shifter clans, especially the wolf shifters. When this forest was still young, the witchblood began to emigrate here. At first they lived alongside the others with relatively little confrontation. But then a dark sorcerer arrived. He was powerful and chaotic, and he sought to unify the witchblood under his control. He tried to stir up discontent.

A few witches joined him and his band—they were the foundation for the Covenant of Chaos, who came later. They lived in this area, and they began to enchant the forest. It's said there's a turnstone somewhere around here.”

“What's a turnstone?” I asked, interrupting. “I read about one in my great-grandmother's book of shadows but I have no idea what it is, and I keep forgetting to ask Rowan.” A shiver ran through me as I said the word, as if even the word alone had power.

“A turnstone creates a portal—a dimension doorway through which other creatures can enter. There are natural areas that create the same sort of vortex, but a turnstone is deliberately created, and usually it connects to the nature spirits and the Fae.” Hank paused, then asked, “What did you say about your great-grandmother?”

“She found a turnstone out in the Mystic Woods when she was looking for something, I gather. She said that she thought that's how the Woodlings found their way across the ocean.” I thought about my encounter with the Woodling when I cast my spell. “Before you continue, let me tell you what I did Saturday night. It's not related to our search, but I feel you should know.”

So I told them about the spell I cast, about the Woodling, and what she said about the Fae.

“Are you sure it was wise to cast your spell out there?” Caitlin asked.

“Wise or not, it's done. And it felt like I needed to.” Then I said, “I'm sorry I interrupted, Hank. Please, finish telling us how the Mystic Woods came to be. You said that the sorcerer brought a turnstone to the area?”

“Yes,” he said. “He did. So the forest here began to change. Shifter legend goes into depth about it—how the woods took on a different feel, darker and more magically enhanced. All forests are magical to some degree, but this was vastly different. Then, a family of wolf shifters decided to move down toward the bay and they took with them trees from the area, from right near the turnstone, and they built a village, and planted the trees. As the centuries passed, the Mystic Wood sprang from those trees.”

“So that’s how the land became so magical?”

“Partially, yes, the area became enchanted. And remember, the parcel where that mental hospital was that we investigated? Remember, it’s located in what was known as the ‘forest of secrets.’ That part of the Mystic Wood was sickened, poisoned if you will, with negative energy, and it still is. There’s nothing that will ever cleanse it.”

“That’s right,” I said. “Charles Crichton, from the Moonshadow Bay Historical Society, told me that the Lhaq’temish—the Lummi People—avoid that area. They tried to warn... what was his name? The freak who built it?”

“Leeland,” Caitlin said. “I remember typing up the notes from the case.”

“That’s right, Leeland. They tried to warn him but he refused to listen.” Then a thought occurred to me. “What if some of the trees the shifter pack took were infected by the energy of the Covenant of Chaos? Could that have created a tainted patch like the one where the hospital was built? Especially one that could have created that thing that lives down beneath the earth there?”

I grimaced. I still wanted to go in and clear out the area, but I knew that we couldn’t. Whatever elemental had lodged

itself into the land there wasn't going to budge. I didn't know of anyone who had witchblood who was strong enough to dislodge it.

“Yes, it could have. Anyway, that's how the Mystic Wood is bound to these woods.” Hank looked around, watching a pair of hawks flying overhead. They were circling, hunting for their dinner.

“So, what's a turnstone look like? If I ever find the one in the Mystic Woods that my great-grandmother was talking about, I'd like to know how to recognize it.” I pulled out my tablet to make some notes.

Hank brought out his own tablet and brought up an e-book called *Turnstones & Sacred Tiles*. He flipped through the pages, touching the right side of the screen quickly. Then he turned the tablet toward us. There was both a photograph and an illustration of a turnstone. It reminded me of a Celtic Cross in some ways, except it was an X in a circle of stone, rather than a cross. And around the edges of the stone, there were runes inscribed—or rather, runic staves from the Celtic Ogham.

“Are they all Celtic?” Tad asked.

“No,” Hank said. “Some have Norse runes, others have hieroglyphs, still others what look like petroglyphs. It depends on what culture made the turnstone.”

“They aren't all from one culture?” Caitlin asked.

“No, they aren't. And the magic of the turnstone depends on the culture that created it. But regardless of the nature of the turnstone, they all attract all sorts of astral creatures, because astral creatures, and others like them, are generally attracted to the energy of the portal, not the nature or beliefs of

the ones who actually created it.” He hesitated, then added, “Whatever creatures exist in these woods, they know we’re here. We’ve been watched ever since we started unpacking our gear. Can you feel it?”

I could feel what he was talking about. I could sense that we were being watched—spied on—and that sensation grew with every minute we sat here talking about the turnstones.

“Shall we have a look around the campground?” I asked, standing. I needed to work off some of the nervous energy that had grown since we started eating lunch and talking.

“I’d like that,” Caitlin said.

“Me too,” Killian chimed in.

“You three go ahead. Wren, you too. Hank and I will check on the gear and make sure it’s all charging.” Tad waved us off. “Take walking sticks with you.”

The four of us found sturdy hiking sticks inside the RV.

“Which way should we go?” I asked.

Caitlin glanced around, shading her eyes. “Which way leads into the woods rather than back to the main road?”

“That way,” Wren said, pointing north. “In fact, it looks like there’s a trail over there. Why don’t we take that?”

The trail was big enough for two to walk abreast, so Killian and I took the lead, with Caitlin and Wren behind us. The trail, marked by a sign that read “LOOSE GOOSE FALLS, 2 MILES,” was well-traversed. We set out on the compacted soil.

At first the trail was made of firm dirt, kept clear from debris. But as the grade of the slope increased, the trail turned into wide shallow steps, reinforced by wooden logs cut to around two feet long each. The trail curved, winding through

the ever-increasing foliage. As the forest grew thicker and the campsite vanished from sight, I began to get a feel for how isolated we were. Granted, it was summer, and the parks were filled with campers, but they were still so large that it was easy to lose track of people.

I was grateful for the walking stick—it helped as the slope continued to increase. I wasn't winded—I'd been working out long enough that I was used to walking and I could manage a simple day hike easily as long as the terrain was easy going, but the continual increase in grade was surprisingly tiring.

"Watch yourself," Killian said, pulling me away from a waist-high patch of stinging nettle that overhung the trail. "You don't want to run into that."

"You're right." I wasn't allergic to it, but stinging nettle was nasty—allergies or not. It left welts on the skin from a simple brush, and it was far worse than any mosquito bite.

"This energy feels familiar," Caitlin said. "It does feel like the Mystic Wood in some ways."

"More feral, though," Wren said. She shaded her eyes, scoping out the tops of the trees. "The birds here are wary, that much I can tell you." She frowned, then pointed to one particularly tall fir tree. "Look, about ten feet up on the trunk."

We stared at the tree. Then I saw what she was talking about. There were claw marks on the trunk, a good ten feet up. Long scratches that dug deep into the bark, and the scratches were at least a foot long. There were three on one side of the trunk, three on the other.

"What the hell made those?" I asked.

"I don't know," Wren said. "I wish we could get a better look."

“We can,” Killian said. “I can boost one of you up on my shoulders. That will put you at eye level.”

I frowned. “It should be someone other than me. Wren, you’re the lightest, I’d say.”

“I can hold you on my shoulders,” Killian said to me.

“You’ve got to be kidding.” I wasn’t huge, but I sure wasn’t light.

“I’m a shifter, remember? I’ve got strength to back me up.”

I glanced at Caitlin and Wren. “What do you think? Who should go look at them?”

“You’re the best to suss out energy,” Wren said. “Though Caitlin and I are both good at identifying tracks and the like.”

Killian laughed. “Stop. I can hold all three of you. One at a time, of course. You can all take a look and then compare notes.”

“Well, that works,” I said with a snort. “Leave it to the guy to come at it logically.”

“Okay, who’s first?” Killian knelt. “Let’s see, how do we do this? I’ve never played cheerleader.”

“January, you get on his shoulders first. Step on and Wren and I will do our best to help you balance as he stands up. Make sure you’re close enough to the tree for her to grab it, Killian.” Caitlin motioned for me to step up behind Killian. “Just straddle his shoulders and we’ll hold onto your hands as he stands up. When you can, grab the tree trunk.”

I wasn’t so sure about the plan, but I did as they told me. I held onto Wren’s and Caitlin’s hands as I stepped onto Killian’s shoulders. He began to stand and I wavered, trying to

balance. I'd never been good at gymnastics and I doubted that now was a good time to start. But as he hoisted me up, his arms wrapped around my shins, I gingerly let go of Wren's hand and reached for the tree trunk.

When I was eye level with the scratches and bracing myself against the trunk, I leaned in to get a good look at them.

They were about a foot long, and they must have been close to a half-inch wide. Whatever made them had dug deep, the claws scraping into the tree to a depth that made me queasy. My first thought was bear, but was any bear ten feet tall when it stood up? And even if it could have been a bear, there was an energy to these marks that didn't say "bear." Feeling slightly nauseated, I tried to ignore the fact that every hair on my arms was standing at attention. Again, I felt like we were being watched.

I fumbled for my phone and, still bracing myself with my right arm, I took several pictures using my left hand, trying to make sure that I caught every nuance. Then, stuffing my camera back in my pocket, I hesitantly reached into one of the claw marks with one finger and brought it out. There seemed to some odd sort of muck in the claw marks, like a brown crumbly powder. I wasn't sure whether it was from the tree or not.

"Pass me up a plastic sandwich bag or something similar."

I waited while Caitlin found an empty plastic bag in her pack. She turned it inside out so that none of the crumbs inside would mix with what I was after and as she boosted Wren up by letting her climb up on her knee, I managed to grab the proffered sandwich bag before Wren jumped off onto the ground.

I broke a splinter of wood off a branch near the claw marks and used it like a primitive knife, scraping the brown paste out of the wood and into the bag. When I had a respectable amount, I rolled up the bag and stuffed it into my pocket.

“How do I get down?” I asked, wavering. I felt like I was about to lose my balance.

Killian backed up a step and, as I abruptly swayed, he reached up with one arm to take my hand in his. I started to fall and he swung me around, catching me. I landed on both feet, staggering a little, but managed to land without breaking anything.

“I got pictures and something else that was in the claw marks themselves. And I don’t really want to do that again,” I said, shaking my head. “I’m not a gymnast. But I think Caitlin and Wren should take a look. I didn’t recognize the marks, though they remind me of the claw marks the Mothman left on the trees. But there’s a difference. I can’t explain what, but there just is.”

Caitlin went next, climbing up on Killian’s shoulders. She balanced easily, and I could see the cat-like grace in her movements, even though she was in her human form. She examined the marks and took more pictures, then sniffed the tree before lithely leaping off Killian to land gently, feet first.

“Not the Mothman, but those aren’t bear or mountain lion marks. Wren?”

Using Caitlin’s and my shoulders, Wren swung up onto Killian’s shoulders and then grabbed hold of the tree branch next to the marks and swung onto it. She, too, examined them, then looked up into the next branch where a large crow was sitting. She let out a startling caw—Wren, not the crow—and the crow stared at her before echoing back a similar cry. Wren

swung down, holding onto the branch, and let go, landing on ground without a problem.

“We should compare notes. Is there a place to sit down?” Caitlin said, looking around.

“I don’t see anything. How far have we come? How far are we from the falls?”

Wren glanced at her watch. It was one of those fitness watches, which I had thought about getting. “We’ve come about a mile and a half from camp, so half a mile left until we reach the falls. We might as well finish the hike and see what they’re like.”

We decided to save our discussion until we reached the falls, and continued the hike.

The grade steepened, and I decided that two miles going uphill had to count for five miles on a straight plane. But we finally made it and broke out onto the edge of a deep ravine. The channel was a good twenty feet across, and the Goose Feather River ran through it, foaming sea-green with a froth of white-water caps that made me think of icing on a cake, or the foam on a pan of boiling water.

As the sound of the river thundered by, I glanced over the edge. If anybody fell into the river, there was a good chance they’d end up impaled by jagged rocks. Shivering, I backed a few steps away from the railing. There was a reason for the signs “NO SWIMMING” and “DANGEROUS ROCKS BELOW.”

At that point, I realized there were spirits wandering past us. In fact, I counted no less than ten ghosts tied to the river. Several of them looked broken and bloody, and the looks on their faces haunted me. A few others looked confused, as though they weren’t sure exactly what happened. And two

looked to be Native American, dressed in what must have been the clothing of their culture. They were walking together, a man and a woman, avoiding the other spirits. In fact, none of the spirits seemed to acknowledge any of the others.

“This is freakshow weird,” I said, staring at the spirits. A couple of them looked at me and then stopped in their tracks. “Uh oh, I think I’ve been outted.” They knew I could see them.

“What? What are you talking about?”

As two of the ghosts started toward me, I backed away from the edge of the ravine. “I’ve got a bunch of ghosts here, and two of them—at least—seem to know that I can see them. I’m not exactly sure what to do. There’s so much energy here that I can’t tell if they’re dangerous.”

“Should we get out of here?” Killian asked, immediately crossing to stand next to me. His eyes were glowing, and I could feel him tense. He sensed the ghosts too—or something—and it was setting off his wolf.

“I don’t know that we can without them chasing me.” I glanced around at the other ghosts. Four of them now noticed me, and they were all heading my way. “Make sure I don’t dive over that railing.” A sudden premonition sprang up, and I could see them dragging me to the railing and throwing me over it. “I don’t trust them.”

The next moment, the first ghost shifted and went from being about ten feet away to being in my face. It was a man, his face battered and bruised with blood covering his ragged shirt and jeans. His eyes were wide and they glowed with a dirty orange light. He opened his mouth and screamed at me, the sound of his voice sending shockwaves through my head.

I clasped my hands to my ears as I tried to drown out the sound of his scream.

He leaned closer and an icy blast of wind rushed through me as he leaped toward me. I could feel him trying to get in my head and I slammed up my wards.

“Get out of my head! You will *not* jump me!”

I pushed against him, blocking him as he tried to worm his way around my protection. Another one of the ghosts approached me from the side and I could feel her, too, trying to force her way in. The two of them then joined together, and as I watched in horror, they merged into one spirit, a nebulous blob of energy.

“Help her!” Caitlin was trying to drag me away as Killian stripped off his clothes. The next moment, he was shifting into wolf form, a huge gray wolf with glowing green eyes. Wren let out a series of calls and a flock of crows appeared, swarming around me. I wasn’t sure what they intended on doing, but the spirits were trying to wave them off.

As two more ghosts headed my way, the crows managed to buy me enough time to break away and stumble back. I tripped and fell on my ass, but the moment I landed I could feel a thick tree root beneath me. I slammed my hand on it.

“Druantia, help me!” I focused on the energy of the earth as it rose from the root, filling me with the force of the soil and rock, bone and crystal, root and branch. “Druantia, fill me with your strength!”

Four ghosts had now merged into one, and still they focused on me, even though the crows managed to offer some interference.

Killian let out a low growl and leaped right toward the ghostly forms. Surprised—he couldn't usually see ghosts—I drew on every ounce of earth magic that was running through my body. Caitlin held out her hand and I took it. She pulled me to my feet and then, as I turned to face the spirits, she began stripping off her clothes as well.

The force of the earth ran thickly through my veins, like sap rising in spring. I straightened up, holding out my hands. I wasn't sure what to do, but I let instinct take over.

*Blood of the Mother, rise within me,
Drive back these creatures caught in-between,
By mountain and stone, by root and leaf,
Drain them, seen and unseen.
Break their bonds to this water,
So say I, Druantia's daughter.*

As a light—glowing purple—began to stream toward the ghosts from my hands, they began to shriek. They were virtually corporeal by this point, and if they took form, they could easily overpower me. At that moment, Killian landed on the amorphous spirit and bit deep, tearing at the rotting flesh. Caitlin, in bobcat form, joined him and they went to town, biting and snapping their way through the bloody mess.

As they attacked the creature that was solidifying, it split apart into four separate spirits again, and I turned my focus on each one in turn. As the light from my hands hit each one, the ghost screamed and began to writhe and smoke. Wren let out a loud cry and the crows descended on the others, ripping and tearing along with Killian and Caitlin.

A moment later, the Native couple rushed up, but they didn't scare me like the other ghosts. They took one look at what was happening and flanked my sides, producing an immediate boost in my energy. The light strengthened and I realized they were helping me. I opened myself up to them and immediately found myself standing on the edge of the ravine, staring down. And yet, they were both standing there and I was merely observing them. The woman was crying, the man was stoic, but I could feel his despair.

They looked around as a group of men from their tribe appeared from behind the bushes and then, desperation on their faces, they kissed each other and—hand in hand—jumped to their deaths.

I broke out of the trance as the magic poured from my hands, draining each ghost, even the ones who hadn't noticed me yet. And then, I turned to the couple. They took their place in front of me.

“No, you helped me, I can't—” I fell silent as the woman began to cry.

Help us. Please. Free us. Her words were in another language but I understood them.

As Caitlin and Killian backed away, the crows landed on the ground in a circle around the couple and me. They began to keen, loud and shrill. Wren knelt beside them, her hands on the ground as she communed with them.

I turned back to the couple. “Do you really want this?”

The man nodded, looking at the woman beside him. I had seldom seen such devotion in anyone's eyes. He took her hand and they both straightened.

I raised my hands, tears streaming down my face. I knew I'd free them. I knew they'd move on to the Veil, but for some reason my heart broke as I brought my palms up and summoned the force that was still streaming through me.

“Travel safe. Travel far. Be free.” And then, I turned my hands to them and the magic streamed out, a steady rain of purple light. As it struck them, they began to melt away, like rain washing away a painting. But the last thing I saw was their faces, and they both looked at peace as they vanished toward the Veil.

CHAPTER NINE

*A*s the power drained away, I dropped to the ground, planting my hands firmly on the mossy soil beneath me. I focused the residual power that was churning through me into the ground, streaming it back to Druantia and to the earth itself before it could back up and knock me unconscious. Whatever I had tapped into, it was strong, and the Native couple had only strengthened it for me.

A moment later, I looked up, still on my knees. Killian bounded over, still in wolf form, and he rubbed against my shoulder, staring into my eyes. He was the most beautiful gray wolf I'd ever seen, massive at the shoulders, and his eyes were luminous. I threw my arms around his neck, resting my head on his fur. He sat down, tongue lolling out, and let out a sharp howl.

Caitlin—still in bobcat form—darted behind a bush. Wren gathered her clothing up and took it to her. A moment later, they both returned, Caitlin back in her human form. Still feeling woozy, I tried to stand up, but my head was spinning and I sat down again.

“I’m afraid you’re going to have to change back in front of us, love. I need to rest,” I said.

“Oh, no problem with that,” Wren said, picking up Killian’s clothing. She carried it behind the same bush behind which Caitlin had changed. “There now, he can go back there and dress.”

Killian padded behind the bush as Wren came over and knelt beside me. “What do you need? That was quite the display.”

“I need something to drink—water, and some form of protein, if anybody has any.”

“I have protein bars in my pack,” Caitlin said, going over to where she had dropped her pack on the ground. She brought me one, opened it, and handed it to me. “Eat up. And here’s a bottle of water. So, what the hell happened?”

“Wait till Killian changes back.” I brought my knees up and rested my head on them as I ate and drank. I was feeling overwhelmed and exhausted, and it was barely three P.M.

“I’m back,” Killian said, stepping out from behind the bush. He immediately sat down beside me and wrapped his arm around my shoulders. “Are you okay?”

“Just shaky. I never expected to be doing...whatever it was that I did.” I finished off the protein bar and the bottle of water. Then, after a moment, I sucked in a deep breath and exhaled slowly before trying to explain what had happened. “There were at least ten people who were trapped here—they died on the rocks below. Either they fell, were pushed, jumped. I’m not sure for most of them. They began to merge into one form—what you and Caitlin were fighting. It was trying to break through my wards.”

“I got the sense of some Native energy?” Caitlin asked.

“Yes, there was a couple—a Native American couple. From what I saw, they were lovers who were being chased by their tribe for something. They held hands and jumped rather than get caught. They’re free now, but they helped amp up my magic as I was fighting the...ghost blob. If you’ve ever seen *The Thing* with Kurt Russell, it was like that.”

“That sounds horrific,” Caitlin said.

“It was.” I shook my head. “I’ve seen that happen once or twice, but I have the feeling that there’s something about this area that...I guess I’d use the words ‘encouraged it’? Whatever the case, the ghosts are all gone now, at least the ones I saw. There may be more around that I haven’t noticed.”

“Well, that was a whole lot of hell,” Wren said. “The birds hate this area. The crows only come here because some of them are bound to do so. The crows who belong to the Morrígan.”

“I’m not surprised. This is a place of death,” I said. “So, should we discuss the marks here, or go back to the campsite? I’m going to vote for the campsite. I don’t want to be up here after dark, and dusk falls earlier in the forests than in the town—mostly because of all the shade from the trees.” With Killian’s help, I stood. “I think I can manage now, especially since we’re headed downhill on the way back.”

“I agree with January,” Caitlin said. “I really don’t want to stay out here after dark. I may not have been able to see much of what was going on, but I could feel it.”

“We all could,” Killian said, wrapping me in his arms for a hug. “All right, let’s go. Caitlin, you lead. I’ll bring up the rear and keep an eye out just in case anything tries to surprise us.”

As we headed down the slope, following the same path we'd arrived on, the sense of being watched heightened, strengthening almost every step of the way. I wasn't sure *what* was spying on us, but I had the feeling we had disrupted something that had been going on for many years. Whoever created that trap near the falls—for that's what it was, a spirit trap—wasn't happy with us. But I didn't want to say anything because I didn't want to worry anybody. Not yet, at least.

The trip back was uneventful, and went faster since we were all eager to get the hell away from Loose Goose Falls and we were also on a declining slope, which was much easier to navigate than going uphill.

We broke into the campground to find Tad and Hank making an early dinner. Hank was making the seafood boil and the combination of Old Bay seasoning, sausage, corn, potatoes, and seafood smelled delicious.

My stomach rumbled and I suddenly found myself dizzy again. Killian helped me to the picnic table and brought me a cup of hot coffee, along with several cookies.

“Don't fill up—dinner will be ready in about twenty minutes,” Hank said, turning around from the stove. He stopped to stare at me. “What the fuck happened to you? You're sparking like a downed power line.”

Tad glanced at me. “You do look...frazzled.”

“Oh, we've got a story for you,” Killian said, pouring coffee for Wren, Caitlin, and himself. They all sat down at the table, along with Hank and Tad. We told them about what had happened up at the falls.

“Well, there's some lore for our files,” Tad said. “What about the marks on the tree?”

I brought out my phone and opened the photos section. But the pictures I'd taken—which had been so clear—were missing. “What the hell? I took at least ten pictures of the marks. They're all gone.”

“Maybe the encounter with the ghosts fried your phone?” Hank asked.

“I don't know,” I said. “All my other pictures are fine and even though cell reception here sucks, I'm still able to open my apps.”

“What about the debris you collected, or whatever it is?” Caitlin asked.

I found the baggie and handed it to Hank. “Have a look at that. I scraped it out of where the claw marks were. Wait, didn't you and Wren take pictures too?” I asked Caitlin.

She and Wren both pulled out their phones but sure enough, their pictures had vanished too. “I don't know what to make of this,” Wren said.

“Well, I can tell you that the claws were far too long for a bear, and too far up the tree, I believe. I know bears can climb, but...wouldn't they leave claw marks in more than one place? Anyway, the scrapes were about a foot long, and they were, oh, a quarter-inch deep into the trunk? I think about that. The energy felt unlike anything I've ever encountered.”

Caitlin and Wren described much the same thing as I did.

“What did the birds say?” Hank asked.

Wren frowned. “They said the spirit of the Forest Beast made them—but in no way do I get the feeling they're talking about a god. I caught the impression of a large shadowy figure. The crows fear him, but keep watch. The other birds stay well away.”

“Sasquatch?” I asked.

“Possibly,” Hank said. “I don’t want to attribute everything to him, but quite frankly, I’m positive enough to put a bet on it. Though I wouldn’t bet my life savings.”

I worried my lip, not wanting to dash anyone’s bubble, but finally, I decided to say what was on my mind.

“Should we be doing this? Should we be intruding in his territory? We’re basically stalking him. And what if we do find proof that he’s out here? Won’t that just encourage amateur hunters to either try to kill him, or to capture him? Or chase him down to the point where they get hurt? You know some of these amateur ghost hunters, urban legend chasers, whatever. They’re like a dog with a bone. They won’t let go, and they usually end up giving a bad name to the entire occupation of ghost hunting.”

“January might be right,” Wren said. But before she could continue, Hank cut her off.

“I’ve been hunting Bigfoot for years. I’m not going to stop now. Someday, someone’s going to find the proof, and they may not be as responsible with it as we will. At least we have enough respect not to try to capture him—to drag him back to the lab in chains.”

Tad sided with Hank. “We’re doing our job. Conjure Ink is a paranormal investigations organization and while there may be some cases too big for us to handle, Hank’s right. We have a ton of circumstantial evidence, and it’s time we give Hank the chance to investigate his passion. We’re not here with guns to shoot Bigfoot, or with a scalpel to dissect him. We’re on a pictures-only basis. Or ancillary evidence like whatever this is.” He held up the baggie I’d brought back. “In fact, I’m going to secure this in the RV right now. We’ll start at dawn

for the campsite where the couple spotted him.” He stood, frowning. “I’m sorry, January, but this is part of the job.”

I frowned, staring at the picnic table. “All right. But I want it on record that I have a bad feeling about this. And you usually listen to my intuition.”

“I think your intuition is just running scared,” Hank muttered as he returned to the stove. “Caitlin’s birthday dinner’s ready. Somebody bring out the plates, please? And can we try to cheer up?”

Caitlin rested her hand on my arm and whispered, “We’ll just have to be careful.”

“Right,” I said, pulling my coffee toward me. Right now, I wished I was working in a whole different field.



AFTER DINNER AND CAKE—WHICH WAS EXCELLENT—WE SAT around the fire as night fell. Caitlin loved her gift—so much I thought she was going to cry.

The wood crackled and popped, and I leaned forward, watching the flames. But they told me nothing, except that sparks landing on my arm could hurt. I walked to the edge of our campground.

“At least let me cast a Circle around our camp tonight?”

“No,” Tad said. “We don’t want to keep anything out. If we’re going to have an encounter, we don’t want magic to stop it. I’m sorry, January, but we’re leaving our defenses down. Hank is setting up some cameras run by motion detectors, though. We’ll be warned if something is caught on film.”

A pit opened in the bottom of my stomach. I turned to Killian. “Come on, let’s go to bed.”

He followed me into our tent, where we sat on the air mattress that Tad had brought. It was far more comfortable than sleeping on the ground. As I undressed and slipped into my pajamas—I wasn’t about to sleep in my clothes—I vented my frustration.

“I wish they’d listen to me. If anything, this afternoon showed us that there are forces in this park far more powerful than we are. I don’t want to be here, Killian. But neither do I feel right about walking out on the others. I’m not that type of person.”

“Be cautious. Keep your wards up. You can’t afford to let your guard down. And regardless of what Tad says, at least cast a Circle around our tent. You can do that from the inside, right?” He looked as frustrated as I felt.

“Yeah, I can. But damn it, what about Caitlin and Wren? And Tad and Hank?”

“Why don’t you talk to Caitlin and Wren, see if they want you to cast a Circle inside their tent?” Killian shrugged. “They should be given the choice. Tad can’t just arbitrarily say no for everyone.”

“You’re right,” I said, unpacking my sneakers and slipping them on. I pulled on my jacket—it was getting cold—and we returned to the campfire. The others were still there. I settled down on a log.

“Listen, Tad. I respect you. You’re my boss and I accept that. But I believe that Wren, Caitlin, and Hank should be given the choice whether to let me cast a Circle around their tents. It won’t stop anything from wandering into the campsite,

but it *will* help protect us and our tents. I should also cast a Circle of protection around the RV, unless you want all that equipment damaged. I can't necessarily stop thieves, and maybe I can't stop Bigfoot, but I can at least keep any spirits from attacking us. And maybe I can add extra protection against physical harm."

Tad stared at me for a moment and, without missing a beat, turned to the others. "I'll go with the majority. Who wants their tents protected?"

Wren shot her hand up. "The last thing I need is some spirit attacking me during the night. I don't need any more stress than I have."

"Me too," Caitlin said.

I turned to Hank. "What about you?"

"I can protect Tad's and my tent if we need it. I'm witchblood too, you know." Hank glanced at Tad. "I think we're willing to experience anything the campground has to offer us."

"I'm game, too," Tad said. "But go ahead and cast a Circle around Wren's and Caitlin's tent, if you like. I won't stop you. Hank and I'll keep an eye on the RV."

I shook my head. "I think you're making a mistake, but it's your choice. Come on, Wren, Caitlin. You can help me."

I led them over to their tent. The sun had set, but we still had a faint amount of light, so I cast a Circle around their tent, invoking the elements and Druantia, asking for protection. I had brought most of my magical supplies that I kept handy for traveling, and I sprayed sage water around their tent, then circled it with a ring of red brick powder and black salt.

“If you need to go to the bathroom, don’t scuff the circle. Step over it here.” I marked a spot with an X. “I’ll open a door but keep the entrance protected. That way you can go in and out without breaking the circle.” I stood back, holding out my hands. The circle of protection pulsed with a gentle energy that was both strong and cushioning. “You should sleep pretty good, I think.”

Wren hugged me. “Don’t be too upset at Tad. Both he and Hank are so excited to finally be out here. They’ve been planning to do this for a couple of years. Tad...I don’t know what has a hold on Hank and him, but they’re fanatical about this subject.”

I sighed, crossing my arms to pull my jacket closer. It was chilly and my PJs weren’t as warm as I had thought they were. “How does it feel?”

Wren and Caitlin hopped over the salt and stood there for a moment. A smile spread over Wren’s face.

“I feel safe and calm. Thanks, January. I’ll sleep better than I thought I would. After the crap up there at the falls, I wasn’t looking forward to tonight. Honestly, I wish we could go home, but Tad and Hank need us.”

“Yeah, I think they do. Okay, hopefully we’ll all just have a good night’s sleep and get up early in the morning to a hearty breakfast.”

I went back to the tent I was sharing with Killian. I cast a Circle around our tent, again using the red brick dust and black salt, and then gratefully slid into the sleeping bag on top of the air mattress. Killian crawled in the double-size bag with me and we shifted around until we were both comfortable. As I listened to the silence, I realized that I needed noise. I was a

bonafide city dweller, and the sheer weight of the mountain made me feel like I was weighed down.

“Are you okay?” Killian asked, sitting up and turning on his flashlight.

“Yeah,” I said. “I can’t sleep very well out in the natural world, apparently. I need the sound of the refrigerator, and the air cleaner and my white noise sound machine. Ocean waves? Good. The sound of blowing air? Good. The quiet of Mount Baker? Nope.”

“I have an app on my phone for white noise, if you’d like,” he said.

“No, that would just drain your battery and while we can recharge pretty easily, there’s no need.” I wrapped my arms around my knees and leaned forward. “At least I feel safe in here—from spirits and other astral beasts.”

“Are you afraid Bigfoot’s going to come tearing into our campsite?” He wasn’t being sarcastic. Killian always took fears seriously. His sister had a phobia of closed-in spaces like elevators. Killian never treated her like she was stupid for it.

“Honestly? Maybe. I don’t know. I’m not usually this easily spooked, but there are so many...things...*energies*...out here that I’m overwhelmed. And up at the falls, that whole mess frightened me, including the energy that I was able to draw on. I called out to Druantia for help and she helped, but now I’m wondering what the hell did I tap into? Will I be able to use it again?” I tried to calm down, because I could feel myself getting worked up and that was the last thing I needed before I went to sleep.

“Tell you what. Don’t worry about the charge. I’ve got a portable charger and I’ll hook my phone up to that.” He

plugged his phone into the charger—the size of a deck of cards—and turned on the app. The sound of ocean waves came floating out, immediately soothing my worries. We snuggled back into the sleeping bag and Killian lay the phone between us where I could easily hear it. The next thing I knew, I relaxed and dropped off to sleep.



MORNING CAME TOO EARLY AND, EVEN THOUGH THE AIR mattress had been comfortable, I still felt out of place and grumpy. But at least we had slept and one night was over. I pulled out the wet wipes and we took a quick sponge bath with them, then dressed and emerged from the tent. I made a beeline for the RV to use the restroom, while Killian stood in line for the next spot, and then I washed my hands and headed out to the picnic table where Tad and Wren were making breakfast.

“How did you sleep?” Tad asked.

“Not great. I’m definitely a city woman, I guess.” I glanced at the table. There was a plate of Danish pastries on it, and Tad was cooking up big pans of sausage and eggs while Wren was making a fruit salad. I carried the reusable plastic dishes and silverware to the table. As I lifted the netting and ducked beneath it, I glanced around the campsite. Everything seemed to be the way we left it the night before. Caitlin and Hank came jogging into the campsite, carrying their cameras.

“Where have you two been?” I asked, arranging the plates.

Caitlin joined me while Hank headed over to Tad. “We decided to take a walk around the campsite this morning.”

“You find anything?” I held the netting open for Wren as she carried in the fruit salad.

“Not much. If there’s been any activity around this area, it’s lying low right now. After we eat, we’ll head up to Lupine Loop and check it out.” Caitlin set down her camera and wiped her hands on her jeans. “I’m going to go wash up.”

As we gathered around the table, eating breakfast and drinking coffee, Tad glanced at his watch. “We should get moving soon. I want plenty of time to hunt around up there in the daylight. Once everybody’s ready, we’ll head out.”

The morning air had piqued everybody’s appetite, but we were all subdued as we finished our breakfast and packed the Jeep up with our equipment. I couldn’t shake the feeling that the incident at the falls was merely a prelude to the main act that was coming.

CHAPTER TEN

Lupine Loop was just off the main road leading through the campground. We couldn't all fit in the Jeep, so Killian, Caitlin, Wren, and I were in Killian's SUV while Tad and Hank were in the Jeep with all the equipment.

The morning air was cool and crisp, but my weather app showed that we were due for sun today and clear skies. This was one of the warmer Junes that our area had experienced—usually summer came in for real during July through early September. But unfortunately, climate change was altering the weather patterns and we were seeing more severe storms and odd heat and cold waves come through.

Lupine Loop was off the beaten track, on a part of Mount Baker that wasn't traveled much. Only the hardest hikers attempted backcountry camping and backpacking. For one thing, there weren't rest stations nearby. For another, there were no trails leading into the backways of the mountains, so the chances of getting lost were far greater. While search-and-rescue teams had a good record, they weren't infallible. Some people got lost and ended up being found later, others landed themselves in trouble and died, their remains not being found until much later, and still others vanished without a trace and nothing was ever heard from them again.

The campground road to Lupine Loop was a narrow two-lane graveled road, without any turnouts. Killian kept his eyes on the road, following cautiously behind Tad and Hank. We were on the edge of a deep ravine on our right, leading down a steep slope to a distant stream below. If we went off the road, chances were the trees would stop the SUV from rolling too far, but it didn't guarantee safety. Grateful I wasn't that frightened of heights, I watched as the ravine grew steeper and steeper.

Wren, from the seat behind Killian, asked, "So, does anybody else think that Tad's become as obsessed as Hank about this?"

"Yeah," Caitlin said. She was sitting behind me. "He's acting odd."

"Has anything happened in his life lately that I didn't get the memo on?" I asked, keeping my eyes glued to the window.

"Actually, yes," Wren said. "I didn't say anything because I didn't feel it was my place but...I guess you guys should know. And if he gets angry at me, well, not my problem."

"What's going on?" Caitlin asked.

"Tad's father's sick. He's developed a heart condition. He had one heart attack, and they're worried about blood clots. I think that Tad's doing everything he can to distract himself since there's not much he can do at home." Wren frowned. "I overheard him talking to his mother, and when I asked him what was going on, he broke down and told me."

"Holy crap, no wonder he's been abrupt lately. But why didn't he just tell us? We're all in this together. We help each other. That's what we do," I said.

“I think I know,” said Caitlin. “If Tad’s father dies, that leaves Tad in control of what basically amounts to a small empire. He’ll have so much responsibility on his shoulders that he won’t have time for his own pursuits. And I know that he doesn’t want to follow in his father’s footsteps.”

“Cripes. No wonder he’s trying to lose himself in his work. Is he expected to take over the family business?” Killian asked.

“*Businesses*, plural. And yes. His father’s a self-made mogul. While he’s fine with Tad following his passions, it’s been understood all along that if his father needs help, Tad’s expected to step up.” Wren leaned forward to peek between the seats. “You know that they’re wealthy, but I don’t think you realize just *how* wealthy Tad’s family is. His father holds several important patents, and the companies that rose out of them.”

“What about Tad’s siblings? Can any of them take up the slack?” Killian asked.

“Tad’s an only child,” Caitlin said. “He once told me that his mother almost died in childbirth with him. She had to have a hysterectomy so she didn’t bleed to death.”

“Then he’s the golden boy,” I said. “The keeper of the flame, so to speak.”

“Yeah, that’s about the size of it.”

Killian suddenly slowed down. Up ahead, Tad was signaling a left turn onto what looked like a one-lane dirt road. A brown sign with gold letters near the turnoff read: LUPINE LOOP.

“Looks like we’re almost there,” Killian said.

“Listen, don’t tell Tad I said anything. Not right now. Let him tell you in his own time,” Wren said. “I think he’s still processing everything this could mean for him.”

“No worries,” I said. “We won’t say anything.”

We bumped up the road, which was primarily dirt. I couldn’t imagine how rough it would be during the rains. It would be far too easy to get stuck out here in the mud. The trees were thick on each side, so tall they blotted out the early morning sun. It was barely seven, and the birds were just getting started for the day.

Wren rolled down her window and listened. After a moment, she said, “The birds are uneasy. From what I can tell, they don’t like this place and the ones who have stayed here are guarding their nests. Something came through recently, which means that the nesting birds couldn’t leave.” She let out a long series of calls, sounding exactly like a crow. “I wish I’d brought my falcon with me—but I didn’t trust to bring her out here. These forests can be dangerous for what amounts to a tame bird, even if she still hunts for herself.”

Wren’s familiar was a falcon named Gerta, just like Xi was becoming my familiar.

“Can you connect with any other birds?” I asked. “I mean, like you do with Gerta?”

“Not that easily, though I can try. But I need to be where I can go into trance and sit very still. A bumpy car ride isn’t conducive to that.” She shook her head. “It’s not normal, though. For the birds to flee an area. If only the nesting birds are left, that means something has spooked this part of the forest.”

“Well, I think we can guess what that is,” I said. “But if the others haven’t returned, that probably means that sasquatch is still around.”

“You’re most likely right,” Wren said. “I almost hope he is—*it* is? I wonder if sasquatch has both genders. How do they reproduce? Or are they astral beings that solidify into corporeal form when they appear here?”

“You think they’re from another dimension?” Caitlin asked.

“Maybe. Maybe another world? There was a book my mother used to read to me when I was a little girl called *The Forbidden Door*. It was about a young boy from another world who had special powers, and he fell through a door into space, landing here. I’ve often thought about that book and wondered if aliens get to our planet through wormholes.” Wren sighed. “There are so many questions, and so few answers to the mysteries in this world.”

“You’ve got that right. I like your theory,” I said, thinking about what she said.

We followed Tad’s Jeep along the dusty dirt road. While five miles wasn’t a huge distance, on a bumpy one-lane dirt road it seemed to take forever. But the vegetation and forest thinned out as the road evened out and we finally saw a sign up ahead that read LUPINE MEADOWS. The road curved to the right.

“This must be the beginning of the circular road. I gather we stop halfway around?” I asked.

“That’s what Tad said,” Caitlin said. I glanced back to see her worried expression as she craned her neck, staring out of the window.

“You okay?” I asked.

She glanced at me, nodding. But I could tell she was upset over something. Then, as I continued to hold her gaze, I knew what it was. She was worried about Tad.

She and Tad had a mutual crush on each other, but neither was willing to chance upsetting the balance in the office by giving it a go. I had the feeling they’d make a great couple, but they both avoided every plan I made to try to get them together. Tad had finally made me promise to stop playing matchmaker.

The drive around the loop took far less time than the trip to the loop—given the road was flat and the terrain was far less bumpy. Finally, Tad pulled off the road into what looked like a makeshift parking lot—still dirt—and we followed him.

I glanced at the clock. It was almost quarter to eight. It had taken us almost forty-five minutes to come about eight miles. But given the terrain, I wasn’t surprised. We all piled out of our vehicles and stretched.

The parking area had a row of long, thick logs spread out to act as both a delineation between the start of Lupine Meadows—the camping area—and the parking lot. Wren and I walked over to sit on them.

“I’m going to try to make contact now,” she said. “I’ll see if there are any local birds that might be willing to act as my eyes and ears. Will you cast a Circle for me? I don’t want to do anything out here that might attract entities looking to jump a witch.”

“Sure thing,” I said, returning to the car for my bag o’ magical tools. I pulled out my great-grandmother’s athame. Though I had my own, I figured for this trip I wanted

something that bore powerful magic, and my own dagger hadn't seen a great deal of ritual yet. Great-grandma Colleen's dagger had a black hilt made of bog oak. The blade was polished bronze. I was also wearing her ring—a silver ring with a bear's head that had emerald eyes. The ring was protective, and I had decided to arm myself as much as I could for this trip.

I took the dagger and held it out, feeling the resonance vibrate in my hand as I cast a Circle, drawing it round the log Wren was sitting on.

The others approached and I motioned them to come inside before I bound the Circle shut. They did, remaining quiet. As they settled down on the log near Wren, I finished closing the circle and then called the elements, bidding earth, air, fire, and water to ring us with their powers. Then, finally, I called on the goddess Druantia for protection, and on the Morrígan—Wren's goddess. As I did so, a flock of crows circled overhead.

Wren waited till I had finished before standing. She raised her arms to the sky.

“Lady of the Crows, Goddess of Phantom and Dreams, Mother of the Battlefield, be with us here. Guide your messengers to me, let me see through their eyes, hear through their ears. Give me the sight of crows, Mother Morrígan. Give me the ability to soar with them, fly with them, spy with them.”

As her voice fell away, the cawing of the crows overhead grew stronger. More of the birds joined the circling flock, their voices raspy and harsh, echoing over the land. I sat beside Wren as she backed up and slowly re-took her seat. She looked toward the sky and her eyes went pure white, as though

massive cataracts had covered every speck of them. I held my hands out, but didn't touch her. The Morrigan was filling her breath, circling her.

Wren's head dropped back and Tad stifled an exclamation. I motioned to him to stay still. Wren was fine. She was just drawing down the power of the goddess into herself.

Hank sat by her feet, watching and waiting. He motioned to me and I joined him, taking his hand. We worked in tandem, strengthening the energy of the circle, building the energy higher. Hank specialized in bilocation and astral work. I worked on drawing the energy from the ground while Hank drew it from the astral plane. The energy encircled us like a sine wave that was rising with each oscillation, a sinuous heart beat growing stronger with each breath. We fell into the rhythm, our breaths synchronizing, and I could feel the pulse of his heartbeat through my fingers, matching mine beat for beat.

Wren stood, her arms upraised in the Priestess position, stretched wide to the heavens. Her eyes were clouded over and she swayed in the light breeze that had suddenly stirred. It ruffled around us, a cool, wakening gust of wind, and I began to hear sounds on it like the distant call of the gulls. The crows overhead began to swoop and dive, not attacking us, but sweeping through the circle, until two of them landed on her shoulders. One of them let out a loud caw, and the other followed suit.

Wren opened her mouth, and her voice echoed as though from a distance. "I can see through the forest. I can see through the trees. The dangers here are ancient and beyond your ken. Do not assume you can shake this once you've begun. Do not assume you control any of this. Now that

you've opened the gate, you cannot close it. Once you begin the journey, you must see it through or it will follow you to the distant corners of this world. When you play with fire, expect to get burned. There is no other path.”

She paused. I wanted to ask her questions—I knew it wasn't Wren speaking, but either the Morrígan herself, or her oracles.

Then, as I glanced beyond her, I saw a figure I had seen once before. I recognized him immediately. A tall man with a staff that glowed with blue fire, he wore an indigo cloak that sparkled with stars, and over the cloak, a fur shawl. The headdress was as I remembered: that of a giant crow with crimson eyes and a curved beak so sharp it looked as though it could pierce metal. He had hair trailing down to his shoulders, and his eyes were glowing neon white.

He stared at me, a cunning look on his face, and he smiled and winked—which terrified me to the core. “So we meet again, Daughter of the Earth. What brings you to my domain?”

I knew that Wren worked with the Morrígan but wasn't a priestess of her. “One of the Morrígan's supplicants seeks knowledge to aid us.”

The others turned to look at me, but I gave a quick shake of the head and they remained silent. Hank was staring at the Crow Man, his eyes wide.

The Crow Man was the messenger of the Morrígan. He traveled before her, paving the way for her appearance. He was dangerous and crafty, but I could trust what he said. That much I knew. The Morrígan was the goddess of spirit shamans, and I worked with the dead just enough to have some overlap in her domain.

“Tell me what you seek to know.” The Crow Man drew closer, stepping inside the circle.

Wren paused, but her eyes remained veiled and she sank deep into her trance, so far I hoped we’d be able to pull her out of it.

I turned to Hank. We were still holding hands. “Can you hold her strong while I talk to him?”

“I can,” he said, breathing deeply. “Who is he?”

“Later. Just trust me for now, please.” I gently let go of his fingers and he steeled himself, bracing the energy to keep it flowing. Without my earth energy, Hank would have to pull double duty to have Wren’s back.

I stood, glancing at the others. They were all staring at the Crow Man as though they had been turned to stone. I pointed to Killian. “Do not interfere, please. I will be all right. I need you to believe me, and to do as I ask.”

He nodded, though I could see his wolf was near the surface, waiting to transform.

I turned back to the Crow Man and approached him. “We are seeking a creature who has been seen in these woods. We don’t know if he’s natural to the area or a visitor. He’s volatile—bipedal but not of our nature.” I formed an image of what we knew of sasquatch in my mind and pushed it toward him.

The Crow Man’s eyes narrowed. “You are playing with fire.”

“My companions—we seek to explore the unknown. A couple was attacked by this creature not long ago, not far from here.” I tried to think of some other reason to give him for why we were here, but since I wasn’t particularly enthusiastic about the trip, I was finding it difficult.

“You know this is a dangerous move,” the Crow Man said. “Why are *you* here?”

“I owe my allegiance to my friends, and they...one of my friends is fascinated with the nature of the creature. I believe they have some destiny together.” It was the best way I could describe Hank’s obsession.

The Crow Man turned to stare at Hank, then back at me. His voice, gritty and yet seductive, swirled around me. “Ah. You are speaking of him. Yes, there is a connection, soul-deep, that even he doesn’t know about. He must come to that understanding on his own.”

“Can you help Wren see through the eyes of the crows? She couldn’t bring her falcon here with her—it’s too dangerous.” I wasn’t sure if that was the wisest idea but it seemed to make sense to me.

“I can help her to relay through the birds. But *who* will pay the price for my help?”

Crap, I couldn’t say Wren—especially if I didn’t know what the price was. I couldn’t speak for anybody but me. “What’s your price? Can you tell me?”

“Ah, so you would bear the price. Just say that I will call on you for a favor one day and no, it does not involve your life, your oath as a priestess of Druantia, or your first-born, should you choose to have one. A simple favor.” But the look in his eyes told me it wouldn’t be nearly as simple as he was making it out to be.

“As long as it doesn’t involve my loved ones being hurt, or my oath to Druantia being compromised, then I will pay the price for your help.” I licked my lips, staring at him. He was

luscious, and his lips were full and inviting. I found it hard to look away.

He laughed. “You wonder what my kiss might stir in you?” As he stepped forward, I quickly took a step back. “Too late to back away. Seal the deal with a kiss and find out. One kiss—nothing more.”

My stomach flipping, I turned back to check on Killian, but everything fell away behind a gray wall of mist that sparkled with blue fire and neon white stars. The mist turned into a star-filled field and the Crow Man was beside me. He leaned down—he was so tall I had to crane my neck to look up at him, and he placed one finger under my chin, raising it up so I was staring into his eyes. The neon white mirrored the white glow of Wren’s eyes, and I found myself falling into the depths of them as he leaned down to press his lips against mine.

I had never felt such cold ever before as when his lips touched mine. It was the cold of the grave, the cold of the Otherworld, the cold of the depths of space. Stars swirled around me, and the night sky lit up with the aurora as we stood on the flickering path of northern lights. Frost crept over me like a lace curtain, bone-chilling, making my blood slow. My heartbeat echoed around us, but I realized I couldn’t hear his.

“What are you?” I whispered. “Are you dead?”

“I am the Messenger of She Who Watches Over Death, I am the Father of Crows. I am the Crow Man, and I bring messages in the night. Once you have met me, you’ll never forget me. Once you have kissed me, you’ll never fully walk without me in your thoughts. I am part of every crow and raven that wings its way across this world. I am found in the depths of the darkness, and the brilliance of the lights that

create the path of the Ancestors. You have sealed the deal, and I will help you. Listen for my call—and do not think that you can renege on our deal. You are bound by the gods—by Druantia, and by the Morrígan.”

And then, he backed away and I was standing in the parking lot, the clouds of mist gone, the night sky gone. Wren let out a scream, then collapsed. Hank caught her before she could hit the ground, and as the others surged forward toward her, I found myself staring out of the circle, wondering what the hell had just happened.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

*W*e all sat there, unsure of what to do next. Wren slowly sat up, squinting. Her eyes were back to normal. I glanced around. Everything looked normal, the mists were all gone, and the Crow Man was nowhere to be seen.

“What the hell just happened?” Dazed, Tad looked around the parking lot.

Wren gasped. “I can see—through one of the crows’ eyes.”

Reluctantly, I told them of the deal the Crow Man had made with me. “I knew we needed your...crow vision, and it didn’t seem an opportune time to say no to the offer.”

Wren gasped. “I never would have tried that if I had known he would appear.”

“Then you know who he is?” I turned to her, waving off the others as they started to all talk at once.

“Yes, I definitely do. I work with crows so much, I know all about the Crow Man. He’s dangerous, though he’ll stick to his word. He won’t break the terms of your deal—not unless you do.” She sighed. “But yes, I can see now, through a crow’s eyes.”

None of them seemed to realize that I had kissed the Crow Man and I decided to leave it that way. But I did turn to Hank.

“He said you’re soul-connected to Bigfoot. And also, he said we’re playing with fire.”

“Soul-connected? Do you know what he meant by that?”

I shook my head. “No, I don’t. But we have to be careful. He was warning us.”

Tad glanced at Hank, then said, “We’ll take extra care. I never take visitations like that lightly. Tonight, cast a Circle around the entire campsite.” He looked so concerned that I wanted to know what had changed his mind.

Apparently, Wren noticed the change, too. “What do *you* know about the Crow Man?”

“My parents were born in Whisper Hollow, remember? They left because my father was marked by the Lady of Crescent Lake. I know all about the Crow Man. While he can go anywhere, his base is Whisper Hollow.” Tad worried his lip. “Did he have any messages for me?” It was obvious he didn’t want to ask the question.

It occurred to me that he was worried about his father being swept up in the energy. “No, he didn’t. This pretty much focused on Wren and me.”

I glanced at Killian, who looked perturbed, but not like he was about to throw a fit. The kiss had been incredible, magical, and yet terrifying. I really didn’t want to experience that again, though I had to admit: I was glad that I had felt what it was like to kiss the gods—and their messengers—once in my life.

“All right, since you can now see through the crow’s eyes, why don’t you see what’s out there?” I felt awkwardly thrust into the driver’s seat, but I was quite willing to hand over the steering wheel again. “Hank, it’s your baby. Take over.”

Hank stared at me for a moment. “I’m still trying to figure out what the Crow Man meant about a soul-connection. But I think you’re right. Wren, can you reach out and see anything?”

She sat on the log again, then closed her eyes. “Speak to me, Night on the Wing.”

I wanted to ask what she meant by that but didn’t want to interrupt. I figured it was either the name of one of the crows, or meant the crow species in general. It seemed to fit.

A few minutes later she took a breath. “I’ve made a connection. There, the crow is winging over the forest to... back toward the camping area. The one here, not back where we’re parked.”

“Lupine Loop backcountry camping?” Tad asked.

“Yes. I’m not only watching it, but I can feel it. There’s danger in the woods. I see where the couple camped—it’s obvious from the air that the area’s been disturbed. I can sense the crow’s uneasiness. There’s something over toward the west of the campground, deep in the forest, that feels like it doesn’t belong there. I think we can safely avoid it, but we’d better keep on our guard. I asked the bird if it would fly over whatever it is, but the crow refuses. It’s afraid.” She opened her eyes. “If we want to go, though, let’s get a move on. I do *not* want to be up here after dark.”

She stood, shouldering her daypack. The rest of us gathered our packs and gear, with Hank, Killian, and Caitlin carrying the bulk of the equipment since they were the strongest. Wren and I shouldered daypacks and carried snacks for the trail. We all had full water bottles.

“Are we ready?” I asked, testing my walking stick. Everybody had brought one, not just me, and I found myself

hoping that the trail wouldn't be too difficult.

“Yeah, let's head out,” Hank said. He left notes on our car windows stating where we were going, and when we were leaving the parking lot. It seemed safest to do, in case something happened and the rangers had to come in and find us.

We crossed to the edge of the parking lot opposite the entrance and stepped off into the lea. The wide swath of open meadow was dappled with wildflowers—Indian paintbrush, valerian, lupine, red heather, and other blooms that covered the ground with a barrage of color. The grass was low growing and mossy, and easy to walk on. We were on a slope that was a gradual decline to the west and incline to the east. I wasn't sure where we were, although a sign I'd seen stated that Lupine Loop was in the vicinity of Heather Meadows Falls.

The forest was thick, wide patches covering the slopes, but here we were open to the sky. But as we continued, the forest grew in clusters, until the open area was about two hundred yards from the treeline. I was relieved to find that—although the terrain wasn't easy—it wasn't that difficult either. Which meant a relatively easy jaunt back to our cars.

I glanced around. “How far are we from where the couple camped?”

Hank consulted his map. “About another quarter mile. We're almost there.”

Sure enough, within a few minutes we came upon the remains of their camp. They had left in a hurry, leaving their tent and gear behind. I was surprised the rangers hadn't been through to cart it out, but maybe they hadn't been informed.

“So, what exactly did the couple say happened?” Wren asked.

“They camped out here, arriving on a Friday night. The next night, they were preparing for bed when they heard noises coming from the woods. They thought it was possibly a bear, so they made sure their food was high off the ground and then set a good fire near their tent to scare off any wildlife.”

“Apparently, that didn’t work,” Caitlin said.

“You’re right about that. During the night, something attacked the tent from the back side, ripping it open. The couple had a rifle and, even though they aren’t supposed to actually use it in the park, the husband shot at the creature while the wife was taking pictures and that scared it off. He thinks he may have grazed its arm, but he doesn’t think that he hurt it. They were afraid to report it to the rangers because they used the gun. They took off, racing back to the parking lot, and managed to get there without incident.” Hank shrugged. “They didn’t leave any identifying info around the tent, so they thought they’d just eat the cost of the gear.”

“And the pictures?” Killian asked.

“Here. The others have seen them but take a look.” Hank handed him his tablet. While the coverage was spotty, he had downloaded the photos to the device.

Killian stared at the pictures for a moment. They showed murky night shots but the creature in the pictures was clear enough to make out. It was large—huge, actually, and covered with a short, rough-looking fur. The eyes were glowing yellow, and it stood upright—bipedal, with long glistening claws. The shape was more humanoid than primate, and there was a particular intelligence in the eyes, but whatever it was, it didn’t look friendly.

“It’s male,” Killian said. “It has a cock and balls, see? The bulge beneath that patch of fur?”

I didn’t really want to look but I forced myself too. And yes, caught in a blurry moment, the groin area of the creature definitely showed a male presence. A rather aroused presence.

“Yeah, it’s definitely hominid male,” Hank said. “I suggest we gather up the gear because there may be some sort of DNA left on it, somewhere. Also, it will keep the park from coming in and confiscating it.”

“Is that legal?” I asked.

“Technically, it doesn’t belong to the park,” Hank said with a shrug.

We broke through into a wider meadow at that moment, into the campsite. I glanced up at the tree where the remains of their food line hung. The food had been torn down and was long gone, save for the remains of the cooler that had been holding it. The broken cooler was on the ground, smashed. The tent had been shredded into a long sheet of plastic, the sleeping bags were torn apart, and basically the entire campsite was one big litter-fest. Wren immediately pulled out several large garbage bags and began picking up the scattered remains of the camp while Hank went over to explore the trees nearest, where the food had been hanging.

He pointed to the claw marks. “Just like on the tree up by Loose Goose Falls?”

I squinted up at them. “Yeah, they do look the same. I wonder if they have that same residue in them. If so, maybe it does come from the creature.”

“One way to find out,” Hank said. “Killian, can you give me a boost?”

Killian boosted him up, and Hank scraped inside the claw marks, bagging something that looked like brown gummy resin when he showed it to us.

“That looks like what I found,” I said. “I guess we take it home and analyze it.”

“Right.” Hank knelt by the bottom of the tree, then glanced up at the marks. “Footprints. Not deep—we haven’t had any rain so the ground is pretty hard, but you can see there are footprints left in the dirt. I need the plaster.”

Caitlin unpacked a small bucket of plaster while I looked around for water. There was a small creek running near the campsite on the northern side, so I took the empty bottle Hank had brought along for the purpose and made a couple of trips, filling it with water straight from the creek. It was a small creek—barely six feet wide and low-running—and it was easy to skip across to the other side using the rocks that jutted out of it. Once I had delivered Hank’s water to him, I went back to the creek and sat down beside it, staring at the flowing stream.

Wren joined me. “I know what happened between you and the Crow Man,” she whispered. “I won’t say anything, but be careful. Sometimes you might as well make a deal with the devil.”

“It was the only way he would help,” I said. “I don’t fancy a repeat, though. He scares me.”

“Well he should. He’s the messenger of the Morrígan and she’s enough to scare anybody.” Wren crossed her legs and leaned back on her hands. “It feels so good to be here, to be out away from the house.” A pained look crossed her face.

“It must be hard, having to handle all the situations Walter’s condition causes. And don’t think I’m saying he’s a

burden—he's not. This is the sort of thing that tests relationships. But it must be exhausting for you at times. Caretaking isn't easy." I had never had to be someone's caretaker, not in the way that Wren was, but I knew it could be draining.

"It is. The hardest thing isn't watching him go from being so active to needing help for some of the simpler things, but to help him cope with the anger. He's so angry, January. He hates asking for help. He hates admitting he needs it and I try to stand back, to let him do what he can but then he'll fall or he'll struggle so much that he blows up. He's not angry at me, but I feel his anger so much." She lowered her head and tears began to stream down her cheeks. "I never know what to say. I'm afraid that if I coddle him, he'll become like a tyrannical little kid, but if I show tough love and tell him to suck it up, he'll hate me."

I watched her weep, feeling totally helpless. There wasn't anything I could do to change the fact that her husband was going through a severe physical change that had to affect him psychologically as well as physically, but Wren needed support.

"What can I do? What do *you* need?"

She dashed at the tears, wiping them away. "Just the fact that you asked, helps. But...I don't know. I suppose, now and then I need to get away for an hour or so and walk down by the bay, or just sit in a garden and breathe. I haven't had the chance to attend to my own garden. We have a home health-care worker now, but even with her, I have so much extra work on my hands with the bills and the doctor appointments, that I don't ever seem to have time to get away. And when I'm not

taking care of all of that, I still have to clean house and do the dishes—”

“Okay, *that* I can help with. I’m going to give you a gift and I won’t take no for an answer. I’m calling a cleaning service and hiring them to come over once every couple weeks for three months. That will give you a break. Even if you’re there when they come, you can retreat to your garden and just sit in the sun, or maybe plant a few flowers.”

She looked over at me. “Are you sure?”

“I wouldn’t have offered if I wasn’t positive. The minute we get home, I’ll find a good service and call them.” I made a note in my phone. “Here, turn around.”

She scooted around, her back facing me. I put my hands on her shoulders and began to give her a backrub. She let out a gentle sigh as I continued. I was good with my hands, at least with massage. And Wren was a pile of knots. I worked on her back, steadily increasing the pressure as trigger spots began to show their painful little heads. She let out a “yowch” now and then, but I noticed she was beginning to relax and her muscles were far more pliable the longer I went on.

“You don’t have to do this—”

“I want to. Hush. Close your eyes and try to relax.” I continued for another twenty minutes until Hank whistled, waving our way. “Okay, let’s go. Tonight, in front of the campfire, I’m giving you a foot rub.”

She blinked, her eyes watery. “Thank you, January. I needed this so much.”

Giving her a hug, I whispered, “Hey, if I can’t give a friend a rubdown, who can I massage?”

We headed back to the campsite where the guys—and Caitlin—had finished cleaning up.

“Well?” I asked. “What do we do now?”

“I’m thinking we should come out here and camp for one night,” Hank said. “Before you protest—we’re a larger group. I doubt if Bigfoot’s going to attack all of us. We can set up our gear and do our best to record some good footage of him.”

I decided to ask something that I wasn’t sure had been addressed before. “What’s the end goal of this trip? Are we out for physical proof that Bigfoot exists? To just gather more knowledge? Contact? What are we looking for?”

Hank glanced at Tad. “I think we’re hoping for actual contact, but otherwise—just gathering more information. We’re not looking to capture, and if contact seems dangerous, then we’ll focus on info.”

“Oh, I think we all can see that contact is dangerous,” I said. “But if you really want to camp here, then what about our camp down at the other site? We can bring the RV up to the parking lot, but I doubt if the rangers would appreciate us driving it up here.”

“That was my thought. Bring everything up to the parking lot. Then we can hike in with the gear. In fact, I think we should go back now, break everything down, and head up here.” Tad glanced at his watch. “We have enough time.”

As much as I didn’t want to agree, I was willing to go along with the majority. Killian didn’t look too happy either, but he said nothing.

“All right, let’s go,” Caitlin said. “If we’re going to do this, let’s get moving so we aren’t setting up camp in the dark. We can keep most of the food in the RV.”

As we headed back to the parking lot, I tried to quell my concerns.

Wren, who was walking beside me, leaned in. “You don’t think this is a good idea, do you?”

I shook my head. “I have a feeling this is the last thing we want to do, but what can I say? I know people respect my intuition, but damn, if I tell Hank and Tad no, they’re both going to find a way to overrule me. I could just say I refuse, but I’m part of the team and I don’t let people down. What about you?”

She pursed her lips. “Not something I’m looking forward to, but maybe if we’re in a large-enough group, Sass will keep his distance.”

I laughed. “‘Sass’? That feels like such a misnomer. In fact, to tell you the truth, I feel like there’s got to be some other name for him that fits better. Bigfoot feels too disrespectful, but sasquatch feels like it just doesn’t fit.”

“I know, but we have no clue what the thing calls himself in his own language. And I do believe it has its own language.” She frowned. “Tonight, I think we should all stay in the same tent, if we can rig one large enough.”

“I’d like that, actually. In fact, I’d almost rather sleep under the stars so that we don’t have to get out if that thing comes into our camp.” Shuddering, I turned to Hank, who was leading the way. “Hey, Hank! What about all of us sleeping in the same tent? Can we rig something that big?”

Hank glanced back at me, a thoughtful look on his face. “We probably can erect some sort of gazebo-like structure—why?”

I decided to just come out and say it. “Wren, Killian, and I would feel safer that way.”

“I would too,” Caitlin chimed in.

Tad clinched it. “I think I’d feel better too. We can rig a large circular yurt-like structure with the tents and canvas tarps that I’ve brought. And it will allow us to get in and out quicker, if needed.”

“That was part of my thinking,” I said. “The last thing I want is to be cooped up in a tent with something that large bearing down on me. By the way, looking at those photos, I figure the claw marks were easily made by Bigfoot raising his arms overhead. That’s all it would take him. And does he have a different name? Bigfoot feels like an understatement and sasquatch feels...odd.”

“The Salish pronounce it *se’sxac*, or ‘wild men,’ ” Hank said.

“Well, that feels more accurate.” I paused, then said, “I fully intend to cast a strong Circle of protection around our camp. I’m not staying out here without some sort of protection.”

“I’m all for that,” Caitlin said from where she was walking beside Tad. They had been talking and I wondered if they finally were admitting the connection they had.

“Good, because otherwise, I’ll sleep in the RV with Killian. And Wren. She’s been through enough lately, she doesn’t need to try to fall asleep worrying about whether we’ve done what we can to protect ourselves.” I had just enough edge in my voice that Hank glanced at me. Then he looked over at Wren, and merely nodded.

We got back to our base camp and packed up, eating sandwiches we threw together for lunch. I didn't want to leave. It was comfortable here, with restrooms and even a small facility for taking showers. I didn't like roughing it. But I comforted myself with the idea that I could cast a Circle, and that we were already one night through the trip.

"You okay?" Killian asked as we packed up his SUV.

"No, I'm not," I said, setting down my pack. I turned to him. "Honestly, I feel that Tad and Hank are being irresponsible, and I think if we *really* protested, the two of them would tell us to go home and chill out. Now, I'd like to do nothing more than that—but I don't want to leave Caitlin and Wren up here. Mostly because there's safety in numbers, at least in a case like this. I think camping up at that site is a mistake and we're going to pay the price, somehow."

I hadn't realized just how irked I was until I started talking.

"You feel they're blindsided to the dangers?" Killian asked.

I nodded. "Yeah, I do. And I think that any attempt to point out the folly of this trip is going to bounce off them like rubber off cement. They just won't listen. They're so intent on stirring the pot that they haven't contemplated what the results might be."

Killian leaned against the car. "Well, we've already seen that there are some dangerous spirits up here, given the excursion yesterday. What makes you think they won't listen?"

I paused, trying to figure out what was setting me off. Wouldn't it just be easier to admit my concerns to them and

see what they said, rather than speculating? Finally, after a moment, I pinpointed it.

“I think they’re almost bewitched by the subject. When a witch—and Hank is witchblood—gets hold of an idea and it begins to haunt them, then there’s no way to steer them clear. You haven’t seen me go through that, but I’m sure at some point you will. It’s an odd mania that seems to be especially prevalent in the witchblood community. And I think that we’re running down a dark path without any streetlights, and there’s a massive pothole in the middle of the street somewhere. But without lights, we won’t see it until somebody falls in.”

“That’s a long metaphor,” Killian said. “But I get it. All right, I’ll keep extra alert and try to talk to them privately. While I doubt either one has a sexist bone in his body, maybe if I warn them again about *my* experience, they’ll take a second to think about it.”

We gathered up everything and packed up all our vehicles, then after making sure our fire was fully extinguished, we jumped in the Jeep, Killian’s SUV, and Hank drove the RV, and we headed up to Lupine Loop.



DRIVING THE CARS OVER THE DIRT ROAD WAS ONE THING, BUT watching Hank maneuver the mammoth RV made me nervous. It wasn’t mine, but what if it got stuck? Or what if some stone jutted up out of the ground far enough to tear the gas tank, or anything else that we might need to make the vehicle go?

But Hank was a good driver and he managed to circumnavigate most of the problematic areas. We finally

reached the parking lot at around four-fifteen, then piled out of our vehicles.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to sleep out here in the RV?” I asked, only half-joking.

“No, we’re all going,” Tad said. “Come help me sort out which equipment we need. We need to get to the site in order to set up everything.”

Dragging my feet, I obliged. We sorted out all of the equipment we might need, that we could carry without too much of an encumbrance.

As I sorted through the stack of EVP equipment and cameras, I wondered. Did sasquatch have their own ghosts? Did they even die? Were they immortal? And if they did have ghosts, did they go through the Veil? Or did the creature have its own form of Veil and afterlife?

My mind replayed the questions over and over as I decided which cameras were best for what we were attempting.

At one point, Tad joined me. “I know you don’t approve.”

“I don’t approve of coming on this trip with so little actual organization. I know we’ve been talking about it for some time, but the fact is, it feels like Hank got the report, saw that this might be the best time to investigate, and convinced you to throw all-in before you had a chance to say no. Hell, how long did you actually plan on what to do once we got here? And was it from here—from Lupine Loop—that you originally decided to explore? Or did the couple’s report just come in and shake everything up?” I had to speak out or I wouldn’t be much of a team member. I wouldn’t be much of a friend, either.

“I guess we just got overexcited,” Tad said, looking at the equipment. “We seldom get reports this substantial. By the time I send Hank out, everything’s always too old. We had a chance to jump on this. We’d already talked about the trip, and it seemed like the perfect time.”

I nodded. “I get it, but Tad—do you realize how dangerous this looks to the rest of us? And don’t even try the ‘It’s because you’re a woman’ line.”

“I wouldn’t,” he said. “When have you ever heard me talk like an incel?”

“I haven’t, but there can always be a first time.”

“Do you *understand*, though? I mean, truly understand how much this means to Hank?” Tad turned to me. “And if he has a soul-connection with it, as you say the Crow Man said, then there’s a *reason* he’s pushed to hunt for evidence.”

“That doesn’t make running headlong into danger a good idea.” I sighed. “I know he’s been chasing them ever since he was young. And you’re right—if he *does* have a soul-connection with these creatures, then there’s more to it than we see on the surface. But I’m afraid for the rest of us. Especially Wren.” I glanced back to make certain she couldn’t hear me.

“What do you mean? What’s going on with Wren? Well, besides the obvious.” Tad liked Wren a lot, and he had done everything he could to make her new normal less traumatizing.

“Tad, she’s stressed beyond belief. She desperately needs a break. She needs to get away from Walter for a few hours every now and then to decompress so she can stay strong for him. I’m worried that the stress of her daily life, and now this trip, will throw her into shock. That can bring on a host of

diseases, including stroke, heart attack, and plenty of other conditions.”

Tad set down the camera he was holding. “Is she really as stressed as all that?”

I nodded. “And she needs all the help we can give her.”

“Well then, Operation Wren begins in earnest the moment we get home. Until then, do whatever she needs to feel comfortable.” And with that, we finished sorting equipment. I only hoped that Bigfoot wasn’t hanging out in the trees, watching.

CHAPTER TWELVE

*A*s we spread out our gear, I motioned Wren off to the side.

“Can you sense Bigfoot around now?” I asked. “Can you see through the crow’s eyes?”

She settled down on the ground in the lotus position and closed her eyes. After a moment she took a deep breath. “He’s out there, all right, but he hasn’t noticed us yet. I’ll bet he won’t be oblivious for long, though. My guess is that sooner or later, and he’ll head our way.”

“We’ll all be under one roof, though, so that may help.” I glanced around. “It’s really pretty here, as long as I don’t think about who’s waiting out in the woods for us.”

“It is. I used to spend summers up in Bellingham with my grandmother. She and my grandfather moved away from Moonshadow Bay when my mother was twelve. But my mother moved back when she turned eighteen. She loves the town. I just wish...” She trailed off, her voice fading.

“Wish what?” I had seldom heard Wren talking about her parents.

“I wish we could connect more.”

“Is there a rift between you?”

“Not exactly. Well, there is but it’s nothing that either of us caused.” She paused. “I seldom talk about my childhood because it was run-of-the-mill. Play with the neighbor kids, I did okay in school, all of that. Except when I was seven. That summer changed everything in our lives.”

I could sense a story coming and waited.

“My mother married my father when she was twenty-three. They had me three years later, and then in another two years, they had my brother. When he was two years old, he managed to slip outside. My parents didn’t see him escape. The screen on the sliding glass door didn’t work that well, but my folks had been reluctant to fix it. They never thought Mikey could get it open. But he did.” She lay back on the tree trunk, staring at the sky.

“What happened?” I knew, I could feel it—but she obviously needed to talk about it.

“He died in Walapagash Creek, which flows near that old asylum we tried to clear out. It was right behind our house—the head of the creek—and he rolled down the embankment, into it. My folks heard him scream, but couldn’t reach him—or even find him—in time.”

There wasn’t much I could say to that. “How old were you when that happened?”

“Seven. I was old enough to understand what happened, and I think a part of myself never fully forgave my parents for not paying more attention. I was over at a friend’s house for a sleepover. They came to get me that night. I still remember wondering why they were making me come home early—what I had done.”

“That’s hard—feeling like you’re at fault for something and not knowing what.”

“Especially for little kids. When we arrived home, my mother broke down and they told me Mikey had drowned. I remember wanting to do something to make things better. But the only thing I could think of was that my mother always smiled when I sang and danced. So I started dancing and singing some silly song. My mother turned to me, her face white as a sheet. ‘How can you be so cruel? Are you *happy* your brother died?’ I remember freezing, then trying to explain myself. I stuttered out that I was just trying to help her, to make her not cry. I think my father understood, but he just asked me to go play in my room for a little while.”

I let out a slow breath. “Do they still live in town?”

She nodded. “Yes. They still live in that house. When I go visit, I often think I hear Mikey, running and laughing.” She hesitated, then turned to me. “Would you go over there with me sometime, to tell me if he’s still there? If he’s trapped?”

I pressed my lips together. I wasn’t sure whether she was hoping he would be there, or that he was free. But I heard the nuance behind her question. She felt guilty for upsetting her mother. She felt guilty for not being there when her brother died. And if I was on track, she probably felt like she might have been able to prevent Mikey’s death.

“Sure, I’ll go. You do know that there’s nothing you could have done if you had stayed home, right? If your parents didn’t hear him until it was too late, chances are good you wouldn’t have, either.” I decided a little armchair psychology was in order.

Wren shrugged—just enough to tell me I was right. “Who knows? There aren’t any do-overs for a situation like this. But

I wish... I wish I could have had the chance.”

“Did your parents ever have any other children? Do you have other siblings?”

Wren let out a long sigh. “No. In fact, my mother had her tubes tied after that. I think she couldn’t bear to ever chance facing that kind of pain again. Mikey’s death changed her. She’s loving and kind, but she keeps a part of herself walled off that no one can reach. I think she’s trying to protect herself against feeling loss ever again. She and my father lead separate lives for the most part. They care about each other, but Mikey’s death changed them both.”

“She never sought therapy?” It seemed like any self-aware person, especially someone with witchblood who understood how emotions affected energy, would understand the need for help in a situation like this.

“No. In fact, she thinks I’m weak for going to therapy to deal with Walter’s diagnosis. I’ve become a disappointment to her over the years.” Wren sighed again, then stood to stretch. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to vent. I don’t even know why this is bothering me so much right now.”

I joined her in stretching. “That’s all right. It’s obvious you needed to get this off your chest. Maybe Walter’s diagnosis triggered memories about Mikey in some way. I can tell you’re afraid to be here on this trip.”

“What if something happens—” She stopped, a look of understanding spreading across her face. “Oh. *I get it*. I’m afraid to leave, in case something goes wrong. No wonder I’ve always been reluctant to go out on trips. I’ve been afraid I won’t be there to make sure everything’s okay. You know, *this* is why I need the therapy. I’m going to have a whole lot to unpack with Dr. Shonner when we get back.”

The men and Caitlin had gathered all the gear we would need to carry in to the campsite. They motioned us over.

“So, is he out there?” Hank asked.

Wren nodded. “Yeah, he is. And he’s waiting. He can sense us around. I’m sorry, Tad, but I have no intention of being caught out in that meadow, over a mile away from the cars, at night.”

“Caitlin was saying the same thing. So, what about this? We make camp about a hundred yards in toward the original campsite? We’ll be close enough to run for the vehicles, but still within the vicinity?”

Tad’s offer to compromise surprised me. But I was grateful for it. “I’m good with that. How about you?”

Wren nodded. “All right. I can live with that.”

We hiked our packs on our backs and then picked up the bags of equipment. Killian, Hank, and Caitlin carried the heaviest ones, while Tad, Wren, and I carried the lighter equipment. Thoroughly encumbered we headed toward the place where the meadow opened out. We were still close to the parking lot, yet well over a mile from the campground. But we were far enough off the road that we might be able to get a glimpse of Bigfoot from here.

We set up our tents, and Caitlin and Hank hung a tarp to one side, then carried a porta-potty from the RV. It was small enough to carry, and they sat it on a large stump so that it was just about the right height. I grimaced. I hated using outhouses and porta-potties but the only other option was to run back to the RV every time we had to go to the bathroom, and that would get old really fast. Especially during the night.

“But who’s going to clean it?” I asked. That was one job I would absolutely refuse to volunteer for.

“I’ll take over the duty, as long as somebody else deals with the cooking. I’ve cooked enough already,” Hank said.

“I’ll help you,” Wren said. “Walt and I have used enough of them over the years when we’ve gone out camping.”

“Okay, then I’ll cook,” I said. “Killian, you want to help me out?”

“Sure, love. I’ll be happy to.”

“Well, if you guys are cooking, and Wren and Hank are on latrine duty, Caitlin and I will gather wood and water. That should take care of all our needs.” Tad glanced around. “All right, let’s hike in to the main camp and set up some cameras. Caitlin, Hank, why don’t you come with me? Wren and January can stay here and get things organized. Killian—you have your choice.”

Killian grinned. “I’ll stay with the women. I don’t think we should split into too small of groups. While most sightings of Bigfoot seem to be in the night, there’s no predicting when or where he’s likely to emerge. I don’t want January and Wren to be here alone. Hank and I are both big guys. We should split up if the group splits in two.”

“He’s right,” I said. “As much as I hate to admit it, Wren and Ta—Wren and I just don’t have the strength that the guys do—or that Caitlin does.” I didn’t want to trounce on Tad’s ego, though I doubted he’d take offense at being included.

“Oh, don’t worry about me. I’m no muscle man,” Tad chimed in. “I feel better with the big guns around, too.”

“All right, we’ll make that a policy this week,” Hank said. “Caitlin, Tad, let’s go get things set up out there. While it’s

only a little over a mile away, Bigfoot is quick, as far as I've been able to tell, and I'm sad to say I think he's dangerous."

It marveled me that he hadn't thought that before. There had been plenty of reports of sasquatch chasing people through graveyards or—in Killian's case—the woods. If that didn't constitute dangerous behavior, I wasn't sure what did. But I decided to drop the thought. Hank was involved in this on a deeper level than I could figure out and, if what the Crow Man had said was correct, there was a bond between the two that nobody understood at this point.

As the three of them headed off toward the other campsite, gear in tow, Killian, Wren, and I turned back to our own site.

"What should we make for dinner?" I asked. "By the time they get back, they'll be hungry."

"Well, we have this big-ass grill," Wren said. "How about we set up a big pot on the grill and make stew? There's ground beef in the cooler, and we have plenty of spices and veggies. We can slice open loaves of French bread and grill them."

"Oh, stew and grilled cheese bread sounds wonderful. I'll peel potatoes," I said, digging through the supplies for a paring knife.

"I'll start up the briquettes," Killian said. He bound his hair back, since it was too long and curly to leave near open flame when using a little lighter fluid to get things started.

We had set up a folding table near the grill and so I sat there, in one of the folding chairs, peeling and dicing potatoes, carrots, and onions for the stew. Wren opened cans of corn, tomatoes, and she found a couple gravy mixes tucked away. Dinner might not be gourmet, but it was going to taste amazing.

After the briquettes were going, she waited till they died down enough, then placed the Dutch oven on the grill and began to brown the meat. When the ground beef was ready, she added the potatoes, onions, and carrots and sauteed them till they were just barely tender, then added the canned corn, tomatoes, and gravy mixes, along with just enough water to make a rich gravy. Moving the pan to a cooler place on the grill, she covered it to let the stew simmer.

Meanwhile, Killian and I sliced open the baguettes of French bread and spread them heavily with butter. They would go face down on the grill for a few minutes when the others got back, then we'd add more butter and cheese. After we finished preparing the bread, we got out the dishes and set up the portable dishwashing station.

"Is there a creek near here?" I asked, glancing around. "It would make it easier if we could carry water from there and save the water in the RV for drinking."

"You want to be cautious with even backcountry water—there are pollutants in almost every stream and creek around," Wren warned.

"Tad brought water purification tablets," I said, holding up the bag that I'd found in the RV.

"Well, that helps," she said, grinning. "I don't know if there's water—let me see if I can ask the crows." She settled down at the folding table and closed her eyes. A couple minutes later she opened them. "That way," she said, pointing to the right, into the thicket. "A five-to-ten-minute walk."

"I'll fetch the water," Killian said. "I'll grab a couple of the five-gallon jugs. Will you be okay here without me?"

“We’re breaking our own rules,” I said, “but go ahead. We’ll be cautious and stay right in the camp. In fact, I should cast a Circle around us while we wait.”

As he picked up the jug and jogged off into the woods, I pulled out my athame and cast a Circle around the camp, drawing it hard and heavy, laying down the energy like a lineman might lay down cable. By the time I finished invoking the elements, I felt much better.

“That’s strong,” Wren said. “I can see the energy. You’ve really amped up your practice in the past few months, haven’t you?”

I nodded. “When I find Gretchen, I’m going to have to be as strong as possible. I don’t anticipate her breaking the curse without being prodded.”

“You never know, but you’re probably right. Anybody willing to curse an entire family line isn’t likely to be good-natured.” Wren returned to the grill where she stirred the stew. “Yum, this smells wonderful. Stick-to-your-ribs fare. Out in the wilderness, it’s so important to have plenty of good food in you. The outdoors really takes more energy, doesn’t it?”

“Well, there’s more to do. Setting up camp, carrying water, even sleeping on the ground seems to exact more of a toll on the body than sleeping in a bed.” I organized the bowls and mugs. “We should make coffee, too. I’m jonesing bad.”

“You’re just one big ball o’caffeine. All right, I’ll put on the kettle. And a pot of water for washing up, once Killian—” she stopped as Killian popped out of the treeline. He was lugging the two five-gallon jugs, both filled with water.

“Here we go. That will hold us through at least part of tomorrow. We can heat some up for washing hands, some for

washing dishes. First, you dip a rag in the hot water, then add soap to the rag, wash the dish with it, then rinse it in clear hot water. That will ration it out without being too strict.” He poured water into a large pot that Wren produced and she set it on the back of the grill to heat up.

“I wonder how the others are doing,” I said. “It feels like it’s been awhile since they headed out, but I know how long it takes to set up camera equipment.” I glanced at my cell phone. “Service is pretty spotty out here.”

“Even more spotty the farther you head up toward the mountain peak,” Killian said.

“I guess we just wait.” I stared at the stew pot. “I’m hungry.”

“We can’t eat without them,” Wren said.

“We *could*. We just need to leave enough for when they get back. We don’t know how long it’s going to take,” I countered. It was rude, of course, to start dinner without half our party here, but my stomach was rumbling.

Wren glanced at Killian. “Is she like this at home?”

He snorted. “I’m not going to answer that. It’s not worth it. But...she’s right. They have been out there for quite a while.” He frowned, and I recognized the worry lines on his forehead.

“Oh, all right,” Wren said, hauling herself out of her chair. “Let’s eat. Hand me half the bread.” She placed it on the grill, and a couple moments later, pulled it off with tongs. It was nicely charred along the edges, with grill marks running across the soft bread surface.

As she handed it to me, I used a cloth to carry it over to a cutting board, where I sliced it into three chunks. Wren served up hearty bowls of the thick stew and we fell to eating. As I

finished my bowl of stew, I glanced at the sky. It was nearly dusk and they weren't back yet.

"I'm starting to really get worried," I said. "It's been an hour and a half. It should have taken them what...fifteen—twenty minutes to hike in. Another half hour, max, to set up. Then twenty minutes to return? That's...a little over an hour."

"Maybe they had equipment trouble?" Wren suggested. "That happens."

"True, but if they're not back in another fifteen minutes, we should set out to look for them." I washed our bowls and silverware, setting them to the side to air dry. Then I checked my boots to make certain they were firmly tied, then zipped up my jacket. I felt like I was preparing for something—though I wasn't keen on finding out just what.

"Let me see if I can find out something with the birds, though most of them are resting by now," Wren said, leaning back in her chair. But she had barely sunk into trance when we heard a noise coming toward us. It was Caitlin, yelling at the top of her lungs.

We jumped to our feet and headed toward the edge of the campsite. Caitlin was racing toward us, neither Hank nor Tad behind her.

"It got Tad, it got Tad!" she was crying as she stumbled into camp, leaning over to place her hands on her knees so she could catch her breath.

"What got him? Where's Hank?" I asked, helping her over to the table. I motioned for Killian to get her some water to drink.

As I pressed the bottle in her hands, she began to weep in earnest.

“It dragged him into the woods—sasquatch. It captured him and ran off into the wood with him. Hank went after him.”

“Holy fuck,” I said, staring at her. “What the hell are we going to do?”

“I can tell you what we aren’t going to do. We’re not going to run off scattershot,” Killian said. “Wren, get Caitlin some coffee while we think about the best way to handle this.”

“It could be killing him right now!” Caitlin was frantic.

I was feeling frantic too, but I knew full well that it wouldn’t do any good if we just ran into the woods unprepared. We had to be smart about this.

“Where did this happen? Were you at the other campsite?”

“No,” Caitlin said, trying to catch her breath. “We were on the way back here—about half a mile from here.”

“Then the creature’s near enough to the camp to be a danger for us as well. You said that Hank went after him?” Wren shoved a piece of cheese bread in front of Caitlin. “Eat something. You’re going to need it.”

“How can I eat right now?” She tried to push the bread away but Wren shoved it back toward her.

“You need the energy. Eat.”

Caitlin reluctantly shoved the bread in her mouth, talking over it. “Yes, he did.”

“Tell us exactly what happened so we know what we’re facing,” I said.

“Well,” Caitlin began, chewing and swallowing a bit of the bread. “We got all the equipment set up—we had some issues with one of the cameras but we worked it out. Then we

decided we needed to get back here before dark. We headed out. Hank was in the lead, then me, then Tad behind me. We should have changed positions—”

“*Shoulda, woulda, coulda*. Don’t fret over it now. Just tell us what happened,” Killian said.

Caitlin sniffed. “Well, we were halfway back here when Tad shouted. Hank and I turned around. That’s when we saw Bigfoot coming out of the trees. Hank pulled out his camera, and so did Tad. I started to run, I was so afraid. Then I heard a shout and glanced over my shoulder. The creature had hold of Tad. Hank dropped his camera and started to run toward him, but Bigfoot just threw Tad over his shoulder and loped into the woods. Hank turned to me and shouted for me to come get help, then followed him.”

My stomach lurched. Tad was no match against a creature that large and unpredictable.

“I got a picture...I had my phone out because I was going to try to call you, but there weren’t any bars. But I caught this.” She held out her phone. There, in a murky picture filled with shadows, we could see the massive figure of a humanoid with vague ape-like features, covered in fur, with Tad over his shoulder. Hank was there, too, a blur of movement.

“Crap. What do we do?” I shook my head. “We don’t know where he went. Hank’s on his trail, but can’t contact us. Wren, are the crows likely to be any help at all?”

“I’d have to be closer to where it happened to find out, I think,” she said.

My stomach lurched. “We can’t just leave them out there in the dark. And it’s too far to the ranger station—they probably wouldn’t believe us, anyway.” I hesitated, then said,

“I can try to contact any Woodlings in the area. They might be able to help. I do have a connection with them.”

“That might work,” Killian said. “What do you need?”

“When you went for water, did you notice any faerie rings around? Any fly agaric? You know—the red-topped mushrooms with white splotches?”

Killian thought for a moment, then nodded. “Right down by the creek, yes. I did see a ring of them. Also a ring of toadstools, the brown kind.”

“*Two* faerie rings? I wonder where the other one leads. Okay, we need to go there. Get my magical bag from the tent, please.” I looked at Wren. “I may need to draw on some of your power for this.”

“Whatever you need. I’ll get my walking stick and heavy jacket. Caitlin, put out the coals on the grill. The last thing we need is to set off a forest fire.” Wren headed toward the tent along with Killian.

I sat there at the table, wondering how the hell I was going to manage this. It wasn’t like just taking a walk in the park to feed the ducks. The Woodlings near my home knew who I was, at least by proximity. Out here, they wouldn’t have a clue, and they might not answer. Or they might be unwilling to help. But it was a risk that I needed to try.

As Caitlin doused the grill and the main campfire, I tried not to think about what might be happening to Tad right now. But that was easier said than done.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*A*s we headed into the forest, Killian led the way. I was behind him, then Wren, and Caitlin brought up the rear, I was grateful that the terrain was fairly even. It wasn't nearly as thick with undergrowth as the forests more toward the coastline.

The Cascade Mountain Range divided the state, with the eastern half being desert-like and arid—desperately hot in the summer and dry-cold in the winter. The forests there were massive, but the undergrowth was sparse and it was easy to walk among the trees.

But here, over in western Washington, we existed in a temperate rainforest zone, and the forests were thick with moss and lichen, undergrowth burgeoning out to make it harder going. The land here was seldom dry, except during the height of summer. The forest floors were clogged with the detritus from years past. The layers of mulch were so deep that you could sink to your ankles or knees in some areas. And stones and roots were easily hidden beneath the layers of leaves and needles.

Near the passes, the Cascades offered woodlands that were a combination of both, bringing the eastern and western sides together. Not only with the volcanic peaks that rested uneasily

on the edge of a tectonic plate, but a less-flush but still abundant undergrowth.

As we trudged through the forest, the trickle of the stream ahead began to sing in my ears. Usually, I loved the sound of running water and it lulled my mind, but right now my thoughts were with Tad. I tried to block out the unwanted images from my mind, but the possibilities were gruesome, and my mind was way too creative. Pictures of the potential damage Bigfoot could do to him kept flashing through, images of broken bones and bite marks. Who knew what the hell the creature wanted him for? Were we food sources? Toys? Enemies to be dismembered? One of our hardest facts was that we had no real clue what Bigfoot was, or what he wanted.

“Are you all right?” Wren asked from behind me.

“I’m trying *not* to think. I always seem to go to the worst-case scenario in my mind. And all I can see...” I stopped. “I’m *not* saying it’s a premonition, but a horror movie is playing out in my head right now and I’d really like to turn it off. I have a hard time trusting my intuition when I can’t seem to clear my head.”

“When we get to the faerie rings, I’ll try to help you,” Wren said. “I seem to be good at calming energy and bringing people in from the ledge. Well, now that I’m an adult, I’m good at it.” She motioned for me to keep going.

We were at the stream’s edge in less than five minutes. Killian pointed off to the left and the right. To our left was a faerie ring composed of the fly agaric. To the right, a circle of brown toadstools. I sat down on the ground between the two, not sure which to focus on. I’d mostly had interactions with the ones created from fly agaric, so I finally turned to my left.

“Wren, if you could...”

“Oh, sure. Here,” she said, kneeling behind me and putting her hands on my shoulders. “Close your eyes and take three deep breaths.”

I did so. *One...two...three...*

“Now, feel my energy surround you. What does it feel like?” Her voice was soothing and I began to relax.

“Like...a cloud. It’s like a comforter, warm and soft.” I felt my shoulders release, and then the tension began to flow out of my body. I let out a long, deep breath and with it, the images of Bigfoot tearing Tad to pieces began to vanish.

“Find your safe spot—the spot from which you know you can make decisions clearly and concisely. Can you find that space?”

I drifted for another minute. Wren’s energy surrounded me. After another moment, I began to see a path through the clouds, into my center. I grounded myself, sending cords of energy deep into the earth, connecting with the element that belonged to my goddess. I could feel her there—deep in the soil, and then she rose, filling the forest around me.

“I’m good,” I said after a moment. “Thank you.” I held on to the energy as Wren withdrew. Then I focused on the earth element. I pictured the Woodlings, imagining them all around us, envisioning them filling the forest.

“I need your aid,” I whispered, sending my thoughts and words out on the wind. “I call on you in the name of Druantia, come to my aid, please. We seek only help, not to harm.”

Another moment of silence, and then I heard a rustle to my left. I slowly opened my eyes to see a Woodling skirting the faerie circle. He made a beeline for me.

I slowly stood, with Killian's help, and waited for the Woodling. He glanced at the others, motioning for them to move away. Killian, Caitlin, and Wren silently stepped back, leaving the Woodling and me to speak. This one was male, and he was a mighty specimen from what I could tell, broad shouldered, with woven wood canes that looked difficult to break.

“Witch of the forest, what do you seek?” Once again, the Woodling spoke in perfect English and I began to suspect that we were just hearing it that way—that they might all speak another language that was somehow translated.

“We need your help. One of our party members was captured by...do you know what I mean when I say the word ‘sasquatch’? Is it familiar to you?” I held my breath. It wasn't going to be easy describing Bigfoot to him, unless he understood human terms.

But the Woodling responded. His eyes grew wide and he swayed in the breeze. “You mean the Forest Beast. Tall, covered in fur?”

I nodded. “Yes. The Forest Beast. He captured one of our party members and we need to rescue him. We aren't even sure where the Forest Beast took him. Another of our members ran after them but it's dark now and this is a huge forest.”

“True, very true.” The Woodling hesitated, then said, “My kind might be of some aid, but we are forbidden from taking on tasks like this without the permission of our masters.”

I froze. I knew exactly what that meant. The *Tuatha de Dannan*—the Fae. My stomach lurched. “Are you certain you can't help us?”

“I’m certain. But I can summon my master and you can talk to him.”

My heart pounding, I turned to the others. “I have to talk to the Fae in order to get help.”

“That’s dangerous. Even *I* know how dangerous that is.” Killian’s eyes flashed.

“Tad’s at the mercy of that creature, and you know Hank can’t take him on—” I paused as a shimmer in the air caught my attention. In the next moment, Hank appeared, translucent, but not in the same manner as a ghost. He was bilocating.

“Hank! Where are you? Where’s Tad?” I peppered him with questions.

“I’m about two miles due east from where Caitlin left to summon help. Sasquatch carried Tad into a cave in the side of a foothill. If I go in, I risk rushing into a trap. I needed to talk to you and the others.”

“Do you know if Tad’s hurt?” Caitlin called out. They could see and hear Hank just as easily as I could. Bilocation was a specialty not many witches were born with, but Hank was a master of it, apparently.

“I think...yes, at least one of his legs looked broken as Bigfoot swung him over his shoulder, and I heard Tad shriek.” Hank frowned. “I’m straining to hold myself here. I’ll go in on my own but I can’t do it by myself. There’s an old shed nearby—it looks like it might have been a miner’s shed at one time.” He turned, and I could see a little of his surroundings.

“We’ll be there as soon as possible,” I said.

Hank nodded, then abruptly vanished, like a rubber band stretched so far that it finally broke.

I turned back to the Woodling. “Yes, I’ll talk to your master.”

“January!” Killian barked.

I held up my hand. “*We don’t have a choice.* We can’t let him kill Tad. And Hank, as well. Because you know if we don’t get there in time, Hank’s going to rush in there and start whaling away on Bigfoot and get himself killed.”

The Woodling gave me a long look. “That is your wish?”

“Yes, I’ll talk to him.”

The wood spirit turned back to the faerie ring and held out his hands. He began to chant in a language I didn’t understand, but recognized as some form of Gaelic.

There was a shift in the energy again. A magical, sparkling resonance that practically bubbled with energy swelled up. I caught my breath, waiting. This would be the first time I had ever talked to one of the Fae, at least that I knew of.

The Woodling crouched down on one knee, bowing his head and covering his face as the mushrooms began to glow. The next moment, a cloud of white mist rose from the center of the ring. The mist sparkled with green and blue lights, as though fireflies were swarming the cloud of vapor. As we watched, a figure began to appear, long legs stretching up, clad in what appeared to be black jeans. Then, the man’s—I assumed it was a man—torso appeared. As he stepped out of the mist, to the edge of the ring, I gasped at his sheer beauty.

He was tall, lanky and lean, with long black hair that flowed down his back. His eyes were the blue of glaciers—cold and frozen, and his features were finely chiseled like smooth stone. His alabaster skin gleamed next to his tendrils of long black hair. The man’s eyes were ringed with black—

guyliner to the extreme—and his lips were a lush pale pink, thick and inviting. I'd never seen a man so purely beautiful as this one.

The Fae was wearing a vest over his jeans, leaving his finely muscled chest and arms showing. He looked around, then his gaze fastened on me and he flashed me a frightening smile, deadly and crafty, inviting and sensuous, with enough biker bad boy in it to make my heart leap.

Behind me, Caitlin and Wren gasped. Even from where I stood, I could feel Killian puff up, rising to the defense.

“Well, a human seeks my aid. No, not *human*,” the man said as he stepped out of the ring and began to circle me. “You’re...” He leaned close and smelled me. “Ah, *witchblood*. Bound to the forest and the dead. And you ask for my help?”

I licked my lips, knowing enough to block out the glamour. Those of us who were witchblood by nature could block out the charm. But even though we had the ability, we had to *choose* to use it, and against Fae glamour, that choice wasn't easy. Luckily, I was worried about Tad enough, and I knew enough about the Fae, that I automatically raised my shields against his beauty and charm.

“I do seek your help, against my better judgment.”

“What a rude thing to say, as if my kind are ever anything but *benign and merciful*.” Just the way he said it mocked me. There was an underlying cruel edge to his voice. “You wound me, deeply.”

I wasn't about to apologize. It was bad enough, seeking aid from one of them. Never thank them, never say you're sorry—both things could lead to severe consequences. But now, I was going to have to chance one of them.

“I doubt that. Listen, a sasquatch has carried off one of our members. We need help in getting him back. *Safely.*” *Always add the caveats*, I thought.

“And you want my help? So, if I tell you where to find this creature, you’re planning to march in and take him on by yourselves? You truly expect me to believe that?”

“We will if we have to. We won’t leave our friend to Bigfoot’s mercy.” I straightened my shoulders, staring the Fae straight in the face. I tried to keep from blinking, but his charm was so relentless that it took everything I had just to stare him down. I glanced over at the Woodling, who was standing there, watching. “We were wondering if you might give the Woodlings in this area permission to help us.”

“Now you leave *me* out of your plans? You wound my feelings, *tenquitara.*”

I frowned. I had no idea what “tenquitara” meant, but I decided not to ask.

“I rather doubt your feelings are so easily damaged. Especially by a mere member of the witchblood.” I kept my tone dry, rather than angry, hoping that he might actually have a sense of humor.

Sure enough, the Fae stared at me, then let out a belt of laughter. “You are the cheeky one. I like that, you know.” He reached out, stroking my cheek.

I forced myself to hold steady. The man’s mere touch was like fire burning straight from my boobs down to my pussy. But *he* didn’t need to know that, and neither did Killian.

Killian was just getting used to me talking to the gods, let alone me flirting with one of the Fae. Which, besides that, *I* wasn’t the one doing the flirting. Regardless of how gorgeous

he was, this man wasn't my intended, and given everything I understood about the Fae, he wasn't about to *replace* my intended.

I waited until he lowered his arm. "Will you help us, or should we just turn back and deal with this on our own?"

His smile vanished and he dropped his arm. "Well, down to business, then. What will you pay me? Will you say thank you, if I help you?"

I grimaced, but I had the feeling that was going to end up being the final price. "What does it mean if I do?"

"Then you owe me a debt that I can collect at any time." His gaze pierced my soul, and I caught a sudden glimpse of him standing in these woods, hundreds of years before if not more. He was ancient—this Fae man—and he was quite willing to let us all go off to die, if we didn't give him what he wanted.

Resigned, I shrugged. "Fine. I will say thank you, but your request cannot supersede my oath to Druantia, my allegiance to my friends and loved ones, or my connection with my familiars. If you accept those terms, I will thank you and owe you a debt for helping us. Don't take all day, though. Our friend is in need and I do not intend to leave him waiting." My karmic credit was taking a beating today, that was for sure.

The Fae didn't respect simpering sycophants, I knew that much. Unfortunately, the Woodlings had no choice but to grovel and prostrate themselves—they were signed and sealed to the Tuatha de Dannan as a race.

He stared at me for a moment, and I could see the wheels turning in his head. Finally, his lips slid into yet another seductive smile. "Very well. I will grant your demands and

terms. I'll help you, and you will thank me after we're done. Shake my hand to bind the deal." He held out his hand.

As the Fae man's hand touched mine, I felt a massive surge of energy race through me. It was both appealing, yet terrifying. The moment he let go, I pulled my hand away.

"You may call me Briar," he said. "Now quickly, follow me." He was all business now that we'd made a deal.

I grabbed my bag of magical tools and walking stick and swung in behind him. Wren, Caitlin, and Killian followed.

We headed, not for the campsite, but toward the ring of brown mushrooms. As he stepped into the ring, he began to fade in and out, then vanished. With no other option, I took a deep breath and plunged ahead, following him.



STEPPING INTO THE MUSHROOM RING REMINDED ME OF ONE other time we had gone through a similar portal, except...*not*.

Everything shifted as I hung there, frozen in space. Then, like a lightning flash, my body was ripped apart, atom by atom, and for a moment I floated, a thousand pieces that each registered as being part of me. It was as though I was looking at the world through a thousand raindrops, and then as quickly as I had come apart, I slammed back into a solid, single form, gasping for breath as the shock reverberated through me.

I looked around and saw Briar up ahead, waiting outside the ring. As I stepped out to join him, I realized we were in a vastly different place in the forest. We were no longer by a stream, but deep in a thicket of fir trees. It was so dark that I couldn't see my hand in front of my face, yet up ahead I saw

glowing mushrooms and plants that gave off a faint greenish nimbus, their auras shining like beacons in the night.

I glanced over at Briar. I could see him, too—shining with silver light. He motioned for me to join him and I did. We waited as the others came through. I still felt shaken from the portal jump, but I had learned over the past couple years to take things in stride. I had to, or I'd go nuts.

When we were all together again, Killian slid his arm around my waist. Briar glanced at him, rolled his eyes, and started to turn, but when Wren brought out a flashlight and turned it on, he whirled on her.

“Turn that off. Do you want to alert the Verilan that we’re here?”

Wren quickly turned it off. “Is that what you call sasquatch?”

Briar gave her a brusque nod. “Yes, that is our name for the creature. It means ‘dangerous forest beast’ in our language. Now, follow me as quietly as you can. We’re not far from its lair.”

I took a deep breath. “Lair? Like a cave?”

“You ask too many questions. Yes, it’s a burrow dug into the side of the mountain. Not an actual cave that you might think of, but over the centuries, the Verilan have created their own series of tunnels through all of these mountains. The creatures aren’t numerous, but they can travel through time and space. They open doorways much like the faerie rings, as you call them, only they have their own methods of doing so that don’t need a physical manifestation.”

He turned again and began to stride ahead. I did my best to keep up, although I was worried about stepping on a root or a

branch and turning my ankle. But somehow, the ground beneath his feet seemed to clear itself—vines and ferns pulled back or flattened themselves, small rocks flew to the sides. I began to wonder if Briar was more than simply a member of the Tuatha de Dannan, but again, I didn't feel comfortable asking.

We reached a crossroads in the woods where several paths met. We could continue straight, or turn right or left. Briar stopped, holding up his hand. He said nothing, but instead began sniffing the air. The shimmer of his aura rippled and I realized that he was using some form of magic, although I wasn't sure what. After a moment, he turned back to us.

“We turn right here. I can smell the creature from here.”

I took a deep breath, trying see if I could smell it. I was hit with a wave of pungent musk. “All I smell is skunk cabbage.”

“Then you smell the creature. It hides itself behind that smell, but there's no skunk cabbage near enough this spot to be noticed. What you smell is the Verilan.”

Skunk cabbage was so named because its smell was reminiscent of a skunk, although there was no mistaking when an actual skunk had let loose. But when I smelled it again, I began to notice the differences. This smelled more... masculine, that was the only way I could describe it. It smelled like old socks and sweat, like testosterone and armpit hair after a workout.

I grimaced.

Briar must have noticed my expression because he let out a low laugh. “Not pleasant, is it?”

“No,” I said. “You're right—it's too...earthy for skunk cabbage.”

“Of course I’m right,” he said, and even though I couldn’t see it, I could hear the smirk in his words. “Come, let’s move on.”

We started up again, turning to the right on the narrow trail that led through the forest. I wasn’t sure how deep in the woods we were, but given the thousands of acres covered with timber, we could be anywhere. Which begged the question, how fast did Bigfoot travel? Or...the *Verilan*. I liked the name. It felt more apt for such a massive creature.

We wound our way through the forest, walking for at least twenty minutes before Briar motioned for us to stop. I was getting tired, and I was pretty sure that Wren was feeling the same. We’d already had a long, rough day, and we were now headed into the night.

“We’re near the lair,” Briar said. “Listen. Tell me what you can hear.”

I closed my eyes and strained my ears. There, in the distance, was what sounded like a series of clicks and grunts, but in a uniform pattern—a rhythmic sound that reminded me of a rapper who was speaking in a different language.

“I hear what sounds like chanting,” Killian said, but Briar cut him off.

“I did not ask for *your* opinion,” he said.

I swallowed hard, hoping Killian would keep his cool. The last thing we needed was for my fiancé to get in a fight with someone who could probably mop the floor with him. Who knew what powers Briar had? And I didn’t want to find out the hard way.

“He’s right,” I said. “It does remind me of chanting.”

“The Verilan is performing his rites that proceed a kill, so we’re coming in at the right time—” he froze, holding up one hand. “Someone is coming.”

At that moment, Hank broke through the trees to our right. He was wearing a dim headlight lamp, and he skidded to a halt.

“January—what—who’s that?” Hank kept his voice low, but his surprise was obvious.

“Hush, witch man,” Briar said. “Keep silent and turn off that light.”

Hank glanced over at me, and I nodded. Without another word, he reached up and flicked the switch to turn off the headlight.

“We’re near the creature who took Tad,” I said, whispering.

“I knew I was close,” Hank whispered back. “I thought I was before but that cave was empty, though I think something had lived there earlier.”

“Briar here is leading us to the Verilan’s lair.” I motioned for Hank to join me.

“The *what’s* lair?”

“Verilan—that’s the name the Tuatha de Dannan use for Bigfoot,” I leaned up to whisper in his ear. “Briar is a member of the Fae. I made a deal with him.”

Hank let out a startled gasp, but said nothing.

Briar let out an exasperated sigh and motioned for us to follow him. We skulked along the path, watching as the plants once again began to pull back. While the moon was barely a

crescent, the plants shone with their own light, reminding me of the aisle lights in a theater.

Hank poked me in the ribs, then pointed toward the plants. I nodded, saying nothing. I didn't want Briar to get so mad that he might take off and leave us stranded. And I sure didn't want to end up owing him a favor without getting something out of it. It would be like getting a speeding ticket—money forfeited with nothing good in return.

We continued through the forest, and I noticed that the sounds of the night had gone suspiciously quiet. No rustling through the undergrowth, no sounds of animals creeping past. It was as though this sector of the forest had gone vacant except for the “chanting” that filtered past on the wind. If the Verilan made its home here, I understood why the animals had fled. I wouldn't want to be a fox or a deer caught by the creature, given I had the feeling anything walking might occupy a place on the dinner menu.

The only sound I could hear now was the faint rumble of clicks and grunts. But as long as that kept up, I thought, the more likely Tad was still alive. I clung to that hope, feeling deep in my core that Briar was right.

A few moments later, Briar slowed down. He motioned for us to creep up and join him. We were standing on the edge of a clearing, and right across the narrow lea was a hill sloping upward. One of the Cascade foothills, a steep slope leading up to yet another hill, a dark patch against the even darker night sky. Briar pointed directly ahead, to the bottom of the hill.

There, a faint luminescence flickered in an arch-like shape.

Immediately, I broke out in goose bumps. Just the sight of the arch filled me with such dread that it took everything I had

not to turn and run. The fear was palpable, like a thick haze rolling toward us in waves. I forced myself to hold steady.

“What’s going on?” I said.

Wren let out a ragged pant. “I’m trying not to turn and run.”

Briar reached out and touched my arm. “Stand steady. The Verilan wears fear as a weapon—it’s almost what you might call a neurotoxin. You’ll have to fight against it. Breathe through the fear and you should be all right.” For once, he didn’t sound sarcastic.

“Does it affect you?” I asked.

He shook his head. “The Children of the Gods fear very few things, save for the gods themselves. My touch can help.”

His touch was actually soothing and the tension began to slide away. He went down the line, touching everyone’s arms. After another moment, we were all breathing calmly again.

“That will stand you for a little while, but the fear may break through again. If it does, just take a deep breath and try to fight it off. You must know and accept two things before we go in. We will not be able to kill the Verilan. We’re going to rescue your friend, only. Two, you have no time to take pictures or anything of the sort. The Verilan is lightning fast, and he has even less in common with your kind than I do. He has no conscience, and no amount of pleading will make him stop. He would kill a child as quickly as an adult, and with absolutely no remorse.”

“What... What are they?” Caitlin asked. “Are they from here? From our world?”

Briar shook his head. “No, they’re from a different plane of existence. They come here for sport, and a few have chosen

to make this world their own. If he gets hold of you, *he will hurt you*. Do you understand? I can distract him while you grab your friend.”

We all nodded.

“Well then, so we go in. Be quick. Be cautious. Be mindful.”

And so, with that, Briar led us on a dash over to the opening of Bigfoot’s lair.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*A*s we rushed toward the entrance, all I could think of was getting Tad out. I took Briar's warning to heart. We had learned with the Mothman that not all adversaries could be conquered—not all problems could be wrapped up in a nice, neat package with a pretty bow. Life was messy, strings were left hanging, sometimes people left us before the end, some story lines in our lives had to be abandoned.

All of this ran through my head as we raced toward the entrance. Briar got there and vanished into the lair. I sucked in a deep breath and was about to jump but Killian pushed me behind him and went first. I watched as he stood on the archway and then vanished through the faint curtain of sparkling lights. Without a second thought, I plunged through, unwilling to let my fear rule me.

It took me a few seconds for my eyes to adjust, during which time Killian pulled me to the side. As I squinted, trying to make out where we were, Caitlin appeared. Killian pulled her aside, too, and then Wren and Hank came through.

By the time they were in the lair, I could see again.

The walls glowed with a pale luminescence, shades of yellow and orange, like the shadow of flames. The room was massive, and a passage led deeper into the mountain. But

there, in the corner, Tad crouched on the ground, bound to a stake with rope that had been crudely tied around his neck.

In the center of the room was a pit, surrounded by stones. It wasn't a firepit—no, inside the shallow well, bones glistened and the stench of rancid meat filtered out.

Near the edge of the pit crouched a creature as big as a giant. He was massive, covered with dirty brown fur, his face matching the face that Caitlin had managed to photograph. His eyes were glowing yellow, and he jumped up, shaking the floor of the lair.

Briar immediately moved to the right, away from Tad, and he said something in a guttural language that sounded a lot like the clicks and grunts that the Verilan had been chanting. Sasquatch swung toward him, eyes narrowing, and let out a high-pitched shriek that nearly burst my eardrums.

Killian grabbed my hand and we headed the opposite direction, toward the corner where Tad was frantically trying to free himself from the bindings that held him to the stake. Wren followed us, while Caitlin and Hank headed over toward Briar.

I dropped to my knees beside Tad and sorted through my tool bag for my athame. It was wicked sharp and as I began to slide it through the ropes holding Tad to the stake, it cut them like butter.

As Killian reached for Tad to lift him up, I saw that the ropes were made from some sort of tanned leather—uneven strips—and as I let them go, dropping the ends, I caught a vision of a young man, probably around eighteen. I knew right then that the ropes were fashioned from human skin and I started to gag, turning to the side.

“There’s no time for that,” Wren said, kneeling beside me. “We have to get out of here and get out of this forest.” She pulled me up and I managed to keep my dinner down, though it wasn’t easy.

We turned in time to see Briar sending a gust of flame toward Bigfoot, who let out another screech and lurched toward him. Hank was holding a large stone and he threw it, hitting the creature square in the forehead, giving Briar enough time to jump away. Caitlin raced back to the curtain of lights.

“Hurry! Let’s get out of here,” she said. “Hank, put that away!”

Hank had pulled out a camera. “I have to get a picture—”

“Go—*now!*” Briar shoved Hank hard. “No time—get out now while you can.”

Killian scooped up Tad in his arms. “He’s hurt. Get out of the lair!”

I grabbed Wren with one hand and my tool bag in the other and we raced toward Caitlin, diving out through the flickering curtains of light. Killian was hot on our heels, Tad in his arms.

“Hank, get the fuck over here,” Caitlin screamed, darting back inside the cave.

I turned around, staring at the entrance. Neither one were emerging. Without thinking, I raced back toward the lair.

“January, come back here!” Killian bellowed.

“I can’t leave Caitlin inside,” I shouted, leaping through the curtain of lights. This time, my eyes adjusted quickly and I saw that the Verilan had hold of Hank. Briar was trying to distract him, and Caitlin was heaving rocks at the creature, who in turn ignored both of them.

I shoved my bag into Caitlin's arms.

"Hold this," I said, quickly opening the clasp. I fumbled through until I found a bottle of Knock You Out powder. It wasn't something I'd ever imagined using, but it sounded good so I had brought it along with a few others.

Opening the lid, I chucked the entire jar toward Bigfoot, praying it wouldn't blow back in our faces. I doubted that it would affect Briar—the Fae seemed immune to a whole slew of things. But it could easily knock Caitlin and me senseless.

Hank, who had been shouting and trying to fight Bigfoot, immediately slumped, which served a purpose I hadn't even thought of. He relaxed so quickly that Bigfoot, unprepared, lost his hold.

Like a wet noodle, Hank's body slithered right down. He landed on the ground, and Bigfoot, looking puzzled, lingered for a moment. Briar took that moment to cast some sort of spell, which sent a silver mesh over the creature. It wasn't an actual net, but magical, and it sparked and sputtered everywhere it touched.

The Verilan let out a shriek as Briar darted forward and grabbed hold of Hank's wrist, dragging him back. He quickly tossed Hank over his shoulder—and given that Hank was large and heavy, it gave me a pretty good consideration for just how strong Briar was. We headed for the door at a dead run. Before Briar could reach it, Bigfoot managed to rip his way out of the magical netting and turned toward us.

"Out, now!" I shoved Caitlin out the door and followed her. Briar came stumbling out the next moment, Hank still over his shoulder.

“Stay in a group—he’s less likely to attack us that way. There’s strength in numbers!” Briar motioned for us to head back the way we had come. He still had Hank over his shoulder and Killian was carrying Tad. Caitlin pushed Wren and me in front of her and brought up the rear.

We wove in and out through the undergrowth, back along the narrow path that had led us to the lair. All the way, I could hear the rustle of forest and the only thing I could imagine was that Bigfoot was after us. He had to be furious, especially since we’d poached his dinner.

What else did I have in my bag o’ magic tricks that might do us some good? Cleansing water wouldn’t help. Neither would some of the other spell powders that I had brought. I had my dagger, but that wouldn’t do anything unless I was close enough to stab him and at that point, I doubted that I’d come out on top.

What else? Without stopping, I was finding it hard to remember exactly what I’d brought. My crystal ball, but the only good that would do was if I threw it at him, and I wasn’t going to waste my beautiful quartz crystal sphere on a big-ass alien.

Behind us, Bigfoot let out a loud shriek that sounded suspiciously like a call for help.

“What the hell is he doing? Calling for others?” I shouted to Briar. The Verilan already knew where we were. Me saying something wasn’t going to alert him.

“I think so,” Briar shouted back. “Run—and I mean *run!*”

We raced as fast as we could go, darting through the undergrowth. Thank gods the plants were still acknowledging Briar and pulling back, giving us a clean channel through

which to run. And with the plants glowing, it was easier to see the tree roots and bigger rocks that couldn't fly out of the way. I leapt over one massive knotted root coming from a nearby fir and landed on the other side, trying to catch my breath.

My lungs weren't on fire yet, but I could tell that I was quickly reaching that point. My legs burned thanks to the build-up of lactic acid, and I felt like a bowl of Jell-O, all wobbly. I was surprised that Wren was managing to keep ahead of me, but then again, she was lighter on her feet and more used to the outdoors than I was.

"Is everyone still with us?" Killian called back. "I've got Tad and Briar still has Hank."

"I'm here," Wren said.

"Here," I shouted.

From behind, Caitlin let out a "Yep." She barely sounded winded at all. I glanced behind me to see her loping along at a steady pace. I seemed to be the only one who was struggling, but I wasn't about to give up now.

Yet, still from behind us came the sounds of Bigfoot crashing through the forest.

I wasn't sure what he was doing, but it sounded like he was uprooting trees here and there, tossing them like toothpicks. I wanted to turn around, see how close he was, but that didn't seem like the best idea so I just forced myself to put one foot in front of the other, over and over again.

A moment later, I realized we were coming to the place where the toadstools formed the portal. A massive feeling of relief swept over me as Briar shouted for us to follow him and he leapt into the faerie ring. Killian jumped to the side, waving us on, Tad still over his shoulder. Wren jumped into the circle

and disappeared, and I followed her, welcoming the sensation as everything fell away, and I submitted to the forces as every atom of my being began to drift.



NEXT MOMENT, I LANDED, HARD, IN THE TOADSTOOL RING near the stream. I leapt out without Briar's urging and waited next to Wren, who was shivering. Caitlin appeared next, and then Killian, carrying Tad. The moment Killian appeared and was out of the circle, Briar reached down and plucked one of the toadstools out of the ground. The energy shifted immediately and the faerie ring suddenly became a simple mushroom ring.

"Did you break the portal that way?" I asked.

Briar nodded. "Yes, it won't function. And without being able to follow directly, it will take the Verilan some time to figure out which way you went. Come, let us get back to your camp. I suggest you leave immediately because now that you've angered him, the Verilan won't stop looking for you. At least not for a while. He'll stay in these woods, though. He won't go too far from his lair."

We hustled back through the woods to reach the camp. Killian and Briar carried Hank and Tad over to the RV and put them in it while Caitlin, Wren, and I began to break down everything important.

"Wait, we have expensive camera equipment out there in that field," Caitlin said. "We can't just leave it."

Briar let out a sigh. "Tell me where. I'll get them. He'll be focused on your scents, not mine."

Surprised he offered, Caitlin started to say, “Than—” but I stopped her.

“Wait. Don’t say it. Let me, since I owe him that already.” I turned to Briar. “You really came through. I didn’t expect you to be so much help, to be honest. I owe you this, and I’m willing to pay it because you helped us out more than I ever could have expected. So...thank you, Briar. Thank you.”

In the light of the LED camp lanterns, Briar’s cunning smile returned and he nodded. “I’ll find you when I need you. What’s your name?”

I swallowed, hard. Giving my name felt like a vulnerable act, but we were beyond that now. “January Jaxson, from Moonshadow Bay.”

“Very well, then. January Jaxson, well met, and we’ll meet again.” He turned to Caitlin. “You—bobcat—tell me where your equipment is.”

She described where they had positioned the equipment—four cameras and microphones—and Briar vanished, running so fast he became a blur.

“You realize what you’ve done,” Killian said after he was gone. He was breaking apart the grill, which had cooled down.

“Of course I do. But we have Tad back—by the way, how *is* Tad? Wren, why don’t you go check on him—and run, don’t walk. We may be able to see the parking lot from here, but you don’t want to take any chances.”

She hurried to the parking lot and we watched until she made it there and climbed into the RV. I finished packing up the food and dishes.

“Listen, who’s going to drive the RV? Neither Hank nor Tad can.”

“I will,” Killian said, tossing me his keys. “You drive my SUV. Caitlin, will you drive Tad’s Jeep? Wren can ride with me.”

“Sure,” Caitlin said. She made sure the fires were thoroughly out. “I have to say, this didn’t go the way I wanted it to.”

“I didn’t expect a walk in the park, but neither did I expect to be running through the woods at midnight with Bigfoot chasing me. The Verilan, rather. I prefer that name.” I sighed, looking around. “I think that takes care of everything.”

“How long does the knock-out powder work? When will Hank wake up?” Killian asked.

“Probably another half hour. I made it strong. I never expected to use it on somebody I knew, though. I wish it had knocked out the Verilan, but at least it startled him. Okay, we’re done. Let’s go wait in the parking lot for Briar to return with the cameras. I hate waiting out here. I feel like we’re sitting ducks.”

“That’s because we are,” Killian said.

We made two trips, carrying everything back to the RV. Luckily, it was only a couple hundred yards away. Killian and Caitlin carried the heavier items while I carried the light. Wren was waiting outside the RV, and we dumped everything beside her. She began putting it away while we went back for the second trip.

When we finished, we stood in front of the RV, waiting.

“How’s Tad? And Hank?” Caitlin asked.

“Tad’s conscious, but he’s fading in and out of awareness. He’s hurt—I’m not sure what’s wrong but he keeps complaining of his side hurting, and he has a broken leg. I

checked him out, and he does seem to have a nasty bite mark on his side, along with a lot of bruising. I suggest we drive straight to the nearest hospital to have him checked out,” she said, a worried look on her face.

I heard something and spun around. There was Briar, loping across the open field to the parking lot, carrying a string of equipment. He reached us, barely breathing hard at all. As he stripped the cameras and mics from around his neck and handed them to us, I could tell it was taking everything she had for Caitlin not to thank him.

I knew better than to thank him again. I’d already said the words twice, which bound me to my word of owing him a favor. But I could word it a different way. “We appreciate your effort. We’ll leave now. Tad needs medical attention. The Verilan bit him. Do you know if they have poisonous bites?”

Briar focused on me, holding my gaze. “Not poison, per se. But their bites are filthy, filled with germs and bacteria. He’s probably already infected from it. Infections from bites like that can be deadly. Go quickly, and I recommend you stay away from this area for some time. The Verilan has a long memory, and a long memory of scents. And they do not forget those who escape them.” He turned to me. “I will talk to you soon enough.”

“Do you need my address?” I started to ask, but he laughed—the derisive sarcastic tone was back.

“I’m one of the Children of the Gods. I know where to find you. *Trust me*,” he said, the emphasis on those latter words giving me the creeps.

I turned to the others. “Let’s go. I’ll lead the way, I guess.” As I fastened my seat belt, all I could think of was that I owed

one of the Tuatha de Dannan a favor, and that in itself was enough to scare the fuck out of me.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The trip down the mountain was nerve-racking, especially under the dark of the moon. I kept fussing, glancing in the rearview mirror to make certain everyone was still behind me.

Caitlin called me halfway through. “I’ve got you on speaker phone.”

“Let me set mine to hands free,” I said, instructing Jerica to set my phone to speaker. “Okay. So, you’re worried about Tad, aren’t you?”

“What do you think? Aren’t you?”

“Of course I am, but I think...” I didn’t want to say it, didn’t want to seem pushy.

Caitlin second-guessed me, though. “Fine, I’m scared for him. I... I really like Tad. Over the past few months it’s been harder and harder for me to act like there’s no attraction there. I know he finds me attractive, and he knows I’m drawn to him. But I’m so afraid of ruining what we have. We have a strong friendship. What if we try and things fall apart? What if I end up having to leave a job I love because I made a mistake?”

“There’s that, of course,” I said, white-knuckling the steering wheel. The road was narrow and I was terrified of

going over into one of the many ravines. But I needed to make this work. I was a good driver, and I'd driven SUVs plenty of times, even Killian's Expedition. I didn't have the leeway to be afraid.

"Well, then..." Caitlin paused. "I really hate this place right now."

"So do I," I said. "I'm not going camping again. Ever! We all made an error in judgment on this one, I'd say." Pausing, I veered around a dead squirrel on the middle of the road. "Caitlin, look at it this way: you and Tad have a good friendship. If things don't work out, if for some reason the chemistry doesn't work or something like that, you can move past that. You and Tad are both level headed and smart."

She hesitated, then said, "I suppose you're right. It's not like the marriage my parents arranged for me. I liked Arlo but there was *never* any chemistry there, not for me. For him, a little, and he was prepared to accept a marriage where the physical side of things wasn't exactly on fire. I wasn't. But...I knew right from the start that Arlo wasn't going to do it for me in bed. Tad...I've always felt a tingle when we're near each other."

"See? And I know he feels the same for you."

Caitlin let out a sigh. "What about you and your ex—and then Killian?"

"I was attracted to Ellison at first. But he only had the hots for me when he met me. I'd had mono and lost a lot of weight. We got married during that time in my life. I started gaining the weight back and his attention instantly vanished. He had no more desire for me than he would for a potato sack. Oh, he did sleep with me, but I always knew that something was missing. And he always made rude comments about my

weight, trying to phrase them as a joke.” I grimaced. “It’s better to have no lover than one who tears you down. But Ellison was into trophy girlfriends. I doubt if you have to worry about that with Tad.”

“You’re right about that.” Caitlin laughed. “Tad seems mystified by men who lust after tall blond beach bodies.”

“Hell, I’m mystified by that. Oh, I guess I see it—everyone has different tastes. Look at my best friend Ari’s wife. Meagan used to be a cheerleader. She’s an Amazon type, tall and blond, but she’s also muscled and fit. I can understand being attracted to a body like hers. But for me—well, when I met Killian I felt an instant pull. My hormones shot into high gear the moment I laid eyes on him. And it wasn’t just his looks, though I think he’s gorgeous. It was his eyes...his energy.”

“I understand that,” she said. “Tad just...he’s so smart, and he’s so funny and honest and I can’t help but feel he’d make the most loyal boyfriend.”

“I can honestly say, I think you’re right. Tad’s an inherently honest person.”

“So, when you met Killian, you said his eyes caught you first?”

“Hmm, let me think.” I could remember that first meeting in detail. I’d barely moved back into my parents’ house when he came knocking at my door, a newcomer to the neighborhood as well. He came over to borrow a cup of salt, and all I had been able to do was stare at him, tongue tied. He’d wanted to do a cleansing on his new house—which was right next to mine. And I’d stood there, overcome with that foggy-headed feeling when you get flustered and can’t remember how to talk.

“Yeah. His eyes. They were piercing, as green as mine—and I don’t meet many people who have green eyes like mine. And he was just... It felt like there was a breath of fresh air when he showed up. He felt new and clear and clean, like spring time. Does that make any sense?”

“I think it does,” she said. “He opened up your world?”

“That’s a good way to put it,” I said. “He made it feel like the world had opened wide and there was so much possibility. And I dove in. Later, he told me that on that first meeting, his heart told him ‘This is the woman I’m going to marry’...which blew me away.”

“I wonder how often people know. Like he did. When do you know you’ve met the right person that you want to spend your life with? I can’t say I know that about Tad, but I know that it would break my heart if he started dating someone else. If he fell for someone else. I’ve been terrified that might happen for the past year or so. Even when I was engaged to Arlo, I kept thinking about Tad. I’d kiss Arlo and find myself wondering what Tad’s lips felt like.”

“Girl,” I said, gently taking one of the many S-curves on the winding road that led to the main highway entrance. “You’re going to kick yourself silly if he decides to look elsewhere because both of you are too chickenshit to give it a chance.”

“I guess you’re right. And if it gets messy—”

“Love is beautiful and transcendent, but it’s messy and painful, and it’s inconvenient. And it makes you want to scream sometimes. If you love someone deep enough, you’re going to get hurt. Even if you never fight, if you fall into that all-consuming, spiraling love, eventually one of you will die before the other—well, except in rare cases,” I said, thinking

about my parents. “And then the pain will come. But how much better to have loved someone that much than never to have had them in your life.”

My eyes teared up as I thought about how much my parents had loved each other. And they died together, a rare blessing, in one sense, for lovers.

But yet, a voice whispered in the back of my mind, we all die alone. Even if we die at the same time, we all face the Veil alone, and we all must walk through on our own, with only the deeds we've done and the words we've said to carry us forward. At the end of all things, we face our fates stripped naked, all veils and masks cast aside.

“You’re right,” Caitlin said. “I’m scared, but if I don’t tell Tad how I feel, I’ll regret it for the rest of my life.”

“Then once he’s out of any danger, tell him you want to give it a go. If he’s still too afraid of what might happen, then you’ve done everything you can. You left your Pride because they wanted you to marry someone you don’t love. What use is that freedom if you don’t go after a love that might lead to a lifetime of joy?”

“Okay, okay, I get it. I do. I’ll give it a try, and here’s hoping Tad’s willing to try.” She let out a long sigh. “But if I need you to pick up the pieces...”

“I’ll be here, one way or another.” I coasted to a stop at an actual stop sign. “I’ll talk to you later.”

We were at the junction between the access roads and Highway 542, which would take us out of the park, through Glacier and back to Bellingham. Then, about ten miles and we’d be back in Moonshadow Bay. I asked Jerica to call Killian.

A moment later, he came on the line. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, but I’m wondering how Tad is. Should we stop in Glacier to see if there’s a doctor available? Can he make it back to Moonshadow Bay?” I didn’t want to stop if we could avoid it.

“Let me ask Wren.” He turned around and I could hear him talking to Wren. A moment later he came back. “Wren said he’s feverish but she thinks he can make it home if we don’t stop for long.”

“I need coffee once we hit Glacier, if there’s a place to grab any caffeine at all. Once we reach Glacier, keep your eyes out for an open coffee shop. I’m not betting there will be one open at this time, but you never know.” I glanced at the clock on the car dash. It was going on one A.M., and though adrenaline was still running through my veins, I knew it was going to wear off soon and I didn’t want to crash.

“Will do,” he said.

“How’s Tad? How’s the bite?”

“Not great, but at least he wasn’t bitten by a werewolf.”

I shuddered. “Thank gods. Okay, talk to you in a bit.”

Werewolves were a special breed of lycanthropes, totally unlike other shifters. Created rather than born, they were products of a virus that was passed through bodily fluids. Werewolves couldn’t control their shifting, and the moon ruled them in ways that put them at the mercy of the tides and the shifting phases. Full moons made them wild and feral, twisted monsters who didn’t recognize anyone, and they would go into attack mode. And the new moons sent them into panic attacks, a sort of agoraphobia, which pushed them into hiding from the

world. The poor victims seldom lived to an old age. A lot of them killed themselves, traumatized by the virus.



GLACIER WAS DRY AS DUST, ALL SHOPS BOARDED UP EXCEPT the gas station. I didn't fancy convenience store coffee, but it would work in a pinch, so we topped off our tanks and bought coffee and pastries heavy on the sugar. I scarfed down a pack of Twinkies, along with a pack of Ding Dongs. Then, putting ice in my coffee to cool it down enough to drink, I guzzled it, looking for the jolt of sugar and caffeine to keep me going. Killian joined me in the store, doing the same.

“You're all right?” he asked.

“Yeah, tired but we'll make it home. I just want this nightmare to end.”

“Okay, let's get moving. The sooner we get back on the road, the sooner we can get Tad to a doctor. I'd rather go to the hospital in Moonshadow Bay where they're experts on this sort of thing.” Killian gave me a quick kiss and we headed back to the vehicles.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

*B*y the time we reached the outskirts of Moonshadow Bay, it was nearly two-thirty A.M. We drove straight to the hospital. Hank was awake by now, though groggy. He staggered out of the RV.

“I’m sorry I caught you with the Knock-Out powder. I was trying to stop the Verilan.”

He gazed at me, and I saw a shadow behind his eyes. I wasn’t sure what it was, but he didn’t look happy. “Not a problem. It did the trick, one way or another. I’m alive, just bruised up.”

“That’s right, he had hold of you. How are your ribs?” I frowned. Hank looked really out of it.

“They hurt. I’ll have the doctor check them out while we’re here. Mostly I’m worried about Tad. The bite mark looks bad. Really bad.” He glanced over at Caitlin as we waited for the stretcher to come out and take Tad in, and lowered his voice. “I think it may have punctured one of his internal organs. I’m not certain, but he needs to go into the ER.”

I nodded, trying to calm my nerves. The sugar and coffee had revved me up, all right, but now I was just dead tired and yet too hyper, and I was starting to shake. Killian met me in

the waiting room and we all sat around while Hank and Tad were taken back to be examined.

I asked the nurse if Dr. Fairsight was on call—she was a doctor who specialized in treating Otherkin. The nurse told me yes, Dr. Fairsight had just come in for the midnight to eight A.M. shift. I breathed a little easier—she was more than capable of handling their injuries.

I sat down next to Killian and leaned against him. “I’m so tired.”

“Why don’t I take you home? I can come back and wait.” He kissed my forehead. “I want you healthy and comfortable. I don’t want you wearing yourself out.”

I shook my head. “I can’t leave till I know that both Tad and Hank are going to be okay.” I glanced over to Caitlin, who was sitting there, holding tight to Wren’s hands. Lowering my voice, I added, “Wren astounds me. She’s so resilient, and yet I know she’s exhausted. I wish I could help somehow.” I stopped for a moment, then said, “I’m hungry. I want a sandwich, but I don’t want cafeteria food. There’s an all-night diner across the street. I’m going to run over and grab some food. The cold air will do me good. What do you want?”

“You sure you don’t want me to go with you?”

I shook my head. “No, I’ll just drive over in your car, if you don’t mind. What do you want?”

“I wouldn’t mind a chicken burger if they have one. And fries.” He pulled out his wallet and handed me a fifty. “Here, take this and ask Caitlin and Wren if they’re hungry.”

“I would have gotten it,” I said, but kissed him on the forehead. “Thanks, love.”

I headed over to Caitlin and Wren. Caitlin asked for loaded baked potato skins and a chocolate shake, and Wren wanted a chef's salad and lemonade. I wrote everything down so I wouldn't forget and headed out to the parking lot. While the diner wasn't far, I realized I was just too tired to walk, so I rolled down the window and drove over to the diner. There were only a couple of cars in the parking lot, so I went in, confident it wouldn't take long.

I put in the order at the hostess stand, including an order of fried chicken for me, and then sat in the foyer on one of the benches. I noticed by the register they had a sign stating they sold lottery tickets. I never bothered with the lottery—I always felt it was too much of a crapshoot and I'd rather have something to show for my money. But something pushed me over to the register.

“One ticket, please.” I pulled out a dollar.

“Scratch-off or the big Lotto?”

“Scratch-off, I think.” I handed her the dollar and she gave me the ticket. While I waited for the food to come out, I shrugged and scratched off the numbers. I found myself staring at six cherries. “What's this mean?” I asked.

The waitress glanced at the ticket. “Oh good heavens, congratulations! You just won twenty-five thousand dollars!” She clapped her hands. “We can't cash that in here, but let me see...here's the address you go to. It's the local division of the Washington department that runs the lottery. How wonderful! What are you going to do with the money?”

I stared at the ticket. How the hell had I known? Deciding it didn't matter, I thought for a moment, then said, “I have a friend who needs help right now. I think...she can use this more than I can.”

The waitress—her name tag read SANDY—stared at me for a moment, then she smiled. It wasn't a fake smile, but one that told me she understood. "Your friend's a lucky woman. We could all use more friends who care that much." Then, as another waitress brought up two large bags of food, she added, "Here's your food."

I handed her the fifty and she started to count out the change.

"No," I said. "Keep the rest as a tip. And thanks." I carried the food back to the SUV. As I drove back to the hospital, I thought about Wren and the best way to make her take the ticket. I decided to just be open and upfront about it. It wasn't charity, I would tell her. It was fate.



AS I ENTERED THE WAITING ROOM, KILLIAN HURRIED OVER TO take the bags from me. I quietly told him what had happened and he agreed with me that I should give the ticket to Wren. I carried her salad and lemonade over to her while Killian handed Caitlin her meal.

"Wren, here's your food. I've got something else for you," I said. "I bought something...and I want you to have it."

"What is it? Not a cake or something—" she started to say, but I shook my head.

"No. It was a total impulse buy, and the minute I did it, I knew that it was meant for you." I pulled the ticket out of my pocket and handed it to her. It took her a moment, but then her eyes widened and she began to shake her head and hand the ticket back.

“I can’t take this,” she whispered. “It’s worth—”

“Twenty-five thousand dollars. And yes you can. Put it toward hiring help for you and Walter. I know that you don’t have enough to supplement what your insurance covers. This will go a long way, at least for a while. It will give both of you the chance to breathe and adapt. *Please* take it. I’m fine—I still have a lot of my inheritance money, and I own my house. I don’t need this. You do.” I paused, then added my argument. “It was fate. I had no intentions of buying a lottery ticket. But the minute I scratched it off, I knew what to do with it.”

Wren’s eyes glistened. “I don’t like charity—”

“It’s not charity. It’s one friend, helping another. If the situation was reversed, you’d do everything you could to help me out and I know that. Right?”

“Well...” She nodded. “Yeah, I would. And I’d want you to let me help.”

“See? You can’t give without learning to accept. Take this. Here’s the address of where to go to cash it in. Please, use it for whatever you need.”

After a moment she finally nodded, dashing away the tears. “People have been so kind to us. That’s one of the good things all of this has brought about. I’ve learned just how helpful people can be, and how good people can be. Thank you.” As she tucked the ticket and address into her purse, I returned to Killian’s side and began to eat. I was ravenous.

We waited for another fifteen minutes and then Hank came out with the doctor. I took a deep breath.

“Well?”

“Your friend here is going to have some sore ribs for a while. One fractured and one bruised. You were lucky, Hank,”

Dr. Fairsight said. “You could have been hurt much worse. Promise me no roughhousing for a couple months, and I want you back in three weeks for another X-ray to see how things are progressing.”

“You’ll get no arguments from me,” Hank said.

“What about Tad?” I asked.

“He’s given me permission to tell you,” the doctor said. “He was bit, deeply. It punctured his liver. We’re going to have to keep him in the hospital for a while. We have to determine the full extent of injury and treat any infection he might have. But yes, he’ll live. He’s going to be down for the count for several months. Meaning no running, jumping, no lifting, no booze...I’ll write up specific instructions for him. Meanwhile, I want him on IV antibiotics because I think he has an infection with some pretty stiff bugs. He said *Bigfoot* got to him?” She glanced at me.

“Yeah, that’s what bit him, all right. It’s what fractured Hank’s rib, too.”

“Yes, so he told me. What the hell were you doing out there hunting for a sasquatch? We all *know* he’s real, but nobody’s ever been stupid enough to go out there and bang on his doorstep. Tad would be dead now if the creature had bit a different organ. He’s a very lucky young man.” When Dr. Fairsight got on her soapbox, it was hell pushing her off. With a wave of her hand, she left.

“It’s my fault,” Hank said. “It was my idea. I had to go chasing after it and I didn’t even stop to think it might be that dangerous. I just...wanted to see it. To prove to myself that it’s out there—that it’s real.”

By the look in his eyes, Hank was on the edge of some existential crisis. He looked haunted, and at that moment his feelings swept over me and I realized just how guilty he felt. He had dragged us out there without even thinking we might end up in the hospital. And now, both he and Tad were hurt—and Tad had almost ended up on the dinner menu. He sat down, staring at his hands.

I had the sudden feeling that he was on the edge of a breakthrough. I moved over to his side and sat down, taking one of his hands.

“Why? What drives you to search for him? Close your eyes and clear your mind.”

Hank did as I asked without questioning.

“Now sit back and let your mind drift.” As he obeyed, I wondered where this was going to lead, but Esmara suddenly appeared by my side. She sat down beside me and put her hand on my arm.

Listen to me but don't respond. There's something hiding back there, in his subconscious, that he needs to understand. But he's afraid of it—I can feel his fear ripple through the ether. Take him back to when he was young—a very young child around four years old. I'm seeing a campfire, and snow, and I smell beer. I can hear screams. You'll know where to go.

I gave her a short nod but did as she asked and didn't respond. Instead, I turned to Hank and held his hand in mine, not letting go.

“Close your eyes and take three deep breaths.”

He did, his body slumping as the painkillers took hold.

“I want you to travel back to when you were a little boy. Journey back to when you were young—perhaps three or four

years old. Do you remember when you were young? Around three or four years old?”

“Yes,” Hank answered faintly, and I realized he was already deep in trance.

“I want you to go back to when you were on a camping trip. It was winter and there was snow on the ground. You were cold, but you loved the snow. Do you remember a time like that? A camping trip in the snow? If so, tell me about it.”

Hank nodded. “Yes. I’m four and my mother and father took me out in the woods. We are going on a weekend camping trip to cut down our tree for Yule. My mother promised me I can help pick it out, and I’m so excited. I love the woods. I love the snow, and I want to go so badly that I can barely sleep. I’m so excited.”

“Do you know where you’re going?”

“My father says we’re going up to the Crookshank Campground. It’s a small campground, out in the woods, but it’s beautiful and right near a waterfall that I love to look at. My parents take me there to the park to play by the foot of the falls every month. There are frog boats—shaped like frogs—that people can rent and we always rent one and go out on the manmade lake around the falls. Father rows, and Mother sings and I watch the water.” He relaxed, smiling. “The sound of the water drowns out the buzz in my head. I can hear other people—it’s like they’re cars, revving up and down.”

That meant that, as a child, he could sense other people’s energy, and it probably drove him nuts. Especially if his parents didn’t realize it was happening. “Does it drown out the sound of their energy?”

“Yeah, it makes my head quiet. I always have headaches. Too many people. I don’t like being around them.” He sounded almost tearful now. “I try to tell my mother but she doesn’t understand. She thinks I’m shy, but they’re just too loud.”

“That must be hard. Does the noise ever go away?”

“When I’m alone, it disappears. I like being alone. Except sometimes if I want to get away from someone, I can disappear. I go somewhere else, but then my mother freaks out and she shakes me and I come back.” He sounded very young now. He had regressed through time. Hank must have accidentally discovered he could bilocate and mistakenly thought it meant he was actually getting away from people.

“Does your mother tell you not to do this?”

“Yeah, it scares her. She says it looks like I’m...a big word. Cat-tonic.”

“Catatonic?”

“Yeah, that’s the word. She doesn’t understand when I tell her I’ve just gone somewhere quiet. I like that space. It’s quiet and calm and nobody bothers me there.” He slouched back even further.

I thought about what he said. Hank must have developed his powers early, and it sounded like they had been strong from the beginning—something most witchblood parents didn’t have to cope with. But he was gifted, and they hadn’t realized it. At least not when he was a child.

“So tell me about the campground—when you went there to cut down the tree.”

He suddenly fidgeted and turned his head, his eyes still closed. “It’s not the same. I don’t like the campground when

it's this way.”

“What way?” The way he said it gave me chills. We were getting close to something.

Hank pressed his lips together, then let out a whimper. “There’s something out in the woods. In the trees. I tell my mother and she says that I’m just imagining things. My stomach hurts. It’s out there, watching us. I can feel it watching me.”

“What do you think *it* is? Have you ever felt anything quite like this before?” I spoke slowly and evenly so I didn’t spook him.

Hank began to breathe faster. “I don’t know, but it scares me. It’s not from here. It doesn’t belong here. And it knows that I know about it.” He was shaking and clasping his arms around his waist. I was worried about his ribs so I put my hand on his arm. “It reminds me of the flying saucer!”

I knew that Hank had seen a UFO at least twice, once when he was little. But he hadn’t mentioned much about his reaction to it. “How did you feel when you saw the flying saucer?”

After a moment, he said, “I was scared it was going to take me away. I couldn’t tell my parents. They aren’t afraid of anything, and they won’t love me if I’m a coward.”

Hank’s parents couldn’t have said that to him, could they?

“Did they tell you that?”

He bit his lip. “No, but I heard them talking about my cousin. He’s too afraid to fly—he’s afraid of planes. I was listening to them though they didn’t know I was there. My mother said she hopes her son is never that cowardly. She said that only idiots are afraid of trying new things.”

I glanced over at Killian. He gave me a look that mirrored my feelings. Right now, I wanted to scold Mrs. Warren. “Hank, you say the creature in the woods makes you feel like when you saw the UFO. Have you ever seen this creature?”

He nodded. “Yeah. But I don’t like remembering because it scared me too much. I looked out my window one night, and it was in the backyard, staring up at me. When it saw me looking at it, I heard it tell me that it wanted to talk to me. That I could understand it because one time, a long, long, long time ago, I had been one of his kind. He said I was trapped in the wrong body. But that couldn’t be right, could it? I’m not one of them—I’m not!” He burst into tears and started squirming.

“I have to bring him out of trance before he hurts himself! Killian, try to hold him still.”

As Killian moved to try to calm him down, I began to call Hank’s name. The first two times he didn’t hear me and just kept flailing, but finally, on my third call, he caught his breath and stopped for a second.

“Hank, come back to today. You aren’t the little boy any longer. Come back to today and remember everything you’ve told me. You’re safe with us. *Nothing will hurt you.*” I brushed my hand over his clean-shaven head, and the next moment, he slumped back, eyes shut, breathing deeply. I sent Caitlin for the doctor, and Dr. Fairsight came running.

“I’m afraid he might have hurt himself. We were just...oh, I’ll explain later.”

“We’ll keep him for observation if you like. Why don’t you all go home and come back tomorrow. I don’t think he pulled his rib, but I’ll make sure and give you a call.” The doctor smiled tiredly as she motioned for the attendants to lift Hank onto a gurney. They took him back to the ER.

I turned to the others. “Well, now we know where his obsession comes from. We’ve got a lot to unpack. I suggest we all get some sleep and meet at my place at noon? Or, if you like, come back to my place now and just crash there for the night. I’ve got room.”

As we shuffled out of the hospital, I wondered if I’d opened up something better left silent. But we wouldn’t know until the next day.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

*N*ext morning I sat up, staring at the clock. It was almost noon. I could smell coffee coming from downstairs, and Killian wasn't in bed, so I assumed he'd gotten up and started breakfast—or lunch, as the case may be. But he came out of the bathroom, towel wrapped around his waist, hair wet.

“You didn't make breakfast?” I asked, confused.

“Nope, not unless you want waterlogged waffles,” he said, leaning down to kiss me. “I'll bet it's either Wren or Caitlin. Remember, they stayed in the guest room.”

That was right. I shivered, thrusting back the covers as all the events of the night before came flooding back. Everything was wrapped up in a blur, but as I examined my thoughts, I began to untangle the ball o' knotted yarn that had been our trip. And then, the scene with Hank in the hospital. Which reminded me.

I grabbed my phone and sat down at my vanity. There were several text messages—one from Hank. I WAS RELEASED FROM THE HOSPITAL THIS MORNING. I DROVE THE RV BACK TO MY HOUSE—IT WAS IN THE PARKING LOT. ARE WE GETTING TOGETHER THIS AFTERNOON? TAD'S ON THE MEND BUT DR. FAIRSIGHT SAID SHE'S KEEPING HIM IN THE HOSPITAL.

Another text was from Ari. MEAGAN AND I ARE HAVING A WONDERFUL TRIP. IT'S GOOD TO SEE NENA AGAIN AND WE'RE SORTING OUT WHAT TO DO ABOUT COLTON.

The third was from Aunt Teran. I DROPPED OVER TO FEED THE CATS AND PLAY WITH THEM, BUT WREN TOLD ME YOU'RE BACK SO I'M GOING TO ASSUME YOU DON'T NEED ME TO PET SIT TODAY. LET ME KNOW IF THE SITUATION CHANGES. HOW DID THE HUNT FOR BIGFOOT GO? FIND ANYTHING?

I texted Hank back, asking him to come over for brunch if he was free. He immediately texted back that he was on the way. I'd text Ari later, but I let Aunt Teran know that we were back early and I'd tell her all about it soon.

That done, I took a quick shower and dressed, dashing down the stairs just in time to see Killian opening the door for Hank. Wren had made breakfast—or rather, brunch. Scrambled eggs, bacon, toast, fruit salad, sausage, and muffins covered the table. Caitlin was pouring orange juice for everyone, and we all gathered around the table.

“So, are you okay?” I asked, turning to Hank. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to stir up bad memories.”

“Actually, I’m glad you did. You brought out a memory I had repressed, and now I understand why I’ve been so obsessed with hunting down Bigfoot. I guess I’ve carried a secret fear that I’m one of them all these years.”

“Yeah, so...what about that?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Now, as an adult, I don’t believe it was the creature who told me that. I think I manufactured that fear inside, because I was so afraid, and I always felt like the odd one out. I was always wondering who or what might be lurking in the shadows. My trip to the Aseer never brought up

anything about me being one of them, and I'm sure if what I thought was true, she would have discovered it." He winced. "I wish I could stretch but that would hurt like hell."

"Well, at least we know where your obsession comes from," I said, spooning fruit salad onto my plate.

"Yeah, and I think it might be over, after last night. I've had enough of Bigfoot to last me a lifetime. Plus, I think I did get some usable footage on film." He accepted the platter of sausage and speared a couple links for his plate.

"So, how long is Tad going to be in the hospital? Can he have visitors?" Wren asked.

"A few days, to make certain the infection is under control. And yes, he can have visitors later today. He was conscious this morning, and other than feeling like he was monster-chow, he's doing fine. He asked me to thank you for coming after him. I didn't tell him about the Fae." Hank turned to me. "I want to apologize. You wouldn't have had to make that deal if I hadn't insisted on the trip."

"Dude, I chose to go. I could have begged off. I'm not really looking forward to paying Briar back. I don't trust the Fae—they're dangerous. But the fact is, he helped us rescue both you and Tad, when he could have blown us off. I owe him for keeping his word, and for agreeing in the first place."

The truth was, I was scared. I knew how deadly the Fae could be, and I knew how frightened the Woodlings were of their masters. Less than stellar reviews, you might say. But it was a bargain sealed and done, and I'd just have to pull up my big girl panties and pay Briar back, whenever that time came. And the Crow Man too, in fact.

“I wonder,” I said, thinking about the Mystic Wood. “I need to see if my spell worked. I’m not sure how I’ll find out but—”

Right then, my phone rang. I excused myself and, standing by the sliding glass door, answered it. “Hey,” I said.

Rowan was on the line. “I thought you’d like to know. I just got a message from Val Slater’s secretary. Val’s been doing some sleuthing and he wanted to let us know he found out where Gretchen Wyre’s living.”

I stared out the window, hope leaping into my throat. “Where is she?”

“She lives in Seattle, of all places. I thought sure she’d still be living over in Ireland, but apparently I was wrong. I have her address. We can go visit her together.”

I didn’t know what to say. After all these years, she was living close to the family she cursed? And all we’d have to do was go visit her? Of course, we’d have to convince her to break the curse, but I’d expected a long search, followed by some impossible trip over to Ireland or Scotland or something like that.

“Are you there?” Rowan asked impatiently.

“Yeah, I’m just...I didn’t expect my spell to work so quickly.”

“What spell?”

I told her what I’d done. And then I told her what had happened up with Briar. “So it’s been an eventful few days. I’m not sure—”

“You made a deal with the Fae? Are you *sure* there’s no wiggle room?” Rowan sounded more horrified than I’d ever

heard her sound.

“No, I’m afraid not. But we didn’t have any choice. We couldn’t let the Verilan kill Tad.”

She paused, then said, “I suppose you couldn’t. But January, you have no idea what you’ve done. This will have reverberations through your life—not just until the deal is paid back, but all the way through your life.”

In the pit of my gut, I knew she was right. But there wasn’t much I could do about it now. “Well, it’s set in stone. Oh, by the way, do you know what ‘tenquitara’ means?”

Again, Rowan stopped. Then she asked, “Who said that? And to who?”

“Briar, he called me tenquitara.”

“Oh, great gods. Tenquitara means ‘my lovely slave’... What *have* you done, January? Never mind, I’ll drop over tomorrow afternoon and we’ll talk about all of this. There’s no way to break a deal with the Fae, so we’ll have to figure out how to mitigate the damage as much as possible.”

I thanked her and then turned back to the table, deciding to focus on the positive for the time being. “Big news. Esmara! Are you here?”

Within seconds, Esmara appeared.

“Oh good, you’re here.” I looked at the others. “Esmara has joined us. I wanted her to be here when I told you. My spell worked. Val Slater called Rowan yesterday with the location of Gretchen Wyre, the witch who cursed my family.”

Killian jumped up, his eyes shining. “Love, that’s wonderful!”

“We’re going to plan out a visit to her. She lives in Seattle, of all places.” And then, everything hit me—the trip, the encounters with Bigfoot, chasing him through the dark, binding myself to the Fae, and now—the chance to lift a curse that would otherwise kill me well before my time. I burst into tears.

Caitlin and Killian led me back to my chair, where I sat down.

“Are you all right, love?” Killian asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Everything just hit at once.” I looked up at him. “I have to have this curse business settled before we get married. I need it done. Ever since I found out about it, it’s been hanging over my head.”

“We’ll take care of it,” he said, stroking my hair. “It’s just been a rough week.” He knelt by my side. “Everything will be all right. Wait and see.”

I dried my eyes. I didn’t want to worry him, but I knew inside that everything wasn’t all right. And wouldn’t be until we broke the curse, and until I’d paid my debt to the Fae. But for now, I’d focus on what was good in my life. I had the love of my life, and good friends, and family I could trust to have my back.

Don’t forget, you have us, Xi said, jumping up on my lap to lick the tears off my face.

“Yes, little one, I have you too. And I’m so grateful you’re part of my life.” I glanced up at Esmara, who was standing beside me. “And you too, Esmara. I’m so grateful for everyone who’s made my life the joy that it’s become.” Feeling heartened, I let out a deep breath.

Rowan and I would find Gretchen and force her to break the curse—we were both powerful women and we could handle a cranky old witch. And whatever Briar asked me to do, I'd oblige him and get it over with. And then...free of curses and hexes, I'd walk down the aisle to join my life to Killian's, and we'd face the future together.

Then, like a shadow on the sun, I felt something creeping in the corners, waiting to cross my path. But I'd deal with the shades casting doubts on my future later—when it was time. Until then, I'd push on as usual, and nothing would stand in my way.



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PLAYLIST

I often listen to music when I write, and WITCH'S WEB is no exception. Here's the playlist for the book:

- **Aerosmith:** Walk This Way
- **The Alan Parsons Project:** Breakdown; Can't Take It With You
- **Android Lust:** Here & Now
- **AWOLNATION:** Sail
- **Beck:** Qué Onda Guero; Farewell Ride; Emergency Exit
- **Black Angels:** Vikings; Holland
- **Blind Melon:** No Rain
- **Blue Oyster Cult:** The Reaper; Godzilla
- **Bobbie Gentry:** Ode To Billie Joe
- **Broken Bells:** The Ghost Inside
- **Commodores:** Brick House
- **Crazy Town:** Butterfly
- **Cream:** Sunshine Of Your Love; Tales Of Brave Ulysses
- **Cypress Hill:** Insane In The Brain
- **David Bowie:** Golden Years; Without You; China Girl

- **Dead Can Dance:** Yulunga; The Ubiquitous Mr. Lovegrove; Indus
- **Deuter:** Petite Fleur
- **Devon Cole:** Hey Cowboy; W.I.T.C.H.
- **Dizzi:** Dizzi Jig; Dance Of The Unicorns
- **DJ Shah:** Mellomaniac
- **Eastern Sun:** Beautiful Being
- **Elton John:** Goodbye Yellow Brick Road; Saturday Night's Alright For Fighting
- **FC Kahuna:** Hayling
- **Fleetwood Mac:** The Chain; Tusk
- **Gary Numan:** The Gift; I Am Screaming; Intruder; Saints And Liars
- **Gerry Rafferty:** Baker Street
- **The Gospel Whiskey Runners:** Muddy Waters
- **Halsey:** Castle
- **House of Pain:** Jump Around
- **The HU:** The Great Chinggis Khan; Song Of Women; This Is Mongol
- **Jeannie C. Riley:** Harper Valley PTA
- **Julian Cope:** Charlotte Anne
- **Kevin Morby:** Beautiful Strangers
- **Lorde:** Royals; Yellow Flicker Beat
- **Low:** Witches; Plastic Cup; Half-Light
- **Marconi Union:** First Light; Alone Together; Flying; Always Numb; Time Lapse; On Reflection; Broken Colours; Weightless; We Travel
- **Mark Lanegan:** The Gravedigger's Song; Riot In My House; Wedding Dress
- **Masked Wolf:** Astronaut In The Ocean
- **Matt Corby:** Breathe
- **Miracle of Sound:** London Town; Valhalla Calling
- **Motherdrum:** Big Stomp

- **Nancy Sinatra:** These Boots Are Made For Walking
- **Outasight:** The Boogie; The Bounce
- **Pati Yang:** All That Is Thirst
- **Peter Gundry:** The Forest Queen; Autumn's Child; Heart Of The Forest; Lady Of The Dawn
- **Rachel Sage:** Among All Of God's Creatures
- **Red Venom:** Let's Get it On
- **Robert Palmer:** Simply Irresistible
- **Robin Schulz:** Sugar
- **Rue du Soleil:** We Can Fly; Le Française; Wake Up Brother; Blues Du Soleil
- **Seth Glier:** The Next Right Thing
- **Shriekback:** Underwater Boys; And The Rain; The King In The Tree; Agony Box; This Big Hush; All About Nothing
- **Snow Patrol:** The Lightning Strike
- **St. Vincent:** Pay Your Way In Pain; Down And Out Downtown; Los Ageless
- **Suzanne Vega:** Blood Makes Noise; Blood Sings; If You Were In My Movie; Solitude Standing
- **Tamaryn:** While You're Sleeping, I'm Dreaming; Violet's In A Pool
- **Tom Petty:** Mary Jane's Last Dance
- **Trills:** Speak Loud
- **The Verve:** Bitter Sweet Symphony
- **Voxhaul Broadcast:** You Are The Wilderness
- **Wendy Rule:** Let The Wind Blow
- **Zayde Wølf:** Gladiator
- **Zero 7:** In The Waiting Line

BIOGRAPHY

New York Times, *Publishers Weekly*, and *USA Today* bestselling author Yasmine Galenorn writes urban fantasy and paranormal romance, and is the author of over eighty books, including the Wild Hunt Series, the Fury Unbound Series, the Bewitching Bedlam Series, the Indigo Court Series, and the Otherworld Series, among others. She's also written nonfiction metaphysical books. She is the 2011 Career Achievement Award Winner in Urban Fantasy, given by RT Magazine. Yasmine has been in the Craft since 1980, is a shamanic witch and High Priestess. She describes her life as a blend of teacups and tattoos. She lives in Kirkland, WA, with her husband Samwise and their cats. Yasmine can be reached via her website at Galenorn.com. You can find all her links at her [LinkTree](#).

Indie Releases Currently Available:

Moonshadow Bay Series:

[Starlight Web](#)

[Midnight Web](#)

[Conjure Web](#)

[Harvest Web](#)

[Shadow Web](#)

Weaver's Web

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Witch's Web

Cursed Web

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Shadow Magic

Charmed to Death

Night Queen Series:

Tattered Thorns

Shattered Spells

Fractured Flowers

Hedge Dragon Series:

The Poisoned Forest

The Tangled Sky

The Wild Hunt Series:

The Silver Stag

Oak & Thorns

Iron Bones

A Shadow of Crows

The Hallowed Hunt

The Silver Mist

Witching Hour

Witching Bones

A Sacred Magic

The Eternal Return

Sun Broken

Witching Moon

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Witching Time

Hunter's Moon

Witching Fire

Veil of Stars

Antlered Crown

Lily Bound Series

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Chintz 'n China Series:

Ghost of a Chance

Legend of the Jade Dragon

Murder Under a Mystic Moon

A Harvest of Bones

One Hex of a Wedding

Holiday Spirits

Well of Secrets

Chintz 'n China Books, 1 – 3: Ghost of a Chance, Legend of the Jade Dragon, Murder Under A Mystic Moon

Chintz 'n China Books, 4-6: A Harvest of Bones, One Hex of a Wedding, Holiday Spirits

Whisper Hollow Series:

[Autumn Thorns](#)

[Shadow Silence](#)

[The Phantom Queen](#)

Bewitching Bedlam Series:

[Bewitching Bedlam](#)

[Maudlin's Mayhem](#)

[Siren's Song](#)

[Witches Wild](#)

[Casting Curses](#)

[Demon's Delight](#)

[Bedlam Calling: A Bewitching Bedlam Anthology](#)

[The Wish Factor \(a prequel short story\)](#)

[Blood Music \(a prequel novella\)](#)

[Blood Vengeance \(a Bewitching Bedlam novella\)](#)

[Tiger Tails \(a Bewitching Bedlam novella\)](#)

Fury Unbound Series:

[Fury Rising](#)

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Indigo Court Series:

[Night Myst](#)

[Night Veil](#)

Night Seeker

Night Vision

Night's End

Night Shivers

Indigo Court Books, 1-3: Night Myst, Night Veil, Night Seeker (Boxed Set)

Indigo Court Books, 4-6: Night Vision, Night's End, Night Shivers (Boxed Set)

Otherworld Series:

Moon Shimmers

Harvest Song

Blood Bonds

Otherworld Tales: Volume 1

Otherworld Tales: Volume 2

For the rest of the Otherworld Series, see website at **Galenorn.com**.

Bath and Body Series (originally under the name India Ink):

Scent to Her Grave

A Blush With Death

Glossed and Found

Misc. Short Stories/Anthologies:

The Longest Night (A Pagan Romance Novella)

Magickal Nonfiction: A Witch's Guide Series.

Embracing the Moon

Tarot Journeys

Totem Magick