

THE DARKEST
MIDNIGHT

R.A. FINLEY

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THE DARKEST MIDNIGHT.

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To my mom.

And to Midnight.

THE DARKEST
MIDNIGHT

Fain would I climb, yet fear I to fall.

Sir Walter Raleigh

PROLOGUE

Cumbria, Northern England 01 November

It felt ridiculous to fear a dead man, but as Cormac walked the cold, deserted passageways of his father's underground stronghold, he did exactly that. Habit, he supposed. Dead was dead. The only ghosts he might encounter lurked not in any actual darkened corner but in his own mind. The ghosts of memory. Of fear, pain, sorrow. Loneliness.

He ducked a low, rough-hewn beam as he rounded a tight turn. Either the long-ago people who had carved these tunnels deep within the mountain had been considerably shorter than Cormac's five-foot-nine, or they hadn't time—or perhaps permission—for comfort.

His boot slipped when the passageway, slick with ice, took a steep downward slant. But rather than slow, he increased pace. With every second the air felt a little thinner, smelled a little ranker; and the walls, already close enough, seemed to push in closer still. If not for his bargain with Murphy, he'd never have returned to Fiend's Fell.

The temperature was cold enough to chill even an American's beer, but he was sweating beneath his jacket, the cotton of his shirt sticking uncomfortably to his back. It was absurd, this anxiety. As far as his Sight could tell, the stronghold was deserted. Whomever and however numerous its

current inhabitants might be, all must have accompanied his father to Orkney, and so either lay dead at the Ring of Brodgar or were on the run from there. Should they seek to return here, even if they could travel the ley lines, it would take them a good while.

No, he had nothing to fear from his father's *thegnas*—followers—nor from the man himself. With the memory, the *feel* of Idris Cathmor's death but two hours fresh, Cormac ought to know better than anyone.

His hands itched, the nerves not yet recovered from being the conduit for so much power. His throat burned from shouting. Screaming, if he cared to be accurate—which he did not. He'd put genuine emotion on display several times already this night, which made several times too many.

His feelings, his fears, every one of them left unguarded when he'd seen Thia about to run headlong into the deadly protection spells that kept them captive inside the Ring of Brodgar. And again when he'd held her as her body struggled to adjust to the newly-introduced powers of the Cailleach. And, worst of all, when the Society of the Brigantium had used him as a conduit to kill Idris.

That one had been the most public, no question. Even with battle raging throughout Brodgar, he and Idris and their dueling storms had doubtless attracted a good deal of attention. Then, once his father was down, with Cormac's hands wrapped around his throat—Cormac shuddered, tamped down the memory before it could fully rise.

The Brigantium's people had certainly seen and seized the opportunity to rid the world of a perceived evil.

Cormac couldn't fault their perception. It was their method he was having trouble with.

The knowledge that, if control hadn't been taken from him in those last moments, he might have done the deed himself was not sitting too well, either.

Guilt. It didn't eat at him, as some had described the sensation. No. It invaded, thickened the blood and turned

marrow cold. Threatened to transform him utterly if left unchecked.

He had nothing against it. Hell, he deserved it, didn't he? Not just guilt over Idris, but over Thia too. He rubbed his chest, the unconscious gesture doing nothing to ease the ache summoned by her name alone.

After a sequence of counterintuitive turns, he entered a hexagonal antechamber. Disbelief hit hard.

The doors to Idris's most secure store-rooms were wide open. Every single one. The protective wards that should have shimmered in Cormac's Sight were gone.

He didn't need to shine the light of his electric torch inside to see that they had all been emptied, yet he did. Nor did he need to enter them one by one, yet he did.

Nothing of significance remained. And, given the lack of any energy remnants—remnants that should have overwhelmed, considering what had been held within—the room had been magically scoured.

He braced his hands on either side of an empty niche at the back of the room and dropped his head forward, his brow pressing into the stone. Eyes closed, he breathed in the dank, familiar smell of failure.

The Achill Bell, promised to Declan Murphy upon pain of death, was gone.

CHAPTER 1

Granite Springs, Oregon 18 December

Thia dreamt of blood. Oh, there were other things. Ancient, lichen-covered megaliths that thrust from a storm-ravaged plain to stab the night sky. The haze of smoke, the crackle of flame. Cries and shouts and screams. Confusion and terror and loss and the feel of a man, comforting and achingly familiar, coupled with the sound of a raven's wings.

But mostly she dreamt of blood, and every morning woke and tried to forget.

It had been almost eight weeks since the events at the Ring of Brodgar. She didn't think about them all the time; mainly in her sleep, it seemed. But she couldn't shake the sense of them. The fear and the guilt, no matter how much might be misplaced. She felt numbed by it, hollowed out, and despite the supportive company of her friends, isolated. She was going through the motions of her old life while trying to understand the new. Caught in the middle, she couldn't connect with either.

"You are like a pupa, yes? The butterfly in its shell," Madame Demetka had told her a few days ago at the store. Thia had waited expectantly—almost hopefully, really—for something like an explanation to follow, but the undeniably odd (and undeniably, oddly psychic) woman had merely

smiled and gone upstairs to set up for the afternoon's Tarot Readings.

Well, Thia thought now, if that were true she wished she'd hatch already.

She took a sip of much-needed coffee and, hip against the kitchen counter, continued to watch morning creep across the wintry garden that, once Lettie's, was now hers.

Frost dusted what leaves remained and covered the small patch of grass. The birdbath had a thin layer of ice at the edges, but nothing insurmountable. Southern Oregon could be cold but not so severely that there wasn't the chance of a feathered visitor. And there were always ravens. The ones here never left, unlike some—or rather, one in particular.

Along with a sudden bitterness, she swallowed the last of the coffee, rinsed the mug before setting it in the drainer.

Cormac wasn't truly a raven, although he had taken that form when she'd seen him last, thanks to his being half Sidhe, an Otherworldly being she'd known little about at the time.

He'd been his usual self (or what she assumed was his usual self) when she'd gone running to him and embraced him for all she was worth, so glad that he was alive—that they had both survived. And then he'd pulled away, transformed into a bird, and left her to stand alone on what only minutes before had been a battlefield with its dead and wounded scattered all around her.

As always, she pushed those thoughts, those memories aside. No good came from thinking of that night—or of him. No purpose served.

She bundled herself in coat and scarf, then pulled a quirky knit cap over her shoulder-length auburn hair on her way to the back door. Her gloves and keys were on the table in the breakfast nook. The latter looked particularly cozy with the sunlight streaming in through the mullioned windows. She used to enjoy sitting there with coffee and toast, with Lettie apt to join her before they headed out.

Now it was simpler to eat at the kitchen counter if she bothered with breakfast at all.

At the door, she paused to look around the garden with a more security-conscious eye. Even if Cassie's threats were not a constant in the back of her mind, her friends had warned her to be vigilant for additional reasons. The power she had gained would not go unnoticed, they'd said. She should expect to be visited by anyone from the mildly curious to the outright hostile. But not this morning. The small yard, so crowded with life in the spring and summer, was empty and still.

Bracing herself, she called on her newfound Sight—the strange and still-developing ability to see things beyond the usual scope. So far, she had only learned how to look for magic use: When there might be energy *fields*, she supposed they were (she didn't understand it all very well...yet). But it was something magical, at least, that she could do without risk.

Across the yard and extending up like a magical dome, the protection wards shimmered, translucent and faintly colorful like a giant soap bubble. She ought to be safe from house to garage, and from there in her car with its own protection wards, the few blocks to her parking spot behind Eclectica.

Putting away the Sight—it helped to think of it like a pair of glasses—she stepped onto the back porch. Her breath was a visible plume. Her muscles clenched with cold.

Not anxiety, she told herself before she took another quick scan of the area and double-locked the door. And then, feeling like an overcautious fool, she made her way down the three slick wooden steps to the yard.

At the crack of a twig high in the neighbor's cedar, she startled and nearly dropped the keys. She looked up in time to see something move along a branch. Shadowed and obscured as it was by the draping needles, she couldn't make out its shape or even color. And then, with a soft flapping of

wings, it took off from the far side of the tree, out of sight. Raven? Gone, in any case.

She told herself not to dwell on it.

In her first weeks back, she'd driven herself all the more crazy by seeking out Cormac at every turn. Every unfamiliar face and especially every raven had held a possibility she had longed for. And each time—each and *every* time—she'd had to acknowledge his continued absence. An absence that was most likely permanent.

It had become too painful, and so she had forced herself to stop.

Stop looking, stop hoping.

Yet it was hard, and sometimes she relapsed.

Her hand went to her pendant, found it no warmer than it should have been from laying against her skin. It was an odd looking thing, the representation of a gorgon; and it was an imperfect safeguard, too, as had been recently revealed. But Thia still took comfort from it. It might not detect or ward off *every* danger, but it had done well enough against a certain individual. And it had been a gift from Lettie.

Chilled, she hurried down the short path to the garage, quickly shut the door behind her to lean against it while her heart pounded.

To think she used to walk to work at all times of the day or evening with hardly a concern. Now she scurried like a frightened mouse across a fenced-in yard in order to drive.

To think she used to believe that magic was nothing more than fantasy and wishful thinking.

Sure, when Thia had come to set up and run Eclectica's online store, Lettie had explained certain practices: Don't allow an opened Tarot deck to be sold; make sure that the wolfsbane remained in the locked case and never went to anyone not on the approved buyer's list; and so on. But Thia had thought it part of her great-aunt's whimsical hobby. Perfectly harmless, like carrying around a rabbit's foot for luck and not walking beneath a ladder.

How wrong she had been.

Pushing off the door, she walked around Lettie's older-model Datsun to the driver's side. The hinges creaked, as did the springs when she settled into the worn bucket seat. Habit had her reach for the button on the remote clipped to the visor. She lowered her hand, took a deep breath.

Little things, they'd instructed. Start with little things.

She closed her eyes, gathered what Abby called "the energy of intention," while envisioning the newly repaired garage door.

White with three horizontal segments and a row of tiny windows along the top. A system of tracks with a cable and pulley. She waited until she could feel the substance, the *reality* of it all—along with the uncomfortable prickle as the Cailleach's power moved from her bones to gather at her palms. Then, with a slight upward sweep of her hands, she pictured the door lifting.

Slowly.

The storage shelves along the walls began to rattle, but she couldn't risk taking a look.

The door, lifting. She needed to maintain the image, the feel of it. She needed to—

Something hit the ground with a loud pop of glass and scattering metal. Thia's eyes flew open as, behind her, the garage door crashed down.

Terrified, she watched more and more things topple from shelves that continued to tremble. Glass jars of nails and screws fell to shatter on the cement floor while a tool chest rattled toward the brink.

She hadn't called back the power.

She'd lost her focus, but was still sending. Oh, *God*. Forcing her eyes closed again, she struggled for calm as—by the great crashing sound of it—the chest dropped. Her hands made another gesture, this time an inward sweep with thumbs and third fingers touching, before she settled them in her lap in a meditative pose.

"To me," she said, fear and frustration turning what should have been an order into a soft-voiced plea. "In me."

Gradually she felt the power reverse course, no longer flowing to her hands but *from* them, back into her bones—where it could remain, as far as she was concerned, for the rest of her days, never to be called upon again.

As the undirected power dissipated, the shelving settled and she let out a relieved breath.

She couldn't ignore the power, she knew, much as she wanted to. Couldn't hope to let it lie dormant forever. There were people, Otherworldly and otherwise, who would go to great lengths to take it or try to use it through her.

In the last couple of weeks she had become better at controlling it, so it no longer shot out at unexpected (and invariably destructive) times. But that wasn't enough. She needed to be able to *wield* it or she'd remain a danger to everyone.

She pressed the button on the remote, stepped out of the car as the garage door rattled upward along the tracks. That was something, anyway. Yesterday she'd warped it so badly it had stuck halfway. Still, it was hard to take comfort.

With cold air rushing in, she crunched over nails and glass shards to where she kept the broom. The last thing the morning needed was a punctured tire. Or four.

●○●

Blooms Alley, Granite Springs

He had come early, cloaked in the mist of wintry dawn, as he had every morning since the prod of magic's insistent fingers beneath the blanket of his solitude.

At the time, he had been gathering supplies, stocking up for the cold months ahead. The idea (what he could recall of it) had been based upon the now-failed hope of staying on the mountain until *Gwanwyn*. Spring. He did not like town.

But come into it he had, every day since that unexpected prod of the Cailleach's power.

Fear had caused him to investigate. Self-preservation, too. Never again would he allow himself to be taken un-awares.

Never again to be taken.

He shuddered, drew his scarf higher about his face and then quickly returned his hands to his pockets. Several fingers of his gloves lacked tips. Sunlight's faint warmth did not penetrate the shadows between brick and metal where he had created a rough shelter of cardboard pulled from the same rubbish bin he sat behind. It and the low-level warming charm he had spell-crafted kept away the worst of the cold but not all. Comfort lulled.

He tensed at the sound of a car.

Unmistakably hers, with its 1972 motor in need of a tune-up. It parked in its designated spot. Six meters from the back entrance to the store; three from his cobbled together blind. With the opening of its door came the awareness at the base of his skull, much like the sensation of hairs standing on end—although, with his hat pulled low and his scarf wrapped high and tight, that was hardly possible.

The sensation was false, but the warning was not.

Power. In great concentration and carrying the all-too-familiar resonance of the Cailleach.

He listened to the thump of the door's closing, the light tread of her steps on the asphalt as she approached the store. The sounds of opportunity. In the distance from her car to the store, she was vulnerable.

The store's back door opened with the click of a latch and a cheery squeak of hinges. But the woman had not yet crossed the halfway point.

His senses, already straining against the leash, surged. His hold began to slip.

"Good morning." *Her* voice.

And then the one with the power. "Zoe, here, let me get that for you."

Both neared.

He held himself rigid, hardly dared to breathe while the bin's lid lifted. Something landed inside. Cardboard, added to the collection.

"Thanks, Thia."

After the lid was lowered and the sound of their conversation assured him they were headed into the store, he risked a look. He had the merest glimpse before they stepped inside—the woman with the power and *her*—but it was enough to stagger. It was as if she were lit from within. If he had but one of her smiles, the ones he'd seen her give so freely to others, he would not need a spell-crafted charm to keep warm.

Less than a minute after the door had closed, it opened again. He knew what was coming. Braced for it. Her steps were quiet. Tentative, despite this not being the first time nor even the fourth. She had been doing this for the past week.

Paper rustled and she set something down at the bin's front bottom corner. He would not risk breaking cover to look. Not at it, not at her. Bad enough that he continued to come here day after day.

Somehow he had decided that her knowing that he spent time in this place was not the same as knowing why. Besides, she didn't know who—what—he was. She thought he was a transient, someone in need.

Because she kept leaving him food.

The door closed. She had gone back inside, and if her routine held, would not come out again until late afternoon. There would be more recycling to drop off. More food. A sandwich and piece of fruit, typically, although yesterday there had been a takeaway container of soup.

After ten minutes, when he was sure no one watched, he pulled in the paper sack she had left.

An onion bagel, lightly toasted. The tinfoil covering had failed to keep it hot, but he could fix that. Two packets, a butter and a cream cheese, along with a plastic knife. Two

lidded paper cups.

One held the usual coffee. Its aroma cut through even the thickest of the area's smells. The other cup was heavier, warmer. He sniffed at the lid's opening, although he figured if she intended to do him harm, she would have done it before this.

Probably.

No. She didn't have it in her. She was good. Innocent.

Oatmeal. Surprised, he pried off the lid, tugged down his scarf. He had not had oatmeal in...He could not remember how long. And he would not try. That would mean thinking though the lost time.

There was a plastic spoon at the bottom of the bag. He pulled it out, scooped up a mouthful of steaming, cinnamon-spiced wonder. His eyes closed on a sigh.

A woman's low, seductive voice intruded. "I believe we have something in common. *Someone*, rather."

Power, angry and dark. Malevolence wormed its way through defenses that he had worked long and hard to erect since his release from *caethiwed*. But his own powers were not what they were. He was fighting an uphill battle and he knew he hadn't the strength for much of a climb.

He tried. Would continue to try until he had nothing left. He shook as the ripples of a compulsion spell licked like the tongue of a slaving beast.

Its fangs would not be far behind.

"What do you want?" he managed, his seldom-used voice strange to his own ears. The cup of oatmeal had dropped from his hands. He would not have noticed but for the wet heat soaking through the leg of his pants where it had spilled. Steam rose like thin, sheer snakes. He looked at them instead of the woman.

He had not heard her approach. Had not felt so much as a glimmer. One moment he had been alone, the next...not.

Power and *skill*.

He closed his eyes as the tremors increased. His breath-

ing had become choppy, his panic like a living thing. Control slipped, as did his footing in his silent, impossible fight against her will.

“Walk with me,” she said, her sickly sweet voice closer than before. She had slipped into the space between the bins.

She bent down, level with the entrance to his shelter and looked straight at him. He felt the nip of the beast’s fangs then, the compulsion spell taking hold.

“Follow.” She straightened, gone the way she had come. He heard her walking away.

He stood, left the cherished gift of food smeared and scattered about. She was halfway down the alley. A tall woman with hair in a long, sinuous cascade down her back. Swaying hypnotically, it beckoned.

He followed.

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Eclectica, Granite Springs

Thia felt a twinge of guilt when she hurried through the café to Eclectica’s upper sales floor, its decorative interior gate already propped open. The mess in the garage had set her back almost a half hour.

The café, accessed through the garden and rear door, opened early (as coffee shops did). The store would open later, hence the gate—the unlocking of which (along with the main door downstairs) was something Thia had recently taken upon herself. It helped her to understand that she did, in fact, own what she feared would always feel like Lettie’s pride and joy.

Hugging the rail to make way for the people beelining up the stairs to the café, she reconsidered her word choice. *Fear* wasn’t right, since the alternative would be to lose even more of her great-aunt than she already had. She didn’t want that, yet she couldn’t feel like a stand-in forever, either. She’d inherited Eclectica along with most of Lettie’s investments

and possessions, which included the Granite Springs house and one in London that she had no idea what to do with. Her memories of it, and of the city in general, were not what she had hoped they'd be when she'd set out.

She knew what she wanted to do with Eclectica, at least. She wanted to make it a continued success. It was already popular both in Granite Springs and, increasingly, online. But it was also, in many ways, like a living thing and therefore not meant to remain unchanged. It couldn't be a shrine to Lettie, with Lettie's original decisions cast in stone. If it did, Thia had come to realize, then that stone would become Eclectica's grave marker. The store needed to stay vibrant, to shift with the combined will of its customers and owner both, or it would atrophy and eventually die.

That was where the fear came in. Or, considering the rest of what Thia had to deal with, maybe it only ranked as "relatively moderate apprehension." Dealing with the power she carried, knowing it was only a matter of time before Cassie sought revenge for the deaths of her twin brother and sorcerer father were far scarier prospects than decisions such as which wholesaler to use for Tara Water or whether to stop stocking crystal orbs now that she knew what they could be used for.

"Good morning, Lynette," she said in passing at the bottom of the stairs and then waved at the customers the clerk was on her way to help. The Winslows. Mother and daughter, they co-owned the Bed and Breakfast across the alley. Both smiled, waved back.

"More ornaments?" Thia was surprised—but pleasantly so. The week before, they had bought the entire stock of glass pickles.

"We like to put one in each room for guests to take with them," said Jeanine, the daughter. "Thanks for getting more in so quickly. We really appreciate it."

Thia felt another twinge of guilt. She'd had nothing to do with the quick reorder. "I'll let Abby know."

Newly promoted to manager (by none other than Thia) and already used to handling such things for the frequently absent Lettie, Abby had been well within her job expectations. But shouldn't Thia have had some part in it? Or would that be micromanaging?

Dammit. Was she going to second-guess herself with everything? She pulled off her scarf, removed her coat on the way to Lettie's—to *her* office, and nearly knocked a menorah from the special Hanukkah display. For as much floor space as the building allowed, the winter holidays took up a great deal more than usual. It was beautiful though, in all its cross-cultural, chaotic glory. Heavily decorated trees (artificial, but who could tell under it all), lights wrapped around or draped over every cabinet and shelf, colorful items that ranged from nutcrackers to wreaths to chocolate-filled advent calendars crowded every surface. And the *scents*. Thia inhaled deeply.

Previously, the store had held a pleasant aroma of fresh-ground coffee from upstairs and herbs from the well-stocked shelves along the back wall. But winter had brought the wonderful, overriding scents of pine boughs, and pomanders of oranges and cloves.

After setting her things in the office, she went to the counter—or more accurately, *counters*. Six of them, arranged to form a hexagon in the approximate center of the main floor. After a few close calls with last-minute rushes of customers who needed to get to their afternoon plays at the Shakespeare Festival, it was one of the changes Thia had felt necessary, and a logical expansion of the existing set-up—something Lettie would have undoubtedly approved of had she been able. Along with the increased efficiency brought by multiple cash registers, the glass fronts and interior shelves allowed for more easily-accessed yet easily-secured display space.

Within the configuration, Abby was restocking an arrangement of delicately crafted fairies: Colorful, whimsical creations that Thia had come to understand had little-to-

nothing to do with the reality they supposedly represented. Most fairies were not fragile, harmless-looking things. Quite the contrary. Most fairies—or rather, *Sidhe*—were the stuff of nightmares.

In fact, Thia wasn't sure that even these (should these porcelain and silk versions prove true to life) would turn out to be as harmless as they appeared.

Appearances, she'd learned all too well, were deceiving.

Thia handed Abby a fairy from the array. "I'm sorry you had to open without me."

Her friend shot her a concerned look before she looped the fairy's ribbon over a waiting twig on the display—a large branch stripped of its leaves and set in a sand-filled vase. The fragile creature swayed, the gauzy strips of its costume fluttering gently. "Everything all right?"

"I made a mess of the garage again."

"The door?" Abby got onto the step ladder, held out her hand for another fairy. Thia chose a brunette with lavender wings and tiny wire-frame glasses.

"Survived." She steadied the branch while Abby worked with the uppermost twigs. "I don't know what I'm doing wrong, I really don't. I'm never going to get this."

Abby stepped down, collapsed the ladder. Her unruly hair had slipped mostly free of its clip. With one hand, she swept the dark curls out of her face. "Nonsense. These things take time. And you've been given a shitload of power to deal with all at once. You can't just expect to be thrown in the deep end of the pool one morning and swim laps by the end of the day."

"It's been weeks. *Six* weeks, to be exact, and I can't even lift a stupid garage door."

"But you haven't made anything fly off the shelves here in at least a week." Abby's small smile held something Thia hoped wasn't pity. It probably *would* be after her next words.

"Not here, no."

Thia had been wrong. Alarm, not pity, dominated Abby's

expression. "Where?"

"This morning. The garage." Thia performed her best "no big deal" shrug. "That's when I lost control of the door. Last night it was the kitchen. I'm not trying stuff at home anymore." She wadded up the tissue that the fairies had been wrapped in and chucked it into the wastebasket under the counter. "Not by myself, anyway."

"I've got time after work tonight. How about we go to dinner, do some exercises after?"

It was an offer Thia knew she should take. But knowing and wanting were two different things. "I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"If you're worried about damage, we could do it at my place. There's not much to break in the drying shed."

Maybe not much property, but what about people? They could be broken just as easily. Sweat dampened her palms. "I don't know. Maybe."

"Come on, it'll be fun." Abby took up the stepladder in both hands and, on her way by, playfully jostled her elbow into Thia. "I'll see if Kendra can come, make it a night out. There's no way anything can go wrong with both of us there with you. Come on." Her face lost its smile. "You need to do this. It won't be safe for you until you can—"

"—control the power, I know. Believe me, I know. It won't be safe for any of us." Because a powerful, vindictive woman wouldn't hesitate to use Thia's love for her friends against her.

That night in the Ring, Thia had killed Cassie's brother and contributed to the death of Cassie's father. It didn't matter that the former had been unintentional or that neither would have happened if the man hadn't set the entire chain of events in motion.

Cassie's final words to Thia had been of revenge, and the inevitability of that threat had hung over her head ever since. Over all their heads, really.

"It'll be okay," Abby said quietly and then carried the

ladder away.

At the jingle of the sleigh bells hung on the main door, Thia turned with a practiced smile. Not too exuberant, or the prospective customer could be put on edge. No one wanted a pushy salesperson, and certainly not before ten in the morning.

A vaguely familiar woman smiled in return and drifted to the right of the door, toward the table of boxed holiday cards. With only three days left before Solstice and Christmas only a few days after that, she was cutting things rather close.

Thia's quick survey of the sales floor showed plenty of available clerks should the handful of browsers need help. She knelt down, disappearing from view, to straighten out the jumble of gift boxes and wrapping supplies. Nearly everyone wanted things gift-wrapped lately. And why not? The season was stressful enough without the added pressure of trying to tie a perfect bow.

They were almost out of small handle-bags. She'd need to get on that before the lunchtime rush. A stack of folding boxes insisted on sliding every which way, and she searched in vain for something to serve as a prop.

The back of her neck tingled.

A throat cleared, the sound masculine and originating above her on the other side of the counter. More tentative than impatient. She arranged another smile and stood.

She found herself looking at the base of a man's neck where it rose from the collar of a beige and blue checkered shirt. She adjusted her gaze upward to his face. He was taller than expected somehow. Different in other ways, too, although why she'd formed any expectations at all in those few seconds, she couldn't say.

He was of middle age and on the tall side of average (as she'd already noted) with clean-shaven, pleasant features and a reserved, almost tense expression. His blond hair was neatly trimmed. Everything about him was neat, she real-

ized, from the line of his brown corduroy jacket to the drape of his wool scarf.

The tortoise-shell frames of his glasses completed the image and made her think of academia. The slight tint of the lenses obscured his eyes a bit, but his irises were most definitely brown.

Her stomach jittered and she felt flushed.

Oh, goodness. At thirty-two she knew all too well the symptoms of acute attraction. She also knew how rare such a thing was for her. Nerves and confusions had her turning up the brightness of her smile. It felt forced. Overdone, but it was too late to dial it back now. "May I help you?"

"Hello," he said. And then made a visible effort to relax. *His* smile was charmingly shy. "Hi."

She felt a surge of delight that was completely out of scale for the situation, and took it as a positive sign. Maybe getting over Cormac wouldn't be as hard as she'd feared.

"Hi," she said.

And they proceeded to stare at one another like fools.

He must have realized it was his turn. "I was hoping you—that is, *wondering* if you could help me."

"Yes," Thia said, amused. "Of course."

He cringed. "You already asked me that."

"I did."

His laugh—a nearly soundless huff of breath—caught her unprepared. So astonishingly familiar.

But his eyes were *brown*, not blue. Cormac might be able to make himself into anyone in the world thanks to spells called glammers, but he couldn't change the color of his eyes. She would know them anywhere. Wouldn't she?

"I need a gift for my...uh...friend," this man who was not Cormac said. "A Christmas gift. I'm new in town, and this shop was recommended."

"Welcome to Granite Springs."

"Thank you."

"What sort of things does your friend like?"

His expression blanked. "I don't—I'm afraid that I don't really know her all that well. It's...complicated, I suppose you could say."

"But you want to buy her something." Thia tried to put him more at ease. "That's very thoughtful. We've got a nice selection of jewelry—I don't think there's a woman alive who doesn't like jewelry." She tapped the counter glass. Below were several velvet-covered boards of necklaces and pins.

He leaned away in subtle but definite rejection. "That feels rather...."

"Personal?" she offered. "Good point. What about something decorative for the home? We have—"

"I might have seen some things in there that looked, uh, pretty." He pointed to the Glass Tower—a rectangular case near the foot of the stairs. "Could you show some to me?"

"Of course." Feeling a blush creep into her cheeks at the idea of going with him—(what *was* she, sixteen?)—she bent to grab the keys from the shelf below the counter. When she straightened, she found him waiting at the narrow pass-through.

"It's just over there," she said. Good grief, as if he didn't know that.

Yet instead of preceding her, he gestured for her to lead.

She did, but he stayed close, catching up to walk beside her despite the unusually rapid pace her nerves caused her to set. She felt profoundly self-conscious.

"Have you lived in town long?" he asked.

"Almost a year."

"And you're well?" He made a small sound, almost like a cough. "*Doing* well? It certainly looks as if you are."

"The store, you mean?" Arriving at the Tower, she went around to the back. He stood at the front, so she saw him through the plate glass. He appeared sheepish again, his gaze darting away and back in turns—and she wondered if maybe he *did* know what the expression did for him.

She turned the key, pulled open the door.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I don't talk to people much. In my line of work, that is. I meant—well, I meant that you seem... happy. Are you?" He let out a tense breath. "Happy?"

Oh. Her mind flashed to the morning's garage disaster, and she felt her carefully crafted mask of retail salesmanship slip if not drop entirely.

The man put his hands in his pockets, tucked his head. "I'm sorry—again. I'm making a mess of this. Forget I said anything, would you? That's a nice piece there." One hand immediately left his pocket to point.

"The butterfly?" She reached for the delicate figure made of silver and glass. One of her favorites.

"Yes."

"It's funny," she said, removing it. "A friend of mine—of sorts—mentioned butterflies to me just the other day. This one is beautiful, isn't it?" She held it out.

"It is."

In taking it, his fingers skimmed the backs of her hands, and the light touch was like an electric shock. Thia's heart leapt, a clumsy start to the race that followed.

Her gaze automatically sought his, but he was intent on the butterfly. His expression grave, he lifted it. The wings caught the light and took it from beautiful to exquisite. Blue became vibrant cobalt while faceted, clear segments glinted and played with reflections, giving the impression of life caught and held within.

"Thank you," he said. "This is the one." Lowering it, he looked at her. Brown eyes, she reminded herself. Not blue.

"Great!" Too exuberant. Awkward. She was such an idiot.

He could have started walking to the counter to make the purchase, but he didn't. As before, he waited. For her?

"Was there something else?" She turned the key with a hand that only shook a little.

"No. No, this should do it."

He seemed almost sad.

Other than give him a hug—completely inappropriate—she didn't know how else to offer comfort.

So she walked past. "Let's go ring it up, then."

On the way, she caught Lynette's attention, asked her to fetch the butterfly's box from the back.

"It's a limited edition," she told the man as she stepped behind the counter. "The number is on the base—as is the artist's signature. Bella Smythe. She's local. The box is made specially to fit, so you'll want to hang onto it."

"Sure."

She entered it into the register.

"Would you like me to gift wrap it for you? We have some standard papers, or you can choose from our selection for purchase over there"—she gestured—"if you'd prefer one more elaborate."

"No, thank you."

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She was nattering on about gift boxes and paper and it was all Cormac could do not to launch himself over the counter. She was right *there*. So close he could grab her and hold on tight and maybe never let go. He had missed her.

He was surprised—and embarrassed—by how much.

Had she always been so lovely? His first sighting of her had been in a photograph of Leticia's (he'd been breaking-and-entering at the time). He had noted Thia's auburn hair, her oval face with, granted, its bright smile and intelligent gaze—and he had thought her of little more than average looks. It was perhaps a matter of the difference between a still image and the animated, real thing. Much more than the sum of her parts. At this moment, in motion and in person, those parts were stunning.

He was making a hash of the conversation, he knew, but it was a miracle he could formulate words at all, let alone whole sentences. She probably thought him shy.

She'd be right.

Are you happy? He couldn't believe he'd blurted it out like that. Morrigan's cloak in a twist, this was not going well.

And it was taking too long. He eyed the tall, dark-haired woman near the front of the store, standing in the window display to fetch a stuffed bear for a waiting customer; Abigail Collins, he'd learned since Orkney. She had gone to Thia's aid, fought alongside the Brigantium and Murphy's people. Had probably helped Cormac kill his father.

Unwanted emotion crested, and he let it break, crashing down like an icy wave. He ignored it. Felt nothing. What he didn't acknowledge couldn't hurt.

Abigail, or Abby as she preferred to be known, eyed him with distrust—exactly what he was worried about. He suspected she had the gift of empathy. And an unusually (and, to his purposes, inconveniently) large gift at that.

"Actually," he said, returning his attention to Thia as she rang up his own so-called and damnably expensive gift. Of course he couldn't have happened upon something more reasonably priced. Or something that didn't require a lot of fuss. "I'm in a bit of a hurry. Does it really need the box?"

She looked at him as if he were a simpleton. Spoke as if he were one, too, although kindly. "It's pretty fragile, so it would need some sort of box, yes." She kept her hand near it on the counter as if she feared he would snatch it up and cram it into a pocket. "Will you be in the area later? I could pack it up, even gift-wrap it if you'd like, and have it here for you."

He pulled out his billfold. Her eyes widened with something like surprise when he laid several big bills on the counter. Well, it *was* a lot of cash to be carrying. But credit cards could be trouble. None of the ones he had with him were in his name, but that didn't mean that someone with the right skills—and the right organization behind them—couldn't trace them to him eventually. He couldn't risk it.

He cleared his throat, surreptitiously wiped a damp palm on his coat. "That'd be perfect. Thank you."

“No problem.” She set his change and receipt on the counter. “What name can I put on it? In case I’m not here.”

Was that a hint of suspicion he detected? He pocketed the items, decided he was being paranoid.

“Connor Michaels,” he told her. If he felt uncomfortable about the lie, he ignored it. “Thanks, again, for your help. I’ll—well. I’ll see you later, won’t I?”

“Yes. See you later.” She smiled, drawing his attention to her lips. He knew them intimately. And yet her, hardly at all.

He couldn’t tell if she was being polite or if she looked forward to their next encounter. He couldn’t tell if he’d made any impact (other than financial) on her at all.

She used to be easier to read.

Or was he letting his concerns, his *feelings* cloud his view?

Aware that he lingered overlong, he forced a smile and made his way to the door.

It took him past Abby, in discussion with the customer by a table-top display of holiday items. Snow globes, stockings large enough for a full-grown ogre, ornate peppermint striped candles, and the like. She studied him far too intently.

He made a small nod in passing—his best attempt at appearing unexceptionable. Although he probably had “Big Spender” suspended above his head after that foolishness with the butterfly.

For which he would have to come back later. It was both a problem and a welcome opportunity: Another chance to interact with Thia. He stepped out of the store and onto the main, retail-centric street.

What to do next?

Given its reported population, Granite Springs boasted an astonishing number of coffee shops, including the one inside Eclectica. But he was so keyed up already, caffeine would be a mistake.

After so many weeks, to have spoken with her, to have

stood so close—and then that one, jolting contact. She had looked at him directly, and he, her. And she hadn't once appeared to suspect that, behind the lenses of his glasses, he had worn colored contacts.

Something pinged on the edges of his awareness. Something decidedly unfriendly. He scanned the area, saw nothing to account for it other than both Thia and her empathic friend watching him through the front window.

Minor and transient. He shrugged it off and began his walk to the hotel. Might as well take care of another bit of business sooner rather than later.

CHAPTER 2

Eclectica, Granite Springs 18 December

With the man no longer in view outside, Thia returned her attention to his purchase. It really was a lovely piece, with the body made of finely wrought silver and more holding the amazingly thin glass segments of its patterned wings. Carefully, she removed the price.

“Who was that?” Abby asked as she brought a customer up to the counter. Her tone was casual, but Thia had come to know her well enough to know there was more to the question than that.

“Someone new to town,” she replied as they smoothly exchanged places behind the register. “Connor Michaels. He bought a gift for a friend.”

“Oh, that’s gorgeous,” the customer said, eyeing the butterfly. Thia held it out for her to examine. “So delicate. And unusual.”

“Isn’t it?” Abby agreed and began to ring up the woman’s items. “Made locally. The artist has been working in stained glass for years, but only recently shifted from panels to standing figures. This is our last butterfly, but there are a few other examples in the case over there if you’d like to see.”

“Some other time,” the woman said with a longing glance at The Tower. “I’m supposed to meet my partner at

her work to sort out our gift lists. This should take care of a good bit of what's left on them. I hope." She indicated the three snow globes she'd selected. "There are boxes for them, right? They need to be shipped."

Before either Thia or Abby could answer, Lynette arrived with the butterfly's box. She quickly spotted the globes. "I'll get them for you," she volunteered, and left again.

Thia moved to an adjacent counter to work, only half-listening as Abby and her customer chatted. The butterfly's box was nice, she thought, but very basic...and it *was* a gift. An expensive one. She went over to the for-purchase papers. If memory served, there was one that—

There. She pulled out a sheet of soft cream patterned with richly colored butterflies and flowers. On another whim, she grabbed a spool of satin ribbon.

Back at the counter, she laid it out, began sizing it to the box.

"Mr. Michaels bought all that, too?" Abby had finished her transaction.

"No. But it goes so well." She took up a pair of scissors, sliced. "Plus it's an expensive item, and since he's a first time customer, we might as well be nice."

"Thia."

She stopped mid-tape, found Abby watching her with concern. Probably because Thia's cheeks were red. "What?"

"Did you feel it?"

Impossibly, she felt her blush increase. She must look like a tomato. "Attraction?"

Abby's violet eyes widened. "Goodness, no—wait. Are you saying you—"

"What feeling did you mean, then?" Thia put in quickly. Cleared her throat. "What did I miss?"

"Power. He was cloaking it, but it leaked through a few times. And there was something else, something...foreign." Abby frowned, shook her head. "You were attracted to him?"

"He had power?" Thia thought back, tried to feel now what she hadn't noticed in the moment. Tried not to feel discouraged when she couldn't.

Finished with the tape, she pulled out a length of ribbon, wound it around the box. "Maybe I mistook it. Maybe that's why he reminded me of Cormac."

Abby's profanity was no less shocking for being quiet. Luckily, it was Stefanie's day off, or else they'd be in for a smudging.

"*Reminded*, I said." Thia's hands stilled on the box, the ribbon half-tied. "His eyes were brown. Cormac can't change his eyes."

Abby rolled hers. "For crying out loud, Thia. He can wear colored contact lenses the same as anyone."

"He had glasses on. Connor—Mr. Michaels, I mean."

"Sure. The lenses would make it harder to tell. When is he supposed to come back? I don't want you to deal with him by yourself."

"He didn't say." She finished tying the ribbon, the satin smooth and cool. Calming, or at least it should have been. She pulled her hands away. "But even if he *is* Cormac—and it would be crazy to think that—he's not a danger to me. He wouldn't hurt me."

"He broke your heart," her friend said gently.

"No."

"Thia, come on. I know how you—"

"No," she repeated, cutting off the argument. On the other side of the window, a small group of pedestrians pointed at something inside before moving on.

She sighed, admitting, "I did that to myself."

"Bullshit. He led you to believe he had feelings for you. That's—"

"It doesn't matter now." She appreciated the anger on her behalf, but it didn't help. Nothing helped. "It's over. Once burned, twice shy and all that. When Mr. Michaels comes to pick this up, I'll try to see if he's wearing contacts."

She put the box beneath the counter and began cleaning up. There was still plenty of ribbon on the spool, so she set it aside to go back out.

What would she do if he *was* wearing contacts—ask him if he were the two-centuries-and-then-some half-Sidhe she'd met on a flight to London and, despite herself, had subsequently fallen for?

Refusing to put a more specific term to the emotion, she dropped the scraps of paper into the wastebasket and put the scissors and tape back beneath the counter. Wisely, Abby returned to the sales floor.

Thia had been told that Cormac had murdered Lettie. She had believed him to be responsible for an attack on her in a London alley, as well as a later one on the Brigantium that had killed many and left one man in a coma. And still she'd had to fight with herself over her feelings. Had she been in—rather, had she *fallen* even then? Or had it come later, at the Ring when he'd nearly sacrificed himself for her?

Could Connor Michaels be Cormac?

She took the spool of ribbon back to the display, heard the jingle of the bells on the door.

Did she want him to be?

The bells jingled again only to be drowned out by the high-pitched voices of several toddlers. To Thia's relief, she counted an accompanying adult for every child, making for a group total of six. Lynette had found something to do along their browsing trajectory, making herself available without being intrusive. Abby was back at the counter, handling another sale, and Thia considered whether this would be a good time to check online orders.

Why would Cormac be in disguise? It was ridiculous to think that he would be...or even that he would be here at all. What would he want?

Are you happy?

An incredible, shelf-rattling rumble started up outside, causing everyone to stop in their tracks and look to the

window. Thia and Abby came together near the door just as the unmistakable belch of a Harley Davidson sounded from somewhere up the block.

Not just one Harley, Thia realized, as the low rumble built to a mechanized roar. One rider after another zoomed down Main Street. Glossy paint, gleaming chrome, scuffed black leather—and more scruffy beards than she'd seen at one time since she'd left L. A.

Maybe they were just passing through.

Exhaust seeped past the door and she grimaced, covered her nose and mouth with her hand.

Gradually, the gang moved out of earshot. People who had stopped outside to watch the impromptu parade went on about their business. Thia turned away and was surprised to find the group with children gathered on the far side of the staircase, putting it between them and the door—or perhaps more specifically, the street. The two women each held a child in their arms while the man cradled the back of a little girl's head while she clung to his leg. There was more here than noise upset. There was fear.

"I was hoping they wouldn't be back," Abby said, still watching out the window.

"They've been before?"

Her friend nodded. "Every winter. You'd think the snow would be a problem, but it never seems to be. They hole up near Soda Mountain. Southeast of town," she explained off of Thia's frown. "There's a roadhouse. Used to be nice, a place for local bikers—motorized and pedal—to go during a weekend ride. Then, about five years ago, those guys showed up. The Rekkrs. They're good at it."

"What do they do?" Thia noted that the group with the kids was browsing again, looking more relaxed.

"In town, nothing much—just noise and an intimidating presence. Outside of town...." Abby shrugged. "It's best not to spend time in that part of the mountain. Not till spring, anyway. Unless you're the snow plow driver," she added with

an attempt at levity. It quickly failed. "Although I don't think even they go up there."

"How can they ride when the roads—never mind." Thia had better things to worry about. "If everything is under control here, I thought I'd go take care of today's shipments."

They looked over at the sound of infectious, little-boy laughter. Brought on, Thia saw, by Lynette's skilled use of a Jack Frost puppet.

"We'll be fine," Abby said. "Sometimes I think she could run the place by herself."

"As could you," Thia assured her, amused by the note of jealousy she'd detected.

"True."

Her mood improved, Thia headed toward the office. If she remembered correctly, there were only a few things to—

"Thia."

She stopped, turned back to Abby.

Who wasn't smiling at all. "If he is not Cormac, that's even more reason not to deal with him by yourself."

Thia felt dread creep through her bones.

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Landmark Hotel, Granite Springs

Cormac pushed open the main door and stepped into the bright warmth of the hotel lobby. It was an old building by American standards, but tastefully modernized. Art deco lines and furnishings, and a background palette of neutral, light colors. Beneath the proliferation of seasonal trappings were some quality oil paintings. Landscapes mostly, and probably local.

And done by the same artist, he decided a few moments later from the spot he had chosen in one of several seating areas that carved up the large, high-ceilinged space. Against the wall and to the left of the main doors (and the reception desk directly across from them), the plump sofa afforded the best view of the interior, and the out-of-the-way section had

only one other occupant. The others, set nearer the fireplace or windows, respectively, were much more popular. Guests conversed over cups of coffee or on their mobiles while others, like the gentleman across from him in one of two armchairs, read newspapers.

A cup of tea would be nice, caffeine be damned, Cormac decided and prepared to flag down one of the staff.

Before he could, Murphy appeared.

That hadn't taken long.

He forced himself to relax—or at least to appear so. Reminded himself that it wasn't for lack of trying that he hadn't been able to uphold his end of the bargain.

Murphy had an intimidating presence: Tall and broad-shouldered, he topped Cormac's natural height by a good half foot. In terms of power, he cloaked whatever he had so well that Cormac could only guess whether they were well matched there or not. Better to assume they were, or to credit Murphy with more to be on the safe side. In Cormac's experience, only people with a lot of power tried to hide it, and only those with great skill succeeded.

On approach, Murphy made the small, sweeping gesture of an elementary coercion spell. The crossword-puzzle man promptly stood and took himself to another chair in one of the crowded areas.

"Wondered when you'd get around to stopping by." Murphy sank into the vacated seat. His words carried a worn trace of Ireland. "Nice disguise you've got going there. Fool anyone with it?"

Cormac shrugged. "Well enough."

"Really." Murphy leaned back in a casual pose belied by the glint of power in his dark eyes. "So. Where is it, then?"

"I don't have it." Cormac braced for an explosion...of temper, of power—a literal explosion. Anything, really, on the scale of furious reactions. So he was unprepared when the other man merely nodded.

"I figured as much," Murphy said, "what with the dead-

line but two weeks away.”

A bargain made according to the Old Ways, upon pain of death.

Murphy had come through with his part; he had not interfered when Cormac first pursued Thia in Granite Springs. If only Cormac had thought to renegotiate on Samhain when Murphy and his mercenary forces had come to the rescue on Brodgar. Given the man’s history with Idris, he had doubtless relished the opportunity to help take him down. Since Cormac had been the one to invite Murphy’s aid, he should have made *that* the fulfillment of their deal in place of the Achill Bell.

But Cormac hadn’t been thinking clearly at the time. Idris and his people had taken over the Ring and surrounded it in Druid Fog, and Thia was being brought right to them. The Brigantium wouldn’t listen to reason and accept that it had been betrayed. There had been no one else to whom Cormac could turn. Beyond stopping his father, he hadn’t considered how else to make use of the situation.

A staff member walked by to refill someone’s coffee, and Cormac regretted not getting that tea. His throat was dry.

“I was hoping”—how he did loathe that word—“that we might adjust our deal.”

Murphy’s grin flashed. “I figured as much there as well.” He flicked a hand, no spell, a gesture only. “Let’s hear it, then. Not excuses, mind. Explanations.”

Fair enough. “I went to the stronghold after I—after I left Brodgar. Someone got there first and cleared out everything of value.”

“Anything you could trace?”

“Cleansed. Thoroughly.”

“That takes more than a passing skill.”

“It does.” Cormac leaned forward, set his arms on his knees. “Fortunately, I’ve encountered the like before.” And could almost guarantee who had been behind it.

Unfortunately, too, considering who that person was.

"The most recent was a few months back, when I was tracking the Stone."

Murphy's expression hardened. "Name."

"Cassandra." His recently-discovered half-sister, bent on revenge. If she was behind the clearing out of Fiend's Fell, it meant she had every piece of Idris's extensive arsenal. Every relic collected, every weapon, every spell.

"She'd have had to work fast," Murphy said. "You got there how long after leaving Innse Orc?"

The Old Irish name for the Orkneys. The mercenary's true roots were showing.

"A few hours." Cormac grimaced. "I—well, it took me some time to get my head straight."

The surprising hint of understanding in the other man's gaze was quickly masked. "So, she had a bit of time, then, but not much. Not enough, I should think, for all that."

That had been Cormac's conclusion as well. An undertaking of that scope would have taken days, not hours. "Idris may have intended to clear out after the ritual. If so, he'd have already made preparations."

"Or there could've been people left behind, able to assist when the *claimsech* arrived."

An unflattering term, but there was no arguing that Cassandra Swinton *wasn't* one.

"It's been weeks," Murphy went on. "Why not tell me straightaway?"

Because Cormac hadn't been able to think clearly. He had been reeling, trying to come to terms with having killed Idris and of finally being free. All while missing Thia to the point of obsession.

"I'm telling you now," he said.

Murphy's eyes narrowed, but he didn't press.

Cormac leaned back into the overstuffed cushions. "She swore revenge."

"That she did."

"Most of the primary players are here."

"And so here is where she'll likely to focus her efforts. That didn't escape me." A flick of his hand called attention to the leather cuff at his wrist. "I've been at this even longer than you, remember."

As if he could forget. Cormac's stomach clenched. He had witnessed a lot of horrors over the centuries, but that night....

Well. He'd been young, after all. Naturally it had affected him more.

"As far as I can tell, she's gone to ground," Murphy said. "I've let it be known I've an interest in her activities. So far, nothing."

Cormac nodded, grim. He'd not had any result on that front, either. But he had a gut feeling. "There is quite a lot of power here. More than when I visited before."

"Sure, there's been an upsurge, true enough." Murphy shrugged. "This time of year, there's nothing unusual in that. You've noticed, I'm sure, that the area is a bit of a gathering place."

"Hard to miss." And that would make it easy enough for anyone to slip in—not secretly, perhaps, but anonymously.

"If she *is* here," Cormac said, casually seizing the opportunity, "we can at least discuss a new time frame."

Murphy laughed, causing a few heads to turn. He flicked a hand and they turned back. "If she took the Bell, her being here would be convenient, wouldn't you say?"

"Goddamn it, I can't protect—" *Thia*, he'd almost said. Not while tracking down the bell. "Goddamn it."

"Language," Murphy chided. "But 'tis the season and all that so I'm feeling kindly. Talk to me again before the two weeks are up. And maybe—*maybe*—we can sort something out." He stood. "In the meantime, we've a few rooms open. Why don't you get yourself one. We do a lovely breakfast."

The glow of power in his eyes made it clear that he was not making a suggestion. He was making an order.

Cormac didn't have to take those anymore. "I'll think

about it.”

No need. He'd made a reservation days ago.

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Elkhorn Park, Granite Springs

They walked the uphill path in silence. Not that she would have permitted talk had the fool shown the inclination, but he was too busy fighting the compulsion she'd crafted.

She felt her mouth curve into a smile. Did he even realize where she was leading? He ought to appreciate it. The watcher she'd put on him had told her that, after the alley, it was his next most frequented place in town.

There was a particular bench where he would sit for hours, she'd been told. She had ruined a new pair of Saint Laurent boots scoping it out yesterday. "Wilderness trail with the occasional bench," was a more apt description than "park" at that point. But it would do well for privacy and, she was betting, the relaxation within him that would allow her spell to take complete hold.

Going by the surprisingly busy playground, she returned the bland smiles from two women ostensibly watching a child in a puffy pink jacket climb the wrong way up a slide. Acknowledging them would, as she'd learned over the past week, make her less memorable, not more. The people here were odd that way.

Which meant they would soon forget her but not the man walking several feet behind.

Such a strange town.

And a powerful one. Such a shame she hadn't the time to find out why.

The paved path changed to bark chips and she felt her annoyance flare again. She hadn't expected to need hiking gear in a bloody city park.

"Is it much farther?" came the voice behind her. She smiled at the strain in it. He'd wear himself out with all that internal fighting, perhaps even before they got to the bench.

She whirled on him, sent more power into the spell. Like pulling up on a choke chain. He flinched, dropped his gaze.

Good dog.

She walked on. Wood chips became half-frozen dirt and fallen leaves as the path wended its way closer to the stream. Creek, as it was called here. Rushing water drowned out any sound from behind, but she sensed when he lost the battle and resumed following. The spell allowed her a vague awareness of his location and, if she strengthened her hold, his intent.

It did not, however, tell her much else about him. She didn't know who he was or even his name—nor did she particularly care at this point. Who or whatever he had once been, he was now broken. The power he had was erratic, weak more often than it was strong, sometimes altogether absent.

She rounded a bend and left the main path for a thin track encroached upon by dead grasses and prickly shrubs. It ended at a small overlook with two benches. Bracketed by trees, they were utterly secluded.

She knew which of the two he always chose. When he arrived, she moved to stand in front of it. Pointed to the other.

"I prefer that one." He indicated the one she blocked. His gaze darted around hers. Held.

That was not how she intended for their relationship to proceed. Calling power to her hands, she formed a ball of white energy: *wanfýr*. Her irises as she did so, she knew, glowed amber.

The man paled. His gaze dropped to the ground.

Yet he persisted with a faint, "Please."

She yanked the invisible leash. He gasped, stumbled a step closer, and she extended her hand to put the *fýr* inches from his downturned face. At such a range, it could do as much damage as *wælfýr*.

"No. Please," he said again. He trembled.

"Sit." She moved the *fyr* so he could. Vanished it when he did as told—on the bench she had assigned. And then she took the one he'd wanted.

"You said you'd tell me about her."

Weak, he was, yet stubborn. She shrugged a shoulder. "So I did. And now that we're in no danger of being overheard, so I will." She sent a needling jab of energy his way. He flinched.

"Thia McDaniel," she said. "She inherited that quaint little shop you've been spending time behind. Employs that girl who leaves you treats."

"She feels like—" He stopped, shuddered. "Her power feels like the Cailleach's."

"Because it is. Thia stole it from my father after she murdered my brother."

He lifted his head, his blue eyes wide.

Cassandra smiled. "You thought she was an innocent?"

"She doesn't use it."

"The power?" Interesting. She increased the compulsion. "Doesn't—or can't?"

His eyes closed tight, his teeth gritting as he fought... and lost. "C-can't. *Can't* use it. She tries. Sometimes alone. Sometimes with others."

"But she fails?"

The man gave a start and looked toward the trail as if he'd heard something.

She hadn't. Nor did she sense anything, but she prepared to disguise herself, nevertheless. "Is someone coming?"

He was too agitated to answer.

The trouble with broken people was exactly that: They were broken. "What the hell is it?"

He made a small noise and then rubbed his temple. "I can't stay."

"You can." She pulled on the spell, forced him to sit when he attempted to rise. "You will."

"Please." He almost made eye contact.

Such a begging tone. Such need—and so strong and clear that she finally understood.

And knew just how to use it.

“It’s the power that has you in such a state, am I right? Her power?” She kept her voice soft. Caring. And fed him a lie. “You were doing better until she came back. Until Thia brought it back.”

He was breathing hard, pouring sweat. She could feel him not wanting to accept her suggestion, but he nodded.

She leaned in, compassion in her tone. Malice in her words. “Wouldn’t you like to do better again? Look at yourself. A near mindless, sniveling mess. Taking charity scraps left at rubbish bins.”

He mumbled something.

“What’s that, *wiel*?”

“N-n-not scraps,” he whispered, eyes squeezed tight as he revealed a new, deeper weakness—one far better than any compulsion spell. “A gift. A kindness.”

Cassie’s voice was equally soft as she leaned in, brought his head up with a finger below his chin. “*Like* her, do you? Your little muffin girl?”

He went absolutely still. His eyes opened.

She laughed. “How delightful.”

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He hated her, this smiling woman. But it also felt all mixed up in his head.

He knew that as if told to him from far away. He *knew* but could not sort it out. And she was in there now, pushing her will into him, confusing him with thoughts and emotions that he did not want to make his own. If she had tried this next year, he might have been able to fight her, but he had not yet recovered from his *caethiwed*. He should never have come into town.

Why had he? Ah, right—he had needed to stock up on supplies so he could avoid town till *Gwanwyn*. And look how

that had turned out.

Had it been a lure, the sudden presence of that familiar, terrible power? Had this woman been behind it? And what about that other one, the one who gave him food and coffee and made him think that she cared...maybe not for him in particular but in general. Kind-hearted. A kind-hearted woman. Had that been a trick?

He felt a mental jab.

This one, the one with seductive smiles and cold amber eyes wanted him to pay attention (as if he could not think and listen at the same time). He was not stupid. He had heard her say she wanted his help to rid the town of the woman with the power he feared. Thia McDaniel, she had said.

The Cailleach's power had *not* been a lure. And if this woman had not seen him behind the store and become curious, he would not be with her at this moment, fighting for control of his mind.

She had had him followed, she was telling him, taunting him with his carelessness. And rightly so. His gaze flicked up as far as her lips. Red and cruel. Smirking. He went back to staring at his boots. Splatters of different-colored paint made different patterns, depending on how he happened to see them. A falcon formed out of green and a streak of yellow. He blinked and saw instead a cartoonish dog in a pointed hat, the kind people wore to look silly at parties. Did they still do that? Wear those hats? He had not been to a party in a long time.

Sharp pain shot through his head, another bite of the beast.

It would be perfect, she said. It took him a moment to understand. (Maybe he had been wrong and he could *not* think and listen at the same time.)

Oh. His refuge. She had gone on to say how perfect it was, off the grid with high levels of protection already in place.

This wasn't about him, but about the home he'd made for himself.

She had no idea who he was.

He wanted to laugh nearly as much as he wanted to rage at her insolence, her audacity. Wanted to tear her apart for her malice and paint the trees with her blood. But this was his own fault. He should never have come into town or taken so long to decide what to do about the woman with the Cailleach's power.

Too slow. He had been too slow.

Slow to think, to decide. Slow to act.

Stupid. How many times had his half-brothers called him that? Yet he had always denied it, always fought back. But maybe they had been right after all.

Was that negative thought part of the compulsion? A side-effect of its beastly fangs digging deeper, ever deeper?

Or was it the godforsaken truth.

"Yes," he heard himself say. She wanted to make him nod, but he resisted. It took nearly everything he had, but he resisted. He would not—

He nodded.

And wanted to die. Or kill her.

Both? Both could work. He searched his boot for the image of the dog in the birthday hat but couldn't locate it. Had it been on the left or the right?

He cringed as the next words entered his mind and then burned his throat on their way out his mouth. "You and yours are welcome in my home," he said. It was little comfort that the lie sounded as forced as it was.

Even so, the woman beamed, the white of her teeth nearly blinding. "Excellent," she said, and smoothly crossed her long legs and stood. Her arm swept out, the manicured fingers of her hand unfolding like a fan as she directed him not back towards town but ahead, where the park trail ended at Elkhorn Road.

"Shall we?"

He was aware that he got to his feet, but it felt unreal. Consciousness had been pushed to a cramped, far away place. He had become trapped, imprisoned in his own mind. It was like before.

And also like before, his own carelessness—no, his own *stupidity*—was to blame.

CHAPTER 3

Eclectica, Granite Springs 18 December

Thia closed out the last register, put the day's deposit in the pouch. As she stepped back from the counter she caught sight of the wrapped gift on the shelf beneath. The man hadn't come back for it. She wasn't sure why that was such a disappointment. Well, no, that wasn't true. She knew but didn't want to admit it. She'd wanted to find out if he was Cormac, wanted to see him again even if he wasn't.

Maybe *especially* if he wasn't. It would be nice to think that she could feel that sort of spark, that sort of attraction for someone else.

It would be nice to think that her heart wasn't broken.

Bank deposit in hand, she turned out lights and went to double-check the front door locks.

Cormac had been so charming and she had been so damned attracted when they'd first met on that flight to London.

She frowned, considering. She'd had time to reflect on every event in that crazy, hectic time, and she had begun to wonder if they might have met the night before. There had been a man outside Lettie's home, and Thia had felt a strange pull—she wouldn't necessarily go so far as to call it attraction, but she *had* felt drawn to him. And, in the next

moment, she had been literally *drawn to him* when he had grabbed hold and tried to pull her over the picket fence.

If that had been Cormac in disguise, then he had been entirely un-charming their first meeting. He had, in fact, assaulted her.

She thought that their eyes might have been similar—that man's and Cormac's—but lighting and memory made it difficult to say for sure, and she hadn't had a chance to ask Cormac about it.

Not that she could trust him to tell the truth. He had misled (if not lied outright) to her more than a few times. For his benefit, mostly, but not always. It would be easier if she could think of him as entirely selfish. But one of his deceptions had led her to believe that she could pull out the knife that had been stabbed into his gut without risk to his life, and so she used it to cut the ropes that bound her legs.

But the powers that normally would have enabled him to heal had been taken from him. He could have bled to death—*would* have if he hadn't managed to get his powers back. He had put himself in grave danger for her.

And that hadn't been the first time.

Yet in the end, when the battle was over and there was the possibility of something between them, he had left.

She climbed the stairs to the café, found Abby chatting with Zoe, its manager and chief baker.

"Hey, Thia," the latter greeted on her way to the light switches behind the counter. She was small in stature, nearly a foot less than Thia's five-foot-eight, and prone to bright smiles and quick motions, the better to showcase her collection of Bakelite bracelets.

"You okay?" Abby looked at Thia with concern.

Her friend was frequently too perceptive—something that was referred to as both a gift and a curse.

Thia forced a smile. "Just thinking some things over. How did we do?" she asked Zoe.

"Great," the young woman replied, turning off overhead

lights. "We had a run on the new biscotti. I took advance orders for a dozen tomorrow." She tipped her head toward where the café's deposit pouch lay by Abby's elbow on the counter.

"Congratulations," Thia said. "I'm sorry I missed them." And she was, too. Zoe was a phenomenal baker.

"I had one when I came in," Abby said, taking up the deposit as she stood. "And it was all I could do not to go back for more."

"Thanks." Zoe laughed, held open the door. "It's the butter."

"The chocolate didn't hurt," Abby said, going outside.

"True."

Thia stepped past them into the patio. "Save me one tomorrow, would you? And I promise, I'll be on time."

"Like I care what time the boss gets in?" With another laugh, Zoe closed the door, got out her key. The wind ruffled her wispy, white-blond hair. "I'll set aside two."

"Thanks."

While Zoe locked up, Abby walked to the vine-covered arbor of the patio entrance and peered out. Being protective of the store's deposit pouches, or was it something more? Thia shoved the unsettling thought aside. Tried to, anyway, and went to join her.

"We're meeting Kendra at the Landmark for dinner," she told Zoe. "You're welcome to join us."

"Oh, thanks." Zoe dropped her key into her vintage clutch began walking toward them. "I'd love to, but I need to pick up a few things for tomorrow's menu. Plus all those biscotti to bake."

"You're sure?" Abby asked.

"Yeah. Regrettably." Zoe exited into the alley.

Quickly, Thia used the Sight to check that the wards were in place, shimmering just outside the fence. They weren't easy to see, being the weaker set. Since Eclectica depended upon a high level of traffic, two sets of wards were

used. A set of only basic protections, enough to keep out anyone intent on doing harm, was in place one hour before business hours until one hour after, when it switched to a much stronger set.

Cassie had been specifically warded against. No matter her intent, no matter the time, she couldn't get through.

"Have you ever seen our transient?" Zoe asked casually and closed the gate.

Concentration blown, Thia's enhanced vision winked out. "Who?"

"Our what?" Abby looked equally shocked.

"I think there's a guy taking shelter back here." Zoe pointed. "Behind the dumpsters."

Abby was already halfway there.

"No," Thia called, too late. "Don't—"

"He's not here," she announced, checking behind.

"Only in the mornings," Zoe said. "Really, I don't think it's a big deal. He seems harmless—not that I've actually seen him. I think he's too shy to come out."

Abby straightened. "We can't have someone—"

"I'm not even sure he exists. I shouldn't have said anything. It was just a feeling I've had lately...and the food I've been leaving there has been disappearing."

"Food?" Thia asked. "You've been leaving food?" If someone was sleeping behind the store, that was terrible and something needed to be done to help; but not by facilitating his presence.

And why there, anyway? When Granite Springs had several very nice shelters and just as many programs to help people get back on their feet, why had he chosen Eclectica?

"Just leftover food. Mostly." Zoe bit her lip.

It was an answer to Thia's spoken question and maybe the unspoken as well: He could have chosen Eclectica for its kind-hearted café manager.

"You need to stop that." Abby used a piece of the chalk she had pulled from her purse to write on the dumpster. "It's

not safe. If he's here tomorrow, you come get me and we'll deal with it. There are shelters. Programs," she said while she chalked. "I'm giving the address of a meals program."

Zoe let out an audible breath. "You're right. Of course you're right. I wasn't thinking. Obviously. I don't know, it just....Never mind. I'm so used to the Usuals"—a reference to the organized panhandlers that congregated along Main Street and by the Shakespeare Festival—"that I didn't see how this was different. I'm sorry."

Not for the first time Thia wondered if she and Abby weren't making a mistake by keeping Zoe out of the loop.

But, she had been relieved to learn, not everyone in Granite Springs practiced magic or understood that things like leyline travel and glamouring and warding and turning oneself into a raven (should one be descended from mythical beings) were possible. There were still people who thought as Thia had before her world got turned upside down and inside out. And, since she had yet to decide whether she'd have *preferred* that obliviousness, she hadn't pushed hard on the issue of destroying Zoe's.

"It was stupid," that young woman said.

"No," Thia argued, "it was kind. Transiency, if that's what is going on here, is a complicated issue. Especially here."

In a town where it could be so profitable.

"You'll be sure to let me know tomorrow," Abby said and in a rare gesture set her hand on Zoe's shoulder. "It'll be okay."

"I will. Thank you." She hugged Abby, gave Thia a smile before stepping away to begin backwards-walking down the alley. "And I *am* sorry to miss out on dinner. I'll be sure to make the next one."

Thia shook her keys to untangle them. "Wouldn't you like a ride?"

"No, no. I'm not far." Zoe gestured toward the next block up. "A friend on Pike lets me park in his driveway."

"You're sure?" Abby pointed to their two cars, her white

and black Mini Cooper beside the brown Datsun. "It's dark and cold and we're both right here."

Continuing to walk backward, Zoe grinned. "I'm two minutes away, tops. See you tomorrow!" She waved as she went around the corner, out of sight behind the B&B.

Something in Abby's expression gave Thia pause. "Are you sensing something? Should we go after her?"

With a small shake of her head, Abby turned toward the cars. "It's the same feeling I've had all day. Just a vague sense of *potential*, I guess is the word. Like a gathering storm."

That didn't sound good.

Thia unlocked the Datsun's driver's side door and, after getting in, leaned over to pull up the stiff passenger-side lock. "We can drive along Pike before going to the bank," she told Abby, opening the door.

"Sure."

Thia started the engine, adjusted the choke. "She'll be fine, though."

Abby got in. "Just two minutes away, she said."

Even so, Thia worried. She took the turn out of the alley too fast and then accelerated up the steep slope to Pike.

"Which way, do you think?" she asked, braking sharply at the stop. To the left was dark. Lights on the residential streets tended to be few and far between.

"There."

Thia looked right. Zoe was halfway down, heading up a steep drive to a single-story house. Thanks to the parking garage opposite—shared between the theater, hotel, and anyone willing to pay the hourly rate—the lighting was much better that direction. Thia turned the car.

When they drove past, Zoe had her car door open, and a glance in the side mirror a few moments later showed her getting inside. Thia felt tension leave her shoulders. Beside her, Abby blew out a quiet breath.

"To the bank," Thia said, and took a right toward Main. A staircase down to the Park lay behind and to the left while

the Festival straddled the street. It was odd to see the buildings dark and obviously empty after being packed with people and events for so many months, but its season had finally come to a close in November. The next would start soon enough in February.

"Kendra was hoping we could eat at the hotel," Abby said as they passed the building in question yet again. The front of it this time. "Something about needing to sample the proposed Solstice menu. Her treat—probably because it won't cost her anything."

Thia laughed. The Landmark's restaurant was world-class; being a guinea pig wouldn't be any kind of hardship. "I'd be more than happy. But what about you?"

"Kendra promised *he* won't be there."

When Abby used that tone, there was no question as to whom she referred: Murphy, the somewhat mysterious owner of the Landmark Hotel and thus Kendra's boss. For reasons never explained, she and Murphy did not get along, (often with disastrous results). Out of loyalty to her friend, Thia was inclined to lay the blame on Murphy, but since he had come to the rescue on Orkney, she was also inclined to cut him some slack.

●●●

Pike Street, Granite Springs

Zoe should have been more concerned that the interior light hadn't come on after she had opened the door. She should have at least glanced in the back seat before she had gotten behind the wheel. But she hadn't, and a hand came around to hold a sickly-sweet cloth over her mouth.

She tried to scream but couldn't. And then something—rope—dropped down from behind to wrap around her arms and chest, holding her in place. Shock and terror reached up to swallow her whole. She couldn't get enough air.

The passenger door opened and another arm shot past her to pull the key from the ignition.

She felt weird. Distant. Something was making her pass out. She fought it. If she lost consciousness, she knew, she might die. But it was so hard. Her vision wavered.

"Do we take the car?" The voice of the man holding her.

"No. Better to leave it." The woman at the passenger-side leaned down. Looked in. "We'll take *her*."

Everything was out of focus and swimming, everything except the white of the woman's smile.

Her eyes closing, Zoe again tried to scream.

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Landmark Hotel

With the whole of the rooftop garden behind him, Cormac leaned his arms on the top of the wall and contemplated the downtown strip below. The heavy, thermal-lined coat of his current disguise was protection enough against the cold of the plaster-covered brick, but it was the warming spells cleverly cast from numerous patio "heaters" placed throughout that kept the frigid night air at bay.

Granite Springs, he had to admit, didn't lack for charm. With yuletide greenery hung on the streetlamps and lights strung across buildings and draped on otherwise bare branches, with shop windows filled to bursting with colorful, well-intended offerings, it would be easy to fall under the its spell.

He considered his choice of words: charm, spell. Was that sort of magic at work here? Aside from the obvious draws (entertainment, scenery, dining) and the less obvious (common magical interests, leyline smuggling to name but a suspected few), was there a grand spell woven beneath it all to attract visitors and new residents alike?

The peaceful beauty of the snow-dusted foothills and the comfort that seemed to emanate from the surrounding mountains were things that couldn't be made entirely out of illusion, of course. But their effects could be augmented. Heightened. It would take an enormous amount of power,

doing something on such a large scale.

He was about to close his eyes and use a different kind of Sight when a shockingly loud, sputtering roar ripped through the night air like something let loose from the mechanized bowels of hell. And there, in the area called The Plaza, roughly twenty riders attempted to start their motor-bikes, with varying rates of success.

It took a minute or two, and by then the noise had gone from intolerable to worse.

With much bellowing and fist-waving, they twice circled the Plaza before speeding down Main Street. People on the pavements stopped to watch, and from what Cormac could see of their faces, reactions ranged from disgust to outright fear. He found himself in accord. Dark energy swirled around the gang. Whether the riders possessed it—and could therefore wield it—or merely carried it in bespelled weaponry or armor, he couldn't tell. But its presence was enough to give him a chill.

Nearly all the riders were men, and large men at that, but there were a few women (also large). And everyone, no matter the gender, wore a black leather jacket emblazoned with a simple graphic in silver: Thor's Hammer below the word, "Rekkrr."

Intentional misspellings were common enough in the realm of rowdy biker gangs, but with that particular pairing? Chances were slim to none. Which meant that was *not* a misspelling of the English word "wrecker," but the accepted modern spelling of the Old Norse for "warrior."

The insufferable roar dimmed to a low rumble as they left the area.

"Mr. Sykes?"

Pushing aside his unease, Cormac turned to face the hostess from the restaurant. He pitched his voice to the gruff baritone used when he made the reservation. "Yes?"

The young woman smiled politely. "Your table is ready. If you would please come with me?"

"Of course." After one last look at the taillights fading into the distance, he followed her inside.

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"Sorry, sorry. I'm late." An obviously frazzled Kendra took the stool next to Abby. "Pasquale changed his mind about being ready with the menu, so the tasting is off. *Again*, actually." Her hands fisted on the bar. "This is the third time he's pulled this."

Something like anger flashed—visibly—in her eyes, briefly turning them from mossy green to emerald.

Either Thia had failed to notice such things before her admittance "behind magic's curtain," as Madame Demetka put it, or her friends were more comfortable with letting them show in her presence.

"I'd call him out on it," Kendra continued with an impatient flick of long, coppery hair, "but we're lucky to have him. And if he throws a tantrum and quits this close to the Holidays...." She shuddered dramatically. "So, ladies, what's it to be? The Landmark's usual menu, or would you prefer somewhere else?"

"Doesn't matter to me," Thia said, which left Abby—who shrugged. "We're here. And *he* isn't."

Kendra laughed. "Okay, then. Here, it is."

Waving off their tab for two lavender sodas, she bid the bartender goodnight and led the way the lobby elevator. It sat empty and waiting, its doors conveniently (or perhaps magically) open.

"Things didn't go so well this morning?" Kendra asked as they sped smoothly to the top floor.

Thia sighed. She had managed to push all of that to the back of her mind. "Broke a bunch of jars, scattered stuff all over the floor. Thought I'd wrecked the door again, but it rattled along okay."

Her friends exchanged a look.

"That's not so bad, really," offered Kendra.

Thia snorted.

"No, no—I mean it. The door worked! That's a definite improvement."

"I could've imploded the whole damn garage!"

"You don't know that."

"The whole place was shaking," Thia said, incredulous. "I'm amazed the shelves didn't come down. I can't control the power."

Maybe she never would.

"Nonsense," Abby said.

Thia stepped up to the doors as the elevator slowed to an easy stop. She didn't want to get into this now. Her failures and inadequacies, how overwhelmed and disheartened she felt—these were not things to air in public. Or, possibly, even among friends. But whatever the case, tonight she wanted to relax. That wasn't too much to ask, was it?

She was the first out when the doors opened, and so led the way down the short hall to the restaurant. To the left of its entrance were doors to the garden and saltwater pool, and Thia caught a glimpse of twinkling lights and people out enjoying the evening before her attention went to exchanging greetings with the hostess at the podium.

Smiling serenely, the elegant blonde gave them all a bright smile.

"Hey, Sam." Kendra came up behind Thia. "I believe you're holding table seven."

"I am." She pulled three menus from a stack. "Want an escort?"

"No, I got this." Kendra took the offered menus and Thia and Abby followed her into the busy room. To take advantage of the daytime views, one of the long sides of the rectangular room was made of floor-to-ceiling glass (the other hosted the bar). Tonight it was all about the garden, dressed in what must have been a zillion tiny lights. It was like looking out on a fairy land.

The kind she once imagined, anyway, thanks to cartoons

and storybooks: all whimsical beauty and innocent fun. She had no idea what a real one might be like.

The table Kendra took them to was one of five set along the glass wall. As they settled, she handed out the menus. "Is this okay?"

"It's perfect."

Abby had yet to look away from the view. "How much is your electric bill?"

"Gorgeous, isn't it?" Kendra's pride was well-deserved. "We should take a walk later."

"Sure. But seriously—how much?"

Thia laughed. "Why, Abby? Are you thinking of trying this at home?" Her house sat on a fair amount of acreage in the mountains northeast of town. What she hadn't left as natural woodland, she had landscaped beautifully.

"Some of it, maybe. The coven might hold our Beltane gathering there this year. So, Kendra, please. How much?"

She shrugged. "More than November's. But we've got a bank of solar panels. And Murphy got a deal on some strings of bespelled crystal."

Thia was intrigued. "They glow on their own?"

"Kind of like solar."

Eclectica's customers would love something like that. "Which ones are those? Are they a lot of work to set up?"

"They're easier to spot when outside," Kendra said, sounding amused. "And, no, I think they're good to go out of the box. Don't bother asking your next question, because I don't know the name of the supplier. I'll have to get it from Murphy."

Thia tore her attention away from the window, found her friends both laughing silently at her expense. To Abby, she said, "Come on. You know they'd sell like crazy."

"They would." Abby broke into a grin. "Including to me."

Kendra's green eyes took on a teasing light. "I could call Murphy now and ask—"

"Don't you dare." Abby's smile vanished.

A waiter arrived and began filling glasses from a pitcher of ice water.

"Hey, Danny," Kendra greeted. "Everything going well?"

"Busy, but smooth so far," the young man replied. Ice pinged cheerfully. "Some really good tippers, too."

Kendra arched her brows. "We'll try not to disappoint."

"Oh, no, Ms. Ross, I didn't mean—"

"Don't worry about it," she said, laughing. She looked to the others. "Wine, ladies? Beer? Cocktails?"

They settled on a bottle of pinot grigio, and then were presented with the specials that included an unusual white salmon. While Danny described the preparation, Thia's found her gaze drawn to a man seated across the room, near the entrance. Alone. For a moment, she thought he might have been watching them—and that it was the same man from the morning.

She was wrong on both counts. His focus was entirely on his meal; and while he and Connor Michaels shared a similar build, this man was older and had salt and pepper hair.

She looked away before he noticed her staring, in time for Danny's departure.

Kendra leaned back in her chair, fixed Abby with an interested look. "I thought you and Murphy were doing better. You managed an entire transatlantic flight without incident."

"I was feeling generous."

Thia took a drink of water, then: "And that generosity has worn off?"

Abby shrugged and took a drink of her own.

Danny returned with their wine, pulled the cork with a skilled flourish, and poured Kendra a taste. She swirled it in the glass, sniffed. Sipped. Nodded. And Danny poured into three trendily oversized glasses.

Thia's gaze drifted across the room again. The man took up his knife to slice a bite of steak. Was there something familiar about his hands?

She couldn't seem to stop looking for things that simply weren't there. It was almost cruel, what she was doing to herself.

Danny's voice cut through her muddled thoughts. "Have you decided on your selections or do you need more time?"

She hadn't given them any thought at all, but she didn't need to. "I'll have the fried chicken," she said in turn. Her usual.

Not that there weren't other tempting entrees, but she was a sucker for the accompanying mashed potatoes and green beans.

After Danny left, Abby passed around a basket of warm rosemary bread. "For tonight, Thia, I thought we would try a few focusing exercises. There's one that—"

"Is that really the problem, though?" she interrupted, a rush of nerves threatening her appetite. "It wasn't like my mind wandered or anything until things started breaking. I let go of my focus because I had to. Everything was falling apart."

"And you got scared."

"Of course! Who wouldn't?"

"You thought you were losing control—so you did." That, from Kendra.

"Huh?"

"Before you started," Abby asked, "were you worried about losing control?"

As Thia thought back, her gaze drifted again to the lone man as he accepted his check. He said something to make the server laugh as he put cash into the payment folio, and then handed it back with a charming smile.

"Probably," she said at last and located her wine glass for a much-welcome drink. Swallowing, she cringed at her friends' knowing expressions. "Okay, I was. You know I was. I always am."

"And so you always do," Kendra said gently.

She blew out a resigned breath. "What are you saying?"

"The problem might not be the power." Abby's violet eyes were dark with concern. "The problem might be you."

And didn't that make it all worse.

"What am I supposed to do about *me*? I can't not be afraid." She set her glass down clumsily. "I've seen what the power inside me can do—just *some* of it—and it's terrifying. I can't just snap my fingers and have that knowledge disappear. I can't meditate it away. I'm scared, plain and simple. I can't fix that."

She looked over, met the man's gaze. He *was* familiar, she realized. Not just his hands, but his whole bearing. His whole *being*. Her vision tunneled. The rest of the room fell away.

"What is it?" Abby turned in her seat. Her voice seemed to come from a greater distance than that. "Dammit."

"What?" Kendra's voice was no closer.

The man stood and turned to leave. With his table so close to the entrance, it wouldn't be long before he reached it.

Abruptly, Thia's senses cleared. Sound rushed in and the whole room snapped into sharp focus.

"It's nothing," she said, sorry to have gotten her friends worked up. "I think I must be hungry, that's all."

She forced herself to look away from the man. "I got light-headed or something."

"Or something' is right," Abby said, and pointed. "Is *he* what's had more than half your attention since we got here?"

That was certainly an exaggeration. "I only noticed him when—"

"Power," Kendra said, staring after the man. "He's masking. A lot, if he's bothering to do it in here." She frowned. "And he's using a glamour."

"You're sure?" Abby fairly vibrated with tension, like a hunting dog on point.

The man stepped into the hall, out of sight.

"Yeah." Kendra stood, flung her napkin on the table as

she moved off. "That's a glamour, alright."

Thia stood as well. "What are you doing? You're not going after him. Kendra?" But she was already halfway to the exit. Abby pushed her chair back, sprang to her feet. "Abby?"

"Stay here." Her friends passed a startled Danny as he approached with their meals.

"We'll be right back," Thia told him and joined the chase. "I think."

She hoped.

CHAPTER 4

Landmark Hotel, Granite Springs 18 December

“Excuse me. Sorry,” Thia said, narrowly avoiding a woman who was also leaving, but at a much more reasonable pace.

“No, no—*I’m* sorry.” Without turning, the slim woman stepped aside. She had dark hair, simply pulled back, and a cell phone held to her ear. She sounded British.

Thia managed to catch up to her friends at the elevator. The call button was illuminated and the digital indicator detailed the car’s descent. Presumably, the man rode inside. Kendra was on her cell while Abby closed the door to the adjacent stairs, apparently deciding against using them.

Mindful of the phone call, Thia mouthed a silent, “What is going on?”

To which Abby shook her head in a “not now.”

Thia forced down a swell of frustration. Yes, she had only a fraction of the knowledge her friends did when it came to a lot of things lately, but she was sick of being left out of the damn loop. And this loop in particular felt like a mistake.

“About six-two, one-seventy,” Kendra said to whoever was on the other end of her call. “Graying hair, slicked back. Dark three-piece suit with a candy-cane striped tie. Yeah, red and white.” She paused, listened. Then, “Really? No, just

watch him. I'll handle it."

Thia noted the flashing number above the door stayed at seven for several seconds before counting back up.

Reversing course—which she was suddenly convinced they should do as well. Forget whatever it was they were doing and return to the restaurant.

"All he did was eat dinner."

Abby shook her head. "He's hiding his identity. And his power. We need to know if he's a threat. If he is, then we need to put a stop to it."

Jesus. Talk about *threat*. Things were on a fast track to getting out of hand, and for nothing more than her friends' protective instincts had been triggered.

"He's probably Cormac." There. She should have said it sooner.

Except Abby didn't seem at all surprised. "Yeah?" she asked sharply. "And what if he isn't?"

Thia didn't have an answer for that. Hadn't considered, really, that they were chasing after anyone else.

Abby cast a quick look toward Kendra, still on her phone, before leaning in to say quietly, "First the guy this morning, and now this one. It could be a coincidence, or it could be part of something. But even if both *are* Cormac, I wouldn't trust him any farther than I can throw him, and I doubt that's very far at all. So I intend to find out what he's up to, no matter who that *he* is."

The elevator chimed its arrival, and Kendra and Abby darted in as soon as the doors allowed—and then blocked Thia's way.

Exasperation became something more like anger.

"If you won't let me," she said, her jaw tight, "I'll just go after." She pointed up at the digital display.

Kendra moved aside.

Thia entered. "Thank you."

Abby reached over to punch the button for the seventh floor and then repeatedly hit "close" for doors that already

were doing so.

"Whoever he is, he's a guest," Kendra said, taking a quick break from her call. "He wouldn't have access to the seventh floor if he wasn't registered. What's that?" she asked into her phone. "Still got him?"

The elevator began to slow, and Abby moved in front of Thia. "Let us go first," she said. "Or better yet, stay here."

"I'm coming." But she wouldn't bother arguing the other.

Abby's demeanor softened. "Have you considered that you're projecting?" she asked quietly. "That maybe you're seeing Cormac in places and people because you *want* him to be there?"

"Of course I have."

She was about to add that she wasn't an idiot...but when it came to Cormac, that wasn't true.

"Which room?" Kendra asked into her phone as the elevator settled. Chimed. "Great. Thanks, I'll—"

The doors opened. Murphy stood waiting. For the elevator? No, Thia decided. For them.

Taking advantage of *their* surprise, he stepped inside, reached past a furious-looking Abby to push the button for the top floor.

She closed what little distance remained to get in his face. "Hey, we're not—"

He put his back to her to speak with Kendra. "Security told me you've taken a particular interest in one of our guests."

"We have," she agreed. "Who is he?"

"An acquaintance."

She crossed her arms. Glared. "I can get his name from registration."

Murphy's expression hardened. "You can."

With Abby seething behind him, he and Kendra engaged in a furious staring contest that had Thia easing herself toward the back corner, as far from them as space allowed.

Abruptly, Kendra's shoulders sagged. "I could, but it

won't do me any good. It's a fake?"

Murphy merely lifted a brow.

"Dammit, this is important." She crowded in, pulled the emergency-stop button on the control panel to bring about an abrupt halt. "A matter of Thia's safety beats whatever deal you've made with—"

At the mention of her name, he turned, found her there in the corner. He nodded in greeting. "Thia."

Nonplussed, she nodded in return. "Mr. Murphy."

"Ah, such formality." In a playfully theatrical gesture, he pressed a hand over his heart. His smile flashed with surprising charm. "Wound me, you do."

Abby inserted herself between them. "For goddess sake, is everything a joke to you?"

The energy level in the small space shot up so fast that Thia's head swam. Lights flickered as the car began to shake, and she recalled some of the words used to describe what tended to happen when those two got together. Words like volatile, explosive.

Really, really not good words.

"Hold it down, Abs," Kendra said softly.

"About this guest now, Thia," Murphy said as if nothing of interest was going on around him. "Are you thinking he's a threat to you and yours?"

Considering, she looked from one friend to the other. She knew what they thought she should say, how they thought she should feel. But she couldn't lie.

"No," she said. "I'm not."

"Thia." Abby sounded like she was chewing nails.

But at least the elevator stopped shaking.

"What did he do that should worry me?" Thia asked. "He reminded me of someone, that's all. Someone who has no reason to mean me any harm. Someone, remember, who saved my life—several times over."

"And if he isn't Cormac, what then?" Abby asked. "He's someone who is hiding who or what he is. Why? Maybe he's

a harmless spy the Brigantium sent to check up on you, but he might just as well be working with that bitch Cassie to—”

“What he *is*,” Murphy said smoothly, “is a guest in this fine establishment. A guest, mind, who is entitled through very explicit and legally binding terms to privacy as well as anonymity.” He honed in on Kendra, his veneer of charm slipping to reveal something cold and fierce.

“Should one such guest,” he went on, “be run down by a high-ranking hotel employee and her friends, for example, or perhaps accosted at his or her room and subjected to questions and accusations without tenable cause, then the consequences of that hotel employee’s actions—and those of her friends—would be dire. Disastrous, in fact, to that employee’s career. And quite out of my hands.”

By the time he’d finished, Kendra had gone white. “Oh, God. I didn’t—”

—think. Aye, so I’d figured.” Murphy reset the button, and the elevator resumed its upward journey.

“If you hadn’t....” Kendra closed her eyes. When they opened a second later, she seemed calmer. More composed. “Did security call you because of us—*me*—and what I was doing, or because they already had orders where he was concerned?”

He smiled. “Yes.”

“So we weren’t the first to take a ‘particular interest?’”

“Safe to say.”

Abby stepped forward again, thrust an accusing finger at his chest. “And you didn’t want us messing up whatever it is you’ve got going, right? Whatever deal you’ve made is more important than—”

Kendra laid a hand on Abby’s arm. “Stop. I screwed up, Abs. He’s right, what he said. We enter a contractual bargain with every guest. What I was doing—what I would have gone on to do would have been in breach of that.”

The elevator arrived at the roof. The doors opened.

“Enjoy the rest of your evening, ladies.” Murphy shifted

so as to allow them to pass.

“What? You expect us to just—”

“Time to go.” Thia snagged Abby’s arm on the way out, and with Kendra taking hold of the other, they moved their friend along.

Kendra gave her boss a backward glance. “Particular interest, you said?”

The door began to close. He blocked it with a firm hand, exposing the leather cuff around his wrist. “Were I you, I’d focus my concern elsewhere. Should our man on Seven do anything *tenable*, shall we say, it will not escape notice.”

Abby tugged free, turned. “And you’ll tell us?”

Murphy removed his hand from the door, inclined his head. “As you wish. *Abigail*.”

The door closed on what might have been a smirk.

“Boss? Is everything alright?”

They turned as Danny hurried out from the restaurant.

“Yes, thank you. It’s fine.” Kendra sounded as stricken as she looked.

The waiter, no fool he, didn’t seem reassured. “I didn’t know—that is, I had your food taken back to the kitchen to be kept warm. Should I bring it to your table?”

Thia couldn’t imagine sitting down to dinner after all that. Not here, anyway.

Nor, apparently, could the others.

“My place?” Abby suggested.

It would mean a bit of a drive, but maybe that was a good thing. Put some distance between them and whoever that man was.

“Sure,” Thia said. “Sounds good.”

Kendra made the decision unanimous. “Box it all up, please, Danny—and put it on my account. Thank you.” Her smile was shaky but wry. “I think you’ll be pleased with the tip.”

Moments Earlier

"Meriwether here."

The cellular connection was not the best. Slowing her pace, Edith wove together a clarity spell in her mind, then snapped her fingers beside the phone held to her ear. The static cleared. "Bea, it's Edith Wilkinson."

"I know, dear. Caller I. D."

Edith cringed. "Of course."

She sensed a rushed presence come up behind her a split second before—

"Excuse me, I'm sorry," said the woman, going by as Edith stepped aside.

"No, no, I'm sorry," she said—to none other than Thia McDaniel, leaving the restaurant for the hall.

Bloody hell. She should have tried to disguise her voice. Made it more American, at least. Then again, this was a hotel in a town geared for tourism; hers couldn't be the only English voice around.

"Who was that?" Beatrice asked through the phone.

Edith put herself close to the wall and ducked behind a topiary trimmed in festive silver bows and tiny lights before she answered. "Thia McDaniel."

"Is she gone now? Did she suspect anything?"

The woman in question joined the two at the lift. They were clearly concerned about something, but it hadn't to do with *her*; Edith decided with a measure of relief. None of them looked her way. "No. I don't think so."

"Good. See that she doesn't. We want her safe. We want to know what she does. We do *not* want her feeling smothered."

"I understand." She'd been told it often enough, hadn't she? *Of course* she understood. But it was harder to do than she'd anticipated, blending into the sidelines of someone's life, watching her and those around her without drawing notice.

The three women hurried into the lift, and Edith waited

for the doors to close.

"You weren't scheduled to report till later," Beatrice said. "What's happened?"

"Today there was a man in her store." Edith left her impromptu blind to approach the lift. She needed to see what floor the women wanted. "And tonight, she and her friends are chasing after—well, I think it's the same man. Only different."

In the pronounced silence that followed, the display counted down the lift's progress.

"Explain," Beatrice said at last. And something in her tone gave Edith chills.

●●●

Tributary Road, Granite Springs

It was easy to get caught up in one's internal craziness when there wasn't much to see but silhouettes of trees against a moonlit sky and road reflectors brought to momentary life by headlights. When one's companion was not inclined to talk, either, it was inevitable.

After they'd collected their boxed dinners, Thia had driven Abby back to Eclectica so they could switch cars. It had seemed a lot of bother, but now she saw the merit. Given how scattered her thoughts had become, she was glad she wasn't the one behind the wheel. On this road especially, lack of focus could be deadly.

"Do you think that was him?" Abby asked, breaking the silence as she held the Mini to a long, tight curve.

The clutching of Thia's stomach might have had to do with how close the steep drop-off was and the absence of safety barricades, but she had driven this road countless times since November. (What better place to try to get a handle on her new powers than Abby's isolated property?)

She fidgeted, careful not to kick the bag of carry-out boxes by her feet. "I'm really not sure."

Abby's gaze flicked her way, then back to the curve. "You

sure you're not sure?"

"For a moment, I was. Sure that he was Cormac, I mean. But now?" She sighed. "I'm too confused."

"Twice in one day."

"My being confused? More like hundreds of times. Today and yesterday. And the day bef—"

"Two men, I meant," Abby cut in, unamused. She steered into a brief straightaway. "Two men that caught your *attention*, so to speak."

"Oh." Thia cleared her throat. "Yes, well. That's true."

"Both could have been Cormac."

"But why would they have been?" Uncomfortable, she tugged at the belt across her chest. "Why would he come to town in disguise—well, okay I can understand that. Maybe. Beatrice told me he has something of a checkered past." No surprise there. "But to not tell me who he was? To pretend he doesn't know me? Why would he do *that*?"

The possibility not only hurt, it infuriated. Because she couldn't see it as anything but some sort of game. Or worse, a prank. Was he laughing at her?

The passenger-side mirror caught the lights of Kendra's Audi, following so she could return to town on her own later.

"If it *is* him," Thia said, tugging again on the belt, "he's going to be sorry. He can't just come here, make a fool of me by pretending to be other people, and expect me to...." Words failed as her anger abruptly dropped.

Expect her to *what*, exactly?

She had no idea. No idea what he might think she would do. What he might want from her.

She remembered all too clearly what *she* had wanted from him, though.

Everything.

And the intensity of that had pushed her toward a line that she'd had to draw: The line between wanting everything but being desperate enough—needy enough—to settle for anything.

Such as a five-minute-or-less anonymous exchange in Eclectica. Or a two-second gaze held across a restaurant.

It was awful how much she missed him.

"Maybe he does have good reason," Abby offered quietly. "Goddess knows I'm no fan of his. And you know I think you would be better off if he stayed out of your life. But I suppose it's vaguely possible that he's thinking of your safety, trying not to attract attention your way."

"Then why come here at all?"

When no answer followed, Thia realized Abby's focus was divided between the road ahead and the rearview mirror.

"Abby?"

"Someone's back there. Behind Kendra."

Thia twisted to look. The headlights—the annoying, super-bright kind—were easy to spot.

"Following?" Thia asked. "Or just going the same way?"

This was the main road through these mountains, and a long one at that. Anyone could be using it, and for any number of perfectly innocent reasons.

Still, Thia worried. And Abby hadn't responded.

"Maybe it's Cormac," Thia tried. He had followed her before, when Matt and Cassie were driving her to what they had planned to be her sacrificial death.

Maybe it was Cassie, come to make good on her promise of revenge. Thia fumbled for her cell phone. "Should I call Kendra, let her know about the car?"

It was, in retrospect, a really stupid question. *Of course* Kendra was aware of the situation. She'd probably noticed those damn xenon headlights before Abby had.

While they had never spoken about it, Thia suspected there was military in Kendra's past. She wielded all manner of weaponry as if she'd been born to it and was equally adept in hand-to-hand maneuvers—as revealed recently when she had tried to acquaint Thia with self-defense that went beyond the basic "shout and run" Thia had relied upon (with

varying levels of success).

"I wonder if I should turn off," Abby said with a glance at the mirror. "Or slow down, see if they pass. But that could be what they want."

Thia had her phone in hand. "I could ask Kendra."

Abby's lips compressed into a tight line as she increased speed. "Yeah. Do it."

Again looking back, Thia dialed.

Kendra picked up immediately—thanks, probably, to her new car's fancy hands-free. "I see it."

Thia put her on speaker.

"What should we do?" Abby asked. "Try to make them pass, or—"

"That might be what they want."

"Mm. I wondered about that." Abby accelerated out of a horseshoe curve. "So, what—"

"I can't get a read into it at all," Kendra spoke over her. "It's warded. Typical Brigantium stuff, but that doesn't tell us much anymore." Cassie and a fair number of Idris's followers had been members. Much of what they'd have or do would read the same.

Thia hadn't considered using her Sight. Something like that should have been instinctive.

Her instincts were crap.

She used it now, saw the faint sheen of protective magic around the car. How Kendra could associate any particular qualities Thia had no idea. She could no more differentiate one soap bubble surface from another.

"We should continue on, right?" Abby was asking. "They probably already know where I live, so that's no matter. And we can better defend ourselves."

"That's my take as well," Kendra said. "But we should push it. They're gaining."

Abby stepped on the gas and they whipped around a turn. Thia quickly faced forward, felt her eyes go wide as Abby immediately cranked the wheel the other way. They

zoomed past one of those squiggly-arrow road signs.

As the Mini continued to zig-zag, Thia took hold of the handle overhead. This was Abby's daily commute. She must be familiar with every bit. Maybe this was her normal speed when she didn't have passenger anxiety to consider.

Yet Thia couldn't help the noise she made when a sharp curve taken too fast bumped her into the door's hard plastic paneling despite her braced hold.

"Almost home," Abby said, her gaze locked on the road ahead. Her knuckles stood out from gripping hard. "Nothing to it."

Right, Thia thought, but kept it to herself.

Kendra's headlights moved in and out of view in the side mirror. She'd dropped back a little, likely not as comfortable with the speed. The other car had fallen back considerably.

"What the hell?" Abby's shocked question yanked Thia's attention ahead. A string of single headlights wove toward them in the oncoming lane. The rumble of engines became audible, then quickly increased to a roar as motorcycle after motorcycle zoomed past.

"Good grief." Thia shielded her eyes against the strobing glare. There had to be at least thirty. "Are these the same guys from town?"

They had to be, right? But she hadn't realized the gang was that big.

"Assholes," Abby grumbled when several flashed their brights. When several more attempted to crowd the Mini against the guard rail, her language worsened.

And then they were gone, the red of their rear lights snaking on down the road.

Thia blew out a breath, relieved despite the car that continued to follow. "That was crazy," she said, then noticed the road sign ahead. Her hand reclaimed its overhead hold.

"Here we go," Abby said, and then began murmuring under her breath. Amidst the slide and pinging crunch of dirt and gravel, she forced a tight turn onto her property's

unpaved drive.

Momentum and the confusing whirl of tree trunks and road reflectors proved to be too much. Thia shut her eyes, waited until the car straightened before opening them again.

Complete darkness.

She jerked upright, the seatbelt digging painfully. She couldn't see anything. How could Abby?

"Where are the headlights?" she asked, panicked. Why didn't Abby stop?

"I did a night vision spell."

That explanation could have come earlier, Thia thought, and then noticed the absence of light behind. "Kendra too?"

"I assume so," Abby said. "She's back there...and clear of the gate." She pressed a remote that had been affixed to the dash.

Thia looked back and again used her Sight. The faint flicker of the wards reassured, and against them she could just make out the silhouettes of Kendra's car and Abby's steel gate. She faced forward again, tried to trust that her friend really could see where she was driving.

Of course, with the right skills or even just the right tools, any wards could be broken. Nothing was guaranteed, she was coming to learn. In magic, especially.

It was why, she supposed, those with the most power often sought to gain more, and why Idris Cathmor had never been—nor would he ever have been—satisfied. And why his twin son and daughter had joined his terrible scheme.

What of his other son, though? Was Cormac driven by that same need? He'd gained a great deal, thanks to Thia, when he'd siphoned some of the power that had been forcing its way into her.

She had sensed at the time that she couldn't handle all of it, that it would tear her apart, and had instinctively felt that Cormac had saved her by doing what he did. Yet by her own admission only moments ago, her instincts might well be crap. Had she been mistaken about his motives? Had he

acted out of self-interest after all?

In that case—and assuming first that he *was* in Granite Springs—was it because he sought to take the rest of the Cailleach's powers from her?

Abby pulled onto a narrow, sloping track that wove through a stand of native fir. Her single-story ranch house and extensive gardens lay ahead, while the other drive led to the ramshackle barn used for her various craft projects.

Craft, not as in needlepoint or macrame but as in witch.

If Thia could be assured that she would survive, should she consider letting Cormac take all her powers?

Mine.

Something fierce and possessive shivered through her bones, momentarily robbing her of breath.

She had felt it come over her before, when she had first taken up the Stone, thinking it a gift from Lettie. Nearly a week before she had inadvertently misdirected Idris's ritual.

Had the powers claimed her even then?

Abby stopped the car, set the parking brake. "I think we lost them back on the main road, but we should hurry just in case." She was out of the car and on her way to the front porch before Thia had recovered wits enough to undo her seat-belt.