

The Gathering

DARKNESS



Lisa Collicutt



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"I haven't read many books about witchcraft or witches, but I loved - LOVED! - the take on witchcraft in 'THE GATHERING DARKNESS.'" - [Jessa Russo](#)

1. [Start Reading](#)
2. [About the Author](#)
3. [Acknowledgments](#)
4. [Copyright](#)
5. [More Books](#)
6. [Full Table of Contents](#)

“Those who don’t believe in magic will never find it”- Roald Dahl

Robyn Blackham and Samantha Nauss, I heart you both. This one’s for you, girls.



Chapter One

Beyond the village rooftops, they stared back at me. Cold, iron likenesses of ravens, strewn across the dormer peaks of the Ravenwyck Inn—a place straight from nightmares.

I hated Deadwich. Dark nights terrified me.

An icy chill swept across my shoulders. I shuddered and dropped my bags onto the porch floor. Mom and Dad had unloaded the rest of my belongings from their SUV and were now headed up the steps.

“Mom, please don’t make me stay here,” I whined as she walked past.

“Brooke, I’m not having this discussion with you again this morning.”

“But, Mom—”

She stopped in front of the red screen door of her sister’s cape house, turned and looked at me sternly. “You’ve protested this move all summer, and you almost had me convinced until last night. Getting picked up by the police for drinking at sixteen is the last straw.”

“But Luke had the beer, not me.”

“It’s one thing after another with you, Brooke. Your father and I think spending a year away from the city will be good for you.” Her voice lowered. “Now shush, or you’ll hurt Aunt Rachel and Uncle Jim’s feelings.”

In a last desperate plea for help, I flicked my eyes to Dad. He wasn’t paying any attention to us.

It was no use. I was a gazillion miles north of Boston, about to begin my junior year with my cousin and not my friends. But worst of all, the nightmares would return as they always did when I slept in Deadwich.

The scent of cinnamon and freshly brewed coffee did nothing to alter my dark mood as the front door flew open. Aunt Rachel greeted me with open arms. I gave her a fake smile and let her hug me. When she let go, Uncle Jim scooped me up in his arms. After the greetings, we followed Aunt Rachel into the yellow painted kitchen. The whole scene was too cheerful for me, so I headed back outside and slumped into the porch swing.

As I answered a text beep, a sharp caw made me drop my cell phone into my lap. I jerked my head toward the disturbance. An enormous black bird circled above before landing in the large oak in the front yard. With a fringe of ruffled feathers around its neck and glossy plumage tinged blue, it was the biggest crow I’d ever seen. It tilted its head and eyed me curiously. Then with a whooshing sound, it flew off, but not before leaving behind an offering. I watched as a black downy feather zigzagged through the air and made its way under the porch roof, coming dangerously close to tickling the end of my nose or its way to my lap. A twinge of fear wedged itself deep inside me, accompanying the gloom.

I tried shaking off the grim feeling by scrolling through pictures I had taken of my friends the previous night. There was Luke with his arm around me, holding that beer—the beer I blamed my fate on.

The sound of gravel crunching caught my attention. I wiped away a tear and looked up to see a girl I barely recognized coming up Aunt Rachel’s walkway.

“Hi, Brooke,” she said with a smile in her voice.

My cousin Sammy had dyed her hair since I’d seen her last. She’d gone from a natural wavy brunette like me, to unnaturally straight and Gwen Stephanie-blond, with a new set of straight bangs resting on her eyelids. I was impressed.

I forced a smile. “Hey, Sammy. How’s it going?”

Her blue eyes widened as they fell to my fingers, where I absentmindedly twirled the feather. “What

is that?"

I held it out and gave a sharp laugh. "A welcome gift from a crow."

"Ew, crows are bad luck. Throw it away."

How could my luck get any worse, I thought to myself, but tossed the feather over the railing anyway.

Her scrunched up expression morphed into an impish grin. "So, I hear you got caught drinking last night and ended up in jail."

"News travels fast in the country."

She was all grins, waiting for the dirt.

I rolled my eyes and sat up from slouching. "It was just a beer, and Luke was holding it, not me. The cops took us to the station when we wouldn't tell them where we got it, and my parents came shortly after. Now I'm stuck here for the rest of my life."

"It won't be so bad." Sammy leaned back on her elbows against the railing. "Deadwich is a happening place, and there are hardly any cops around. Oh, and there's a party next weekend on Skull Island." As she said it, she looked thoughtfully down the street towards the ocean.

"Skull Island? Are you kidding me?" Didn't sound like the kind of place I wanted to hang out, especially when there was a sale on designer clothing back in Boston that weekend. "Is it shaped like a skull or something?" I asked not out of curiosity, but for lack of something else to say.

"No. There's a legend that says two lovers were murdered out there, like a hundred years or more ago and—"

"Murdered?" *Great, a nature party with murdered lovers*. Not my idea of a fun time.

"Yeah, and some people believe their skeletons are still out there somewhere. Their bodies were never found. But like I said, it was ages ago."

She talked about it as casually as if she was describing the local playground to me. I finally blinked and tried not to look so shocked.

"It's a day-time party right?" *Please say yes*.

"Nope. It's an all-nighter, actually."

"And you're allowed to go?" My eyes widened with curiosity behind the hair that blew across my face. I flicked it back and glared at Sammy.

"Not exactly. I tell Mom I'm staying overnight at Robyn's and she says she's staying here." Her grin widened, exposing perfect white teeth and no braces.

Okay, enough of Skull Island. I had to change the subject. "So, how hard is working at the Inn?"

As I said it, a chill crept up the back of my neck. The after-school job, which Sammy had gotten me, was something else I wasn't looking forward to.

"It's not hard at all; we just make beds and fold laundry, then we can leave whenever we're finished."

I stretched and got up. "I'm going for a walk." I'd slept through most of the hour-long drive up the coast and needed to wake myself up. I walked past Sammy and down the stairs, looking back over my shoulder. "Coming?" Sammy darted to my side.



I didn't know where I was going; I just needed to clear my head and went where my feet took me. As we walked, we caught up on the past year, not thinking where our path took us. We had turned a couple of corners and come to a stop. It was then I realized where we were.

The Ravenwyck Inn loomed before us, looking like something from a horror movie.

"It still looks haunted," I whispered.

"You'll get used to it. I did."

The century old, dark green building stood three stories high, up a short incline from the road. On

the peaks of the dormers, each raven looked the same; wings spread, their tips arching downward like their heads. It was as if they were the eyes of the Inn, forever watching the grounds.

“No way can I work inside of that creepy old building.” I pictured long dark hallways and secret rooms and lots and lots of ghosts. I’d even had a nightmare or two, starring the haunted-looking mansion.

“Oh come on, Brooke. You’re not, like, scared are you?”

“Of course not.” I lied. I was terrified of the place.

“Come on, I’ll introduce you to Maggie.”

“Who’s Maggie?”

In a scary story-telling voice Sammy said, “She’s the Mistress of the Manor.” Then she laughed.

I couldn’t find the humor in it.

Sammy led the way and I followed. Once on the other side of the thick shrubs that lined the property’s perimeter, the place didn’t seem as foreboding. The parking lot was filled with vehicles. They had to belong to someone—right? The scent from the pink and white wild rose bushes, which hedged the landscape, mixed with the scent of freshly cut grass from somewhere else in the village, created a calming effect. Probably how Maggie the murderess lured in her victims.

My steps were slow and guarded. I was ready to turn and run at any moment as we approached the iron-hinged front door. Sammy peeked over her shoulder at me. I gave her a fake smile and gestured her onward. She opened the door and walked right in. I followed.

My mood didn’t change once inside the creepy old place. If I was to imagine a haunted hotel, this it is how it would look. Decorated with dark paneling and heavy chandeliers and laced with cobwebs, it held as much charm as Dracula’s castle might.

Off to the right, a wide doorway opened to a large main room where clusters of people sat engaged in a medley of conversations. Sammy led the way past a huge, dark-wood staircase, which dominated the foyer and wound its way upward.

“Samantha.”

The ancient voice crept under my skin and seeped into every cell, chilling me to the core. I stopped dead in my tracks and turned in the direction it had come from. *For crying out loud, it’s just a little old lady.* So why did I feel like I should run and never turn back?

“Hi Maggie.” Sammy smiled, showing off her dimples.

Maggie was alone, leaning heavily on a cane for support. She hobbled toward us, fixing her ice-blue eyes to mine.

“I wanted you to meet my cousin, Brooke,” Sammy said as casually as if Maggie was her own grandmother.

“Ah yes. How thoughtful of you, Samantha.”

Maggie seemed pleasant enough, until she spoke again. *“I’ve been waiting for you, Brooke.”*

Although her lips hadn’t moved, her sharp, frigid words pierced my brain like pointy icicles. Unable to look away, I stared at her, wide-eyed, while her teeth grew to sharp points and an inky blackness swallowed the pale blue of her irises.

As quickly as the apparition had paralyzed me, it released me. Once again, I looked upon the face of the feeble old woman Sammy had just introduced me to, with the new knowledge that her last remark had solely been meant for me to hear.

I grabbed both sides of my head, trying to rub away the sharp, pulsing pains that lingered there.

“Brooke, are you okay?” Sammy asked through clenched teeth, while jabbing her elbow into my arm.

I lowered my hands and sucked in a sharp breath. My mind was playing tricks on me—it had to be. This sweet, ancient-looking woman posed no threat and neither did her Inn. I had to get a grip. I would soon be working here.

“Brooke?”

Finally able to blink, I lowered my eyes from Maggie’s. “Yeah, I’m sorry. I got up too early today, I guess.” I put on a genuine smile. “Hi, Maggie. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Maybe you should sit down dear,” Maggie suggested. “You’re a ghastly shade of ecru.”

With her cane, she pointed toward a red velvet settee at one end of the foyer. I sat uncomfortably on its edge, clutching my clammy hands together. Maggie and Sammy sat in chairs opposite me. The sharp pains in my head mellowed slightly.

A pale-skinned girl, who looked to be about twelve or thirteen, appeared from behind the staircase and stepped lightly across the foyer toward us. Her raven hair, a stark contrast against her pale complexion, was gathered into a loose ponytail at the nape of her neck. Despite the layers of clothing she wore and lack of make-up, she was sort of pretty in a peculiar way. She came to a stop beside Maggie’s chair, her hands clasped in front of her. She stared at me oddly with dark, lifeless eyes. The chill melted, and I grew uncomfortably warm from the inside out and lowered my eyes to the timeworn patterns in the area rug.

“Beth dear, will you be so kind and bring us drinks?”

Beth nodded obediently at Maggie before disappearing behind the staircase.

The air in the foyer was thick, smelling faintly of fresh paint over oldness. I found it difficult to breathe as Sammy and Maggie conversed about mundane happenings of the village.

Within minutes, Beth came back carrying a tray with three glasses of sweet tea, complete with lemon slices and a plate of homemade sugar cookies, sprinkled with colored sugar. She sat the tray on an oak side table and smiled at me before leaving us.

“So, Brooke dear, you must find it a big change moving from the city to our quaint village.” Maggie smiled, pushing back the abundance of wrinkles like an accordion, the new arrangement of deep lines framing her mouth.

“It wasn’t my idea, that’s for sure.” I regretted my sarcasm immediately and changed my tone before I continued, not wanting to sound like an ungrateful brat. “But I’m sure I’ll get used to it. And thanks for giving me a job here.”

Maggie smiled, but seemed as though she masked a more sinister grin—my imagination again. She made every effort to make me feel comfortable, so why didn’t I? There was something odd about her, and I was sure Sammy didn’t detect it or she would have said something to me.

I kept up the grateful façade throughout our conversation, eating a cookie and drinking the sweet tea. And when I just about couldn’t take any more of this creepy old woman and her creepy Inn, Beth came back to collect Maggie for a phone call.

With Beth’s help, Maggie stood. “I’ll look forward to seeing you girls later this week. Goodbye until then.” She turned and hobbled away with Beth at her side.

Once they were out of sight, I stood up so fast I got a head rush. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

“Geez, Brooke, relax.”

“I am relaxed,” I snapped.

I bolted toward the open door as fast as I could without running, pushing past a couple of the Inn’s patrons. I didn’t stop to wait for Sammy until I was halfway down the walkway, where I allowed myself to stop and breathe in the fresh sea air and wild roses.

“Are you alright? You’re acting weird,” Sammy asked when she caught up.

After some deep breaths, I turned to face her. “No, I’m not all right. That woman’s a total creep and so is her sidekick.”

Sammy burst into a laugh. “I’m sorry, Brooke, but when did you get so paranoid? You used to be the tough one.”

If she only knew.

“Come on. I’m suddenly hungry,” I said, making any excuse to get out of there.

There was an absence of streetlights the entire way back. I tried to picture the light outside my bedroom window. It had illuminated my nights and lightened my dreams ever since I could remember. I would miss it most. In approximately nine hours, Deadwiche would be in total darkness, and my new bedroom was in the back of Aunt Rachel’s house, gifting me with a million-dollar view of the Ravenwyck’s dormer peaks. How lucky for me.



Chapter ❷

How do you dress for your first day at a new school? Fitting in was most important. My first choice was a sweater dress, leggings, and heels, until I saw Sammy come out of the washroom in jeans, T-shirt, and sneakers, so I copied her look. I applied some make-up, left my hair long and swept my bangs to the side.

As a finishing touch, I pulled on the leather boots I'd gotten for barely making the grade and threw on my leather jacket. My reflection wasn't as happy as it should have been on this day. Sad hazel eyes, glistening with unshed tears, reflected back at me from the mirror, making them seem more green than brown. But I wouldn't give in and let the tears spill over. I took some deep breaths and trudged down the stairs for a cheerless breakfast.

"Hey, that jacket's sick," Sammy said as I entered the sun-filled kitchen.

"Thanks," I muttered and plopped onto a chair that had been warmed by a beam of sunlight.

Uncle Jim had already gone to work at his animal clinic. It was just the three of us: Aunt Rachel, who taught history at Deadwich High, Sammy, and me, all getting ready for our first day of the new school year.

Aunt Rachel poured me a glass of orange juice and then sat at the opposite end of the table sipping her coffee. Clearly, she and Sammy were excited about the day ahead—a far cry from how I felt. I picked up my juice and downed it.

The bright spot in the storm was that Aunt Rachel could drive us to school in the mornings. It would be after school that I would have to take the big, yellow school bus home.



Deadwich High was impressive compared to the small country school I expected. Now I was even more nervous. I had spent all my school years so far with the same group of people. This was a first for me, a stranger in a new school. Everyone would stare.

"Hey, Sammy, wait up."

We both stopped in the parking lot and turned in the direction of the voices. Two girls ran toward us.

"Hey you guys, this is my cousin I was telling you about, Brooke Day."

Great, I was expected.

"Brooke, this is Robyn and Megan."

"Hey." I forced a smile and kept it simple.

"Hi, Brooke." Robyn seemed friendlier than Megan, who greeted me with a "hey" as I had greeted her.

A crowd began to gather. Everyone wanted to see the new girl. I had to suck down the humiliation and try to fit in right away, or it would be a long year, and I was determined not to be on the outside of the clique—if there was one. At least it was the first day of school for everyone.

As I stood with Sammy and her friends, the squealing of tires caught everyone's attention—a welcome distraction from me. I turned with everyone else to see a red Honda Civic fish-tail into the school parking lot.

Two guys emerged. Sammy leaned in close to me. "Those are the smoking hot Knight twins. The blond one is Evan. The tall dark-haired one is Marcus."

They certainly were cute, but didn't look anything alike. Evan walked with a swagger. Marcus walked straight, hands in the front pockets of his jeans. Evan shouted something inaudible from across the parking lot. His happy-go-lucky smile reminded me of Luke's—my heart constricted. But it was Marcus, the somber one, who I wasn't able to peel my eyes from, until he looked up from the pavement and caught me looking at him. Suddenly shy, I turned back toward the girls. Their conversation was the same one I should've been having at my old school with my old friends at that very moment, back together after summer.

As the brothers neared, all females stared. And they stared right back—at me. Cute and animated Evan, his eyes blue and laughing, swept his gaze over me. But it was Marcus, with his dark, and penetrating glare, that I couldn't stop staring at. It was then I noticed all the females gawking at me now. But there was a different look on their faces, that who-does-she-think-she-is look—jealousy. I'd never felt more awkward and self-conscious.

Evan stopped in front of me. "Hi, City Girl." His eyes twinkled as he spoke. There were murmurs behind me.

"How does he know her?" someone asked, accompanied by sounds of disgust.

"Oh," Sammy whispered out of the corner of her mouth, "I might have told them about you."

I looked at her sideways. "*Might* have?"

Evan flicked his head, probably a habit he'd acquired since his disheveled hair fell continually into his eyes.

I masked my awkwardness with triumph and flashed him a brilliant smile. The sudden thought of making the other girls jealous gave me some sick form of satisfaction. I checked over Evan's shoulder. Marcus hovered on the outside of the group, talking to some other guys. The student body began babbling again.

"Welcome to our school," Evan said. "I didn't catch what year you were in."

I gave an airy laugh. "That's because I didn't say."

"Right, so what year are you in?"

I couldn't resist his charm. "Junior. You?"

"Senior."

So that would mean Marcus was also in his senior year. I was relieved. I was self-conscious enough without having to share a class with either of them.

Evan seemed easy enough to be around; at least I felt comfortable around him. The clouds parted briefly, directing a ray of sun over my shoulder and into Evan's face. His eyes came alive. The blues became separate colors, dark and light, mixed with gray, creating the effect of a still photograph taken of a tropical storm.

As quickly as the clouds parted, they closed, casting him in shadow once again. A look of amusement spread across his face. I blinked and looked away. How long had he held me spellbound? Half a second? Two seconds? However long was too long. My cheeks warmed.

"Did Sammy tell you about the party this weekend?"

"Yeah." I nodded, looking past him to his brother.

"You're coming, right?"

Quick, think of an excuse, so you don't have to spend the night on the dark island "Yeah, I'll be there." I couldn't think of one that quickly.

"Great!"

I found myself checking Marcus out periodically as Evan prattled on. Sometimes when I peeked over at him, I caught his eyes flick away from me.

As the conversation grew awkward, the bell rang.

Morning ended none too quickly, giving way to lunch hour. I walked to the cafeteria with Sammy,

Robyn and their entourage of friends, picked up a sandwich and some juice, and followed Sammy to a table, all the while scanning the room for the brothers, specifically one. They weren't there—at first.

I was engaged in a conversation about the girls' basketball team, which Sammy and her friends wanted me to join, when Evan's boisterous laughter stole my attention. Forgetting about the girls, I snapped my head in the direction it came from, hoping my sudden interest wasn't too obvious.

"Well? Will you? Brooke?"

"Huh?" I looked at Robyn dumbfounded.

"Will you join our girls' basketball team? Sammy said you played at your school last year. I'm the captain."

"Basketball, oh, yeah sure."

I lifted my eyes away slightly to look at the brothers who sat at the table across from us. Sammy elbowed me. I didn't miss the smirk on her face. I also noticed the other girls at our table staring at me.

"I guess we know who Evan's next fling will be." Sarcasm dripped from Megan's words. "You might as well try him on. We all did." She spoke loud enough that I was sure most of the students in the cafeteria had heard. "Looks like you're at the top of his food chain this year." She gave a sharp laugh.

"What? Not me!" I felt the blood surface in my cheeks. Did they know something I didn't? And then something else she'd said sunk in. "All of you?" I was astounded as to how they could so easily let themselves be a part of his girlfriend list.

"Don't listen to Megan," Sammy said. "She's just pissed that Evan broke up with her before she could break up with him."

The girls giggled.

I risked one more glance at the table across from mine. Clearly Evan was the center of attention with the guys too, dominating the conversation. Marcus barely cracked a smile.

There was something I had to know, so I asked the question that had been burning on my tongue all morning. I tried to look and sound as casual as possible. "So, what about Marcus, does he have a girlfriend?" I stuffed my mouth with the last bite of sandwich and chewed nonchalantly.

"Not right now—" Robyn said.

Megan interrupted, "Why, are you interested in him too?"

"No. I—"

"Don't be such a bitch," Robyn chastised Megan. She looked at me, and in a low voice said, "He doesn't date much."

"But he's sizzling hot," Sammy added dreamily.

"I wonder why he doesn't date?" *Oops.* I hadn't meant to say that out loud.

"What Robyn meant to say is, he's had a few girlfriends his own age, but he doesn't date younger. Oh, except for last year when Megan convinced him to take her to a school dance."

"I didn't have to convince him," Megan spat.

"Whatever." Sammy rolled her eyes then looked back to me grinning. "He didn't pay much attention to her. She's never gotten over it."

The other girls at the table laughed, all except Megan, whose face flushed. Now her jealousy made sense. She'd been rejected by both brothers.

"We made out in the boys locker room." She looked smug now, twirling a blonde lock around a finger. "He played plenty of attention to me then."

"Who's the best kisser, Megan?" Robyn asked. "You're the only one who's had the double experience."

Another array of giggles erupted from our table.

Megan tightened her jaw and stood. She put her hands on the table and leaned toward me. "Marcus is the best kisser, but you'll never find out. Besides me, no one else our age has ever come close to

getting with him.” She spun on her high heel and walked off with her nose in the air, clearly livid.

Everyone at my table stared at me. I wanted to sink into the chair. Then my defense mechanism kicked in. “I wasn’t planning on going for either of them. I was just wondering what all the hype was about.”

“What hype?”

In the distraction, I hadn’t noticed Evan come up behind me. My chair jarred as he grabbed the back of it. He pulled a chair over from the next table and squished it in between me and a girl named Madison.

It was apparent by the grin on his face he hadn’t heard all of our conversation. “How’s your first day at Deadwich High going, City Girl?” There were giggles, as I began to realize there were every time he spoke.

“Um, it’s fine.” As hard as I tried not to, I couldn’t help but allow my eyes to drift across Megan’s empty spot, which cleared a path straight to where Marcus sat, watching us. The bell rang just as the situation became uncomfortable.



The afternoon couldn’t pass fast enough. All I thought about during last class was having to ride the school bus home—not cool. I was glad my friends back home wouldn’t see me.

Finally my first day of school in the country was over. Even *I* had to admit, it hadn’t been as bad as I’d thought it would be. With the exception of Megan, I’d been well received. The teachers were okay and the school, what I’d seen of it, looked like any other school—no dead witches anywhere.

As I walked with Sammy to where a string of yellow buses were lined up, a now familiar voice called out to me. I turned to see Evan in his car with his head hanging out the window. He gestured with a wave of his arm for me to come over. I hesitated and looked at Sammy.

“Go on. We have time. I’ll wait here.”

Without seeming too eager, I walked across the parking lot to the red Civic. Evan was alone. I was disappointed.

“Do you want a ride home?” he asked when I’d reached him.

It was a chance to not have to take the bus, but how would it be perceived to Sammy and her friends, and most of all, Evan?

In the end, the offer was too good to refuse. “Sure. Do you live near Sammy?”

“Close enough.”

“Wait, I better go with Sammy. She’s waiting for me.”

He looked past me to the gathering of students. “Hey, Sammy.”

She darted over. “What’s up?” She flicked her pin-straight hair over one shoulder and peered into the car.

“Do you two want a ride home?”

I thought it nice of him to include her.

“Yeah, sure.” She looked at me, clearly excited, then back to Evan. “Is Marcus coming?”

I wondered the same thing.

“No, he had to leave early.”

Sammy gestured for me to get in the front. I hesitated, feeling awkward, but she happily climbed into the back and pulled the front seat back before I could jump in beside her. So I got in the front.

Evan talked enough on the way home that I didn’t have to say much. Sammy held conversation with him as if they were just old friends and not exes. As we pulled into the village, I noticed how the roof peaks of the Ravenwyck soared above the tree tops, dominating all else in Deadwich. A scene I would

have to look at every day.

A minute later, we pulled in front of Aunt Rachel's. "Thanks for the drive," I said before shutting the door. I really was grateful.

His grin widened. "Any time."

Before taking off, he turned his attention to Sammy. "You're working tonight, aren't you, Sammy?" I'd totally forgotten about my first night at the Inn.

"Yup, me and Brooke."

His eyes lit up when she said my name. "I'll see you there then."

"Huh?" I asked, confused.

"Oh, Evan and Marcus are painting some old rooms in the Inn. Maggie's restoring the second floor."

Marcus would be there. "I guess I'll see you tonight then," I said, smiling at the thought.

Sammy watched like a love-sick puppy as he drove off.

"You still like him don't you?" I asked her as we headed up the front steps.

"He likes you now."

I got the feeling she was giving me her blessing.

"But I'm not really interested in him."

Now she looked absolutely shocked.

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. I admit he's cute and nice I guess, but I'm not attracted to him that way."

"Weird," she said, gawking at me like I suddenly sprouted another head.

The conversation ended and we went inside.

While waiting for supper, I made a few phone calls to my old friends, which put me in a bad mood; I missed them so much, and it felt like I'd never see them again. After we'd eaten, Sammy and I walked to the Inn for my first day on the job. I was already nervous, but the closer to the Inn I got, the more scared I became.



Chapter Three

Beth met us at the front door and gave us our instructions. At the top of the stairs, the scent of fresh paint hung heavily in the air. One wing was almost completed. It was there we would be making up guest rooms.

Sammy and I were working away, and everything was fine until Beth sent me into a room by myself while she and Sammy went for more sheets. The room was light enough, having two windows. I told myself there was nothing to be afraid of and got straight to work.

The room was furnished in antiques, same as the others in the Inn. On a desk sat a pile of bed linens. I picked up a sheet and shook it open. The sharp snap of the crisp fabric echoed louder than it should have.

A new awareness crept over me. Except for my movements, the room was deathly silent. The sound of my hand smoothing over the sheet sounded like sandpaper on wood. My light footsteps and shallow breathing seemed amplified. The creak of a floorboard beneath my sneaker seemed to echo all the way down the hall. All of these sounds seemed intensely loud. There was no doubt, I was paranoid. And to add to my terror, I couldn't shake the feeling that unseen eyes watched me.

Where the hell was Sammy?

I grabbed the next sheet and shook it open over the bed. The touch of a frail hand shot icy tendrils up my arm and around my shoulder. I didn't hear anyone behind me, when I really should have, given the perfect stillness of the room. I jumped a foot and spun around, falling back against my elbows on the bed. A shriek of terror passed through my lips, cutting the silence like the scrape of a chair leg on the floor of a classroom during exams.

Maggie stood where I'd just stood, still as a stone statue. Her only movement came from the twitch of a grin that touched the corners of her mouth. She glared down on me through narrowly-slitted eyes. Her once blue irises were now black. Evil emanated from her. Cold stung my flesh, making the hairs on the back of my neck prickle. Terror seized every cell in my body, and I froze. When I realized I wasn't breathing, I sucked in a sharp, frigid breath.

The sound of voices in the hallway made my heart accelerate. In the same instant as Sammy entered the room, Maggie came to life.

"I'm so sorry I scared you. Are you alright dear?" She reached a frail hand out to me, but instinct made me cringe away.

"What happened?" Sammy asked.

"I'm afraid I scared the life out of Brooke, poor dear."

"Geez, you're as white as that sheet. Are you alright?" Sammy asked.

When I was finally able to peel my eyes from Maggie, I nodded nervously and said, "Yeah."

Standing was difficult. The upper half of my legs felt as if they were detached from the lower half. Pain swiftly replaced the coldness where Maggie had touched, sending shooting stabs of agony through my arm. I wasn't crazy. Maggie had come in here purposely to scare the crap out of me, and she'd succeeded.

"Well, if you're sure you're alright, I'll let you get back to your work. I'd forgotten what I came in for anyway." Maggie's face was that of an innocent little old lady once again. She turned and hobbled out of the room on her cane, which a moment ago she hadn't had.

I sat heavily on the bed after she had gone, rubbing my arm where she'd touched, confused as hell. I grabbed the hem of Sammy's T-shirt and looked up at her.

"What is it, Brooke?"

“That woman is ... crazy.” Sammy looked at me as if I was the crazy one. “I’m serious, she’s ... oh forget it, just don’t leave me alone in this creep pit again, you got that?”

A look of confusion spread across her face. She nodded, as if to humor me.

Sammy and I finished making the bed together and then went to the next room. I heard movement in the hallway, a clattering of something metal. I stretched my neck past the door frame, but saw nothing.

Even after promising not to leave me, Sammy went down the hall to the washroom. Unable to stay in the room alone, I grabbed a pile of sheets and went to the linen closet in the hall where I had a clear view of the washroom door. I heard the clattering sound again.

It grew closer.

A few seconds later, someone with dark, tousled hair rounded the corner carrying paint cans and other supplies. My heart leapt to my throat. Marcus was coming this way. Nerves replaced fear. I opened the linen closet door and tried to act casual. He drew closer. The opened door created a barrier between us. Casually, as if I hadn’t seen him coming, I peeked around the door—it was inevitable, he had to pass at some point.

He lifted his gaze from the items he carried and looked at me. His step hesitated briefly, then continued. Clearly, he hadn’t expected to see me there. My heartbeat quickened. Suddenly shy, I forgot for a moment about creepy Maggie and where I was.

He spoke first. “Hi.”

“Hi,” I mimicked.

“Are you working here with Sammy?” The deep smoothness of his tone made me forget for a moment about the icy pain in my arm.

“Yeah, I am.”

I smiled. Marcus smiled back. Like mine, it seemed genuine, not forced. How cute he looked as he stood before me in jeans and a faded denim shirt, splattered with paint, and a white T-shirt peeking out at the neck.

I played nervously with an end of my hair, twirling it between my fingers, unable to look directly into his eyes. How pathetic.

“So, you’re working here too?” Of course, that was obvious. How stupid of me. I would have rolled my eyes at myself had he not been looking at me.

He nodded, still smiling.

“How do you like Deadwich?” he asked.

“Deadwich’s alright. I’ve been coming here since I was little. School’s better than I thought it would be.”

A moment of awkward silence passed.

“Well, I’d better get this stuff put away.” By now he had relieved one hand of the paint cans he’d been carrying, setting them on the hallway floor.

He opened a door beside the linen closet, which I hadn’t noticed before. A gust of cold, musty air rushed out, taking my breath away. I peeked in. It was dark. Marcus reached in past my shoulder and flicked on a light. Inside the door I saw a narrow staircase, twisting upward.

An icy pulse of pain shot through my arm, making me grimace.

“Where does that go?” I stared, wide-eyed into the stairwell.

“It goes to the attic. We store our stuff up there.” He bent to one side and began to pick the stuff back up he’d been carrying.

Without thinking I asked, “Do you need any help?”

“Sure, if you want.”

I picked up the two remaining paint cans and followed Marcus into the stairwell that led to the attic

of the Ravenwyck. I had a feeling I wasn't going to like it there.

The stairs creaked loudly under our weight. I cringed at the sound and stayed close behind Marcus. How totally absurd this was—especially after my recent ordeal with Maggie. If Sammy had asked me to follow her up here, I would have told her she was crazy. But as if I couldn't help myself, here I was, following this enchanting stranger into the attic of my nightmares.

Paint cans scraped against the narrow passage walls, knocking loose paint chips onto the stairs. I gritted my teeth together. I didn't want to get caught exploring, especially since I was supposed to be working.

The stairwell turned a corner halfway up, leaving the light behind. Our shadows grew long on the wall, taking menacing shapes—a product of my overactive imagination. I wanted to turn back, but something in the back of my mind pushed me forward. I looked away from the shadows and focused on the back of Marcus' hair, which was half tucked inside his collar.

A moment later, he came to an abrupt stop and opened a narrow door. It opened with a groan, letting another gust of dank air escape—this time colder. He flipped on a switch, which shone much welcome light down the top section of stairs.

“Couldn't you just leave this stuff in an empty room downstairs?” I was even more nervous now, as I looked into the attic.

“Maggie wants us to keep it up here out of the way.”

At the mere mention of her name, another pulse of pain shot through my arm.

Marcus stood inside the attic looking back at me. I forced my feet to move and joined him under the dangling light bulb.

I sat my paint cans down beside some others and turned to leave, but waited on the top step while Marcus organized some stuff—no way was I going back down there alone. I folded my arms across my stomach to try to keep warm.

Behind Marcus, gloomy daylight filtered through endless grime-coated dormer windows. No light reached the middle of the vast attic. In fact, the space was so expansive I couldn't see either end.

“Doesn't it bother you to come up here by yourself?”

“Should it?” His eyes, as always, were serious, but a slight grin adorned his face.

With my bravest look, I said, “Um, I guess not.”

“Do you want to look around?” Out of character, an eyebrow rose in anticipation of my reply.

“No.”

His grin expanded and his eyes softened. “Come on. I'm here.”

How gallant of him. Clearly, there was a hidden meaning in those last two words, even if he hadn't realized it. I felt protected and compelled to follow him. For the first time he seemed almost normal, in a quiet sort of way. He also smiled a lot more than Sammy had given him credit for. I couldn't resist his charm. Had he lured me up here? Or had I come of my own free will? I had no idea. Except now, the attic didn't seem as threatening anymore.

“Alright, if you can find a light switch over there.” I pointed into the darkness.

With a half-grin, he pulled a flashlight out of his back pocket.

We walked out of the circle of light and into the dim, natural light filtering through the dirty windows. In front of us, layers of dust blanketed everything, turning the attic into a landscape of mute gray. At first we walked in silence, side-by-side. The only sounds came from the creaky floorboards and my accelerated heartbeat.

It was difficult to stay in the natural lighting of the dormer windows at times; there was so much junk piled in places.

“Have you been over here before?”

Marcus shook his head. “No, but I've always wanted to check it out.”

Funny, he didn't seem like the check-it-out type, as most boys did. And why hadn't he and Evan ever checked it out together?

As we walked, we started talking about school and before I'd realized it, we were in the middle—where no light reached, except for the small glow from the flashlight Marcus held.

It was in this shadowy section in the middle of the attic, that I came upon an old trunk. It wasn't the first one we'd passed, but this one looked different. As the beam from the flashlight passed over it, I saw there was no dust on it.

"Hey, have a look at this," I said.

Marcus turned and came back to where I had so bravely stopped.

"Look." I touched the trunk with my fingertips and rubbed them together to see if my eyes were playing tricks on me, but my fingers were dust free.

"Strange," Marcus said.

"Yeah."

Feelings of familiarity picked away at my brain. I began to think that we hadn't ended up in this spot by chance. No, it was a more complex path that led us to this particular chest. Again, Maggie popped into my head, sending a chill under the surface of my skin. I reached over and rubbed my aching arm.

"Why do you think it doesn't have any dust on it?" I asked as if he would know.

"Maybe it was brought up here recently."

"Maybe." I wasn't completely convinced.

Marcus shone the flashlight on the floor around us. "Weird, though. There aren't any footprints in the dust except ours."

My bad feeling was justified.

He shone the light over the trunk. Two wide leather straps, fastened by an old padlock, held it shut. My fingers traced over a spiral pattern carved into the wood. Marcus reached for the lock and pulled on it.

The instant Marcus' hand grazed the wood, whisper soft tingles touched the tips of my fingers. I pulled my hand away. Marcus let go of the lock at the same time. The tingles diminished. Maybe they'd never been there. I tried reading the expression on Marcus' face, but it was impassive.

"Let's get out of here," I said with a sense of urgency. I'd had enough weirdness for one day.

"Yeah. Evan will be wondering where I am by now, anyway."

It didn't take us as long to get back to the dangling light. I put myself in front this time. I was terrified of leaving a dark room, and there was something comforting about Marcus being between me and the darkness. I was halfway down the steps when I heard him close the attic door.

"Well that was interesting," I said once back in the hallway.

"You seemed spooked. I shouldn't have taken you up there."

"No, I'm glad I went." I tried to mask the lie with a smile.

"There you are!" Sammy stood in a doorway up the hall with her hands on her hips. "Where were you?" Her eyes drifted suspiciously from me to Marcus.

"Ah, I was just checking out the attic with Marcus," I said sheepishly, feeling as if I had just gotten caught doing something naughty.

She took a step closer to us. "After what had happened earlier, I was worried. I thought you might have skipped work and gone home."


I glared at Sammy and then laughed to cover up my embarrassment, but thankfully Marcus didn't ask any questions. A few minutes later, Evan found the three of us standing in the hallway. Marcus didn't offer him an explanation for his disappearance, and Evan didn't ask for one.

"Well, I made up the last room, so we can take off now," Sammy said, still eyeing me suspiciously.

"We'll walk out with you," Evan offered.



Chapter Four

aggie was nowhere in sight as we headed down the grand staircase, across the foyer, and out the front door. But her presence lingered everywhere.

The sky had darkened, and I was grateful for the company. As usual, Evan talked incessantly. He was in the middle of an animated description of the last party they'd all been to, when my cell phone rang. I got a small thrill when I saw Luke's name in the display window. I lingered back so the others wouldn't hear my conversation.

"Hi, Luke."

"Hey. How was school? Any dead witches?"

It was a joke that my friends in Boston would tease me about whenever I'd visited Deadwich in the past. They never realized how literally I took it.

I laughed grimly. "It was okay. How did it go there?"

"Your name was on the list for Mr. Moore's class. That's who me and Courtney got."

A puddle formed on the edge of my eyelids. It would have been the first year Luke and I would have been in the same class. I longed to be in that class with him and Courtney.

"Brooke? Say something."

"That would have been cool." I wiped away the tear that fell down my cheek.

"I'm sorry about the other night. If I hadn't taken that beer outside—"

"No, it's not your fault. My parents had it planned all summer."

"You coming, Brooke?" Sammy shouted back to me. They had reached the end of the street. I hadn't realized I had come to a stop in a dark area until she'd spoken.

"Yeah, I'll be right there." I yelled back.

"Are you with someone?" Luke asked.

"Sammy and I are just walking home from work." No need to mention the fact that we were also with two cute guys.

"Oh. Well, I guess I'd better get going. I'll see you sometime." The sadness in Luke's tone made my throat ache when I swallowed.

"I really miss you, Luke," I blurted before hitting 'end'. I almost wished he hadn't called. I wiped my eyes with the backs of my hands then rushed to catch up to the others.

Before turning the corner, I glanced back at the Ravenwyck. The roof peaks were still visible. I shuddered and turned away. The brothers left us soon after. Evan had been reluctant to go. "The night's still early," he'd said. Sammy seemed reluctant to go home as well, but I used the tired excuse, first day at a new job and all. I really didn't want to hang around the darkening streets.



When we got back to Sammy's house, she helped me organize my new room. Every once in a while I found my eyes drawn to the bedroom window and the view of the Ravenwyck. How lucky for me. I put my stuff away in the closet, brushed my teeth, and then crashed beside Sammy on my bed. She was watching music videos on the little TV that sat on the dresser.

I tried to focus my mind on the TV and not the Inn and the events that had transpired there earlier, but my mind didn't cooperate. The music video gradually became a dull hum in the background, until it disappeared altogether. Absentmindedly, I rubbed my thumb back and forth over my fingers. It hadn't

been something I'd imagined. The tingling, no matter how faint, had been there.

I snapped myself out of it. Music flooded the room once more. I sat up cross-legged. "Sammy you're going to think I'm crazy, but I really think Maggie is um ... psycho."

"Oh, come on, Brooke. I admit, maybe she's a little strange, but she's really old. No one knows how old, even."

"That woman is more than strange." I lowered my voice to a whisper. "I think she's evil."

Sammy rolled her eyes at me. "Brooke, I've been working there all summer. She's really sweet ... honest."

I threw my head back against the pillow in frustration and let out a deep breath.

"Just give it a couple more days. Once you get used to working there, you'll see how sweet she is. The Inn's always freaked you out. You'll get over it."

Then how do you explain the pain in my arm where she'd touched me and the numb tingly sensation in my fingers where I'd touched the trunk? I wanted to scream to her.

"Well, we'd better get to bed." Sammy yawned and stretched before getting up and walking to the door.

"Oh, Sammy, is there a nightlight?" I asked sheepishly.

"Yeah, sure. There's one in the hallway. I'll get it for you."

"It's just that the streetlight shone through my window at home. I sort of got used to it." I was sure Sammy could see through my excuses. But as long as there was light ...

Sleep didn't come easy that night. When I closed my eyes, it seemed darker than usual despite the nightlight. A pain began to radiate from the spot in my arm where creepy Maggie had touched me. When I finally did fall asleep, it was fitful. I tossed and turned and finally woke up. At least I thought I was awake, but I couldn't open my eyes or speak; a clear case of sleep paralysis.

Someone was in the room with me. A shadow passed over my closed lids. There were low whispers, although nothing I could make out. I tried to scream, but couldn't. My body began to heat up as if it was on fire. The heat made my throat close off. I fought with every fiber to move. The voices stopped abruptly. My eyes flew open. It was dark, profoundly dark. I hauled in a deep breath to alleviate the smothering feeling.

What had happened to the nightlight? My heart thumped louder and faster until I felt it pulse in my ears. Fumbling with the switch, I tried turning the table lamp on—it didn't work. The power wasn't off. The display on the alarm clock said twelve o'clock, midnight. Too afraid to even blink, I sank under the covers and stared into the darkness. The only sounds were the loud thumping of my heartbeat, and my own ragged breathing. The room was still.

My arm began to throb again. It was impossible to ignore the pain. I was chilled to the bone and started to shake uncontrollably.

What the hell was happening? Light, I need light. I covered my eyes with my hands and wished for light or a quick death to end this nightmare that was my life now. I felt a tingle in the tips of my fingers, and at the same time, a dim glow seeped between them. Slowly, I lowered my hands from my eyes. The room was aglow in the soft light of the nightlight once more. Momentarily stunned, I lay there and looked around the room. Everything seemed the same as it had before I'd gone to bed. Then a soft voice spread warmth through my body, taking the chill and fear away.

"Claire, I am with you. You're safe now."

"What?" I bolted upright. "Who said that? And who's Claire?" No one answered, but I knew the voice. My heart rate slowed. Perhaps I conjured the voice from my subconscious because it was what I wanted to hear. It didn't matter; I felt safe.


I lay back down and closed my eyes with Marcus' words imbedded in my mind. I fell into a semi-conscious state, the realm between awake and asleep, where your subconscious mind takes over rational

thinking, but you're still somewhat aware.

In my mind, a warm glow surrounded me. I saw Marcus bathed by a halo of light. It was very dark behind him, as dark as pitch. But he kept it at bay. I felt safe and fell into a deep sleep.



Chapter Five

 The next morning as I got ready for school, all I could think about was the nightmare. The same one I'd had on my last visit to Deadwich and the visit before that. Except this time it brought me Marcus, and with him came light.

I thought about the name Marcus had called me in the dream, "Claire", or had he called someone else Claire? Why did that name seem so important? I shook my head to clear it. For a moment, I wondered if I really was losing my sanity.

Because Marcus and Evan weren't as fast at painting rooms as Sammy and I were at making them up, Maggie gave us the rest of the week off to allow the boys to get a few more rooms painted. School became a welcome distraction from my night terrors, or whatever they were—I had them every night. And just like the first night, I awoke at midnight to the sounds of ghostly whispers and shadows. And every time, a feeling of peacefulness came over me soon after, keeping the shadows and whispers away. Only then was I able to drift off to sleep and dream of Marcus and the light.

I could hardly look at him now without feeling shy about having him in my dreams every night, so I became a recluse where Marcus was concerned. But that didn't prevent him from coming to me at night.

Evan, on the other hand, hardly left my side during recess and lunch. He made me laugh a lot, and he was growing on me. Now I understood why all the other girls had crushes on him. They couldn't help themselves. Yes, he was obnoxious, but in a charming sort of way.

By the end of my first week at Deadwich High, I knew everyone in my class and then some. I also came to realize that Sammy and her group of friends, which now included me, were the popular girls in school—not a bad position to be in.

On Friday, the lunchroom buzzed about the upcoming long weekend and the party on Skull Island, the one thing that put a damper on my day. What if I had a nightmare out there? I tried not to think about it, but it was impossible to ignore, since that was all anyone within a three-table radius babbled about.

Evan had taken up the habit of sitting next to me during lunch the past couple of days, leaving Marcus and their friends at another table. I couldn't decide if I was comfortable with it or not. We were definitely getting closer, and I wasn't sure if it was what I wanted. For one thing, I didn't want to fall into the Evan-trap as every girl had before me, and for another, I was interested in someone else. But it was happening between us so effortlessly, and I didn't know how to stop it without hurting Evan's feelings and making a fool of myself.

"So, City Girl, are you ready for a night in the country you won't forget?"

Evan's arm pressed against mine. I wanted to pull away.

"Oh yeah, am I ever."

Evan didn't seem to pick up on the nip of sarcasm in my tone.

"A night with no restrictions," he said.

That statement alarmed me. I twisted my neck to face him. "None?!"

Everyone thought I was being funny and laughed, including Evan. I really had no idea what he'd meant by "no restrictions," but laughed to blend in and hoped I hadn't sounded too nervous.

"We'll show you how to party Deadwich-style." He laughed out loud, nudging my arm with his elbow as he did.

Megan, who had made it perfectly clear throughout the week that we weren't friends, snickered. At least there would be a bunch of us together, unless everyone paired off and went their separate ways. I wasn't sure how these country all-nighters worked.

As the party babble continued, I risked a quick glance across the cafeteria to where Marcus sat, and as always he caught me looking at him, or was it me who had caught him looking at me? My cheeks warmed and I lowered my eyes, but in the wrong direction. They landed on Megan. Jealousy flashed in her glacial blue eyes.

She flicked her gaze to Marcus then back to me. I was overwhelmed by the feeling of her hatred; it radiated at me. She got up and tossed her blonde waves over her shoulder, then took herself and her too-tight jeans over to Marcus' table. She pulled up a chair beside him and managed to get a smile on his face in no time. I watched, oblivious to the others at my table, whose constant chatter became a dull hum in the back of my head along with the rest of the cafeteria commotion.

She leaned into his chair seductively, resting her elbow on its back. Whatever she said, she had the attention of the whole table, but after a short time, Marcus seemed to grow bored. As if we were the only two people in the cafeteria, his eyes found mine again. The breath caught in my throat. He'd caught me looking at him again, and for a brief moment, I was unable to turn away.

A sudden pressure to the back of my neck brought me back to reality. The lunch-room chatter grew louder as if someone had pulled plugs from my ears. Marcus got up and walked away from Megan and out of the cafeteria, leaving the laughter at his table behind.

With his exit, came the realization that Evan's arm lay across my shoulders. Had Marcus noticed? Is that why he'd left? *Don't be ridiculous, Brooke*, I told myself. *Why would Marcus care about you?* Very much aware of everyone's eyes on me now, I wanted to crawl under the table. How could I get out of this situation with Evan before it got too serious?

"City Girl?" His hand gripped my far shoulder. He shook me.

"Huh? What?"

"Where was your head just now?"

"Oh, somewhere a million miles away, I guess."

There were some chuckles. I forced myself to look at him and smile. From this too-close position, I saw how his blue eyes lit up under the cafeteria lighting, like they had in the sunlight. One sparkly, blue eye was half-hidden behind the tendrils of blond hair that hung over his face. Normally, I wouldn't have been able to resist the cuteness, but it was his handsome and mysterious brother who enchanted me, not cute, irresistible-to-every-other-girl-but-me Evan.

Evan continued with whatever he'd been saying while my head had been a million miles away. "I said, I have to leave school early today. I guess you'll have to take the bus home, and I know how much you're going to hate that." More giggles from the girls. Evan's grin widened.

"Oh, really?" I pouted. I truly was disappointed. No way did I want to take the bus home. I sighed.

"Well, I guess I'll survive. If everyone else can take the bus, then I suppose I can, too."

I glanced over at Megan, who was now sitting beside Marcus' empty chair. Her arms were folded in front of her, and her gaze was narrowed on me.

Throughout the rest of our conversation, Evan left his arm casually draped across my shoulders. I felt awkward.

When the bell rang, signaling lunch was over, Evan stood and said, "I'll see you tonight."

I was relieved when the pressure left my shoulders. "Okay, see you then." I tried to smile as non-flirtatiously as I could.

I watched Evan swagger out of the cafeteria, then blinked and turned back to the now silent girls at my table. Everyone stared at me. Hot blood rushed to the surface of my cheeks again.

"What?"

"Well, well, well," Robyn said, grinning widely. "I hope you have better luck with him than the rest of us had." As soon as the words were out of her mouth she seemed to regret it. An awkward moment passed as she scrambled for new words. "What I meant was ... well ... um ... I really hope it lasts." Her

pretty brown eyes were sincere.

Out of all of Sammy's friends, Robyn was the nicest and the prettiest. I was jealous of her long, dark hair, which hung down her back in an abundance of loose ringlets, and her olive complexion, which made her look exotic—forever tanned.

The afternoon flew by; no doubt because I knew I had to take the school bus home.

"You're a country girl now," Sammy said with a huge grin as we walked from our last class to the parking lot, where a fleet of bright yellow buses awaited us.

"Yeah, whatever." I rolled my eyes and followed.

I watched my step as I got on and kept my head down, following Sammy up the aisle. The inside smelled like cheap vinyl and diesel, with a hint of bubble gum. Without warning, Sammy pulled off to the side, one row from the back. I planned to follow, but she sat her butt down in an aisle seat. When I lifted my head, I saw why. Robyn occupied the other half of that seat. The only other empty seat was behind her. My eyes went to that one empty seat. My breath caught and I hesitated. I shot a glare at Sammy, who looked up at me so innocently; I could almost see the halo around her head. I had no choice but to sit in the last seat—next to Marcus.

He stiffened as I sat next to him. I crossed my legs and sat at a bit of an angle, facing the aisle, trying not to let any part of me touch any part of him.

"Hi," I said shyly.

"Hi," he answered just as shyly.

Giggles floated back to me from the seat in front of us. I wanted to reach out and smack both their heads. It was almost as if they'd planned it like this, but that was impossible.

Sammy looked back with a huge grin on her face that spoke louder than words. I glared back at her. She knew she was in trouble. She gave me a look of mock-fear, then turned to face the front, giggling with Robyn.

I slouched slightly in the seat, folding my arms across my stomach. The bus pulled away from its parking spot sluggishly.

A few minutes into the ride I became aware of something, a feeling in the small space between Marcus and me. I tuned out the mundane chatter drifting throughout the bus and concentrated to make sure it was really there and not my imagination. The more I focused my attention on the space, the stronger I felt it. It was like a magnetic force, trying to pull our bodies closer together. The energy from the field shimmered all the way down the right side of my body. My arm felt heavy folded in front of me and wanted to drop to my leg, as my desire worked to overtake my will. I wondered if Marcus felt it too.

Then Marcus did something that made my heart flutter. He turned his head in my direction. I swallowed and was forced out of courtesy to return his gaze. His dark eyes held a spark I'd never seen there before, and a rare hint of a smile touched his mouth. Just that hint was enough to make any girl melt, and if I continued to look at him, I would surely be reduced to a pathetic puddle on the bus floor.

I smiled back, just a hint. He had to know how exquisitely handsome he was—or maybe he didn't.

I straitened in my seat and broadened my smile; it was a rare gift I bestowed upon him. I cleared my throat and spoke.

"Are you going to the Island tonight?" It was the first time I'd spoken to him since he took me into the attic of the Ravenwyck, almost a week ago, and I was nervous all over again.

"Yeah. You?" He tilted his head, as if waiting for my answer.

I nodded. "I'd never hear the end of it if I didn't." I flicked my eyes toward Sammy.

He chuckled low. "But you don't want to go." He said it like he knew I really didn't.

"No, not really." I fidgeted with the books on my lap.

"Looks like we have something in common." His smile faded, his forehead creased, and his look darkened.

That surprised me. I looked at him more closely. "You don't want to go either?"

He shook his head.

"Then why go?"

He bestowed upon me another rare smile. "Because, *I* would never hear the end of it."

I nodded in understanding. We were both stuck in the same situation and neither of us wanted to be. As I stared off into space, contemplating our conversation, Robyn turned around to face us.

"So, Marcus, are you bringing your boat tonight?"

"Yeah."

She bounced up and down on the seat excitedly. "Oh, can we have the bed?" Her rich chestnut eyes looked like the eyes on one of those adorable cartoon characters. How could anyone resist her?

He nodded. "Sure, you always do."

He gifted her with a smile also. She had to be melting now, or was I the only pathetic one?

"Awesome, thanks," she squealed.

"No problem."

She looked at me and winked before turning back around. Robyn and Sammy giggled like little girls with their first crush. I found it embarrassing. Then I began to wonder how big a boat he had and how many beds there were. So I asked.

"How many people does your boat sleep?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"How cozy you like to be in bed." He grinned and raised an eyebrow.

I blushed.

"There's only one bed. You'll be comfortable with Sammy and Robyn."

I wondered where everyone else would sleep.

As if he read my thoughts, he answered. "The guys usually sleep outside in tents."

"Oh, that'll work."

Just as I was beginning to relax, the bus drove over a bump in the road and bounced us off our seats slightly, making me land closer to Marcus. Our conversation ended abruptly. Again, I became self-conscious. His leg rubbed against my leg, his arm against my arm. Our bodies tensed, the muscle in his leg tightened against mine, but he didn't pull away—neither did I.

Finally, the bus reached its destination - the middle school - which was in the village and only a five minute walk from Aunt Rachel's. I got up, kicked a few wads of paper out of the way on my walk down the aisle, and got off the bus.

I didn't notice Evan in the parking lot until he called out, "Hey, Brooke, Sammy."

Sammy and I turned to the sound of his voice.

"Get in I'll drop you off."

With a big smile, Sammy dashed to the car. Robyn and I followed.

Evan grinned at Robyn and asked, "Would you like a drive home, too?"

She considered his question then said, "I think I can make it across the street." Her eyes rolled playfully at him, "But thanks for the offer."

"Okay, see you tonight," Evan said.

My mind went into high gear. I jumped into the back seat with Sammy before Marcus had a chance to offer the front to me. A couple of minutes later we were at Aunt Rachel's house.

"Do you want us to pick you up here?" Evan hung his head out of the window as we headed up the walkway.

"Um, you'd better not. My parents might get suspicious," Sammy said low. "They think we're staying at Robyn's. We'll just meet you on the wharf around six."

“Alright, see you then,” Evan said in his happy-go-lucky manner. Marcus didn’t say anything. He just gave us a nod as the car drove off.



Chapter Six

We had two hours to get ready for the party. Sammy utilized the entire time. She flat-ironed her hair for the second time that day until it was pin-straight. I let my natural waves hang loose. Sammy skinned on a new pair of dark jeans, low-waisted enough to show off the dragonfly tattoo on her hip. She wore a short purple tank with a neckline that would have been revealing on some, but on Sammy, it was just a neckline.

As she fussed with her hair for the tenth time in front of her mirror, I lay on my stomach across her bed trying to pick up a vibe of excitement from her. But all I felt was anxiety.

“What’s the matter with you, Brooke? You’re going to your first party. Get ready!”

“It’s hardly my first party, Sammy. And all I have to do is change my clothes.” I just couldn’t catch the party fever.

“Do you even know what you’re wearing?” Instead of turning, she talked to my reflection, while smearing pink gloss on her lips.

I shoved visions of dark forested islands with skeletons and dead witches lying all over the place out of my head and got up. “Are you happy now? I’m up.”

“Hurry, we’ll be late,” Sammy said to my back as I headed to my own room.

I stood in front of my closet regarding the mess inside. There was still one box in a corner I hadn’t unpacked yet. I pulled it out and dug up a pair of jeans—new designer skinny jeans. As I held them against my legs, I thought how good they would look with heels, but I wasn’t wearing heels. I threw them on the bed and resumed digging through the box where I discovered my last year’s school logo T-shirt. I considered it for a moment, and for sentimental reasons, decided to wear it. That way, I figured it would almost be like having my friends with me.

“Cool jeans, but is that what you’re wearing for a top?”

I spun around to find Sammy leaning against the doorframe to my room, her lips and eyelids shimmering in pink.

I shrugged. “It’s just a T-shirt, no big deal.”

“Exactly, it’s *just* a T-shirt.”

“We’ll you’re wearing *just* a tank top.”

She looked appalled. “Just a tank top!” As if I’d hurt its feelings, Sammy smoothed her hands over the silky material. “This thing cost a fortune. I was saving it for tonight.” She adjusted some of the hanging fabric around the neckline.

“Well, it *is* nice, but so is this T-shirt.”

“If you say so.”

My eyes swept over my reflection in the dresser mirror. The T-shirt was white and fitted, and came to just above the low waist of my jeans, allowing a thin band of skin to peek through. I added some make-up and walked across the hall to Sammy’s room.

She was on all fours, her butt in the air, mumbling something to the dust bunnies under her bed. Two odd socks, one coated in dust, and a dangly silver earring lay on the floor around her.

“What are you doing?”

She didn’t get up. “Looking for my good earring.”

A few seconds later, an exclamation of delight squealed out of her. “I found it!” She held up the earring that matched the one on the floor.

“Great, now can we go?” I asked impatiently.

“You sound real excited—not.”

“I’m excited enough, now come on.”

I grabbed a hoodie from my closet and my bag off the closet door handle, shoved my bare feet into my sneakers and headed downstairs.

“Are you two sure you’re not hungry?” Aunt Rachel called out from the kitchen as we were leaving.

“I told you, Mom, we’re making pizza at Robyn’s.” Sammy lied expertly.

Aunt Rachel came into the hallway. “Oh, right. Well, have fun then. And take care of Brooke.”

I appreciated Aunt Rachel’s order to Sammy, because as ridiculous as it sounded, this city girl felt as if she needed taking care of tonight.



Sammy and I headed the short distance to the parade square where Robyn and Megan were meeting us. Now that I knew Megan disliked me, I was uncomfortable around her. Halfway down the street, she and Robyn came into view.

Robyn was dressed similarly to me in jeans and T-shirt, a jacket hanging from her hand. Megan leaned against a street pole, wearing a too-short mini-skirt, a top even skimpier than Sammy’s, and high heels. Now, granted, there was nothing wrong with the outfit for a party, and I was no island-party expert, but at least I had enough sense to wear comfortable clothing. However, I brought my toothbrush and make-up bag along with me.

Sammy slowed her pace. “You and Megan have some serious tension between you—”

“Ya think?”

“She’s got a big-time hate on for you.”

“What’s her problem anyway?” I asked.

“Well, I told you she went out with Evan last year before I did, and you know she went on a date with Marcus once, but besides that, she’s been crushing on Marcus all throughout high school. But he never pays her any attention. Not like he does to you.”

I looked at her sideways. “What do you mean like he does to me?” I was sure I looked as confused as I felt.

“Oh, come on, don’t tell me you haven’t noticed?” Sammy grinned, and the evening sun glinted off her super glossy lips.

Maybe Sammy was right. I *had* caught him looking at me more than once, but I never thought it was because he was interested in me. I mean, he hardly ever spoke to me. If he liked me, wouldn’t he have tried to strike up a conversation with me at some point? Not like the forced one we had on the bus earlier. He didn’t even say goodbye when I got out of the car. No. Sammy must be wrong. At least, I wasn’t going to allow myself any false hope.

“I think you’re delusional,” I shot back. “He never pays any attention to me.”

“Oh my God, Brooke, you’re so naive.”

“Am not!”

She rolled her eyes. “Brooke, the whole school sees the way he looks at you. He can hardly keep his eyes off you.” She grinned. “And what about today in the cafeteria?”

“What about it?” The interrogation started to annoy me.

“Oh, come on. The way you and Marcus were looking at each other, lost in your own little world together.”

“What!” I stopped in the middle of the street and turned to face Sammy. “I really don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Sammy rolled her eyes, looking frustrated. “Alright listen. In the cafeteria today, whenever you weren’t looking at him, he was looking at you. Believe me. I was watching, and so was everyone else.

And it wasn't only today. It was all week,"

"Hell-o, we're waiting, here," Megan called out with a hand on her hip.

"Yeah, yeah, we're coming," Sammy yelled back.

I shook my head. Was I too busy being charmed by Evan to notice the apparent attention Marcus was giving me? A car came up behind us honking the horn. Sammy and I scooted to the side of the road.

Sammy continued, "Either one of them would walk ten miles through a snow storm to get you a stick of gum if you asked them to." She laughed. "You've got Megan so jealous; she doesn't even act like herself anymore."

The revelation stunned me. I thought of what she'd said earlier. "*Everyone* thinks it?"

"Everyone *sees* it," she corrected me.

"I really hadn't noticed," I said, bewildered. I turned and started walking again, but slower. I would have to pay more attention. Now, I was even more nervous about the night ahead.

"It's a no-brainer to see you like him too," she said, pointing a playful finger at me.

I stopped again, just before crossing the street to get to the gazebo. Now Robyn sat on the railing, gabbing on her cell phone, her legs swinging over the side, while Megan sat on the steps, one leg crossed over the other, looking at her nails as if to keep from getting bored.

"Sammy," I whispered loudly, "we hardly even talk to each other."

"But you were alone with him in the attic!"

My voice rose out of frustration. "Yes, because his arms were filled with paint cans and stuff. I offered to help him. That's it!"

"So, you don't like Marcus?" She looked at me with her eyebrows raised and a smirk on her face.

I calmed myself. "I didn't say that, but—"

Her face lit up. "See. I'm right. You do like him."

"Ugh!" I threw my hands up in the air. "I give up."

Sammy beamed in triumph.

Eventually, we made it across the street to the gazebo. As usual Robyn was friendly to me, and as usual Megan wasn't, but I could play that game too. I ignored her.

Together, the four of us walked across the short bridge that connected the mainland to the Peninsula where Evan and Marcus lived with their parents. The Peninsula was the most upper class part of the village. Big seaside homes sat amongst tall spruce trees—each with its own wharf. It was to one of these wharves we headed.

Two cruisers were tied to the end of the wharf, rocking gently on the waves. As planned, Marcus and Evan were on one of the boats waiting for us. The other boat was crowded with people who I vaguely knew from school—mostly guys from the soccer team and a few girls. Everyone was friendly, though, and seemed happy to see me.

We climbed down the wharf's ladder to the deck of the boat. Megan pushed past me and sat next to Marcus who operated the boat. She threw her tanned legs up on the side and chattered continuously about mundane stuff. Marcus didn't seem to be paying any attention to her, or me either for that matter. Sammy had to be wrong. And this bothered me.

The boat's motor hummed smoothly as we pulled away from the wharf and began the half-hour cruise to the Island. A few minutes into the ride, I noticed a crow circling above the boat. It stayed with us the entire way. If anyone else had noticed, they didn't seem to care. What should have been the prospect of a fun night, felt wrong.

As we pulled up alongside of the Island wharf, I could see another boatload of people were already there. A large camp fire blazed on the shore, some tents were set up in the sand, and music blared from a portable stereo.

Marcus, carrying a large cooler, walked past without looking at me. Megan followed him, carrying

nothing but her heels. I helped carry a cooler and some blankets from the boat to the beach and then crashed on a blanket with Robyn. Immediately, Evan was at my side handing Robyn and me a beer each. At least there were no cops out here to catch us drinking.

Sammy went off on the prospect of landing a new boyfriend—a cute guy named Justin who was on the school soccer team. Evan sat on one corner of our blanket and talked about soccer, his car, and his new workout routine.

As I listened to Evan boast, my anxiety about the Inn and Maggie subsided. I even began to have fun. Everyone was nice to me, with the exception of Megan, and I could handle that. A bunch of girls had gathered on the blanket with us and kept me busy talking about life in Boston. It shut Evan up, and I was happy being the center of attention for once.

Megan however, did not look happy, so to compensate for the lack of attention from the Knight boys, she flirted. She started with Justin, who brushed her off and then moved to any guy who wasn't with a girl. Lastly, she sat next to Marcus on an old weathered log near the fire. I kept my eye on her from a distance, or maybe I was keeping my eye on them, but wouldn't admit it to myself.

In the middle of some juicy gossip Robyn was spreading about another girl at school, Evan, who had left us sometime before, came back and stood on the blanket, towering over us. He held out his hand to me. I was reluctant to take it.

“Come on, Brooke. Let's go sit by the fire.”

All eyes were on me now. Ugh, what could I do without hurting his feelings? So I reached my hand out and let him pull me up, but that wasn't the end of the hand-holding. He didn't let go until we came to the fire, where he offered me a fold-out beach-chair next to his. We sat at opposite ends of the fire from where Marcus and Megan sat.

Evan handed me another beer. An unsettled feeling stirred inside me. I wondered if he thought we were a couple.

Through the flames, I watched Megan grab Marcus' arm and cuddle up to him. He didn't cuddle back, but he didn't cringe away either. Megan tilted her face up to his ear. He leaned his head toward her. Whatever she whispered to him, made his body shake with laughter. She shared his beer. Jealousy burst inside me. Then Evan did something that made me totally uncomfortable.

Our chairs were close together. He reached over and played with an end of my hair. Eventually his hand found its way to the back of my neck. I wanted to cringe away. Not that it didn't feel good; on the contrary, it felt awesome and made me want to lean toward his touch, but not in front of Marcus.

I looked through the flames again until I saw Marcus. He leaned forward, resting his arms on his legs. His expression was dark, and he was glaring at me.

For a moment I felt as if only the two of us and the fire between us existed. The nervous, scared butterflies inside me kept me from breathing. I lowered my gaze to the chunks of burning wood and took a deep breath, chasing them away. When I looked up again, he shrugged Megan off his arm, got up and walked away. Megan looked after him, pouting. I turned my head to see where he was going. Then a warm hand was massaging my neck, breaking my concentration. I turned my gaze back to the flames. The hand subtly reached down my back and pulled me closer. My only thought was that I wanted out of this situation. I felt a nudge to my other arm. I looked over to see Sammy grinning sinfully down at me. I nudged her back, harder, more of a jab.

“Ow!” she protested with a fake hurt look on her face. She bent forward and whispered in my ear. “I just came to see if you had to go.” Her head bobbed strangely to one side.

I looked at her just as strangely. “Go where?”

“You know, go.” Her eyes rolled toward the woods.

“Oh!” I actually did have to go, but wasn't looking forward to the nature part of the task. “Yeah, I'll go with you.”

I looked at Evan. It seemed as though I couldn't stand up now without offering him an explanation as to where I was going. I sighed to my pathetic self. "I'll be right back."

"I'll be right here."

His voice was uncharacteristically soft, his blue eyes dreamy—probably the same look he gave all the girls he seduced. He gave the back of my neck a little squeeze before I got up, sending an unexpected tingle down my spine. *How did he do that?* This was getting way out of control, and the sad part was I didn't dislike it. How pathetic of me to allow myself to be next on his list.

As Sammy and I walked toward the woods, I looked back and spotted Marcus on the wharf talking to some guys, although his face was turned toward me.

"Saaaaammy," Robyn called from down on the beach. We stopped in our tracks. She staggered toward the water, throwing her clothes off.

"You'd better go and stop her before she drowns. I'll be okay," I assured Sammy.

"You sure?"

"Uh huh. Go. Hurry."

"I think she's drunk," Sammy yelled back as she ran toward the beach.

I turned away from her, and in the gathering darkness, I entered the woods alone, on Skull Island.



Chapter Seven

wandered far enough into the woods for no sounds from the beach to reach me. No people hooting and hollering, not even the loud music from the radio could be heard. I figured that way I would be far enough away for some privacy.

Except for the forest sounds, all else was silent.

So when a stick snapped beneath my foot, echoing eerily through the trees, I jumped—and so did my heart. The sharp caw of a lone crow that followed, somewhere above the tree tops, sent chills down my spine. I lifted my eyes, but could see nothing through the thick canopy of twisted branches but a few specks of darkening sky.

With a sense of urgency, I did what I had to do and headed back—at least, I thought I was headed back. It didn't take me long to realize I'd been walking too long and should have been back already.

I was lost. Panic set in. I was on an island for crying out loud. Didn't it have to end somewhere? I resisted the urge to yell out. If I could make it to the shore, I could find my way around and back to my friends. I would be embarrassed of course, and with being the new girl and trying to fit in, my image was fragile. I didn't want to shatter what I'd spent a week building up.

It had been a good half-hour since I'd left the warmth of the camp fire behind. My cell phone was on the blanket back at the beach, and I hadn't thought to ask someone for a flashlight.

The fear of being alone in the forest after dark quickened my pace, making me stumble over a tree root. I fell, ripping my new jeans and cutting my knee. I wanted to curl up and cry, but refused to allow myself that luxury—and also, I didn't want my mascara to run. I picked myself up off of the moss-covered ground and continued onward.

“Okay, Brooke, this is ridiculous.”

I tried talking out loud to calm myself, but my voice in the quiet stillness of the dim forest sounded eerie to me, so I refrained from speaking again. There were no signs of wild life now; even the crow had left me.

I had a fleeting thought that maybe I should stay put; someone had to be looking for me by now. Anxiety won over my reasoning and I keep moving.

A new panic set in as the darkness gathered in around me. I hurried my pace, almost to a run, not watching where I walked. My foot landed on something soft—too soft. Before I could get my other foot in front of me, I was falling. I screamed as I fell. With a loud thud I hit bottom. Everything went silent even my breathing.

Momentarily stunned, I sat in the new darkness, unmoving until pain in my ankle brought me back to reality. I must have twisted it when I hit bottom, but bottom of what?

“Ow.” My voice reverberated back to me, joining the sound of my accelerated heartbeat. I propped myself up on my hands and pulled my injured leg out from the awkward position it was in, straightening it out in front of me. Something sharp dug into the back of my other leg. I reached under and pulled out what felt like a stick and tossed it away from me. It made a hollow sound as it hit the ground. Where was I? I had stepped on something soft and had fallen. With wide eyes, I looked up and sucked in a sharp breath.

Oh no! It wasn't a bad dream. The undeniable pain in my ankle was a clear reminder of the fact that I was awake. I looked at the dim circle of light high above me. It was a long way up. No light found its way down here—in the dark—where I was—alone.

I found my voice and yelled for help. Over and over again I yelled out. Pride didn't matter anymore. I yelled despite the ache in my dry throat. I yelled until my voice cracked, and then I sobbed.

“This can’t be happening.” My sobs became whimpers. “Ow.” The pain in my ankle came in throbs now. I sat on the cold, damp ground with my arms wrapped around myself, rocking back and forth, staring into the blackness, terrified and alone. “Help,” I whimpered one last desperate time, but not loud enough to do any good.

As I sat there, the darkness seemed to come alive. My eyes grew wider and wider. Blinking became an effort. The new silence became so deafening; I was scared to yell out again.

A low throaty rattle broke the silence. In the middle of the circle, against the midnight blue of the evening sky, the shape of a large bird sat amidst a tangle of tree branches. Its sharp caw echoed in the tunnel-like space that surrounded me. A familiar sound I remembered from Aunt Rachel’s front yard the day I’d moved to Deadwich. I snapped my head down and stared straight ahead again.

Unpleasant warmth seeped under my skin. I blinked away the trickle of perspiration that ran down my forehead and into my eyes, stinging them, but I didn’t move. My body was on lock-down now, as it always was in the face of my worst fear—the dark. I felt it close in around me, become thick and heavy. Breathing became an effort. I was too terrified to move a muscle for fear the darkness would see me. Like holding your breath, waiting for a cold wave to crash over you, I held mine waiting for the darkness to claim me.

Just when I thought I would go insane and be swallowed whole, a distant sound brought me hope. With my ear tipped upward, I held my breath and listened keenly.

“Brooooooke”

I sucked in a sharp breath and yelled back. “Here. I’m down here. Help!” I didn’t know or care who it was, they were calling my name, and it filled me with hope.

“Brooke, I hear you. Where are you?”

“I’m in a hole. Down here.” A rush of adrenaline pumped through me. With my good leg, I pushed myself into a standing position.

“Brooke, I’m here. I’ll get you out.”

I recognized the voice. Of all people, why did it have to be him? My heart thumped at a new level as Marcus’ dark silhouette peered over the edge of the hole.

“Are you hurt?”

“Just my ankle, I think it’s sprained.”

“It looks like you’re in an old abandoned well shaft.”

For the first time since falling, I looked at my surroundings. Sometime during my anguish, unbeknownst to me, my eyes had adjusted to the dark. I could vaguely make out now that I was in a round hole, lined with moss-covered rocks.

“Brooke, I have to go for help.”

“No!” I blurted. “Don’t leave me here.”

Marcus hesitated. “I need a rope. There’s one on the boat.”

“It’s too dark.”

“Okay, I won’t leave. I’m just going to look around the well for something. Hang on.”

I stood in the middle of the well, gnawing on my bottom lip, my hands clutched against my chest, afraid he wouldn’t come back.

“I promise I won’t leave sight of the well,” he yelled out, his voice now an uncomfortable distance away.

I nodded nervously, not thinking he couldn’t see me.

An immeasurable amount of time passed as I stood there, too frightened to move again. Then the sound of Marcus’ voice filled me with relief.

“I found a fallen tree. I’m going to lower it down. It’s heavy, so watch out.”

With my eyes glued to his silhouette, I hobbled backwards until my back hit the damp rocks that

made up the wall of the well.

With many grunts and some colorful words, Marcus managed to lower the tree into the well. Some of its limbs broke off, crashing around my feet, but the main part of the tree stayed whole. As he climbed down, I worried the dead wood would break under his weight and he would come crashing down, but it held.

Once his feet hit the ground beside me, I didn't care who he was anymore; I flung my arms around his neck and held on tightly. After a brief hesitation, I felt his hands on my waist. My eyes closed, and I pressed my face into the softness of his flannel shirt, allowing myself a moment to bask in the security of his arms.

Why did being in Marcus' arms feel so right? Not so long ago, I was on the verge of making out with his brother. Reluctantly, I tore myself out of our embrace and took a step backwards.

"Thanks," I said, suddenly shy and embarrassed. I tried not to put any weight on my injured ankle and ended up stumbling back into his arms again as he caught me from falling.

Marcus helped lower me into a sitting position. "Is it just your ankle? Did you hurt anything else?"

I shook my head. *Just my pride*, but I wasn't going to admit that.

Marcus surprised me by pulling a folded piece of newspaper out of his shirt pocket and a lighter from another pocket. I sat quietly amazed as he ripped the paper into shreds, gathered some sticks that had broken off the tree on its way down into the well, and made a small fire.

"Wow, I can't believe you just happen to have a fire-starting kit on you."

His mouth turned up at the corners, into the promise of a smile. It reminded me of the way he'd looked at me on the bus earlier.

"If I'd really been thinking, I would have brought a flashlight."

I let out a sharp laugh. "Yeah, I know what you mean."

The glow from the small fire flickered across one half of his face, leaving the other half shadowed. I couldn't help but stare at him as he busied himself with building a stick pyramid over the weak flame. He tilted his face toward me. I stared at the light dancing in his dark pupils, and a strange feeling came over me. A vision formed in the space between us.

A young girl with flowers in her hair and clothed in a long, frilly dress, flitted happily in and out of the trees. A handsome young man chased her playfully. Their laughter filled the air. Then without warning, the vision turned to one of horror. Out of nowhere, someone grabbed the girl and boy and dragged them through the woods. Screams replaced laughter. Their fading cries of despair tore at my heart.

Another voice in the distance pulled me out of the trance. There was a light pressure on my shoulders. Someone was shaking me. My eyes focused on Marcus. He stared at me. I blinked.

"Are you sure you're alright?" he asked.

My mouth hung open in shock. I snapped it shut and swallowed. "Yeah, I'm fine."

"What just happened?" His hands lingered on my shoulders as if he didn't want to let go. Their weight warmed my skin.

"I-I don't know." I lied. "I must have blacked out."

"Maybe you hit your head when you fell."

I tore my gaze away from his. "No, I'm fine, really. I didn't hit my head." I didn't want to tell him about the vision. He would think I was crazy. "I'm just freaked out that's all. Now can we get out of here, before it gets any darker?" I acted somewhat annoyed, masking my real feelings. Not even sure of what those were.

Although this was the worst situation I'd ever been in, Marcus made me feel safe. It was the oddest thing. He brought light to my darkness here and now, just as he had in my bad dreams at night. He comforted me, and I was glad now that he'd been the one who'd found me.

His arms dropped to his sides. “Can you stand?”

I nodded and tried to push myself up. After some effort, Marcus helped me. He kept an arm around my waist for support. I let him.

“Do you think you can climb?”

“Well I’m not staying down here all night.”

He reached down and lifted a long piece of wood from the fire and used it like a torch. The small, flickering flame, held high, illuminated the entire bottom of the well. I saw Marcus’ eyes rest on something behind me. I turned to look. He bent and picked the object up, turning it to catch the light.

“It’s a bone,” he said mesmerized.

My mouth fell open. It wasn’t a stick that I’d pulled out from under me. It was a piece of a skeleton. Marcus bent forward and dug the point of the bone into the soft layers of earth that made up the floor of the well. It wasn’t long before his curiosity uncovered more parts to the skeleton.

“Okay, enough,” I said horrified, staggering backwards until my back hit the rocks. The story Sammy had told me about two young lovers being murdered on Skull Island flooded my head. My good leg gave out and my knee buckled. Marcus dropped the bone and caught me before I hit the bottom of the well.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” he asked again.

“Yeah, I’m sure. Let’s just get out of here.” I twisted out of his grip and limped toward the makeshift ladder.

I wrapped my fingers around a splintery branch. Marcus’ hand hovered protectively near the small of my back. But before I could reach the next branch, something shiny in the stone wall caught my eye. The flame from the stick glinted off its surface.

“What’s that?” I asked, pointing to a dark crevice in the wall between some rocks.

Marcus held the burning stick higher, and at the same time took the necessary steps to get to the object. Forgetting about the skeleton and the growing darkness, I left my perch on the tree and hobbled to the rock wall. Marcus pulled a handful of moss away, letting it fall to the ground. The object he uncovered was metal and ancient looking. A limb from the tree must have scraped some of the moss away from it on its way down, exposing it.

Marcus pulled the object from the crevice. It dangled from a long chain that had once been silver in color. The pendant was a familiar looking double spiral. Tarnished with age, only a small bit of silver shone through the patina. We both stared at the object, speechless as he turned it over in his palm, wiping away some dirt with his thumb.

As Marcus rubbed the object, the flame from the end of the stick he held shot up into the air like a blow torch, startling both of us. It flickered wildly, as if trying to tell us something. Our eyes met and then shot back to the pendant. Probably a draft, I tried telling myself—although I hadn’t felt one.

As I watched Marcus wipe away more dirt with his shirt tail, it dawned on me where I’d seen the ancient symbol before. “I know what this is,” I said pointing to the object in his hand. “I did a history project on Celtic symbols last year in school.”

Marcus lifted his gaze from the pendant to me.

“It’s a double spiral. It was used to symbolize the equinox, when day and night are equal” My voice trailed off, as what I’d just said sunk in. Day and night ... Day and Knight. I truly was losing my mind.

Marcus was silent, as if considering what I’d just told him, so when he finally spoke, I jumped.

“Here, you found it. It’s yours now.”

He dropped the stick onto the dying embers and took a step closer to me. The faint scent of fabric softener from his clothing camouflaged the musty scent of wet earth that surrounded us. He worked, gently placing the chain around my neck, lifting the hair off my shoulders from under it. It felt awkward.

as if he gave me a gift, but I didn't stop him. The chain felt cold against the back of my neck, but when his fingers grazed my skin there, a warm tingly feeling replaced the cold. I felt my face flush and was glad for the darkness.

We were close enough now to kiss. Too shy to look into his eyes, I stared at the hollow in his neck, the spot where his T-shirt formed a vee. One of Marcus' hands still held the pendant while his other smoothed the hair over my shoulder. I barely breathed as he slipped his hand out from underneath, letting the cold metal fall to my skin. The moment the double spiral touched me, a shimmer of energy like a mild electrical current shot through me, jolting me slightly. A gasp flew from me at the same time as my hand flew to the pendant. The cold metal turned warm against my skin—unnaturally warm.

The soft pressure from the hand on my shoulder turned into a tense grip. "What's happening?" I could tell by the look on Marcus' face, that he'd registered the shock on mine the moment the metal had touched my skin. "Take it off."

I couldn't bring myself to remove it. I shook my head. "No." I felt as if the pendant had wanted me to find it, and I wasn't giving it up so easily. Almost defiantly, I looked into the dark eyes that stared back at me. "I'm keeping it." My hand gripped around it protectively. Marcus let go of my shoulder. I glanced at the dark hole where the pendant had come from before grabbing the tree limbs and climbing out.

It wasn't an easy climb. Some of the limbs were slippery with moss and rotting bark, but after some effort on my part, my head emerged from the hole, only to find more darkness.

Relief came nonetheless. I pulled on roots and rocks, and clawed at the dirt until I was on my hands and knees on solid ground. I collapsed face first into the musty-smelling, but soft, moss-covered earth, panting.

Seconds later Marcus emerged behind me. I rolled out of the way and onto my back. He crawled to my side and stared down at me. My chest heaved as did his.

"Thanks for rescuing me," I said in between pants. "I could have been down there all night."

Marcus stared at the pendant in silence, ignoring my words. He seemed mesmerized by it. Then his gaze lifted to mine. "Come on. Let's get away from this place."

I didn't like the tone of his voice. "Away from this place" implied a lot more than simply, out of here did. He sounded spooked, which made me even more spooked. I didn't want to be anywhere near this tomb in the pitch darkness, which would be soon.



Chapter Eight

Marcus stood, pulling me up with him. I looked down at myself, brushing away dirt and other bits of forest floor off my clothes. While I examined the rip in the knee of my jeans, I felt a hand brush lightly against the side of my face. I straightened. Marcus' fingers were in my hair. He pulled his hand away, and in it was a dried leaf. Instinctively, I lifted my hands to my hair and began to pull my fingers through the tangles.

"Crap, I must look like" I struggled for the right word without sounding vulgar, "like"

"Like someone who'd gotten lost in the woods and had fallen into a hole and then climbed their way out?"

"Yeah." I let out a quick embarrassed laugh. "Like that."

Marcus grinned.

"I can't ever remember being so dirty."

"Because Boston's so clean?" he teased.

"Immaculate." It was me who grinned now. "Well there was one time last month, when a car drove by and splashed my new boots with dirty puddle water and"

As I babbled away nervously, a breeze blew somewhere up above, rustling the leaves in the tree tops, reminding me of the situation I was in. My mood grew serious again. "Did you bring the extra newspaper you didn't use? You never know if we might need it again." I laughed at the irony.

"Yeah," he said patting his shirt pocket.

An awkward moment passed as I balanced on one foot, wondering how I was going to put pressure on the injured one to walk.

As if Marcus had read my mind, he said, "You won't be able to walk on that ankle." He turned his back to me and crouched. "Here, get on."

I climbed onto his back, and for a second didn't know what to do with my arms. But when he reached down and grabbed my legs, being careful with my injured one, I wrapped my arms around him, clasping my hands together at the front. I felt my heart beat against his back and wondered if he could feel it—how embarrassing.

As we bounced along through the forest, dark wisps of his hair tickled my face, but I didn't complain. Marcus smelled good, too. Not perfumed or fruity, but fresh like the outdoors. Like laundry hung outside on a cool day, lightly scented with smoke from the campfire we'd left behind on the beach. I found myself savoring every moment of my piggy-back ride.

"How long did it take you to find me?" I wondered out loud.

"About an hour, but I walked really fast ... ran at times."

"You were running through the woods to find me?"

"Ah, yeah, well I only had a couple hours before dark, and when I didn't find you right away I hurried."

After his unwilling confession, which hinted to me that he did have some sort of feelings for me, neither of us spoke for some time.

As I bounced along, clinging to Marcus like he was my life preserver, the sky darkened completely.

"How close are we?" I asked.

"Not close enough. I can't see that well anymore." He stopped. I could tell by the way his shoulders heaved up and down that he needed a rest. I slid off him, landing on my good foot.

Marcus raked his eyes over the area.

"Don't you have a cell phone?" I asked with despairing hope.

He shook his head. "I left it on the boat."

"Well that was smart," I mumbled under my breath.

"I'm going to yell out to see if anyone can hear me."

With his hands cupped around his mouth, Marcus yelled at the top of his lungs, but the only reply was his echo and a distant caw.

"It's no use," I said. The yelling just made me jumpy.

"I'll make a fire. We'll have to stay here until morning." He gave me an apologetic look that I could barely see.

"Great," I mumbled and then looked around the ground for anything useful. "What can I do?"

"Tear some loose bark from that tree." He pointed at a white birch.

The tree was maybe a dozen feet away. As apprehensive as I was about leaving his side, I didn't want him to know it. So, keeping him in my sight, I hobbled over to the tree and ripped off an armful of loose bark. He had the leftover newspaper shredded into bits, and a small pile of sticks arranged in a pyramidal formation by the time I returned. A bundle of fallen sticks lay on the ground beside him. He built us a sufficient campfire of our very own, and although it was only a dim glow, he brought light to me once more.

However, the prevailing gloom hovered near the fringes of the light, waiting to quell the last ember and plunge us into darkness once again.

With Marcus' help, I lowered myself into a sitting position on a patch of dry moss. He sat down beside me and stared into the flames. Except for the crackling of burning sticks, the forest was quiet. So when I spoke, it was very low, so as not to disturb the forest.

"What did the others do when you left to find me?"

He hesitated, and an amused grin spread across his face. "I don't think anyone noticed me leaving."

"They must have noticed by now?" I was annoyed at his casualness of the situation.

"By now, they're probably thinking we've run off together. I mean, that would be the obvious assumption, wouldn't it?" An eyebrow rose in anticipation of my reply as he continued to stare into the flames.

"Oh. I hadn't thought of that." He was probably right. *What would everyone think of me? What would Evan think?*

"You've ruined my brother's night by getting lost, you know. I'll never hear the end of it." He chuckled quietly.

"This sucks." *Or does it?* I asked myself.

His expression darkened. "What, you're not having fun?"

"Not funny." I stared gloomily into the flames, feeling their warmth kiss the front of my body.

Marcus stirred the fire and then tossed on the last of the dried sticks and a big fallen log he'd found nearby. Cinders soared into the night sky, casting a brighter glow upon us—swelling our circle of light—pushing back the darkness somewhat. I sneaked a glance at him out of the corner of my eye. This impenetrable country boy was perfectly content out here in the wild. *He must really like me to have run through the woods to find me,* I thought to myself.

"How's your ankle?" he asked suddenly.

Crap! He caught me looking at him again. Embarrassed, I quickly turned my face away. "I think it's swollen, and it stings, but it's no worse."

Out of the corner of my eye I saw him nod. I was also aware of the fact that he was looking at me again.

A sudden gust of wind swept over us, blowing across the flames, causing them to lick at the ground. I shivered and wrapped my arms around myself despite the warmth of the fire.

"Here." Marcus took off his over-washed flannel shirt and handed it to me.

“But you’ll be cold.”

“I’ll be fine,” he assured me.

As I reached for the shirt, I allowed myself a few seconds glance at the muscled arm that held it out to me. That’s when my eyes rested on something unexpected. The breath caught in my throat, and my eyes grew wide. I stretched my neck out toward his arm to get a closer look. When Marcus turned his head toward me, I saw my shock mirrored on his face.

Shyness aside, I reached over and shoved his T-shirt sleeve up. A tattoo of double spirals encircled his biceps. “Why didn’t you tell me?” My voice was higher pitched than usual.

He shrugged. “It’s just a tattoo, no big deal.”

“No big deal?! It’s the exact same symbol as the pendant we just found!”

“I figured if I told you, you’d freak out, like you’re doing now.”

“Freak ... of course I’m freaking out.”

“Brooke, it’s just a coincidence.”

“No way. This is too weird to be *just* a coincidence.”

He looked down at my hand where it covered his view of the tattoo. Aware for the first time that I was touching him, I pulled it back, but the sleeve stayed bunched up around his shoulder.

Instinctively I grabbed my new Celtic relic and held it up in a way so that I could see both, his tattoo and it, in my vision at the same time. As if we needed it, the light from the fire intensified. It gleamed off the shiny bits of metal peeking through the burnished surface of the pendant, casting a warm glow over the black ink around Marcus’ arm, and it brought a spark of warmth to his eyes, which were looking intensely into mine.

With a fever spreading over my skin and a yearning pull in my gut, I jerked my gaze back to the object in my hand. Each double spiral in the tattoo was equal in size to the pendant.

“So, what do you think it means?” he asked, the serious edge in his voice betraying his casualness of the situation. “Day and night, huh?” There was a nervous ring to the short laugh that came after his last remark.

“Or,” I pointed to me then to him, “Day and *Knigh*?”

Wordless, he nodded.

All this time, he had to have been pondering what I’d told him about the symbol. I dropped the pendant to my chest and looked back at the tattoo. It looked slightly raised, as if it were still healing. My eyes narrowed in suspicion. “When did you get it?”

“Last Sunday.”

“The day I came to Deadwich,” I said.

He nodded.

I shivered again and remembered I still held the shirt. Grateful, I slipped my bare arms into the warm sleeves. I wrapped my arms around my legs and lay my chin down on my knees and drank in the masculine, but fresh scent of Marcus. As I stared into the dying fire, I considered all that had happened in the hours since I’d gotten lost. Then I yawned.

“Why don’t you get some sleep? I’ll keep the fire going,” Marcus suggested.

“I am really tired,” I confessed before yawning again. “But, I don’t know if I’ll be able to sleep out here.”

The truth was, this double spiral thing had me totally freaked out. It was somehow significant, and so was falling into the well to find it. And despite what Marcus wanted me to believe, I had a feeling he was just as freaked out as I was. It was no coincidence that our last names matched the symbol’s meaning. I yawned again. It couldn’t be.

I looked over at him. “Um, you can’t just sit there all night. Why don’t you lie down too?” I was grateful the fire had died down, because I felt my face flush with my sudden boldness.

“If it’ll make you feel better,” he said casually and then, to my surprise, he shuffled closer to me.

He lay down behind me and put his hand on my shoulder as if to guide me down. *How perfect.* My heart raced wildly. He wasn’t just going to lie down anywhere; he was going to lie down beside me. The side of my face came to rest against the musty-smelling moss. Marcus kept his body just far enough behind me so I couldn’t really feel him.

We can do better than this.

I sat back up, took Marcus’ shirt off and positioned it over us, then lay back down. His body had shifted, and this time, my head landed on his arm. From the initial surprise, I stiffened, but after a few breaths, I allowed my body to relax into his. With just our T-shirts between us, I could faintly feel his heart beat against my back. I smiled to myself. *That’s better.*

I laid my hand across his arm, next to my cheek, and was rewarded by the comforting feeling of his other arm draping across my waist. He snuggled in a little closer still. My light was with me, and I felt warm and safe in the dark forest.

The flames flickered in the dying fire, imprinting images of all sorts in my mind, until every shape I saw became sinister and scary. I closed my eyes and concentrated on feeling Marcus’ warm body next to mine; the soothing thump of his heart beating against my back made me want to turn and press my heart to his. *Where did these feelings come from?* I told myself it was just because he’d saved me from doom, and I was grateful, nothing more. Then why did I get a tingle when he stirred slightly, flattening his hand out on my stomach? The kind of tingle that makes your heart stop beating for a second then flutter back to life; the kind of tingle you don’t want to end.

“Are you still cold?” he asked, stirring the hairs on the back of my head with his breath.

“No. You?”

“No.”

A few moments passed.

“Marcus?”

“Yeah?”

“What made you decide to come and look for me?”

He didn’t speak for a long moment. I held my breath waiting for his answer, and then he said, “You were gone too long. I thought you might be lost.” He paused. I heard him swallow. “And it was getting dark.”

“Oh.” Funny how he had been the only one who noticed I was missing.

“Thanks again for finding me,” I said softly. In answer, his arm tightened around me, and I fell into a dreamless sleep in the light of my protector’s arms.



Chapter Nine

I awoke shivering. The morning air had a chill to it that nipped the skin on my lower back where my T-shirt had hiked up. Sometime during the night, Marcus and I had both turned. I was curled into a ball now against his back. My head lay on the moss, and ... *oh, my God* ... my arm was around his waist. His arm was on top of mine, his hand around my wrist, holding it closely to him.

My eyes sprung open to darkness. My face, which was buried under the flannel shirt, was pressed up against Marcus' black T-shirt. My mind raced back to the previous night, searching for a reason why I would be hugging him, but my last memory before waking up was of falling asleep, facing the fire with *his* arm around me.

Careful not to wake him, I eased my arm out from under his. When I heard a soft groan, I stiffened, my hand hovering an inch above his side. When he didn't move, I retracted my arm and rolled onto my back. It was then that I felt as if I had been beaten and left to die.

Every muscle in my body ached from the fall—and sleeping on the ground hadn't helped. I clamped down on my teeth and sat up. Marcus stirred and looked over his shoulder at me.

"Oh, sorry. Did I wake you?" I asked, before I could think of something *not* stupid to say.

"Yeah," he said with a morning rasp to his voice, "and I really wanted to sleep in today too."

I rolled my eyes at him. "Well roll back over then, and I'll wake you at what ... noon?"

"I'd appreciate it, thanks," he said in a sleepy whisper. His head rolled back away from me.

You can't be serious, I said to myself when it looked as if he really was going to go back to sleep. When I saw his shoulder twitch with a silent laugh, I smiled to myself.

I rubbed my eyes and looked at our surroundings for the first time. A thick accumulation of mist made it difficult to see the tree tops. Other than that, the forest didn't seem as frightening in the morning light.

The raw dampness raised goose bumps on my arms, though, and I shivered again. I shoved them back under the shirt, not wanting to come out from under it just yet. To the left of me, our little fire that had once kept me warm and safe from the darkness was reduced to a pile of ash. On the other side of the ash, through the pathless forest, the well existed somewhere—or did it? I began to wonder if it was really there when no one was around to see it.

Get a grip, Brooke. You need to get out of this place and back to civilization. If that's what you would call it.

I glanced down at Marcus again. His back warmed my legs. His breathing had become steady again. "Are you seriously going back to sleep?"

"Just five more minutes," he groaned.

I huffed in disbelief, threw the shirt off my legs and with a few muffled grunts and groans, pushed myself into a standing position. Marcus rolled lazily onto his back, stretching himself out. His head fell into the indentation in the moss where mine had been, his eyes still closed.

In a way, I wished I hadn't gotten up. I wanted the chance to wrap my arm around him again, feel him against me and let him sleep if he wanted to. Already, as I stood stiffly hugging myself in the chill air, the memory of the warmth between us faded.

As if he sensed me staring down at him, his eyes flew open and they were aimed directly at mine.

"Good morning," he said.

Crap! I did a casual sweep of the area around him, hoping he hadn't noticed me staring at him. "Does this mean you've decided *not* to sleep in?"

"It's too cold to sleep now. It was much warmer a few minutes ago."

I felt my face flush and turned away.

Shy all over again, I changed the subject and said, “Which direction were we going in when we stopped?”

He sat up and raked a hand through his tousled hair. “That’s the way back.” He pointed to woods that looked the same in every direction, but his confidence gave me hope. “How’s your ankle?”

I flexed it, teetering on my other foot. “Hurts a little, but not as bad as it did.” Despite the pain, there was no way I was going to be carried out of the woods in front of Sammy and all her friends like some prissy city girl—even though that’s exactly what I was.

Marcus stood up and stretched as if he’d slept in the woods all the time. “Here,” he said handing me the shirt when he saw me hugging myself.

I took it from him, appreciating the warmth still lingering from our bodies, and slipped my arms into the sleeves.

“Well, should we have breakfast first, or wait till we get back?” I joked.

He laughed. I gave a little laugh too, mostly at the irony of the situation.

“I could skewer us a squirrel if you’d rather eat now?” He looked at me with adorably messy hair and a cute grin.

“I think I can wait, but that’s good to know.”

The stiffness gradually left me as I walked, but my ankle still hurt. I tripped now and then in the thick fog, even though I was usually quite coordinated. Marcus caught me from falling more than once. He offered many times to piggy-back me, but I refused, claiming that my ankle didn’t hurt that much anymore. The truth was, it hadn’t hurt that much when I’d first woken up, but all this walking made it worse.

“I can just imagine what those guys are going to say when we walk out of the woods together,” I said, starting to get a nervous twinge in the pit of my stomach.

He chuckled, as if he looked forward to hearing everyone’s opinions.

“Are you worried about what Evan will say?” he asked with an undeniable note of interest in his tone, accompanied by a hint of sarcasm.

“Um, no more than anyone else.”

“He’ll be mad you know. He has a childish sort of temper.”

His sudden seriousness took me off guard, and I got defensive. “Well that’s his problem. I’m not his property.”

He flashed a curious eye at me. “You like him, don’t you?”

This wasn’t a conversation I wanted to have with Marcus. I couldn’t believe he was putting me on the spot like this. I wanted to tell him, he was the one I liked, not Evan, but I didn’t have the guts to say it.

“It’s complicated,” I said after a pause. Although Marcus stared straight ahead, his pace slowed, as if he were waiting intently to hear more. “I think he’s misunderstanding our friendship.”

He stopped to hold a tree branch out of my way, but before I could take a step through the spot he’d cleared, he looked straight at me. “Is that what it is ... friendship?”

A spark surfaced in his eyes, a shimmer of hope maybe, and in that moment, I couldn’t get my legs to work. Like me, he too seemed to have stopped breathing.

I looked at him, almost apologetically. “That’s how it started.” And then I turned my head away and walked past. Behind him, I heard the tree branch swoosh back into place.

But the interrogation didn’t end there.

“And now?” he asked, coming up beside me.

I stopped and shot a frustrated glance at him. “Why are you asking me about this?”

He shrugged. “Just curious.”

As uncomfortable as I was with the conversation, I felt compelled to answer Marcus. I felt the need

to put his mind to rest.

I resumed walking. "Well, to be honest, I didn't think it would get this serious."

"So it's serious then?"

I threw my hands up in the air in frustration. "No, that was the wrong word. I think *he* thinks we're a couple—"

"And you don't?"

My frustration escalated. It was clear to me that he was beating around the bush, with more serious questions on his mind.

"If there's something you want to know, just spit it out, because I'm getting really uncomfortable with the interrogation," I said, angry now. He stayed quite. "Look, I didn't plan on Evan and me becoming a couple, but somehow, it seems to be happening anyway."

"Well if you don't like him that way, you should tell him," he said frankly.

I quickened my pace, taking the lead again. Now I didn't know whose side he was on, mine or Evan's. He was right though. I continued on in silence. Marcus didn't ask any more questions.

About an hour into the walk, the fog had lifted. Not long after, I saw a clearing up ahead on the other side of the trees. My heart pounded in my chest. Instead of being ecstatically happy, I was extremely nervous. If I was being honest with myself, I would rather stay here, in the forest with Marcus forever, then face everyone knowing what would be on their minds when they saw the two of us walk out of the woods together, but it was unavoidable.

"Wait," I said.

I stopped suddenly and took a deep breath. Somewhere in the low shrubs that grew on this part of the Island, birds sang their morning songs to one another. Marcus turned to face me. His serious expression had softened since our last conversation.

"What is it?"

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him how I felt about him, but the words wouldn't form. I swallowed them and looked away.

"Just tell him the truth."

I looked back at him. "What is the truth?" I held my breath waiting for his answer.

And in a soft, serious voice he replied, "You tell me."

Was he waiting for me to make the first move? I pursed my lips, my frown deepening. I looked down and realized I still had his shirt on.

"Here, you'd better take this; don't want to make it look worse than it already looks."

When he reached for his shirt, his T-shirt sleeve hiked up exposing the bottom swirls of the double spiral tattoo on his arm. We hadn't talked about it yet today. My eyes lingered below the hem of his sleeve.

"I wonder how they're connected, the tattoo and the pendant. Or if there even is a connection." I said the last part more to myself than to him.

But he shrugged and answered simply, "I don't know."

The tenderness in his voice made me look up at him. And with all the vulnerability I could spare, I took a few seconds to look from one eye to the other, and then back to the tattoo.

Marcus pushed his sleeve up exposing the whole design imprinted across his biceps. He looked at it briefly and then glanced at the pendant. I longed to touch the spirals. My fingers twitched at the thought, then he let go of the sleeve and it fell, covering the tattoo once more. I looked away.

My own double spiral was cradled in my palm. "Do you think it means something good or bad?"

He shrugged.

"You must have an opinion," I said when he didn't answer my question.

He took a step closer and held his hand out. I dropped the pendant into his open palm.

Without lifting his eyes from the object he held, he took a deep breath and asked, “How’s your ankle doing?”

I pursed my lips and stared at him, waiting for his opinion. He must have had one, and I wasn’t going to let him change the subject.

By now the back of his hand rested against my chest just above the neckline of my T-shirt, sending a feathery soft tingle across my skin. With his other hand he pulled the neck of my T-shirt out and let the pendant drop inside, where it rested comfortably.

“Maybe you should keep it hidden.” Then he lifted his eyes to mine and answered my first question. “I honestly don’t know, but I have a feeling we’re going to find out.”

“So you think it *is* significant in some way—the whole symbol and the meaning of it?”

“The equinox, when day and night are equal?” he said. “Maybe *we* represent day and night.”

My eyes widened. Now we were getting somewhere. “Yes. Maybe that *is* it, but I still don’t understand.”

“The equinox is in a couple weeks. Maybe we’ll find out then.” He shrugged an eyebrow.

“I hadn’t thought of that.” I had the strongest feeling then that moving to Deadwiche was fate rather than an unlucky circumstance.

I wondered how much of a mystery this was for Marcus. For me it concerned creepy Maggie, the bad dreams I’d been having, and now the whole pendant, day and night thing.

I closed my eyes for a second and wished I was back in Boston, waking up in my own bed. When I opened them back up, Marcus gave me a grim smile and then turned away.

We continued on toward the clearing, but slower than we’d been traveling all morning. It was as if neither of us wanted this time to end.

“Marcus, have you had any weird dreams lately?”

“Weird dreams? How weird?”

He might as well have said yes, because he had just unwittingly confessed to having weird dreams of his own. There was no way I was going to tell him I dreamed about him every night, or my thoughts on Maggie. No, I couldn’t risk him thinking I was crazy. He looked over his shoulder at me. I had to give him something.

“Every night since last Monday I’ve had a nightmare, and I wake up at twelve midnight, sharp.”

He nodded as if he knew. “And are you surrounded by darkness in your nightmare?”

I barely heard him over the crunch of the forest floor beneath our feet. Maybe he hadn’t wanted me to hear. But I had.

My eyes widened. “You too?”

“No. What I mean is—”

Our conversation came to an abrupt end.

“Hey, Brooke, where were you all night?” I looked past Marcus, to see an excited Sammy scrambling through the bushes toward us.

I stopped in my tracks. Marcus stopped beside me. I had been alone in the woods with Marcus for so long that seeing and hearing Sammy felt like an extreme invasion of privacy.

She looked as if she would explode waiting for my answer. “Um.” That’s all I had. I hadn’t thought of what I was going to say. I looked to Marcus for help.

“Brooke got lost. By the time I found her, it was so dark we couldn’t see to get back, so we waited till morning.” Marcus’ voice was steady, as if his line had been well rehearsed.

“How convenient.”

I stiffened at the sound of Evan’s voice. He appeared behind Sammy, stopped beside her and looked at me accusingly.

“I’ll bet he took real good care of you, too.”

Marcus took a step out in front of me, almost protectively. He opened his mouth to say something,

but I had other ideas.

I came up beside Marcus again, and passed him by a step. This was my chance to break off whatever little thing there was between Evan and me, so cutting Marcus off before he began, I blurted, "As a matter of fact, he did take good care of me!"

I looked at Evan, daring him to defy me. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Marcus wince ever-so slightly.

"Well lucky for you," Evan shot back.

"At least he came to look for me."

I felt my face redden with anger, and despite my sore, abused ankle, I left Marcus' side and stomped past Evan and Sammy, who stared open mouthed, and hurried the rest of the way out of the woods to the beach, which I could now see between the trees.



Chapter Ten

Brooke, wait up!” Sammy yelled after me, but I was too mad to stop and wait for her. I needed to get out of the woods—it was getting crowded.

Finally, I reached the beach. When I passed the last tree, making my entrance back into society, all eyes were on me. The first person I saw was Megan. She was shaking the sand out of a blanket. I didn’t turn my head in her direction, but I felt the hatred radiate from her as I walked past.

A few obscenities were called out as I walked across the beach toward the wharf. I didn’t stop to acknowledge anyone. I just wanted to bury myself in the sand. By the time I’d reached the wharf my ankle throbbed, but I couldn’t baby it yet. I jumped down onto the deck of the cruiser, twisting it, hurting it further.

I glanced over my shoulder. Evan and Sammy came out of the woods followed by Marcus, who received a round of applause when he emerged. The brothers were having a heated discussion. I saw Evan jab his finger into Marcus’ chest several times before Marcus shoved him. Someone grabbed them and pulled them apart, just as they were about to go at each other. Overwhelmed with a medley of emotions, I turned away and went inside the cabin.

Someone had pulled the little curtains across the portholes inside. The darkness was welcoming. I sat heavily on the unmade bed and let my head drop into my hands allowing a few tears to escape down my cheeks.

“Ohhh.”

An ungodly moan came from deep within the blankets. I jumped and wiped my tear-stained face with the backs of my hands. A head covered in messy, dark, curls emerged from under the covers.

Robyn sat up, moaning, holding on to her head, as if to keep it from exploding. She looked at me under heavy lids, her hand shielding her eyes from the thin shaft of light coming from the slightly open cabin door. It cut across the bed on an angle, nowhere near her.

“Are you just getting up?” she moaned.

“No. Ah, I’ve been up for a while.” Obviously she hadn’t remembered or even noticed I’d gone missing the previous night. “Can I get you something? You look awful.”

“A gallon of ice water would be nice.” With both hands she scratched her entire head, messing her hair up further.

A quick search of the compact cabin, led me back to the door where a short counter with a tiny sink was built onto the wall. Below it, a small fridge fit snugly under the counter. The fridge was stocked with hangover elixirs—bottled water and soda. I grabbed us each a bottle of water.

“Here.” I unscrewed the cap off the bottle and handed it to Robyn. She audibly gulped down half without stopping and then handed it back to me. Her eyes fell shut before her head of dark curls hit the pillow again. She stayed silent, so I left her to her misery.

I found my bag of toiletries on the floor in the small space between the foot of the bed and the wall and took the opportunity of being alone, well almost alone, to brush my teeth with some of my drinking water. I pulled my hair brush through my tangles, raking out bits of moss and other debris as I did, and then looked for a place to sit down. The benches had been transformed into the bed, which Robyn slept in, so there wasn’t any place inside to sit.

I limped my way out of the cabin and sat on one of the benches molded into the side of the boat. The fog had evaporated completely, and the warmth of the sun wrapped itself around my chilled body. I sat sideways, stretching my injured leg out on the bench, and pulled my pant leg up. My ankle was puffy, so I held the water bottle against it, wincing when the cold touched it.

“It looks swollen.”

My heart fluttered at the sound of a now familiar voice. I looked up. “I think it’s getting worse,” I said, wincing again as shooting stabs of pain shot up my leg.

“You shouldn’t have walked on it.” Marcus jumped onto the boat, making it rock slightly, and sat down by my foot.

“What should I have done then, stayed in bed until it got better?”

His cheeks lifted into a grin at my sarcasm. “I wasn’t complaining.”

I let out a sharp huff and pursed my lips. His expression grew serious, while my cheeks grew warm.

“I jumped onto the damn boat and made it worse.”

“Don’t curse Claire.” He smiled fondly.

“Who’s Claire?” I had been rolling the cold bottle back and forth along the side of my ankle, and the skin there started to get numb. I lifted the bottle away to get a clear view.

“You’re sitting on her,” he answered. Instead of looking at me, he put one hand on the back of my calf and proceeded to push my pant leg past my ankle. He succeeded by a couple inches.

“The boat? Ouch!”

With light fingers, Marcus pushed on the swelling.

“The boat’s name is Claire?”

His eyes darted to mine. “Sorry.” He stopped poking. “Yeah, meet Claire,” he said, patting the back of the molded seat.

My mind darted back to the dreams I’d had all week. I could see Marcus bathed in light, I could hear him saying the name, “Claire.”

“Why Claire?”

He gave a quick laugh. “It’s stupid really.”

“What? Tell me,” I coaxed

Whether he realized it or not, the hand that had been poking at the swelling now rested on my leg. A light breeze blew hair into my eyes. I quickly tucked it behind my ear, never taking my gaze from Marcus’.

“Claire’s a girl I used to dream about,” he said. The sudden blush on his cheeks peeked through the tan.

“You had a crush on Claire?” I couldn’t help but smile.

He laughed. “No, no. I used to call the name out in my sleep when I was little. No one knows why, or who Claire is.”

I almost stopped breathing. *Tell him. TELL HIM.* But I couldn’t bring myself to tell him about the dream, because that would be admitting that I dreamed about him.

“Cool,” I said quietly.

“So, when I was ten years old and we got the boat, my mom and dad were talking about a name, and I suggested Claire, so that’s what they named it.”

I nodded, watching the breeze lift dark wisps of hair off his forehead.

“So, you’re not going to laugh at my imaginary girlfriend?”

“No. I think it’s sweet.” *Sweet and significant.*

With my teeth ground together, I lifted my knee, putting too much pressure on my ankle and quickly gave up.

“You look like you’re in a lot of pain. Do you want some Tylenol?”

I nodded. I hadn’t realized my face had contorted into a grimace, but even now that I was aware of it, my expression didn’t change. *I was* in pain.

Marcus disappeared inside the cabin. I let my arm rest over the side of the boat. “So you’re, Claire,” I said softly, caressing the smooth, white side with my hand. Over my shoulder, I could see people back

on the beach acting as if it was still the night before. Some were even drinking alcohol already. One guy chased an overly dramatic screaming girl. When he caught her, they landed on the sand together, entangled in a heated kiss. I didn't see Megan anywhere.

I felt a brush of air beside me and turned away from the beach. Marcus had emerged with a bottle of Tylenol and a bottle of water for himself. He passed me the Tylenol and sat down on the bench again. My heart almost stopped beating when he gently lifted my leg up and laid it across his lap. I sucked a sharp intake of air through clenched teeth to keep from crying out with pain.

"You should keep it elevated," he said.

So, after our mysterious disappearance, there we sat, alone together, neither of us caring to be anywhere else.

A loud thump and a gentle rocking of our boat made me look up. Justin, Sammy's new guy interest, and some other guy, had piled onto another boat behind Marcus'.

"Well, I'd better get you home, unless you want to wait for Evan," Marcus said casually.

Before I could answer, Sammy was on our boat carrying my hoodie and cell phone.

"So, what happened anyway?" she asked in her excited voice, her eyes popping from their sockets.

The unexpected intrusion made me feel self-conscious and I jerked my foot off Marcus, causing little needles of pain to shoot through my leg. Carefully, I lowered it to the deck. Sammy stood with her hands on her hips looking questioningly from Marcus to me.

Marcus got up. "I'll be back in a bit." He left the boat completely and went to talk to some friends on the beach.

"Brooke, you're not paying any attention to me." Sammy snapped her fingers at me. "You just can't take your eyes off him can you?"

She sat in Marcus' empty spot staring at me, playing with an end of her hair, while periodically eyeing Justin in the other boat. I lowered my eyes. This was the moment I dreaded.

"So, tell me, what did you two do in the woods all night together?" Her eyes sparkled with excitement.

"We didn't do anything, Sammy." I sighed and began my explanation. "Remember how I went into the woods alone, because Robyn was running towards the water throwing her clothes off, and you had gone to save her from drowning? She's got a wicked hangover by the way."

"Yeah, I remember."

"Well, I got lost, and then I fell into a hole. Well, Marcus had called it an old abandoned well shaft, and I hurt my ankle." With a sharp intake of air, I lifted it slightly. "It was almost dark when he found me." The farther into the tale I got, the more vivid it became in my mind, as if I was there again. "We walked for a long time. It got dark real quick, and we couldn't see to walk anymore, so Marcus made us a fire, and we slept beside it until morning."

"Uh-huh. You just slept?"

By the look she gave me, I could tell she waited for me to tell her something juicy, but I had nothing more to say on the matter.

"Did he kiss you?"

"No! Nothing happened!"

"You can tell me. I won't say anything," she persisted.

I raised my voice. "But, Sammy, nothing happened. I swear. He was a perfect gentleman."

She looked truly disappointed.

"Sorry to disappoint you, but it's the truth."

I leaned forward to look at my ankle, and when I leaned back, the weight of the pendant fell against my chest reminding me of its presence. I decided not to tell Sammy about it. Not yet anyway. For some reason, I felt compelled to keep it a secret from everyone except Marcus. It would be our secret—

something special between us. I would consult him first if I felt the urge to tell Sammy or anyone else about it.

As I grew uncomfortable with Sammy's inquisition, Marcus came back to the boat alone. "Are you coming with us, Sammy?" he asked her.

Just then a muffled moan came from inside the cabin.

"Oh, right," Sammy said looking at me. "I'll have to come with you, unless you want to take care of her?"

"Ah, no. I can barely walk. You're coming."

"Oh, alright." She pouted and looked over at Justin, still on the other boat.

Marcus sat at the helm and started the cruiser. Justin made Sammy's morning by jumping onto Marcus' boat and coming with us.

As we cruised closer to the mainland, I noticed the size of the Island. It really wasn't very big. "How in the hell did I ever get lost out there?" I said to no one in particular.

Sammy, who sat beside Justin in the seat behind the helm, was the only one who acknowledged my question.

"It isn't very big. How *could* anyone get lost on Skull Island?" She said it in a way that I knew meant she didn't believe my story.

I shuddered, remembering the pieces of bone in the well. I had been alone with them for a short while and was glad now that it had been too dark to see down there.

A half-hour later, Marcus expertly pulled the boat up alongside his wharf. Justin and Sammy had been whispering to each other, until Marcus cut the engine. She looked at me, and then to Marcus, as if undecided who to address with whatever she was about to say.

"Um, Marcus."

He looked at her, while picking a few empty beer cans up off the deck of the boat.

"Do you think you could take Brooke home?"

She just threw me under the bus. "Sammy!" My back straightened off the backrest.

She looked at me apologetically then she looked at Marcus waiting eagerly for his answer.

"Sure. It's no problem. I can take you home," he said.

I gave Sammy the evil eye. She gave me a wink. I didn't know if it pertained to her or to me.

Just then, Robyn staggered onto the deck. One hand blocked out the bright sunshine from her eyes, the other held a second bottle of water—or maybe a third. "I cleaned up inside," she said with a scratchy voice.

"You didn't puke did you?" Sammy asked.

"Of course not," Robyn shot back, then added sheepishly, "Not in the boat anyway."

Sammy looked at me then. "Um, Brooke"

"Forget it." I wasn't taking care of Robyn so Sammy could go off to who knows where with Justin.

Marcus, who had just done a quick check of the cabin and was back outside, said to Robyn, "We can take you home."

"Or," Justin said, grinning, "We can take you home."

"Gee thanks! I've never felt so wanted," Robyn said with mocking sarcasm.

Sammy tapped her fingers against the seat of the boat, waiting for Robyn to decide. I really didn't mind if she came with Marcus and me. If he wanted to see she got home safe, who was I to stand in the way?

After a moment Robyn said, "I can't believe I'm going to pass up two hot offers, but I really need the walk." She rummaged through the bag slung over her shoulder and pulled out a pair of heart-shaped sunglasses with white plastic frames, and slid them on her face.

"No one can pull off a hangover like you can," Sammy complimented her.

With confidence, Robyn climbed the ladder and strutted down the wharf as if it was a cat-walk. “Later,” she called out when she reached the end.

Justin, who also lived on the Peninsula, walked with Sammy to his house to get his car.

“I guess you’re stuck with me,” I said, as Marcus busied himself with tying up the boat.

He grinned. “I don’t consider it a chore.”

Marcus helped me onto the wharf. When I stepped onto solid ground, I turned back to look at the boat. The name Claire was written on its side in a beautiful loopy font.

“I have to go and get the car. Why don’t you wait in the boathouse?”

“The boathouse?”

“Yeah. Come on, I’ll help you.”

The boathouse was a smaller version of a two story house. A narrow wall of beach stone faced me as I walked in. On either side, a grid of windows, stretching from floor to ceiling, made up the front wall.

“Wow. This is awesome.”

He helped me to sit down on a light blue sofa then went to the refrigerator. “Can I get you something to drink? How about some food? You must be starving.”

“No, I’m fine, thanks.”

“Will you be alright until I get back?”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll be fine.” I brushed my injury off as if it were a scratch.

“The remote’s on the table in front of you if you want to watch TV. I won’t be long.”

“Okay.” I waved him off.

The flat screen TV sat on top of the fireplace mantle—a thick piece of grayed driftwood. Through the grid of windows, I could see two more boats coming to shore. One would have Evan on it. A twinge of guilt gnawed at my stomach.

Instead of watching TV, I found the washroom and then hopped back to the sofa. It was near noon, and the sun shone through the endless windows, splashing the polished wood floors with its golden rays. The mood inside the boathouse was so serene, I almost felt as if I was on a vacation. I couldn’t help but sink into the soft cushions.

I must have fallen asleep, because the next thing I saw when I opened my eyes was Evan. He sat on the edge of the sofa, leaning over me.

“Hey, sleepyhead.”

“Huh?” I pushed myself into a sitting position and looked around the room.

“Marcus isn’t here.” His dreamy tone wavered. “I’m sorry about earlier.”

He turned his head to the window. I could tell he truly was sorry for the way he’d acted, which added to my guilt, because I was glad everything had happened the way it had.

“I shouldn’t have treated you like that.” To my horror, he picked up my hand and held it. “I believe you, if you say nothing happened.”

“You’re right! You shouldn’t have. And nothing happened. I got lost, he found me, and by then it was too dark to find our way out of the woods, so we waited until morning.”

He still looked doubtful. “It’s just that, well, the Island isn’t that big and—”

“He yelled. No one answered. It was dark. We couldn’t see to go on. There was nothing we could do.” I was mad at myself for giving him more of an explanation than he deserved.

His hand found the side of my face. I cringed away slightly. Evan didn’t seem to notice.

“Do you forgive me?” He rested his hand on my cheek; his fingers entangled themselves in my hair.

“Yeah, let’s just forget about it.”

I almost stopped breathing when he pulled me into his arms, and that’s when Marcus walked in. Quickly, I pushed myself away from Evan, as if I’d just gotten caught doing something wrong.

“I can take her home,” Evan said dryly to Marcus, who stood framed by the doorway.

I realized then that Evan hadn't even asked me about my ankle. He must have seen me limping out of the woods.

"Let me up." I pushed him out of the way and stood on one foot. "Marcus can take me home. He needed the car for something else anyway, so he might as well drop me off on the way." I lied to Evan. I didn't want him to take me home. I limped to the door. Evan didn't offer to help me walk.

"No." It was Marcus.


I froze to the spot halfway between the sofa and the door and looked at Marcus.

"Evan can take you. I just remembered I have something else I have to do."

Clearly hurt, he turned and walked out of the boathouse. It felt as if I'd been stabbed in the chest. I had to explain that the hug meant nothing. It was more Evan hugging me than me hugging him. But by the time I'd gotten to the door, he had disappeared. My shoulders fell. I walked by myself out to the Civic.



Chapter Eleven

 Silence accompanied Evan and me on the drive to Aunt Rachel's. I sat frowning, staring out the side window, wondering if Marcus would even speak to me again. Things had gone horribly wrong at the boathouse, leaving an empty ache inside me.

Finally, we pulled into Aunt Rachel's driveway. Before I could get out of the car, Evan reached his arm across my backrest. I looked at him for the first time since getting into the car. His boyish grin touched his eyes.

"So, am I forgiven?"

"Yeah, just forget about it," I said dryly.

I grabbed the door handle and eased myself out, careful not to bang my injured ankle on the door frame. "Thanks for the drive." I shut the door with more force than necessary and limped away.

"Need any help?" Evan called out from the driver's side window, after I was halfway up the driveway.

I didn't turn around. "Nope. I'm great. See ya."

"Okay. See ya later."

There was a flicker of disappointment in his tone. I had a moment of pity for him. Maybe he deserved a better explanation, but I just wasn't in the mood. My frown deepened. If my actions of today weren't clear enough for him, then I would just have to suffer through the humiliation and give it to him straight.

Aunt Rachel and Uncle Jim met me at the front door, which surprised me.

"Sammy called," Aunt Rachel began, "she said you hurt your ankle and Marcus happened to be driving by—" She craned her neck to see past me, stopping in mid sentence. "But that was Evan wasn't it?"

I quickly caught on to the lie Sammy had told. "Uh, yeah. She must have meant Evan."

"You should have called. I would have picked you up," Uncle Jim said.

"That's okay. It happened last night while we were ... ah ... doing Yoga exercises in Robyn's room, and I didn't want to leave so early." I smiled with false innocence.

Uncle Jim helped me to the living room sofa, fussing more than necessary. His experience as a veterinarian made it easy for him to diagnose my injury as a mild sprain. Still, they tried talking me into seeing the doctor, but I won the argument after promising to keep my leg elevated and keep the bag of frozen peas that Aunt Rachel had wrapped in a towel on the swelling.

Once I was settled on the sofa, propped up against the cushions, the remote all to myself, Aunt Rachel left the room to make me something to eat. I was starving. I hadn't eaten anything since lunch at school the day before. A short while later she came back into the living room carrying a plated grilled cheese sandwich and a glass of milk, then disappeared into the study to grade some assignments.

I knew Sammy had to work and assumed Justin had taken her, and Uncle Jim had gone to the animal clinic. That left me alone. Mindlessly, I flipped through the channels on the TV. My focus was on one thing only: Marcus and the pendant. Well two things, but these two things seemed connected.

I sifted through the events of the night before. Every detail was vividly etched into my mind as if it had been recorded there waiting for me to hit playback. The image on the TV became a blur while I was back on Skull Island with Marcus. We'd spent the night together, and now he might never speak to me again. *You blew it, Brooke.*

Barely able to keep my eyes open now, I went up to my room. Once there, I took off the pendant. Immediately, I felt its absence like a hole cut out of my chest. The metal turned cold in my hand. A cool

ache flowed through my palm and up through my wrist into my arm, stopping at the spot where Maggie had touched me with her icy fingers almost a week ago. I sat the pendant on the table and hobbled to the bed.

After propping my leg up on a pillow, I lay back against the cushions. Between the twin aches of absence inside and on top of my chest, mixed with the icy pain in my arm and my sore ankle, I was convinced I was falling apart.

My eyes wandered to the window and beyond the trees to the rooftop of the Ravenwyck. If I hadn't been so tired I would have gotten up and closed the curtains, but as I stared across the distance to the creepy Inn, I drifted off.

As I dreamed of eerie glows coming from dormer peak windows in the night, and shadowed hands reaching out to grab me, I heard a ringing in the distance. It grew louder, and I realized it was a phone.

At the same time as my eyes flew open, I lurched forward on the bed and stifled a scream. Sunlight streamed through the window and across my bed, bringing warmth with it. I ran a hand through my hair. The phone rang again. After the third ring, I picked it up and looked at the display. "Oh crap," I said when I saw it was the Knights' residence. What did Evan want? I almost put the phone back on the receiver, but something compelled me not to.

"Hello."

My voice was slightly shaky from the nightmare. There was silence on the other end, and then the most soothing of all sounds caressed my ear, bringing a smile to my face.

"Hi." Marcus hesitated and then said, "I'm sorry about earlier. I shouldn't have left like that."

My heart still throbbed, but in a different way. He was apologizing for leaving me at the boathouse. The empty feeling inside of me vanished.

"How's your ankle?"

I gave it a quick glance. "Uncle Jim says it's just lightly sprained. No bruising, and the swelling's almost gone."

"That's great. Um, listen, I need to talk to you. Can I come over?"

My hand flew to the birds nest on top of my head that was my hair. "Yeah, sure," I said breathless.

"Okay, I'll be there in a few minutes. Bye."

"Bye."

I hung up the phone and jumped out of bed, wincing when I put pressure on my foot. There were so many things I had to do and so little time in which to do them. First, I grabbed the pendant off the table—it was warm. I put it back on and hobbled to the washroom to brush my teeth. My hair was hopeless, so I gathered it into a ponytail and put a little makeup on. Then I remembered I was still wearing the same clothes I'd come home in, so I grabbed a clean pair of jeans and a T-shirt and hurried into them.

I checked myself in the mirror as the doorbell rang. The rushed make-over would have to do.



Chapter Twelve

Marcus stood on the front porch, framed by the red trim around the door. His dark hair glistened with moisture from a recent shower. He wore a light blue T-shirt with our school name on the front, and a picture of a soccer ball below. His hands were stuffed into the front pockets of his jeans. I was left breathless in more ways than one.

“Hey,” he said with a slight grin.

“What’s up?” I grabbed my jacket off the hook and stepped outside.

His grin faded. “There’s something I thought you should know.”

Why did I have the feeling this conversation wasn’t going to be a happy one? I couldn’t name one remotely happy moment, Marcus notwithstanding, since the day I’d arrived here, so why should this moment be any different?

“Let’s sit down.” I gestured toward the porch swing. “Gotta keep the ankle up. Doctor’s orders.”

He nodded and sat beside me.

My plan was to rest my foot on the railing, but the railing was too far from the swing.

Marcus must have noticed because he patted his leg and said, “Here, put it up here.”

I turned sideways, accepting his offer, laying my injured ankle across his lap, leaving the other one dangling.

He rested one hand on my leg and began to play with a cluster of frayed threads that dangled from the hem of my jeans. All previous thoughts flew from my head.

Marcus was looking over the railing towards the road when he began. “This morning in the woods, you asked me if I’d had any weird dreams lately.”

I stared at him intently now. He stared straight ahead.

“Well, I have.”

“What are they about?” I asked quickly.

Marcus hesitated. His fingers let go of the threads and his hand flattened out on my leg. He angled his body to face me. “You, actually.”

A tiny bubble of excitement edged with a pang of fear burst inside of me.

“Last Saturday night, I had a dream. I can’t really remember it, but it seemed like I was in a different place and time—a very old place, maybe ancient. The double spiral symbol had been scratched into the skin of my arm.

“In my dream it looked like a series of raised scars, like some sort of tribal marking. I don’t know why, but when I woke up, I felt a strong urge to have it tattooed on me. That day, last Sunday, Evan and I went to the tattoo shop in Salem, and I came back with this.” He gestured toward his arm. The tattoo was hidden under his sleeve. He lifted his hand from my leg and raked it through his damp hair.

I unclenched the inside of my cheeks from my teeth. “The day I arrived in Deadwich,” I said low. “How weird is that?”

“Humph, not as weird as the other dreams.”

“Others?”

He nodded, the muscles in his jaw clenching as he did. I was more intrigued now than he had probably realized.

“Every night since, other than last night, I’ve dreamed about you. You were in distress.”

“Yeah, that’s the new me, the damsel in distress.” I pursed my lips and let him continue.

“Wherever I saw you in the dream, darkness surrounded you. You tried to run from it, but it wouldn’t let you go. It was the same, night after night. You were alone in the dark, crying out for help.

Then I came into the dream bringing light with me. I was offering it to you ... like a gift. I surrounded you with it, pushing the darkness back, but not completely, just enough so there was a perfect balance of both.”

I must have looked shocked because he leaned closer to me and said, “Are you alright? You look pale.”

Ignoring his concern, I snapped my mouth shut and found my voice. “And did you call me Claire?” His eyes widened. “Yes.” Then a look of realization swept across his face. “You mean”

I nodded. “Yup. You called me Claire in my dreams too.”

“So you’re Claire, and we’re having the same dream?”

“Uh huh. Only mine are much worse. They feel like nightmares and end like yours. For as far back as I can remember I’ve had them every time I’ve slept in Deadwich, but never with you in them. Not until now.” I swung my leg off him and sat up straight.

“My dreams I was telling you about when I was little,” Marcus began, “they’re the same ones. I’m surrounded by light, but there’s darkness all around me and, of course, I’m calling to Claire.”

“It’s just so weird. We’ve essentially had the same dreams all our lives, only slightly different, and now they’re coming together to make one dream, if that makes any sense,” I said.

“Perfectly.”

Some supernatural power was messing with me, and I didn’t like it, even if it was connecting Marcus and me together in some twisted way.

“This place is too weird,” I said.

“It hasn’t always been.”

“Before I came, you mean.”

Marcus didn’t comment. We sat quietly, engrossed in our own thoughts for a few minutes while I pushed the swing back and forth with my good foot. Sometime during our conversation the lawn mower up the street had stopped, and I could almost hear Marcus breathing.

“You know,” I said suddenly, as if I needed to defend my sanity. “I would never admit this to anyone else, but my life has been pretty normal up until now. Other than getting into trouble a few times and being sent here against my will to live out my sentence, nothing unusual ever happens to me, I swear.”

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t implying that you were the cause of all the weirdness.” He leaned forward to get up. “I should leave. You need to keep your leg up.”

“No!” I blurted.

He hesitated on the edge of his seat. No way could he leave now. Not after the huge secrets we’d just shared with each other. “Please, stay.”

He relaxed his body, but didn’t sit back.

Despite everything, this felt like an intimate moment between us, and I wanted it to last.

“I wanted to tell you something.” I stopped pushing the swing. “What you saw in the boathouse. Well, I wanted to tell Evan that he was delusional. That we were never a couple, but I was in too much of a bad mood, and my ankle was throbbing.” My voice had picked up an angry tone midway through the sentence. “And then he hugged me, and I felt bad.” My expression softened. “Then you walked in. I’ll talk to him the next time I see him.”

“It’s your choice,” he said simply.

What did he mean, it’s my choice? Was he offering himself as one of my choices? Was he asking me in some subtle way to choose between them? There was no choice. It was him, but I still didn’t have the guts to tell him so. I broke into a sweat and shrugged out of my jacket.

“Well, I’d better get to work before Maggie puts a curse on me or something,” Marcus said suddenly.

“What? What did you just say?”

“I said, I—”

“No, I heard you. You said ‘curse’. Why did you say that?”

He sat up straight and looked at me strangely. “It’s just a joke, Brooke. The whole North Shore jokes about Maggie being a witch.”

My body went numb, all but one spot. My arm where Maggie had touched pulsed with pain.

“Brooke, you’re pale again. What’s wrong?” When I didn’t answer he grabbed my shaking hands. I looked over at him and tried to speak.

“She’s a witch,” I said, my voice barely audible.

“It’s just a local myth. There’s no such thing as witches.”

“I don’t feel very good,” I mumbled.

I rested my elbow on the arm of the swing chair and dropped my head into my hand. The sudden hum in my head threatened to drown out the neighborhood noises, but I concentrated on the car that was driving past and Aunt Rachel’s tinkling wind chimes until the humming stopped.

“Can I get you something? Are you going to faint?”

“No, no. I’ll be fine.” So, that was it. It had to be. Maggie was a witch! I lifted my head from my hand and let it drop to the backrest of the swing. “Geez, you must think I’m whacko.”

“Brooke.”

It was then that I realized our hands were linked together, resting in the small space between us. Out of shyness, I was careful not to move a muscle of that hand. I turned my head to look at him.

“I don’t think you’re crazy. What I think is that something strange is going on—”

“It’s more than just strange.”

“Right, it’s definitely something bizarre, and somehow we have to figure out what it all means. Have you told anyone else?”

I shook my head. “You?”

“Well, my parents know about the ‘Claire’ dream of course, but not the ones I’ve had since you moved here.”

He lifted his hand from mine. Cool air replaced his touch. I wanted to grab it back, but didn’t.

“Can I see the tattoo before you go?”

I wanted so badly to touch it, and I wasn’t going to let another opportunity slip by. Before Marcus could push his sleeve up, I lifted my hand and pushed it up for him. My fingers were so close to it they trembled. I held the sleeve up with one hand and lightly brushed my fingers over the still-raised spirals. The pendant within the confines of my T-shirt grew warm against my skin. I let the sleeve drop, but kept my fingers on the tattoo. With my other hand, I reached inside my T-shirt and pulled out the pendant. My skin tingled ever-so-slightly where the spirals touched it.

Marcus jerked his arm away from my touch.

“What?” I asked, curious.

He looked at me strangely. “Did you feel that?”

“You felt it too?” I asked.

“Just now when you touched my arm; it felt like some sort of mild shock.”

I held the pendant out to him and put my hand on his tattoo again. He took the pendant from my hand.

“Wow, the same thing. I feel it.”

The hint of a smile played up one corner of his mouth.

We discovered that when one of us touched both his tattoo and my pendant at the same time, a mild current flowed from the symbol into us.

I pushed his sleeve back up and rubbed over the tattoo gently with my thumbs. Before I knew it,

both my hands were circled around his biceps. The muscle involuntarily flexed under my touch. Then I became aware of a new sensation between us—a sensation that electrified *every* cell in my body.

I lifted my eyes. Marcus stared at me. Our faces were close. My cheeks warmed. I let my hands drop to my lap. Marcus let the pendant drop to my chest, leaving it hanging on the outside.

As the moment grew awkward, a sharp caw jump-started my heart. We both turned toward the sound. A huge black bird landed in the oak in the front yard. We both stared at it. It stared back.

“I’ve seen that crow before,” I whispered.

“That’s not a crow,” Marcus said. “It’s a raven.”

“Oh. No wonder it’s so big.” And then I remembered something that made my skin prickle. “Last night, before you found me in the well, I saw it again.”

“How do you know it’s the same bird?”

“I don’t know, it’s just a feeling.” I shuddered.

Marcus stood, taking my jacket with him. He leaned over the railing, waved the jacket toward the raven, and told it to go away. At first the bird protested by beating its wings and squawking sharply, and then it conceded and flew off over the rooftop of the house across the street.

With his back to the railing, Marcus looked at me. “It’s gone now, and I really do have to get to work.”

“Yeah. You’d better go before Maggie turns you into something.” I laughed, while trembling on the inside.

He held my jacket out to me. I took it, both our hands lingering close together a few seconds.

“I’ll see you Tuesday,” he said, letting go.

“Oh right, Monday’s Labor day.” That sucked.

“Don’t let this, whatever it is, freak you out too much.” He got up and walked down the steps then turned to look at me. “Remember, we’re in this together, and we’ll figure it out together.”

I watched him walk away. He turned at the end of the driveway and waved. I sat holding the pendant, watching him walk down the street, until the neighbor’s shrubbery hid him from view. Then I listened to his footsteps fading on the asphalt.

I sat for some time pondering over our conversation. I knew one thing; I had to find out more about Maggie and who, or what, she really was.

When I awoke the next morning, sunshine streamed through my bedroom window encompassing me in its warmth. The soothing press of the double spiral reminded me of its presence around my neck. I reached for it and opened my eyes.

For the first time since I was little, I’d slept a peaceful, dreamless sleep in Deadwich. The only downside was, I hadn’t dreamed of Marcus. I wondered if he’d had his ‘Claire’ dream.



Chapter Thirteen

By the Tuesday of my second week in Deadwich, my ankle felt good enough to walk on without limping. After the long weekend, I was almost as nervous as I had been on my first day at school, but for different reasons. I wanted to see Marcus. Even to just see him from a distance would help the empty feeling that had returned. Also, I wanted to have it out with Evan. I had promised myself I would tell him the truth; just give it to him straight. The thing was, I'd never broken up with anyone before, and I was angry. To me, the thing between us wasn't even a relationship yet. We hadn't even kissed! But I decided to treat it as if it was a real relationship—because Evan obviously thought it was, and dump him as gently as possible.

I stood on the school grounds with Sammy's group of friends, excluding Megan—which suited me just fine. She absolutely hated me now and didn't try to hide it. We'd picked up a replacement for Megan, anyway. Justin stood close to Sammy now. I was glad she'd finally gotten over Evan.

We were talking about basketball try outs, which were on Thursday, when the boom from a subwoofer vibrated the pavement. I jerked my head around in time to see the red Civic pull into the school driveway, setting off sparks of excitement inside me. As hard as I tried to pay attention to Robyn, I couldn't peel my eyes from the Civic.

Marcus had driven and was now getting out of the driver's side. I got a sick feeling when I saw Evan getting out of the other side. They both came towards me. As much as I thought I was prepared to face Evan, I wasn't.

Evan's face held the same cute, boyish expression as it did every day, but I didn't waste the moment looking at him. The hem of Marcus' black shirt was bunched up around his wrists as his hands were shoved into the front pockets of his jeans. He wore a black leather jacket over the shirt, and under them both, a white V-neck T-shirt peeped through. He looked good in black. It suited his dark mood. Just watching him filled the emptiness inside me.

As the brothers neared, I forced myself to turn back to the group. I laughed at whatever they had been laughing at. Evan, who thought I hadn't seen him yet, came up behind me and nudged me in the arm. I was disappointed when I turned to see it was him and not his brother.

"Hey," he said, grinning, his blue eyes sparkling down on me.

"Hi," was all I could think of to say.

This wasn't going to be easy. My stomach churned at the thought of what I had to do. And when would be a good time? There was never any alone-time during school hours.

Marcus went to the other side of the circle to talk to Justin. It didn't appear that he was paying any attention to me at all. But I hoped he was. I wondered if he'd dreamed about me, but then I figured, I hadn't had a nightmare, so there was no reason for him to come to me, and therefore no reason for me to be in his dreams.

Last week the buzz at school had been about the party on Skull Island, this week it was all about the upcoming school dance on Thursday. Again, I didn't want to go. This time I would make an excuse.



I spent the entire morning classes devising a plan. Ten minutes before the lunch bell, I would raise my hand and ask to use the washroom, but I wouldn't come back. Instead, I would sneak upstairs to where the senior classes were and wait for Evan to come out of class. Third period was passing slowly as

I watched the clock, but finally the time came to put my plan into action.

My stomach twisted into knots as I climbed the stairs. I'd never been on the senior floor before. I glanced in all the classrooms until I found Evan. He and Marcus were sitting in the back row of room 12-B, a few seats apart. Evan's head rested on the backrest of his chair. Marcus sat slightly straighter, his head forward, scribbling something into the wooden desktop. Evan looked bored, Marcus preoccupied. Somehow, when they came out for lunch, I would have to get Evan's attention without Marcus noticing me.

I leaned back against a locker on the opposite side of the hallway, where I had a clear view of the back row, and waited. Nervously, I flipped a strand of hair between the fingers of one hand while biting the thumbnail of the other.

After a couple minutes the bell rang. I jumped, dropping my hands stiffly to my sides. All the classroom doors opened at once. There was instant chaos as the seniors bolted through their classroom doors and into the hallway. Students blended together, and I couldn't tell what class was what anymore. My eyes sifted through the guys until I saw Marcus coming down the hallway. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

His white T-shirt hung loosely under his opened black shirt. His shirt sleeves were bunched up past his elbows, one hand in the front pocket of his jeans, the other holding a textbook. He was laughing at something a pretty girl was saying to him. I couldn't help but smile. Evan appeared from behind him. They both noticed me at the same time. I got a wink from some guy who walked past me and quite a few grins and glares from others. Apparently, no one had forgotten what had happened on the Island. And I was sure that those who hadn't even gone to the Island that night knew the story, or some misconstrued version of it.

Evan's huge grin told me how happy he was to see me. Marcus nodded once and kept walking with the pretty girl. I didn't miss the grin in his eyes, however, and wondered if he knew what I was up to. I was about to make the choice. Perspiration beaded beneath my bangs as Evan stopped in front of me.

"Hi," I said.

"Hey, City Girl."

I figured this would be the last time I would hear him call me that, and it actually made me sad.

"Can I talk to you before lunch?" I asked.

"Sure." He put his arm around me and puffed himself out, as if he was letting everyone know that was his territory, and walked me into the classroom he'd just left.

"What's up? Did you want some alone-time?" He put his other arm around me, encasing me. I felt as though I was being contained and twisted out of his embrace.

"Evan." I sighed and decided right then and there that I needed to take the point-blank approach with him. "You and I," I pointed to him and then to me, "we're not a couple."

The expression on his face changed slowly, like cooling lava.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have led you on."

I went on to blame myself, because I thought it might be the only language he would understand. To him, he was Mr. Perfect. Nothing could ever be his fault. So I took full responsibility—anything to get out of the non-relationship I was apparently in.

Evan's face hardened like stone. His blue eyes lost their sparkle. "So you *did* get it on with my brother."

I gasped at his accusation, and then got mad.

"Not that you deserve an explanation after that remark, but *no!* I didn't 'get it on' with anyone, and nothing happened on the Island!"

"But you want to." Evan couldn't contain his anger now.

"Ugh." Frustrated, I gave up and pushed to go past him, but he grabbed my arm and spun me

around to face him.

When he spoke next the bitterness had left. “Brooke, I’m sorry, really. I told you already that I believe you, so what’s wrong with us?”

I couldn’t tell him the rest, so instead I gave him a reasonable excuse. “Evan, you move too fast for me. I just started school here, and you were all over me the first day. I need some space.” Guilt gnawed its way inside my stomach.

His expression cooled again. “Fine, if that’s the way you want it. I always thought you were a stuck-up city girl anyway.”

His last words stung, but it was for the best. I didn’t reply, letting him have the last word.

He let go of my arm and walked out the door as Marcus was entering. “She’s all yours now bro,” he said, shouldering Marcus into the door on his way out.

Marcus had come back, but why? I turned away from the door and took a few steps toward the window while a stubborn tear slid down my face.

“Hey, are you okay?” he asked.

The smoothness of his voice lingered in my ears. I took a deep breath and turned to face him. He was standing closer to me than I’d expected him to be.

“I did it. It’s over.” *I’ve chosen.* I laughed to myself at the joke and at the irony of it. The fact that I hadn’t even considered Evan and me a couple, but I still felt free. Breaking up with my non-boyfriend was one of the hardest things I’d ever done.

I gazed upon the choice I’d made. The windows behind me reflected in his eyes. He was close enough that I could see rich honey flecks scattered throughout the velvety browns in his irises, so different from Evan’s striking blue eyes. I couldn’t think of a single visual that connected the two as twins.

Marcus was at least an inch taller than Evan and not as broad. He was as brunette as Evan was blond, and their personalities were as opposite as hot and cold. And he was staring at me right now. And he was hot.

He must have just realized that he was my choice, because there was a slight blushing of his cheeks. “I forgot my jacket,” he said quickly. “That’s why I came back.”

“So,” he said changing the subject, “judging by the jab into the door I got, Evan didn’t take it too well?”

“No. He was pretty nasty.”

“No one’s ever broken up with him before. You’re his first.” There was a hint of amusement in his eyes. “He’s used to breaking hearts, not getting his broken.”

“I highly doubt that I broke his heart. I think it was more his ego that got broken than anything.”

Marcus gave me an adorable grin, and I did my best to mirror one back at him. He took a few steps closer still. Only his desk stood between us.

My smile faded. “I guess I’m stuck taking the bus home now.”

“I can drive you sometimes. It’s not just his car.”

“Why do you share a car anyway?”

“Our uncle bought it for us when we turned seventeen.”

“Nice.”

My phone vibrated annoyingly in my back pocket. I grabbed it and looked at the display. It was Luke calling. He would be on his lunch break too. *Sorry Luke, later.* I shoved it back in my pocket and let it vibrate.

“Aren’t you going to answer it?”

“It’s not important.” No, not even my old friends from Boston were as important to me as this moment was.

He nodded then looked up at the classroom clock. "You'd better go have lunch before classes start again."

"I don't feel much like eating, but you go eat. I have some studying to do anyway." I lied.

"Oh." He sounded disappointed.

The truth was, I didn't want to show my face in the cafeteria, where Evan probably was. I imagined him bragging about breaking up with me, and I didn't need the glares.

I left Marcus at a turn in the hall, pretending I actually had some place to go. Shortly after, I came across a girl's washroom and ducked inside. I walked over to the sink and stared at the unhappy girl in the mirror. I hadn't been unhappy a few moments ago when I was talking to Marcus. Was he the key to my happiness in Deadwich? It seemed as though the only times I wasn't scared of something or unhappy since I'd moved here was when he was near.

I pulled my lip gloss out of my pocket and slicked it across my pouting lips until they looked like they were dipped in strawberry jelly. When I thought I'd given Marcus enough time to get to the cafeteria, I went back to his classroom.

His desk was easy to find. His jacket still hung on the back of the seat. It was clear to me now that the jacket wasn't the reason he'd come back to the classroom. He'd used it as an excuse. My hand caressed the soft leather from shoulder to shoulder before I took a seat. I slouched down and rested the back of my head against the collar of the jacket. I imagined myself sitting beside him during class. The looks we would exchange back and forth.

What was happening to me? I'd never had this much of a crush on anyone before. I'd never noticed a guy's scent before, or how deeply they looked at me. Marcus' smile made me melt inside. If I could just get past the darkness that surrounded me now; I was sure this could be a great year at Deadwich High.

I sat there daydreaming, and in the daydream, I scribbled the initials, B D + M K inside a heart onto the middle of his desk—a surprise for when he came back to class. I was deep into my daydream when the bell rang. I jumped up so fast I got a head rush then bolted from the classroom, hoping no one would see me until I was on my own level of the school.

"Where were you during lunch?" Sammy snapped at me from her desk.

I glanced around the classroom. When I was confident enough that there was enough noise from the students shuffling to their seats that no one would hear me, I said, "I broke up with Evan."

Sammy gasped.

"Um, and then I went for a walk."

"A walk?" She looked at me as if I had two heads.

"Yeah, a walk! Didn't you hear the first thing I said?"

"Everyone's heard. Evan was bragging about breaking up with you, though."

"Well whatever, as long as he gets the point."

"Now you don't have a date for the dance." She pouted.

The noise in the classroom dropped a few levels, so I lowered my voice. "Sammy, is that all that matters to you, a date for the stupid dance? I'm not going to the dance anyway," I said as an afterthought.

"What? Yes you are. You'll change your mind by Thursday. Besides, even if you don't have a date, you can come with Justin and me." She grinned sinfully.

"So, what, you two are together now?"

"We will be by Friday morning," she said with an exaggerated grin.

I rolled my eyes.

When Ms. Myra came in, Sammy was still hanging sideways out of her desk, talking about Justin. I quickly turned to face the front.

"Samantha," Ms. Myra said, startling us, "would you like to share your thoughts with the class?"

There were a few giggles from the girls close enough to hear what she'd been telling me. Flustered, Sammy bolted upright in her seat and shook her head, smiling innocently.



Last class came and went, and I knew I wouldn't get my drive home in the Civic, so I automatically walked to the bus. Sammy was already on and had a seat saved for me a few rows from the end. Even though I knew it was no use, I scanned the bus on my way back to her, hoping a certain someone would be on it, but I didn't see him. A few rows in, Megan stuck her pointed-toe boot into the aisle, intending to trip me, and she'd almost succeeded, but I grabbed the seat to the left and saved myself the embarrassment. I kicked her foot out of the way and continued up the aisle, still scanning.

As I was about to turn and sit beside Sammy, I saw him. Almost hidden in the back row, next to the window, Marcus sat alone. Ignoring Sammy, I walked to the end of the bus.

"Hey," she called after me, "I saved this seat for you." She gave a soft sound of exaggerated frustration.

Although no one was in front of me, I still harbored an irrational fear that someone would appear and jump into the seat beside Marcus before I could get there.

His face was turned toward the window when I reached him. "Is this seat taken?" I asked calmly, nearly bursting on the inside.

An adorable smile lit up his face as he looked up at me. He shook his head. I smiled back and sat down, proud of myself for making another move. I sat back, relaxed and crossed one leg over the other. There was a soft squeak of leather on leather as the sleeves of our jackets pressed together. He didn't move away—neither did I.

"So," he asked casually, as if we were old friends now, "are you going to the dance Thursday?"

"I think I'm having a *déjà vu*," I said. We laughed briefly. "I'm not planning on it, but you know how plans change. You?" I asked.

"Probably. You should come."

All of a sudden I became over-heated. He wanted me to come to the dance, therefore of course I would.

But I kept nonchalant about the whole thing and simply said, "I'll see," which put a hopeful look on his face.

"Have any bad dreams lately?" he asked.

"No. Not since I found the pendant. You?"

He shook his head. "But that's a good thing, right?"

"Oh, yeah," I said, "it's good." It was good, but I missed him in my dreams.

"Are you working today?" he asked, sounding hopeful.

"No, tomorrow, but don't remind me." It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him my thoughts of Maggie, but I didn't want to ruin whatever was brewing between us.

Life really didn't seem so bad at the moment. Marcus and I were getting to know one another, the bad dreams were gone, and I was rid of Evan.



Chapter Fourteen

I was anxious to get to bed that night for two reasons. I couldn't wait to get to school the next morning, and I couldn't wait to try out my little experiment. So after supper I pretended to yawn a lot and went up to my room early. I took the pendant off for the first time since Saturday. Immediately, I felt its absence. Nothing felt right. Nothing looked right, so I put it back on. After pacing the room several times, I convinced myself not to be such a wuss and took it off again. Same thing—almost felt ill without it, but with great effort, I placed it in my jewelry box and went to my computer.

I found Marcus on my favorite social media program and added him. In the message, I put an XO, then I climbed into bed.

I lay awake for a couple hours, tossing and turning, feeling the absence of the pendant—so much for going to bed early. At one point, I even felt nauseated. Finally, I fell asleep.

Sometime later, I heard whispers and couldn't open my eyes—same as always. Shadows passed over my lids—as before. The whispering grew into a steady monotone hum. I tried frantically to open my eyes, but couldn't. The whispering grew louder. With every ounce of strength I had, I flung my eyes open. Dark shadows circled the bed. The hum transitioned into a chant. I couldn't make out the words, but I could tell the sound was coming from the shadowy forms. With clenched fists, I gripped the edge of the comforter and pulled it tightly around my chin—this was not how the dream was supposed to unravel.

The chant grew louder. The shadows stopped circling and turned towards me. Past them, I could see that I wasn't in my room anymore; however, I was still in my bed. The room had transformed into a forest. Twisted shapes of trees, their branches reaching out like claws, stood where the walls had once been. Above the tangle of branches, the midnight blue sky peeked through. There were no stars, just the crescent moon cut like a slash into the night sky.

The air around me grew colder as the shadows drew nearer. Now I could see that they were human shaped and clothed in robes of the deepest black, their faces hidden under billowy hoods.

I squeezed my eyes shut, hoping the nightmare would change. Marcus should be with me by now, pushing the darkness away.

The chant continued.

My heart beat wildly in my eardrums as the figures approached the bed. I bolted into a sitting position and looked to the side. The night table was there, and on it sat the alarm clock displaying the time, twelve o'clock—midnight.

The urge to flee was overwhelming. I flung the covers aside and stood. A chill from the cold ground shot up my legs and seeped into my body, leaving my flesh dotted with goose bumps.

I had no plan, but I knew my life depended on getting out of there. Instinctively, I reached for the pendant. It was then that I remembered talking it off. I looked to where the dresser had stood. Everything was gone, except the bed and the night table. I knew I had to run. I had to find Marcus. So I forced every muscle in my body to move. I bolted in between two figures, and as I did, a deathly chill emanated from them, prickling my skin further. A cry I didn't recognize flew from my lips.

In my tank top and underwear, I ran through the frigid darkness. I ran, not knowing where I was going. Only the outline of the trees was visible. Their clawed branches raked over my skin, biting into my flesh as I darted past them. The rough ground scraped against my bare feet.

Over and over again, I yelled for Marcus. There was no answer. I slammed into something solid. As the breath expelled from my lungs, I lurched forward over the hard object, slamming into the ground on the other side. Momentarily stunned, I lay still, one side of my face pressed into the musty earth. I heard

myself moan. My entire body stung from the deep lacerations the branches had made in my skin. Stiffly, I forced myself into a kneeling position and reached a hand into the dark to find the object I had run it to.

I gripped something hard like a rough stone wall and felt my way up. The structure came to a point on top. On either side of the point the stone sloped downward. Despite the cold, my insides felt hot as the realization of what I was gripping penetrated my brain. With a groan, I pulled myself up.

“Marcus,” I whimpered hopelessly. “Where are you?”

Warm blood trickled from my wounds and ran down my cold and battered body. I closed my eyes tightly, hoping that when I opened them again, I would be in my room awakened from the worst nightmare of my life.

My teeth began to chatter as the coldness drew near. I opened my eyes to see five black-robed figures circling me. With shaking hands, I clung to what I now knew was a gravestone.

One-by-one the figures lowered their hoods.

The first face I saw was Megan’s. A shriek I didn’t recognize came from deep inside me. She glared at me with black, lifeless eyes. To the right of her, Robyn emerged from under a hood. The third was Evan and the fourth, Sammy. The fifth person, I didn’t recognize. She was a beautiful raven-haired woman, about nineteen or twenty. Her skin was so white as to be almost transparent; blue veins pulsed visibly beneath the surface.

I looked desperately at Sammy. “Sammy, what are you doing?”

She stayed silent.

It’s just a dream, I told myself, just a dream.

“Sammy, stop, please. It’s me, Brooke.”

She had the same dead expression on her face as the others—their eyes wide, their irises as black as their robes. The Raven-haired woman was behind me now. I turned to face her. Evil vibes seeped from her like pus from an abscess. My knees gave out, and my back slid against the rough granite until my butt hit the ground. I gathered my bloodied legs in front of me and wrapped my arms around them. I was hopeless. There was nowhere to run now that the gaps had closed between my pursuers.

I watched through straggled pieces of hair, fallen across my eyes and pasted to my face with blood and tears, as the raven-haired girl stretched a pale, hand toward me. She moved so fast I didn’t have time to duck. She latched onto my hair and yanked my head around, forcing me to face the front of the gravestone.

With a shake in my voice, I screamed to the others. “Sammy, help me. Evan, please,” I cried frantically. “Why won’t you help me?”

I felt myself being dragged backwards by the hair. Then she let go of me. Other than the trembling, couldn’t make my body move. I gulped down a mixture of salty tears and blood.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the hungry expression on Megan’s face. Her mouth was set into a wicked sneer. She was the essence of evil standing dominantly over me. Before I could turn away from her, they vanished and were replaced by a scorching ring of fire.

I sat on the ground, in the middle of the circle of fire with no escape. The flames cast an eerie orange glow over the polished surface of the granite. Something was written on the gravestone. I read it and knew I was doomed. The flames closed in. The heat was intense—beyond anything imaginable. I screamed out the name, “Christian,” as the flames consumed me.



Chapter Fifteen

In my dream, I screamed the screams of someone burning. My body twisted on the ground in agony. I didn't recognize my own cries. Then I heard another voice in the distance.

"Brooke, wake up. You're having a nightmare. Wake up!"

My eyes flew open to the early light of dawn. Sammy was sitting on the edge of my bed, shaking me by the shoulders. When I saw her I screamed and cringed away.

"It's me, Sammy. You're awake now."

I shook my head slowly, confused. I didn't trust her.

"Look at your face. You must have scratched yourself while you were dreaming."

As I stared at Sammy, in her little pink nightdress and messed up hair, fuzzy-slipped foot tucked under one leg on the edge of my bed, I remembered all too well how she'd looked just moments ago. How the blondness of her pin-straight hair had contrasted against the black fabric of the robe she'd worn. How she'd looked at me with dark, lifeless eyes. How she'd left me to burn.

"That must have been some nightmare," Aunt Rachel said from the doorway. She let herself in and stood behind Sammy, waiting for me to say something.

The nightmare was too real. The sickening scent of burning flesh still lingered in my nostrils.

I took some deep breaths and tried to calm myself. Aunt Rachel sat down beside Sammy on the bed.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she asked.

I shook my head. I couldn't find my voice at first, and when I did, it was just a raspy whisper.

"I just want to go back to sleep now." The truth was, I wanted them to leave.

"Okay Hon, if you need anything, I'm just down the hall. Come on, Sammy; let's let Brooke get back to sleep." Sammy shuffled to the door, yawning. Aunt Rachel looked back at me and smiled before she shut the door behind her.

I hauled in a huge shaky breath and sat up. It was then I noticed how sore my body was. "Ow," I whined and pushed the covers away. I glanced over myself and wasn't surprised by what I saw. Streaks of blood and dirt covered most of my skin. I felt faint and had to lie back against the pillows. A few minutes later, after my heart-rate slowed and I'd talked myself out of fainting, I rolled out of bed stiffly and looked at the clock. It was almost six in the morning. There was no way in hell I was going back to sleep. In fact, I thought I might never sleep again. As much as it was going to hurt, I had to take a shower.

The first thing I did was put the pendant back on—vowing to never take it off again. Next, I gathered together my blue velour sweat pants, matching hoodie, and a white tank-top, deciding it would be too painful to wear jeans. I was going to school today if it killed me. Marcus had to know what I'd seen.

With the softest towel I could find, I blotted myself dry. The water washed away the blood and dirt, leaving behind raw streaks of crimson and lots of bruising. I eased myself into my sweats, which were too snug against my tender skin. I was sure Sammy would have something to say about me wearing sweats to school, but she wasn't on my favorites list right now anyway.

Too tired to care what I looked like, I pulled my wet hair back into a ponytail and dabbed some cover-up under my eyes. My dark circles couldn't be concealed, so I gave up trying.

"You'd better change. We have to go soon." Sammy said kind of snobbishly over breakfast.

"I don't feel very good today." They were the first words I'd spoken to her since I'd come down stairs. "I think I'll just keep them on."

"But they're sweats!"

“If you don’t want to be seen with me, then don’t.” I got up and walked out of the kitchen and slipped my feet into my sneakers, deciding to wait outside on the porch swing for Aunt Rachel and Sammy.

Since the first day of school, Sammy and I had decided to take turns sitting in the front seat of the mini-van. Today was my turn. I didn’t speak to anyone on the way to school. My insides were still shaking, and I really did feel sick, and on top of it all, I had to work at the Inn after supper.

When we arrived at school, I told Sammy I was going over to the bleachers to study for the math quiz we were having. Of course she looked at me as if I was crazy. The truth was, I really needed to talk to Marcus, and it couldn’t wait until lunch. I also couldn’t get past how she’d treated me in the nightmare. It was more than just a dream to me; my defiled body was proof of that.

I walked over to the bleachers, which were on the side of the school, but had a perfect view of the parking lot. I was alone but for a couple of sophomores that were kicking a soccer ball around the field. I took a seat on the top bleacher and waited.

For every car that pulled into the school driveway, my heart skipped a beat. Finally, the red Civic squealed around the corner. I could tell by the reckless driving that Evan was at the wheel. I just hoped Marcus was with him. When I saw him get out of the car, I almost cried with relief.

Now, to get him to notice me and come over. There was no way I could yell out to him, or get his attention without getting everyone’s attention in the school yard. I drummed all ten fingers on the bleacher seat and watched his every movement. It looked as though he was searching above the crowd for something—hopefully me. I grabbed the chain around my neck and pulled the pendant out. I wrapped one hand around the double spiral and concentrated with every cell in my body for Marcus to look this way. It took great effort to not raise my arm and wave him over. When he finally did look my way, he immediately left the group and hurried across the soccer field to where I was.

“Hey, where are you going?” a female voice called after him. He didn’t look back. Then I heard a whistle. But it didn’t matter what anyone thought, as long as he was coming.

As I watched him approach, my stomach twisted into knots. I had a fleeting thought that conveying my nightmare to him might be a bad idea, but quickly dismissed it. He had to know. When he reached the bleachers, he stopped, rested one foot on the bottom seat, and smiled up at me. I sat six rows up, looking down at him in his long-sleeved, white T-shirt, which molded perfectly to the shape of his athletic upper body.

“I got your message,” he said grinning.

Despite everything, I blushed, remembering the XO I’d left him, but I had no smiles.

His grin quickly dwindled. “What’s wrong?”

With the pendant still in my grasp, I cleared my throat and asked, “Did you dream about me last night?” I gnawed on my bottom lip, waiting for his reply.

His look darkened considerably. “I did, but it was different this time. I heard you, but your voice sounded far away, and I couldn’t find you.”

I listened to his recount of the dream, one knee bouncing frantically up and down.

“I tried following your voice. I yelled to you over and over, but you didn’t answer. Just before I woke up, you yelled out the name, ‘Christian.’”

Suddenly overwhelmed, I thought I might cry. It took all my efforts to keep composed. I swallowed and cleared my throat again. “I wandered for hours in the dark, but you never came.” I bit down on my bottom lip to keep it from trembling.

Although there was no way he could know the extent of my nightmare, the pained look in his eyes revealed the helplessness he felt for failing me. He took the steps two at a time until he was on my level and sat down beside me.

“Brooke, I’m so sorry. I tried, but I just couldn’t find you.” He shook his head, as if not knowing

what else to say.

“*They* found me,” I whispered, still terrified as I spoke about them out loud.

“Who?”

I glanced over at Sammy and her friends briefly then back to Marcus. “The ones who’d been looking for me—the black-robed ones.” I didn’t want to tell him who *they* were, because however real the dream was, the faces under the hoods were just figments of my imagination. I let go of the pendant, which was now imprinted into my palm, and let it lay outside my clothing.

Marcus’ eyes dropped to it. I gazed across the field. Sometime during the last ten minutes, the two sophomores had left. I let out a deep breath and began.

“They chased me through the dark until I fell over a gravestone. They surrounded me, and then they vanished, leaving behind a circle of fire. I was in the middle. I couldn’t escape. I felt the heat. I could smell my skin burning. I”

When I felt Marcus’ hand squeeze my shoulder, whatever else I was about to say was lost. I turned my head to look at him. His already dark eyes had deepened to bitter chocolate. His brows pulled together deepening the line between them.

“I saw the engraving on the gravestone, Claire Elizabeth Day, 1896 – 1912. Exactly one hundred years ago, Claire died when she was sixteen.” It was an effort to swallow past the lump in my throat.

“It was just a dream, Brooke.”

“Was it? And all our lives; were they just dreams too? Meaningless dreams?”

He sighed. “They have to be, don’t they?”

“What about Claire? Your Claire and my Claire. They have to be the same person. It’s too much of a coincidence to be otherwise.”

He shifted closer to me and gathered me into his arms. I leaned into him easily and found the nerve to lay my head against his chest. I felt his breath move my hair as the side of his face pressed gently to the back of my head. His embrace felt so natural, so comforting and protective.

With the rise of his chest, I breathed him in. Today he smelled of fresh linens and cinnamon gum. His hand drifted from my shoulder to my back, awakening the sting of my wounds. I lifted my head away from his heartbeat and told him what else I’d seen.

“There’s something else. On the gravestone, above Claire’s name, the word ‘Witch’ was written in blood.” I took a deep, shuddering breath. “Why didn’t you come?”

His shoulders rose then fell. “I don’t know why I couldn’t find you this time. I never stopped searching until I woke up. And then, I had the most horrible feeling. And I couldn’t wait to see you today.”

For me, it was all worth it to hear him say those last words. I angled my face more toward his. For the first time, his eyes rested on the inch long cut above my right eye.

“What happened?” he asked.

I turned my head the rest of the way to face him, watching his gaze slide from the cut above my eyebrow to the gravel burn on my cheek, to the cut on my chin. Wordless, I bent forward and pulled one pant leg up, exposing a leg covered in numerous cuts and bruises. His gasp confirmed his shock. I pulled the other pant leg up. That leg looked the same. Under the jagged crimson lines, swollen bumps had formed. Some cuts slashed through bruises, some crisscrossed each other. They all looked angry.

Marcus stiffened against me, cursing under his breath. “How did you do that?”

I looked at him helpless. “They were there when I woke up. It happened in my nightmare while I was running through the trees. I’d swear the branches were reaching out for me.” I shuddered and pushed the pant legs back down to my ankles. “They’re all over me.” I unzipped my hoodie and pushed one shoulder down, exposing two plump scratches, one slashed through the other. I turned my head, suppressing tears until my throat hurt again.

“I feel like I need an exorcism.” I let out a sharp breath, almost a laugh. “The whole thing is my fault anyway.” Through my bangs, I glanced at the students in the school yard, laughing, oblivious to my torment, then lowered my head and stared at my sneakers. “I took the pendant off before going to bed.”

Marcus shifted beside me, angling himself toward me. “Why would you take the pendant off?”

Because I wanted you to come to me in my dream—yeah, as if I would admit that out loud. I lifted my head and looked at him apologetically, not offering an explanation.

“Wahoo, check those two out,” Robyn yelled out from halfway across the field.

She and Sammy were coming this way—an unwelcome distraction. Marcus pulled his arm from around me and sat forward, leaning on his thighs.

“Damn. I don’t need this right now,” I said.

“Do you want to go somewhere? We can take the car.”

Before I could answer, Sammy interrupted.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Sammy stood at the bottom of the bleachers with one hand on her hip and one eyebrow raised. “Did I interrupt your studying, Brooke?”

I rolled my eyes at her.

“So what’s up? Are you guys studying?” Robyn asked, innocent enough. At least she seemed friendly.

Sammy was acting like Megan. I was confused by her sudden sarcasm and just wanted them to leave.

“The whole school’s talking about you two right now. I just thought I’d come and share that with you,” Sammy said. I felt heat rise to the surface of my cheeks.

“What’s your problem, Sammy?”

“Why would you think I had a problem, Brooke?” I had to pull my eyes from her piercing glare. She suddenly reminded me of the Sammy in my nightmare.

The bell rang, saving me. Sammy and Robyn skipped off toward the school hand-in-hand.

“Are you two having a fight or something?” Marcus asked.

I regretted not telling him everything about my nightmare; at least then he would have understood.

“No, not really.” I sighed. “Let’s just go to class.”

By the time I stood up, my muscles were stiff and sore again. My lacerations didn’t feel that great either.

“Does it hurt?” he asked.

I nodded.

“There must be something we can do to stop these nightmares. You can’t wear that thing around your neck for the rest of your life.”

The word “we” was all that registered. He was making my problem *our* problem, and I didn’t feel alone anymore.

Once inside the school, Marcus walked me to class. I stopped in front of my locker and turned to look at him. “I guess I’ll see you later,” I said trying to smile without hurting my scraped cheek.

“I’m really sorry about last night.”

I shrugged. “It was just a dream, right?”

“Yeah.” He didn’t look convinced. “Hey, are you sure you don’t want to skip school and go somewhere else?”

We’d been late getting in. The hallway was empty. I considered his offer and was on the verge of taking it, when Ms. Myra came to close the classroom door and saw me lingering back. She looked at me over her glasses, where they sat on the end of her nose, and waited silently with one hand on the door knob. I looked at Marcus and shrugged. It was too late now. I had no choice but to go to class.



As the morning wore on, I became detached from Sammy and Robyn, so I didn't go to the cafeteria during lunch. Instead, I went outside to the bleachers. I thought Marcus might come and look for me there. The field was empty at first.

The clouds threatened rain, but it was warm. I didn't feel like eating, so I sipped an energy drink instead. Finally Marcus came out, but not as I'd expected. The school soccer team came out to practice, and of course Marcus was with them.

Great. Now the whole soccer team would think I came here to watch Marcus. After a half-hour, I got tired of sitting there. It was obvious Marcus couldn't leave the group, or maybe he didn't want to. I went back into the school, avoiding the cafeteria, and went straight upstairs to his homeroom. His leather jacket hung on the back of his desk. With an idea in mind, I sat at his desk and took out a pen and a pad of sticky notes from my bag. Butterflies fluttered in my stomach as I held the pen over the notepad. There were several things I wanted to write down, but this wasn't the time to pour my heart out. Finally I wrote:

Thanks for this morning.

Too bad about lunch.

See you at work tonight.

B. D.

I almost added a heart at the bottom but thought better of it. I smiled at my subtle love note and then quickly folded the lime-green square into four and stuck it in his jacket pocket, letting my hand linger there a moment.

It was hard to concentrate on school work that afternoon. I had mini anxiety attacks every time I thought about the note. Had he found it yet? Would he know who it was from? Would he think it was childish?

By the end of the school day, Sammy and I had become totally detached from one another. It seemed less odd as the day grew longer. When the bell rang, I rushed outside. I lingered around the front doors of the school, hoping to see Marcus. I waited till the last possible moment and then reluctantly got into the bus line-up.

I walked up the aisle to the very back seat, where Marcus usually sat. It was empty. I curled up in the corner and twisted my head toward the window, scanning the students outside. My thorough scan of the school grounds led me to the field, where the blue and white uniformed soccer team was doing drills. My shoulders fell. I slumped down into the seat, but kept my eyes on the team, hoping for one last glimpse of him before the bus took off.

I felt my seat judder. *Crap*, who sat next to me?



Chapter Sixteen

✠ got your note.”

The sound of Marcus’ voice stopped my heart. When it beat again, a warm, fuzzy feeling radiated from it. He’d found the note. And he skipped soccer practice to take the bus home.

As I turned to look at him, my heart was overwhelmed by his brilliant smile. I eased myself up from slouching and flashed him one in return. It was the first time I’d smiled since that morning, and my gravel-burned cheek hurt from the movement.

Then I began explaining about the note, stumbling over my words. “Oh yeah, well, I went for a walk and ended up on the second floor.” I laughed nervously. “I saw your jacket and—”

“How do you feel?” he asked, rescuing me from myself.

“Fine.” I stared at him, mesmerized by his adorableness. Then I noticed his eyes resting on the scratch on my forehead. “Oh, that. I’m getting used to the cat-scratch feeling.” Neither of us laughed.

“Aren’t you supposed to be at soccer practice?”

He shrugged. “They’ll manage without me. Besides, I wanted to take the bus home today.” He grinned, and my insides melted.

“How are you and Evan getting along?”

“About the same as you and Sammy are.”

I nodded. “I just don’t know what’s with her today. But after my nightmare, I can barely look at her—” I stopped abruptly, remembering I hadn’t told Marcus about Sammy and the others.

“What’s she got to do with your nightmare?”

I looked around for the first time since getting on the bus. The babble came at me in a rush. I had it perfectly tuned out before. Marcus had a way of making me forget about everything else around me when he was near. Sammy was sitting close to the middle of the bus with Robyn. A couple of younger kids sat in the seat in front of us. I twisted my body, sitting with my back to the window and faced Marcus. I spoke low and told him who the robed figures were in my nightmare.

His expression darkened. “You say there were five of them?”

I nodded.

“There’s an old story I heard once about a coven of witches who came from Salem and settled in Deadwich years ago, but I don’t remember any details, only that there were seven in the coven.” He shrugged a shoulder. “I never believed in all that witches and magic stuff, so I never really paid much attention to the story.”

“And now? Do you believe now?” I asked almost desperate for him to be on the same page as me.

He lifted his eyes from my clenched hands to my face. I must have looked shocked, because he said, “It’s not real, Brooke. It’s just a myth.”

I finally blinked. “How do you know it isn’t true?”

“Logic tells me it isn’t.”

“What are you, a scientist now?” I felt half-annoyed. “What about this?” I pulled my sleeve up exposing a long, swollen scratch on my forearm that extended down the back of my hand. I wasn’t mad at Marcus, so I quickly changed my tone, but kept the frown. “This isn’t logical either.”

He frowned and said, “I think we should talk to my uncle.”

“Why? Who’s your uncle?”

“Uncle Edmund. He lives on a small island up the shore.”

“What does he have to do with this?”

“He’s the one who told me the story of the Ravenwyck Witches.”

“The Ra—” I choked on the word at the same time as the Inn’s rooftops, came into view. My eyes followed the line of the Inn’s roof until it disappeared behind a thicket of trees. I shuddered and looked back at Marcus. “Seriously?” I whispered so low I watched him read my lips. “They were called the *Ravenmyck Witches*? And I have to work there tonight?”

“I’ll be there too. What time are you going? I’ll meet you there.”

“Five-thirty.” I thought about the walk to work with Sammy, how awkward it would be.

“I’ll meet you at the gate at five-thirty.”

“I really don’t think I should go there anymore.” The thought scared the crap out of me.

“Remember the trunk?” he asked.

I nodded.

“Let’s find out what’s inside. Remember the double spiral carved into the wood?”

“Oh, my God, I totally forgot. But there’s no way I’m going into the attic of that place now.”

There was a light pressure on my thigh. I looked down to see Marcus’ hand resting there. Where he touched, warmth penetrated the velour and soothed the scratches beneath.

“It’s okay,” he said reassuringly. “I’ll be with you.”

It was the same thing he’d said the first time he’d asked me if I’d wanted to explore the attic. If Maggie was a witch, and I was beginning to believe the absurdity that she was, how could Marcus possibly protect me against her? The bus pulled into the middle school parking lot. Marcus removed his hand from my leg, but the warmth lingered.

Sammy and Robyn had exited first and hadn’t waited for me, so Marcus walked me home. We stopped at the stone wall on the corner of my street. He brought his hands out of his jacket pocket. The note rustled. I blushed. Marcus looked down at the ground.

“I’m sorry things didn’t work out at lunch,” he said.

“No, it’s okay. You couldn’t leave the team.”

“I could have come over to say hi.”

“There’s enough gossip about us at school now.” I let on as if it didn’t matter. He looked at the pendant that I wore outside of my T-shirt all day.

“Maybe you should hide that from Maggie.”

My eyebrows rose. “So you *do* think something’s up with her?”

“I really don’t know, but whether it’s with her or not, something *is* up, and it isn’t good.”

He glanced at the scratches on my face. I swallowed back the fear I felt from his sudden change of tone.

As we stood there, both deep in our own thoughts, a dark cloud passed overhead, almost devouring the daylight. We both looked up. A large, grey mass was moving in from the sea about to swallow Deadwich. The mass moved swiftly across the sky, blanketing everything it touched with its dismal shadow.

“That can’t be normal,” I said, suddenly feeling chilled, even though it was warm outside.

“It’s just a cloud. We haven’t had any rain for days. Things are starting to dry up,” he joked, but I saw the anxiety behind the smile. “You’d better get going before it rains.”

Suddenly anxious to get inside, I nodded and said, “See you at five-thirty.”

“I’ll be there.”



Thankfully, today’s supper conversation was mostly about the new cocker spaniel pups that were born by cesarean in the clinic the previous night. How everything had turned out successfully. Sammy was interested in the news, so that left us off the hook for talking to each other.

After supper I brushed my teeth then went to my room to find something comfortable to wear. After careful consideration, I decided it was either jeans or sweats, so I decided to wear what I already had on. However, I compensated by fixing my hair.

After taking the ponytail out, my hair was still molded to the shape, so I had no choice but to straighten it. I gave it a crooked parting and pulled my bangs to one side, hiding the cut over my eye, and then added some earrings. I was finishing up with a touch of make-up, when Sammy walked by my room. She leaned against the doorframe with her arms folded, one corner of her mouth turned up into a snarl.

“Humph, so it’s only been a week and a half and you managed to snare both Knight Brothers—the two most popular guys in school.”

I let her ramble on. I didn’t know where all her anger was coming from all of a sudden.

“And you know Evan would have you back in a second if you wanted him. Even Justin looks at you differently.” Now she sounded jealous.

I slammed the mascara down and turned to face her. “Look, Sammy, I don’t know what your problem is all of a sudden, but you knew from the start that I was never interested in Evan, and I let him know before it went any further. As for Marcus” I hesitated, not knowing what to say on the subject. I decided to be honest. I took a few steps towards her. “Yes, I like him, okay? And Justin’s just a nice guy. You should be lucky that he likes you. Stop wasting your time on being jealous.” I grabbed the door and slammed it in her face, making her jump backwards.

Just as the door slammed, a loud thunder clap startled me. *Oh great.* I could just imagine how cozy the Inn would be during a thunderstorm. I went back to the mirror, deciding that from the neck up I looked great. I put some lip gloss on and was ready to go.

The heavy clouds looked as if they would burst open at any moment. It might as well have been night time, it was so dark out. I went downstairs and put my sneakers on.

Uncle Jim called out from the living room, “Daniel Knight’s truck is in the driveway. Looks like one of the boys driving.”

Something fluttered in my chest. I couldn’t imagine why Evan would be here, so I figured it must be Marcus. I peeked behind the shear that hung on the side window of the door and saw Marcus alone inside the cab of a black truck.

I thought fast. “It looks like rain; I think he came to pick us up for work. Coming, Sammy?” I said sharply.

“Actually, Mom,” Her tone changed to a fake whine, “I have a really bad headache, and Brooke has a drive, so I think I’ll stay home tonight.” She was in the front hallway with me. Aunt Rachel and Uncle Jim were in the living room watching the news.

“Okay honey, make sure you call Maggie and explain.”

“Okay, Mom,” she sang out.

My heart pounded at the thought of being alone in the Inn. She knew exactly how it would make me feel. Her eyes pierced through mine, and a slow smile of triumph lifted her cheek. Frustrated, I grabbed my windbreaker off the hook and threw the front door open. I didn’t say good-bye.

The silver lining was that Marcus was waiting for me.

“It looks like it might rain any minute. I thought you might want a drive,” he said as I closed the truck door behind me.

“Thanks.”

I sat staring straight ahead. The anxiety at the thought of being alone in the Inn was overwhelming.

“What’s wrong?”

“Sammy’s not coming. Something’s not right with her.”

In answer, the sky crackled over-head, shooting streaks of crooked light across the sky. I suddenly

felt sick. Marcus backed out of the driveway as the rain burst from the clouds, slashing sideways across the windshield.

“Where’d that come from?” Marcus said, turning the wipers on the highest speed. It was unnaturally dark outside for only five-thirty.

“You said we needed rain,” I reminded him dryly and slouched back into the seat.

“Okay, so I asked for it.” He laughed.

The wind whipped up out of nowhere, shaking the tree tops, letting loose an abundance of leaves. In little more than an instant, Deadwiche was drenched.

The stage was set. The curtain was about to go up, and I had the feeling that I was the solo act in this horror drama.

But amidst everything that was wrong, Sammy, the weather, my life for that matter, I was sitting in a truck next to Marcus. No matter what was in the darkness waiting for me, I had Marcus now—my light.

Marcus parked facing the Inn. I pulled my windbreaker over my head and put the hood up, ready to jump out and make a run for it. Marcus sat still for a minute and then turned sideways to face me.

“Are you going to be alright in there without Sammy?”

“What, in Dracula’s Castle during a thunder and lightning storm, by myself? Why would I possibly not be?”

One corner of his mouth turned up at my bitter humor. “Okay, if you don’t want to check out the trunk tonight, we’ll do it another night,” he teased.

“Thank you!” I couldn’t help the slight sarcasm.

“I won’t be far away. Sammy always works on the second floor, and that’s where Evan and I will be.”

“Yeah, good to know. If you hear a blood-curdling scream, I’m sure it will be coming from me. Please *do* come and find me.”

His shoulders shook in a silent chuckle. “Hey, you’re shivering. I’ll turn up the heat.”

“The pendant’s cold,” I said. “It turned cold when we pulled into the parking lot.”

Marcus looked at me uncomprehending.

“Here, feel it.”

I reached for the chain, but Marcus was faster. He picked both sides of the chain up with his fingers and pulled it out of the front of my top until the double spiral lay in his palm. He closed his hand over it and looked at me.

“It *is* cold. Do you think maybe you should take it off?”

“No. It’s the weirdest thing, but I don’t feel right without it.”

He gave me a half-hearted smile and let go of the pendant. I put the cold chunk of metal back inside my top.

The truck was still running, and the fan pumped out heat through the vents in the dash. The radio played a popular slow song, and I mouthed the words. Marcus got serious and said something that melted my insides.

“There’s so much about you I don’t know.”

Was he kidding? There was everything about me he didn’t know. His serious statement disarmed me. I didn’t know how to counter. To me that line implied that he wanted to know more. I got shy and lowered my eyes to the blue-lit dash display.

“Brooke?”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I lowered my hood and turned sideways on the bench seat to face Marcus. My fingers twisted nervously together in my lap.

“Yeah?”

“I was just wondering; have you decided yet if you’re going to the dance?”

I shrugged. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“Can I pick you up?”

I hesitated. He seemed to take it as an uncertainty.

“Unless, of course, you have other plans.”

“No.” I shook my head and lifted my eyes to gaze upon the face of this mysterious boy. “I don’t have any other plans.”

He reached his arm out across the backrest of the seat, leaning toward me a bit more. “Good, it’ll be just you and me then.”

While the rain continued to batter the truck, my insides continued to melt. “Uh huh, just us.”

My mind wandered immediately to my outfit. I would have to unpack the rest of my things tonight in case I had to wash or iron something. Oh, but then I couldn’t wear a dress, or a skirt because of my damaged body. I wouldn’t want to traumatize anyone—unless I wore leggings and long sleeves.

A heavy metal song came on the radio, someone screeching death and destruction. I couldn’t concentrate on the moment anymore. As if the heavy music jarred Marcus’ concentration too, he switched channels from a button on the steering wheel, settling on something lighter. Overhead, the thunder sounded muffled, as though it were drifting away from us. I pulled some hair away from my face, tucking it behind an ear, forgetting about the scratch over my eye, until Marcus’ eyes drifted to it.

He took his hand out from behind the seat and brought it up to my face. I stopped breathing and held perfectly still as his fingers traced lightly over the scratch on my forehead and down past the outside of my eyebrow. Feather light, they brushed past the gravel burn on my cheek, to the scratch on my chin. Then, his hand slipped around back of my neck, under my hair. Tingles shimmered over every inch of my skin. It was an effort just to keep breathing.

Something happened to me in that moment. My heart burst open and wrapped itself around Marcus—encasing him inside. I don’t know where I found the nerve to say what I said next, it just flew out of me.

His fingers played at my hairline, sending pleasant shimmers of coolness down my spine. I shifted my body; ending up a few inches closer, so that our knees touched. I felt myself blush before the words were out.

“I think I really like you ... a lot.”

His brilliant smile lit up his eyes. “I don’t have to think. I know I really like you. I knew from the moment I saw you on the first day of school. Somehow, I knew right away that you were different from anyone else I’d ever met.”

Exactly what I’d thought when I’d first seen him. My heart fluttered, remembering the first time I’d seen him getting out of the Civic. How familiar he seemed.

His smile softened, and his eyes lightened. Was I in his heart now too? I felt pressure on the back of my neck and knew what was coming. Our bodies closed the gap between us. Inches apart and seconds away from our first kiss; chain lightning lit up the sky like a million florescent lights, followed by a deafening thunder clap. We sprung apart. My hand flew to my chest. I took some deep breaths.

“Damn! That sounded close,” Marcus said.

“Geez, I almost had a heart attack,” I said.

There was another loud crack. Torrential rains pounded steadily against the truck. I looked at the clock, still trying to slow my heart-rate. It was five-forty.

“We’re late,” I said.

Marcus and I had both turned toward the front. The moment was lost. He looked as disappointed as I felt.

“Okay, let’s make a run for it,” he said.

I flipped my hood back on. Just as I was about to open the truck door, something pounded on the outside of it.

“Oh! What was that?” I grabbed my chest again.

“That was Evan letting us know he’s here.”

“I don’t think my heart could take another scare.”



Chapter Seventeen

We left the truck at the same time and ran together, splashing through the puddles that had accumulated on the ground already. How ironic that I was running to the Inn, instead of away from it.

The little doorstep had a roof. Before Marcus opened the door, he turned to face me. Rain dripped from the ends of his hair down the sides of his neck disappearing inside his collar. The porch light glistened off the layers of water that ran down the front of his leather jacket. Before I knew what was happening, he reached up and slid my hood down. Instead of lowering his hands, he molded them to the sides of my face. My heart fluttered sporadically. Thunder rumbled overhead. Rain blew at our feet, but I didn't care. He was about to kiss me. Inches from mine, his lips parted slightly. I licked mine in case they were too dry. Finally, I felt the feathery softness of his lips brush against mine.

The front door flew open. We pulled back. Evan stood in the foyer with his arms folded.

"You're late!"

Marcus rolled his eyes and grabbed my hand, leading the way into Dracula's Castle just as another lightning bolt lit up the sky, followed by another crack of thunder.

In contrast to the brightness of the lightning outside, the inside of the Inn almost looked as though it was in darkness. I swallowed hard and squeezed Marcus' hand.

Evan cleared his throat. "Whenever you two are ready, we've got work to do. Remember, Marcus? The painting?"

His sarcasm hurt, but I guess I deserved it. I gave Marcus his hand back and took off my windbreaker. Liquid ran off of it, dripping onto the wide plank floorboards. The front of my hair was soaked and was already in the process of curling. Water dripped from the ends, wetting the front of my hoodie. Marcus stood close by my side as if he was hesitant to leave me.

Beth entered the foyer smiling pleasantly. "Hi, Brooke, glad you could make it," she said in her child-like voice.

I forced a smile back.

"Hi Evan, Hi Marcus." Her eyes lingered a bit too long on Marcus for my comfort.

Creep.

"Hey," Evan mumbled.

"Hi, Beth. How are you tonight?" Marcus gifted Beth with one of his rare and cute smiles.

She beamed. Pathetically, so did I.

"I'm great, now that you're here. I mean, all of you." She said the last part too quickly.

Although Beth looked much younger than me, she seemed older, and I got an odd vibe from her. She dressed old-fashioned for her age, always in a dress and sweater, with white socks and shiny black shoes.

She tore her eyes from Marcus to look at me. "Tell Sammy we hope she feels better soon. You're stuck with me tonight." She continued to smile, emphasizing her dimples.

"Yeah, I will," I said.

It was a strange relief I felt then. It was the most I'd heard her talk, and suddenly she didn't seem as creepy anymore. The pendant even grew warm. I almost reached inside my top to touch it, but fought back the urge. I decided having Beth close by would be better than being alone in this place. There was no sign of Maggie.

I looked at Marcus and smiled, remembering how, just moments ago, his lips had brushed lightly against mine; so light I'd barely felt it, yet memorable enough for the feeling to linger. He smiled back,

perhaps remembering also, and then disappeared up the grand staircase with Evan.

With a gesture from Beth, I followed her into the kitchen. I couldn't get my mind off of the almost-kiss that almost happened twice. Maybe something or someone didn't want us to kiss. I shuddered at the thought.

The kitchen was large and brightly colored, but not cheery—nothing in this building was cheery. And like the other rooms that I'd seen, this room looked as if it was from another era. Floral-printed wallpaper covered the upper-half of the walls, while an off-white wainscoting covered the bottom.

Beth stopped at a large butcher-block island in the middle of the room. Iron and copper pots dangled above her head. "It's pretty nasty out there tonight. I almost called to tell you to stay home if you wanted, but this place gets pretty lonely when you're here by yourself."

There was a vulnerability about her that began to form a soft spot inside of me. Now I understood why Marcus went the extra mile to be nice to her. Maybe he felt sorry for her, too.

"Where's Maggie?" I asked, forcing her name between my lips.

"She's away for a couple of days. Gone to Salem to visit family."

"Oh." Immediately, I began to relax, until something hit me. "You mean she leaves you here by yourself?"

"I'm used to it, and besides, I'm never really alone. Tonight's one of the few nights that the Inn doesn't happen to have any guests."

"But you're so—"

"Young?"

I nodded.

She smiled and said, "I'm not as young as you think."

I decided not to press on that subject. But I was still curious about her. "So, how long have you worked here?"

She turned away from me, busying herself at the counter. "A long time, and I've lived here even longer."

"Oh. You live here too?" The news unsettled me. Beth would be very close to Maggie if she lived here.

She nodded. "Maggie is my ... legal guardian," she said while organizing a plate of cookies.

"What about school. Do you go to the middle school?"

She shook her head. "No. I'm home schooled."

"Oh." That would explain why I'd never seen her walking home from school.

"These are for the boys," she said with her hands on the plate of cookies she'd just arranged. It was clear she wasn't going to offer any more information. "Later, you can take the cookies upstairs to them with a cup of hot chocolate. And one for yourself too, of course."

I could handle that.

"What will I be doing tonight?" I was curious.

"I have everything you need to iron set up in a room upstairs."

Ironing didn't seem so bad.

"I'll be close by if you need anything," she added.

When Beth finished arranging cookies, she led me upstairs. The emptiness of the Inn surrounded me like a giant tomb. The last time I'd been here, the rooms on either side of the foyer were filled with people. Now they were dark, empty holes. I tried not to think about it and stared straight ahead.

Beth led me to a room I hadn't been in before. It was down a hallway, opposite of the one I'd been in with Sammy making beds. This room hadn't been freshly painted yet. The once white paint had discolored and chipped off the walls in places. A large table had been set up with a mountain of linen on top. An ironing board and iron were the only other items in the room.

“Come down whenever you want a break and get the cookies and hot chocolate,” Beth said on her way out the door.

“Okay, thanks.”

I ironed uneventfully for an hour. The storm seemed to recede as it had before, and I was grateful. Halfway through the pile of linens, I picked up a white table cloth and placed it on the ironing board. Lightening flashed outside, accompanied by a sharp crack of thunder—the loudest yet. My hand froze like a claw over the iron’s handle. I stared at the small rectangular window and held my breath as the lights flickered, went out, and came back on again.

“That was close,” I said out loud.

Perspiration beaded on my forehead. With the back of my hand I wiped it away and decided it was time for cookies and hot chocolate—my excuse to see Marcus, and I needed the company, even if Evan would be involved. I unplugged the iron and left the room.

As I hurried through the maze of hallways, Beth was nowhere in sight, and I didn’t look very hard. I wasn’t about to explore the unknown by myself. The cheerless kitchen held no comfort as I made three steaming cups of hot chocolate. Not even the intoxicating aroma wafting under my nose could take away the fear that prickled my skin. Marcus. I had to see him. It would be awkward with Evan there, but as long as I had company for a while, I would suffer through Evan’s bitterness toward me.

Outside, the steady rumble overhead threatened to explode again. As quickly as I could without spilling the hot liquid I carried, I ascended the staircase. When I reached the curve halfway up, more lightening flashed. The lights flickered again. This time they went out for half a minute then came back on.

“Oh please,” I pleaded to no one in particular, “please let the lights stay on.”

With another step came more lightening, bringing more crackling thunder with it. The chandelier crystals tinkled, and the light bulbs flickered like fireflies. As I braved another step, I saw movement out of the corner of my right eye. The pendant grew cold against my skin.

A huge dreary painting hung on the wall to my right. I hadn’t noticed it before. Lightning flashed through the stained glass window at the top of the stairs, casting an eerie rainbow across the painting and the surrounding wall.

The picture was of the Ravenwyck at night. The dark green building was barely visible against the night sky. There were two antique-looking cars in the parking lot along with a few carriages that horses would have pulled.

With a new sense of urgency to reach Marcus, I turned away and took another step. Again I saw movement out of the corner of my eye. As if compelled, I turned back to the painting. There was movement in the bottom right corner, next to the ornate bronze frame. I flicked my eyes up to the stained glass window, hoping there was a tree branch or something that might have cast a shadow on the wall, but outside the window, all was suddenly still. The only sounds now were my shallow breathing and pounding heart.

As I stared at the painting, unable to look away, a black shadow crept into the foreground, looking like spilled ink. Within seconds the shadow separated and transformed into five hooded, back-robed figures. As if someone shot ice water through my veins, my body turned cold, and I froze to the spot. The tray I carried fell out of my hands, crashing down every step until it reached the foyer floor.

But my focus was on the painting and the figures now drifting up the walkway. When they reached halfway, between the gate and the Inn, they turned. Their eyes, dark and glossy, peeked out at me from under their hoods.

My knees weakened, and I fell to the step. “This isn’t real,” I whispered to myself. “It has to be another nightmare.” My fingers gripped the edge of the step, digging painfully into the carpet.

The person in the middle of the group lifted an arm and held it out straight. From under the black

bell sleeve, a white, bony hand appeared. The hand reached toward me. I tried pushing myself backwards, but I was already against the railing. Unable to breathe, I watched as the claw-like fingers emerged from the painting. Every cut over my entire body sizzled and stung with renewed life. I shrieked from the pain, piercing the silence.

The other four figures drew closer. I could almost see their faces. The pendant felt like an ice cube against my skin, jolting me, alerting me to move. With new found strength, I stood, and just as the clawed hands of the other four figures reached out of the painting, I bolted up the stairs, but not before one reached out and ripped my sleeve at the elbow. Shrieking and stumbling, I made it to the top of the stairs.

I didn't look back as I ran down a hallway, not knowing which direction I'd taken, until I slammed into something solid. I screamed again. Someone held me forcibly by the arms. I fought to break free, but couldn't.

Through my screams I heard a soft, comforting voice say, "Brooke, it's me."

I stopped fighting and looked up to see Marcus.

His grip on my arms didn't loosen. "What is it? What happened?"

I found my voice. "Come on." It was just a squeak, but it was audible enough. "We have to get out of here." I grabbed his arm and started to run past him, but he didn't move. I stopped and looked back at him. "Come on!" I cried and pulled at his wrist.

He looked down the hallway, where I'd come from then back at me.

"Please."

Whether he believed there was danger or not, he kicked it into high gear and pulled me along by the hand. We ran as fast as we could down the narrow hallway. We ran past the room Evan was painting in, down a back staircase, and into another hallway.

"In here," Marcus said, pulling me into a dark room.

He closed the door behind us, quickly finding the light switch. I pressed my hands against my beating heart and tried to catch my breath. My chest hurt from all the pounding inside. I wiped my eyes with the back of my other hand and turned to look at the small room.

All the furniture was covered in white sheets. There was no window. I felt the weight of Marcus' hands on my shoulders.

"Tell me what happened," he said.

"You won't believe me," I said in between breaths and sobs.

His arms went around me. I turned and flung myself into them and held on tightly, burying my face in his denim shirt, breathing in the fresh paint-splattered scent, as a silent sob shook my body. He patted the length of my hair, as one would pat a puppy.

"I'll believe whatever you tell me, Brooke. Remember, I'm a part of this mystery too."

With a shaky breath, I let the nightmare I'd just witnessed spill out of me. When I was finished I took a step back and out of his embrace.

I looked at him feeling desperate. "Will you take me home?"

His body went rigid. His eyes widened. "Jesus!"

"What is it?" His horror-filled expression shot cold fear through my body.

He lifted a hand and rubbed his thumb against my forehead. I flinched under the sting of his touch. He held his hand out behind my head and looked at it. I whirled around. Next to the smudge of white paint on his thumb, was a smear of bright red blood—my blood. With a shaking hand, I touched my forehead where he'd just touched. Fresh blood had seeped out of the wound, staining my fingertips.

"Ow." It came out as a whimper.

Suddenly, as they had on the stairs, every wound over my entire body stung as if they had been reopened with jagged razor blades. I lifted a pant leg up. Fresh blood oozed from every cut and ran down

my leg. I pulled the neck of my tank top down, exposing more flesh than I would normally dare. Every laceration over my entire body was spilling fresh blood.

“No, no, this can’t be happening.” I wasn’t sure if I was talking out loud or not. The room swirled around me making my head feel heavier and heavier. Light dissolved into darkness.

The next thing I remembered was the lower half of my body lay on something hard. The upper half was cradled in someone’s arms. The cool sensation of blood rushing through my veins brought me back from wherever the darkness had taken me. Marcus’ voice sounded far away, gradually becoming closer, until my ears were fully unplugged and I could hear once again. The muted sound of thunder made my body jerk.

“It’s okay, I’m right here. You’re safe with me,” Marcus soothed, rubbing a hand down the side of my face.

I opened my eyes to a white T-shirt smeared with fresh blood. Its softness was soothing against the side of my face. I took a deep breath, hauling in the scent of fresh laundry mixed with a splash of pain and the rusty smell from the blood.

He was kneeling on the floor, holding me against him, rocking me like a child. I unfurled my fingers from the hand that lay between us and latched onto the front of his shirt. With my other hand, I touched my forehead again. There was no need to look at it; I felt the wet smear of blood on my fingertips.

“I can’t handle this,” I whispered into his chest. “I feel like I’m in a horror movie that won’t end.”

“I know.” Instead of trying to make things sound better than they were, he agreed with me. “This is insane.” He raised his voice. “If it’s someone’s sick twisted idea of a joke, it’s not funny.”

I attempted to push myself up.

“What are you doing?” he asked, sounding concerned.

“I’m okay now.”

He looked at me not fully believing that I was alright, but helped me to get up anyway.

I held up a hand. Blood trickled down my fingers and dripped off my wrist, forming a small puddle on the wooden floor.

“Maybe you should see a doctor,” he said.

“And tell him what? That I had a fight with the neighbor’s cat? I think you know as well as I do that I can’t take these injuries to a doctor.” I looked down at the crimson lines that were now soaked through the front of my tank top. “Where are we anyway?”

“We’re in an old office in back of the Inn, on the main level,” he said.

As tempted as I was to run out of the front door, I suddenly had an urge to explore the trunk. “Marcus, take me to the attic.”

He looked at me as though I might be losing my mind. “But—”

“I’m fine now, well except for a few dozen scratches covering my entire body that are bleeding for no apparent reason. Seriously, I need to see the trunk.” As if to affirm my decision, I felt the pendant turn from ice to soothing warmth against my chest, and I knew then that if he wouldn’t take me, I would go to the attic alone.

“Okay, if that’s really what you want. We’ll have to be quiet so Evan doesn’t hear us.”

So, with me tucked under Marcus’ arm, we left the room. When we came to the narrow staircase in the back section of the Inn, I turned to go up.

“No, we can’t go that way,” Marcus said. “We’d have to walk past the room Evan’s painting. He might see us.”

“But, we came down that way.”

“We were just lucky he didn’t hear us.”

“Okay, then which way?” I had a sinking feeling.

“The main staircase.”

“But, that’s where” I couldn’t speak of the horror I’d just witnessed there. I gripped his shirt with both hands.

He tightened his arm around me. “It’s okay, I won’t let anything happen to you.”

The front door was closed. And as if it had never happened, the tray I’d dropped had been cleaned up, along with the mess.

With my gaze lowered to the stairs, I squished myself into Marcus’ side, ready to scream at the slightest sound and, reluctantly, began the ascent. When we came close to where the painting hung, I closed my eyes and let him guide me along. Marcus assured me that the painting looked perfectly normal—to him it probably did. Once I was at the top, I let out a deep, shaky breath, but didn’t let go.

“I wonder where Beth is. Didn’t she hear me scream?” I whispered as low as I could.

“Beth’s kind of strange. Always gives me the creeps,” he whispered back.

“Seriously? I thought you really liked her.”

“She’s kind of pitiful. I can’t help but feel sorry for her when I see her, but I still think she’s weird.” I shuddered.

We came to the attic stairway door. Marcus opened it carefully, cringing when its hinges squeaked. I could hear the ladder squeaking not far down the hallway.

“Evan must be wondering where you are by now. Didn’t he hear me scream?”

“Yeah, but he probably figures you saw a spider, and by now he knows I’m not coming back.”

“Oh.” I could imagine Evan visualizing Marcus and me making out in some dark room in the Inn.

As if.



Chapter Eighteen

As I clung to Marcus' arm like static, the two of us stepped into the frigid coldness of the attic. Breath clouds expelled from our mouths. When my teeth started chattering, I had second thoughts. "Maybe we should just get out of here while we still can."

Marcus opened his mouth to speak, but I cut him off.

"I know, I know, you're here."

"Actually, I was going to agree with you. Do you want to leave?"

The nagging feeling won over my better judgment. "No, come on. You do have a flashlight though, right?"

"Right here." Marcus picked the flashlight up off the floor and turned it on. He also picked up a hammer and stuck the handle in his belt.

As soon as we left the glow of the dangling light bulb behind, a series of bright flashes lit up the edges of the attic, followed by a sharp crack of thunder and a loud rumble. A squeak flew from my mouth. Outside the dormer windows, tree branches slashed violently against the panes of glass. The whole scene looked like something from a horror movie. But it was real, and I had the lead role.

Marcus' hand closed over mine and our fingers locked together. I situated myself as close to him as possible. Despite everything that was happening to me, I was very much aware of the chemistry between us.

As if the path had been laid out for us, we found the trunk in no time at all. It was the oddest thing our footprints from last time were gone. A fresh, untouched blanket of dust covered everything except the trunk. It was as if we'd never been here.

"Here, hold this," Marcus said handing me the flashlight.

With a cold and bleeding hand, I reached out to take it. Marcus gave my hand a pained look, then wrapped his fingers around my wrist. He passed the flashlight over to my other hand, and proceeded to wipe away some of the blood off my fingers using his shirt tail.

"Does it hurt a lot?"

I shook my head while watching him dab gently at the cuts, and lying said, "It doesn't matter." Then I took my hand from him and shone the flashlight on the trunk.

Marcus took the hammer out of his belt and gave the old padlock a whack. Sparks flew into the darkness. The crack echoed loudly through the attic. I froze, waiting for a reaction. Nothing but the echo. The lock didn't budge either.

He looked at me for approval. I nodded giving him the go-ahead. I braced myself for the next sharp crack. The hammer came down harder this time, breaking open the padlock with another array of sparks. It fell to the floor with a loud clank. We both cringed at the noise. I held my breath; sure that someone would have heard it this time. When nothing happened, we looked back at the trunk. Marcus pushed the leather straps off the top.

"You take that end," he said.

By now, I was stiff from the cold, and the wetness from my blood-soaked clothing wasn't helping matters.

We both knelt in the dust in front of the trunk and put a hand on the bottom of the lid. Instantly, a shimmer of energy passed from the trunk into my fingers and up my arm, stopping where the pendant lay against my chest. By the surprised look on Marcus' face, I knew he'd felt it too.

Together, we lifted the heavy lid, easing it back on its hinges.

"Oh! Do you feel that?" I asked.

My fascination was mirrored on his face. As if someone had turned on a heater, the area surrounding us grew warm, dissolving our breath clouds. I waited for the smell of must and oldness to come from within the trunk, but there was no scent, just comforting warmth.

As I knelt in front of the trunk feeling almost peaceful, I heard Marcus suck in a sharp intake of air. Afraid of what I might see, I glanced at him warily.

“Brooke! Your cuts ... they just disappeared in front of my eyes.”

Overwhelmed by the warmth, I hadn't noticed that I didn't hurt anymore. I looked at the smooth, blood-free skin on the back of my hand and then reached up and touched the spot on my forehead where another freshly bleeding scratch had been. There was no blood. The scratch was gone. I looked down at my chest. The crimson lines had disappeared from the front of my tank top, and when I pulled the neck out to look inside, skin that had looked freshly massacred moments ago was now completely healed, as if the scratches had never been there.

“They're gone!” I heard the elation in my voice. “And look!” I pulled the pendant out by its chain. As if it was newly polished, it gleamed, brilliant silver. Mesmerized, I turned the warm metal over in my palm.

“This is twisted,” Marcus said, staring at the pendant. Thunder sounded overhead, but no lightning reached us here, in the middle of the attic.

“My life's been twisted since I moved here,” I replied. “But you know that.”

“I wish there was something I could do.”

I looked at him incredulously. “You're kidding, right? You're here with me now. And you believe me. We're figuring this out together. You're already doing all you can.”

He looked dissatisfied. “I just wish I could do more.”

“Let's just see what's inside of the trunk so we can get out of here.” *And maybe back to that kiss.*

I shone the flashlight inside the trunk. Marcus reached in and picked something out. He held it out between us. It was a black robe, exactly like the one I'd seen on the people in my nightmare and in the painting.

“There's something else,” he said. He passed me the robe and pulled out a book.

I let the soft garment fall to my lap and took the small, black, leather-bound book from him. With a light touch, I caressed the double spiral embossed into the center of the cover and the intricate scroll detail etched into the leather surrounding it. Other than a line of runes down the spine, there was no writing. I took a deep breath and looked at Marcus, who was kneeling patiently in front of me, his eyes wide. I slipped a finger under the front cover. The book fell open with a cracking sound to the spine. I stared at the first page without surprise.

“Claire Elizabeth Day,” I said low. “It was Claire's book.” A strange feeling of déjà vu washed over me. Maybe it was seeing her entire name in writing for the second time. I sat back on my heels and brushed my fingers lightly over the dents in the writing. “The year 1912 is written in the corner.”

“Exactly one hundred years ago,” Marcus said.

I flipped through the silver-edged pages in silence.

“Well, what's it about?” he asked.

“I'm not sure. A book of spells maybe.”

His eyes narrowed. “How would you know what a book of spells looks like?”

“I don't know?” I shrugged. “The pages are filled with strange words and symbols. It just looks like a book of magic.”

“So, Claire was a witch, too,” Marcus said with confidence.

I looked at him regarding what he's just said. “Do you think?”

He shrugged. “Why not? Maggie might be.”

“Maggie is,” I said adamantly. I was absolutely convinced now that Maggie was a witch—an evil

witch.

“Okay then, why couldn’t Claire be too? It *is* her book. And she *was* in our dreams, even if only symbolically. And what about the robe?”

“Okay, let’s say she was; what does it have to do with us?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe Claire wanted us to find the book.”

“Maybe.” I closed the cover and fondled it lovingly.

“As I said on the bus, my uncle might know more. Maybe he’ll even know who Claire was. I’ll take you to see him Saturday morning.”

A loud, boisterous voice, edged with sarcasm, interrupted our moment. “Decent or not, here I come.”

We both snapped our heads up. Instinct kicked in. For some reason, I felt the need to hide the book from Evan. I shoved it into the front of my sweats and pulled the bottom of my hoodie down over it laying my hand protectively across my stomach.

Within seconds Evan was standing behind me. I knelt stiffly.

“Can’t you two stay away from each other long enough to get your work done?” When we didn’t answer he looked at me and said, “Beth’s looking for you.” He let out a sharp laugh. “So, did I interrupt, or are you finished already?”

Marcus stood. From the expression on his face, it looked as though it wouldn’t take much for him to beat the crap out of his brother.

I stood too, and positioned myself in between them.

“Don’t.” I mouthed the word to Marcus.

“What do you want?” Marcus asked bluntly, over my shoulder.

“Like I said, Beth’s looking for Brooke.”

“Okay, thanks.” I swallowed my pride, anything to avoid an argument, or worse, a fight in the attic.

“We’ll be down in a minute.”

I felt the intensity of the anger that radiated from both brothers as I stood in the middle. They glared past me at each other, provoking the other to make the first move, until Evan lowered his gaze to the bundle on the floor.

“What’s that?” He gestured toward the robe with his chin. When neither of us answered, he bent and picked it up. For a fleeting moment, his face held the expression of someone deep in thought.

“What is it?” I asked staring at Evan’s puzzled expression.

“Huh? Why are you staring at me?” He let the robe drop over the side of the trunk. “Well, if you two want to stay up here and play, then go ahead. I’m going back to work before I lose my job.” He turned and walked away.

“That was weird,” Marcus said.

“Really! I’m glad I’m not the only one who thought so. Something happened to him when he held the robe. He was in a trance, or something.”

“He’ll never tell us what it was, though. I don’t know about you, but I’m ready to get out of here. I think I’ve had enough of the attic for one night. Marcus sounded more anxious than I’d ever heard him.

“So, you’ll leave with me?” I was still worried that he would take me back to my ironing room and go back to work.

“Of course. Don’t worry. I’m not leaving you alone in this place.”

“What about your job?” I asked.

“I’ll get another one.”

I tried to smile. “Come on. Let’s put this stuff back.”

I grabbed the robe and threw it into the trunk, not taking the time to fold it.

“Where’s the book?” Marcus asked.

I patted the spot where I'd shoved it in my pants.

"Are you sure you want to take it? What if it's cursed or something? You don't want to mess with a witch's property."

"Seriously?" I almost laughed. "You don't believe in witches, remember? And besides, Claire's dead."

"How do you know?"

"Because the book's dated one hundred years ago. She has to be dead now. Anyway, I can't explain it, but I feel like the book wanted us to find it." As I said it, I patted Claire's book again through the velour.

"If you say so," Marcus conceded, looking skeptical.

He lifted the cover back onto the trunk. Instantly the warmth left us, and our breath clouds returned with the cold. But my body stayed healed.

"I can't get out of here soon enough," I said and shivered.

His hand found mine.

We wasted no time in walking back to the light and down the attic stairs. I focused my eyes on our feet as we hurried down the grand staircase and past the lifeless painting, which an hour ago had been very much alive.

I grabbed my windbreaker off the hook by the door with such a force, I heard it tear. Just as Marcus was about to open the front door, Beth came into the foyer.



Chapter Nineteen

Brooke? Where were you, I've been looking for you?"
Crap. I looked at Marcus for help.

"Brooke is sick. I'm taking her home."

"Brooke?"

I faced Beth. "I'm sorry. I looked for you, but ... I'm really sick. I have to go." I had no other explanation. I just needed to get away from the Inn as fast as possible. I turned to leave.

"Wait," she blurted in her meek voice.

I swallowed hard and turned back. Beth pulled an envelope from a pocket on her cardigan.

"This is from Maggie." When I didn't reach out to take it, Beth said, "It's your pay from last week."

She gestured for me to take it so, reluctantly, I did. The truth was, I didn't want anything from Maggie, not even her money.

With great effort, I turned the corners of my mouth up and said, "Thanks."

"See you next time. Hope you feel better soon," she called out after me as I crossed the threshold. Somehow, I knew she was sincere. But unbeknownst to her, I had no intentions of going back to the Inn—ever.

The rain battered us as we ran to the truck. The thunder and lightning hadn't let up either. As we pulled out of the driveway, I risked a quick glance back at the Inn. Flashes of lightening framed the huge building, emphasizing the raven statues, making the whole scene look as frighteningly creepy as it always had in my dreams when I was little.

Suddenly, I felt scared for Evan. "Maybe we should make Evan leave too," I said, staring out the window at the Inn.

"And how do you suppose we do that?"

"I don't know, but he's in that creepy place all alone."

Marcus chuckled darkly. "It's nice of you to worry about him, but I don't think there's anything we could say that will make him leave just because we want him to."

"Yeah, I guess so. But still."

The truck lurched forward before coming to a stop halfway out of the gate. "Do you want to go back?" Marcus asked, a little too harshly.

I shrugged. "No."

Marcus shifted gears with more force than necessary. "My brother can take care of himself."

"Okay, you made your point."

We rounded the corner, leaving the Inn behind us.

"Unless" Marcus hesitated.

"Unless what?"

"Unless you're unsure."

I looked at him questioningly. "Unsure?"

He stared straight ahead.

"I'm not unsure about anything."

He didn't acknowledge that I'd said anything, so I faced the front and with a sick ache in my chest, I pondered over our recent conversation.

Our little tiff was followed by a period of awkward silence. I glanced sideways at Marcus. He was leaning against the door of the truck, one hand on the steering wheel, the other on the stick shift, staring straight ahead. Why had he gotten so gloomy when I mentioned Evan? We never even got to have that

kiss, and now I didn't think we ever would.

Three minutes after leaving the Inn's driveway, we were at Aunt Rachel's. After everything that'd just happened to us, I couldn't let the night end this way. I had to do something—I wanted that kiss.

“Um” I started to speak, but he continued to stare straight ahead. I sighed and gave up. “Thanks for bringing me home.” I spoke fast, jumped out of the truck and ran through the downpour to the front porch, not taking the time to put my hood up.

“Brooke, wait!”

There was an edge of panic to Marcus' voice. My heart constricted. I turned on the bottom step and waited for him. Rain poured down my face—a perfect camouflage for the tears that spilled uncontrollably from my eyes.

When he reached me, he grabbed my arm, pulling me up the stairs and out of the rain. I tightened my jaw and swallowed, promising myself that I wouldn't cry now that I was under the protection of the porch roof. I forced myself to look at Marcus' adorable face. My throat ached and my eyes burned. My heart didn't know whether to melt or break.

The pain in his eyes showed his regret for his recent behavior. His face softened. He even smiled. “I'm a jerk. I don't know why I acted like that.” He looked thoughtful. “I guess I was jealous.” He let out a sharp huff. “I've never been jealous of Evan before.”

He took a step backwards, leaning against the railing, and instinctively, I took a step towards him. “You don't have to be jealous of Evan. I was just scared for his life, that's all.” As I said it, I realized how ridiculous it sounded. “That's what the Inn does to me.”

“You know, when you cry, your eyes turn green.”

I looked out onto the street. “I'm not crying,” I said as I blinked back stubborn tears.

The rain bounced off the pavement like tiny ping-pong balls. There was no escaping the dampness. The scent of wet earth was everywhere. As I stared into the rain, I felt Marcus' fingers brush away the strands of wet hair that clung to my dampened face, sending tingles across my skin. The microscopic fissure in my heart sealed shut, and the sickness in my chest was replaced with a feeling much greater than a schoolgirl crush. My heart swelled.

I turned my face toward him again, but stared down at the one side of his shirt collar that was flipped outside of his jacket. I had the urge to reach up and tuck it in for him, but a bout of shyness had my hands pinned to my sides. After a deep breath, I said what I'd been too shy to say until now.

“I made my choice.” My gaze lifted from the collar to his face. “I chose you.”

I'd never felt more vulnerable as I stood staring into his eyes. I'd opened up my heart and made the first serious move. Now it was his turn. He reached up and raked a hand through his soaked hair, leaving it adorably messy, reminding me of how flat my hair must be from all the rain.

“Are you sure I'm the right choice?” he asked, gazing at me warmly.

Mentally, I shook my head. “Who are you comparing yourself to? Evan isn't even in the equation. He never was. It's always been you.”

Without thinking about it, I brought a hand up and let it rest on the front of his jacket, toying with the zipper. My gaze fell to the hollow of his neck. “I liked you from the first moment I saw you get out of the Civic. I hardly even noticed Evan that day. You're not like anyone I've ever met before.” As I poured out my heart, the pendant grew warmer.

He swallowed. Then he said softly, “That first day of school, I wished ever since that I had been the one who came over to you.” I glanced up to see a hint of a smile play at the corners of his mouth. “I imagined so many times having a conversation with you that day.”

I smiled. “What would you have said?”

He brought one hand up slowly and brushed it across my forehead, letting his fingers rest where the scratch had been. He slid the other around my waist, pulling me closer. I stepped into his arms freely.

His eyes flooded with emotion, changing to a warmer shade of brown. "I would have asked you if I could kiss you."

Reveling in the tingles that shimmered over me and through me, I angled my face toward his, offering myself. His face inched toward mine. When we were close enough that I could feel the whisper soft touch of his minty-scented breath on my skin; the moment before our lips met for the first time, he hesitated. Maybe he was giving me a chance to change my mind, but the craving was too strong. My eyes fell shut and my lips parted. And in that instant, I felt him, and everything was right. His lips were soft and warm and familiar, as if we'd kissed for a thousand years.

The world around me stalled—even the rain paused. Despite all the crap that had happened to me, I felt lightened.

Then the front door opened, and Sammy cleared her throat loudly.

Marcus ignored her and pulled away slowly, and before we were detached completely, he whispered the word, "finally," against my lips.

I sighed dreamily and opened my eyes.

Then I got annoyed and turned my head toward Sammy, who stood behind the screened door with her arms folded and a smug look on her face.

"What the hell do you want, Sammy?"

In a stuck-up tone, she replied, "I just thought you should know that Dad will be home any minute. And you wouldn't want him to catch you making out on the front porch, would you?"

"Whatever, Sammy. Go away." I ignored her and turned my head away from her, letting it fall against Marcus' shoulder. I heard the door slam shut.

"Something's different about her," Marcus said. "I've never seen her act this way."

A thought entered my mind then. "How come you and Sammy never" *Ugh.* I couldn't even finish the sentence, because it was one of the stupidest things I'd ever said to anyone.

But he answered anyway. "I've never thought of Sammy in that way."

"Sorry. It was a stupid question."

"You're the only one, Brooke."

"The only one?"

That statement disarmed me. Was I the only girlfriend he'd ever had?

"From the first time I saw you, I couldn't get you out of my head. It drove me crazy to see you with Evan."

"I wasn't really with him, but I'm sorry." Sammy had been right. All the times I'd caught Marcus looking at me in school, he'd had these feelings for me, and I hadn't even realized he liked me in that way.

"I want to make your pain go away," he said. His fingers lightly caressed the side of my face before they slid to the back of my neck where his grip tightened. "I want to protect you from whatever you need protecting from."

"You do make the pain go away. My scratches are gone," I said on an up-note.

"Yeah, the magic of the trunk." He smiled.

"It *was* magic. Maybe Claire's ghost was there."

"Maybe it was."

I lay my head against the wet leather of his jacket again and closed my eyes briefly, wondering why this felt like a bittersweet moment. Like the end of something and not the beginning. Something was off. I could feel it. A dark force was keeping me from being truly happy.

Out on the road, headlights shimmered on the wet pavement, preceding their vehicle.

Marcus groaned. "I don't want to let you go. But we wouldn't want Uncle Jim to see us 'making out' would we?" he mocked Sammy.

We laughed quietly.

Marcus pulled away casually as Uncle Jim pulled into the driveway.

“Don’t leave yet,” I said, almost sounding desperate.

“I really should get back to work.”

“What?” I was stunned.

“I left Evan without an explanation and with all the clean-up.”

“Are you crazy? You can’t go back there.” I couldn’t stand the thought of him at the Inn. What if Maggie did something to him to hurt me? “Promise me you won’t go there; at least not tonight.”

“Okay. I promise I’ll go straight home. Promise *me* you won’t take the pendant off.”

I’d gotten so used to its warmth I’d almost forgotten about the pendant. “Yeah, I promise. I don’t think I’ll ever take it off again.” I pulled it out and looked at it. “Besides, it’s kind of nice now that it’s all shiny.”

By the time Uncle Jim had reached us, Marcus had situated himself so that he was casually leaning up against one of the railing posts, his hands in the front pockets of his jeans. I stood at a respectable distance. Uncle Jim stopped to say hello. He asked Marcus how his parents were and me how my ankle was, told us about the beagle that’d come into the clinic with a broken leg, and then went inside.

Before I could blink I was in Marcus’ arms again. “I wish I could hold you in my arms all night and keep the witches away,” he whispered against my ear.

My neck complied with his gesture by tilting to the side. He gathered my hair and pulled it behind my shoulder. I was barely breathing when his mouth brushed past my ear and pressed against the spot on my neck just below, sending a pleasant cool sensation down my neck and up into my face.

I sighed contentedly as he pulled away.

“I’ll see you at the bleachers tomorrow morning,” he said then turned and walked down the steps.

“I can’t wait.”

There was a longing inside me like never before as I stood on the porch and watched until the truck was out of sight. I had the strangest feeling that my whole life had led to this very moment. That every action I’d ever taken, every breath I’ve ever expelled, led me to now. That this was all there was, and the future didn’t matter. And I was fairly certain that if I kept the pendant on, the nightmares would stay away.

Tomorrow would be a new day, and with it, a new relationship. It couldn’t come soon enough.

Maybe Claire’s book held an answer or two, to the secrets of the village. I hurried upstairs and went straight to bed with my new find.



Chapter Twenty

When I awoke the next morning, Claire's book was clutched in my hands next to my chest, the way I'd fallen asleep. I'd leafed through the pages the night before searching for words that I could understand, but the writing was foreign to me. So I gave up when every page turned into a vision of Marcus and me on the front porch engaged in our first kiss. I tried to remember exactly how his lips felt against mine, but it didn't satisfy the craving.

Beating Sammy to the shower was a morning challenge that I won this time. I put on my best jeans—black, low-rise and faded down the front and back, accessorizing them with a wide, black belt and a pink top. Its neckline was low enough that the pendant had nowhere to hide. Today I would wear the mysterious double spiral proudly.

Before leaving for school, I ran upstairs to add a pair of silver hoop earrings to my accessories. Claire's book was lying where I'd left it, half sticking out from under the comforter on my bed. I took a few moments and fanned through the last quarter. There were a few letters here and there that I could make out, but the context in which they were used was odd. The letters and symbols were woven into strange runes that I didn't understand.

I turned the last page carefully, as I had all the previous pages before, and gasped with delight at the prize that awaited me at the end.

An old square picture was held to the back cover by four black paper corners. The picture looked to be in perfect condition, as if it had been taken with a new camera in sepia mode. It had no cracks or tears. Perhaps magic had protected it all these years.

Although the two people in the picture were tiny images in the center of the small square, their faces seemed happy. The girl wore a light colored, long skirt, with a short, dark fitted jacket, cinched at the waist. Her long, wavy hair was pulled back at the sides. A young man stood beside her, wearing a white, long-sleeved shirt and dark pants, his hands at his sides. They stood in front of a building, with its siding as the backdrop of the picture. A warm smile formed on my face as I imagined the girl to be Claire.

Carefully, I pulled the picture from its protective bindings, cringing as one corner tore off and stayed behind. "I'm sorry," I whispered. Another picture, hidden behind the first, fell to the bed. Intrigued, I picked it up and held it delicately in my palm.

Shock replaced curiosity as I stared at seven black-robed people who stared back at me.

"We're ready to go, Brooke," Aunt Rachel called up to me.

My widened eyes flicked to the first picture. I flipped it over and gasped again. I expected to see Claire's name on the back, but I didn't expect to see the name, Christian Knight. The picture was dated 1912, as the book was.

I shoved the two pictures in a pocket inside my math binder, placed Claire's book in my night table drawer, covered it up further with some junk inside the drawer, and hurried down the stairs.

Aunt Rachel and Sammy were already in the van. I crawled into the back seat and sat there quietly, hugging the binder to my chest, my mind whirling.

When I got to school, I went directly to the empty bleachers and sat on the top, waiting. The rain had stopped sometime during the night. It was warm and dry now.

It was clear that Sammy and her friends weren't speaking to me today, and I couldn't have cared less. This was the happiest I'd been since moving to Deadwich. I'd slept a dreamless sleep and had woken up in the best mood I could ever remember being in. Oh, and Marcus' kiss still lingered on my lips.

I was humming the last song I'd heard on the radio in Marcus' father's truck, when the Civic pulled into the school driveway. I couldn't see where they'd parked, but as I watched the crowd, Marcus

emerged. He ignored the comments and shouts from the students and headed straight toward me. The light blue T-shirt he wore complimented his tanned skin and dark hair. My heart swelled.

“Hi,” I said, all shy again, when he reached the bleachers.

“Hi,” he said back.

The soothing softness of his tone warmed my insides.

Marcus climbed up the bleachers, stopping one step below me. He looked straight into my eyes. “Did you have any nightmares last night?”

“Nope. I slept dreamless all night.”

“Awesome. You look great.” As his eyes swept over me, the warmth I felt inside surfaced at my cheeks.

“I feel a lot better.”

Marcus took a quick glance at the students and then back at me. “There’s something I want to ask you.” Amber flecks from the sun’s rays, glinted in his eyes. “Would you mind if I kissed you right now, in front of the whole school?”

His grin was contagious. After a quick glance at the students, I noticed Megan looking this way. I looked back at Marcus and shook my head. “No. I wouldn’t mind at all.”

Marcus put his hands on my knees. They parted, and he knelt between them. His hands slid around my waist. Mine were glued to the bleachers. I reached within myself and found the nerve to lift them to his arms, and before I realized it, they were sliding up under the sleeves of his T-shirt, where they rested on his shoulders.

Some obscene shouts were directed toward us, along with a lot of hooting and hollering as our lips met for the first time in front of the student body. Although I was mildly embarrassed, I’d never felt more proud. But tuning the audience out was impossible. Our brief, tender moment turned into the two of us suppressing laughter. When Marcus lifted his head back, the clapping started.

“Sorry,” he said, grinning.

“You’ve got quite a fan club. Does this happen whenever you kiss a girl?” As I asked, a not so nice image popped into my head of Marcus’ lips on Megan’s.

“Never. That should prove how special you are. How special *we* are.”

“I like ‘we.’”

Marcus lowered his eyes to my lips, and instinctively they parted. His mouth brushed lightly against mine at first. I gripped his shoulders and pulled him closer until our upper bodies crushed together. We succeeded in tuning out the shouts this time.

After a minute, he pulled away, smiling, and for some reason, that smile reminded me of the pictures.

“I almost forgot. I have something to show you.”

I opened my binder and pulled the pictures out of the inside pocket with care then passed them to Marcus. As if he knew how precious they were, he handled them with as much care as I had. I watched his eyebrows pull together into a frown, deepening the line between them. He looked from one to the other in silence and then flipped them over.

“Well?” I said when I couldn’t stand the suspense any longer.

With his eyes fixed to the pictures, he asked, “Is this what you saw in your nightmare?” He was holding the picture of the robed people slightly above the other.

“That’s exactly what I saw, except there were only five in my nightmare and in the painting at the Inn last night.”

He nodded. “So this is Claire,” he said, changing focus to the picture of the boy and girl.

I grinned. “Your mystery girlfriend.”

“She’s hot,” he teased.

“If you’re trying to make me jealous, it’s working.” And as silly as it seemed, he had succeeded in making me jealous of a girl in a hundred-year-old picture. “Christian’s pretty hot too,” I added just to keep on top of things.

He stared at the picture considering what I’d just said. “Nah, I don’t see it.” Then he got serious. “This is all too weird. I wonder who Christian and Claire really are.”

“Remember, you said you heard me call out the name Christian in my last nightmare?”

He looked up. “Yeah, I remember, now that you mention it.”

“He’s a Knight and she’s a Day.”

“Like us,” he said. “And look, this is Claire and Christian.”

He pointed to two of the seven. As I studied the oddly familiar faces, I knew he was right. Claire and Christian had both been witches. Marcus passed me the pictures, and I tucked them away.

“You look like Claire.” he said suddenly.

That stunned me. I hadn’t noticed. “Must be the hair,” I thought out loud. “And Christian must be your ancestor.”

“Yeah.” His hands rested on my knees. “I think we’ve been brought together for a reason.”

My eyebrows shot up. “No coincidence?”

He shook his head, and with his eyes fixed to mine said, “There’s definitely too much going on here to blow it off as a coincidence anymore.”

“I’m glad you feel that way. At least we’re on the same page now.”

“I always believed you, Brooke.”

“Yeah, but I don’t think you fully felt it the way I did.”

“Until last night,” he added.

The bell rang, and we joined the droves of students piling inside the building.

“What are you doing lunch time?” Marcus asked as we walked down the hall towards my classroom.

“Basketball tryouts are at lunch today, but I don’t think I’ll go.”

“You should.”

“I don’t think so. Not with Megan and Sammy on the team, and Robyn’s the captain.”

“Things won’t be this bad all year, and then you’ll wish you had.”

“Well, if they still want me next week, then maybe I’ll join, but today, I have more important things to do.” I tried to bring the happiness back by smiling playfully at him.

“Oh? What’s more important than basketball?”

“Us.”

In answer, his arms slid around me, and he pressed me into the lockers. “Lunch it is. Do you want to try the cafeteria?”

I made an uncertain face. “Do you think we should?”

“Why not? It’s our school too. Other than Evan, Sammy and Megan, I think the school approves of us.”

“Yeah! You’re right!” I grinned back.

The sound of heels clicking on a hard floor caught my attention.

Like a snob, Megan strutted up the hallway, stomping her high-heeled boots as loudly as she could. She was as bad as Evan for dominating everyone’s attention. When she reached us, she flicked her blonde hair over her shoulder and smiled seductively at Marcus. As usual, I got a bad vibe from her.

“You know, she never used to be such a bitch,” Marcus said.

“I can think of a more appropriate word than, bitch,” I said, watching her wiggle her white jeans down the hallway.

“Forget her,” Marcus whispered, before his lips touched mine.



That morning, I went into class with the proud feeling that our kiss was visible on my lips for everyone to see. I walked past Megan, who was sitting in her seat twirling her hair with an exaggerated, it-doesn't-bother-me-to-see-you-with-Marcus, look on her face. I sat down in my usual seat, between her and Sammy, with a smug look on my face and licked my lips with emphasis. She huffed and flung herself around to face the front of the class. I smiled.

Lunch hour turned out better than I'd thought it would. Sammy, Megan and Robyn, along with a few others I knew, were at basketball tryouts. Marcus and I sat at his usual table in the cafeteria. Evan had changed lunch tables at the beginning of the week. The seniors at Marcus' table freely accepted my relationship with their friend.

After school, Marcus left me at the corner of my street, promising to pick me up at seven for the dance. I'd barely touched my supper. Something about being in a crowded gym, a favorite song blaring through the airwaves, arousing every cell in the body, and mood lighting, had me excited.

"Okay, where are you?" I said out loud as I rummaged through an unpacked box in the middle of my bedroom floor.

At the last minute, I'd decided to wear my black sweater dress; the one with the silver threads woven through the black. "There you are." I pulled the dress out of the box, discarding the rest of the clothes I'd thrown on the floor in the process, and slipped it on. It was fitted and fell halfway to my knee. I adjusted the wide neckline, exposing one shoulder and put on the largest pair of dangly earrings I could find. I threw on a couple of silver bangles too, and strategically messed up my hair. For the final touch, I slipped my bare feet into a pair of peep-toe, high heel booties.

As I looked down at myself, I had second thoughts about my outfit. Maybe it was over the top for a country school dance. But it was what I would have worn at my old school dance, and I hadn't worn the shoes yet, so I decided to leave it on.

As I strategically placed a few strands of hair around my face, I thought about how ridiculous it was that Sammy wasn't sharing this moment with me. I'd never gotten ready for a dance alone before. I clomped into the hallway and peeked into her room. She was standing in front of her closet in a short denim skirt and black bra.

I knocked lightly. "Hey Sammy."

She twisted her body around to face the door, looking disappointed when she saw it was me. "Oh, what do you want?" She turned back around and continued to scan through the closet, as if I wasn't there.

"I thought we could make up. Don't you think this is ridiculous?" Whenever we'd fought as children we'd always make up before the other went home.

"Forget it. I wish you'd never moved here."

Her words stung. I didn't know how to fix things with Sammy. Hell, I didn't even know how this whole thing had started. I turned to walk back to my room, when Sammy's cold voice stopped me in my tracks.

"How was your evening at the Inn?" Her words were sharp. There was something else in her tone too—it almost sounded like hatred.

Something clicked inside of me then. I rushed into her room and slammed the door shut behind me. "What do you know about the Inn?" I asked sharply. "Why didn't you really go to work last night?"

She stood with her arms folded, her mouth slowly turning into a sneer. The pendant grew cold, penetrating the fabric of my dress. I gasped and took a step backwards.

"Did you have fun at the Inn last night, Brooke?" Her eyebrows were raised to points.

"Tell me, Sammy," I shouted. "What do you know?"

She lowered her glare to the shiny double spiral I wore boldly on the outside of my dress. Her eyes grew wide and menacing. Suddenly feeling threatened, I backed toward the door. Sammy followed. She grabbed for the pendant. A shriek pierced the air when the metal touched her skin. I gasped. Her arm recoiled like a snake.

“What just happened?” I asked, my eyes as big as marbles.

“Get out!” she screamed.

My hand went to the icy cold pendant. I walked out backwards, my insides shaking. I had to fix whatever was happening to me and the people around me, before something really bad happened. I could hardly wait until Marcus took me to see his uncle.

My mind whirled as I sank onto the edge of the bed. I couldn’t get the look of pure hatred or Sammy’s face out of my head. And what had happened when she’d touched the pendant? Why had she even touched it? I wrapped my hand around it. It felt warm now. Why didn’t it surprise me? Nothing surprised me anymore.

I reached for the picture of Claire and Christian and noticed the envelope that Beth had given to me from Maggie that I hadn’t opened yet. My hand detoured, grabbing the envelope forcefully. I ripped it open. Thirty dollars fell into my lap along with a folded piece of paper. I stared down at the note, hesitant to pick it up. My cell phone rang. I jumped a foot off the bed. The paper and the money scattered.

“Hello.”

“Hi,” Marcus answered. “Are you almost ready?”

I took a deep breath to calm myself.

“Brooke, are you there?”

“I’m here. Something weird just happened with Sammy.” I spoke low with my hand cupped over the phone. “I’ll tell you about it later.”

“Okay. I’ll be there soon. Don’t worry.”

“Okay. See you soon.” I wanted to tell him to hurry, but I didn’t want to seem any more desperate than I already was. I got mad at myself, reached down and grabbed the paper off the floor, and unfolded it.

Dearest Brooke,

By now you’ve figured out that things aren’t quite the way you’d expected them to be in Deadwich. I have two conditions for you. One, give me the amulet; and two, stay away from Marcus—far away. You wouldn’t want him to suffer for your transgressions, would you? You will have until Sunday. And, Brooke, we are watching you.

Margaret

“Margaret,” I mouthed the word with a familiarity that gnawed at my brain. At the same time, my hand went limp, and the note slipped from my fingers and floated to the floor. Like a sack of sand, I slid off the edge of the bed and landed on the floor beside it. A cool numbness replaced the feeling of flus in my face. My heart felt as if it was beating against my eardrums. After a couple of deep breaths, I assessed what I’d just read.

For some reason, Maggie didn’t want me with Marcus. Maybe because it made me happy, and I wasn’t allowed to be happy as long as I lived in Deadwich. That was crystal clear now.

Maggie also wanted the pendant, which she’d called an amulet. My pendant. Would it give her magical powers, or make any existing powers she had stronger? What could she possibly want with it, other than to gain the ability to torture me in my sleep?

So that was it. I would be denied happiness as long as I lived in this twisted village. I felt guilty for even thinking badly about Marcus’ home. But what had Deadwich ever done for me? Oh right; it brought me to Marcus, and he meant more to me now than Boston did.

The sound of a vehicle pulling into the driveway and, a moment later, voices in the foyer, lifted my

heart.

“Brooke, Marcus is here,” Aunt Rachel called up the stairs.

I pushed myself up off the floor, crumpled the note and threw it at the trash can, missing it. After one last look at Claire’s picture, I left the room.

“Will you tell me what’s wrong? You’ve barely said two words since I picked you up.” Marcus parked his father’s truck close to the school and turned to face me, sliding closer. “Whatever it is, you know you can tell me.” He picked my hand up and played with my fingers.

No, he couldn’t know what I’d read in Maggie’s letter. I could picture him going to the Inn to confront her. Who knew what she was capable of? But I’d tell him about Sammy. I had to give him something.

“It’s Sammy.” As I spoke, the most powerful urge came over me. I leaned into Marcus. He folded his arms protectively around me. I felt safe. “She went psycho on me in her bedroom.”

“What did she do?”

His hand smoothed down the length of my hair as I spoke.

“First, she asked me how my night at the Inn went. But it was the way she looked at me when she’d said it. It wasn’t Sammy. It was almost as if she was possessed.” I’d just scared myself further with my speculations.

“Then she grabbed for the pendant. Something happened to her when she touched it. She screamed and pulled her arm back, like it had hurt her. I asked her about it, but she yelled at me to get out. And her eyes got all scary and dark. I don’t know how I’ll ever be able to sleep in that house again.” I lifted my head off his chest.

Marcus cupped my face with both hands and buried my mouth under his. For a moment I lost myself in the kiss, and then my emotions broke through my façade, and my bottom lip quivered under his. A single tear trickled down my cheek. I pulled away so I could lay my head on his shoulder.

“It kills me to see you like this. There’s gotta be something I can do. What if I went to see Maggie?”

“No!” I pulled back. “You can’t ever go there again. Promise!”

“Okay. I won’t.”

“Promise!”

“Alright, I promise.”

Marcus cuddled me close. I squeezed my eyes shut, suppressing more tears. A few escaped anyway and fell on his black shirt.

Two car loads of students pulled up beside us. I sat up quickly and dabbed the small bit of moisture away that had accumulated in the corners of my eyes. I didn’t want to ruin my make-up.



Chapter Twenty-One

Jared and his girlfriend Amy, who had gone out of her way to make me feel welcome during lunch earlier, came over to the truck to talk with Marcus and I. Amy came to my door. I rolled down the steamy window.

“Hiya, Brooke. I’m so glad you came tonight. You can hang out with us.”

Her excitement was contagious. I couldn’t help but smile back.

“Wow, that’s a hot dress,” she said, sticking her bouncing, strawberry-blonde curls through the window. “Nice bling, too.”

Before I knew what was happening, she reached her hand into the cab and picked the pendant up off my dress. I held my breath. From the corner of my eye, I saw Marcus watching intently, probably holding his breath. I waited. Nothing happened.

“Awesome,” she said, and let it fall back to my chest. “So, are you guys coming or what?”

I looked at Marcus and lifted my eyebrows. I was as ready as I’d ever be. We got out of the truck and walked toward the school with Amy and Jared.

“Hey wait up,” a female voice called out from behind us.

The four of us looked back. Christy, another one of Marcus’ friends, and a couple of guys I’d seen around but hadn’t met yet, caught up to us.

“Hey, Marcus, Brooke. Glad you guys came,” Christy said, bouncing on her heels in front of us. Clearly, she was as excited as Amy.

“Cool dress, Brooke.” Christy nodded approvingly.

“Thanks. You two look awesome too.” I gestured to both Christy and Amy, who were dressed similar to me—short dresses and high heels.

“This is Dave and Jamie. Guys, this is Brooke,” Marcus said, finishing the introductions.

Jamie nudged me in the arm with his elbow as if he’d known me for years. “Nice to meet you, officially.”

His little gesture of friendliness built up my confidence. Dave just smiled and nodded. I returned his greeting.

The seven of us walked across the school parking lot together. Amy had eased herself in between Marcus and me. She and Christy were on either side of me now. They talked about their outfits and mine and how hot we looked. With the exception of Marcus and me, everyone babbled at once. I tried to keep up with all of the different conversations that were going on around me.

“What’s gotten into your cousin lately, anyway?” Christy, the bolder one, asked. “She and Megan have been acting weird all week. I couldn’t help but notice how rude they’ve been to you.”

Geez, did the whole school notice? I hesitated, searching for an answer that would satisfy her enough to drop the subject. “I think it started with Megan—”

“Ugh, that bitch,” Amy said.

“You got that right, girl,” Christy said.

They waited for more from me.

“Um, I don’t think she’s liked me from the start, and Sammy *is* her best friend, so I guess that’s what it’s all about. Maybe she’s jealous,” I offered, as an afterthought. I shrugged and tried to look as confused as they did.

Amy put her arm around me. “Well, screw them. Stick with us. We’re more fun anyway.”

She and Christy laughed.

“Hey, who wants to take a detour to the bleachers for some herbal refreshment before going

inside?” Dave asked. He was already on his way, followed by my new friends.

Marcus and I tagged along.

Once there, I declined the offer to get high. My brain was already on overload. I thought it best not to mess with it further. Marcus declined also, saying he had a sore throat.

I liked Marcus’ friends. They were cool, and reminded me of the friends I’d deserted back in Boston.

Finally, I was starting to feel relaxed, and allowed my mind this small measure of time to be free of the turmoil that dwelled there. It had been a long time since I’d laughed and had a good time. Not since that last fateful night in Boston, before I’d gotten picked up by the cops for under-age drinking.

While I was in the middle of laughing at Jared and Dave’s antics, I heard tires squealing. My laugh ended abruptly. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I didn’t have to look to know who it was. Marcus put his arm around me and pulled me close.

The music blared from the open windows of the Civic as it pulled into the school parking lot. The ground vibrated under my feet from the boom of the subwoofer. My brief happiness was replaced with anxiety and turmoil once again.

Evan and Megan got out of the front, followed by Justin, Sammy and Robyn. Justin spotted us and waved. Poor guy, he was probably confused as to why Sammy and I weren’t speaking, thus not being able to hang around his usual friends.

“What’s up with your brother lately? Since when did he start hanging out with the juniors?” Christy asked Marcus, and then looked at me, horrified. “Oh. No offense, Brooke.”

I shrugged her comment off.

“It’s just that Evan always hung out with us.”

“Maybe he’s into Megan or Robyn again,” Marcus suggested.

“Yeah, maybe.”

Once they were long out of sight, I suggested we go in.

The gym, sparkling with mirrored balls and mood lighting, was conveniently located beside the cafeteria. A row of tables had been placed around the inside walls. Megan sat on top of one close to the gym door, dangling her long legs skillfully over the edge. Sammy sat on a chair beside her. As I walked past them, their icy glares sent chills down my spine. My insides turned cold, and I shivered.

Amy hooked one arm through mine and the other through Christy’s, pulling me along. By the time we’d reached our destination, a far corner of the gym, our procession had grown to more than a dozer people.

“Everyone thinks you’re cool,” Amy shouted in my ear over the music.

“Why would they think that?” I asked, bewildered, although her flattery made me blush.

“Because you’re from the city, and you’re dating one of the most popular guys at Deadwich High.” Her smile was reassuring. “It doesn’t get any cooler than that.”

“Oh.”

In that moment, I wished I was a senior, so I wouldn’t have to go back to classes with Sammy and Megan. So far, I liked hanging out with Amy and Christy. My best friend Courtney would approve.

The DJ played a rap song. My leg began to twitch.

“Can we borrow Brooke?” Amy asked Marcus, her entire body bouncing to the beat.

“I guess that’s up to Brooke.”

I guessed he imagined that I wouldn’t want to dance under the circumstances, but I surprised him and myself with my reply. “Okay. Just this once, though.”

My excitement was building as I let Amy drag me by the hand through the crowd. She and Christy hauled me over to a group of girls, some of whom I’d met over the past couple of weeks. Immediately, I started to bounce to the beat.

Three songs later, an odd feeling struck me in the chest. I promised the girls I’d be back, and after

much pleading on their part for me to stay, they reluctantly let me go back to Marcus.

I missed him.

When I first left the group, I was a bit disoriented, until I saw the opened gym doors and the cafeteria beyond. From there I knew which corner to go to.

Sammy and Megan weren't at their table when I walked by. I was relieved. A slow song came on. The lighting changed to angle more onto the mirror balls. Tiny flecks of light flickered across everyone and everything, looking like a million fireflies.

As I got close to where I'd left Marcus, I saw Megan standing in our corner. Her arms were wrapped around someone. As I stared through the gaps in the crowd, I realized it was Marcus. He had his hands on her. I felt a sharp stab to my newly swollen heart. My steps slowed, but something continued to push me in their direction. Why wasn't he pushing her away? His hands caressed her back. A group of people walked in front of me, obstructing my view. After they'd passed I saw his face buried in her neck. The reflections from the facets on the mirror balls, danced over them. Her hands were in places mine had never been. Dave and Jamie looked on with eager grins. My stomach knotted.

From behind me, I felt a warm touch to my shoulder.

"Hey, are you looking for me?"

My heart skipped a beat. I closed my eyes and let out a long relieved breath. When I opened them again, Jamie and Dave were the only two people in the corner. Had I imagined it? I didn't know. I turned my head toward the door. Megan sat on top of the table like she'd always been there. My mind was playing tricks on me. I turned and wrapped my arms around Marcus' neck. He slid his arms around my waist and pulled me close.

"I missed you, Marcus." I said into his ear.

"I missed you too, and if it wouldn't have made me look so desperate, I would have come and collected you."

"Collected? Like some sort of prize?" I teased him.

"No. You're much more than a prize. You're a treasure."

Following a sudden urge, I pressed my mouth against the warm skin of his neck and held it there a few seconds, until I felt his pulse flutter against my lips. I kissed him there, lingering, and then lifted my head back. Although Marcus' eyelids looked as heavy as mine felt, he held them open and lowered his mouth to mine. Our bodies melted together.

We kissed in the middle of the dance floor to the slow song that blasted from the speakers. Oblivious to the other couples who waltzed in circles around us, we stood still as if we were the only two people in the room.

Our tongues brushed lightly together for the first time. Excitement pulsed through my veins, and I grew warm all over.

Someone shattered the spell by yelling into our ears, "Get a room."

Our kiss ended in a laugh. I laid my head on his shoulder as our bodies swayed to the music. I don't know what came over me then, but I had a sudden urge to ditch the crowd.

I lifted my head and looked into his eyes. "Do you mind if we go?" The still-dancing girls would be disappointed, but I really wanted to be alone with Marcus, and I couldn't stand the thought of seeing Megan again.

Disappointment flashed across his face. "Do you want me to take you home?"

I shook my head. "Is there somewhere else we can go?"

A new light flicked on in his eyes. "We can go somewhere, if that's what you want," he said, with obvious interest. "There's Jared. I'll go tell him we're leaving."

"Okay, I have to use the washroom before we go. Meet me at the gym door."

The music carried into the washroom. The words were muffled, but the music was audible. I put

some lip gloss on and was pulling my fingers through my hair, when the door burst open, smashing loudly against the tiled wall. I snapped my head in the direction of the door.



Chapter Twenty-Two

Megan in her silver heels and skimpy purple dress towered in the doorway. Her icy glare sent a chill across my body, instantly replacing the warm fuzzy feeling. Her eyes stayed glued to mine while she held the door open until the last of the girls left the room.

It wasn't Megan who scared me. It was the darkness within her. If she'd been the Megan I'd met on the first day of school, I'd have pushed past her and left, but she wasn't that girl.

I stood with one hand clinging to the sink, my body frozen to the spot, and watched as she closed the door behind her. She strutted toward me with purpose. Her perfect blonde waves cascaded down the sides of her face and past her revealing neckline.

She was the Megan from my nightmare.

With great effort, I found my voice, although it was weak. "What do you want?"

A wicked grin turned up the corners of her mouth. "What I want is very simple. I want you to break up with your boyfriend." Her words, and the sharpness in which she'd spoken them, stunned me. "And I want you to do it tonight!"

"What?" My heart pounded in my throat.

"You heard me, Brooke."

She took a step closer. The pendant turned cold as it had in Sammy's bedroom. Its icy touch penetrated the fabric of my dress, turning my already cold skin colder.

"He loves me." She glared at me in silence for a moment, as if remembering something and then added, "He told me so."

The coldness penetrated through to my heart, where it left an ache.

"It's true, Brooke. It was a long time ago. He said he would always love me, that there would never be anyone else for him."

What if it was true? Why would she lie when I could just ask Marcus? Would he tell me the truth?

Her perfect face twisted into a snarl. "And then you came along and charmed him, like the *witch* you are." The bitter hatred in her tone escalated. She took another step closer. "He will come back to me eventually, when he gets bored with you. I doubt you could satisfy him the way I can."

"I don't believe you," I said in a quick breath.

Her blue eyes blackened. "I don't care if you believe me or not. If you really care for him, you'll leave him ... tonight!" With her eyes fixed to mine, she smashed the side of her fist into the towel dispenser, leaving an impossible dent behind.

My insides shook. I couldn't speak anymore. I took a stagger backwards, which put me against the tiled wall. There was nowhere else to go.

"He's mine, so give him back before he gets hurt." I saw a flash of vulnerability in her eyes, as well as heard it in her voice.

Remembering Maggie's letter, I forced myself to speak again. "Wh-why would he get hurt?"

"Maggie will hurt him if you don't leave him." Her voice wavered slightly from its acid tone.

My eyebrows pulled together over my widened eyes. "Why will Maggie hurt him?"

For the first time during our conversation she lowered her gaze to the pendant. She reached for it. Curious, I let her. As her fingers grazed the cold metal, she shrieked and pulled away, just as Sammy had earlier. I grabbed it myself and wished her away. For a brief moment, she looked scared.

"Remember what I said." She peeled her black eyes from the pendant and fled the room.

Megan might as well have thrust a dagger into my heart, for all of the emotional pain she'd just inflicted upon me. What if she was right? What if Marcus loved her? But Sammy had said they were

never really together. Yet, he took her to a dance, and they made out.

“Oh God,” I said out loud. My head spun, and I felt physically sick. I grabbed the sink in front of me for support. “He loves her.” He’s never mean to her, even though she’s always mean to me. Also, there were circumstances surrounding their date that I didn’t know about.

Tears flowed down the face of my reflection. With a shaking hand, I pulled out a piece of paper towel from the defiled holder and pressed it to my eyes. The washroom door flew open and a couple sophomore girls walked in.

“Hey, are you alright?” One asked.

Without lifting my head from my hands, I nodded.

“You sure? Do you want me to get Sammy?” the other offered.

Panicked, I looked at them. “No! I just need a minute. I don’t feel very good.”

When I looked back into the mirror, I knew the girls weren’t fooled. They proceeded to fix their hair and struck up a conversation about boys. I had to get out. I flew past them and pushed through the door as another group of girls came through.

I didn’t look to the gym door, where I knew Marcus would be waiting for me. Instead, I bolted from the cafeteria. Once I was in the hallway, I ran to the stairs that led to the main floor. My heart stopped when I heard him call my name out.

I decided in that moment that even if Megan was lying, I still had to cut myself out of Marcus’ life for his own safety. Maggie had said so, and now Megan. I couldn’t exist if anything happened to him. If my fate was to live the rest of my miserable life in this cursed village and only glimpse Marcus from a distance, then I would be content knowing he was safe.

As I ran up the bottom half of the stairs, Evan was coming down from the top. I slammed into him on the landing. He grabbed my arms to keep me from falling backwards.

“Let go of me.” I tried to keep a steady voice, but the tears spilled anyway.

“What’s this now?” With a confused look that quickly changed to amusement, he let go and stepped back as if to assess me. “Trouble in paradise already?” I ignored his hurtful remark and pushed past him, but he grabbed my arm again.

“Let go. I have to go home.” I twisted out of his grip.

“And how do you plan to get there?” he asked.

I didn’t answer. I hadn’t thought that far ahead. I wiped my face with the sleeve of my dress.

“I’ll take you,” he said after a pause.

Perhaps he had some ulterior motive, but the way I saw it, I had no choice but to take him up on his offer. I needed to get Marcus out of my life, and so I would use Evan to hurt Marcus, even though it would kill me inside.

“Okay, let’s go,” I said, unable to look directly at him.

We were heading up the second half of the stairs when I heard Marcus call out.

“Brooke. Where are you going?”

I didn’t stop.

“Brooke!” His voice was louder this time.

He’d caught up. I stopped and turned to face him. With an ache in my heart and a cracked voice, I said, “I have to go. Evan’s driving me home.”

“What just happened? Tell me?” he pleaded.

I closed my eyes trying to summon the strength I needed, but couldn’t find it. “I just have to go.”

“Then I’ll take you.”

“No. Evan’s taking me.” I could just imagine how much Evan was enjoying this. The dagger plunged deeper. “Please, just trust me,” I pleaded through my tears.

His face changed from shock to hurt. Marcus grabbed the front of Evan’s jacket. “What did you do

to her?” he demanded.

Evan’s grin widened.

“Stop it!” I tried to pry Marcus’ hands off his brother. “He didn’t do anything. I ran into him on the stairs and asked him to drive me home. Now please let us go.”

Marcus’ hand touched my arm. He opened his mouth to speak but changed his mind. An invisible hand shoved the dagger in to the hilt and twisted it, wounding my heart beyond repair. My knees weakened. I swallowed, hurting my throat, and turned away from him. He didn’t follow.



I didn’t speak to Evan on the way home. The music was too loud anyway. I used up his entire stash of fast-food napkins from inside of the dash on my tears. When he pulled into the driveway, he reached over to put his arm on the backrest of my seat. I reached for the door. Evan grabbed my shoulder and held it forcibly.

“Leave him, Brooke.”

I felt the pendant grow cold again, and my hand froze to the door handle. Too afraid to look at him, I summoned the strength to get out of the car and, without a word, slammed the door shut and ran to the house.

I collapsed to the floor of my bedroom in a crumpled heap next to my bed, clasping Claire and Christian’s picture to my chest, and cried my heart out.

I tried to convince myself that I’d done the right thing, but I’d never felt such an ache in my chest in all my life. The ball of paper, all that was left of Maggie’s letter, lay on the floor nearby, where I’d thrown it earlier. I reached for it and smoothed out the wrinkles then read it again.

It was obvious to me now that Megan was part of whatever was happening to me, and for some reason I couldn’t comprehend, Maggie wanted me away from Marcus.

Nothing made sense.

In my despair, I decided I would give Maggie what she wanted. I would give her the pendant and then, maybe, I could have some sort of normal life here. Perhaps I would even beg my parents to let me come home. Although I knew my heart would stay behind.

A half-hour later, as I sat on my bedroom floor, reduced to sobs, my cell phone rang. I looked at the display and clutched the phone to my chest. A new wave of tears spilled. I didn’t answer Marcus’ call. He called two more times, and when I didn’t answer the third, he texted me.

“I’m outside your bedroom window. If you don’t come down, I’m coming up.”

My spirit had weakened, all but one tiny fragment. It was that fragment that pushed me up off the floor and forced my legs to move, until I found myself standing at the window.

I looked down into the back yard and could barely see him in the darkness below. Something pinged off the window pane. I sighed, knowing he wouldn’t give up.

“I’m going outside,” I called into the living room to Aunt Rachel and Uncle Jim as I slipped my feet into my sneakers.

“Is everything okay, Brooke? You came home from the dance awfully early.”

Aunt Rachel turned her head away from the TV to look at me. I made sure not to look at her directly, for fear she’d see evidence on my face that things weren’t okay.

I tried unsuccessfully to lighten my voice. “Yeah, everything’s fine. I’ll be back soon.”

“Okay, remember it’s a school night.”

Apprehensively, I stepped out onto the unlit porch and stood there, numb. Marcus stood beside the truck, holding the passenger door open. His face was shrouded in darkness. I felt my chest tighten.

“Get in,” he said, his tone void of expression.

I obeyed.



Chapter Twenty-Three

Marcus shut the door behind me and got in the driver's side. I clutched Maggie's crumpled letter in one hand, the picture in the other, and sat stiffly, staring straight ahead.

A barrier of silence hung between us as Marcus drove to the boathouse. Once there, he got out of the truck and walked inside. I followed, feeling as if I was in deep trouble.

The moment I closed the door, he turned and drew me to him, holding me like he was afraid to let go. "Tell me, Brooke. Tell me what happened at the dance tonight."

I squeezed my swollen eyes shut. They hurt. From in between us, I loosened the hand that clutched the letter and held it up to him. When he took it from me, I walked to the front wall of windows.

The light at the end of the wharf shone dimly through the multi panes of glass. The lamp on the table behind me gave off a soft glow, enough to paste my gloomy reflection in the window in front of me.

"Where did you get this?" he asked after a few minutes of silence.

I stared at the whitecaps washing onto shore and answered softly, "It was in the envelope Beth had given to me from Maggie."

"Why would Maggie give this to you?"

I couldn't answer his question, but I had one for him. "Why didn't you tell me about Megan?" I ended up sounding more jealous than hurt.

"What about her?"

Through the window, I watched him walk across the great room and stop behind me. His bewildered expression was mirrored in the glass beside mine.

"You love her. You were with her before I moved here. Why didn't you just tell me?"

"Love her? I don't even like Megan," he said, sounding both disgusted and confused.

I turned from his reflection and faced him.

"She told me tonight, in the washroom, that you loved her and that you two" I couldn't finish the sentence. He could figure it out.

My shoulders dropped, surrendering to the emotional pain. I was too tired from all the crap that had just gone down to have this conversation.

Marcus brought his hand to the side of my face and held it there.

"She lied. How can I make you believe me?"

Like a flower turning toward the sun, I leaned into his touch, my gaze lifted to his.

"There's something I want you to know." He clenched his jaw and swallowed. "I was waiting for the right moment, but after tonight, I might not get another chance." He hesitated. "I love you, Brooke."

His declaration stunned me. I blinked and lowered my eyes to the point on his throat where his T-shirt began. For a few seconds I couldn't move.

When I didn't say anything, he continued. "I have since the first day I saw you. It might sound ridiculous, but it's true. I never knew what it felt like to be in love before I met you. I swear."

The softness of his hand sliding down my face and neck and coming to rest on my shoulder sent a cool tingle across my skin. In that moment I knew I loved him too. I had from the beginning. That's why everything hurt more than it should.

"Megan lied. Whatever she told you was a lie." He looked at me firmly, waiting for me to say something.

I thought back to the school washroom. "Megan's eyes, they were black, and she was so strong." I whispered for fear that she or Maggie might somehow hear me.

“Did she hurt you?”

“No, not physically. I think she’s possessed. Her eyes turned black, like Sammy’s had and” My mouth dropped open.

“What?”

“They looked the same as Maggie’s had, when she went psycho on me in the bedroom at the Inn on my first day at work. Sammy’s connected with them. Maybe the witch has put a spell on them.”

I rambled on, suddenly on the verge of becoming hysterical; all the while I held on to the thought that Marcus had just told me he loved me. Although my heart still bled, I felt the wound mending. A smile tried to dissolve my frown, but it wasn’t strong enough to lift the corners of my mouth. I couldn’t allow his heart to break any longer. I loved him too.

“Brooke, Megan lied, and I don’t care what’s written on this paper.” As he said it, he crumpled Maggie’s letter into a tight ball and threw it across the room. “It’s obvious that the three of them are in this together, or maybe it’s like you said, Maggie *has* put a spell on them. Please believe me, Brooke.”

“I think Evan is one of them, too.” I relayed to Marcus the last words Evan had spoken to me and told him how the pendant had turned cold.

Marcus ran his fingers through his hair. “I guess that doesn’t surprise me. He’s been acting strange lately.”

“Marcus, I’m so sorry about tonight. I was having such an awesome time until I went into the washroom. I’m sorry I believed her, but it was Maggie’s letter too. Marcus, we can’t ever be seen together, she’ll ... I love you too much to risk your life.”

When I realized what I’d said, I took a deep breath and held on to it. A warm feeling shot through me and surfaced in my cheeks. My gaze wandered, unseeing to the room on either side of him before finding his eyes again.

I watched as an adorable smile lit up his face, dissolving the darkness in his eyes.

“You love me?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I do. The nightmares ... I felt the love every time you came to me, even though I hardly knew you. The light you brought, it was love.”

He nodded.

I looked down at my hand, at the picture I was holding of the two happy people with no idea at that moment that their doom was near.

“Just like Claire loved Christian,” I said.

“How do you know Claire loved Christian?”

“How can you not know when you look at this picture?” I patted the area over my heart. “I just know they loved each other.”

I flipped to the back of the picture. “1912; the same year that was carved into Claire’s gravestone. The same year she died” My voice trailed off sadly.

“It must have been awful for Christian.” Marcus turned his body so he could look at the picture with me.

“I feel their love, but I also feel a deep sadness, and it touches me,” I said.

He took the picture and studied it closely. “No wonder they were so much in love. Claire was beautiful. Just like you.” He kissed the top of my head. “Will you stay for a while?”

I nodded. “I’d really rather not be home when Sammy gets there.”

“You can stay here as long as you like.” He pulled me by the hand to the sofa.

“Oh, I’m sure your parents would like that.”

“My parents are really cool. They wouldn’t care if you stayed.”

“Well, I have to go back eventually, so Aunt Rachel doesn’t call my mom. If I get into any more trouble, Mom and Dad will probably send me to reform school.”

Marcus grabbed a remote off the coffee table. With the press of a button, he created the illusion of flame in the electric fireplace, which was set into the wall of beach stone that separated the two walls of windows. He tossed the remote on the table and slouched into the cushions on the sofa, offering himself to me as a pillow. I laid my head on his lap, facing the fireplace, and curled my legs up.

The moon was hidden behind the clouds, peeking out occasionally. The faux flames gave the room a cozy glow. Marcus stroked me like a kitten, from the top of my head down the side of my body and over again.

“I’m sorry I’m such a mess. If only you’d known how I was from the start, then you could have avoided me.”

“Brooke, I’d have taken you however you came.”

“I’m broken.”

“Then I’ll fix you.”

“What if I’m unfixable?”

“You’ll still be mine. And I’ll still love you, just as Christian loved Claire.”

“Claire was damaged too, you know. She was a witch and they killed her. She was only sixteen—my age.”

“You’re speculating. How do you know how she died?”

“Something Sammy said to me on the day I moved here. She told me an old story about two young lovers who were murdered on Skull Island.”

“Yeah, I know that one.”

“Well, we saw the bones in the well; you know, where we found the pendant? But there’s something I forgot about.”

“What is it?” Marcus asked, running his fingers through my hair, making it difficult for me to concentrate on the story.

“When we were in the well, I had a vision.”

“A vision?”

“Yeah. Remember when I blanked out, after you first found me?”

“Oh, so that’s what was happening when you were staring off into space.”

“Right. Anyway, I saw a boy and a girl, about our ages, chasing each other playfully through the woods. The scene was a happy one, until. Oh, my God!”

“What is it?” His hand stopped in the midst of twirling a strand of my hair between his fingers.

“I just remembered something. Some people came out from behind the trees and grabbed them. But what I hadn’t remembered, *connected* until now, was that the people were dressed in black robes. I didn’t know it at the time, but the happy couple had to have been Claire and Christian!”

“Well, that was then. You’re not Claire. You’re Brooke, and you have me to protect you, not Christian. And technically, we don’t know that anyone is a witch, although we definitely know that something weird is going on. Remember, I felt the warmth when we opened the trunk, and the energy when we both touched it. I also saw your cuts heal with my own eyes.”

“What a tragedy it was, they were both murdered. It’s so sad.”

“It’s obvious that Claire’s your ancestor,” he said.

“And Christian’s yours. It would be too much of a coincidence otherwise.”

“I know—the Day and Knight thing.”

I flipped myself over onto my back so I could look up at Marcus. With an urge I couldn’t resist, I lifted a hand to the front of his shirt and pushed it off his shoulders. I trailed my fingers down his arm until I found the double spiral tattoo. His muscle was hard beneath his soft skin. In my other hand, I held the pendant. A smile lifted the corners of my mouth when my fingers on both hands tingled. After a few seconds I held the pendant out to him.

He closed his hand around it and smiled back.

Suddenly, I needed to be closer to him, so I pulled myself up until I was sitting on his lap, the upper half of my body twisted to face him.

With an intensity that I could feel fluttering in my stomach, we stared into each other's eyes.

"I'm glad you came for me."

Before he could answer, I lowered my mouth to his. My hands gripped his hair, and I pulled myself tightly to him. One of his hands lay perfectly still on my leg, the other pushed against my back.

I wasn't sure what I wanted. But I had to be close to him, really close. In my chest, my heart bled. In my head, a jumbled mess of emotions raged. I needed to be fixed, and he'd said he would fix me.

"I love you," I whispered against his lips. His reaction was to wrap his arms around me and bury his face in my neck.

"I love you," he said back, his voice more emotional than I'd expected.

"I want to stay here tonight," I said, cradling his head in my arms.

He pulled back to look at me. "Are you sure?"

I nodded.

"Then call your aunt and tell her you're somewhere safe and you'll be home tomorrow, so she doesn't have the cops out looking for you."

I pulled my cell phone out of my bag and sent Aunt Rachel a text instead; that way I wouldn't have to talk to her. When I was finished, I turned the phone off and tossed it aside.

"Where were we?" I asked.

"I really think you should get some sleep. It's after twelve and a school night. Let me tuck you in."

"You're not leaving?" I looked at him, suddenly scared.

"No, of course not. I'll be right beside you, but you've had an emotional night and I just think that ___"

I ended his speech with a kiss. I kissed his closed eyelids and brushed my mouth against his forehead. "Take me upstairs," I whispered against his cheek.

He surprised me by pushing himself into a standing position with me still on his lap. I wrapped my legs around his waist and my arms around his neck and let him carry me up the log staircase.

When he stopped beside the bed, I unfolded my legs from around him and slid down. The rug was soft beneath my feet.

We were in the loft, one large room with a log railing and a view of the great room below. I understood now why the windows in the front of the house were two stories high. I imagined the view from the loft would have been breathtaking, had it been daylight.

My body was very much aware of Marcus standing beside me and tingled all over. I looked at him almost playfully and said, "Let's go to bed." And then, to my horror, I yawned. I had to admit to myself that I was really tired. Marcus turned down the bedding. I pulled off my sweater dress and let it drop to the floor. My impulse made me feel awkward as I stood there in my bra and underwear.

Marcus turned and looked at me questioningly.

I lifted my hands in the air and said, "I'm not going to sleep in my clothes." As if such a thing was unheard of. "Are you?"

He accepted my challenge and slipped out of his jeans and shirt, then turned down the soft blue duvet. Satisfied, I climbed into the big, soft bed, parking myself in the middle under the dim glow of the skylight.

I couldn't believe the turn of events that had led me to this moment. A couple of hours ago, I thought my life was over, and now, Marcus was climbing into bed beside me. He loved me, and I loved him.

Megan's acid words rang in my head, temporarily ruining my happy moment. "Maggie will hurt

him,” she’d said. But why would Maggie hurt Marcus? Was it just to punish me because, for some unknown reason, she hated me?

I couldn’t think rationally. I was spent. Marcus yawned, making me yawn again.

“You see? You’re tired,” he said.

He rolled to his side, facing me. His leg slid across mine. I lifted my head from the pillow, so that my lips could find his in the near darkness. With our legs intertwined and our arms wrapped around each other, we kissed softly. His hand caressed the side of my body, while I explored the hills and hollows of his. The kiss changed, becoming more determined. Marcus’ lips became rougher on mine, his moans gruffer. I heard myself moan, and I needed air, but I wasn’t letting go. Then I heard his breath catch and felt him stiffen.

Marcus rolled off of me and onto his back. His chest heaved. He ran a hand through his hair.

“What is it?” I asked, breathless.

“I’m sorry,” he said in between breaths. “I didn’t mean to get carried away.”

“It’s okay,” I assured him, “you didn’t.”

He rolled back to his side to face me and picked up the newly glistening pendant, hanging down the side of my arm, and placed it back on my chest, and then he pressed his hand on top of it. My heart beat fast beneath his palm.

“Listen to me,” Marcus began, “you’re too special to take advantage of.”

“But—”

He shushed me with a finger pressed to my lips. “I mean it.” Then his finger traced the line of my mouth.

“You wouldn’t be taking advantage of me.”

“I would feel like I was.”

I sighed and laid my hand on top of his. “You’re really special, Marcus.”

“It’s because I love you so much. You mean much more to me than” He paused and changed the direction of his speech. “I mean, here you are in my arms. What more could I want?”

I smiled at my good fortune. “Well, good. Consider tonight a test then and you passed.”

He laughed.

I reached over and touched the smooth skin on his face. “I love you, Marcus. I’m so glad we met.”

“I love you, Brooke.”

His lips touched mine in a good-night kiss. I rolled over and pressed my back to him.

“I’m glad you’re fixing me.” I yawned, stretching my mouth until my jaw hurt.

So far, he’d removed the dagger from my heart and stitched me up roughly, but the turbulence still raged on in my head.



Chapter Twenty-Four

The next morning, I lay in bed staring out of the uppermost panes of glass into the fog—so much for the view.

I cuddled Marcus' pillow close to my body while my mind wandered back to everything good that had happened between us in the short time since we'd met. I struggled to hold on to the new memories, however; they became obscured by the darkness.

Marcus was freshly showered when I came downstairs and into the kitchen area. He made us toast and hot chocolate for breakfast. After we'd eaten, and I was sure Aunt Rachel and Uncle Jim had gone to work, he took me home so I could clean up and exchange my dress for jeans.



"I should tell you," Marcus said as we cruised through the patchy fog and up the shore in his boat, "Uncle Edmund is really old."

"How old?"

"No one in the family knows for sure, but he has a Harvard diploma hanging in his hallway with his name on it dated 1916."

"That's old."

"Yup. Of course, it's highly unlikely that it's really his, but we humor him."

"Oh, I get it."

We broke free of the fog and came into view of a slender strip of land, one of many islands that dotted the bay here.

"Yeah, he's a bit eccentric. To the public, he acts old and confused. To the family, his mind seems young and sharp. We can't figure him out. We think it's just an act that he seems all confused around others, but we don't know why."

I wondered how he would act with me there.

A flock of seagulls took flight when we neared the wharf, only to return to the pebbled shoreline once the boat's engine cut.

We walked down a sun-bleached wharf. Its last few planks were buried under a thin layer of sand, transitioning the wharf into a well-worn sand path. Farther up the path, cut through a hedge of wild rose bushes, an inviting opening awaited. A once-white gate, which hung from its bottom rusted hinge, had broken some time ago and lay open.

A vegetable garden spread out before us on the other side of the broken gate. In the middle of the garden stood an older gentleman with a thick crop of wind-blown, granite-colored hair. He held a bunch of freshly picked carrots in one hand. Perched atop the roof peak of a gray-shingled Cape house with faded yellow door, two seagulls eyed us curiously.

We walked up the sand path in silence, stopping at the edge of the garden. Uncle Edmund didn't hear us approach. He stood with his back to us, mumbling something inaudible. Marcus greeted him in a low voice, so as not to startle him.

"Hi, Uncle Edmund."

Nothing. He didn't turn. It looked as though he was counting the bunch of carrots he'd picked.

Marcus looked at me and shrugged. "Must be going deaf."

We took a few steps closer. Marcus stepped in front and in a louder voice said, "Hi."

Uncle Edmund's hands flew up in the air, scattering the carrots over the garden. I jumped back, just as startled. Marcus grabbed one of his uncle's arms to steady him.

"It's me, Uncle Edmund, Marcus."

"Wha ... who?" Uncle Edmund steadied himself, picked his glasses up from a cord around his neck and put them on. "Oh, it's you, Marky. Why didn't you say so? You almost gave me a heart attack."

Marcus looked at me and rolled his eyes. I suppressed a laugh.

"What brings my favorite nephew all the way up here?"

"I brought someone I want you to meet."

"What? You brought someone? Who did you bring?" His tone had picked up an edge of panic.

Uncle Edmund spun in his tracks. Once he had me in his sights, he steadied himself. The intermittent breeze had blown strands of hair across my face. I pushed them away and tucked one side behind my ear. All of Uncle Edmund's movements ceased, even his breathing seemed to stop. I couldn't read his expression. I looked from him to Marcus, my eyes widening slightly.

"This is Brooke," Marcus said, slightly louder than he'd spoken the first time. He came and stood beside me.

His uncle gazed upon the two of us with a look of awe.

"Amazing," he said.

Marcus shook his head. "What's amazing?"

Uncle Edmund blinked, narrowed his eyes back to a normal size and came out of his trance. "Do forgive me" He fumbled with his words, as if trying to remember what Marcus had called me.

I thought I'd better break the ice. "Hi, I'm Brooke. It's nice to meet you." I flashed him a smile.

"Brooke." He said my name as if he were amazed at the sound of it on his tongue. He straightened his body from his slouch and cleared his throat. His eyes became more alert. A more refined, older gentleman stood before me now.

"I am very pleased to make your acquaintance, Brooke. Won't you please come in?" He turned and walked toward the house, his head held high.

I glanced at Marcus, totally confused.

"You see? He does that when he feels completely comfortable around someone. Totally changes from befuddled to sharp and agile; although, I've never seen him change so quickly without knowing the person first."

"Maybe he feels the love." I brushed up against Marcus' side in a playful gesture.

"That must be it." Marcus smiled and took my hand.

Framed in mahogany, the questionable Harvard diploma hung proudly in the hallway, next to the living room doorway. The lettering looked Latin. Except for the name, Edmund Alcott Knight in bold script and the signatures on the bottom, I couldn't read a word of it.

"It looks too old to be a fake," I whispered to Marcus, who was standing beside me.

He pointed to the date, which was written out in Latin and whispered it to me. "Nineteen hundred and sixteen. It just isn't possible."

When I turned the corner into the living room, my eyes didn't know where to look first. Two entire walls were covered with bookshelves, accommodating hundreds of volumes. Stacks of more books littered the floor, arranged to create paths through the room. Several were fanned out over a studded leather sofa.

Uncle Edmund walked over to a rustic beach stone fireplace and leaned an arm on one corner of the mantle. Beside him was a flat screen TV, which sat atop an outdated, wooden floor-model TV.

As I walked farther into the room, I took in the far corner, where an open laptop sat atop a burled wood desk, with a stained glass lamp on one corner and a brass armillary sphere on the other.

To me, this looked like a room for someone of high academic stature.

Perhaps Marcus and his family were wrong. I got the impression the Harvard diploma had been justly earned by Edmund Alcott Knight.

Uncle Edmund walked to the sofa, picked half a dozen books up, and stacked them on the floor, clearing a spot for us to sit. "Please, make yourselves at home." He waited until we sat down before sitting in one of the two tapestry-covered wingback chairs opposite the sofa.

He picked a pipe up off the coffee table and held it in his mouth, but didn't light it, all the while studying me.

Uncle Edmund cleared his throat. "So, Marky, was there something you wanted to see me about?" He spoke seriously, as if he'd known that we hadn't just come to chat. Somewhere in between the garden and the living room, he'd picked up an air of sophistication.

"Well, Brooke has—"

Uncle Edmund cut him off, looked at me again, ignoring Marcus, and said, "Forgive me, but what did you say your last name was?"

I hadn't said. "Day. Brooke Day."

He nodded slowly. "Yes. Of course it is."

He mumbled into the mouthpiece of the pipe, but I'd heard him. I looked at him with my eyebrows raised, expecting an explanation, but none came.

He looked back to Marcus. "Please continue, Marky."

"Brooke has something to show you."

That was my cue. I pulled a picture out of my bag and handed it to Uncle Edmund; the one of Claire and Christian.

He adjusted his glasses on the bridge of his straight nose, then reached across the table and took the picture from me. I couldn't stop my leg from bouncing nervously up and down. Marcus took my hand and held it in the small space between us. Uncle Edmund studied the picture for quite some time. His only movement was when his eyebrows pulled together, deepening the lines in his forehead.

After a few intense moments, without raising his head, he lifted his eyes above his glasses to look down at our linked hands, and then to our faces and then back to the picture. His deeply tanned face was as somber as Marcus' was now.

Come to think of it, he and Marcus had the same bone structure, and those eyes; right now they looked like bitter chocolate. The same as Marcus' eyes looked when he was in a serious mood—like now.

After a couple of intense minutes, Uncle Edmund heaved a heavy sigh and lifted his head from the picture.

"Where did you find this photograph?" He addressed his question directly to me.

I chewed on my lip, not sure if I should divulge that information. Marcus saw how nervous I was and answered for me.

"She found it in a trunk in the attic of the Ravenwyck."

Uncle Edmund's eyes widened. "You're not still working there are you, Marky? I thought you only had a small job to do. I warned you to stay away from that place."

My leg stopped bouncing, my body stiffened, and I looked at Marcus disbelievingly, wondering why he hadn't shared that fact with me.

I narrowed my gaze on Uncle Edmund. "Why should he stay away from the Inn? Is there danger there?" I knew there was for me, but

"Brooke works there too," Marcus explained.

Uncle Edmund's face grew stone-like. In an even tone he asked, "Does Margaret still own the Inn?"

I nodded, assuming he'd meant Maggie.

"Yes, of course she does." Holding the bowl of the pipe in his hand, he shook the mouth piece at us. "Neither of you should step foot inside that Inn or go anywhere near it again. It was once, and I suspect

still is, a place of great evil.”

I shuddered at his warning.

“What about that brother of yours?”

By his tone, it would seem he wasn't as fond of Evan as he was Marcus. I thought back to when we'd first arrived, how he'd referred to Marcus as his favorite nephew.

“Evan's still working there, too. What kind of danger are you talking about?” Marcus asked warily.

Still holding the picture with one hand and the unlit pipe to his mouth with the other, Uncle Edmund started to answer, but apparently changed his mind.

“What is it?” Marcus sat forward, releasing my hand. “Do you know who they are? In the picture?”

For a moment Uncle Edmund retreated back to the befuddled old man I'd met in the garden. “I shouldn't, no, I mustn't. It's time, but how?” Uncle Edmund argued quietly with himself.

“Tell us,” Marcus demanded. When he didn't answer him, Marcus looked at me. “I'm going to tell him everything.”

I nodded.

Marcus recounted our experiences in full, first my story from the start of my nightmares, to the events at the Inn. He told Uncle Edmund about the well and the pendant. I thought it odd how his eyes lit up when Marcus mentioned the pendant. He showed him his tattoo and told him about my scratches and what I'd seen in the painting. All the while, Uncle Edmund stared down at the picture, lifting his head now and then to look at me, as if he were comparing me to someone.

“May I see the amulet?” His eyes brightened when he asked.

I pulled the chain out of my sweater and proceeded to lift it off my neck. Uncle Edmund jumped up from the chair, as spry as a teenager.

“No! Don't take it off. You mustn't ever take it off.”

He looked at me sternly. I sat there in shock.

He placed one hand on the middle of the coffee table for support and leaned over it, picking the pendant up from the outside of my sweater, handling it delicately.


“Fascinating! Just as I'd remembered it.” He slid his hand out from under it carefully, and with his hands linked behind his back, he walked toward the far wall of books.

“I think it's time you knew everything, Marky.” Uncle Edmund sighed and turned around, grabbing hold of his suspenders; his expression grew gravely serious.

Marcus' eyes narrowed. “Knew what?”



Chapter Twenty-Five

 On top of the highest shelf, Uncle Edmund pushed a few books aside, reached his arm behind a hidden row of books, and pulled out a polished wooden box. He walked back to us, but instead of sitting in the chair, he came around the coffee table and sat next to me on the edge of the sofa. He held the box on his lap, his tanned, aged hands fondling the glossy wood.

He cleared his throat and looked past me to Marcus. "I've been thinking about this day since you turned twelve. It was then, that there was no more doubt in my mind. I'd planned on telling you last spring when you turned seventeen, but I didn't think you'd believe me."

"Oh, I'd pretty much believe anything now," Marcus assured him.

"Exactly. *Now* you would believe; last spring, it would be highly unlikely. It's high time you knew the truth—both of you."

"Both?" I couldn't help repeat.

Uncle Edmund ignored my comment and opened the box. He flipped through a row of old pictures until he came to one in particular. He pulled it out and looked at it for what seemed like a long time before handing the picture to me.

Too scared to look at first, I held it for a few seconds before setting my eyes on it. When I finally did look, I could do nothing but stare in awe at the only person in the aged picture. I flipped it over. Claire's name was on the back, and it was dated 1912. I flipped it back to the front.

A young girl, clothed in an early nineteen hundred's style dress, was sitting on a large rock. Her gloved hands held a closed parasol. Ringlets cascaded down the front of her shoulders. But what took my breath away—literally—was her beaming smile. My smile.

I tried to speak, but choked on my words. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Uncle Edmund nodding.

"Why does she look like me?" I finally got the words out.

"My dear ... she *is* you."

Marcus grabbed the picture from my hand and stared at it. My eyes stayed fixed to the empty spot between my hands, where the picture had been.

I cleared my throat twice before I could speak again. "Wh ... how can that be?"

"When you hear the whole story, you'll understand," Uncle Edmund said.

Marcus looked at me wordlessly and shrugged.

Uncle Edmund flipped through a few more pictures and pulled out another one. "Excuse me, Brooke."

He reached in front of me and handed Marcus the next one. I looked at it with him. It was a picture of two handsome boys. With the exception of hair length, the older boy looked exactly like Marcus. The younger boy looked similar to Marcus also.

And as I'd expected, the back read, Christian Knight, but I didn't expect to read the name, Edmund Knight, below it.

"Christian and Edmund?" Marcus asked, sounding justifiably confused.

"Christian was my older brother." Uncle Edmund paused and assessed us over the top of his glasses, and when we didn't comment he continued. "He was seventeen when he was murdered." He looked at Marcus again, who was silent. "It's obvious to me now, that the two of you are Christian and Claire reincarnated."

Marcus let out a sharp breath that sounded much like a sarcastic laugh. "Reincarnated?"

"But that doesn't make any sense," I said, coming out of my initial shock. "Not that I believe in

reincarnation, but if I had been reincarnated, wouldn't I look different? Wouldn't we be somebody totally different?"

"Perhaps, but not necessarily. Who really knows? However, there is no mistaking that the people in these photographs are the two of you."

Uncle Edmund stood and began to pace the room.

"Marky, it was around the time you'd turned twelve when I'd realized how much you looked like Christian; of course, I've always had the photographs to compare you with. I see it not just in your looks, but in your mannerisms and voice as well. Everything about you is Christian. The older you grew, the more undeniably certain I became."

Marcus shook his head as if to clear it. "Okay, let me get this straight. You think that I'm Christian and Brooke is Claire and we were murdered? Who murdered them ... us, then?" Marcus looked totally confused.

"You betrayed your coven. You were murdered for high treason against the coven."

"What coven?" Marcus asked, his tone becoming slightly edgy.

"Margaret's coven. The Coven of Seven. Claire and Christian were witches."

I listened wide-eyed, chewing on a fingernail as the revelation of being a witch in a past life penetrated my brain.

"You practiced witchcraft at the Inn. I did odd jobs for Margaret and followed my big brother into the attic out of curiosity and into the woods to watch.

"Margaret was your Mother Priestess. Each of you controlled an element."

"Wait a minute," Marcus interrupted, holding up a hand. "You said there were seven, but there are only four elements."

I looked at him astounded. "How would you know how many elements there are?"

He shrugged. "I don't know; earth, water, fire and air. Everyone knows that."

I just stared.

"Spirit can sometimes be a fifth element in the world of magic," Uncle Edmund continued. "Margaret manipulated spirit, but Claire and Christian had a gift that no others had. A gift brought with them from another lifetime—an ancient lifetime. They could channel energy from darkness and light.

"Christian drew his magic from darkness and Claire from light. It was thought that if Claire and Christian were able to reach their peak in magic, that darkness and light together might have generated great power, but they were never to find out. Margaret had Claire and Christian killed as they were about to come into the peak of their power."

"I'm lost," Marcus said.

"As you should be. Jason, your best friend at the time, was one of the seven." He walked back to the table and pulled another picture from the box and handed it to Marcus.

"No way," I said, looking at the picture of Christian and Jason. My heart pounded in my throat.

"Yes, Brooke, Jason has been reborn also, and is now Evan. Like you, I suspect they have all been reborn."

I shuddered at his words.

"Jason was Christian's best friend and Claire's fiancé."

I let out a sharp breath in disbelief. There was no use trying to remember. I was reduced to using my imagination.

Something Uncle Edmund had said a moment ago registered. "We'd betrayed the coven," he'd said. If Claire and Christian were so much in love, then they must have been having an affair. Claire betrayed Jason, thus betraying the coven.

Marcus ran a hand through his hair, tossed the picture on the table and stood. I was too weak to use my legs. I had a million questions, but couldn't find my voice, so I sat there, waiting to hear more.

Uncle Edmund began again. "Christian was also betrothed."

He handed Marcus another picture. Marcus looked at it for a second, laughed at the irony, then threw it on the table and walked away from us. I could see it clearly enough without picking it up. It was a picture of people who looked like Megan and Marcus playing dress-up in old clothes. His arms were around her waist and they looked happy.

My stomach twisted into knots. So Megan was telling the truth in the bathroom; he had loved her. "No wonder Megan hates me," I mumbled to myself. "How could all of this be true? I don't want to believe it, but everything that's happened to me since I moved here shouldn't be real either, and it is." I let out a long slow breath.

Marcus sat heavily in a straight-backed chair across the room. Maybe he suddenly felt as weak as I did. This wasn't just about me any longer. Marcus was every bit as much a part of this twisted tale as I was.

"You said there were seven of us, but you only mentioned four so far," Marcus said.

"I have another picture," I said to Uncle Edmund, remembering the picture of the seven black-robed people I'd found in Claire's book. I pulled it out of my bag and handed it to him.

He pointed to every person, reciting their names as he did. "Jason, Christian, this one is Claire, Julia, Margaret, Sally and Emma, they're all here."

A cold shiver passed over me when I looked at the person he pointed out as Maggie. "She wants the pendant," I said pointing to her.

"Of course she does. Its magic is deep and she knows it. Are you ready for more? Have you digested what I've told you?" He looked from Marcus to me.

"Tell us," Marcus said from across the room.

I nodded, eagerly.

"The amulet possesses great power. Besides granting its possessor eternal youth, in certain hands, it can be forged into a powerful weapon by channeling energy from deep emotions, such as love and hatred, or severe weather, anything that emits natural energy—energy that only magic users have insight into. Used properly, the amulet can also channel energy from all five elements, plus light and dark.

"Claire found it on Skull Island. She'd said something beyond her control compelled her to go there, and once there, she felt a pull deep within her. That pull brought her straight to the amulet. She couldn't help but take it."

"Was it Maggie's?" I asked.

"No. I will reveal the true owner's identity soon. But, I will tell you that Margaret had the amulet in her possession for centuries. Margaret has never been reborn. With the aid of the amulet of immortality she has lived a very long existence."

"Why doesn't she have it now?" Marcus asked.

Uncle Edmund hesitated briefly. "I took it from her, and she aged."

Marcus and I looked at his uncle disbelievingly.

"It's true. Once you were both gone, she'd let her guard down. It was easy for me to find it and take it.

"I wore it, on and off, for forty years. Today, at one hundred fourteen years old, I am as a man of seventy-four. Forty years younger than I rightly deserve to be.

"I knew I couldn't stay young forever without speculation, so I tossed the amulet into the well on Skull Island where I knew Margaret had hidden Claire and Christian's remains."

I flinched at the visual that popped into my head. The bone I'd pulled out from under my leg in the well belonged to either Marcus or me. The inside of my head felt as if it was spiraling downward and I felt dizzy. I closed my eyes and composed myself as best as I could.

"Margaret found out about the affair between Claire and Christian. She used it as an excuse to

execute them, though her real motive goes much deeper.” There was a moment of silence, and then Uncle Edmund said, “Tea anyone?”

His change-about was so sudden, it startled me. I was afraid he would retreat back into the befuddled old man I’d first met and not finish the story.

“Is that it?” Marcus asked, shocked. “Aren’t you going to tell us the rest?”

“In good time, Marky. Right now it’s tea time. You digest what I’ve just told you, and I’ll be back in a flash.”

Uncle Edmund exited the room, leaving the two of us alone and in utter shock.



Chapter Twenty-Six

As soon as Uncle Edmund left the room, my cell phone rang. After a whole repetition of the tune I'd downloaded for its ringer, Marcus lifted his head off the back of the chair and said from across the room, "Aren't you going to answer that?"

I came out of my trance and pulled the ringing, vibrating phone from the back pocket of my jeans and looked at the display. "Damn," I said when I saw who it was.

"Hi, Luke."

"Hey, Country Girl. How's it going?"

Oh geez, he was using Evan's line in reverse. "Um, I really can't talk right now, Luke."

I hated to give Luke the brush-off, but with everything I'd just learned from Uncle Edmund, I couldn't deal with normal life.

"What's up? Its lunch time there, isn't it?"

I'd completely lost track of time and the fact that it was a school day.

"Yeah, it is."

I glanced across the room at Marcus, who stared at the floor, fidgeting with a corner of his shirt tail, looking as if he was in a daze.

"Um, I'm at basketball tryouts." I cringed at the lie.

"Oh. Call me later then, okay?"

"Yeah, sure."

He hesitated. "I have something to tell you. Well, I'll talk to you later. I miss you."

I blinked back tears. "Yeah, me too. Hey, tell Courtney I said hi, okay? See ya."

"Who's Luke?"

Marcus' voice was closer than I'd expected it to be. I jumped in my seat and dropped the phone onto the floor. Marcus bent over, picked it up, and handed it to me.

"Um, Luke's an old friend, Courtney's boyfriend."

I hadn't liked lying to Luke, but I hated lying to Marcus. A huge pang of guilt nestled in among the other emotions I was feeling.

Marcus sat beside me on the edge of the sofa.

"Do you believe any of this?" I asked, intentionally changing the subject.

"If I hadn't witnessed your miracle the other night, then I probably wouldn't. But the fact is, those scratches healed themselves right in front of my eyes. Or something healed them. So why not believe it?" He sounded defeated.

I nodded.

"And what about the pictures?"

"Well, if it is true, I was meant to move to Deadwich. This was all meant to happen. Maggie probably expected me."

"I wonder how old she really is," Marcus said.

Just then, Uncle Edmund entered the room carrying a tray. On the tray sat a China tea set and an assortment of sandwiches, cut into triangles with their crusts cut off.

"Morwenna is her Welsh name. She arrived in Massachusetts on the Mayflower in 1620."

"1620?!" Marcus blurted.

"Yes. However, she is older yet. Christian and Claire were first born in Wales about a thousand years ago."

My eyes bulged at the time frame.

“Then, Christian’s name was Kalan and Claire’s was Bryn.

“What would you like in your tea dear?”

Although Uncle Edmund meant well, the interruption was annoying. I didn’t even drink tea, but took it with a drop of milk and one sugar cube. It wasn’t that bad. He insisted we eat the sandwiches he’d made while he continued.

“Where was I?” He laid a finger on the side of his chin in thought.

With a mouthful of pastrami and Swiss, I blurted, “Wales! A thousand years ago!”

“Right you are. Kalan and Bryn came from two very different families. Kalan was born of the most powerful family of witches in all of Britannia.”

I stopped chewing and looked at Marcus sitting next to me, seeing him in a new light. He stared, expressionless, into his cup.

“Bryn”

Uncle Edmund paused and looked at me above his glasses. I swallowed my last mouthful of sandwich and held my breath, staring intently at Marcus’ uncle.

“Well, Bryn’s family was also powerful in magic for their kind.”

“Their kind?” I asked, raising my eyebrows.

“Yes. You see, Bryn was a fairy.” He sat quietly, staring at me.

A sharp laugh burst out of me. I cupped my hand over my mouth in case there was any food left inside. “Yeah, right.” I rolled my eyes to the ceiling then back to Uncle Edmund. I’d never seen a more serious look on anyone’s face. I shook my head in total disbelief.

“Uncle Edmund, you can’t be serious,” Marcus said leaning forward. “You don’t expect us to believe in fairies too, do you?”

“I assure you, Marky, it is very true. From what Christian had told me, fairies had grown out of their wings ages before and blended effortlessly among humans for centuries, but their power had never diminished.

“Bryn and Kalan happened upon each other one day on the outskirts of their realms, on human territory, and fell in love.”

His use of the word “human” made me realize that if everything he was saying was true, I might not be human. I couldn’t comprehend that.

“It was in this secret spot, by the stream under the great willow, that they rendezvoused for many years, until one day, their families found out. Like the Capulets and the Montagues, fairies and witches were sworn enemies. Neither family would allow a blending of realms.

“At first, they were warned to stay away from each other. They tried, but couldn’t. Both Bryn and Kalan were free spirits who couldn’t be reined in. Their infinite love drew them together, no matter the risk.

“Unbeknownst to either realm, the rulers of the fairies and the rulers of the witches employed the aid of the same nomadic witch to follow the lovers—Morwenna was her name.”

“Maggie,” I whispered. A chill feathered across my shoulders.

“Yes. Morwenna was and still is a powerful witch. Some even believed she was a demon. Morwenna confirmed to the rulers of both realms that the lovers were secretly meeting. Their families had then heavily guarded after that.

“Kalan and Bryn were devastated. Unable to escape the guard, they had no way of being together. Kalan used his time away from Bryn wisely and devised his own invisibility spell. Months later, with the aid of his spell, Kalan was able to sneak out of his realm and into Bryn’s, which he’d found on an island hidden in an ancient forest of yews. With him, he carried his family’s amulet of protection and immortality—your double spiral.”

I nodded.

“As Bryn slept, Kalan placed the amulet around her neck, but before he was able to slip out unnoticed, his invisibility spell wore off, exposing him to Bryn’s guard. There was no escape. The guardians of the fairy realm caught him easily.

“Bryn awakened as Kalan was being torn from her bedside. She flung herself at him, but the guard held her until they had taken Kalan away. Kalan fought back, but his magic was weak in the fairy realm. As the guard dragged him away, he yelled out to Bryn, promising her that they would be together again one day. If not in that lifetime, then in another.

“The next day, Kalan was executed within the fairy realm by Morwenna. As her punishment, Bryn was made to watch. Morwenna executed Kalan in the only way a witch could be killed—by fire. With his dying breath, Kalan cried out to Bryn to never take the amulet off. Morwenna couldn’t touch her as long as she wore it.”

A metallic taste overpowered the pastrami and cheese in my mouth. Without realizing it, I had bitten the inside of my lip, making it bleed. Marcus sat motionless, as if envisioning the whole story, as I was.

“What happened to Bryn?” I asked in a whisper, as if I was talking about someone else and not myself.

“Once Kalan’s remains had cooled, Bryn gathered them and buried them under the willow, in their secret spot by the river. After a period of grieving, Bryn sought out Morwenna and begged the witch to kill her, too. Fairies were physically unable to cause themselves harm, let alone end their own lives.

“Morwenna was happy to oblige Bryn’s request, on the condition that Bryn freely give Morwenna the amulet. None, not even someone as powerful as Morwenna, could take it by force.

“Bryn took it from around her neck and placed it in Morwenna’s hand. Morwenna was about to thrust her dagger into Bryn’s heart, when Bryn asked for one more favor. She asked Morwenna to end her life as she had ended Kalan’s and to bury her ashes under the willow with his.

“Morwenna honored Bryn’s wish. Together they traveled to the willow by the river, where Bryn died the agonizing death she’d asked for. Morwenna kept her other promise as well and buried Bryn’s ashes with Kalan’s.”

“That’s the saddest thing I ever heard.” My voice was a whisper.

As I wiped away a few stubborn tears, I felt Marcus’s hand slip into mine.

“Neither, not Morwenna nor Bryn, knew that Kalan’s last promise to Bryn was a promise he knew would come true. Nine hundred years later, Kalan and Bryn were reborn, here in Massachusetts, as Christian Knight and Claire Day.”

The story had unfolded to me in a vision as Uncle Edmund had narrated the tragic tale. The deep love Bryn and Kalan once had for each another was the same love Marcus and I shared now, even though we’d just met two weeks ago. He was part of my soul, and I wouldn’t be me without him.

Mechanically, I took a sip of cold tea and placed the cup and saucer on the table. Then I gripped the pendant with renewed love.

“Kalan knew they’d be together again,” I said softly.

“Yes, he knew,” Uncle Edmund said.

Marcus let go of my hand and sat forward as if he were just coming out of a trance. “How do you remember the story, word for word?” He still sounded skeptical.

“I wrote it all down as Christian told it to me. He suspected it would happen again. And it has. Here you both are.”

“Wow,” I said and dropped my head into my hands.

“Wow is right,” Marcus agreed.

Uncle Edmund cleared the tray away, giving Marcus and me some privacy.

“Do you believe now?” I asked him, turning my head toward him.

He grimaced. "I guess so."

I sat up and began to rummage through the picture box, pulling pictures out at random. There were several of Claire, some with Jason. I suppressed a shudder when I came across another one of Christi and Julia, who I now knew was Megan. Twelve-year-old Edmund was also in this picture. Julia was holding his hand.

I discovered without surprise that Sammy and Robyn were the other two members of the coven. Sammy's name was Emma and Robyn's was Sally.

By the time I'd decided I couldn't take any more, I had pictures scattered across the coffee table and some on the floor.

While I was in my frenzy of searching through my past, I hadn't even noticed Marcus in the room, until he got up and walked across the room in silence. I looked down at the collage of pictures I'd unintentionally created, and stood.

I walked to where Marcus had stopped in front of a collection of foreign language books and touched his arm. He sighed heavily, turned and held his arms out to me. My body shook against his with silent sobs.

After a few minutes, I whispered, "I'm sorry. I never cry in front of anyone, and now, that's all I seem to be doing." I sucked in a shaky breath and lifted my head from his shoulder. "Will you say something?"

"I'm so sorry," he said in a broken voice.

"About what?"

"I let you die. Not once, but twice."

"You died too."

"Well, we're not going to die this time. I think the key is to stay together. Not let her separate us. That's what she wants, right? To keep us apart."

He pulled his head back and looked into my moist eyes. The look of anguish on his face made my heart ache ten times worse.

"And never take the amulet off."

The instant in which he'd called my pendant an amulet, was the instant it all felt real to me. As if it was possible, I felt even more afraid of the future than I had moments ago.

"We have to kill her, you know," I said softly. "But how?"

"The only way you can kill a witch. Burn her." The anger in his voice flashed in his eyes.

"Yeah, well, good luck with that."

"We'll figure out a way. We have to this time." He sounded desperate and pulled me closer, one hand gripping the back of my head.

"I think you're right about burning her, though. In my last nightmare, when I was cornered by the witches—or our friends and family, however you want to look at it, I was surrounded by a circle of fire. The witches had vanished and left me behind, and it was as if I couldn't pass over the flames. But I'm not a witch. I'm a sprite, a pixie, a stupid bug with butterfly wings."

Marcus chuckled. "Sorry, Brooke, but I couldn't help laugh at that one."

With a tender touch to the side of my face, he managed to spread cool tingles down my cheek and over my neck.

"You know that's just the way fairies have been portrayed in children's stories. Look at you. Do you look like any of the things you've just described?"

I pursed my lips. "Whatever."

Uncle Edmund returned. I wiped my face with my sleeve.

"You must find Claire's grimoire," Uncle Edmund said out of the blue.

"Her what?" Marcus and I asked together.

“Her grimoire. It is a witch’s journal of magic, unique to her. A witch’s bible, if you will. Every incantation, every charm, every invocation she has ever executed will be in that book.”

I looked at Marcus, my eyebrows raised. He nodded, confirming my suspicions.

“I think we already found it,” I said.

“Where is it?”

“Right here in my bag.” I walked to the sofa and pulled the worn, black leather book out and handed it to Uncle Edmund.

Carefully, he turned a few of the crispy pages before snapping the book shut. “Yes indeed. You *have* found it.” With a look of awe, he handed the book back to me—its owner. “It’s unsafe for anyone to look upon the pages of a witch’s grimoire, other than the witch who it belongs to,” he explained his hastiness of returning it to me.

“But, I thought I wasn’t a witch.”

“You were, from the first moment the amulet was placed around your neck.”

I gasped and looked at Marcus. “Did you know?”

He looked at me as if I were crazy and shrugged. “How would I know now what I knew then?”

“Oh, yeah, sorry.” I rolled my eyes and let out a deep breath.

I held the book with both hands and stared at it, not knowing what to do with it. Marcus and Uncle Edmund watched me intently. My fingers traced over the intricately embossed double spiral on the cover. A strange feeling came over me, a new awareness. Suddenly, there was no more Claire. In my visions and thoughts, she had been replaced by me. Bryn, however, seemed like a totally different person. She was too far away to connect with yet. But I absolutely became aware of the fact that Marcus and Christian were one person—Uncle Edmund’s older brother. We’d betrayed our coven with our ill-fated love, and were murdered for it.

I opened the book to the inside cover. The inscription had been by my hand. Although it had been written ages ago, I still saw traces of similarity to my writing now.

Overwhelmed, my eyes flooded again. A single tear escaped and dripped off my cheek, splattering onto the page. I smeared it across the delicate paper with my thumb and blinked back the rest, swallowing the lump in my throat. I wouldn’t allow myself to cry again.

“It’s written in a different language,” I said, trying fruitlessly to read some words on a page.

“It is written in ancient fairy Welsh,” Uncle Edmund said.

“And I’m supposed to know how to read it?” I asked, skeptical.

“It is buried within you. It will surface in time.”

I’d had enough. I didn’t know where I wanted to go, but I needed air. It seemed as if I’d been cooped up in Uncle Edmund’s house all day. As I thought about leaving, the mantel clock chimed three times.

“It’s three o’clock. We’d better get going,” Marcus said. He must have felt anxious too.

Uncle Edmund led us to the front door

“So, technically, I’m older than you,” Marcus said to his uncle, lightening the mood, somewhat, gracing us with a half-grin.

“No, technically you’re not. I have lived many more years than you have in all three of your lifetimes put together.” Uncle Edmund chuckled.

“Oh, right.”

“This time around, however, you are going to outlive me, if I have to kill the demon-witch myself.”

He’d just shattered the lightened moment with his reference to Maggie as a demon.

The fog had returned. It seemed fitting. The sun had shone only briefly since I’d moved to Deadwich, why should today be any different?

Uncle Edmund walked with us to the end of the wharf. He looked genuinely relieved now that he’d

unburdened himself of the secret he'd been keeping for close to a century. He hugged us both before we got onto the boat.

"Don't hesitate to come to me for anything. If you need a place to stay, you can hide out here," he called out as the boat pulled away from the wharf.

I sat at the helm with my arms wrapped around my knees, my body tucked under Marcus' arm while he steered the boat through the fog. The hum of the motor quickly drowned out the seagulls' cries.

"I don't get it," I said.

"What don't you get?"

"How could I have been so afraid of the dark all my life, when it was you all along? You were the dark in my nightmares. And now when I think about it, the evil was just a feeling. I never actually saw anything scary in the nightmare, just dark."

"I didn't know you were afraid of the dark."

"Yeah, I always have been," I said sheepishly.

"Maybe you won't be now that you know what the dream means: that I'm the dark surrounding you, and I've been trying to find you this whole lifetime. That's why you've always had dark dreams—not nightmares. And now, since we've met again, I'm able to bring your light to you."

"Which is strange, too." I shifted, turning toward him. "Why haven't I always had the light with me if it's my element?"

"Um, because you lost it?" An adorable crooked grin spread across his face lightening the gloom.

I couldn't help the giggle that escaped me.

"Well thanks for finding it for me."

I laid my head on his shoulder. The mainland came into view, and I wasn't looking forward to facing Aunt Rachel. Then I thought of something that brought the gloom back.

"Maybe there was evil in the darkness. Maybe the evil I'd felt in my dreams represents Maggie trying to get to me all those years, and now that I'm in Deadwich, she really is getting to me."

Marcus' arm tightened around me. "I won't let her get to you."

"I'll have to sleep home tonight. I'm probably already in a crap load of trouble."

"I'll miss you," Marcus said.

"I'll miss you too. I'll hate being alone." I cuddled in closer to his side.

"I'll be with you. Remember, it was me who gave you the amulet all those centuries ago." He kissed the top of my head.

I smiled to myself.

Once we were back at his wharf, he walked me home. As I was about to turn onto my street, he grabbed hold of my hand and pulled me to the stone wall of the corner property.

"I can't let you go just yet," he said.

His hands were warm against my cheeks. He lowered his mouth to mine. It was the first time our lips had touched since the night before at the boathouse.

"Then don't let me go," I whispered in between kisses.

He reached inside my sweater sending a tingle over my skin where his hand touched and pulled out the amulet and kissed it.

"As long as you wear this, I have a feeling I'll always be with you."

"I wish I had something to give to you."

"You gave me your heart ... a thousand years ago."

"Yeah, it's always been yours." I reached up and pulled his face to mine in a final kiss.

A car drove past. Someone laid on the horn.

"Mmm, my very own fairy princess," he said ignoring the audience.

I felt his lips turn into a smile against mine.

“Very funny.” I grinned also.

“Come on, I’m walking you to the driveway. Anything can happen between here and there.”

“Funny, we wouldn’t have thought so a week ago.”

Marcus watched me until I was inside of the house. I waved from the doorway. He blew me a kiss.

“I’ll call you later,” he said before I closed the door.

Suddenly, I felt so alone. There was no one in my life I could talk to now except Marcus, and he was gone.

I thought about calling Courtney and telling her the whole sordid story, but how would I ever make her believe me. I sighed and went in to face the music.



Chapter Twenty-Seven

Is that you, Brooke?" Aunt Rachel called out.

Crap "It's me."

"Can you come into the kitchen please?"

I trudged down the hallway, beginning my explanation before I reached her. "I'm sorry I didn't come home last night, but—"

When I reached the kitchen doorway, the rest of my excuse caught in my throat. I sucked back a sharp breath so quickly I choked.

"Are you alright, Brooke?" Aunt Rachel asked, getting up from the kitchen chair.

I coughed and heaved, trying to catch my breath, while my knees weakened beneath me. The door casing caught me from falling as Aunt Rachel patted my back.

"Come and sit down," she suggested.

My feet wouldn't move. With bulging, watery eyes, I stared at the other person in the room.

"My goodness, are you alright, Brooke dear?" she asked in her sweet, sickening way.

I didn't answer. I couldn't. Finally able to breathe again, I stared at Maggie, or Margaret, or Morwenna—whoever she was.

"Brooke?" Aunt Rachel shook my shoulder. "You're awfully pale. Do you feel well? Maybe you should go lie down and we'll talk later."

Maggie got up from her chair and walked with a slouch to the cupboard. She pulled a glass from the shelf, filled it with water, and brought it to me. As she drew near, a cold chill radiated from her and seeped through every pore in my body, turning my blood to slush. I knew Aunt Rachel couldn't feel it. It was only meant for me. I also knew that only I could see the sinister grin on the witch's face.

Like prey cornered by its hunter, I was backed against the door casing, paralyzed with fear. Air wheezed in and out of my seared throat as my breathing steadied. With her malevolent glare, Maggie drew me into the pit of her decay-ridden soul, and for an instant, my spirit was hers to command.

A pointed-toothed grin, for only me to see, lifted her wrinkled cheeks. "Here you go dear, have some water," she said, holding the glass out to me. It might as well have been the poisoned apple; I wasn't drinking it. Still captured, I could do nothing but stare into the black pits of her eyes.

"Brooke, did you lose your manners overnight?" Aunt Rachel asked.

With great effort, I forced the words, "Thank you ... Maggie," from my dry mouth. With a shaking hand I took the glass.

Maggie's eyes lowered to the amulet, freeing my soul for a brief moment. Instinctively, I grabbed the chilled metal with my free hand, hiding it from her view. She flicked her darkened eyes back to mine. Captured again, I was sucked back into their depths.

My body grew hot on the inside. My head felt as if it would combust. I released the amulet and the glass of water at the same time, and my hands flew to the sides of my head. The glass crashed to the floor. I shrieked inwardly at the intensity of the pain Maggie was somehow inflicting upon me, even as she stood before Aunt Rachel, looking as innocent as an ordinary old lady.

Not only did I feel heat, but now I saw its source. A turbulent circle of flame surrounded me. I wasn't in Aunt Rachel's kitchen anymore. Beyond the searing flames, willow branches bowed in sorrow, and on the other side of the branches, a familiar green meadow, painted with splashes of purple stretched out before me, cut in half by a sparkling stream.

I was Bryn now, and I was dying an agonizing death. The death I'd begged for. As the flames consumed my body, I longed to run to the stream and jump into the cool, sweet water, but my love for

Kalan bound me to my fate.

In the distance, I heard my agonizing screeches as the flame consumed everything but my soul; that belonged to Kalan. I found comfort in the thought that our souls would soon be together, then the pain eased and a peaceful feeling washed over me.

I passed through a gray area. Slowly, the bright, yellow kitchen came back into view. I felt the wetness from the dropped glass of water on my legs. Finally, I was able to lower my eyes from Maggie's.

My body felt cool again—naturally cool. I took some deep breaths, feeling as if I was going to faint. Aunt Rachel hadn't seemed to notice my attack. To her, mere seconds had passed since Maggie handed me the water; to me it seemed like a lifetime ago.

Aunt Rachel put her arm around me and attempted to peel my back away from the door casing, but I refused her help.

"I need some air," I said with a sharp breath, and forced my feet to carry me outside, where I collapsed on the porch swing.

Immediately, I knew I'd made a mistake. Maggie would have to pass by to leave. Why hadn't I just gone to my room?

Although it was painful, I tried to remember back to the attack, or vision, or whatever it had been that I'd just experienced. I wanted to remember everything, but there was only pain. I took my cell phone out of my pocket and was about to call Marcus and tell him what had happened, when I heard voices in the foyer.

Maggie was leaving.

I ran down the porch steps and around to the side of the house and waited. As soon as Maggie had stepped off the bottom step, something compelled me to step out into the front yard and confront her.

"Morwenna." The name sprung uncontrollably from my lips. I gasped and cringed once I'd said it, wishing I'd gone upstairs when I had the chance.

Beyond the startled look, Maggie looked like any other old lady. I was taken aback, but quickly recovered—as did she.

"Yes, I know who you are and who I am." I bluffed my way through the act of bravery, as my stomach churned.

It didn't take long for her face to transition from helpless old lady, to the evil witch she was. Her back straightened, and a slow, frightening grin crept across her face.

She spoke in a demonic voice that raised hairs on the back of my neck. "So, you've figured it out. No matter, your time is nearly up."

Her eyes, black as coal, tried to capture mine again, but I fought against their seduction and, to my surprise, I was able to pull my gaze away.

"What exactly is it you want?" I asked, looking at the pavement. "Why don't you leave us alone this time, and we'll stay away from you."

She murmured something low. It sounded like a mocking laugh. "If you really know who I am, then you already know what I want. Give me the amulet and you may live." She took a step toward me, a scowl replacing her grin. "Fail to comply with my request and you and your lover shall die ... again."

"You know I'll never give you the amulet."

"It is your choice. When your body is reduced to bone and ash, I will take it as I have in the past."

The sound of boot heels clicking on stone made my head jerk in their direction. Sammy stood in the middle of the driveway, looking apprehensive of coming closer.

Maggie held a bony hand out to her. "Come to me, Samantha."

Sammy hesitated no longer and darted to Maggie's side. Her pupils darkened like Maggie's.

"You see, Bryn, you are outnumbered, as always."

"Not anymore she isn't." The smooth voice I'd come to love called out from the road.

I turned to see Marcus running up the driveway. He stopped beside me and wrapped an arm around me securely.

Maggie grinned, exposing needle-sharp teeth. "How sweet of you, Kalan, but you couldn't save your fairy princess in your previous lifetimes, and you will not be able to save her in this life."

"We'll see about that."

Although his words came out bitter and brave, I felt his fear.

"Don't look into their eyes," I warned him. "They'll spellbind you."

"Clever girl," Maggie said. "Run along, Samantha. I must be on my way."

Sammy did as she'd been instructed. Once she was inside the house, Maggie took another step closer. Marcus' arm tightened around me.

"Enjoy this time together, for it will be short-lived."

And with that she vanished, leaving behind a wavy outline, much like a heat wave rising from hot pavement, but icy cold instead.

I shivered uncontrollably and turned toward Marcus. My head dropped to his chest. "I'm glad you came back."

"I was almost home when the strangest feeling came over me. At first I felt hot, and then my head felt like it was on fire. I couldn't see the road anymore. I saw Bryn, under the willow, engulfed by flames. It was exactly as Uncle Edmund had described it. When the vision ended, I had a sick feeling in my gut that you were in trouble, so I ran here as fast as I could."

"Yeah, Maggie took me on a generous trip back in time to witness my own death. Sweet of her, huh? It was painful beyond words, and I don't ever want to feel it again."

"I know." He squeezed me tight. "I felt it too."

The front door burst open. "Oh, Brooke," Sammy sang out sarcastically.

I jumped and turned my head in her direction. She wasn't the evil Sammy now, just the sarcastic one.

"Supper's ready."

"I can't eat," I said to Marcus, ignoring Sammy. "But I'd better go in. Aunt Rachel thinks I'm coming down with something. Maybe she'll go easy on me." I let out a sharp laugh.

With a finger, Marcus angled my face to his and eased his lips gently onto mine. "I'm so in love with you, Brooke."

Every muscle in my body relaxed to the point where Marcus had to tighten his grip on me.

"Leaving you earlier was torture."

"I love you too," I whispered.

Marcus slid his hand under my hair and brought my face closer. "This time I want a whole lifetime with you."

"Hi kids," Uncle Jim said cheerfully, sneaking up behind us, as if he hadn't just caught us making out in the driveway.

My heart stopped beating momentarily and my heavy lids sprung open with renewed energy. We separated too quickly and gave Uncle Jim our best fake smiles.

"Everything okay, Brooke?" he asked casually. "I noticed you didn't come home last night."

"Um, yeah. Everything's fine." I hoped my nervous laugh didn't give me away.

Sammy came back out of the house as her father went in. She was talking to someone on her cell phone. As she leaned against the railing, twirling a strand of hair, laughing into the phone, she looked like my cousin again.

I looked at Marcus. "Sounds like she's talking to Justin."

"Don't be fooled," he warned me. "Even though she seems like the old Sammy, don't trust her."

"Don't worry. You're the only one I trust now. I'd better go. Now's a good time while Justin has her

occupied on the phone.”

“Okay. I’ll call you later.”

Reluctantly, I tore myself away from Marcus and went into the house. Sammy didn’t look at me on my way past.

“Are you feeling better now, Brooke? Do you think you can eat something? How about some soup?”

Well, at least Aunt Rachel didn’t seem mad at me.

“I really don’t think I can eat anything, but thanks. Oh, about last night,” I’d just thought of an excuse, a pathetic one, but it was the best I could come up with, “I was with Marcus at his parents’ boathouse, and I fell asleep on the sofa. I couldn’t help it; I felt really sick and didn’t want to move. He stayed with me all night so I wouldn’t be alone. Of course, he slept in another room.” More lies. “And today, I was just too sick to go to school. It was all I could do just to get home.”

I didn’t have to fake a sick look; I had Maggie to thank for that, so the whole story wasn’t completely a lie.

More naive than my mother, Aunt Rachel believed me. “At least you were somewhere safe, and I know Marcus and his family.” She looked up from setting the table. “So, are you two ... ?” A smile formed on her face and her eyebrows rose in question.

“Ah, yeah. I guess we sort of like each other.” “Like” was an understatement, but it was all she needed to know. “But I swear nothing happened.”

“I believe you,” she said still smiling as if she was enjoying the gossip.

“Thanks. I think I’ll go and lie down now.”

“Okay, let me know if you get hungry.”

“Oh,” I turned halfway up the stairs. “Why was Maggie here earlier?”

“She stopped by for a visit.”

“Does she do that a lot?”

“Rarely. She was really bragging you up,” Aunt Rachel said proudly.

“Yeah, I bet,” I mumbled.

I took a couple Tylenol then crashed on top of the covers. I was as tired physically as I was mentally. For some reason, my heart still ached. Maybe I was broken beyond repair.



I didn’t remember falling asleep, but when I opened my eyes again, I was bathed in a warm, beam of rare sunlight. My clothes from the day before were still on, and someone had pulled a quilt up over me. I yawned, stretched, and rolled over to check the time. It was 7:30 a.m. I couldn’t help wonder why Marcus hadn’t called me the night before. I shoved the gnawing twinge of fear out of my head and got up.

The hot shower felt good. I dressed in sweats and a T-shirt and went down to the kitchen for a bowl of cereal. Uncle Edmund’s sandwiches were the last thing I’d eaten, and I was starving.

I wanted to call Marcus, but it was just after eight. A small jolt of excitement shot through me when I realized he might have sent me a text, so I put my bowl and spoon in the dishwasher and ran upstairs to check my cell phone for messages.

“Where is it?” I said to myself, annoyed after spending a half-hour checking every possible spot in my room that my cell phone could be in. In the middle of my room, I stood with my hands on my hips in thinking mode, when Sammy walked in, still in her pajamas.

“Are you looking for this?” she asked casually, holding my phone out to me. After a brief pause, I snatched it from her hand.

“What are you doing with my cell phone, Sammy?”

"I found it." Her sweet voice was obviously phony.

"On my night table?"

"No," she said in a saucy tone "It was in the washroom."

Maybe it was or maybe she was lying, I had no way of knowing. "Get out of my room. You're not welcome in here anymore," I said bitterly.

With a smirk on her face, she turned to leave.

"Oh, and I remember the past," I said, confronting her like I'd confronted Maggie.

She turned to look at me; her smirk was replaced with a frightening scowl.

"That's right, *Emma*, I know who you are. I know everything." Then I felt a longing for the old Sammy and softened. "I'll fix things this time, and hopefully everything can go back to normal."

A sharp, unrecognizable laugh burst from her. She whirled around and left the room. I sighed and checked my phone for messages. There weren't any. Something was up. Marcus would have at least sent me a text, unless he'd fallen asleep too. Hopefully that was what had happened.

A soft knock came at my door. I opened it apprehensively. Aunt Rachel stood in the hallway.

"I heard you get up. Are you feeling better today?"

"Um, yeah, all better."

"That's great. Marcus said you were feeling better before he left."

"What?" I was sure my face looked as shocked as it did confused.

"Last night, when Marcus came to see you. I think he really cares for you, Brooke."

"Marcus was here, last night?" My mouth hung open in surprise.

"My, my, you must have been sick. Don't you remember him tucking you in?"

A warm, fuzzy feeling gushed through me in the form of relief. "Oh, right. I remember." I nodded keeping up the act.

"Okay, well, Jim and I will soon be leaving for the day. His receptionist is sick. I'll be filling in for her. Call my cell if you need anything," she said, then turned and walked away, stopping at Sammy's bedroom door.

I closed the door and walked to the bed, falling back against it. With a rare smile on my face, I wrapped the quilt around me that Marcus had covered me with.

I remembered taking Tylenol and lying down, and that was the extent of my memories. Pain meds always made me drowsy.

It was just after nine now. I couldn't refrain from calling Marcus any longer.

"Hello?" he answered.

"Hi, you weren't sleeping were you?"

"I'm so happy to hear your voice, and no, I wasn't sleeping. Actually, I've been dying to call you, but I didn't want to wake you."

"Oh, I've been awake for a while, and I was dying to call you, too. I wish I'd been awake last night when you were here."

"It doesn't matter. I was just happy to be there. Did you get my message?"

My smile grew. He *had* left me a message. "Nope. I lost my phone and found it in Sammy's hand. She must have erased it."

"I wanted to know if you wanted to spend the whole day together, doing whatever you like."

"Oh yeah, it's Saturday." I'd lost track of time. "That sounds awesome. What do you wanna do?"

"I don't know. We can drive to Boston if you want."

That tempted me enough to sit up. "Wow, I can't believe I'm going to say this, but I really don't want to go to Boston right now. Hey, don't you have a soccer game today?"

"Yeah, but I wasn't going to go."

"I think you should go. I'll come too."

“Well, if you’re up for it.”

“You have to be there for the team.”

“They’ll live without me, but you talked me into it. Why don’t I pick you up around eleven and take you out for lunch before the game?”

A rush of excitement shot through me. “Okay, it’ll be like a date.”

“You sound happy.”

“Well, at the moment, I am.”

“Good, see you soon.”

I kissed into the phone and hung up.

Suddenly aware of how I was dressed, I ripped the wet towel off my head, threw it on the floor and hurried to my closet. Forgetting for a moment about the dark side of my life, I got ready for my day with Marcus.



Chapter Twenty-Eight

Marcus picked me up in the truck. After a pleasant lunch at a seaside restaurant, he drove us to the soccer field. Amy and Christy were on the bleachers waving frantically at me when I got out of the truck.

“Good. You’ll have friends to sit with,” Marcus said as he heaved his gym bag over his shoulder.

He offered to walk me to the bleachers, but I brushed him off. After a lengthy kiss and a couple of teasing shouts from Amy and Christy, Marcus left me to go to the locker room to change. As I walked to the bleachers to sit with my new friends, I felt as if I belonged somewhere again.

The day was moving along beautifully.

“Hey girlfriend.” Amy greeted me, smiling hugely. She moved over a space, offering me the spot between her and Christy.

“Hey, nice T-shirts,” I said, complimenting them on their skimpy, Deadwich Ravens tees.

“We’ll have to get you a Ravens shirt for the next game,” Amy suggested.

“That’d be cool,” I agreed.

I scanned the bleachers hoping no one noticed.

“Don’t look back, but the three witches are sitting at the top left corner,” Amy said.

“Huh?” I jumped in my seat and did exactly what she’d told me not to do. I looked back.

There they were, three of the seven Ravenwyck witches. Amy had no idea how accurate she’d been in her name-calling.

Even though I knew something was up with Sammy, Megan and Robyn, looking upon the three of them for the first time, knowing what they really were, sent a cold shiver across my skin, leaving goose bumps behind on this blistering hot day. As if they sensed my stare, all three of them glared at me at the same time with definite malevolent intent. With the back of my goose bump-covered arm, I wiped sweat beads off my forehead.

“Geez, are you alright?” Amy asked. “You’re as white as a ghost.”

Her voice brought me back to my senses. I faked a smile.

“Which reminds me, I haven’t seen you since the dance. What happened?” As Christy asked, a sly grin spread across her face.

I sighed at the lie I was about to tell. “Um, I didn’t feel very good, so I left early. I needed yesterday off to recover.”

“It doesn’t look like you’re over whatever it was you had,” Christy said.

Amy ignored Christy’s comment to me and nudged me in the arm. “We heard you spent the night in Marcus’ boathouse.”

Her and Christy’s smirks and raised eyebrows told me they’d already had their minds made up as to why I’d spent the night at the boathouse. I knew there was no point in protesting the issue. But just the same, I felt my cheeks warm knowing what it was they thought.

“She’s not touching that one, Amy,” Christy said, then winked at Amy.

I didn’t comment. They both giggled. I blushed further, feeling shamefully proud.

“Do you know how many girls would trade places with you in a heartbeat to spend a night there?” Amy said, linking her arm through mine.

“With either brother,” Christy added.

“Seriously,” Amy said.

I laughed inwardly at the irony. If only they had insight into my twisted existence, none of them would want to trade places with me. But I wouldn’t give up any of it, not if it meant that Marcus

wouldn't be in my life. As long as we were together I could endure whatever horrors awaited me.

The crowd began to cheer—finally something to draw Amy and Christy's attention away from me. The Deadwich Ravens jogged onto the field, followed by their rivals; the Ipswich Vultures. I searched the blue and white jerseys until I found number fourteen.

Amy and Christy babbled back and forth about how cute the Ipswich guys were. Apparently, Amy had gone out with one. I totally ignored them. Tall, dark and handsome, number fourteen was the only guy who grabbed my attention. Although, I couldn't ignore Evan, no matter how hard I tried.

His laughter resonated above everyone else's on the field. Not to mention, he was obnoxiously animated, elbowing his buddies, perhaps a little too hard. His friends played along with his antics, though, as if he was Deadwich's greatest gift and they were satisfied to be a part of his entourage.

"Whoa, check out number fourteen, girl," Amy said, elbowing me playfully.

"Yeah, he's pretty hot," I said gushing.

"Evan too," Christy added, sounding appalled that we would leave him out.

It was hard not to scowl as I said, "Yeah, him too."

I hoped that one day I could see the cuteness in Evan again, but right now, any good attributes he'd once had were lost somewhere deep inside the evil Evan. And just like the evil Sammy, I wasn't sure if they would ever surface again.

The whistle blew. The captains shook hands with the coaches and referees and the players assumed their positions on the field. Ipswich Vultures had the kickoff.

After a couple of good plays by Ipswich, they scored the first goal. Marcus and Evan played offence together; Marcus as the lead striker, Evan as a midfielder. Although it was the first game I'd watched them play, I would have to be blind not to see the tension between the two brothers.

Instead of passing Marcus the ball, Evan would greedily keep it and try to score himself, but Marcus caught a pass from Dave and scored the first goal for the Ravens, tying the game 1-1.

It was apparent that the Ravens' coach noticed Evan's behavior, because he pulled him from the field and made him sit the rest of the first half out.

"What's with Evan?" Amy asked, looking at me. "Aren't Marcus and Evan getting along? I mean, yeah, they hardly spoke to each other in school all week, but can't they just get along for the game's sake?"

I shrugged. "You know more about their relationship than I do." Then in Marcus' defense I added, "I think it's more Evan than it is Marcus, though, don't you think?"

"You're right. Evan's been acting like a jerk lately," Amy said.

"Seriously, It's hard to believe they're twins," Christy added.

I let out a long, slow breath. The sun had grown even hotter, if that were even possible. Or was it just me? With the back of my hand, I continually wiped sweat from my forehead. I rummaged through my purse until I found a clip and pulled my hair back into a ponytail.

Amy looked at me concerned. "I think you should go see a doctor, Brooke."

"Why? Don't you guys find it hot?" I asked, fanning myself with a piece of folded paper I'd found inside my bag.

Christy shrugged. "It's nice actually."

"Seriously?" Come to think of it, after having a quick glance around, I discovered that I was the only one who was visibly sweating.

"Yeah, seriously. You're still sick. Do you want me to get you a bottle of water?" Christy offered.

"Maybe that would help." I smiled at her.

"I'm coming, too," Amy said. "Do you want to come with us, Brooke?"

"Uh-uh. I think I'll just wait here." I handed her some change for the machine. The truth was my legs were suddenly weak.

“Okay, we’ll be right back,” Christy said.

Something was up. My stomach knotted, making me feel sick. I risked a quick glance to the top left corner of the bleachers. Sammy, Megan and Robyn shot glares my way. The knot tightened. I turned around quickly.

I found Marcus. He was sitting on the bench. His shoulders rose up and down from his efforts on the field. As if he felt me looking at him, he turned and smiled up at me. I smiled back.

After a brief rest, Marcus was back on the field. He and Jared were in the middle of an intense play when I heard a voice that momentarily stopped my heart.

“Hi, Country Girl.”

Wide-eyed, I looked down. Luke was standing in front of the bleachers. He sprinted up the middle and plopped himself down beside me.

My mouth dropped open. “What the ... how did you know where I was?”

His grin dwindled, but even when Luke wasn’t smiling it was hard to tell what mood he was in. He was gifted with a perpetual look of happiness.

“Your Aunt Rachel told me where you were.” I could tell by the change in his tone that he was disappointed in my reaction to seeing him.

“Cool.” I tried to look happy.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Evan in a break-a-way. Luke turned his attention toward the field—so did I.

Evan dribbled the ball down center field, followed closely by two Ipswich players. Marcus was in front of the opposing goal waiting for the pass. But it was clear Evan wasn’t going to pass it. The crowd yelled frantically at Evan to pass the ball.

The Vultures’ attacking offense pulled out from behind Evan and intercepted the ball from him. Jared caught up to the Vultures player, pulled out in front, and stayed within touching distance of him, waiting for an opportunity to take the ball. When he saw his chance to retrieve the ball for the Ravens, as the opposing player was about to turn and pass it to his team mate on the left, Jared maneuvered himself close enough to the Vultures player to intercept the ball.

The crowd went wild. I glanced sideways at Luke. His eyes were glued to the game. It was as if I wasn’t even beside him. I rolled my eyes and switched my focus back to the game, also.

Marcus was deep into the opponents half when Jared passed him the ball. He stopped it with his thigh. It dropped in front of him. From a distance of about ten yards from the goal, Marcus booted the ball. The crowd cheered wildly, including Luke. The ball flew through the air and into the top left corner of the net.

“Good play,” Luke said.

I smiled, tight-lipped.

While the teams switched players, he turned his attention back to me. He held his arms out for a hug. I shot a quick glance to the field. Marcus was standing by his bench back to me, drinking from his water bottle. He was having a discussion with Evan.

I felt Luke’s arm go around my back, then his other arm came across the front of me.

“You have no idea how much Boston sucks without you.” He lowered an arm, but kept one draped across my shoulders “So, are you happy here?”

That was a tough question, but I thought it best to tell him that I was.

“Believe it or not, I am happy, but I miss you guys so much.”

The sudden shrill of the referee’s whistle drew my attention back to the field. Evan and Marcus’ discussion had turned into a heated one. Marcus glanced over his shoulder in my direction. I froze. Luke looked at me and then back to the field. I didn’t like the look on Marcus’ face.

“Is ... are ... who’s he?” Luke finally spit the words out.

“Ah, he’s someone special.” I looked at Luke apologetically.

“Oh.” In that instant, Luke lifted his arm from around my shoulders.

Marcus had seen us and so had Evan. With a smirk on his face, Evan pushed Marcus from behind, provoking a fight. Marcus turned and lunged at Evan, grabbing him with such force it scared me. Barely breathing, I slid to the edge of my seat. A wave of adrenaline rushed over the crowd. They stood. No one was silent. They jumped up and down, trying to get a better view of the fight. In no time at all, a circle of people had formed around Marcus and Evan.

“Man, that guy’s got a temper,” Luke said.

I didn’t answer. I knew he was talking about Marcus.

Marcus knocked Evan to the ground. The spectators went wild. The rest of the crowd rushed to the circle to get a better view. The Ravens’ coach grabbed Marcus by the back of the shirt and dragged him off Evan, but he couldn’t hold Marcus back. Now standing, both brothers tense, they flew at each other again. It took a couple of guys to pull each brother off the other and hold them apart. After a long moment, Marcus flung himself out of Jared and Dave’s grips and turned to walk away. The crowd broke up. The coach blew the whistle frantically, trying to get some order.

As Marcus walked toward the bench, he glanced up at me and Luke. Evan came at him a final time pushing him from behind again. He fell, hitting his head on the bench. I jumped in the air, trying to spot Marcus on the ground. All I could see was his unmoving legs, covered in shin guards, on the other side of the bench.

Everything was a blur as I ran down the bleachers and across the track until I was outside of the dense circle of people. I couldn’t get through.

My heart sank when I heard a voice call out, “Someone call an ambulance.”

As a numb sensation crept from the top of my head down over my body, I pushed sideways through the crowd until I saw Marcus lying on his back—his eyes closed—blood leaking from a gash on his forehead.

A woman was administering to him. I wondered briefly if she was his mother. He hadn’t said she was coming. She pressed her fingers to his limp wrist. My head felt woozy. Strong arms held me up.

“Come and sit down,” Luke breathed in my ear. It was useless to argue, I hadn’t the strength to stand anymore. My knees buckled beneath me, just as Luke guided me down to the bench. I leaned against him, fighting to keep my eyes open—it was hopeless.

The will drained from me. My last thought before I passed out was of how weak I was when Marcus needed me.

Muffled sounds came back to me first, and then a cool sensation rushed through me, bringing life with it. My ears unplugged, letting the drone of the crowd back in.

I lifted my head and pushed my upper body away from Luke’s. A distant siren rang in my ears, something I hadn’t heard since I’d left Boston.

“Marcus,” I whispered.

“He’ll be okay. The ambulance is coming,” Luke soothed.

I leaned against him again, trying to focus. Evan came into view. He was standing a distance away with his arms folded smugly across his chest. The neck of his jersey hung open where it had gotten ripped during the fight.

I heaved myself to my feet and turned toward Marcus, who still lay on the ground at the other end of the bench—lifeless.

Luke grabbed my hand to pull me back.

“Luke, let me go.”

“You just fainted, Brooke.”

“I don’t care.”

Frantic now, I snatched my hand back, feeling almost strong again. I pushed past a couple of guys on our team, who graciously parted for me.

When I reached Marcus, my knees gave way. Justin steadied me as I lowered myself to the ground.

“She’s his girlfriend, Mom,” he said to the woman who was attending to Marcus.

She nodded and let me stay. I looked questioningly at Justin.

“She’s a nurse,” he said.

I sat on the ground in silence beside Marcus’ head. Afraid of hurting him, my fingers barely grazed the ends of his sweat-soaked hair.

Justin’s mom looked at me with a friendly smile and said, “He’ll be fine.”

Her words weren’t reassuring.

“But why doesn’t he wake up?” I asked in a broken voice.

And then a glorious sound came from Marcus. He moaned.

His body shifted slightly. I looked down at his face. He squinted and moaned again. Justin’s mom picked his wrist back up and checked his pulse again. I felt as if I was going to faint again, from relief this time, but held it together.

“Marcus,” I whispered.

He didn’t respond. I wiped away a trickle of blood that had found its way to the crease in his eyelid. His beautiful eyes fluttered opened, then closed, then opened more fully and focused on me. The ambulance peeled into the parking lot.

“It’s okay. You’ll be okay,” I assured him, not knowing if it was true.

“Brooke,” he said in a weak voice. His eyes fell shut again.

The crowd parted for the paramedics. Justin, who hadn’t left Marcus’ side, helped me to stand and walked me out of the way.

Marcus made no other sound or movement. He was placed on a stretcher and loaded into the ambulance. Stunned, I stood there, oblivious to the crowd around me, until I heard Evan’s voice.

Something strange happened to me in that moment. A fresh shot of adrenalin rushed through me. I grabbed the amulet and silently asked it to give me strength. My palm grew warm against the metal. It penetrated the skin of my hand, warming my body on the inside. A wave of electrical energy washed over me and through me. And in a motion so fast it nearly lifted me off the ground, the energy engulfed my body, penetrating every cell, until I felt weightless and electrified.

Evan’s voice boomed inside my head. I let the amulet drop to my chest. He didn’t seem to care that his brother was on his way to the hospital and it was because of him. I tightened my jaw and felt the heat rise to the surface of my face.

Before I realized it, I was standing in front of him. Furious, I smacked his arm. He didn’t budge. He looked at me as if he’d just noticed me there, an amused look on his face.

“Why did you push Marcus?”

“I didn’t push anyone. You should get your facts straight.” He didn’t look like the evil Evan, just the obnoxious one.

“I saw you. You pushed him from behind,” I said through clenched teeth. “I know who you really are.”

Instantly the smug look vanished from his face.

I continued to glare—to fake bravery. I hadn’t backed down from Maggie or Sammy, and I wouldn’t back down from Evan.

A smirk spread across his face. “So, Claire, if you know who I am, then come back to me and I’ll lay off Christian.”

I watched his eyes darken as he transformed into the evil Evan.

My courage wavered slightly. I swallowed hard and then blurted, “I’ll never leave him.”

“Not even to save him?” A curious eyebrow rose to a point.

“Stay away from him. We’re both more powerful than you will ever be. Don’t make us hurt you.” I bluffed, only assuming my threat was true.

Evan threw his head back in a roar of laughter. Before I could take another breath, his arms were around me. His mouth pressed to mine with such a force, our teeth scraped together. My eyes bulged. I tried to push away, but he was too strong.

“Hey man, what the hell are you doing?”

Dave, who was standing nearby, grabbed Evan’s shoulder, twisting him away from me. I sucked a huge breath of air deep into my lungs, wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, and looked around. People scurried around us to get their things together. At the Ravens’ bench, Amy and Christy were keeping Luke busy by flirting with him. No one was paying attention to Evan and me. It was obvious no one had even seen Evan knock Marcus down. Evan jerked his upper body out of Dave’s grip.

“I’m warning you, leave her alone,” Dave said, glaring at Evan. “What’s the matter with you? Your brother’s on the way to the hospital.”

Finally, Evan conceded and walked away—but not far.

“You okay?” Dave asked me.

“I’m fine, thanks.”

“Okay, let me know if he bothers you again.”

I nodded.

The moment Dave left me, Evan came back and grabbed my arm. His muscles flexed, his grip tightened. His eyes were fierce, and his mouth was set in a tight line. For an instant I was scared and cowered.

“Don’t ever threaten me.” His words were sharp and low. The black pits that were his eyes held no life, no spark.

I gripped the amulet and felt my arm flex under Evan’s grip. A blast of energy rose to the surface of my skin, bursting through. With a pained look, Evan snatched his hand back, and for a second, he looked like the one who was scared. I didn’t know what it was that I’d done, but I felt it too, only to me, it was not unpleasant.

“You witch!” With a feral look on his face, Evan raised his fist as if he were going to hit me.

I cringed.

“Hey, take your hands off her,” Luke said in his tough-boy voice.

Oh, no. Luke couldn’t get mixed up in this. By the time I’d turned around, Luke was already at my side shoving Evan backwards.

“Luke, don’t. Please. Let’s just go.” I knew from experience that once Luke had gotten his feathers ruffled, there was no stopping him.

Evan raised his fist ready to throw a punch, his eyes black as pitch. A whistle blew.

“Hey, you two. Break it up.”

I was the only one who turned in the direction of the coach’s voice. Evan and Luke had a good grip on each other.

“Evan, you’re already suspended from soccer, do you want a suspension from school, too?” the coach bellowed.

I jumped in between Luke and Evan. “Luke, c’mon let’s get out of here.” I pushed on his chest. “I need you to take me to the hospital.”

He hesitated, probably deciding what was more important; me, or not losing the fight.

With an angry tone, I said, “Luke, you can’t win, now c’mon.” I pulled at his T-shirt until he finally conceded and walked away with me. Luke was the first to back down. I would never hear the end of it.

Evan’s smirk returned.

“I’ll deal with you later,” I said to him, acting brave now that I had my bad-boy at my side. I turned and walked toward the parking lot with Luke.

“I’ll look forward to it,” Evan called out. “And thanks for the kiss. It’s been a long time.”

I cringed.

“I could have taken him, Brooke,” Luke whined as we walked through the school parking lot.

I sighed. “Trust me, Luke; he would have taken you down.”

Luke looked upon me with disgust that I would even think such a thing.

“And when was the last time you saw someone take *me* down?”

I didn’t answer, because he was right. Luke always won his fights.

“That’s what I thought, never!”

“Just take a deep breath and relax, Luke. No one in Boston will ever know. I promise I won’t tell.”

I was trembling on the inside and almost at the end of my patience. It had been a while since Luke and I had hung out together. I’d almost forgotten all the trouble he used to get me into. Like the very trouble that caused my parents to send me to Deadwiche in the first place, which, thinking about it now, seemed inevitable. Luke had just been a tool in some greater power’s tool box.



Chapter Twenty-Nine

So, where are we going?” Luke asked casually as he peeled out of the school parking lot.
“Salem Medical Center,” I answered frantically.
“Uh, is he your boyfriend?”

“Yeah.”

“That was quick.”

My body tensed. I turned and glared at him. “Not fair.”

He was right, though. On my last night in Boston, Luke had kissed me for the first time. Although it was in the police car, it was still our first and only kiss, and then I left him the next day. And technically, I hadn’t known Marcus very long. But already, it seemed as if it was a lifetime ago that we’d met—and in reality, it was. There was no way to explain it to Luke. He would just have to think what he wanted.

I held the amulet in both hands and wished for Marcus to be awake when I got to the hospital. I wondered where his parents were—if they knew yet.

“You like him a lot?”

I rolled my eyes. “Luke, please. Do we have to talk about my love life?”

“Sorry. Geez, you’re in a bad mood.”

“Ya think? Whose car is this anyway?”

It took a few moments, but once I was away from the chaos of the soccer field and on my way to the hospital, the numbness in my brain subsided and my senses rushed back to me. From a vent in the dash, a stream of cold air blew lightly across my face, cooling my fever, and the scent of leather interior awakened memories of Marcus in his leather jacket sitting next to me on the bus for the first time.

“It’s my mom’s new ride.”

I listened for the lie in his voice, but couldn’t find it. “Are you sure about that? You’re not lying to me, are you?”

“Brooke, I’m crushed.” He chuckled. “Seriously, she bought it last week. If you don’t believe me, you can check out the papers in the dash.”

“And she’s letting you drive it already?” I looked at him questioningly.

“Um, well, she doesn’t exactly know I have it. My parents are out together in my dad’s car today.” He grinned sheepishly.

I pursed my lips and stayed silent. I couldn’t get Marcus off my mind. I should have gone to the hospital with Amy and Christy and sent Luke home. I would send him home as soon as he dropped me off.

A half-hour later we pulled into the Salem Medical Center parking lot. I unfastened my seatbelt and twisted my upper body to face Luke.

“Thanks. I’ll get someone to drive me home.”

“That’s it? You’re just going to leave?” he asked, surprised.

“There’s someone pretty important in there that I have to be with. Please understand.”

“But I haven’t told you the news I came to tell you,” he whined.

I sighed impatiently. “What news?”

“Um, well—”

“Spit it out, Luke.” I tried to remain calm, but I couldn’t contain the anxiety in my voice.

“Well, Courtney and me, uh—”

“What about you and Courtney?” My hand was on the door handle.

“We’re sorta together.”

It took me a minute to comprehend what he'd just said. "What do you mean 'together'? I don't understand what you're saying."

For half a second, I forgot about Marcus. Images of Courtney and Luke flooded my head, only they were separate images. I couldn't see them together.

"Will you say something?" Luke asked after a long moment.

"I don't know what you want me to say."

"For one thing, you can wipe that confused look off your face and replace it with a happy one."

"I'm not very happy right now."

"Oh, right. So do you approve or what?"

"What does Courtney think?"

"Duh, we're together. She obviously thinks the same as I think."

"Of course. Well then, I'm happy for you both."

I wanted to tell him to be good to her, but he would've taken it the wrong way. Instead, I smiled and reached over the console and gave Luke a big hug.

"I'm sorry, Luke. My head's really messed up right now." I looked at him apologetically.

He gave me a familiar boyish grin. I couldn't help but smile back.

"Wow, you and Courtney huh?" I laughed softly. No wonder she'd been texting me like crazy the past couple of days. I'd been too distracted to look.

At least the lie I'd told Marcus at his uncles wasn't a lie anymore. Not that I was exonerated from having told the lie in the first place, but somehow I felt better about it now.

"Yup. She wants to come and visit you soon."

"That'll be awesome, but let's wait until things get better around here okay?"

"Sure. Give us a call."

"Thanks for coming today. I really do have to go now."

"It's okay. I understand. Take care."

"Stay out of trouble."

I smiled quickly and shut the door. I didn't look back. Marcus was the only thing on my mind now.

The scorching heat from the sunbaked pavement didn't slow me down as I dashed across the parking lot. I bolted through the front entrance of the hospital, not stopping until I slammed into the front desk. Breathless, I asked the woman where the emergency department was. After a couple of wrong turns, I found it right where she'd directed me.

The emergency waiting room was overflowing with sickness and suffering—a new chaos. The sounds of babies crying and children whining were enough to drive anyone insane. As I rushed to the desk before anyone could get in front of me, I lost my focus and almost tripped over a man pushing a walker.

Behind the desk, through the window of a large grey door, I saw two paramedics wheeling a stretcher down a hallway. My heart thumped wildly.

"Can I help you?" a small voice asked.

I pulled my gaze away from the sights behind the grey door and looked down at the older woman, who sat looking up at me, obviously stressed after a long shift. I wiped the sweat off my forehead and took a deep breath.

"I'm looking for Marcus Knight."

Silently, her eyes spoke the words, "More information," to me.

"He was just brought in by ambulance," I added.

"And you are?"

"Um, I'm his ... sister." I knew I wouldn't get anywhere with her if I'd told her I was merely his girlfriend.

“And your parents are where?” She looked on either side of me, her eyebrows raised.

I thought fast. “They’re not here yet. I can’t reach them.”

She ran through a couple pages of computer database. After a couple intense minutes, she looked up at me. “Yes. Here he is. He was brought in twenty minutes ago.”

“Through this door, room twenty-one. Tell the nurse at the desk inside who you are before you enter the room.”

“Thank you,” I said, already halfway through the grey door.

My stomach twisted into knots as I walked down a hallway lined with stretchers, filled with people waiting to be attended to. I wondered why Marcus had been taken to a room ahead of these people. The knots in my stomach tightened.

I came upon the number twenty-one, which was pasted to a wall beside a pulled curtain that closed off a room. “Please be awake, Marcus,” I whispered.

“Can I help you, Miss?” a woman in floral scrubs asked.

“Is this Marcus Knight’s room?”

She checked the chart that hung on the wall beside the curtain. “Yes, but I’m afraid you can’t go in.”

My stomach constricted.

“Why can’t I go in?”

“I’m sorry, but the doctor is with him now. There’s a waiting room at the end of the hallway if you want to wait there.” Her smile was rushed as she went off in another direction.

There were too many sick people here and not enough emergency rooms, which confirmed my fears. Things were bad with Marcus if he had a room already.

From the direction I’d just come from, I heard a distressed female voice utter Marcus’ name. I snapped my head toward the grey door.

A tall, fair-haired man and a medium-height, tanned woman with dark hair were being led my way. Not wanting to be seen, I ducked to the other side of a portable linen tower and peeked over a stack of sheets.

“Is he okay? What happened to him?” the frantic woman, who I assumed was his mother, asked the nurse.

“Come in and I’ll let the doctor explain,” the nurse said in a gentle voice.

The curtain opened for them, allowing them access to Marcus and then closed after them. I stretched my neck so I could hear their conversation.

“His vitals are good,” the doctor explained. “The laceration on his forehead is minor. However, he should have woken up by now. We don’t know exactly how the head trauma was sustained.”

“Head trauma?” his mother uttered in a weak voice.

“Mom, Dad, how is he?”

My heart did a back flip. Evan had arrived, playing the concerned brother.

“Evan, did you see what happened?” his dad asked.

“Yeah. He fell during soccer and hit his head on the bench. It’s just a scratch isn’t it?”

I could barely breathe. I needed to be in there, but there was no way I could show myself. Weakened, I leaned back against the wall, my hand absentmindedly fondling the amulet. I realized what I was doing when it warmed beneath my fingers. Its warmth was comforting. I tried channeling its energy to Marcus.

An orderly passed by me and walked into Marcus’ room.

“This is Sam,” the nurse said. “He’s going to take your son for an MRI scan.”

Oh, my God, this is bad. On weakened legs, I sneaked down the hallway and found the private waiting room. I ducked inside and curled up in a large green chair and waited.

I waited until I couldn’t wait any longer. I had to use the washroom, and remembered passing one in the emergency waiting area.

“Brooke!” Amy and Christy chimed together. “How is he?”

“I don’t know. His parents and Evan are with him.”

“We brought your purse,” Amy said, handing it to me.

“A bunch of guys from the team are here,” Christy said. “Come on.” She put her arm around me.

“Let’s go get a drink.”

I walked with them to the cafe down the hallway where half the soccer team was waiting for news of their friend. They circled me; all with the same questioning look on their faces.

“How is he?” someone asked for the group.

“They took him for a cat scan. He hasn’t woken up yet.”

There were low murmurs. The bulk of the crowd broke up and went back to their tables.

“Come sit with us.”

Amy pulled me along by the hand. I let her. I had nowhere else to go.

“How long does an MRI scan take?” I asked a while later.

“I dunno,” Christy said.

They both shrugged.

Someone checked periodically to see if there was any news on Marcus. He hadn’t come back to the emergency room.

After a couple of hours, I was too anxious to sit around and listen to the unimportant ramblings of teenagers any longer.

“I have to go and check on him,” I said, standing up.

“Do you want us to come with you?” Amy asked.

“You can if you want to.”

The three of us walked back to the emergency department. I was allowed to go right through the big grey door, but Amy and Christy had to wait in the waiting room.

A few minutes later I came back out. “They’ve taken him to a room upstairs. I don’t know anything.”

“Wow, I wonder why they admitted him,” Christy said, and then exchanged a discomfited look with Amy.

“Let’s go find him,” Amy suggested, then headed for the main desk. “Okay, he’s on the fourth floor; room 412,” she said on her return.

I felt weak in the elevator, and a thought came to me. “Hey, his parents don’t even know me. I can’t just walk in on them.”

“Sure you can,” Christy smiled warmly. “Amy and I know them pretty good and we’ll be with you. Besides, don’t you think Marcus will want to see you?”

They sounded more optimistic than I felt.

As we approached room 412, I heard a soft cry and stopped in the middle of the hallway.

“I can’t go in there,” I whispered as I listened to the heart wrenching sound of his mother crying.

“Do you want me to find out what’s going on?” Amy asked.

I nodded.

As she was about to enter the room, Evan walked out. I froze. The sight of him sickened me. I wanted to tell everyone what he’d done, but I knew deep down inside that the evil Evan had caused his brother harm not the normal Evan.

“Hey, how is he?” Christy grabbed his arm, making him stop.

“He’s still asleep. Has a concussion. He’ll be fine.” Evan’s voice was on the verge of sounding robotic. He pushed past Christy and continued down the hallway, without acknowledging me.

“Geez, he’s awfully casual about the whole thing,” Amy said.

“Brooke, you look faint again,” Christy said.

“Get me out of here,” I whispered through numb lips.

Amy and Christy each took one of my arms and walked me to the car. I’d forgotten how hot it was outside.

The drive back to Aunt Rachel’s was a blur. Amy and Christy talked continually above the rap music, but I wasn’t paying any attention.

“If you want to go back later or tomorrow, we’ll take you, okay?” Amy offered as I got out of the car.

“Thanks a lot, and if you hear anything please call me,” I said.

“Right. You call us too. Maybe he’ll be home in the morning,” Christy said on an up note.



Chapter Thirty

My heart felt ripped from my body. I couldn't sleep, so I lay awake in bed most of the night studying the grimoire, or at least willing myself to read the words. As hard as I tried though, I couldn't read the ancient fairy Welsh.

After a few hours of sleep, I got up, had a shower, and waited curled into the corner of the porch swing for the rest of Deadwich to wake up. The morning was cool and cloudy—a far cry from yesterday, but fitting.

Amy arrived at Aunt Rachel's around nine. I didn't even have to call her.

She handed me a gym bag and sat down beside me on the porch swing. I looked at her confused.

"It's Marcus' stuff from the locker room at school. I thought you might want to take care of it for him, so I told Justin I'd get it to him." She smiled half-heartedly.

"Oh. I'll make sure he gets it," I said, feeling as if I had a piece of him with me now.

"I came to take you to the hospital. He's still there. I called Evan before I came over. His parents stayed all night. There's no change."

A cool numbness flooded my face. "I'll go get ready. Do you want to come in?"

"No. I'll wait here, thanks."

It was highly likely that I would meet Marcus' parents today, so I was conflicted with what to wear. Really, I didn't care, but through the numbness, I knew I should look presentable—not that they would even notice me, but still.

I kept my jeans on and exchanged the band tee I was wearing for a more conservative top. I pulled my hair back into a ponytail and left off the make-up. I shoved the grimoire inside my purse and grabbed a banana and a bottle of water from the kitchen before leaving.



"But my brother's unconscious and my parents stayed all night. They're expecting me to relieve them," Amy fibbed expertly, with crocodile tears in her eyes, to the woman at the front desk.

"What did you say his name was honey?" The woman asked again in a more sympathetic tone.

If I hadn't been so grief-stricken, I would have rolled my eyes at Amy's expert performance.

"Marcus Knight." Amy wiped away a tear as she'd said it.

"Oh," the woman said after checking the computer.

Her grim smile knocked the breath out from me.

"What?" I couldn't help but ask.

"He's been moved to ICU. Second floor. Room 208."

I let out a sharp breath.

"I'm afraid your friend will have to wait down here until visiting hours begin at eleven," the receptionist said to Amy then looked at me apologetically.

"She's my sister," Amy said without hesitation.

"Oh, alright then. ICU is open to immediate family twenty-four hours a day."

"Thanks," Amy said. "C'mon, Brooke."

As I approached the doorway of room 208, the muted sound of a heart monitor brought everything to reality. The soft voices within sounded full of concern. I listened from outside his door.

"Daniel is A positive, but I'm B negative. Can't I give him blood?" his mother practically begged the

doctor.

It was worse than I'd thought.

"I'm afraid not, Mrs. Knight. The only blood an O negative person can receive is O negative." The doctor paused and then said, "And because of its rarity, there's a shortage of O negative blood in the hospital right now."

Why did he need blood?

"Well there must be something you can do, for crying out loud. This *is* a hospital." Marcus' father sounded edgy. I couldn't blame him.

Without another thought, I stepped away from Amy. With a shaking hand, I pushed on the door to Marcus' room. It squeaked opened. Marcus' parents, the nurse, and the doctor turned to see me standing in the doorway.

"I'm O negative," I said softly. The heart monitor was slightly louder now that I was standing inside of the doorway, but not as loud as my heartbeat.

The anguish I was feeling was mirrored on Marcus' parents' faces. The doctor held out his hand for me to come into the room further. I took a couple steps toward the bed, noticing Marcus' still body for the first time.

"Is this your daughter?" the doctor asked optimistic.

"No," his mother said curiously. "You must be Brooke." She managed a soft smile.

I nodded. Without further hesitation, she walked over to me and put her hand on my back, bringing me all the way in to their little family circle of grief.

"Marcus speaks about you quite often."

Her words surprised me. "How is he? I was here yesterday, but—"

"You should have come in with us, but you're here now." She patted my back and gave me a fragile smile. "Daniel, this is Brooke. Brooke, this is Daniel and I'm Veronica."

"It's wonderful to meet you, Brooke. I wish it was under better circumstances," Marcus' dad said, before lowering his gaze to the speckled floor tile.

"It's nice to meet you, too," I said.

Then I remembered what had so boldly brought me in here. I looked at the doctor. "I'm O negative. I can give him blood." In any other circumstance, the thought would have repulsed me, but Marcus lying still, under the pale-blue hospital sheets, terrified me more.

"How old are you, Brooke?" the doctor asked.

"I'll be seventeen in a few weeks, and I weigh one hundred and twelve pounds. I read the chart in the emergency waiting room yesterday," I said, explaining how I knew what the guidelines were for giving blood.

"That still makes you sixteen," the doctor said.

My face fell.

"However, with a parent's consent, you can still donate."

"How much does he need? You can take as much as you want."

His mom gave me a gentle squeeze. In fact, she hadn't let go of me since she'd found out who I was.

"That's very generous of you, Brooke, but I'm afraid, you can only give one pint," the doctor said.

"Oh. Why does he need blood, anyway?"

The doctor explained to me as if I were the mother. "Marcus has become anemic overnight. We can't find anything really wrong with him, except for the minor head trauma he's suffered."

"Head trauma?" I repeated.

"He has a mild concussion. His motor responses are good and he should be awake by now, but he seems to have slipped into a coma for no apparent reason, and now he's become anemic. A blood transfusion will help him immensely."

I looked at Marcus' mom and said, "I'll go and call my mom."

"Are you sure you want to do this?" she asked in a soft voice.

"Absolutely."

Amy was in the hallway waiting for me. "Wow. You're really going to let them take all that blood from you?"

"Of course. He would do it for me."

I grabbed my cell phone and dialed home. "Hi Mom, I need you to come to the Salem Medical Center—"

"Brooke, are you alright?"

Her sharp tone prickled the inside of my ear.

"Yes. I'm fine, just listen . . ."

I went on to explain the dire situation to her. At first, she was apprehensive about letting me give blood, but when the desperation in my voice sunk through to her, she promised to come immediately.

When I went back into Marcus' room, his mom asked if I would mind if she and his dad went downstairs for coffee. I think it was their subtle way of giving me some alone-time with their son. When they left, so did the nurse. The doctor had already gone.

Careful not to disturb the tubing and wires that protruded from under the sheets everywhere, I sat gingerly on the edge of the bed. Precious life was slipping away in front me, and my heart ached beyond anything imaginable.

An oxygen tube had been placed below Marcus' nose. An IV dripped clear liquid into a vein in one arm.

I looked at the blood-stained bandage taped to his forehead and swallowed hard to fight against the tears. His arms lay outside the sheets. I pushed the sleeve on his left arm up, exposing the double spiral tattoo and bent close enough to lay the warm amulet against the ink.

At the same time as a shimmer of energy passed into me, under the tattoo, Marcus' biceps twitched ever-so-slightly.

"Do you feel that?" I whispered. "I'm going to make you better. I'm giving you my blood." The last word squeaked out. "I know you'd give me yours." Tears spilled down my cheeks, splashing onto his arm. All the while, my eyes stayed fixed to the tattoo, in anticipation of another twitch. None came.

After a few minutes, I pulled my tear-streaked face back to look at his. Instead of tanned, his skin had picked up a dull gray tone. Gently, I caressed the sides of his face, brushing the tips of my finger over the one eyebrow that wasn't covered by the bloodied bandage. His skin felt unnaturally hot. I lowered my face until it was mere inches from his.

"I love you. I'll fix you, so you can fix me like you promised."

I lowered my quivering lips to his pale ones. There was no response. I lingered there until the tears came again and then sat up.

I grabbed a couple of tissues from the box on the night stand and wiped my eyes. After that, I sat on the edge of the bed, numb, watching Marcus' unresponsive face, praying for the slightest movement.

The constant beep of the heart monitor became comforting. It was his only way of communicating.



About an hour later, his and my parents entered the room together with Amy. Quickly, but gently, I picked up Marcus' hand from my thigh where I held it, placed it back on the bed, and stood.

"Mom, Dad!" I was surprised to see them both.

"Baby," Mom said, holding her arms out to me. She grabbed me in a desperate hug, which I eased myself out of. "Your father and I are both O negative. We're going to donate, too."

“Oh,” I said surprised. “Thanks.”

“Glad to help,” Dad said.

Marcus’ mom spoke then. “I met your parents downstairs. We had coffee before we came up. I hope you don’t mind.”

“No, of course not.”

Amy, who stood beside me, whispered in my ear, “I asked every appropriate looking couple if they were your parents as they came in the door.”

“Thanks.”

Overwhelmed by my parents’ generosity, I fought back a new wave of tears.



Chapter Thirty-One

Against its will, my body surrendered its fight against unconsciousness. The illusion of sinking farther and farther into the cushions of the recliner as I grew heavier and heavier overwhelmed my senses. No longer able to hold my eyes open, I concentrated on my breathing while struggling in vain to stay alert.

“Listen, Mom,” I let my head roll to the side and forced my eyelids open into slits, careful not to look at the blood-filled tube protruding from her arm, “if I faint, don’t let them stop, okay.” As I said it, I felt myself losing the battle. “Please promise”

“Brooke? Nurse! I think she fainted.”

Mom and the nurse sounded as if they were talking under water—a distant muffled sound. My heavy breathing was the next sound I heard. Gradual noise from the outside world pulled me back. Something cold and wet lay across my forehead. I concentrated all my energy toward the refreshing coolness.

“Are you okay baby?”

“Uh huh,” I breathed.

I pushed my heavy lids up, looked down at my arm, and sighed with relief. Still attached to me, the plastic tubing sucked the fairy blood from my vein.

“I’m okay now,” I said once fully conscious.

“I’m very proud of you,” Mom said.

I nodded, unable to lift my heavy head off the back of the recliner. It was just her, me and the nurse in the room. Dad was in the hallway filling out his form, waiting his turn—with Amy, who I had discovered was comfortable talking to just about anyone.

“This probably isn’t the right time to bring this up, but I’m really sorry I made you leave Boston. I’ve been feeling guilty about the whole thing, and if you want to come home, your dad and I really want you to.”

With strength I didn’t realize I had yet, I peeled my head from the back of the recliner and looked at Mom incredulously. “Forget it! I’m not leaving Deadwich.” As if I would even consider moving back to Boston now.

“Okay, calm down. I just want you to know that you can if you want to.”

I let my head fall against the backrest of the chair and took a deep shuddering breath.

“Well, on that note, we’re going to Deadwich to look at a house in a couple of weeks. It’s on the Peninsula.”

I perked up, forgetting for a moment about the blood-sucking tube in my arm. “Really?”

“Yes. You remember the Peninsula, don’t you? We used to visit the Carver’s there, during the summers when we went to Aunt Rachel’s.”

I rolled my eyes. “Of course I remember. I only live two blocks away from there. Marcus lives on the Peninsula,” I added, trying to act casual. Although I knew, perceptive as Mom was, she’d see right through the act.

“Is that a fact? Poor kid. What exactly happened, anyway?” she asked.

I told her the story that everyone believed, except Evan and me.

“Hopefully, this blood will help him.”

“It will,” I said with confidence. “It has to.”

“You really like this boy, don’t you?”

The subject was unavoidable. So I decided to be honest and get it over with. After a deep breath I said, “I don’t expect you to understand this, because you think I’m so young, but trust me when I say

that Marcus is the one.”

“I understand more than you think. Remember, your father and I were both sixteen when we met and fell in love.”

Gross. I had no reply. I tried to keep the image of my parents in love at sixteen from entering my mind.

Twenty minutes later, the two synthetic bags were completely filled with our blood. The nurse wouldn't allow me to leave the room until I drank a bottle of juice and rested for a bit.

“How soon can he have it?” I asked her while she stuck a bandage to the inside of my elbow.

“The blood will have to be tested first.”

“For what?” I asked innocently. I had pictured them rushing into Marcus' room, with the fresh, warm blood and hooking it up to his arm immediately.

“For disease and other abnormalities.” She checked my blood pressure as she answered my many questions and when she finished, she said I was ready to go. “You've been very brave.” She smiled at me.

“I fainted,” I said, embarrassed.

“A lot of people faint, believe me.”

Mom wanted to walk me back to the room, but I made her stay with Dad. Amy promised her that she'd stay with me.

“Did it hurt?” Amy asked, fascinated.

“Actually, it didn't hurt at all. I just fainted because I'm such a wuss when it comes to hospital stuff. But now that I've done it, and I have such rare blood, I think I'll do it again, often. You should try it.” I coaxed her.

“Maybe I will,” Amy said, exhibiting what seemed to be a new sense of admiration for me. “How do you feel now?”

“Great.” And I did, knowing that with little effort on my part, I was giving someone else a chance at life.



It would be the next day before Marcus would receive the blood we'd donated. There was a slight blushing of his cheeks and lips, but that was the extent of any new signs of life he'd shown after the transfusion. He was still in a coma, and the doctors were still baffled as to why.

Tuesday I resumed my school life, although concentration was impossible. Sammy and Megan resumed their hatred of me and didn't seem to care about Marcus' health. They acted happy and normal. Robyn, however, was different. She seemed sympathetic, but kept her distance.

Uncle Edmund stopped by the school during lunch on Tuesday to ask me if I wanted to go to the hospital with him, so I skipped afternoon classes and went.

After a couple hours of listening to the repetitive sound of the heart monitor, Uncle Edmund was ready for home. I stayed, assuring him that I would get a ride home later with Marcus' parents.

Later that day, as I lay curled into Marcus' side, half asleep, I felt a caress of air against my face. I lifted my head from the pillow. Robyn stood very still inside of the room, in front of the closed door. I hadn't heard it open or close. A spasm of fear stopped my heart.

Robyn's exotic features were enhanced by a cascade of beautiful dark curls. Her naturally dark eyes were warm and friendly, not cold and malevolent. She looked innocent.

“What are you doing here?” I whispered.

“I'm not here to hurt you guys. I came to help.”

Even though Robyn sounded sincere, I was still on guard.

“Can I explain?”

I sat up groggily and eased myself off the bed. I walked to the other side and stood between Marcus and Robyn, ready to lunge at her if necessary.

“Go ahead,” I said.

“I know what you are and about your history.”

I felt the color drain from my face, but stayed silent and let her continue.

“I’m a witch. A real one. Not like the zombie witches Maggie has turned the others into. I’m real, like you and Marcus. My mother is a witch and so was my grandmother when she was alive. Maggie killed her before I was born. She knew Maggie was evil and tried to end her existence, but failed.”

I’d known all along that Robyn was different from the others. Now I had questions.

“So, the others are not real witches?”

“No. Not since the early nineteenth hundreds, when we all practiced witchcraft together. You and I were good friends then. We both come from a deep line of magic; ancient, stronger than the others, and like you I want Maggie dead.”

“Are the others possessed then?”

“Yes, the demon-witch has possessed their minds, but not their souls. As long as their souls are their own, they can still be saved. She allows them a small amount of magic, enough to make them seem like witches and to aid her in your demise. We must kill Maggie without hurting the others.” She gestured toward Marcus. “How is he?”

“Not good. He’s getting worse every day. The doctors can’t figure out why such a small head injury has put him into so deep a coma.”

“It’s a magically induced coma, Brooke. The minute Evan pushed him, well, the minute he hit his head, Sammy, Megan, Evan and I were instructed to put him into a coma and to keep him there, or he would have woken up by now.”

Her confession stunned me.

“Of course, I didn’t do my part, but I couldn’t stop it either.”

“Can you get him out of it?” I asked, desperate.

She shook her head, making her curls bounce. “Only you have the power to do that, Brooke. You just don’t know how to use it yet. But there is something I can do for you.”

“What is it?”

She reached in her shoulder bag and pulled out a small silver pouch and handed it to me. I loosened the drawstring and tipped it upside down into my other hand. Two translucent, aqua-colored crystals tumbled into my palm. Similar in size, the roughly formed crystals were cold.

“Close your hand over them, Brooke, and think about who you want to keep out.”

Feeling silly and not expecting anything to happen, I closed my hand over the crystals and concentrated first on Maggie and then the other evil witches, excluding Robyn. The crystals grew warm and then hot. Startled, I looked at Robyn.

I was just about ready to drop the stones onto the floor, when she warned, “Don’t let go of them, or else you’ll break the spell before it’s finished.”

“But they’re hot—really hot.”

“Then they’re working. Your hands are the only hands to have come into contact with the ancient quartz in a century. As Claire, you brought them into my great-great grandmother’s magic shop and asked her to keep them until you returned, but you never did. They’ve been guarded by my family ever since.”

“What are they?”

“They’re fairy quartz from Wales. An ancient crystal mined only in the fairy realm.”

My eyes narrowed. “But if I’m a witch, how can I perform fairy magic?”

“My mom says that fairy blood is magical and remains with its soul throughout all eternity, so that

whoever has been born of the Fair Folk will remain fair no matter how many lives she or he lives.”

“How do you know about my first life?”

“My mom told me today. I don’t know how she knows. I just found all this out myself.”

As if alive, the fairy quartz pulsed in my palm as they shifted from too hot, to comfortably warm

“So is that it?”

“Place the crystals at the entrances to the room you want to keep people out of.”

I walked over to the door to Marcus’ hospital room and placed a quartz on top of the door frame and then did the same at the window.

“I really wish I could help heal him,” Robyn said, as she looked down on Marcus.

“Can you do any magic?”

She shrugged. “Some, but not healing. I just found out about the whole witch thing when I turned sixteen. My fingers started to tingle, and weird visions began flooding my head. That’s when I started asking questions. My mother kept it a secret from me, hoping I wouldn’t inherit the gene. It’s kinda nice to have someone to share the weirdness with.”

“Yeah, it is,” I said.

Robyn stayed for the best part of the afternoon. When Marcus’ parents came, I got a ride home with her.

A part of me felt relieved with the fairy quartz guarding the entrances to his room.



Chapter Thirty-Two

Every night I lay in bed wearing the Red Sox T-shirt I'd found in Marcus' gym bag. His freshly showered scent was fading fast. Every night, I tried to decipher the script in the grimoire.

One night, as I was at the middle of the book, I was absentmindedly fondling the double spiral when I thought I saw a word I recognized. I brought the book closer to my face, dropping the amulet onto the open page. My eyes dropped to where it landed.

“OhmyGod.”

In the tiny centers of the spirals, the script was legible, while all around the spirals, the letters stayed foreign. I bolted into a sitting position and grabbed the amulet. I discovered that if I held it halfway between my eyes and the book, I could see through its centers, and the wording on the pages became crystal clear.

All this time, among its other attributes, the centers of the spirals were some sort of magical reading apparatus. I flipped the book to the first page and began reading. For the most part, the pages were filled with spells—some of their ingredients were things I hadn't heard of in this lifetime.

Too soon, my eyelids grew heavy. It was after midnight, and I had to get up for school in the morning. I flipped to the last page of writing, just past the middle of the book. As Claire, I had written a note to myself.

Saturday, September, 23rd 1912:

It is the day of the eve of the equinox. As witches, we should be celebrating, but the others know about Christian and me now. Margaret has known for a while that I took the amulet of immortality from her. It is rightfully mine.

It is also the day in which Christian and I bound our souls with our blood. A ritual we wouldn't have known about if not for Beth. I shudder to think of what might happen to her if Margaret finds out she helped us.

Besides Christian, Sally is the only person in the coven I can trust. However, even she won't risk her own life to save mine—not when she knows how powerful Margaret is. But she doesn't know that Christian and I will become more powerful than Margaret at the time of sunset, on this eve. It is then that darkness and light will have the ability to absorb all other elements, thus make us stronger.

We must stay alive until sunset.

Someone is coming

“What? That's it?” I whispered loudly, flipping frantically to the next page. I took a deep breath to make up for the breath I'd been holding while reading Claire's—my message to myself.

The rest of the pages were blank. I'd never made it back to the journal. I fell back against the pillows, hugging my book close to me, trying to decipher what I'd just read. It was as if I'd written it to myself for future reference in case something went wrong, and it obviously had.

Our secret blood binding. Uncle Edmund hadn't said anything about a binding. What was it? And Beth—she had helped us. Maybe Marcus' injury was meant to happen. Marcus had received two bags of blood so far. I wondered if one had been mine.



Thursday during lunch, Uncle Edmund picked me up at school again and took me to the hospital. With the grimoire on my lap and the amulet in my hand, I read to him what I'd read last night. He didn't know anything about the soul binding.

Like every other day, Uncle Edmund and I sat and listened to the unwavering beep of the heart

monitor. I became in tuned with its lulling melody to a point where I thought I would miss it if it wasn't there.

"It's been almost a week and there's still no change," I said grimly.

"He'll get better, you'll see," Uncle Edmund said reassuringly.

After a couple long hours, he left me and went home.

I'd only been given the opportunity of being alone with Marcus a couple times since he'd been injured. His parents weren't here yet, so I slid my chair up against the bed and laid my head on his chest with my arm draped across him. I was exhausted from lack of sleep and had just started to doze off when a nurse entered the room carrying a bag of blood. I fought off the fatigue and sat up.

"You're giving him more blood?"

"As long as he's anemic he'll need blood," she answered softly.

"But, I thought the blood he'd had helped with that."

She picked up his limp wrist and pressed her fingers to the inside. "It did, but only for a couple days." Her smile was sympathetic.

She was right. Why hadn't I noticed how pale Marcus was today? The gray hue was back in his skin, and underneath his eyes were the beginnings of purple crescents.

"This is your blood," she said thoughtfully as she hooked the bag to the support frame.

I gasped softly. "You mean" I was too overwhelmed to speak.

"We saved the best for last." She winked at me and then busied herself with connecting the intravenous line to the inside of Marcus' arm.

"How is he, really?"

"His vitals are good. Everything is working the way it's supposed to, except for the fact that he won't wake up."

"But he will," I said.

"Yes he will," she said.

The nurse stayed a short while; she'd said to keep an eye on the line. Once I was alone again with Marcus, I snuggled up beside his feverish body, stretching out the length of him and watched the crimson love dissolving into his left arm.

The sight of blood didn't really bother me when it was contained behind plastic, so I watched the point of entry until my eyes grew heavy.

I imagined the fairy magic flowing through his veins. Bright red liquid followed by a trail of sparkly fairy dust, being absorbed by every cell in his body. I imagined it rushing through his heart, draping it in a blanket of sparkle. As my mind wandered through his veins, I even thought I detected a slight change in the beep of the heart monitor. It was the most optimistic I'd felt since his accident.

Then I decided to do something I hadn't done for a long time. With the fairy quartz in place over the entrances to the room, I figured it would be safe for me to take the amulet off. Maybe Marcus would come to me in a nightmare, but then I thought if Maggie couldn't reach me because of the quartz, I might not have a nightmare. There would be no reason for Marcus to come to me.

I took the amulet off anyway and shoved it under Marcus' pillow. In its absence, I felt odd. But I was so tired I had no problem falling asleep.



At first there was nothing but emptiness as I slept, and then suddenly, besides the steady beep of the heart monitor, which followed me into dreamland, a sound way off in the distance made me alert. At first I couldn't make it out. I tried to open my eyes but couldn't. I tried to yell out but couldn't move my mouth.

The difference this time was that there was nothing to fear. I felt relaxed and at peace. As the sound grew near, I recognized Marcus' voice. This time he was calling me Brooke.

My eyes and my mouth flew open and I yelled back. "I'm over here." Wherever here was. It was so dark.

"Brooke, I see you. Don't move. I'm almost there."

My heart beat anxiously as I waited. After what seemed like forever, I saw a faint glow in the distance. Excitement bubbled inside me. Once again, he was bringing my light to me.

I craved the light this time. Slowly it came closer. "You're so close now," I yelled out. "I can almost see you, just a little farther."

The aura that surrounded Marcus brightened as he drew near. All of a sudden the brightness blinded me, and I had to shield my eyes from its brilliance. Then the darkness that surrounded me absorbed some of the light, creating a perfect balance. I lowered my hands from my eyes. Marcus stood in front of me, garbed in a hospital gown, wheeling the support frame the blood bag and IV fluid were attached to.

It wasn't what I'd expected, but it was Marcus, standing and talking. His color was still an odd shade of gray. In fact, the whole dream was colorless except for the crimson hue that tinted his mouth and cheeks and the bright red blood that flowed through the tube and into his body.

Although I couldn't feel a floor under my feet, I ran to him and threw my arms around him, ignoring the plastic tubing. "I've missed you so much."

"We'll be together again soon," he soothed. He pulled me close. His heart beating against my chest kept time with the monitor.

"When?" I whispered.

"Your fairy blood is already making me stronger. I can feel it absorbing the witches' spell. They won't get us this time, Brooke. I remember everything."

He slid his hands up my arms and rested them on my face, leaving a trail of warmth behind.

I pulled back to look at him. "Everything?"

He nodded. Although colorless, a glimmer of life smoldered beneath the surface of his eyes. I stared into them, willing that faint glimmer to surface.

He brought his face closer until I felt his feverish, reddened lips melt into mine. When he pulled away, the sun-kissed color was back in his face and the spark back in his eyes. Warmth seeped under my skin and into my soul. The empty blood bag hung from the frame beside him. My blood was in him now. At the thought, a tingle shot through me.

"You see, I'm better now. You saved me. And now I'll fix you." He gifted me with one of his brilliant rare smiles.

Relieved, I let out a deep breath. Then to my horror, I felt myself floating backwards, back into the dark, away from Marcus. "No. Don't go," I yelled out desperately as the brilliant light engulfed him, leaving me behind in the dark, alone.



I heard myself whimper and felt the weight of a hand on my shoulder as someone shook me awake. Distressed, my eyes flew open. The room was softly lit by the night-lighting.

"Brooke, you were dreaming," Marcus' mom said softly. She was sitting in the chair beside the bed, which I lay on beside Marcus. How embarrassing.

She slid the chair aside so I could get up.

Through the hospital window, I saw the lights of Salem. From above, it sort of reminded me of Boston—well not quite, but it was a lot brighter than Deadwiche was.

I rubbed my eyes. "What time is it?"

“It’s nearly seven-thirty,” Veronica said.

“Crap. I fell asleep sometime in the afternoon. I can’t believe I slept that long.”

“You’ve been putting in some pretty long hours here. It’s no wonder you’re so tired.”

I wondered briefly if I should tell her about my dream, then decided against it. I didn’t want to give her false hope. I however, firmly believed in my dreams. In my head, I saw Marcus’ glorious smile and felt it wrap around my heart. My insides were bathed in the cozy warmth of his essence, and things didn’t seem so hopeless anymore.



Chapter Thirty-Three

It wasn't until I was getting dressed for bed that I remembered taking the amulet off and forgetting to put it back on. I pressed my hands to my chest where it usually hung. How could I be so careless? I knew it would be safe under Marcus' pillow with the wards of protection I'd placed over the entrances to his room, but *I* was vulnerable without it.

It was nearly ten o'clock, and I had no way of getting back to the hospital. Too scared to sleep, I put laundry away and cleaned my room. Both were things I'd been neglecting lately.

When I finally did go to bed, Sammy burst through my bedroom door. Right away, I noticed a change in her. She exuded confidence. Her presence felt threatening. I got a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach.

She came into the room uninvited and sat down on the edge of the bed, idly twirling a lock of hair between her fingers. I pulled the covers up under my chin, hoping she wouldn't discover the absence of the amulet. Terror held my mouth shut. Sammy's black pupils were fixed on my widened eyes. Her breath was cold on my face. With a sardonic grin, she tucked the quilt around my shoulders, like a mother would a child. I trembled beneath the covers.

Then, in a sickening sweet tone she said, "Sweet dreams, Brooke." When she was finished terrifying me, she clicked the table lamp off and left the room, closing the door softly behind her, leaving me in the dark.

With a shaky hand, I found the lamp and turned it back on. She must have sensed I didn't have the amulet. Still shaken, I rolled over and curled into a ball. "Oh, my God what have I done?" There was only one thing I could do now. Stay awake all night. But even then, Maggie could still come for me. Without the amulet, I was unprotected. I got up and went to my desk and flipped through the grimoire, but couldn't read a word of it without the magic of the amulet. I turned the computer on and answered a dozen emails, something else I'd been neglecting.

It was late and the house was quiet, so when I got a text beep, I jumped in the chair. Hesitantly, I walked over to the night table. Who would be messaging me this time of night? I grabbed my cell phone off the table and read the words that brought me to my knees.

"You're amazing and I love you. See you tomorrow fairy princess."

With moist eyes, I stared at Marcus' message, reading it again and again. He was awake. Once I was able to gain control of my emotions, I sent him a text back, keeping it simple. He didn't message me back.

My heart soared. All I had to do now was stay awake until morning.

I dressed in jeans and T-shirt and went down to the kitchen to make tea—something I'd drank every day since I'd had the first cup at Uncle Edmund's more than a week ago. I lost count of my yawns as I watched TV in the living room. As hard as I tried, I couldn't keep sleep from claiming my conscious mind.



It was much later, I didn't know how long, but it was still dark when Aunt Rachel helped me up off the sofa. She took my hand, and I followed her, unable to open my heavy lids.

It wasn't until I felt the brisk night air on my face that I realized something wasn't right. But I couldn't think past the fog in my head. Suddenly, my body felt weightless. Was Uncle Jim carrying me to

bed? I was definitely being transported somewhere.

A mixture of voices surrounded me. As I concentrated, I was able to pick out every one. Although I knew I should be scared, the semi-comatose state I was in kept me from caring.

After a while, I felt myself being lowered onto something soft, a mattress perhaps. Something was being draped over me. For a moment I felt as if I was suffocating, then cool air washed over my face again, bringing with it briny sea air. The soft hum of a motor drowned out my moans.

Feeling weightless again, my body jarred with every step of its carrier. The scent of damp earth and moss permeated my nasal cavity and I felt nauseous. I heard sticks snap beneath feet and the ghostly hoot of an owl from somewhere up above. After a while, I was able to open my eyes into slits. Through a blur, it looked as though I was draped backwards over someone's arms. The dark world was upside down. I could just make out the shapes of treetops against the darkened sky.

An unbearable metallic ring vibrated inside my head until I thought I would go insane. My body felt as though it had been filled with lead. I tried to lift an arm, but it wouldn't budge.

Now that most of my senses had returned, I knew I was under some sort of spell, and I grew a afraid as I should have been all along. The ringing in my head subsided, along with the nausea as I became more aware.

"Where am I?" I whispered through dry lips. No one answered.

A strong arm lifted my upper body. My head fell heavily against someone's hard chest. The musty scent of the earth was replaced with the scent of fresh laundry, and images of Marcus flooded my head.

With great effort, I tilted my head, opened my eyes, and looked up to see Evan's face framed by shadowed tree branches. Through the brain-fog, I blinked and tried to focus on my surroundings. Megan was to Evan's left, Sammy to his right. Robyn wasn't with them.

"Evan," I moaned.

He looked down at me, and for an instant, I thought I saw a flash of pity in his eyes, and then he looked away. My head hurt. I closed my eyes and relaxed my body against him.

Sleep seized me again. The next time I woke up, I was hanging limply over someone's shoulder. I had the feeling of descending. Once the motion ended, I was dumped forcibly on rough ground. All was quiet. The musty scent of the earth reminded me of something past. I flitted in and out of consciousness. And as I did, I heard a soothing whisper.

"Brooke. Brooke, can you hear me?"

I moaned and lifted my eyelids to see Robyn. Her face was surrounded by a familiar circle of dim light.

"Where are we?" My voice was accompanied by a ghostly echo—another reminder of something past, and I was pretty sure I knew where I was now.

"We're in the well on Skull Island," Robyn said grimly, confirming my fears.

"Marcus is awake." I groaned the words out and pushed myself into a sitting position. My head, still groggy, dropped to my knees.

"That's great, about Marcus," she said.

My legs felt bound. Something was wrapped around them. It took me a few minutes to realize that a black robe had been draped over my clothing at some point, and had gotten twisted around my legs.

I turned my head to look at Robyn, who was kneeling beside me, also draped in a similar robe. It was then I realized the bottom of the well was illuminated by a bluish white glow, and that the tree Marcus had used last time to get us out was gone.

She answered my unspoken question.

"I made us a magical light."

"Can you get us out of here?"

"No. My magic isn't that strong."

“Why are you down here?”

“Maggie found out that I helped you. She knows everything.”

“Crap. I’m sorry.”

I tilted my head back and looked up through the dark tunneled walls to the dawn sky, realizing that I’d been here not once before, but twice.

“It’s over now. I can’t escape this time.”

Robyn twisted her upper body to face me. “You can save us, Brooke, but you have to find the will.”

“But I don’t have the amulet.” I’d never felt such hopelessness in all my life.

“You don’t need it.”

Frustrated, I threw my hands in the air. “Then how? I don’t think I’ve been gifted with magic in this life.”

“Think of Marcus. He has to know where you are.”

“No! He’s too sick. He can’t come here.”

“It’s our only hope. If you concentrate all your energy on him, he’ll know where you are.”

I wouldn’t allow myself the luxury of thinking about him and putting him in anymore danger.

“Why didn’t they just kill me last night when they had the chance?” I let my head fall back against the cold stone wall and drew my knees closer to my body, wrapping my robed arms around them.

“Maggie’s too dramatic for that. It would have been too easy for her. Don’t forget, she’s always won in the past. She has no fear of losing this time, either.”

“I hope she doesn’t know where the amulet is.”

“Where is it?” Robyn asked.

“I’d rather not say out loud. You never know who’s listening.”

“Oh, right.”



Robyn and I spent all of Friday in the bottom of the damp well, curled up next to each other to keep from shivering. At some point, it dawned on me that maybe we were being used as bait. Maggie wanted Marcus too. The thought sickened me.

“What must Marcus think of me now that I haven’t gone to see him all day?” I whined to Robyn. “He’ll think I don’t care about him.”

“I doubt that. He’s gotta know by now that something’s up.”

“But I don’t want him to suspect anything. He’ll just do something foolish, like confront Maggie, or Evan. I don’t even want to think about what he’ll do.”

Maybe Maggie would forget about him once I was dead, but he would never let her forget him. No. He would go after her. Maybe there would be another life for us somewhere in the future. It was the only hope I had left to cling to.

Morbid thoughts entered my mind throughout the day. I thought about my parents and how they would take the news of my disappearance. Then, a strange thought entered my mind. Twice before, I’d left parents behind to suffer the same tragedy that my new parents were about to suffer. Nothing had saved me then, why should I have any hope of being rescued from death this time?

Darkness crept in on us as day gave way to night, dissolving the circle of light above. Robyn used her powers to magic us a soft glow as she had the night before.

As if things couldn’t get worse, it started to rain. At first just a sprinkling and then after an hour, a steady shower dampened us. But not even the cold rain could darken my mood further. I was already in the deepest, darkest state of mind I could ever remember being in.

Robyn complained when her curls began to frizz. I didn’t even have the will to roll my eyes at her.

Sometime later, the echo of a pebble bouncing off the wall of the well woke me from a fitful sleep. I cringed with fright and shook Robyn awake.

“Listen. I thought I heard something,” I said in one breath.

Robyn and I jumped to our feet. We grabbed each other in the darkness. My heart pounded loudly. I strained my ears, but all I could hear was the pitter-patter of rain drops landing lightly on the forest floor above. And then, I heard a sound I didn’t expect to hear and thought I must be dreaming.



Chapter Thirty-Four

Brooke.”

For a second my heart stopped beating as if it was listening too.

“Brooke, it’s me. Can you hear me?”

“Robyn!” My voice was a sharp whisper.

“It’s Marcus,” she said grabbing hold of my arms.

“Marcus, is that you?” I whispered loudly.

“It’s me. Are you hurt?”

“No. Robyn’s here with me, but it’s okay. She’s not one of them. How did you know where I was?”

“It wasn’t hard to figure out. I just had to wait until my parents left the hospital before I could call Uncle Edmund to come and get me.”

Robyn was outwardly excited. I was anxious.

“Hang on,” he said. “I brought a rope from the boat. Watch out, I’ll throw it down.”

The rope slapped against the wet stone wall.

“I’m coming down.”

“No! Don’t come down, we’ll come up. Go,” I said, pushing Robyn toward the rope.

The rope had been knotted at intervals, making it easier to climb. So, with robes tangled around our legs, we climbed, taking more time than we should have. When I finally emerged, Marcus wasted no time in scooping me into his arms.

“How can you be alright?” I sobbed against his neck, too scared to let go.

“Once your blood was inside me, the spell broke. I’m absolutely fine, really. It’s like nothing ever happened. If anything, I’m better than I was.”

I lifted my head from his shoulder to look at him, although I could barely see him in the dark forest. “How did you find the well? It’s so dark.”

“I followed the raven.”

“What?” My head snapped upward. I could barely make out the outline of the trees against the night sky.

“It’s okay.” The backs of his fingers brushed the side of my face. “Listen.”

All I could hear was the leaves rustling in the breeze and an occasional drop of rain pinging off the forest floor. “I don’t hear anything,” I said.

“I hear it,” Robyn said. “Over there, Brooke.” Robyn pointed into the dark. We took a couple steps forward, and then I heard the familiar throaty rattle of what I now knew was a raven and not a crow.

“How can you trust that thing?”

“It led me to you.”

“Yeah, because Maggie wanted it to.”

“I don’t think so. I can’t explain it, but for some reason, I don’t feel threatened by it, and I think it’s waiting to show us the way out of here. C’mon.” He grabbed my hand, and Robyn’s too. “This time we’re not spending the night in the woods.”

We wasted no time in moving away from the well. Although it was difficult to see, we followed the sounds the raven made. The flapping of wings as it flew from tree to tree, the gurgles and cackles that were surprisingly low, as if it didn’t want anyone else but us to hear.

As we trudged along, Robyn and I explained to Marcus that she was a real witch and that the others were Maggie’s minions. We told him about the wards of protection I’d placed over his window and door to his hospital room. Then I thought of the amulet and asked Marcus if he had it.

“What? Don’t you have it?” I heard the dread in his voice.

“No, I took it off and put it under your pillow, so I could dream of you. And it worked.”

He swore under his breath. “It must still be in the hospital,” he said. “We’ll call first thing in the morning to see if anyone’s found it.”

“Yeah,” I said hopeless.

I knew that once it was taken from the protection of the hospital room, it would be easy for Maggie to find, but kept my thoughts to myself.

“I tried so hard to keep you out of my mind,” I said as we hurried along.

“You can’t keep me from your heart.” He squeezed my hand. “I know what we have to do now. I remember everything. I remember every minute of my lives as Kalan and Christian. And you will, too.”

He didn’t say any more on the subject. Maybe he didn’t want to reveal secrets in front of Robyn.

“Are you sure you’re not sick or anything?” I asked Marcus for the tenth time as we pounded through the damp forest like a herd of elephants.

“Positive. Stop worrying.”

“Where are we going to go when we get out? We can’t go to our homes,” I said.

“We’ll take the boat to Uncle Edmund’s.”

“Oh, I like your Uncle Edmund,” Robyn said excitedly.

I gave her a sarcastic look that I knew she couldn’t see in the dark. “It’s not like we’re going on a vacation, Robyn.”

“I know, sorry.”

The rain had stopped soon after Marcus had found us, but dampness hung heavily in the air and started to seep through the robe to my clothes underneath. I was tired and hungry and grew edgy.

“We should be at the beach by now,” I complained.

A stick snapped behind us and a tiny squeal flew from me.

“Just keep walking. We’re almost out,” Marcus said. “Don’t look back.”

A few minutes later, we stepped past the last of the trees and into the tall grass that edged the sandy beach. Wisps of dark clouds drifted across the sky, allowing stars to peek through now and then. The sound of the surf rolling quickened our pace to a slow run.

Without another sound, except for the whoosh of its flapping wings, the raven flew over our heads and headed toward the mainland.

Everything seemed to be in our favor, until Marcus stopped in his tracks, sucked in a sharp breath, and called Robyn’s name out with a question mark ending.

“What?” I asked panicked.

“Robyn!” he yelled this time. His hand tightened around mine as he spun in the sand, taking me with him.

“Where is she?” I said, barely breathing.

“She just disappeared.”

Marcus yanked me to him. We stood in the middle of the beach, between the woods and the ocean, and Robyn was nowhere in sight. Neither was anyone else.

“How could she just disappear? Someone must have taken her,” I said in a panic.

“No. Her hand just dissolved inside mine. It was the strangest feeling. She wasn’t pulled away.” His arms tightened around me.

I felt sick.

“You’re soaked,” he said, suddenly. “Let’s get to the boat.”

“What about Robyn?” I asked.

“I’ll go back and look for her.”

“No! Not unless I go with you.”

“You’re not going back into the woods. I’ll take you home and come back in the morning,” he said firmly.

“The plan is to go to your Uncle’s. Let’s just stick to the plan,” I said and jumped when I heard Marcus swear loudly. “What now?”

“The boat’s gone!”

We ran to the end of the wharf. I looked as far as I could see across the dark water. The boat was nowhere in sight. Marcus stood still and quiet for a moment. A breeze blew over us, and I shivered from the dampness of my soggy clothes. Marcus looked at me, took his jacket off, and began to unbutton his shirt.

“What are you doing? You’re not going to swim are you?” I grabbed his arm, determined not to let go.

“No.” When he had his shirt and T-shirt in his hand, he handed them to me. “Take that wet thing off.” He said it as if it repulsed him to see me wearing it.

Gladly, I flung the black garment over my head. It dropped heavily to the wharf. I took my wet T-shirt off, too, and stood shivering in my bra and jeans. Once I had his T-shirt on, he covered me with his flannel shirt. The clothes, warmed by his body, warmed me quickly.

“I have to sit,” I said and dropped to the wharf on the second plank from the end. Marcus sat close and put an arm around me. With his free hand, he pulled out his cell phone and punched in a number.

“We need your help.” There was a pause. “Brooke and I are stranded on Skull Island.” Another pause. “Okay, hurry.”

I hated the seriousness in Marcus’ tone. It added to my fear.

“Uncle Edmund will be here within the hour,” he said.

I laid my head against his chest, and in return, felt the comforting pressure of his head resting on top of mine as he spoke into my hair.

“I’m sorry I left you for all those days.”

“I didn’t think you would ever come back to me, and then when you texted me from the hospital, I tried to stay awake all night, but I couldn’t ... and they got me.”

His other arm came across the front of me, and I breathed in the comforting scent of his leather jacket. I sighed, almost completely content, and then I thought of something I was reluctant to bring up, but needed to. I lifted my head and looked at him.

“Marcus, remember at the soccer game? When you saw me on the bleachers just before the fight?” I cringed and looked down at the weathered wharf planks.

“That was Luke, I presume.”

“Yeah.” I drew the word out. “He really picked the wrong time for a visit, but he’s kind of unpredictable like that, and Aunt Rachel told him where I was and”

His hand smoothed down the length of my tangled hair. “It’s okay, you don’t have to explain.”

The clouds parted briefly and the slender moon accented his features. And when a gust of wind blew his hair away from his forehead, I saw the hint of a scar above his right eyebrow.

“You weren’t jealous, were you? I feel like the whole fight was my fault.”

He picked my hand up off the wharf and held it between his. “I wasn’t jealous. Well maybe a little, but that wasn’t what started the fight.” He looked into my eyes. “That fight was inevitable. Evan provoked me for the last time.”

“Promise?”

“I swear it wasn’t because of you and Luke.”

“Good, because there never was a ‘me and Luke.’ We’re just friends.”

With one hand on the back of my head, he pulled my face closer and kissed my forehead.

“Are you ready to remember everything?” His eyes, newly re-kindled, smiled down on me.

“How?”

“By combining my witch blood with your fairy blood.” His eyes searched mine.

“Our binding,” I said, remembering. “I’d read about it in the grimoire, but wasn’t sure what it meant.”

“You can read the grimoire?” he asked, surprised.

I nodded. “Yeah, but I’ll explain later.”

He reached into the front pocket of his jeans and pulled out a pocket knife. My eyes widened.

“It’s the only way,” he said softly.

He brought my hand to his lips and kissed my palm.

“If we were normal human beings, I wouldn’t do this to you. But the fact is, we’re not normal in any sense. We had planned to share our blood a thousand years ago. I remember now. It was the only way to bind our souls and make our magic stronger, but we were torn apart. As Claire and Christian, we didn’t have a chance after the binding. And now, our third lifetime together might soon be over.”

“Don’t say that.”

“It’s true.”

“What do I have to do?”

He let go of my hand and flicked the small blade open. To my horror, he pressed the knife point into the middle of his palm. I made a face, but didn’t look away.

As if the trickle of blood that leaked around the point of the blade wasn’t enough, he glided the knife along his skin until a thin crimson line appeared down the length of his palm.

My breathing changed, becoming louder. An unpleasant feeling settled in my stomach. His eyes flicked to mine.

“I sterilized the blade before I came,” he said—as if that could take the horror of it away.

My hands were curled into fists in my lap. I didn’t move them.

He held out his bleeding hand to me. The fresh line of blood widened.

“Does it have to be that long?” I asked with my face held in a grimace.

“It’s not as bad as it looks. Trust me.”

Reluctantly, I lifted my hand and uncurled my fingers. I held it, palm side up, between the two of us, not willing to give it to him completely. Marcus took my hand and held it firmly in his. When I felt the tip of the blade touch my skin, I closed my eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Just do it, fast.”

I turned my head as far away from the site of operation as my neck would stretch. I bit down on my bottom lip and waited for the pain. In the same instant that the tip of the blade penetrated my skin, several things happened around us.



Chapter Thirty-Five

Without warning, a violent wind reared up off the ocean, swirling around me, lifting my hair, whipping it against my face, taking my breath away. My eyes squinted shut. I heard grunts, Marcus swear loudly, and the knife drop to the planks, but not before the blade accidentally sliced down the length of my hand and into my wrist, making me shriek with the intensity of the sudden pain. Our hands were ripped from each other's grasps.

"Brooke!" Marcus yelled.

I fought against the wind to speak, but couldn't find my breath. Strong hands grabbed me and yanked me to my feet. The wind subsided as mysteriously as it had appeared. My eyes flew open. The first thing I saw was Marcus struggling to free himself from Evan's grip. Evan held one of his arm securely behind his back in a submission hold, same as my captor held mine. I snapped my head around to see Megan standing behind me. Instinct made me struggle, but it was useless. She tightened her grip on my arm, digging her nails through the flannel fabric of Marcus' shirt and into my flesh.

"Ow!" I screamed.

Pain shot up my arm and into my shoulder. My bleeding hand throbbed. I watched the blood, black in the hour before dawn, trickle down the length of my fingers and drip onto the wharf. As hard as I tried not to let it, an agonizing moan escaped me. Marcus stared in horror. The sudden jerking motion of Evan grabbing Marcus had made the blade cut more deeply into my flesh than I was sure he'd meant for it to.

This was it. We were going to die. We weren't strong enough to fight them, and I was going to bleed to death anyway.

"Let her go," Marcus yelled sharply, struggling against his captor. "You can have me. As long as one of us dies, the other is no threat to you."

He was looking to the other end of the wharf as he spoke. I jerked my head in the same direction Maggie had materialized out of nowhere. Sammy stood beside her. Maggie stepped closer. As always, when she spoke, her ancient voice chilled my insides, and I shivered.

"This game has gone on long enough. She would have been dead by now, if it weren't for something else I had to take care of."

"She? What do you mean, she?" Marcus' tone was on the edge of hysterical.

What *did* she mean by singling me out as the one who would have been dead by now? Would she let Marcus live? Amid the turmoil, my heart soared at the thought, and I couldn't hold my tongue.

"Wait! I'll die. If it ends this curse and one of us can live, let it be me who ends it." If there was a chance that he could live, I wouldn't have it any other way.

"No! Don't listen to her." Marcus looked from me to Maggie.

"I'm bleeding anyway. It's okay," I said to Marcus.

A sharp laugh cut through the air. "And wouldn't that be a twist of fate. If I let Brooke bleed to death, then Marcus would live with the knowledge that he killed his fairy princess." Maggie didn't toy with her words, they were sharp and to the point.

Marcus looked utterly shocked and pale.

As Maggie came nearer, she seemed to float instead of walk. The folds of her robe rustling softly in the breeze was the only sound she made. Near the horizon, a cloud swept across the sky, exposing the setting crescent moon, and in that instant, the glow of the moon glinted off something shiny set against the blackness of Maggie's robe. My amulet hung around her wrinkled neck.

"Where's Robyn?" I asked, fighting against the pain and the weakness that was quickly overtaking

me.

“Safe, for now.” Maggie’s tone had changed to annoyance. “Her witch of a mother thinks she has saved her, but it is only temporary. Eventually, she will be punished for treason.”

So it was Robyn’s mother who had transported her away from here. I was glad for her and held on to the slim chance that she might be able to help us.

Maggie came closer, stopping directly in front of me, her eyes glued to my bloodied hand. From somewhere in a fold of her robe she produced a tiny glass vial. Instinctively, I curled my fingers into a tight fist and pressed it close to my side, but Megan grabbed my wrist and thrust it out in front of me.

“What are you going to do?” Marcus yelled at Maggie. She didn’t answer.

With one arm held tightly behind my back and the other held stiffly out in front of me, I jerked my body, trying to break free, hurting myself further as Megan’s grip tightened.

Maggie was close enough now that I could feel her cold breath on my face. Her icy fingers seized my wrist. My fist tightened. Blood oozed from between my closed fingers and ran up my arm inside Marcus’ shirt sleeve.

Maggie scrapped the glass vial against the inside of my wrist, collecting a drop of blood. The only thing keeping me from fainting was the coolness that radiated from her and the immense terror that prickled every cell in my body.

When her icy fingers let go of my wrist, the pain from her touch lingered. My hand fell limply to my side. I tried to keep conscious, but my head drooped slightly. A substantial crimson puddle formed on the wharf planks below me. Maggie drifted back to Sammy’s side.

Marcus seized the opportunity. Although I could see he was in pain, he twisted himself free of Evan’s grip and lunged for me, grabbing my bleeding hand with his.

In that moment, my world forever changed. Marcus’ energy shot through me, entirely. Every aspect of my two past lives infused into me instantly. I didn’t have to remember anything, I already knew. No longer was I merely, Brooke Alyson Day, I was Claire and Bryn, too. My entire life as a witch came flooding back to me, as well as my life as a fairy.

I was Bryn, flitting across treetops under a starry sky, dancing atop glistening ocean waves bathed in moonlight.

Effortlessly, I glided over the grasslands of the human territory, until I came to the spot in the meadow where the willow wept over the stream. I knew Kalan would be there waiting for me.

Day after glorious day, we frolicked innocently through the tall grasses mixed with wildflowers, under the golden sun. We bathed unclad in the sparkling stream.

Every moment together was more precious than the last. Kalan’s love seeped through every pore of my body and wrapped itself around my soul, enhancing my senses.

With every touch came a tingle.

With every breath came the fresh scent of Kalan’s skin, mixed with the fragrances of meadow clary and the glistening stream, all warmed to perfection under the sun.

Surely no two beings had ever found this level of love.

Now and then, mortals would visit our stream, but our magic allowed us to blend into our surroundings. None ever laid eyes on us.

For us magical beings, it was easy to tell when humans were in love—their auras shone brilliantly, for only us to see.

Whenever two mortals in love came to our stream, we celebrated our love with them by secretly gifting them with long lives of happiness and prosperity. Occasionally, they would hear the sounds of our giggles, like whispers on the wind, as we danced around them. Sometimes, they heard us splash, as we frolicked invisibly in the stream, but try as they might, they never found the source of the whispered sounds.

The vision shifted, and I was standing in front of the newly built Ravenwyck Inn. Jason was by my side. A dapper Christian was helping the beautiful Julia out of a horse-drawn carriage. The sight of Christian made my heart swell.

With Julia at his side, Christian turned to face Jason and me. Bashful, I blushed and looked down at the gravel. It

wasn't long ago that we'd met, and yet I loved him already. He took a step closer, making my heart skip a beat.

Jason and I greeted Julia and Christian and then went inside the Inn to attend our scheduled coven meeting.

Margaret shot Christian and me looks that made me uncomfortable. Did she know?

As I stood as part of the Coven of Seven, our robes brushing lightly together, my body was very much aware Christian to my right. I felt a pull and longed to lean into him. I felt nothing from Jason to my left.

Margaret asked us to join hands. Once the circle was formed and we were linked together, we invoked the spirits. We each took turns calling upon the guardians of earth, water, wind, fire, and spirit, always saving darkness and light for last.

And as always, unbeknownst to the others, once darkness and light were called upon, a shimmer of energy passed from Christian into me and from me into Christian, binding our souls further.

Our linked hands, concealed within the bell sleeves of our robes, grew warm. I felt Christian squeeze my hand, gently I squeezed back, and all the while we had to concentrate on casting the circle.

As I stared into Margaret's young and beautiful face as she chanted, her image wavered.

Once again, I was on the wharf, struggling to break free of Megan's incredibly strong grip. Marcus was on his knees now, both his arms secured behind his back. He lifted his head and stared at me with wide, frightened eyes.

Maggie was in front of us. She raised her arms, a spell rolling off her tongue. A bright blue light lit up the end of the wharf and Marcus' boat materialized.

"Put them on the boat," Maggie snapped the order.

The tide was high, so the jump from the wharf onto the boat wasn't far. I couldn't see Marcus behind me, but I heard the thump and some struggling, as he and Evan hit the deck of the boat together.

Before I had a chance to turn my head to see if Marcus was all right, Megan shoved me into the cabin. I stumbled to the floor. Too scared to move, I knelt on my hands and knees where I'd fallen and watched through the tangles of hair that had spilled over my face as Megan entered the cabin with me closing the door behind her. She stood in front of the closed door, looking as if she'd just walked out of a beauty salon. Her silken waves, a stark contrast against the blackness of the robe she wore, cascaded down the front of her shoulders. Her French manicure and make-up looked as though they had all been executed professionally. For some reason, I was more terrified of her than any of the others, ever Maggie.

When I realized she wasn't coming after me, I cautiously raised myself up off the floor. In the dim light of dawn seeping through the porthole windows, I stared at Megan's expressionless face. It was as if she really was a zombie.

I took two steps backwards and fell against the bench seat. A slight sting made me look down at my hand. A thin, pink line had replaced the open gash on my palm. It had healed itself. I smoothed my hand across Marcus' shirt, wiping away some of the blood. As I stared at the scar, puddles formed on the rims of my eyes. We had been so close. I wondered if I would even see Marcus again before it was all over.

With my new knowledge, I now knew that any powers we would be gifted within this lifetime would come to us on the eve of the equinox—this evening. And that our powers would only last until midnight, but we had to be together for it to work. That seemed impossible now.

A light brush of air made me look up from my hand. I cringed against the back of the seat. Megan stood directly in front of me. Her pupils that had been flat and dull a moment ago were now black and depthless. They drew me all the way in until I felt weightless.

Megan captured my spirit and dangled it above a scene I did not want to see. Julia and Christian lay on a bed together, naked, their bodies intertwined, engaged in shameless activities. Sounds of passion floated up to me. I tried frantically to close my eyes, but in my spirit form, I had no eyes to close. I watched for hours as the two young lovers satisfied each other. Only when it was over, did Megan release my spirit. She smiled down on me wickedly.

She spoke to me as Julia. “Once Margaret is finished with Christian, he will be mine again.”

I gasped, appalled at the thought. My mind went through a dozen scenarios. Although weak, I found my voice. “What is Maggie going to do with him?”

She let out a quick, dark laugh and bent low enough so her bewitchingly beautiful face was level with mine and whispered seductively, “She wants his baby.”

If I could have pushed myself through the bow of the boat, I would have. “That’s impossible,” I whimpered. “She’s too old. It’s just sick.”

“Now that she has what she needs from you, she will be young and beautiful again very soon. Christian won’t be able to resist her.” It was clear that Megan was amused with the whole idea. “And then, when she’s finished with him, he will be mine forever. I have already fashioned a potion that will make him fall desperately in love with me. He won’t remember you even existed.”

With a manicured finger nail, she lightly traced the line of my cheek down to my chin, leaving behind the sensation of being scraped with the tip of a razor blade dipped in ice.

I shivered.

The door to the cabin burst open. Megan straightened.

“We’re here,” Sammy said flatly.

Megan grabbed my arm and forced me to my feet. Feeling heavy, I trudged out the door and into the early dawn. Marcus was nowhere in sight.

“Where is he?” I asked sharply.

“He’s not your concern anymore,” Sammy answered.

It was just Sammy, Megan and me now.



Chapter Thirty-Six

We were docked at a wharf, which looked as if it belonged to nothing. Beyond the aged wharf, a vast cemetery began at the shoreline and spread over a hill, looking long forgotten. The dismal scene held no houses or buildings.

Flanked on either side by the two witches, I walked through the pathless cemetery—a place I knew I'd walked many times before. A patchy mist covered the ground. How fitting. The seaside gravestones were so old; their etchings had eroded over time. As we neared the top of the hill, a low throaty rattle made me look up. Perched atop a cracked obelisk, sat the raven, eyeing us as we walked by.

On the other side of the hill the trees thickened; their twisted roots crawled along the uneven ground. This part of the graveyard was a sea of green. Protected by the shade, a dense covering of moss blanketed the gravestones, the ground, and the tree trunks.

Anxiety about my imminent death began to settle in. I began to wonder which tree I would be tied to and burned at, but I continued on in silence as if I were dead already.

Sammy and Megan stopped abruptly in front of a large, unembellished tomb. The structure was sealed shut with a stone slab. Wordless, Sammy raised an arm, and with a finger, traced the rune for 'open' into the air. With a grinding noise, the cement slab slid to the side. Sammy stepped into the darkness. My heart thrummed loudly against the wall of my chest. I took one last look around, convinced it would be the last time I saw the daylight. Beyond the trees, a large green building with many dormers came into view.

The Ravenwyck.

I knew exactly where I was now. The old graveyard I'd once walked through with Sammy on a dare when we were kids. The graveyard in which, as Claire, I had been burned to death for treason.

The legend had been wrong all those years. It wasn't on Skull Island that two young lovers had been murdered. It was here. The murderers had just taken our remains to Skull Island and thrown them into the well. Until a few minutes ago, I'd forgotten this place was through a thicket of spruce trees, behind the Inn.

"Follow her," Megan said.

I tore myself away from the dawn and stepped into the darkness with the feeling that I was walking into my own tomb. Megan followed closely behind. The concrete slab ground to a stop behind us, sealing us inside. Darkness was replaced by a discomfiting eerie glow. The musty stench of old earth filled my nostrils as I descended gradually through a narrow passage.

Something happened to me as I walked. With no food for more than twenty-four hours and hardly any sleep, not to mention the blood loss, I should have been dead on my feet, but suddenly I felt more alive than ever. A new soul was awakening inside of me. My body felt lighter. Hope coursed through my veins, along with Marcus' blood.

I knew the grimoire cover-to-cover now. I tried a simple spell of darkness. It didn't work. The eerie glow continued to light our way.

We walked through a narrow tunnel in silence for a long time until we came to a wooden door. Again, Sammy traced a rune in the air. The rusty-hinged door creaked open. On the other side, narrow steps carved out of the earth ascended. I followed Sammy to the top, then down a hallway. I knew I was in a basement now—the bowels of the Ravenwyck to be more specific. Here, wall sconces illuminated our way.

After walking through a maze of hallways we came to a large chamber with three arched entrances and a domed ceiling. In the chamber, there were three closed doors. Sammy led the way to one door,

stopping in front of it. She passed her hand over the lock. There was a click and the door flew open with an echoed creak.

Sammy stepped aside and turned to face me. "Get in."

I hesitated and felt a push from behind. Megan shoved me into the dimly lit, empty room and closed the door, locking it. For the first time since I'd fallen asleep on the sofa at Aunt Rachel's, I was alone, but now, I was alone in the Ravenwyck, the place I feared most.

My prison was a small cube of a room made from stone. No furnishings. I sunk to the floor and let my head drop to my hands. Marcus was close by. I could feel him. With his blood in my veins and mine in his, I suspected he sensed that I was near, also.

The love I'd once had for Kalan and then Christian, on top of the most recent love I felt for Marcus, fused together, making me more in love than I'd ever imagined possible.

"Marcus, if you can hear me, we have to live this time. I'm not giving up. I remember everything, and I'm alright." I spoke into the palm of my hand then blew the invisible words into the air, hoping they would find their way to his ear. It was a way we used to communicate to each other from far distances when we were Bryn and Kalan—I hoped it would work now.

Like a whisper on the wind, for only me to hear, Marcus' answer found me. "No, don't give up. I love you, and I'll die before I let them hurt you."

I locked those words away in my heart and fell asleep on the cold, damp floor.



Time passed. I had no idea how much. The door squeaked open, awakening me. I lifted my head off the cold stone.

"Brooke," a tiny voice whispered. "It's me, Robyn."

For a moment I thought they'd captured her too, until she spoke again.

"I'm gonna get you out of here."

I stood, shivering from the cold, and wrapped Marcus' torn, bloodied shirt around me. "How did you get in?"

"Through the cemetery."

"Maggie must know you're here."

"Maybe, but I couldn't leave you here. I figured this is where they'd bring you."

The lock clicked again. I jumped letting out a shriek. Robyn slapped her hand over my mouth. Beth walked through the door, closing it behind her.

She had a tray in her hands that held a tall glass of water, which I could have killed for, and a sandwich. I looked at her, not sure if it was a trick, not sure if I could trust her despite the recent return of past memories. Robyn took the tray from her and passed it to me. I almost downed the water.

"Maggie doesn't know I'm here," Beth said meekly. "She would punish me severely if she did."

"Why are you here?" I asked through a mouthful of peanut butter and jam sandwich.

She twisted the corner of her sweater nervously, looking frightened and pitiful, exactly how she looked one hundred years ago. She swallowed hard. "I want her dead as much as you do. I want to be free."

"Who are you, really?" Robyn asked.

"What I am doesn't matter. I have always belonged to Maggie."

Strange, Robyn hadn't asked Beth *what* she was; she'd asked her *who* she was. My eyes narrowed in suspicion. "For how long?"

"A very long time." Her words were whispers. "But that doesn't matter. I can help you."

I stopped chewing. "How do we know we can trust you?" I asked.

“I know where Marcus is, and I’ll take you to him. But once you’re with him, you have to escape on your own. The same way you came in.”

Robyn nodded frantically. I was too nervous to eat anymore. I finished the water and handed the tray with half the sandwich back to Beth.

“Let’s go,” Robyn said.

Beth peeked around the corner of the door, then practically tip-toed across the chamber to another door. Robyn and I followed close behind.

“Going somewhere?”

Pain gripped my arm. The three of us stopped in our tracks and turned.

Maggie’s voice, reverberating off the chamber walls, was like an everlasting stab to my chest. She stood before us, in the middle of the large chamber, alone.

Hunched and wrinkled she may have looked, but underneath the layers of oldness, stood a frightening demon-witch with great power.

Her icy glare flicked to each of us as she spoke. “It looks as though I can’t let you out of my sight for a minute, Brooke. And Robyn, thank you for gracing us with your presence. It saves me from having to locate you later.”

“Glad to be of help,” Robyn said sourly.

Maggie’s expression switched from annoyed to angry as her eyes turned black and flicked from Robyn to Beth, who was huddled against me.

“As for you, Beth, I’ll deal with you later.” With a wave of her hand, Maggie disappeared, taking Beth with her.

Evan and Sammy materialized in the spot where she’d stood.

“Start walking,” Sammy said coolly.

“Can’t you do something?” I whispered to Robyn.

“Not against two witches.”

We walked until we came to the main level of the Inn. It seemed empty of people. I thought about making a run for the door, but that seemed impossible. We walked up the main staircase, past the creepy painting that had once come to life in front of my eyes. Unable to resist, I glanced at it. Everything was as it should be.

When we reached the top, an overwhelming feeling of foreboding cut deep into my chest. I held no hope of ever being in Marcus’ arms again.



Chapter Thirty-Seven

With a good idea now of where they were taking us, I walked beside Robyn and followed Sammy and Evan through the attic. The cold raised goose bumps over my flesh. I clamped my mouth shut and tightened my jaw to stop my teeth from chattering.

We were led in a different direction than I'd gone in with Marcus, but I knew the way from a memory long ago. In the middle of the attic, an iron staircase descended into darkness, where a secret room lay hidden beneath the floor.

At the bottom of the staircase, Sammy mumbled words of magic. Hanging from a beam in the middle of the high ceiling, seven candles set into an iron chandelier flickered to life and set the room aglow.

A large septagram had been etched into the stone floor long ago, each point representing one of us and our element. Inside the tip of each point, the symbol of our element was carved into the floor. Mine was a sun representing light. Marcus' was a crescent moon representing dark. Beyond the points of the septagram, like slumbering sentinels waiting to be awakened, seven different colored candles sat atop seven iron holders.

This was our ritual room.

As I took my first step inside the room in a hundred years, the air was alive with power. It prickled my skin like sharp needles. Now though, instead of opening my pores and letting the energy seep into my network of nerves, I tried the impossible—to shut it out.

My eyes fell to the center of the septagram where a circle of ancient runes was carved. Inside the circle stood an intricate network of twisted iron, sculpted into a stand. On top of the stand, a crystal septagram, approximately a foot in diameter, each point clutched by a tendril of iron, hung cold and lifeless, waiting to be awakened. As my eyes swept over the familiar room, memories overwhelmed me—not all good ones.

Out of habit, I walked to my point of the septagram and turned to face the center of the room.

"Put these on," Sammy said, thrusting black robes at Robyn and me.

I caught the soft garment before it fell to the floor. "I won't help you cast a circle," I said defiantly.

"Yeah, we'll see about that," Sammy said, almost sounding like her sarcastic self.

Maggie, old and decrepit, materialized into the room. I let the robe drop down over my legs. Its hem grazed the floor.

"Where's Marcus?" I demanded.

"He'll be here," Maggie said in a most pleasant tone, as if she was enjoying herself. A black embroidered septagram, visible only to the seven of us, gleamed over the heart of her robe.

Finally, Marcus came down the stairs on the far side of the room with Megan clutched to his arm. He didn't seem to notice me. His expression was blank.

Already robed, the two walked hand in hand across the room. Megan stopped when they reached Marcus' symbol on the floor—beside me. She let go of his hand and stood in front of him, facing him. With a sly grin, she looked at me sideways, then reached her hands up, resting one on the back of Marcus' neck and tangled the other in the back of his hair, pulling his face toward hers.

My blood froze, chilling my insides. I watched in horror as Marcus' mouth met Megan's in a fierce kiss. His arms lifted around her, one pushing against the small of her back, the other reaching under her blonde waves, entangling his fingers in her hair. When he moaned with obvious pleasure, I whimpered.

I felt a light touch to my shoulder. "It's just a trick, Brooke," Robyn whispered. "He's under her spell."

My eyes flicked to Maggie, who stood perfectly still, a sly grin on her face and hunger in her eyes. Was she next? My stomach lurched at the thought.

Megan slid her hands to the front of Marcus' robe and leisurely unhinged her lips from his. His eyes popped open. Anger flashed across his face, and he pushed Megan away from him. He looked around the room until he found me.

Satisfied with herself, Megan turned from him and walked past me, licking her lips seductively, as I'd once done to her.

"What the hell are you doing, Maggie?" Marcus asked with a sharpness I'd never heard from him before.

A look of sick delight had frozen on Maggie's face. Her mouth twitched at the corners. "Did you enjoy the entertainment?" she asked.

"Hardly."

"That's not what it looked like to me. On the contrary, I think you enjoyed yourself immensely. At least it looked as though you did." She looked from him to me. "Didn't it, Brooke? That *was* quite a kiss." Maggie's grin widened. "And it was only the opening act."

Marcus' face reddened. The muscles in his jaw tightened, pulling the cords in his neck. But he stood still, as if knowing he was powerless against her.

The pain of what I'd just witnessed stung my eyes and burned my throat. I felt Marcus' eyes on me, but I couldn't meet his gaze.

"It wasn't his fault," Robyn whispered, before leaving my side to take her place on the septagram.

The others took their places as well, and for the first time in a century, the Coven of Seven was assembled. I felt nauseous.

Maggie held out a white hand. "Samantha, come to me."

Without hesitation, Sammy darted to her side. The two of them walked to a long wooden table set against a wall.

"Everything is ready, Priestess," Sammy said, bowing her head.

On the table sat a lit candle, a small pouch, a glass of what looked like red wine, and the vial that held my blood. Sammy picked up the glass. While murmuring a spell, she took a smidgeon of ingredients from the pouch and sprinkled it into the liquid in the glass. She held the vial over the candle flame until it bubbled then poured the hot blood into the red liquid. With the motion of her wrist, Sammy swirled the ingredients inside of the glass, mixing them thoroughly. When she was done, she held the potion out to Maggie. Maggie took it, closed her eyes, spoke a few words of magic, and drank until every drop was gone.

With curious eyes, we all watched as Maggie transformed into the familiar Margaret. White teeth gleamed between crimson lips, framed by porcelain skin. The ends of her raven hair were lost in the blackness of her robe. Margaret was strikingly beautiful once again. She smiled, relishing the moment.

"Merry meet, Witches."

Margaret's zombies droned the greeting back to her.

"Who would have thought we'd all be together again for one final casting," she said. Her black eyes, fringed with long lashes, darted to each one of us. Her pupils glistened like lacquered obsidian.

I blinked and pulled my gaze away from her. None of this made sense to me. Why would she want to cast a circle? Marcus and I wouldn't be able to participate unless we came into power, which she would never allow. It would mean that Marcus and I would have more power than we'd ever had—possibly even more than Margaret. The very reason she'd killed us last time.

"I've had a sudden change of heart." She said as if reading my mind. "In a few moments, the two of you will come into full power. Something you have never lived through before. I hope you appreciate the sacrifice I'm making for you." Her eyes darted from Marcus to me.

“What’s in it for you?” Marcus asked sharply.

“Now why would you think this was to my benefit?” She acted as if her feelings were hurt.

“Stop playing games. What do you really want, Margaret?” Marcus demanded. His hands turned into fists at his side.

“Oh, very well.” She exuded innocence as she spoke. “There is one tiny thing I want. I want to break the seal of the Coven of Seven.”

My blood froze. “There’s no way in hell I’ll help you break the seal,” I snapped.

Her eyes darted to me. “Now, Brooke, you’re hardly in a position to disobey.”

“Don’t be foolish, Margaret,” Marcus said. “You can’t control the power contained within the crystal.”

Her expression darkened.

One hundred years ago, during our last coven meeting, the seven of us had sacrificed a small amount of power, imprisoning it within the crystal septagram. We created a magical seal around the crystal and bound it shut with wards of protection. It was an experiment to allow the power inside to grow and strengthen until one day, together, the seven of us would release it, thus making each one of us stronger. How foolish, now that I thought back.

“What makes you think we wouldn’t use the power against you?” I asked.

Margaret threw her head back in a fit of musical laughter. “My dear, you haven’t begun to see the extent of my powers.”

“If you’re so powerful, then why do you need more?” I argued.

She ignored my last remark. Her face turned from amused to curious. Her glossy eyes lit up. “It is time, sunset on the equinox—when day meets night.” Her eyes, along with everyone else’s, flicked to Marcus and me.

Before I could blink, an invisible force wrapped itself around me, lifting me inches off the floor. I hung suspended in an upright position, as did Marcus, while an electrical current swept through my body like a shock wave. A fresh breath of air invaded my lungs, reviving every cell. My eyes fell shut, and I became aware of *my* body only and the sensation of sweet liquid flowing through it—Marcus’ blood. It washed through me like a tidal wave, drenching me internally. The molecules I was made from absorbed every drop. My eyes flew open. The experience of coming into power was a feeling far beyond anything I’d experienced in the sixteen years of my current life. To stand in this room, knowing that, besides Marcus, I might be the most powerful witch in the coven, was exhilarating beyond measure. When it was over, I felt myself being lowered to the floor once more.

All eyes were on us. But it was Margaret’s that drew my attention away from everyone else’s. Her eyes were animated beyond the boundaries of excitement.

My whole body was electrified with magic now. A mild shimmer touched the entire surface of my skin. I felt it in my hands, my lips; even my eyeballs shimmered as the magic surged over me and through me. I looked at Marcus, and I knew by the expression on his face he’d experienced the same gift I had. He smiled warmly. And despite the evil surrounding us, I smiled back.

I was powerful now. Why did Margaret think that I wouldn’t take Robyn and Marcus and escape with the snap of my fingers—if it was even possible?

“We’re leaving,” Marcus said, as if he’d read my thoughts.

Margaret’s answering smile was both beautiful and pure evil.

“Maybe you will, but I think Brooke will stay. And if Brooke stays, then I am almost certain you will stay.” Her grin widened along with her eyes.

“What are you talking about? Why will I stay?” I asked.

Margaret raised her arms in front of her. She pointed two white index fingers at a corner. And with a modest show of blue fireworks, two very scared people appeared.



Chapter Thirty-Eight

No!” My mouth fell open in shock.

“Brooke? What the hell?” one said.

The other shook violently with fright.

She had me. I wasn’t free. I had no choice but to do her bidding.

In the corner, tied together, were my two best friends.

“B-Brooke, wh-wh-what’s going on?” Courtney stuttered while looking as if she’d just stepped out of a teen fashion magazine.

“I’m so sorry,” I said, as if that could ever be enough.

“Before you get any ideas, the rope they’re bound with is magical. As long as it binds them, your magic cannot touch them.” Margaret looked from me to Marcus, then back to me. “One false move from either of you, and I will cut out their hearts so fast, their blood won’t have a chance to spill. Or, I can dissect them slowly and messily. That will depend on how well you follow direction.” She smiled, as if enjoying herself immensely. “Once the seal is broken, I will send them back to Boston immediately with no recollection of the night’s events.”

Courtney shrieked. Luke swore, loudly. Before I could blink, Margaret was standing in front of them with the point of a dagger pressed against Luke’s chest.

“You may be strong now, maybe even stronger than me, but I doubt you can whisk everyone out of here at once. Choose your path wisely.”

“We’ll do what you ask,” Marcus blurted. “But how do we know you’ll keep your promise and release them?”

“You’ll just have to trust me.” Her sinister grin wasn’t reassuring.

I looked at my terrified friends and felt ashamed of who I was.

“Let’s get on with it,” I said defeated.

The seven of us joined hands. With Marcus to my right, Evan to my left and the others in their positions, we began the casting.

“Guardians of spirit,” Margaret began. “I invoke thee. Enrich us with your divine presence.” When she fell silent, the purple candle behind her burst into a toxic purple flame that shot upwards.

Courtney shrieked.

As I stared into the crystal, I saw a tiny fleck of purple dance in its center.

Next was earth. Robyn called upon the guardians of earth. Before the last words had sprung from her mouth, the green candle behind her shot an iridescent green flame into the air. Inside the crystal septagram, a tiny fleck of green swirled fluently with the purple.

Sammy invoked air, Megan water, and Evan fire. The multi-colored life in the center of the crystal grew, swirling violently.

Marcus squeezed my hand and began his invocation. He called upon the guardians of dark. Instantly the swirl of colors seemed to disappear, but really, their colors were just hidden within the darkness. The flame on his candle was strikingly black.

Everyone but Marcus, who I had the feeling wasn’t too proud of himself, glared at me, almost hungrily, waiting.

I sighed and called upon the guardians of light—my element. The spirits of light—which only I had the ability to feel, embraced me, letting me know they were there. Although I couldn’t see it, I felt the heat behind me as the white candle burst into a pure white flame. The light, as if taken by force, was pulled from around me and sucked into the center of the crystal, illuminating some of the over

powering darkness, creating a perfect balance. For the first time in a century, the colors in the center of the crystal pulsed with renewed life.

The energy in the room swirled around us, prickling the skin, awakening the most remote cells in our bodies. I'd forgotten what a rush it was to cast a circle—an ecstasy far beyond words. Much greater than any human experience could ever be.

"It is time to break the seal." Margaret's voice betrayed her obvious hunger for the power within.

With our hands linked to keep the circle alive, we began the chant we'd devised a century ago—mine and Marcus' last task as part of the Coven of Seven. This time though, we chanted in reverse.

If the seal were to break, each element would aid the trapped magic in finding its way to the tips of the crystal, where it would be released into the room to find its conjurer, thus increasing his or her power.

After a long span of chanting, nothing happened. Then suddenly, Courtney shrieked my name out. Startled, I looked over at her and Luke.

Spidery lines of crimson appeared on their faces, traveling in no particular pattern down their necks, as if someone with a shaky hand were sketching them on with a razor blade. Blood beaded down every line.

"Stop it!" I yelled to Margaret.

At once, the crimson lines ceased their travel and disappeared, as if they were never there.

Margaret laughed darkly. "I warned you not to disobey me."

"I haven't disobeyed you." I said, sharply.

"The seal stays shut!"

The malevolent look in her eyes stopped my heart.

"If you wanted the seal to open it would have been open by now."

"The binding of the seal is stronger than you thought," I said. "Than any of us thought it would be. Maybe we can't unbind our own seal."

Then without thinking, I let go of Evan's hand, thus breaking the circle. The look on Margaret's face then would have made the devil cringe. Marcus reached an arm out in front of me and pushed me behind him.

The blaze from the seven candles dwindled to a meek flame. The violent swirl of color inside the crystal ceased its rage and then disappeared altogether. A horrendous shriek from Margaret shook the room. Her arms rose in the air. Her voice, now violent, chanted out a spell, loudly and frantically.

I ran to Luke and Courtney. Marcus was at my side and grabbed my hand. "Together," he said.

I knew what he was thinking. I grabbed Luke's hand. Marcus grabbed Courtney's. Together, we began a transporting spell, but before the second word was out of our mouths, something happened.

The image in front of me flickered ever-so-slightly. I felt different—heavier. The chant was lost. Marcus and I looked at each other, confused. Then we turned to Margaret, who had calmed herself and was smiling once more.

"You see? I *am* more powerful than you."

Beyond the smugness, I detected a look of relief in her eyes.

With no fight left in me, I asked, "What just happened?"

"I took you back in time. It is precisely two hours earlier than it was a moment ago."

"But, you're still . . ." I couldn't bring myself to say the words.

"Young and beautiful? Yes, and I always will be now that your fairy blood lives in my veins."

"I love you."

I heard Marcus whisper in my ear. Maybe he thought it would be his last words to me. I felt weak. Tears stung my eyes, but I pushed them back.

"How sweet." Margaret's voice was edged with sarcasm. "It wasn't always you who he loved."

I looked at Marcus. He looked as confused as I felt.

“Well, do you want to tell her, or shall the pleasure be mine?”

“Tell me what?”

“You see, Brooke, before Kalan met Bryn, he met ... Cyra.” She hissed the last word out.

I felt as if an arctic wave slapped me in the face, and I gasped loudly.

I heard Marcus’ breathe catch and felt him stiffen at my side.

“Who’s Cyra?” Robyn asked.

I ignored her and glared wide-eyed at Marcus, feeling betrayed in the worst way.

Horror-filled recognition dawned on his face that was quickly replaced with pain. His shoulders fell.

“I’m sorry,” he said without looking directly at me.

“Sorry?” Still in shock, I looked back to Margaret and waited for more.

“Kalan and Cyra were in love—”

“No! It was never love,” Marcus said, glaring at Margaret like he would kill her right then and there if he could.

I expected him to deny the charge altogether, but he didn’t. The stitches that had held my heart together the past couple weeks tightened and snapped apart.

“Lust then,” Margaret said with a wave of her hand. “Either way, he belonged to me first.” She looked at me curiously, as if waiting for my reaction.

“Who is Cyra?” Robyn demanded, with growing impatience.

With my eyes fixed to Margaret, I told Robyn the tale.

“Cyra was Bryn’s older sister—my sister.” I thought back to Wales. There were no clues to their relationship. “She was cast in disgrace from the fairy realm—”

“The fairy what?” Luke interrupted. “Man, this is getting too wacked out for me.”

I winced. I’d completely forgotten they were there.

“Any fairy powers she had were taken from her before her banishment. I see now, how my blood made her beautiful again.”

“If she has fairy blood in her, why did she need yours?” Robyn asked.

“At the moment of banishment, Cyra was given over to the demon world. Not a single drop of fairy blood remained in her body.”

“Wow. She must have been really bad,” Robyn said.

“She was.”

Margaret interrupted. “So now you know who I really am, dear sister ... the good one ... the one who everyone loved.”

“You killed him. How could you kill Kalan?”

“He loved *you*. It was a satisfying revenge.”

“You also killed your own sister? How cold-hearted,” Robyn added with disgust.

“Yes, twice, and I’m about to kill her again, then Kalan will be mine once more.” Her smile flaunted her delight.

“That will never happen,” Marcus said. “I’ll die first.”

I swallowed pushing the acid back down my throat.

Margaret laughed darkly. “I won’t allow that.” Her gaze lowered to the floor. “Beth dear, I don’t remember summoning you.”

I looked past her to see Beth standing meekly at the bottom of the stairs.

“You didn’t,” Beth said.

Without warning an ear-piercing shriek cut through the air. Margaret’s face contorted into a horrendous mask of distress. Her back arched. She staggered forward. A network of thin cracks formed in the stone beneath her feet. Like a blip in time, the room altered again. As the power shifted, strength

and magic flowed through me once more, lightening me. Margaret spun around to face a trembling Beth. The hilt of a dagger protruded from Margaret's back. Blood, as black as her robe, cascaded down her back, pooling on the floor.

By the look on everyone's face, they were all as stunned as I was.

With just a look, Margaret began choking the life from Beth.

Quickly, I regained my senses and turned to Courtney and Luke. "Forget you were ever here."

"No problem," Luke said.

With ease, magic flowed through my arms and out the tips of my tingling fingers. With a crackle, the magical binding ropes that restrained my friends loosened and fell to the floor at their feet. With Margaret in distress and engaged in Beth's demise, it was easy to override her spell.

I called upon all the guardians for aid in sending Courtney and Luke back to Boston. Courtney latched onto Luke's arm. A few seconds later, they disappeared into thin air.

"I cast a spell on them so they'd forget this night," Marcus said.

I nodded, unable to look into his eyes just yet.

Margaret was too involved with Beth now to care about Luke and Courtney anymore. Poor Beth, she lay awkwardly on the hard floor, struggling to speak. Her bulging eyes searched the room until they found Marcus. With a gurgled last breath, she mumbled out a word that sounded like, "Father." After death, her pain-filled eyes stayed wide open.

Marcus and I exchanged looks.

"What did she mean, 'Father?'" I whispered to him.

Marcus shrugged, looking just as confused and freaked out as I did.

Margaret, oozing hatred, turned back to us. Her beauty was slightly marred by the contortion of pain her face held.

"What did Beth just say?" Marcus demanded.

Margaret's chest heaved. She staggered toward us, stopping in front of the crystal septagram and with a raspy voice said, "She called you 'Father.'"

"Why?"

"Because, she is Kalan and Cyra's love child."

My mouth fell open. Beside me, I heard Robyn gasp and saw her hand fly to her mouth.

A sharp breath of air expelled from Marcus. "She's lying!" The loudness of his voice made me look at him. His face muscles tightened. A blue vein was visible under the tanned skin at his temple. I'd never seen him look so angry.

"I do not lie." Though, Margaret's shoulders rose up and down in her efforts to breathe, she looked equally as threatening.

"Why does she look so young?" I asked.

"Beth died in Wales when she was young."

I thought I saw a flash of hurt in her eyes, but I could have mistaken emotional pain for physical.

"How did she die? Was she murdered?" I kept up the interrogation.

"She died because she was part" Margaret hesitated.

"Because she was part demon," I finished for her.

"Yes. Had she been part fairy and not demon, she would have lived, but demons do not spawn well with other races." As she spoke, the spark was leaving her.

Robyn shuddered. "We have to get out of here," she said in a rush. She pulled on my arm, but I didn't budge.

Megan, Sammy and Evan all held defensive stances in front of the stairs.

"I can't go without the others," I said to Robyn.

On the other side of me, Marcus was very still, but I felt magic emanate from him.

On the table, Margaret's dagger trembled then lifted. Quickly, I figured out what he was doing. I stood still and watched him work his magic. His face was an intense mask of concentration. The dagger lifted higher, turned, then hurled toward Margaret, piercing her black heart before she could twist herself away. She had been too weakened by Beth's attempt at murder to react fast enough. Another ear-piercing shriek split the air. Margaret fell. With a cracking sound, the fissures in the floor traveled to where she now lay. The iron stand toppled and fell. The crystal crashed with it, sending hundreds of shards across the floor.

"That won't kill her," Robyn said. "We need fire."

Evan left Sammy and Megan's side and lunged for Marcus. Instinctively, I lifted my hand to stop him with a spell.

"No!" Marcus yelled. "I changed him back."

When Evan reached Marcus, he threw his arms around his brother and hugged him.

"I don't know what to say," Evan said.

"We'll talk later," Marcus said, patting his back.

While Margaret withered on the floor in obvious agony, I took the hint from Marcus and turned Sammy back to her old self. She ran to me shrieking.

"It's okay, Sammy, were leaving. Where's Megan?" I asked, looking around the room.

"She must have taken off," Marcus said.

"We have to find her," Robyn said.

"We will," I said. "But right now we have to see to my sister's death."

Margaret was reduced to a weakened heap on the floor. Her bony fingers gripped the hilt of the dagger and pulled it out of her chest. It clanked to the stone. Beside me, I heard Robyn mumble something. The rope Margaret had bound Luke and Courtney with, was now tied tightly around her, thanks to Robyn's magic.

"Fire," Robyn said, panicked.

"Come on," Marcus said, pulling me by the hand to the bottom of the stairs.

Once all of us, excluding Margaret and Beth were in front of the stairs, Marcus, Robyn and I concentrated all our energy on conjuring fire on a stone floor. It wasn't hard. Almost as soon as we'd begun, a circle of flame surrounded Margaret. Ancient languages I wasn't familiar with rolled off her tongue in the form of spells and curses. Somewhere in the back of my head, I heard Evan yell over the chaos that he was going to go look for Megan. I was too involved in the spell to stop him.

When we were satisfied the circle of fire was strong enough to hold Margaret, we stopped our chant.

Sammy was huddled next to me clutching my robe tightly with two fists. When I didn't budge, she yanked on my sleeve. "C'mon, Brooke. She can't escape now."

"How do we know she's going to die? Fire kills witches, but how do we know it will kill a demon? And how do we know she won't come back?" Marcus asked.

"She doesn't have a soul. She can't be reincarnated. And, unless she has someone to bring her body back to life and keep her that way, as she did for Beth, she cannot come back," I said.

"I wonder how she kept Beth alive all these years," he said.

"Morwenna was probably able to revive Beth and keep her alive because she was part *witch*." I emphasized the word 'witch' rather harshly, throwing it in his face. Then I looked at Beth's lifeless body and softened. "That part of her had a soul." She looked like a child. I wanted to go to her and close her eyes, but she was too close to the flames. Silent tears ran down my cheeks for Beth.

We stayed long enough to watch Margaret's robe catch fire. After that, I couldn't watch anymore. Marcus, who didn't want to leave until she was reduced to a heap of ash, had to be coaxed to leave.



Chapter Thirty-Nine

Margaret shrilled out spells and curses as she burned. The balance of power was shifting again. With her use of magic as a last ditch effort to save herself, we couldn't use ours to whisk ourselves away from the Inn, so we ran. Ear-piercing shrieks chased us through the attic, echoing sharply against the acute pitch of the roof. The sounds of a demon-witch dying were something I was sure I would never forget.

Our feet pounded heavily down the narrow attic stairs and down the hallways. When I came to the main staircase, I paused and watched as smoke and flame billowed out of the attic dormer windows in the painting. Sammy caught my wrist on her way by and yanked me away, practically throwing me off my feet.

We made it to the bottom of the stairs and bolted through the front door. I stopped on the walkway in front of the doorstep to catch my breath. Marcus stopped behind me. Sammy and Robyn didn't stop running until they were closer to the street. Evan and Megan were still inside somewhere.

I tore my robe off and threw it on the ground.

"Why are you stopping?" Marcus asked, between heavy breaths.

A moment of silence passed between us.

"Brooke?"

I drew a shaky breath of fresh air into my lungs. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw his robe drop to the ground on top of mine.

At first I didn't know what to say, and then without thinking, accusations started spilling from my mouth.

I turned to look at him. He winced as his eyes dropped to the front of the shirt of his that I wore generously stained with my blood.

"Did Christian know about ... Cyra?" It pained me to even say her real name.

"Only after the binding. By then it was too late."

"But Kalan knew everything in Wales and kept it from Bryn."

"At the time, Kalan didn't know Cyra was Bryn's sister, or that Cyra turned into Morwenna."

"That doesn't change the fact that you were with someone else."

All hell was breaking loose around us, and there I stood, in front of the burning Ravenwyck, a jealous sixteen-year-old, confronting her boyfriend about a past girlfriend. I knew I was acting childish. I also knew how much I loved Marcus and that none of the past mattered, but my emotions ruled the moment.

"That's two past lives you've been with someone else before me ... in that way."

"You were with Jason," Marcus said. I knew by his tone, he'd said it out of desperation.

I shook my head. "No. Claire was never with Jason in that way, only Christian."

"Oh. I didn't know that."

"And Bryn had only ever been with Kalan."

The acrid scent of something burning other than wood wafted from the open door, accompanied by wispy tendrils of smoke. I turned my head away and stepped to the side of the walkway into the clear air.

"C'mon, we have to get out of here." Marcus flicked his head back and forth anxiously, from me to the smoke.

My stubbornness persisted. I ignored the danger.

"Who were you with before I came to Deadwich?"

He took a step closer and circled his arms around me, ignoring my puny struggles to break free. I

finally conceded and softened against him.

Marcus lowered his head and spoke into my hair. "I haven't been with anyone in that way in this lifetime."

I contemplated that for a moment. "No one?"

He shook his head. "I guess I've been saving myself for you."

I let my forehead drop to his shoulder. "I'm sorry. It doesn't matter, really. None of it matters." As I blabbered on, his arms tightened around me. "The past is the past. I'm just tired and cranky ... and hungry."

He smoothed the back of my tangled hair. I took a deep breath of leather into my lungs. His hands found the sides of my face and he lifted it to his.

The corners of his mouth twitched into the promise of a smile. "We have a lot to look forward to plus a future we've never had before." His eyebrows rose slightly, smoothing out the creases.

"Do you think you could ever forgive me?"

"If anyone needs forgiveness, it's me."

"No. I'm really sorry. I can't believe after everything that has just happened I had to act like a jealous teenager. It doesn't matter what happened in the past."

"Whatever happened, I only ever loved *you*."

"I know." And I did.

Oblivious to our surroundings, we stood in front of the burning Ravenwyck and kissed.

The sharp caw of a bird ended our tender moment. Marcus' lips jerked away from mine. We looked up. A large raven circled above us, spiraling downward. Something shiny was clutched in one claw. It spiraled lower. A claw opened, releasing the object. It fell into Marcus' hand.

I stared at it, mesmerized.

Draped across his fingers, was my amulet. The raven landed on top of a nearby tree and looked down at us. I stared into its dark and familiar eyes. It stared back.

Something clicked inside me then—the innocent eyes, the raven hair. "Oh, my God. I think the raven is Beth. I knew she had a soul." The raven's head bobbed, as if to confirm my theory. "Thank you." I mouthed the words to it.

The huge black bird spread its wings and tore into the sky. We watched it fly over the rooftops until it was out of sight. I felt at peace knowing Beth was free. I looked at Marcus, tears rimming my eyelids.

He turned his gaze from the sky back to me, then without words, he placed the amulet around my neck where it belonged. It felt right. I closed my eyes, spilling the pools of liquid down my cheeks. Marcus wiped the tears from my face and pulled me close.

"The roofs on fire," Sammy shouted from the other end of the walkway.

"Well, what did you expect?" I heard Robyn say to her.

We pulled apart. Sammy and Robyn were running toward us.

I looked up, and my mouth dropped open. "The ravens! The ravens are gone!"

"What?!" Robyn said.

Marcus looked up in silence. Robyn and I looked at each other, the same astounded look on our faces. The row of sculpted ravens that had sat atop the dormer peaks was gone, as if they'd flown away—maybe with Beth.

Thick billows of dark smoke, fringed in flame, spiraled into the night sky. The fire alarm sounded at the station. Clusters of people began to form on the street. Within minutes, sirens blared and lights flashed.

"Everyone's going to see us," I said, suddenly alarmed.

The sound of timber cracking from within made us jump back.

"I have to go in and find Evan," Marcus said, letting go of me and bolting for the door.

“No!” I grabbed his jacket sleeve and wouldn’t let go. “I know Evan’s in there, but I can’t let you go in.” I sounded desperate, but I loved him more than life, and I wasn’t going to lose him now. “Please,” I pleaded when he tried to break free of my grasp.

“Marky!”

We spun around to see Uncle Edmund sprinting up the walkway toward us.

“Uncle Edmund! What are you doing here?”

“When you didn’t make it to my place I knew something was wrong, so I searched for you on Skull Island, and when I didn’t find you there, I came here. The doors and windows were locked. I spent most of the day trying to find a way in.”

“They were probably magically sealed,” Marcus said.

“Where’s Evan?” Uncle Edmund asked.

“He’s inside.” As I said it, Megan, draped in black, came shrieking out of the front door, alone.

When it looked as though she wasn’t going to stop running, Marcus caught her arm and whirled her around. With a savage look in her eyes, she crouched like a ferocious tigress ready to strike and then lunged at Marcus. Before she slammed into him, she lost control of her muscles and went limp in his arms.

“That was close,” Robyn said.

“I didn’t do anything. Did you, Brooke?” Marcus asked.

I shook my head.

A loud sound of wood snapping and groaning, mixed with glass breaking, came from the upper levels of the Inn. We looked up. Pitch black smoke and violent flames raged together, engulfing the entire upper level.

“She’s dead.” Marcus said flatly. “All spells she’d ever woven are now broken.”

Marcus was right. Margaret was dead. I could feel the magical energy shimmering over my body again. Marcus looked at me knowingly.

Megan recovered and twisted herself out of Marcus’ grip. She straightened and looked down at herself. In disgust, she flung the robe off. As she tossed it on the ground, I zapped it into oblivion along with ours. The tips of my fingers tingled with renewed life.

For the first time since we’d met, I wasn’t intimidated by Megan. I stared at her through narrow slits, holding her with my rage, imagining the possibilities of what my magic could do to her. My top lip even twitched into a snarl.

Her eyes widened, and she crouched away from me.

“Easy, Brooke,” Marcus warned.

I ground my teeth together and released her from my glare.

Several police and emergency rescue vehicles were parked in front of the Inn now. For an instant, their lights took me back to the night Luke and I had been picked up by the police—the night I’d once held responsible for my fate.

“We have to get out of here before anyone sees us,” Sammy said in a panic.

I looked around. “Where’s Uncle Edmund?”

“I saw him go inside,” Megan said.

“He went inside? I have to go find him,” Marcus said.

I stopped him again as the sound of more snapping and cracking exploded from inside. Violent flames shot out of all the windows now.

“Back on the street kids,” a fireman yelled, startling us.

“They’re coming this way,” Robyn said.

Several firemen ran toward us with hoses and other equipment. “This is no place to play,” another one said.

“My uncle and brother are in there,” Marcus said.

The fireman stopped in his tracks and pulled out his radio. “Two civilians inside,” he shouted into the radio, and then walked through the middle of our group. “Is there anyone else in the building that you know of?”

“No!” the five of us chimed at once.

“Right. Stand aside kids, we’ll find them.”

We stepped back to the edge of the property, away from the intensity of the heat, hidden from view of the street by the hedge of wild roses. An ambulance came blaring into the Inn parking lot. Two paramedics got out. Minutes later, two firemen emerged from the Inn pulling a coughing Evan out by the arms. Marcus ran to him. I went along to keep him from going inside.

The paramedics hovered over Evan, directing him to the open back of the ambulance. Evan refused to go inside, and instead sat heavily on the back bumper.

“Did you see Uncle Edmund?” Marcus asked.

The paramedics had a portable oxygen mask strapped to his face already. Evan waved them away. They stepped aside, but stayed close by. Evan nodded to Marcus. He pulled the mask off his soot-covered face. The grim look he gave Marcus then made the bones in my legs turn to mush.

“I couldn’t see. It was dark. Uncle Edmund” He swallowed hard.

I was barely breathing, waiting.

“I couldn’t see to get out. I heard him calling me. I followed the sound of his voice. I was almost to him when part of the ceiling fell on top of him, trapping him. I tried to drag the debris off, but some of the pieces were too heavy.”

Marcus’ eyes widened. The pain and shock on his face was like a stab to my heart.

Evan took some deep breaths into the oxygen mask, which he now held, and continued. “Then the firemen came. The three of us dug for him until the flames got too intense. I didn’t want to leave, but they dragged me out.” His shoulders rose then fell heavily. “I’m sorry.” Evan lifted a shaking, soot-covered hand and pushed away the sweat-soaked hair that had matted to his forehead. His blue eyes were glossy.

Marcus looked too stunned to speak. I was torn. Evan looked as if he needed me more, so with a heavy heart, I went to him and put my arms around him.

“It’s not your fault,” I said.

His arms tightened around me. I reached a hand out for Marcus. He took it and joined our embrace. There were no tears, although the three of us exuded sadness.

Marcus straightened and broke away first. With a raspy voice he said, “We have to leave and make it look as if we were never here.”

Already, it was chaos on the Ravenwyck grounds and equally chaotic out on the street. It looked as though all of the Villagers had come out to watch the Inn burn—probably the most exciting thing that had ever happened in Deadwich. They would never know it, but the Village name had been justified, once again.

“Evan, I can magic you home if you want,” Marcus offered.

“No. I’d rather walk, but if you can get me away from these guys—” He gestured toward the paramedics, “and make them forget about me, that would be great.”

“Sure,” Marcus said and then hesitated. “Do you want to come with us?”

Evan shook his head. “Just get me out of here.”

Marcus nodded. His face was an emotionless mask, and I knew that he was concentrating all his energy into making his brother disappear.

As I watched Evan sitting on the back bumper of the ambulance, hunched forward, his arms resting heavily on his legs and his head bowed, he vanished into thin air as if he’d never been there at all. The

oxygen mask he'd held was gone—probably put away wherever it'd come from.

Marcus grabbed my arm and pulled me to the side of the ambulance, away from the paramedics' line of vision.

With a resistant groan, one end of the Inn collapsed, shooting sparks like the Fourth of July into the air and across the lawn. People on the street yelled out in distress, or excitement—it was hard to tell. Personally, I couldn't wait for the Inn to be reduced to ash.

"I'll walk Sammy and Megan home," Robyn said. "But you can whisk us out on the street too, so no one sees us leaving."

I looked at Sammy for her approval.

"Wait!" she said. "Brooke, I can't believe everything that's happened. I didn't want to be mean to you, honest."

I wrapped my arms around my cousin. "Sammy, I'm so glad you're back. I missed you."

When she pulled back, her face was tear-stained. "I'll make it up to you. We all will."

"None of it was your fault, Sammy. There wasn't anything you could do differently."

She smiled grimly and then lightened her tone. "I can't believe I was a real witch." Then she looked at me strangely. "I can't believe you were a fairy. Wow. You'll have to tell me all about it sometime."

I nodded. "We'll talk."

She looked at Marcus and smiled half-heartedly. "Sorry about Uncle Edmund, Marcus."

With a grim look, he nodded.

Standing on the edge of the group, Megan kicked the toe of her designer boot into the grass, looking as if she wanted to say something.

"Megan, you coming with us?" Sammy asked.

She nodded and said, "In a minute." She bit her lip, looking nervous. She looked at Marcus then me. "I just wanted to say that ... I'm sorry, too."

"Like Brooke said to Sammy, nothing was your fault," Marcus said.

She looked at me, totally remorseful. I figured this was probably the hardest thing she'd ever done, so I showed her some sympathy. "Margaret possessed you this time around. You had no control over anything you did. I know that."

"But I was such a bitch in school."

"Oh, you're always a bitch, Megan, but we love ya anyway," Robyn said, linking her arm through Megan's.

Megan pursed her lips and nodded knowingly.

"Okay, you guys ready?" I asked, with increasing anxiety.

Robyn nodded.

As I concentrated on the magic within me, my body pulsed with electricity. With a simple wave of my hand, I whisked the three of them to the end of the street.

"That just leaves you and me," Marcus said when they were gone.

"Don't you want to stay? Maybe, he'll"

He shook his head. "No. He's gone. I can feel it. No one but us will even know why he was at the Inn." He paused looking thoughtful. "Maybe they'll think he had a thing for Maggie."

"That wouldn't be so bad if everyone thought that. We could even say he told us about it and swore us to secrecy," I said, although I didn't sound too convincing.

"No, that's good." Marcus sighed. "He went in there so I wouldn't."

I didn't like the guilt his tone had picked up.

"Yes. He gave up his very long life so you could finally live yours. You know he wouldn't have had it any other way."

Marcus pulled me into his arms and buried his head in my hair. "What am I going to tell my

parents?”

“Nothing. We’re not here, remember? If they need an explanation for why Uncle Edmund was here, then we’ll offer them ‘the crush on Maggie’ story, but not unless we have to.”

“Right.”

A fireman on the other side of the hedge saw us and said, “Will you look at that. Teens have no respect these days.”

“Where are their parents,” another said. “Those kids oughta be in bed by now.”

We couldn’t help but smile half-heartedly.

“It’ll feel good to be normal again,” Marcus said.

“I know what you mean.”

Marcus looked at his cell phone display. “Ten minutes to midnight. What do you say we ditch this place?”

“Okay, but first, we have to erase ourselves from the minds of the firemen.”

We put our magic into use again. Once we were confident we hadn’t missed anyone, Marcus grabbed my hand and whisked us away, making sure the two firemen who had made snide comments about us, saw us disappear.



Chapter Forty

We materialized inside the entry of the boathouse.
“I wish I could have seen the looks on their faces when we vanished” I said, laughing and then clamped my mouth shut, remembering the bitter-sweetness of the situation.

When reality of where I was set in, I grew serious. “Don’t you think for our family’s sake we should go home?”

Marcus brushed a lock of hair out of my eye, leaving a warm spot behind where his hand had grazed. “They won’t miss us tonight. I took care of it. I really don’t want to be alone, and I couldn’t imagine saying goodbye to you right now.”

“I know.”

“But I don’t want this night to be a sad one either,” Marcus said.

“How can it not be?”

“Because you’re here with me and we’re safe. We have our whole lives to look forward to now. I want to celebrate it. Tomorrow I’ll mourn.”

He shrugged out of his leather jacket and threw it on a bench by the door. His upper body was bare which gave me an idea.

“What time is it now?”

Marcus looked at the digital clock on the stove panel. “Eleven fifty-five.”

“Five minutes of magic left. How about a couple of quick showers?” I asked playfully.

Marcus smiled and nodded.

With our brief time of magic soon at an end, I quickly thought of everything I needed and with tingling fingers, zapped us freshly showered with clean clothes.

“Flannel? All you could come up with, is flannel?” Marcus teased, looking down at himself.

“I like you in flannel. Besides, it’s designer flannel.” I looked down over my own designer apparel that I’d put together. “Nice,” I said, more than satisfied with my look.

“Very nice,” Marcus said, eyeing me in a new way.

“One more thing,” I said. Knowing I only had a couple seconds of magic left, I waved my hand toward the kitchen table. A take-out bag from my favorite chain restaurant in Boston appeared. Two cheeseburger meals complete with shakes.

“Mmm, I’m starving,” Marcus said.

“Hey, do you feel that?” I asked, feeling slightly heavier than I had a few seconds ago. “No more tingling. The magic is gone.” My face fell.

“Come here. No sadness tonight, remember?”

Marcus took me by the hand and led me to the sofa. We sat sideways, facing each other. The spark in his eyes grew warm and fluidic like chocolate fondue.

“We don’t need magic to have fun, and we’ll make our own tingles.”

As he said it, he reached underneath the back of my shirt and laid his hand on my back. A tingle shimmered up my spine.

I gave him a warm smile. “I thought I’d never feel that again. I’ve missed you so much.” I squeezed him as tight as I could, breathing him in. As always, he smelled fresh. I’d gotten everything right.

“It must have been awful for you. I know it would have killed me to see you in a coma.”

“It was hell, that’s for sure. Worse than anything that had happened in the past two days.”

He pulled back to look at me. His eyes dropped to my neck. “Where’s the amulet?”

“I sent it home. It’s safe with the grimoire. I don’t think I’ll wear it anymore.”

“You don’t want to live forever?” His eyebrows rose in question.

“Not if forever is without you.”

Marcus gifted me with one of his brilliant and rare smiles that melted my insides. I had a feeling they wouldn’t be so rare now. He cupped the sides of my face in his hands.

“Brooke, I love you more than my mind can even comprehend.”

I nodded, knowing exactly how much that was. “That’s about right. If you can envision that amount of love times infinity, then you’ll know how much I love you back.”

“I already know.”

While gazing into my eyes, he lowered his mouth to mine. My lips felt like mush beneath his. I tangled my fingers through his shampoo-scented hair and pressed his face to mine. An endless amount of delightful tingles raced through my body. My eyelids became too heavy to hold open, so I let them fall over my glazed eyes and basked in the moment.

After a couple of minutes, Marcus pulled away, leaving me weakened and wanting more. I pried my eyes open.

“I have something for you.” He pulled something out of his shirt pocket and held it out to me. It was a familiar looking silver pouch.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Open it and see.”

I picked the pouch up off his hand exposing, a thin, pink, slanted scar across his palm—a symbolic reminder of our little ritual on the wharf. I lifted my scarred hand to his and compared. The scars didn’t match. Mine was three times as long, ending halfway down my wrist. Marcus winced when he saw it for the first time.

He took my hand in his and pressed his lips to the scar.

“Sorry about that.”

“Don’t be. If you hadn’t done it, we wouldn’t have remembered our past. And I cherish those memories—most of them.”

“I almost killed you. I thought you were going to bleed to death in front of me.”

“I can’t imagine how that felt, but I *didn’t* bleed to death.”

“I wouldn’t have lived without you.”

Marcus’ serious turn-about scared me.

“It’s over. If things hadn’t happened exactly the way they had, then maybe we wouldn’t be here, together. Maybe one of us or both of us would be dead.”

“Maybe you’re right, but it will always cause me pain to look at this.” He held my hand up in front of us.

I looked at my scar. “Well I like it. I liked the whole blood sharing thing we did. So what if it didn’t go exactly as planned? It still worked.”

“Okay, I’ll try to get over it.” His eyes softened again. He smiled and said, “Open your surprise.”

I took my hand back and tipped the pouch, gasping with delight when I saw what was inside. Two aqua pieces of fairy quartz tumbled into my palm.

“How did you know about them?”

“Back on the Island, you said you’d left them in the hospital, so while you were conjuring up food, I used my last seconds of magic to conjure up something special for you. Something precious from your fairy realm.” A smile touched his eyes.

I stared at the fairy quartz, too overwhelmed for words.

“Come on,” he said. “I’ve still got a job to do.” He took my hand and stood up, pulling me with him.

I cleared my throat and swallowed past the lump. “What job?”

“I still have to fix you.”

I smiled. “I think you need some fixing too.”

“Then we’ll fix each other,” Marcus said, clutching me close to him.

“Okay, but first, let’s eat.”

Tomorrow we would mourn. Tonight we would lock away the hurt and sorrow and bask in our new happiness. We wouldn’t let anything, not even the death of Uncle Edmund, take this night away from us.

Tonight we would make our own magic.

Tonight we would fix each other.



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About the Author

Lisa Collicutt is a native of Nova Scotia, who takes daily ocean views for granted. She left her urban life far too early and finished growing up in rural NS, where she met her husband and had their son. But a big chunk of her soul remains in the city.

Besides riding on the back of her husband's Harley (because she doesn't yet have her own bike license), Lisa's passion is writing. Her imagination is like an unleashed pet. It requires her attention every waking hour, whether she's at her day job, in a store line-up, or driving from point A to point B. Her pet plays on the fringes of her mind, attempting to capture her attention with story after story.

Lisa can't imagine writing without an element of magic. But besides that, she likes to transport the reader back to their first love. There's nothing like a captured glance, or the brush of an arm, or that first time when her lips touch his, to send shimmers of tingles over your body and release those caged butterflies.

Enter Lisa's imagination where light ends and fantasy begins. But heed these warnings: It's dark . . . It's magical . . . You may experience tingles.



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Frustrated, and desperate to move on, Ever finds herself falling for her hot new neighbor Toby. His relaxed confidence is irresistible, and not just Ever knows it. But falling for Toby comes with a price that throws Ever's life into a whirlwind of chaos and drama. More than hearts are on the line, and more than Ever will suffer.



[Fade, by A.K. Morgen](#)

When Arionna Jacobs meets Dace Matthews, everything she thought she knew about herself and the world around them begins to fall apart.

Neither of them understands what is happening to them, or why, and they're running out of time to figure it out.

An ancient Norse prophecy of destruction has been set into motion, and what destiny has in store for them is bigger than either could have ever imagined.



[Wilde's Fire, by Krystal Wade](#)

Katriona Wilde has never wondered what it would feel like to have everything she's ever known and loved ripped away, but she is about to find out: her entire life has been a lie, and those closest to her have betrayed her.

What's worse, she has no control over her new future, full of magic and horrors from which nightmares are made.

Will Kate discover and learn to control who she really is in time to save the ones she loves, or will all be lost?



[Wilde's Army, by Krystal Wade](#)

“Hello, Katriona.” Those two words spark fear in Katriona Wilde and give way to an unlikely partnership with Perth, the man she's been traded to marry for a favor. Saving her true love and protector Arland keeps her motivated, but the at-odds duo soon realizes trust is something that comes and goes with each breath of Encardia's rotting, stagnant air.

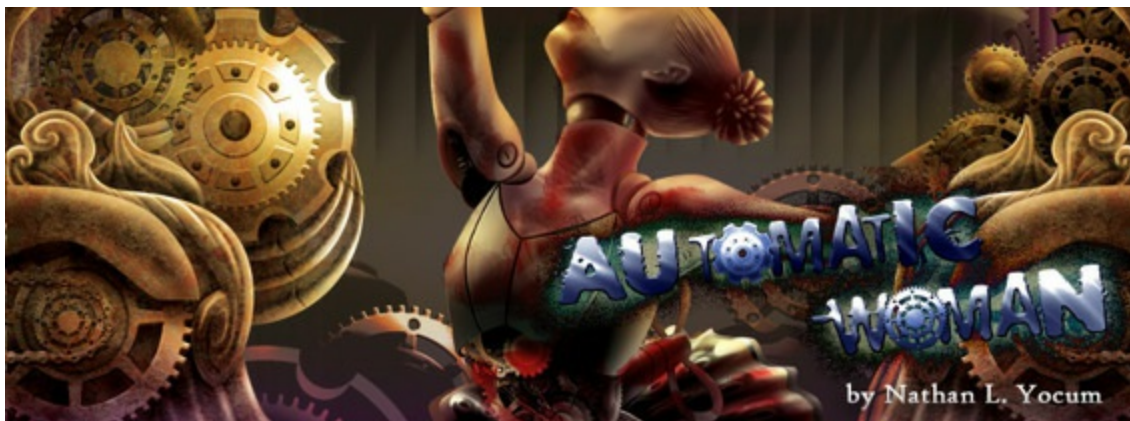
Now, Kate must unite her clashing people, and form an army prepared to fight in order to defeat Darkness. When so many she's grown fond of die along the journey, will she still be Katriona Wilde, the girl with fire?



[Worlds Burn Through, by Vicki Keire](#)

Chloe Burke has nightmares of a world burned to ash and the strange boy who saves them both. Underneath the dreams lurks a deeply buried reality; Chloe and a handful of others are survivors of a decade old apocalypse that burned their home world to the ground.

Now their ancient enemies hunt them again. To keep their adopted world safe, Chloe must undergo a ritual of blood sacrifice that will have life-long consequences if she survives. Her lethal protector, Elio Gray, must keep her alive long enough to do it. Together they will uncover even more dangerous secrets buried in the past's deepest, darkest ashes.



[Automatic Woman, by Nathan L. Yocum](#)

There are no simple cases. Jacob “Jolly” Fellows knows this.

The London of 1888, the London of steam engines, Victorian intrigue, and horseless carriages is not a safe place nor simple place...but it's his place. Jolly is a thief catcher, a door-crashing thug for the prestigious Bow Street Firm, assigned to track down a life sized automatic ballerina. But when theft

turns to murder and murder turns to conspiracy, can Jolly keep his head above water? Can a thief catcher catch a killer?



[**The Department of Magic, by Rod Kierkegaard, Jr.**](#)

Magic is nothing like it seems in children's books. It's dark and bloody and sexual – and requires its own semi-mythical branch of the US Federal Government to safeguard citizens against everpresent supernatural threats.

Join Jasmine Farah and Rocco di Angelo – a pair of wet-behind-the-ears recruits of The Department of Magic – on a nightmare gallop through a world of ghosts, spooks, vampires, and demons, and the minions of South American and Voodoo gods hell-bent on destroying all humanity in the year 2012.

Table of Contents

Appetizer:

- [Book Cover](#)
- [Title Page](#)
- [Dedication](#)

Main Course:

- [Chapter One](#)
- [Chapter Two](#)
- [Chapter Three](#)
- [Chapter Four](#)
- [Chapter Five](#)
- [Chapter Six](#)
- [Chapter Seven](#)
- [Chapter Eight](#)
- [Chapter Nine](#)
- [Chapter Ten](#)
- [Chapter Eleven](#)
- [Chapter Twelve](#)
- [Chapter Thirteen](#)
- [Chapter Fourteen](#)
- [Chapter Fifteen](#)
- [Chapter Sixteen](#)
- [Chapter Seventeen](#)
- [Chapter Eighteen](#)
- [Chapter Nineteen](#)
- [Chapter Twenty](#)
- [Chapter Twenty-One](#)
- [Chapter Twenty-Two](#)
- [Chapter Twenty-Three](#)
- [Chapter Twenty-Four](#)
- [Chapter Twenty-Five](#)
- [Chapter Twenty-Six](#)
- [Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)
- [Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)
- [Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)
- [Chapter Thirty](#)
- [Chapter Thirty-One](#)
- [Chapter Thirty-Two](#)
- [Chapter Thirty-Three](#)
- [Chapter Thirty-Four](#)
- [Chapter Thirty-Five](#)
- [Chapter Thirty-Six](#)
- [Chapter Thirty-Seven](#)
- [Chapter Thirty-Eight](#)

- [Chapter Thirty-Nine](#)

- [Chapter Forty](#)

Dessert:

- [Closing](#)

- [About the Author](#)

- [Acknowledgments](#)

- [Copyright & Publisher](#)

- [More from Curiosity Quills Press](#)

The Gathering

DARKNESS



Lisa Collicutt