



REMEMBER

PROTECTORS OF THE ELEMENTAL MAGIC BOOK 1

MARNIE CATE

REMEMBER

PROTECTORS OF THE ELEMENTAL MAGIC
BOOK ONE

MARNIE CATE

CONTENTS

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Next in the Series](#)

[About the Author](#)

Copyright (C) 2023 Marnie Cate

Layout design and Copyright (C) 2023 by Next Chapter

Published 2023 by Next Chapter

Edited by Graham (Fading Street Services)

Cover art by Lordan June Pinote

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the author's permission.

*In the honor of my Gram whose love and guidance were with me in each page.
And my sweet Lilli, you were not only my furry muse...*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to J.M. Northup for her editorial support. From our collaboration, I learned so much about not only writing but the editorial process.

CHAPTER ONE

Smoke filled the skies, and the heat from the flames of the burning homes and storefronts was unbearable. Main Street was empty. Stores that were not ablaze had been ransacked.

The ice cream shop, once filled with happy customers, looked as if a tornado blew through it. Broken tables, chairs, and meals littered the ground. My eyes fell on a silver name tag surrounded by ash. I cringed when I saw the burnt body of a waitress underneath. Her badge was the only item not blackened or damaged.

I forced myself to keep moving as I searched for anything or anyone familiar. I continued to find only destruction. It was futile. I was alone.

Fighting back my tears, I looked to the sky and cried out, "Gram, I am not strong enough!"

A blinding light surged through me, and I fell to my knees. My world went dark. The next thing I knew, a hand gripped mine and dragged me. Stumbling and confused, I pulled against my captor.

"Stop fighting me," the familiar voice of my grandmother scolded.

Gram stopped long enough for me to confirm it was her.

"Where are you taking me?" I questioned.

"No time for talking."

Once again, we were moving quickly through the tree line. I no longer resisted as my grandmother led through the forest. My home was being destroyed, and I didn't know who to blame or how to stop them.

The dark smoke grew thicker, and my chest burned. I began to cough. I fell to my knees, unable to go on any farther.

"No, get up. We are almost there." Gram ripped a piece of fabric from her dress and wrapped it around my mouth.

When the coughing stopped, she tugged my hand and encouraged me to stand. When I complied and she propelled us onward, our pace was even faster. Just when I thought I would collapse again, Gram stopped in front of a broad oak tree.

She looked around, though I wasn't sure why. There was not a sound in the forest. We were alone.

Suddenly, she ducked into the overgrown plants. Her hand trailed the thick trunk of the tree. When we reached a split in the bark, Gram pushed me forward into the crevice.

"Hide here," she commanded.

I resisted and grabbed onto her. Choking back my tears, I begged, "No, let me go with you."

She hugged me and smoothed my hair. "Mara, my little one, always remember that you are my treasure. You must prepare to be strong for when the darkness appears."

"Don't leave me," I sobbed.

"Hush. You will hide and survive, Mara." She pressed a cold metal object into my hand and kissed my cheek. "This ring will be your guide when I am not here to remind you."

I wanted to ask her where she was going and what I needed to be reminded of, but I never got my chance. With those words, she shoved me into the hiding spot and left. I struggled to hold back my tears. I resisted the urge to follow my grandmother away from the safety of trees and back towards the smoky flames of the burning buildings.

Clutching the ring, I could feel cold energy releasing from the blue stone. The surrounding silver calmly pulsed small, almost indistinguishable bursts of electricity like a heartbeat. The charm slowly chanted, "Go there, go there."

But where? I wondered, closing my eyes, and centering my thoughts on the

stone.

I saw the Starten Forest with its deep green and lush trees. The bright full moon shone above a nest. It was like none I had ever seen before. The large nest was made of silver twigs with a lavender glow in the center.

“I know where to go now, Gram,” I whispered.

A loud crash sounded, and I heard the cries of a child.

It was my sister, Meg.

She needed me, but I could not see where she was. I fumbled in the darkness, trying to reach her. My heart was racing as I frantically searched for my escape. I banged my shin on something hard and fell to the ground.

As I lay writhing in pain, a small crack of light appeared. Awareness washed over me, and everything began to make sense. I patted the hardwood floor underneath me before I laughed out loud.

I was not in the forest. Reaching up for the switch, I flipped on the overhead light and looked around my closet. I let out a sigh of relief that I was home.

Trembling as the adrenaline of my night terror began to wear off, I quickly exited the closet. The sounds of the busy kitchen below comforted me. I breathed in the sweet cinnamon pancakes and freshly brewed coffee. My home grounded me.

“It was just a dream,” I told myself.

Pushing away the unsettling dream, I looked around my bedroom. Unsurprisingly, my little sister's bed was empty. The nine-year-old seemed to have a surplus of energy that, even though I was only seventeen years old, I couldn't keep up some days. Meg was full of ideas and dreams that I had forgotten many years ago.

Sizzling sounds of bacon and the clatter of dishes being laid on the table jolted me into action. In Gram's world, there was no sleeping in. Not wanting to worry her, I quickly dressed.

I glared at the wavy curls that plagued me, and I pulled my long raven hair

into a ponytail. *I should just cut it all off.* I shuddered at my thought as I remembered the short haircut I gave myself when I was ten. I vowed to never play with scissors again after that day.

My image in the mirror would not please my grandmother. Gram would be concerned by the dark circles around my eyes, which only enhanced by my pale white skin. I didn't want to tell her the nightmares – that had been gone for so long – had suddenly returned. However, a full night's sleep seemed like a distant dream, and it was starting to show.

Quickly dusting my face with powder and lining my hazel eyes with dark purple, I looked at my reflection again. “Add some dark red lipstick, and you can look like a vampire from those old books Gram loves,” I said aloud. With a long sigh, I glossed my lips with cherry lip gloss and then practiced a fake smile.

It was time to join my family.

As I climbed down the ladder of the loft bedroom, I stopped to inspect each rung. The ladder was aged, and each step had a different name carved on it. On the sixth rung, I ran my fingers over the letters. Slowly tracing the letters, I tried to remember her. *How can I barely recall this person – my mother?*

“Today isn't the day to think of the past,” I scolded myself. Feeling frustrated for even thinking about her, I finished the descent down into the warmth of the kitchen and my family.

My grandmother's home – my home – was a large spacious house. When you entered it, you immediately felt a warm, inviting feeling. The colors of the house were bright and cheery, but not overwhelming.

A half-wall divided the spacious kitchen, where Gram could usually be found, from the living room. The white walls of the large room contrasted with its comfortable furniture. The variety of bright colors welcomed you to sit and relax. You could sit on either the purple or lime green overstuffed couches. Both would wrap you in a big fluffy embrace as you settled into them. If you wanted to be alone, you could pick one of the overstuffed chairs. Depending on my mood, I could choose to snuggle up on either a yellow, an aqua, or a red one.

The loft bedroom I shared with my sister was nestled above the cozy kitchen and over the sleeping quarters of the house. The high half-wall made my

bedroom private, but not closed in.

"I thought you were going to sleep the day away." Gram greeted me with a kiss on the cheek and handed me a plate filled with fresh fruit, fluffy pancakes, and two slices of thick, crispy bacon.

"Good morning, Gram, this looks great." I threw on my fake smile, forcing myself to be cheery.

She gently touched my forearm before returning to the stove to stir the pot of berries she was slowly cooking.

I flopped into the seat by my sister and took a long sip of the tea that had been waiting for me. It was the perfect temperature. For some reason, even the delicious breakfast and giggles of Meg could not break the gloomy mood I was in.

"Can I have your pancakes, Mar?" Meg whispered while eyeing our grandmother. "Gram only made me a tiny stack, and they are sooooo good!"

Meg's big green eyes, surrounded by thick black lashes, pleading were hard to resist. "Just one." I slid it onto her plate and tapped her on the nose with my finger.

"What about the bacon?" Meg asked with a sly smile. "Mar ahhhh..."

Using the nickname she had given me usually was the key to her getting her way with me. Marina Addisyn Stone was the name I was given, and nicknames from childhood friends came and went. Then along came Meg and her inability to pronounce Marina. Her name for me became the name I loved the most – Mara.

"You may be pushing it, kid." I laughed.

Gram quietly chuckled before turning away from the sink to give me a wink — her silent blessing to continue.

Once Meg ate the last bite of her breakfast and helped clear my plate, she gave her standard thumbs-up, confirming the meal was delicious. I couldn't help but laugh at how cute my little sister could be.

"Gram, you didn't eat anything." I placed the cleared dishes in the sink and began to wash them. "You need to keep your strength up to keep up with Meg."

"I know, love." Gram took the plate I was washing and put it back into the

sink. "Let these soak."

I looked over at my sister, who had moved to a small game table in the living room. The stuffed animals she had lined up were getting a lecture on the importance of eating breakfast. The smell of cinnamon, vanilla, and lavender filled my nose as Gram drew me into her arms and tightly hugged me.

"Gram, do you think we'll ever see her again? I don't understand how she could just disappear, and no one knows where she went for so long."

Gram's eyes grew dark as they always did when I asked about my mother. She cleaned a dish and handed it to me, nodding at a nearby kitchen towel. This signaled the conversation was over, and there would be no point in pressing further.

I dried and neatly put each item in its place in the cupboards. Dishes in bright shades of red, orange, yellow, green, and blue made a rainbow of color. Not one matched but still seemed to be part of a perfect set to me.

Gram returned to the jam she was making. Her face was washed with a sadness that I had caused. I wished I could take back my question.

I kissed Gram on the cheek and swiped the spoon from her hand. Quickly, I stuck it in my mouth before I lost my stolen treat. "Mmm. You outdid yourself on this batch."

"Really, Mara," Gram scolded.

I grinned sheepishly and put the spoon in the sink. "I'm going to meet Cole. He is going to teach me how to catch trout today."

"Trout, huh?" Gram smirked.

"Yes, he said I would chicken out. Of course, I can't let him be right."

"But you are a scaredy-cat," Meg called.

"I am Mae Veracor's granddaughter. There isn't a weak bone in my body," I teased, tousling Meg's light brown locks. "What does a little princess like you know anyway? The summer has faded your hair so much that We'll have to start calling you Cinderella."

Meg stuck her tongue out at me before falling into a fit of laughter.

Bounding out the door, I carried the satchel filled with the day's necessities. I followed the paved road in front of my house that would eventually lead to the center of town. The lingering terror of my dream haunted me as I traveled. Images of burned homes and burnt bodies flashed before my eyes.

There was no fire. Everyone is safe, I scolded myself.

After less than a mile and having passed several homes, I reached my destination. At the end of a cobblestone walkway, I casually strolled towards the pale-yellow house. When Cole saw me, he dropped the ball he had been bouncing.

“Took you long enough! I have been waiting all morning. I thought you chickened out.” Cole grinned.

Cole Oliver Sands always took my breath away when I saw him. His dark brown hair had grown long over the summer, covering his deep blue eyes, which were framed with thick black lashes. With a big breath, he blew the offending hair out of his face and continued to scold me.

“I really thought I might grow old and die waiting for you to show up.” Cole feigned a swoon and slumped over the patio railings.

“I'm not late.” I handed him the bag I had packed. “You, my dear, are just impatient. I was getting the things you insisted we needed. I still question the necessity of peanut butter and jam sandwiches. Whoever heard of trout swarming for PB&J?” I put my hands on my hips in mock anger and gave him my signature eyebrow lift.

Laughing, he tore one of the sandwiches out of the bag and began to devour it. In three large bites, the sandwich was almost gone, and Cole had forgotten I was late. “Yes, these will do. Gram's is the best cook in the town,” he greedily proclaimed.

I couldn't disagree. Gram was known for her delicious food. When I was younger, my grandmother had taught me that mashing ripe berries with lemon juice and brown sugar made the best jam. Each jar was an individual batch she made with love. Even her homemade peanut butter was really unique. She added a pinch of cinnamon and cayenne pepper that tasted amazing with the jam. Adding these flavors with the sweet wheat bread that was made yesterday

morning, the sandwich would make it hard for anyone to not be happy.

Cole popped the last bite into his mouth. “Now, with my need for sustenance out of the way, I should thank you properly for your kindness.”

In a swift movement, he grabbed my hand and swept me into his arms. His firm grip felt warm and even a bit sticky from the sandwich. But not even that could change the way my heart felt when I was with him. Everything seemed right. He kissed me tenderly and proceeded to nuzzle my neck.

Cole was strong, but not overly muscular. His hug seemed to soften the dark feelings I felt, and the warmth of the affection drowned out the negative emotions that were haunting me. I felt safe in his arms.

As quickly as he had begun, he let go of me. “Tempting to stay here all day, Mara, but if you want to be trained in the way of a trout fisherman, we best get going.”

Sighing, I composed myself. I had asked for this adventure. I only hoped I wouldn't regret it.

CHAPTER TWO

Cole led us past the cottage behind his house, deep into a part of Starten Forest I was not familiar with. The thickness of the trees threw off my internal compass. The woodland began to thin as we started down a path.

Ignoring my apprehensions, I pushed away my fears. Cole knew exactly where we were going. However, my trust wavered the higher we climbed. We were too far from my home.

"You didn't say we were going to climb any mountains today," I complained. "Gram is going to kill you if you get me lost up here."

"She won't. See that path right there?" He motioned towards large stones and overgrown brush. "We are going to follow it down to the river."

I had no doubt there would be snakes and spiders, waiting to attack. If there was a trail to follow, I couldn't see it.

"The path over there looks smooth and safer. Why don't we look for trout up there?" I suggested.

"Gram will kill me if we go up there. If we keep walking, we'll be joining the Drygens for dinner." Cole clutched his heart in mock fright.

I wrinkled my nose at the thought. The wealthiest family in town was also known for being the cruelest. Gram had taught me from a young age that money didn't have a heart and, sometimes, greed could turn a person cold. I looked from the beaten path to the treacherous one, weighing my options. *Death by a snake or being pushed off the mountain by a Drygen?* Neither sounded appealing.

Cole laughed. "Be brave, Mar. We're going down there, even if I have to carry you." He wrapped his arms around my waist as if doing just that. I cried out in protest.

He nuzzled my neck and whispered, "Shh, Mar, look out there."

We were so high up that I could see even the farthest edge of Starten. Nestled within the emerald-green trees, I could see our community. Our homes were little boxes of color.

"Oh," I murmured in surprise.

"Isn't it amazing how s our little town's problems are if you look at it from afar?" he asked softly. "Up here, we can just breathe and forget our worries. When will you ever trust me, Mar?"

"I trust you," I whispered my half-truth.

Cole and I had known each other for so long that he understood my fears. He held me tighter and allowed me to take in the view silently. After our brief moment of contentment, we reluctantly began down the pathway.

I tried to focus on everything around me to prevent my mind from racing. It was easy to do since the trail was so overgrown. I knew it had been forgotten. *Our secret place*, I thought.

In no time, we left the quiet of the mountain for babbling water. The river we walked along was purple with blue froth. The current grew stronger as we continued. I knew if we kept walking, we would eventually reach the rainbow-colored waterfalls that fed into Sparrow Lake.

A flock of gold and silver butterflies appeared. I stopped to watch as they swam against the current. *Here, I could learn to calm my mind*, I realized.

In the quiet of the forest, I recalled Gram's stories of magic. It was as if everything around me had a tale. Watching the butterflies, I remembered the story of *Three Billy Goats Gruff*. The gold and silver powder from butterfly wings had been used to put the troll to sleep, so the bridge could be crossed.

One day, I found a book at Thompson's Used Book and Sauerkraut Store. It contained all the stories Gram had told me at bedtime, but the stories were slightly different. There was not a butterfly sleeping powder that helped the goats, but rather, an older, stronger goat had pushed the troll into the water.

When questioned, Gram patted my hand and said, “My stories are more memorable.”

A high-pitched squeak pulled me back to the present. Above us, a fighting trio of green squirrels drew my attention. The rodents’ metallic green fur glimmered in the sunlight, and reflections bounced off the water as they flew through the air.

Gram had told us the stories about Starten, and what it had been like before the Drygen Cannery explosion. She’d explained how the water sources had been polluted. Some liked to believe it was magic that changed everything, but the hefty fine paid and admittance of fault, by the cannery proved more feasible.

Gram loved to show us pictures of her mother's world. A time before the change. Everything seemed so odd. The only flying squirrels did was to glide from tree-to-tree. Butterflies flew in the air and avoided water. They did not swim in streams. Instead, trout swam in the river and were caught using poles with a worm on a hook at the end. The thought of that always grossed me out.

“Are we close yet?” I whispered, shaking off the repulsive thought.

Cole nodded and placed one finger on his mouth to remind me not to speak. In the brush ahead, I saw bright, colorful tails, swaying back and forth. Tugging Cole's hand, I pointed. He nodded and grabbed the net gun from his bag.

As we got closer, he motioned for me to stay put and handed me a hand-woven net on a stick. I raised my hands to question this.

“Catch any that get away,” he whispered.

Cole picked up a rock from the stream and threw it at the bush. The trout began scrambling out from under it, heading towards him. He launched the massive silver net. It flew through the air before it landed and trapped six adult trout. They snapped their teeth and slammed their black and pink bodies against their captor.

Several small gray baby trout scurried towards the area where I waited. Quickly, I lowered the net and covered them. When several escaped, I rapidly shoved them back under the net with my boot.

The net confused them, and they began circling. “Cole! What do I do now?”

Cole laughed and came towards me. The net over his shoulder held two large

trout. Each was over a foot long and no longer moving. The ones selected to live were now scrambling into the underbrush. They were probably going deep into their holes to wait for the danger to go away.

As he walked, Cole threw a trail of crumbs from his sandwich behind him. When he was about ten feet from me, he said, "Lift the net now. The little ones need to go back to their nest to grow."

I lifted the net and watched the grey babies scamper back to their home, stopping along the way to gobble the crumbs Cole had dropped.

"This should be enough to feed us for months," Cole said and handed me the net. The net was at least thirty pounds.

"Shouldn't I have watched you decide which adults to let go and how to... you know?" I asked, uncomfortable with the thought that the trout were living just minutes before.

"You know this is crazy." He grabbed my hand and pulled me close. "You won't ever be without me. There is no need for you to prove you can do this. I promise I will always take care of you."

He leaned in and slowly kissed me. Quickly, the gentle kiss became harder and more demanding. Wanting to be consumed in the feeling, I kissed him back, slowly running my free hand up and down his spine. Cole abruptly pulled away, taking the net from me. I sighed in frustration. *How quickly he can abandon me*, I thought bitterly.

"Come on, Mar. Don't be mad. It's getting late, and Gram will worry." Cole kissed my hand.

Once again, he chose to be practical over being consumed by passion. I couldn't help feeling disappointed. I removed my hand from his grasp.

"Don't be like that." Cole brushed his lips against my cheek as he whispered, "We wouldn't want Gram to think I'm not a gentleman, would we?"

I nodded and wiped the scowl from my face. The way Cole always considered my grandmother's feelings was one of the things that made me love him. However, sometimes, I just wanted to get lost in the moment. For just a second, I could feel all fear and doubt fade away while lost in his embrace.

As we walked back, hand-in-hand, to deliver our catch to Gram, I suddenly

felt a lingering sense of dread wash over me. Forever promises never seemed real. The dark feeling did not make sense to me. I had spent the day with the man I loved and trusted. How could I feel forever was possible one minute, wanting to be swept up away, and then allow myself to drown in the nagging sense that anything I loved would be lost the next? *Must I always destroy things before they have a chance to hurt me?*

Later that evening, Gram cooked up the trout with her special peach sauce and served it on a bed of golden rice. The fresh vegetables from the garden were crisp and flavorful. The water, with lemon raspberry ice cubes, was refreshing.

“Mae Veracor, you're the best cook. I should ask you to run away with me, right now,” Cole joked between bites and reached for another helping.

Gram swatted him and laughed. “Save some food for the girls.”

Light conversation filled the dinner table, and my fears from earlier faded. I felt calm and at ease while I watched my family joking, enjoying the meal. I could not understand why my emotions were always such a roller coaster ride. Perhaps, I just needed to learn to live in the moment and stop worrying about the unknown.

Meg savored each bite. When she thought Cole was not looking, she stole nibbles from his plate and giggled. As much as I wanted to enjoy her playfulness, I still felt tense.

A voice snuck into my head. It softly reminded me not to believe this would last. It never did.

I won't listen, I told myself. Shaking away the doubt, I began clearing the table.

“Who has room for dessert?” Gram asked.

“Two scoops for me, Gram!” Meg shouted.

Dessert was homemade black licorice ice cream. Gram dished up two tiny scoops, added red sprinkles to the top of Meg's treat and handed it to the little girl.

“But...I'm ten years old. I'm old enough for a bigger helping,” Meg protested.

"You aren't ten yet. Don't wish away your youth." Gram gently kissed Meg on the head. “Let's save room for later.”

I smiled at Gram. We both knew Meg's eyes were larger than her little tummy. I set the bowl Gram had scooped for me onto the table.

“Thank you for everything. I love you so much.” I hugged my grandmother tightly. Her silver hair felt soft against my cheek.

“I love you, too, Mara.” No matter how my day had gone or how confused my emotions could be, Gram always made me feel better. "I want you to come with me," she whispered.

When I released her, she grabbed my hand and softly patted it. “Cole, can you watch Meg for a bit? I want to steal Mara away.”

“I think I can handle this little ball of trouble.” Cole stole a bite of her ice cream from my sister’s dish and laughed.

“Not fair, Cos,” Meg whined, using the nickname she had given him. Gram had said the nickname stuck because Cole was always the cause of any mischief that started.

Meg retaliated by scooping up a considerable amount of his dessert. I smiled as my sister filled the air with her devious giggles.

Cole raised his hands in surrender. “Ok. Ok. You win. You win. Look, Mara is leaving her ice cream. We should eat hers.”

“You know he is going to get her more ice cream if we are gone too long,” I warned.

“I would expect nothing less from that boy,” Gram responded.

CHAPTER THREE

Gram led me down the hallway, passing the bedrooms, and into the enclosed patio. She rummaged through a white cupboard, moving bottles and bags until she found a small white box. She pulled out a small crystal vial attached to a silver chain from the container. It was filled with a purple liquid that shimmered with green, blue, yellow, and red sparks. Something felt so familiar about this moment.

Holding the vial out to me by the chain, she said, "When you were young, Mara, you knew things about the magic that I had not known until I was much older."

"Magic? I just had a good imagination," I interrupted.

She raised her eyebrows at me.

"Sorry, I'll listen," I apologized.

"By the time you were six years old, you were so comfortable with your gift that I became worried. I had begun to suspect that your mother was using her magic for Cedric Drygen."

My gift? Is Gram losing her mind? I wondered.

She put the vial into my palm, enclosing my finger around it. She held my hand tightly. "Please forgive me for taking away your memories and the magic you held. I only did what I thought was best."

"What are you talking about?" I asked, staring at the vial in my hand. *My grandmother has definitely lost her mind.* "Magic isn't real, Gram."

"I needed to protect you. Please trust me. Drink this, and you will soon have

the answers you seek," Gram pleaded. Her brown eyes glistened with tears which she quickly blinked away.

Her desperation frightened me, but I had no choice – I trusted her. My grandmother was the strongest person I knew. So, I took the top off the vial and inhaled the sweet-smelling liquid. Without another thought, I drank it. The cold fluid turned warm as it slid down my throat.

"It just tastes like blackberrsh..." The room began to spin. I reached out to my Gram, afraid of what was happening.

"You will be fine, love. Sit down and rest." She led me to the wicker love seat, where I closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep.

The sound of a child humming roused me. Blinking to clear my vision, I found myself in my parents' bedroom. Glancing over, I saw a young girl, admiring herself in front of a mirror.

Smiling, she smoothed her lengthy black curls and adjusted the white ribbon in her hair. She shifted the bow on the headband, ensuring it was in the perfect position – off to the left. With her hair in shape, she seemed focused on the lacy edges of her white socks. When they were folded perfectly, and her black shoes were shiny, she spun around. The girl giggled as her lavender dress lifted and showed white ruffles.

Strong feelings overwhelmed me, and I wanted to twirl until the room blurred into colors, and the light took ahold of me. That was when I realized I wasn't watching a stranger. I was spying on a younger version of myself.

A creak sounded, and I whipped around to see the door open. I was faced with my grandmother. She looked so young, and her hair was no longer silver. Instead, she had long, light brown hair that she wore loose. She was beautiful in a long, sage green dress. I had forgotten how vibrant she could be.

I gasped when she walked through me as if I wasn't there. *Of course, you aren't here. This is a memory,* I chastised myself.

Calling out to my younger version, Gram laughed, "Come along, my little

dancer. Let's get your shoes on. We don't want you to be late for your guests.”

Running towards my grandmother, my young self crowed, “I have already put them on. I even buckled them without help.”

“Why, yes you did, Marina.” I cringed at her using my full name. The name my mother insisted on using, even though she knew I preferred the nickname Meg gave me. “Aren't you so smart.” Gram opened her arms to welcome the child.

“Do you think I look pretty today, Gram?” Young Marina wrapped her arms around Gram's neck and hugged her tightly. I felt a twinge of envy.

“You're always pretty, my love. You're what is most important - beautiful inside and out.”

Gram set her down. Then, she held out her hand, and my younger version clasped onto it tightly.

I followed them as they left the bedroom and moved onto the patio. I half-expected to see myself sleeping there, but the chair was empty. Continuing to follow as they walked outside into the backyard, I inhaled the smell of the fresh-cut grass. The familiar scent of wood chips drew my attention to Gramp's workshop, which hummed with sawing and buzzing sounds.

I gasped in surprise as I saw over a dozen chickens and six cows grazing on grass and feed. The animal life had dwindled long ago as everything fell on Gram, and it became too much to maintain. She gave up the responsibility and chose, instead, to keep the vegetation.

Tall trees of a bright green were bursting with colored fruits, and the garden was overfilled with vegetables of all kinds. Gram had a natural way with plants, so much so that she made an arrangement with the local butcher, David Jones. She would keep him stocked with produce in trade for meat.

Young Marina's giggles pulled me back from my thoughts. We had reached the largest tree in the yard. Under the oak, a blue and white flowered picnic cloth had been laid out. In the center, a teapot and a plate of biscuits had been set up. Five small teacups, resting on saucers surrounded them, creating a ceramic rainbow of colors.

Young Marina sat in front of the white cup, and immediately exclaimed,

“Raspberry tea biscuits! My favorite. Thank you so much!”

Gram kissed her cheek and said, “Have a nice tea party. I will check on you later.”

I wanted to follow my grandmother, hoping she was going to Gramp. I longed for one more glimpse of him. One more silly joke. One more warm hug. However, I knew my wishes were foolish. I was here for the return of my memories, not too long for what was gone.

Turning my attention back to Young Marina, I watched her fill her cup with hot tea. The citrus scent of the Lady Gray tea permeated the air. Gram only made her favorite black tea on special occasions. She once told me that it was the only kind of tea her mother, Genevieve, would drink.

After taking a small sip of her beverage, Young Marina murmured, “Delicious.” Humming, she began to fill the other cups, and carefully added several of the tea biscuits along the rim of the saucers.

As Young Marina sat patiently waiting for her guests, a great ball of white light appeared above her. It danced with colors of reds, blues, greens, and yellows that swirled in the center until it exploded into four separate balls. Bouncing directly over Young Marina, the four orbs were a breathtaking sight. The yellow ball held feathery streaks of blue that blew wildly inside. Flickering flames of orange tinged with pink filled the red one. Inside the blue orb were glittery white and aqua waves. The green sphere seemed to sprout little brown leaves and yellow flowers.

Dancing around each other, the balls of light hummed with magical sounds. It was a melody I felt I had heard before. It felt like a song I knew, but I couldn’t remember the words.

What a delight it was to see the free spirit within my young self. I wanted to join her as she clapped and danced joyfully. I wanted to feel carefree again. When the music stopped and the balls stilled, I wanted to cry out, “More! More!”

The red ball was the first to catch my eye as it began to grow. Expanding, it changed from a red ball to an orange flame that twisted and turned until it formed into a beautiful young woman. The petite girl was no more than a foot tall. Her long slender frame was covered in a red dress layered with shimmery orange scales. Large catlike eyes shone with golden radiance. Her long hair, a salmon-orange in color with dark red streaks, waved down her back.

“Blaze,” I said to myself, as I looked at her. I felt like I knew her.

The blue ball of light bounced up and down, pulling my attention away from Blaze. It went up high into the sky, moving faster and faster. In one swift moment, it suddenly stopped and came crashing down in a rapid descent. As it hit the ground, it splashed into a hundred droplets. As quickly as it had come apart, the water came back together and formed, yet another beautiful girl.

Both girls had round angelic faces and were not much taller than most of my old dolls. However, this time, the lady’s catlike eyes were piercing silver. She had straight blue hair with aqua streaks running through it that was tied up into a high ponytail. It was held by a seashell band that matched her glittery aqua dress.

As she twirled the short and frilly frock, the edges turned up, showing white and seafoam green petticoat. Her feet were covered by sparkly sandals of silver with straps that wrapped up around her calves. Spinning around, she laughed while spraying droplets of water flung about.

“Bay,” Young Marina called, “would you like some tea?”

Halting her movement, Bay plopped down in front of a blue cup and said, “Of course, and another biscuit.”

Sighing, Blaze rolled her eyes and shook her head at Bay's entrance, and then stared at the activity above. The green and yellow balls had begun circling around each other. Weaving up and down, it seemed as though they were competing. I could only assume they were trying to decide who would be next to join the party. Around and around, they went until they collided, both dropping to the ground.

The green sphere looked like it had destroyed itself. Instead of a round and green orb, it was now just a large brown mound of dirt. As I stared in shock, I watched a small green blade poke out from the soil. As it grew long, it began to

sprout a yellow bud that grew until it formed a large white flower. It twisted and turned on the stem, taking shape as it rose. Another beautiful girl's face formed in the yellow center of the blossom.

Young Marina laughed. "Daisy! Join us before your tea grows cold."

As her body formed, a dress of white adorned her tiny frame. This garment – covered with white and pink petals – went to just below her knees. Around her waist, she wore a sage green belt, and her bare feet had dark green painted on each of her toenails. Laughing, her deep emerald cat eyes widened as her wavy yellow locks grew out. The shoulder-length hair was messy and wild yet looked perfect on her.

"Thank you," she said, as she kissed my younger version on the cheek before settling beside her cup.

With a burst of speed, the yellow ball swirled all around Young Marina until it turned into a small blue bird. Zipping by Daisy, the bird nipped the tea biscuit out of her hands just as she was going to take a bite.

Daisy shrieked, "Breeze, stop showing off!"

With a dramatic landing, the blue bird quickly changed, as the others had. She had pure white hair that was streaked with blues, greens, and gold. Her shoulder-length hair was fashioned in a long angled-cut style, where it was longer in the front than the back.

Her deep blue eyes glared at Daisy, and her pink lips turned into a pout. "If Bay had not shown off with her ridiculous splash, I would not have had to fly around to dry off."

Smoothing her long blue dress, the fabric changed color with each run of her hand. When she was finally done fixing herself, the dress was no longer a deep navy blue, but rather, a peacock variety of colors shimmered throughout the fabric. I expected her to grow a fan of feathers, but instead, she settled by a teacup and pouted.

I watched on as they each took turns showing off for Young Marina, who delighted in everything they did. I felt so comfortable. I had an intense longing to join them, though I refrained from doing so.

"Caterpillar. Where are you?" The fun was interrupted by the loud male

voice calling for me.

The tea party guests instantly disappeared. Young Marina straightened herself up and turned toward the man. I could see four marble sized balls flying high up in the tree.

Caterpillar was the nickname my father had given me. He would say that as I grew, I would change from a young worm into a powerful butterfly that would be respected and adored. A lump formed in my throat. I had grieved the loss of him for so long that the pain had finally subsided.

“There you are,” my father, Elliot Stone, called.

My heart raced. I wasn't ready to see him again. I couldn't lose my father twice. *It's a memory*, I chided myself.

The choice was made for me when my father walked through me. His light blond hair glistened, and his ordinarily sun-kissed skin was a deep tan. I stared at his ruggedly handsome face, not sure how to feel. He had died when I was ten, but I often thought of what life would have been like if he had not.

Another ghost from my past was before me.

“Hi, Daddy,” Young Marina said as she ran to greet him. He picked her up and swung her around. “Did you come to join my tea party?”

Looking around at the partially eaten cookies and half-full cups of tea, he said, “It looks like your party was interrupted. Where did all your guests go?”

“They all...” She began to answer his question until a leaf fell from the tree and landed on the back of Young Marina's head. The blade grew a small hand that began tugging on the long strands of her hair.

She continued as if she understood the warning, “They are right here. You know Sally, Susie, and Sandy.” She gestured around herself towards imaginary friends.

“Only three guests, but you have four cups?” he questioned.

“Oh, right and...and...” she stammered.

“Samantha,” I whispered as I remembered my lie.

As if she had heard me, she quickly responded, "Samantha. You know how shy she is."

"Yes, of course, Samantha. How could I forget her? You must tell me all about your friends," he said. He sat down and took a tea biscuit from Blaze's saucer, popping it into his mouth.

"Marina," I turned to see my grandmother waving from the patio door. "I'm starting to make those cookies you wanted to bake. Are you ready to help me?"

"Yes, Gram," she replied. "Sorry, Daddy, I promised I would help." Standing up and smoothing off her dress, she turned and headed towards the house.

"Wait," he said, pulling the leaf out of her hair and handing it to her. "It looks like you have a hitchhiker."

"Thank you." Young Marina giggled. She took the leaf and then broke into a run.

Watching my father, I could see him inspecting the area. He seemed to be looking for something. From the house, my grandmother stood staring at him with a worried look in her eyes. The odd interaction made me wonder.

Regarding my father for one last time, I said, "I miss you." Then, I walked back to the house without looking back.

I found Gram and Young Marina talking in the kitchen.

"You are right, Marina. We should introduce them to your mother and father. Why don't we plan a special party this weekend?" Gram suggested.

Around her, I could see the four balls of light bouncing up and down in agreement.

"Now, drink this and let me know what you think of the taste." I watched my grandmother hand my young self a crystal vial on a silver chain filled with purple fluid, similar to the one that I drank.

"It's really sweet." She licked her lips and tipped the rest of the vial's contents into her mouth. With a feeling of both sadness and wonder, I watched my younger version consume the liquid. When Young Marina collapsed into

Gram's arms, my grandmother gently rocked her.

Her soft words were filled with pain. "This is the only way to protect you. I hope you will, one day, understand why we couldn't tell them."

Tears flowed from my eyes. It explained why I always thought I would lose things I loved. Suddenly, the world spun around me, and the images blurred. I closed my eyes to push back the nausea. As everything slowed, I opened my eyes and found myself in my grandmother's arms, once again.

"I'm sorry, love. I really wish I didn't have to take your memories from you." Gram's eyes shone with tears.

Hugging her tightly, I cried. "I understand, but no more secrets, ok?" I broke away, and our gaze locked onto each other.

"Now that you remember the magic I took from you, it is time for you to decide if you are ready for it. You're right. No more secrets," Gram vowed.

CHAPTER FOUR

Gram brought me to her bedroom. The space was bright and airy. Lavender, vanilla, and cinnamon faintly scented the air. The walls were bare, except for a large oval mirror. The silver frame had a straw-like design. To me, it looked like it was cradled inside a bird's nest.

Gram pulled out a silver chest from under her king-size mahogany bed. I had seen the chest as a young girl, snooping around. When I found it, I asked about the names engraved on it. She told me it was very special, and that mine would, one day, be on it, too. I begged for her to put my name on it, then and there. She laughed and promised I would learn more when it was time – the right time.

Gram set it before me. "Open the chest, love. It is time you learn who we are and what's inside. This box was given to me by my mother. Each of the women on this chest promised to keep the elemental magic safe from those who would misuse it."

I traced the names with my fingertip. The name *Genevieve* felt warm and tingled as if it was a song. Tracing my grandmother's name, I felt the same warmth along with a rush of peace and tranquility. When I moved to the next one below Gram's, I stopped and stared. *Eliza* was icy and made my heart beat faster.

"Why does her name feel so cold? Does it mean she's dead, Gram?" I whispered.

"Open the chest, and you will have answers to your questions," she promised, unable to hide the sadness in her voice.

When I opened the lid, the chest began to glow with a lavender light so

intense that it lit up the room. Deep inside the box, resting on a satin bed, was a ring. Braided silver surrounded the robin egg blue stone. I picked it up and held it.

Looking back into the chest, I saw a dark-haired woman smiling as she placed a ring. It looked like the same piece of jewelry, except for her purple stone. Her image faded.

When the next woman appeared, I gasped as I recognized her. It was my grandmother. She was a teenager with long brown hair pulled into a delicate braid. White flowers were laced throughout the twisted locks. Her soft brown eyes shined as she held a dark blue ring in front of her and said, “I promise to always protect this magic. I vow only to use it to protect and guide, never for self-benefit.”

The first woman appeared again. She spoke in a firm voice as she gazed deep into my eyes. “Marina Addisyn Stone, do you promise to protect this magic from those who would misuse it? Will you stand strong, and defend the magic when the time comes?”

Before I could say a word, an image of a young girl appeared. It was undeniably my mother, Eliza. Her dark red hair flowed down her back in loose curls, and her green eyes shone proudly as she swore her oath as a protector while holding a ring with a light pink stone.

It was eerie to watch Eliza transform into a woman. This time, she was holding a black-haired baby. She sang sweetly to her cooing child – me. A burst of light flashed, and suddenly, Eliza held Meg, a bright-eyed baby with blonde curls. My ten-year-old self stood next to them. The way we felt was palpable.

The image turned gray. As it became clear again, I saw Eliza was no longer smiling. Her dark red hair was still long and flowing, but it was now a blackish-red streaked with pure white. Her once green eyes were black.

She wore a restrictive black bodice with fitted black pants that were embossed with a silver snake pattern running up the legs. The skintight clothes hugged her body as she walked slowly, carrying a gold-jeweled goblet. Her black boots had silver spiked heels that clicked on the dark granite floor, announcing her entrance to a man sitting in a large chair.

The man was dressed in a tight black T-shirt and wore black leather pants with the same snake pattern on the legs. The man's raven-colored hair was short and spiked with white tips. He had a long silver scar under his left eye.

The coldness in his black eyes seemed to warm as the woman approached him. He accepted the goblet she offered, and then pulled this dark version of my mother onto his lap, kissing her passionately.

Eliza placed her hand on his cheek and pushed him away. The ring on her finger was no longer pink. Instead, it glowed blood red. As she stroked the black stubble along his jaw, he gazed into the ring and smiled.

“Soon, love,” she whispered. “Soon.”

The image of my mother faded, and the comforting vision of the first woman returned. She repeated her question, “Marina Addisyn Stone, my great-granddaughter, do you promise to protect this magic from those who would misuse it? Will you stand with us when the time comes?”

Clutching the ring, I shut the chest and hid the woman within it. Hot tears fell down my face as I turned to face my grandmother.

“You knew where my mother was all along? How could you keep the truth from me? How could you keep it from Meg? You know how much we have worried about her.”

“It was not safe for you to know.” Gram grabbed my hand and held it tightly. “If circumstances had not changed, I'm not sure I would have told you yet. But they are growing stronger. Hiding the truth from you is no longer protecting you. Sit and I will tell you what you need to know.”

I held the anger that was welling inside me, took a deep breath, and sat down on the bed. My grandmother had always been there for me. If she held anything from me, it would have only been to protect us. She loved my mother as much as I did, and I could see the hurt in her eyes as she looked at me.

Gram took my hand and patted it in the comforting way she had done when I was a child. Then, she cautiously began her story. “Your grandfather was fifteen years older than me, and after years of marriage, I never thought I would be blessed by the Goddess with a child. When I was twenty-three, I had Eliza. Eliza was a wild child, full of mischief. She never wanted to hear ‘no’. If I warned her

not to do something, she would run off and give it a try, no matter how risky it was.

“I repeatedly warned her about how dangerous it was to go off alone, especially into the Starten Forest. One day, when she was fourteen, she left the house early in the morning. When she hadn't come home by sunset, I had decided to search for her. I met her in the backyard. Her face was streaked with dirt, and her hair was covered with leaves.

“I could tell she was frightened, so I asked her about it. She claimed nothing was wrong. Eliza said she had just been lying in the grass, watching the clouds in the sky, when she drifted off to sleep. When I pressed her, she grew angry. I knew she wasn't telling me the truth, but forcing the issue would be of no use. My daughter was never the kind of child that would run to me for help.

“After that day, Eliza seemed more cautious and listened to my warnings. She met your father not soon after and, four years later, they were married. After you were born, she seemed so happy.” A faint hint of a smile showed in Gram's expression, but it disappeared quickly.

She sighed deeply before resuming her tale. “It was not until your father died that her behavior began to change. There was a darkness inside her. She began to dress provocatively, and she would sneak out of the house after you girls were sound asleep.”

As Gram spoke softly, she continued to lightly pat my hand. The circular tapping motion of her palm seemed to erase my anger.

“One night, I followed Eliza. I found your mother with Cedric Drygen at Sparrow Lake. I suspected she had been meeting him, but that night, I confirmed my worst feelings. As they lay on the rocky shore, he convinced her to use the magic for him. He made promises of all the things he would provide for her. Eagerly, she charmed his rings and cast spells as they laughed and drank.

“Rushing home, I cast a spell and bound her pure magic. I couldn't let her use our magic for the Drygens. When Eliza returned that evening, she was enraged and screamed that she knew what I had done. At first, she cursed me, but then she tried to convince me to reverse it. Eliza said breaking the binding would be the best thing for you. Not believing her reasons, I told her she would

no longer abuse our family's magic and that I would only consider her request when she was ready to honor the promise she had made to protect it.

“She spat in my face and laughed. Eliza told me my silly promise would be the end of me. Without even packing a bag, she left the house and went straight to Cedric Drygen.” My grandmother shook her head sadly. “If she were in her right mind, she would not have left my girls. The darkness inside her had turned her into a hateful person. Someone I no longer recognized.

“Yes, Mara. I knew all along where she went.” Gram took a long breath. “I’m sorry I kept that from you.”

“You must be wrong!” I said, trying to hold back my rage. “She would never leave us for him.”

“Yes, love, she left all of us for him, but more so, to feed the dark magic that was beginning to grow inside her. The Drygen family has always been able to be kept under control because we could limit the magic they had access to. However, your mother was always so strong that I knew my binding was not going to last forever.

“Forgive me for not telling you, until now, but I had to make sure you were safe. I have kept many things from you that I have always felt guilty about. Still, all my decisions have been to, first, keep both of you girls safe and, second, to honor my promise. Now, they have warned me that I will not be able to do this alone. I will need you, child. You will be the one to save the magic and keep it pure,” Gram said with hope in her voice. “Look inside the chest again when you’re ready to give your answer.”

A crash sounded from the living room.

My grandmother scowled. “I should find out what is going on with those two.” She patted my hand gently, one last time, and kissed me on the cheek. “I will leave you to decide for yourself. We’ve more to talk about, but it can wait.”

Walking through the white door, she left me alone in her room with the silver chest and a mind full of thoughts.

“I can't do this,” I thought painfully. “Eliza is my mother. Why would my own mother leave me...leave Meg...for him? She must be under a spell. She must be...”

I stopped myself from making excuses for her. I knew what my grandmother said was true. I knew my mother was too strong-minded to be forced to do anything she did not want to do.

My mind drifted back to when I was that little girl with the dark braids I had just watched in the chest.

One morning, I awoke to Meg crying. The sun was shining into our room. I sleepily called down to my mother, but there was no answer. Climbing out of bed, I wiped the sleep out of my eyes and looked down the loft ladder. I could not see anyone, but I heard the faint sounds of whispers and laughter.

I carefully crept down the hallway that led to the back patio to investigate. A man's indiscernible words could be heard. I thought the deep voice belonged to my father, and I moved faster. I stopped, suddenly, as I saw my mother. She was kissing a man, but this man was not my daddy.

Frightened, I didn't know what to do. Cautiously, I turned around and silently ran back to my room. I returned to Meg. Picking up my baby sister, I held her close as she cried and carried her down the ladder, careful not to drop her.

Her cries became softer and softer as I sang to her, “Goddess, I ask you to calm this child. Remove her sadness and calm her fears. Protect my baby throughout the years.”

When I reached the bottom, I realized my mother was behind me, watching.

“Thank you, darling. I was just coming back with her bottle.” She took my baby sister from me and began to feed her.

I hadn't told anyone about what I had seen that night and, until now, I had not remembered it.

Shaking off the memory, I gazed at the blue ring in my hand and slid it onto my finger. Knowing what I needed to do, I opened the box and, as my great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother had all done before me, I made the promise.

“I promise to protect the magic from those who would misuse it for self-

benefit,” I confidently declared. “I will stand with you when the time comes, even if it means standing against her.”

I gently closed the silver chest and placed it under Gram's mahogany bed. Wiping the tears from my eyes, I decided to return to my family.

As I left the room, I caught my reflection in the mirror as I turned to close the door. The reflection told me, “You're strong enough and soon, you will know how strong you can be.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Cole smiled at me as I entered the kitchen. “Gram just took Meg to bed. I just finished cleaning up the bookcase we knocked over.” He smiled and patted the seat next to him. “Sit, you look like you have seen a ghost.”

I started to tell him, but something inside me silenced my words. How could I explain to him that my grandmother knew where my mother was all along? That I had taken an oath to protect magic? I didn’t know where to start.

I filled the tea kettle with water, contemplating my words. “Let’s go into the living room and sit by the fire. I’m just cold.”

Cole opened his mouth as if to ask a question but promptly changed his mind. Relief filled me. He would give me space and let me tell him on my own terms.

“Why don’t I start the fire?” Cole suggested.

“Good idea. Did you want any tea? Gram traded Mrs. Everstone some jam for her blueberry orange spice tea leaves.”

“Sure, and a snack,” he called back as he left the room.

Shaking my head, I smiled to myself. He seemed to always be hungry.

Fixing two mugs of warm tea with a splash of fresh milk and a bit of honey, I pulled down a crystal cookie jar that was full of tea biscuits. These hard cookies were flavored with blackberries soaked in orange zest. Not only had Gram turned the berries we picked into delicious jams, but she took the time to make my favorite treats.

I popped one in my mouth and picked up the tray I had prepared. The sweet, buttery taste of the biscuit was followed by the bitter citrus. Finally, the complimentary blackberry sweetness filled my senses. I hummed softly in delight.

I joined Cole in the living room. He had turned all the lights low and was adding more wood to the fire. He stopped his task and took the tray from me. When I settled next to him, he covered me with one of the soft throw blankets. We sat in silence, sipping our tea, and nibbling the cookies.

My mind played over, and over, how I would tell him everything I learned. The flames of the fire, dancing in front of us, quieted my thoughts. *Another night to reveal your secrets*, I decided.

After the small plate of cookies was gone, Cole took the teacup from me and set it on the coffee table in front of us. He turned back to me with a serious look in his eyes.

"When I told you, today, that I would be there for you – always – I meant it, Mar." Cole pulled me close to him before he withdrew a delicate silver band from his pocket.

The front of the ring was the infinity symbol. Inside, the band was engraved with two small hearts, linked together, and the words *forever in my heart*.

"In three months, you will be eighteen, and we can get married. I have loved you for as long as I can remember, and I will continue to love you forever."

I stared at the ring, not knowing how to respond. My heart wanted me to throw my arms around him and be lost in the moment forever, but my mind cautioned to let him go. The soft look in his eyes comforted me.

This is Cole. Your rock. He will never hurt you, I reminded myself. *But don't they always leave?* The dark thought washed away my brief belief in forever.

I gently placed my hand on his cheek. "I love you, too, Cole," I sighed. "Don't promise forever. Neither of us can promise tomorrow."

"No, I won't listen to this anymore." Cole's eyes burned with an intensity I had never seen before. "I will love you forever because you are meant to be loved. And I won't leave you, so stop trying to push me away."

He took my hand from his cheek and pulled me into a deep embrace. I held

him tightly, not wanting to let go. His lips trailed the curve of my neck. The soft kiss and the warmth of his touch made me melt. His fingers tangled in my hair.

"I'm not pushing you away," I said, unable to find the right words. "I need you to..." Trailing off, I suddenly felt a cold chill in the air and heard the creak of the front door opening.

"Marina, my dear, are you not going to come give me a hug? How I have missed you," purred the voice from behind me.

Turning to face the voice that I had not heard for many years, I glared at the intruder, "Hello, Mother."

Eliza strode over to me and grabbed both of my hands with her icy fingers. "Let me look at you. My, how you have grown." With surprising strength, she pulled me to my feet. "Why, you're a woman now, Marina. I always knew you would be a beauty."

I yanked away from my mother and coldly glared. "To what do we owe this honor, Eliza?"

My heart began to beat faster, and I could feel the anger inside me rising. The sting of finding out why she had left us was still fresh. My emotions were too strong.

Eliza stood back, eyeing me. "That isn't a warm welcome, darling. Now, come to me, and all will be forgiven." She opened her arms to welcome me into a hug.

Stepping back, I kept my frigid stare trained on her. "Why are you here?" I asked, not hiding my fury, "Don't you have your new life with Cedric Drygen? I can't imagine what we could offer you. Are you in need of jam? You can buy this at the market on Main Street." I continued aggressively, "You do remember where that is, right?"

"Don't be ridiculous." She moved towards me. "I came for you. I have missed you so much. It was painful for me to be kept away from you for so long." Her eyes glistened with tears.

The show she was putting on did nothing but harden me even more against her.

“You need to leave!” I shouted. Anger that I had never felt before boiled inside me. “You’re not welcome here anymore!”

Eliza's eyes widened in surprise at my reaction. I thought she was going to slap me when her eyes narrowed.

“I shouldn't be surprised to find my daughter turned against me by you.”

I turned to see Gram coming down the loft ladder.

“Enough of this nonsense. Pack a bag for you and your sister, Marina. I will explain everything once we are home.” Eliza turned back to me with a look of hurt. “I have so much to tell you.”

My heart ached. I wanted to fall into my mother's arms and ask her to come home...beg her to love me again.

“You will not be taking these girls anywhere. Mara was right in saying you aren't welcome in this home anymore.” Gram stepped forward and blew small flowers into the air. The smell of lavender and cinnamon engulfed the room.

The flowers turned into white smoke tendrils that surrounded my mother. Shock filled her eyes as the small strings bound her arms and began to circle around her neck. Eliza turned from the room, grabbing and pulling at the tendrils attaching to her.

Quickly, opening the front door, she exited and turned to say, “You cannot keep them from me, Mother. They are mine.”

Gram held her hand out in front of her, causing a warm wind to blow through the room and slam the door shut.

"No, Eliza," my grandmother corrected. "They are mine."

No one spoke for minutes. When my eyes caught Cole's, I could see the sadness that filled them. He knew how much I had missed my mother. He understood how desperately I wanted everything to go back to the way it was before she disappeared.

Closing my eyes, I breathed in the lavender that scented the air and tried to calm my heart. I could feel gentle patting on my hand. When I looked down, I saw the tendrils of smoke that had chased my mother away. The smoke was warm, and it felt like the soft touch of my grandmother's hand, comforting me. I closed my eyes again and let myself be reassured.

“Cole, go home and pack some of your things. You're staying here for a few days,” Gram ordered.

Cole began to protest. “Gram, I don't need protection. I will be...” His voice trailed off as he saw the serious look in my grandmother's eyes.

She walked to the fire and grabbed the iron poker. With wide eyes, Cole watched, waiting for her next move. The white and gray stone of the fireplace shimmered as if millions of little stars were buried in the material.

Gram held the poker high in the air, making tiny circles. Her circles turned into silver chains that began to twist and turn in the air around us. Even when she put the poker down, the tendrils continued to weave themselves into small circles. Abruptly, the rings dove at Cole.

"I said I was going," he cried out.

Cole lifted his hands to stop the attack. Instead of striking him, the silver slowed and wrapped his wrist. Twisting and twisting, it formed the most elegant silver bracelet. Circles entwined, creating an oval shape that resembled an eye.

When the weaving stopped, Gram held Cole's arm and closed her eyes. The ocular-shaped silver turned a glowing red. I thought it would burn him, especially when Gram released her hold on his arm. I expected Cole to cry out in pain, but instead, he curiously stared at his wrist.

Slowly, the red faded, and then the silver disappeared, leaving his wrist covered in a black ink tattoo. On the inside of his wrist, he bore an eye. The pupil was a color I had never seen before – a vibrant blue that almost seemed to change into shades of purple, and then green. It was a peacock feather of colors.

Gram grasped his hand and gently patted it. “Cole, this will protect you, warding off any harm. Go quickly and gather just what you need for a few days.”

“Ok, I will be back soon. I will only grab a few of my things.” Cole kissed me on the cheek. “We will continue our conversation when I return.”

I watched as Cole walked out the same door my mother had left.

“He will return,” a whisper on the wind told me.

“Mara, do you remember the prayer I used to say over you each night? Go to Meg and sprinkle this in a circle around her bed while saying that prayer.” Gram handed me the purple bag of the herbs she had just used.

“Gram, I remember the prayer, but I can't create magic like you just did.” I tried to hand the bag back to her.

“You will do just fine.” Gram held my left hand in front of me. The blue ring on my middle finger swirled with magic. “Trust your promise. I have been preparing you for this day all of your life. Now go.” She gently swatted me away.

Not feeling confident in my so-called ‘gift’, I climbed the ladder. When I touched my mother's name, anger built up inside me. I was reminded of why I committed to my promise.

I found Meg tucked in bed and softly snoring. She was deep in sleep. The energy she expended during the day always ensured her night's sleep was deep. Amazingly, not even the chaos from below had woken her.

I pinched a small amount of the herbs from the bag. They grew warm between my fingertips. Slowly, I began sprinkling the purple flowers around Meg's bed. I recited the words I had heard my grandmother say as she tucked us in each night.

“Goddess, I ask for your guidance on this night and ask you to aid in invoking the elements that guide.”

“With my hands to the east, I call upon you, Air, and ask you to blow away any harm and to clarify my thoughts.” A rush of air sent the herbs I had dropped up into the air about me and swirled my hair.

“With my hand to the south, Fire, I call upon you and ask you to burn away any fear I have and burn away those feelings that harm.” Taking more herbs from the pouch from my left hand, I watched as the light purple turned to small,

red embers as they fell to the ground and quickly died out.

“With my hand to the west, Water, I call upon you and ask you to wash away my fears and cleanse those who wish to harm.” The herbs I dropped from my right hand turned into a droplet of water. When it landed on the floor, I heard a string of chimes.

“With my hands to the north, I call upon you, Earth, and ask you to ground me in goodness and strengthen me.” I felt the wood beneath me move. It turned into a grassy field, and I could smell the fresh grass and dirt. The herbs I dropped disappeared into the grass for a moment, but then a small yellow flower began growing from the dark green blades under my feet. I half expected Daisy to appear from the bloom.

“Goddess, my request is complete, and I ask you to keep us safe. Please guide this child as she sleeps and wake her with the light of morning.” The herbs I dropped, this time, turned into white tendrils of smoke that emitted a sound – almost like a small child's laughter. The essence danced through the air and swirled around my slumbering sister. A small smile covered Meg's face as she continued to sleep soundly.

“Thank you, Goddess,” I whispered, and then I kissed my sister on the cheek. “Sleep sweet, my little Meg, sleep sweet.”

Her small eyes barely opened, and she wrapped her arms around my neck before she dozed off again.

Holding my sister in my arms, I felt all the doubt I had been carrying around, off and on, all day fade away. I shifted myself and lay beside her. Before I knew it, I had drifted off, too.

CHAPTER

SIX

I was jolted by a set of sharp nails digging into my forearm. The hot searing pain filled me as I tried to yank away. The harder I pulled, the tighter the grip became.

“How ridiculous you are to think that anyone but me will truly ever love you,” the voice of Eliza snarled.

I searched the darkness for her.

“Everything you are and will be is because of me.”

Looking around for an escape, all I could see was darkness.

“You can run, but I’ll always be able to find you. You are *my* child. You’re from *my* blood. Soon, you will forget the ridiculous ideas that have been planted in your head by that woman, and you will see what real power the magic you hold has in store for you.”

Tearing myself away from her, I felt a sting of pain in my arm as the skin ripped. Falling to my knees, I tried to find something to stop the warm blood from running down my arm. Blinded by the void, I jammed my shoulder into something sharp. Feeling helpless, I cried out for my grandmother.

Eliza’s taunts continued as I tried to move in the opposite direction of the voice. However, she was everywhere, and instead of escaping, I trapped myself. There was nothing but solid walls around me.

“She can’t save you now, Marina. Only I can...only I can,” my mother hissed coldly. The faceless voice began to shake me violently. “Listen to me, Mara, join me...”

I let out a bloodcurdling screaming, praying someone would save me.

"It's me, Mara; it's me," a soft voice pleaded, "Please, wake up, please."

Light penetrated my consciousness. I looked around, expecting to see my mother. Instead, I saw a rainbow mural on the wall and a small bed covered with, at least, twenty different stuffed animals on top of a pink bedspread. The moon shined in the round window, and I could see the stars shining in the night sky.

Realization washed over me. I must have fallen asleep, but I was safe in my room. Recognizing that it was all a bad dream, I began to take in the damage I had caused.

I was crouched in the corner of the loft bedroom I shared with Meg. I had wedged myself between the nightstand and the wardrobe. My jewelry box and all my vanity items were strewn across the floor. The picture frame that held the photo of my mother and father was shattered. Sticking out of it was a large piece of blood-soaked glass. Blood droplets formed a trail that led to me.

My frightened little sister came into focus. "I'm sorry, Meg. It was just a nightmare. Did I hurt you? Are you ok?" I apologized. Shaking, I held out my arms to her.

Meg's green eyes were wide and filled with concern. "I'm ok, but you're bleeding." She pointed at my arm.

She was right. I had a deep cut that ran from the ring finger of my left hand to my elbow. Conscious and with the adrenaline wearing off, I could feel how severe the injury was.

"Can you bring me a towel from the bathroom, please?" I asked calmly, trying not to frighten my sister more than I already had. "It looks worse than it is. Stupid nightmares. Lucky I didn't fall off the ladder, huh?"

Trying to make light of the situation didn't appear to be working. My little sister still wore a brave face, but I could tell she was trying to hold back her tears.

"It will be ok, Meg. Can you just grab the first towel you see?"

Meg nodded and rushed towards the bathroom we shared. Moments later, she returned with a small, hot pink bath towel.

I held out my arm, and asked, "Can you open it, fold it in half the long way,

and place it around my arm?”

My little sister was definitely still a child, but when needed, she could follow directions as well as any adult. She quickly folded it just as I had asked. Then, she gently laid it on over my hand, covering the deepest part of the cut.

I carefully removed my fingers and tightly wrapped my makeshift bandage around my throbbing arm. Putting on my best *don't worry little sister* face, I patted her on the head. “Let's go downstairs and see Gram and Cole. Cole should be back. He is going to stay with us for a few days. I bet they will make us hot chocolate with peppermint marshmallows.”

She nodded with a subtle trace of a smile on her face.

My nightmares were nothing new to Meg, but this time I had really scared her. Guilt filled me. I was supposed to protect my litter sister, not hurt her.

I handed Meg the fluffy white robe that was hanging on a peg beside her bed. “Put this on. You don't want to catch a cold.”

Narrowing her eyes at me, she retorted, “You can't catch a cold from being cold. Everyone knows that.” Begrudgingly, she slipped her arms into the soft robe, covering her satin blue princess gown while mumbling.

“Very true, smarty. How did I get such a wise little sister?” I asked.

Shrugging, she remarked as she began to climb down the ladder, “You're lucky, I guess?”

“Yes, I am.”

When I reached the last step, I was met by Gram. “Oh dear, what have you done to yourself?” she asked before lifting the towel to see how badly I'd been injured. Her face flashed with worry. “Come with me.”

I followed Gram to the sink and let her clean the wound.

“Is she ok?” Cole asked.

“She will be. Cole, go to the pantry and grab my emergency kit.” Turning towards me, she asked, “What cut you?”

“It was just a nightmare, Gram,” I tried to reassure her, grimacing as the cold water flushed the laceration. “I knocked a picture off my dresser and broke it. I'm ok. It really doesn't hurt,” I lied.

Cole brought Gram the bag. “What can I do to help?” he questioned me.

“You could make Meg some hot chocolate,” I suggested.

He shook his head. “I’ll stay with you.”

“I’m fine. I promise. You know how I am – these nightmares are more painful for those around me than they are for me.” I squeezed his hand. “Please. Meg needs you more than I do, right now.”

Cole looked at my sister, who was sitting on the ladder still. He went to her without further delay. Kneeling down beside her, he asked, “You want to know something good?”

“Uh-huh,” Meg half-heartedly replied.

“At least, she didn’t have one of those nightmares where she screamed so loud that Old Lady Callaghan was sure the banshees were coming for her again.”

The two shared a laugh at my expense. I couldn’t be mad, though. Cole was effectively comforting my little sister.

“Ok, Meg, let’s get you something warm to drink. I’m sure Mara’s shrieks chilled you to the bone.”

“She screamed so loud I thought all the windows would crack,” Meg said seriously.

“What are we going to do with your sister?” Cole picked Meg up and swung her around.

Giggling, she grabbed onto his neck. “We should sell her at the next Market Fair.”

The two of them fell into a fit of laughter again. They were entertained by all of the suggestions about what they could do with me.

Gram and I left them to make their hot chocolate. We moved to the living room, so she could mend my wound.

“You’re very lucky it didn’t cut any deeper. Tell me what happened.”

Lifting the formerly hot pink towel, which now looked like a red Rorschach test, she, once again, washed the blood from the injury. The blood flow had lessened, and I was finally relaxed enough to tell my grandmother what had

happened.

As I retold my dream, Gram listened patiently as she coated my cut with a purplish mixture. She smoothed the cold goo in long strokes, followed by a slow figure-eight pattern. The paste stung, at first, but then warmed. It felt like hundreds of hot pins were being poked into my arm. Thankfully, the pinprick feeling began to subside as I finished my tale.

“Did I do the blessing wrong?” I built up the courage to ask, not really wanting to know the answer. I feared her response. “When I called the elements, I felt all of them come to me. Shouldn't it have protected Meg from harm, even from me?”

“No, love. You say you felt all of the elements come to you? If that is true, then you did everything correctly. The Goddess wouldn't have blessed you in such a way if she didn't feel your open heart.”

Taking a cream-colored roll of linen bandages from her bag, she lightly wound the fabric around my forearm. It created a cast-like protection.

“I'm sure that what happened tonight was just a dream. You know that these come more often when you're worried. If you didn't have a nightmare, especially tonight of all nights, I would have been surprised.” She stood up and gathered all her supplies, stuffing them back into her bag. “Now, let's finish this up and go check on those two.”

In the kitchen, we found clues that hot chocolate had been made. Crumbs indicated cookies had been added for additional comfort. Not wondering whom the cookies were really comforting, I smiled.

Cole and Meg were sitting on the couch, reading a book. I sat down next to Cole and put my head on his shoulder. “Thank you for being here for us tonight.”

He kissed the top of my head and said, “Always.”

“Let's all go to bed.” Gram picked up Meg, who was unsuccessfully fighting sleep.

Her slight frame gave the illusion that she was frail, but my grandmother could outwork most men in town. My little sister seemed like a light cloth in her arms as she lifted her with ease and carried her off to bed.

Stopping, she turned, and spoke, "Cole, you can sleep in the guest room since you have already put your things in there. Mara, there is plenty of room in my bed for the three of us. Don't be too long with your good nights. We can deal with things tomorrow."

Watching Gram carry my little sister away, I felt a wave of sadness wash over me. *I can't keep putting her through this. I need to figure out why my dreams are so real. I need to control them for her sake.* My grandmother had more to deal with than was fair. If Eliza was as persistent as she was in my dream, I feared what she would do.

As though he sensed my internal struggle, Cole held me tightly. "I won't ask what your dream was about, tonight, Mar. I'm just glad you're safe. Do I dare look at the damage in your room?"

"I don't even want to think about that right now. I just want you to hold me and tell me it will be all ok."

"It will be ok," he said with a smirk. "Now, let's get you off to bed before I have to face the wrath of your grandmother. I don't want her to weave any protection spells on you that I won't be able to undo."

Cole led me past the dining room towards the hall to the downstairs bedrooms. As we passed the ladder that led to my room, I looked up. The white half walls on each side of the ladder blocked my view. I could only see a portion of the rainbow mural. I looked away, not wanting to think about the mess I had caused.

Once we reached the door to Gram's bedroom, Cole wrapped his arms around me and gently kissed me. "Love you, Mar."

"I love you, too."

He reluctantly released me from his embrace, kissed me on the cheek, and walked down the rest of the hallway into the guest room. The same room that had once belonged to my parents.

I watched him go for a minute before I closed my eyes. "Goddess, please,

protect all those who sleep in this house tonight.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

When I entered the room, Meg and Gram were sleeping. I changed into the long T-shirt that my grandmother had left for me at the end of the bed. It was one of my grandfather's.

Chester Veracor was a tall, handsome man with silver hair. His blue eyes held a mischievous sparkle, especially when he teased Gram. I was only nine years old when he died, but I remembered spending time with him while he worked on his creations.

His work area was behind the house in a wood building that he called a barn. Gramp had told me it was once full of animals that lived on the property. They would roam the forest behind us during the day, looking for food, and then return to the barn for shelter at nightfall. We had a small, covered area that my grandfather had designed to provide them with shelter from the weather.

Gramp's workshop was his pride and joy. He used it to build furniture to sell at the market and for improvements around the house. As he sanded, stained, painted, and polished his wood creations, he would tell me stories about his life had been growing up. Whenever I smell fresh-cut wood, my mind is transported back to the time I spent with him.

Suddenly feeling exhausted, I pushed away my memories. I put my clothes into the hamper in the master bathroom and skipped brushing my teeth or even washing my face. I wanted – no, I needed – to just sleep.

I climbed into the big bed beside my sister, and I nestled into the feather

mattress pad. The large mauve comforter was warm, and the sheets were so soft. My grandmother had a gift for making the most comfortable beds. It was like being stuffed between two fluffy clouds.

Taking a deep breath, I inhaled the lavender, cinnamon, and vanilla intermingled with the freshness of the linens. The grandfather clock chimed ten times. It seemed so much later to me.

As I lay, listening to the soft breathing of my grandmother and sister, the moonlight cast a small light on the ceiling and the glitter in the paint sparkled. When I was a little girl, I would stare at the ceiling and count the stars. The soft tick of the clock with the comforting chimes broke into my thoughts reminding me to sleep. Slowly, counting back from one thousand, I deeply inhaled, again, willing myself to just let go and sleep. Nothing was going to be resolved in my mind tonight.

“Nine hundred ninety-nine, nine hundred ninety-eight, nine hundred ninety-seven,” I softly counted. Somewhere after six hundred forty, I lost count and faded into a deep, dreamless slumber.

I woke to a small foot kicking my head. Looking out the window, I could see it was still dark outside. I felt like I had just fallen asleep.

Pushing Meg's foot off me, I sat up and settled on the edge of the bed. Of course, my sister continued to sleep. There was no sign of my grandmother, but there was a stack of my clothes on the fabric-covered trunk at the end of the bed.

Looks like I'm being dressed by my grandmother today, I thought with a smile.

I hopped off the bed and instantly regretted it. The wood floor was ice cold and there was a chill in the air. Gathering up my assigned clothing, I entered the bathroom to prepare for the day.

I moved quickly, hoping to warm up, and shed my nightwear. I pulled the white shower curtain open before stepping into the white tiled enclosure. Without thinking, I turned the water on and was blasted with a frigid burst of

water.

“Damn it,” I hissed.

Jumping back, I held my hand under the stream until it became lukewarm. I, then, dared to slip under the running water again. When I did, I turned the silver knob to the left, trying to make it even hotter.

The hotter the water, the better, I thought.

As I washed my hair, I realized I still had the bandage on. Holding my arm out while trying to rinse the soap out of my hair was impossible. Therefore, I simply gave up.

By the time I was done, the bandage was starting to fall off, so I slowly unwrapped it. There wasn't any pain, just a slight itching. I envisioned finding an oozing gash that would scar terribly. Instead, I found the long cut had already scabbed over.

I gently rubbed the purplish paste and bits of dried blood off my arm. I sat under the hot water spray, just letting it beat on my face. I must have been in the shower for a while because the hot water began to cool.

Grabbing a towel from the hook, I wrapped it around myself and stepped out onto the fuzzy, white bathmat. I stood under the heat lamp, just absorbing the warmth. Thoughts of the day ahead pushed me to hurry up and just get ready. I finished drying off, and then looked through the clothes that Gram chose. Jean shorts, a black V-neck T-shirt, my favorite black bra, and white panties with a rainbow on the back.

“Funny, Gram,” I said, holding up the underwear to inspect them.

At least, she didn't buy the days of the week pack she had threatened to get when she found them at the store. I had not seen this purchase. She must have been saving them for a special occasion...the special occasion being the giggles that would erupt from my little sister as the gift was given at the most inconvenient time. Knowing her, she probably intended it for one of my birthday gifts, planning to have it opened in front of my friends.

I finished dressing after toweling off my hair. Grabbing my extra toothbrush from the holder, I put the peppermint toothpaste on the brush and let the foam get to work. Once I looked appropriately rabid, and each tooth felt sparkly fresh,

I rinsed my mouth.

Next, I began to work on my hair. Not wanting to spend time trying to dry it, I twisted it into a long braid. I took my bath towel and squeezed out all the extra moisture. Opening the vanity drawer, I pulled out Gram's mauve lipstick and lightly covered my lips. Once again, thoughts of *good enough* filled my head.

I quietly opened the bathroom door, not wanting to wake Meg. She was still sleeping as I left the room and headed towards the kitchen. There was a soft light above the table. Gram was sitting in her light blue housecoat, writing in her lavender journal. In front of her was a steaming cup of coffee.

"Join me. I'm just finishing this." Gram patted the chair next to her and closed her writings.

Sitting down, I looked into her light brown eyes. They were filled with worry. "What do you think she will do now that we sent her away?" I questioned.

Closing her eyes, she replied, "I'm not sure. I really am not sure what she has planned, but we'll be ok."

Not wanting to cause her any more worries, I stood up, kissed her on the top of her head, and replied, "You're right. We'll be fine. Now, I'm going to my room. I want to clean it before Meg wakes up."

I picked up the red mug my grandmother made for herself and took a big gulp of the warm liquid. Gram's coffee consisted of a strong black brew with generous sprinkles of cinnamon and sugar, and an even more generous splash of cream. The sweet concoction made me smile.

"This was for me, right?" I coyly asked, giving her my best *aren't I cute* impersonation. "When I'm done upstairs, we'll talk about your choice in underwear for me."

She took the half-full cup back from me. "You're lucky I love you. It isn't everyone I share my morning coffee with. Now, grab yourself a piece of the apple bread before you head up to your room. Coffee alone does not make a breakfast."

Doing as I was told, I grabbed a big slice from the platter in the middle of the table and, this time, I kissed my Gram on her cheek. Her soft skin felt like silk.

“I love you, too,” I called back to her as I headed up the ladder.

CHAPTER EIGHT

With my apple bread in hand, I, once again, climbed the ladder. I greedily took large bites while I made my ascent. Each portion had caramelized apples, and raisins swirled into it. As I popped the last morsel into my mouth, I stopped to stare at the sixth rung from the top. Running my fingers over the name *Eliza*, I frantically scratched my nails across the engraving. I tried to erase it completely, but my efforts were in vain. My short nails did nothing to the hard wood.

My quick breakfast felt like a rock in my stomach. An urge to scream while destroying everything my mother ever touched overcame me. “Air, I ask your blessing of peace,” I pleaded. “Please, blow away the anger I’m carrying.”

A small burst of wind twisted around me, and I could hear soft twinkling laughter as it encircled me. The warm breeze lifted my damp braid and then dropped it.

“Bright blessings, Air,” I thanked the element.

I began to feel calmer, so I continued my climb. I looked forward to not thinking about Eliza. Hope-filled, I had a way to eliminate the anger and sorrow that consumed me. With the help of Air, I would be stronger, and I could be in control of my emotions.

The burst of Air made one last spin around me before it trailed down the ladder. Surprise filled me that the element had not only responded to me but stayed to make sure I was ok.

I found a bucket of cleaning supplies at the entrance to the loft. Gram must have put it up here for me. Looking at the mess I had made of our room, I was thankful Gram hadn't cleaned it for me. She knew I needed to see for myself what damage I had done.

My section of the room was on the north wall. My bed had not been disturbed by my night terror. The purple bedspread was in place, and the lime green pillows had not been touched. My small, black lamp sat on my white nightstand. Perched up against it, undisturbed, were a little stuffed wolf and a tiny lamb. Gram had given them to me when I was younger, to comfort me when I was scared.

I followed a small trail of blood around my bed to the corner where it pooled. Pulling out a fresh rag, Gram's homemade cleaning solution, and a large paper bag from the bucket of supplies, I set to work. Taking care not to cut myself, I put the broken pieces of glass into the bag before I scrubbed the dark blood off the floor. With it as clean as possible, I sought my next project.

My long dresser was bare since everything had been thrown onto the floor. Most things were still in good condition. They just needed to be wiped off where the blood droplets had dried. As I cleaned each item, I put everything back into the correct place.

Wiping down my black and white polka dot makeup bag, I realized it held more cosmetics than I would ever use. *I always find myself wanting to try new things*, I thought with a gentle shake of my head. *I ought to throw half of this stuff away without bothering to clean them*. Of course, feeling extremely clingy to my things, that's not what I did.

In complete contrast to the bag, my white, porcelain jewelry box was less full. I placed my silver earrings, rainbow bangles, and barrettes back into the container. I replaced the lid and set it on the dresser, where I stared at the box for a moment. I felt like I was seeing it with fresh eyes. I knew the flower's half petals, which decorated the case, had represented the four elements. However, I never really understood how much they were around me.

"Thank you for always being here for me, even when I didn't know you were," I said to the elements. The arch-shaped petals each came to life for the

briefest moment and danced in front of me. It was as if they said, “You’re welcome.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the broken picture frame that injured me. I took the color photo of my parents from it and threw the rest into the garbage bag. I loved this image of my parents.

My mother's hair was pulled high on top of her head with large curls cascading over her shoulders. Always stylish, she had chosen a short, dark green dress, and white thigh-high boots. The four-inch heels matched her height to my father, Elliott Stone.

They were a beautiful couple. While my mother was fair, he looked sun-kissed. The contract was aesthetically pleasing.

My father's blond hair was short and spiked. He stood six feet tall with a slender frame. He wore a matching dark green shirt and a light pair of khakis. His soft green eyes were joy-filled, and a big smile was on his face.

At first look, they seemed so happy, but as I continued to examine the picture, something felt wrong. I could not put my finger on exactly what was disturbing me. Perhaps it was the darkness in Eliza's eyes, which I had never noticed before.

I initially found this picture after my mother left. When I showed it to Gram, she told me it was taken on the day Eliza found out they were expecting me. I was so excited to have the first family photo.

Now, holding it in front of me, I wanted to tear it up and erase her from my memory, forgetting she existed. As I contemplated destroying it, I found myself examining it more carefully. My gut told me I was missing something, so I continued to search for the answer.

After a few minutes, I finally realized my mother was wearing a silver snake ring on her small finger. The ring twisted into the same design embossed on the black clothing she wore in the image the spirits showed me. I could not remember seeing her wear the ring before. I held the picture closer, scrutinizing the intricate design of the snakes.

Thinking back, my mind drifted to my father. I could not remember him wearing any jewelry, except for his wedding band. He never even wore a watch.

I recalled asking him why he didn't wear one, especially since Gramps wore his. He had told me the only time he needed to tell was by the beat of our hearts.

Shaking me from my memories, Cole called out from the ladder, "Taking a break already?"

I quickly folded the picture and shoved it in my pocket. I needed to find out more before I shared it with Cole.

"No, I was just finishing up." I quickly got to my feet. "Come look around and tell me what I missed."

Cole picked up several stuffed animals and put them back onto Meg's bed. He added them to her collection, which included a mermaid, variously dressed bears, dragons, and other animals. He finished making up Meg's bed, and then pulled a necklace from under it.

"Is this yours?" he questioned.

I looked at the twine string with various charms attached to it. Taking it back, I replied, "Yes, I have been adding to this since I was twelve."

Eventually, when we had more time, I would share with him how I began adding charms soon after I began to think of him as more than *just the boy I grew up with* – when I first started considering him *mine*. I would tell him how the first charm I added was the screw nut that fell out of his pocket when he constructed the rope swing on the large sycamore tree in our front yard.

I placed the necklace inside the box, set it on my dresser, and then relayed to him everything that had happened the night before. I started with my acceptance of the ring and the promise to protect magic. As I told him my story, he sat on Meg's bed, just listening. When I told him about the blessing, he smiled.

"I know this may sound crazy to you," I said, "but I still feel the elements around me. Just before I finished the climb up the stairs, I was feeling so angry that I thought I was going to explode. I asked the element, Air, to remove my negative thoughts, and I was surrounded by wind."

"I don't think any of this is crazy. I have always known you were special." Cole reached into the pocket of his jeans and held the ring out to me. "I hope you won't be adding this to your jewelry box." Cole kissed my hand before he slipped the promise ring onto my finger.

I started to respond, but he stopped me.

“Before you say anything, let me speak. I spoke to your grandmother this morning about us. She warned me that the tattoo she gave me was not only to protect me from harm, but it would also protect you and your family. If my heart isn't pure and my promises to you are false, I'll feel a pain like no other, she warned.” The bright eye in the center of his wrist seemed to change colors as if confirming Gram's promise.

“She then took my hand and called the elements. I felt each one as they surrounded me. I don't know whether she wanted to scare me off or prepare me for our future. The entire time, I just kept thinking about you, so I'm going to ask you this again.”

Cole guided me to sit on the bed before he knelt before me. “Mara, I have always loved you. Over the years we have known each other, the love I have felt for you has only grown stronger and deeper with each breath I have taken. I'm offering you this ring as a promise to love you and take care of you until the day I die. I want to spend the rest of my life with you, and only you. No matter what this life holds for us, I want to face it together.”

I put my hand over his lips and said, “If you let me speak, I can answer you. You don't need to sell yourself to me. I realized I loved you when I was twelve, and you hung the swing for me in the front yard. I've only loved you more each day. Last night made me realize how I have been holding back out of fear of losing you. I can't keep doing that. I can't push you out of my life and end up making what I feared most come true. I can't be, and will not be, in this world without you.”

Cole kissed my hand as he removed it from his lips. “You won't be without me, Mar.” Cole joined me on the bed, grinning from ear-to-ear. “I can't believe you finally admitted you love me. You have made me the happiest man in the entire world.”

He held me in his arms and pressed his lips to mine. Our soft kisses quickly turned stronger as I pulled him towards me. With Cole, I felt safe, and I was able to ignore the negative voice that kept telling me I didn't deserve his love.

My feeling of contentment was loudly interrupted by a high voice. “Gross!

Gram they're up here kissing." Meg called down to my grandmother.

"Don't be like that, Meg. She has finally agreed to marry me." Cole stood up and ran his fingers through his hair.

"It's about time, Cos," Meg quipped, still standing on the ladder. "I thought I was going to be old and gray before she ever stopped being silly."

"*She's* right here." I gave my sister a stern look. "We'll have plenty of time for this discussion later. Did you come up here for a reason, other than being sassy?"

"Well, if you weren't such a crab, I would tell you breakfast is ready." Meg stuck her tongue out at me and quickly scrambled back down the ladder.

"We better tell Gram the good news," Cole said, unable to hide the excitement in his voice.

"Why don't you go ahead and get your breakfast? It won't be long before I follow."

"You haven't changed your mind, have you?" Cole's face paled.

Kissing him on the cheek, I said, "I've never been so sure of an answer. Go on. I'll only be a minute."

What we would face was not going to be easy, but I had to believe we were stronger together than apart. With that knowledge, I called after him, "I love you, Cole."

Watching him descend the ladder, I reached into my pocket to pull out the picture of my parents.

"What else are you hiding from me, Eliza?" I asked, glaring at the image of my mother. Afraid I would find out soon enough, I put the picture into my jewelry box, and then went downstairs for breakfast.

CHAPTER NINE

After making sure everything was back in its place, I found the kitchen had become a controlled chaos. Crates lined the counter, full of glass jars of jam, bags of dried herbs, and tonics. The smell of fresh loaves of bread and scones baking permeated the room.

People from all over would come to buy and trade goods while participating in the entertainment. Meg was old enough to join the other young girls in the traditional lunar dance. She had been practicing for months to make sure she knew all the steps.

"Mara, sit and eat your food before it becomes cold." Gram handed me an omelet overflowing with fresh vegetables, including mushrooms, onions, and peppers. I took a large bite, savoring each cheesy morsel.

Meg eyed my plate, and I playfully growled at her. "Mine. Eat your fruit," I whispered.

Meg scooted away in pretend terror.

"Finish eating girls. We have much to do." Gram took advantage of Meg sitting still to brush her messy hair. "Meg, we'll be busier than normal tomorrow. You'll need to stay with me at our stand until it is time for your performance. No running off where I can't see you," she instructed.

"Will I get to see the other stands?" Meg slouched in her chair.

"I'm sure Mara and Cole will cover us, and we'll take a break. Now, stop pouting and sit up," Gram ordered.

Meg meekly obeyed, and Gram twisted my sister's hair into two long braids.

When she weaved flowers into Meg's hair, I was reminded of the image I had seen, last night, of my grandmother as a young girl. Meg was the spitting image of her.

When my grandmother finished her hair, she patted Meg on the head and said, "Now, run along and practice your dance. Later, we'll have you try on your dress to see if we need to make any more adjustments."

Cole joined us in the kitchen. He squeezed my shoulder gently and kissed my cheek.

Gram directed her attention towards my boyfriend. "If you got enough breakfast, can you help me gather some tonics from the pantry?"

Cole stole a piece of the cut fruit from my plate and popped it into his mouth. "Yep. I'm all done. I'm now at your service, fine lady."

My grandmother handed a sheet of paper to Cole. Watching her go over how she wanted the tonics stacked and assigning him additional duties, I could see the love she had for him. Cole brought so much happiness to my family, and he made Gram's eyes brightened as he joked. He was so much more than just my boyfriend.

A twinge of sadness filled me as I thought about Cole's life. It had not been perfect. A few months after his sixteenth birthday, Cole's mother, Sarah, died. Less than a year later, his father, Thomas, remarried a woman he had just met. His new wife, Rosalind, was a selfish, cruel woman.

Gram warned me to stay away from Rosalind. My grandmother told me she had never seen a person wear so many masks of deceit. That the woman was hiding something, but what, we didn't know.

When Rosalind and Thomas married, she insisted Cole give up his room for her son. Instead of arguing, Cole moved to the cottage behind the house. He ended up spending more time at my home than at his own.

Six months ago, when he turned nineteen, his father announced that they were leaving Starten. He said they wanted to be closer to Rosalind's family, who

lived thousands of miles away. Leaving the family house in Cole's care, Thomas walked away and had only sent one letter to his son since then.

The click of the last bottle of rosemary hair tonic and lemongrass oil being stacked broke my focus.

"Good. We are ahead of schedule," Gram said. She took a seat next to me. "Cole, let's sit for a while and talk about everything."

Cole joined us with three mugs of piping hot coffee, just the way I liked. Gram took a small sip and nodded her thanks.

"I knew the time would come when we would be talking about this. Marriage isn't something either of you should take lightly," Gram began, "Saying that, I love you both, and I wholeheartedly support your decision. The two of you are meant to be together. Do you have any plans for when this will happen, or will it be a long engagement?"

Cole shook his head. "We haven't discussed details yet. I was —"

Interrupting him, I said, "The day after my birthday."

"Well, you have your answer then. In less than three months, we'll marry," Cole declared with a delighted look of surprise on his face.

"Are you sure you don't want to just get married tomorrow?" Gram teased.

"Now, Mae," Cole started with a deep southern drawl and tipping an imaginary hat at her, "no bride of mine shall be expected to plan a wedding extravaganza as fine as the one we shall have on less than a day's notice. Why the person that suggests such a thing should be tarred and feathered."

I interrupted the remaking of *Gone with the Wind* that I was sure would ensue, and I took both of their hands in mine. "Enough of the wedding talk, we'll have plenty of time to discuss the *small*, simple event. We need to talk about the red elephant in the room that we have been avoiding. What are we going to do about my..." Unable to call her my mother, I started over, "What are we going to do about Eliza?"

No one spoke for what seemed like ages. The ticking of the clock sounded like a bomb waiting to go off.

Tick tock tick tock tick tock

Minutes went by before the silence was filled with a long sigh and Gram's

soft voice began, “Since you were a little girl, I have been preparing you for the path you accepted last night. Think back to the stories I told you.”

Frustrated, I asked, “I just found out our family is the protectors of magic. How can you think a story about pigs, and other such nonsense, can even begin to prepare me for this? You dropped a bomb in my hand, last night, that I don't know how to handle.”

“Tell me the story of the pigs.” She patted my hand, and a calming warmth surrounded me.

Her comforting touch brought me back to the little girl I had once been. When I would snuggle into her arms while she told me magical tales.

"Remember, there were three little pigs that lived with their grandmother," she prodded. Continuing where she left off, I closed my eyes and began to retell the story. "When the little pigs became old enough to live on their own, their grandmother told them five things they would need to make a strong home that would keep out the wolves. 'Gather up these supplies, my little piglets – airy lavender from the east, fiery cinnamon from the south, a water lily from the west, salt of the northern earth, and a blessing to the Goddess by your door.' With the reminder, the piglets set out to build their new homes. Each with a plan."

Hesitating, I looked at Gram. When she nodded for me to go on, I took a deep breath and, focusing, I continued, *"The oldest pig laughed at their grandmother's advice and decided his home would be made of sturdy brick. The middle pig went searching for the items his grandmother said he would need, but he gave up after only gathering lavender and salt for the stable wood home he built. However, the youngest pig spent many days gathering all of the supplies that the grandmother had told him were necessary. It had taken him so much time to find everything that he only had time to gather nearby straw to build his home."*

"As the last piece of hay was added, the small pig joyously danced around his new home in a circle, sweeping a small broom as he sang: 'Goddess, I ask for your guidance on this night and ask you to aid in invoking the elements that guide. I place this lavender from the east, and I call upon you, Air, to blow away my fear and those who wish me harm. I place this cinnamon from the south, and

I call upon you, Fire, to burn away all fear I have and burn away those feelings that harm. I place this lily from the west, and I call upon you, Water, and ask you to wash away my fears and cleanse those who wish to harm. I place this salt from the north, and I call upon you, Earth, and ask you to ground me in goodness and strengthen me. Goddess, my request is complete. Thank you for the blessings you have bestowed upon my home.’”

As I finished the little pig's song, I felt all of the elements dancing around me. The smells and sounds that invaded my senses overwhelmed me. I closed my eyes and took one last breath before I continued, *“When the older pigs visited their brother's home, they snorted. ‘Your home will never keep out the wolves. You will become their breakfast before the sun rises.’ Laughing, they danced away to their homes.*

“When night fell, and all three little pigs were tucked into their beds in their new homes, the oldest pig heard wolves howling and banging at the front door of his brick house. The force was so strong that the wood door began to splinter. Afraid, he quickly ran out the back door of his home and straight to his middle brother.

“Inside the wooden home, the two brothers huddled together, afraid to sleep. Again, the howling of wolves began banging at the front door. Just as the door fell down, the brother pigs escaped out the back door and ran down the road to their little brother's straw house.

“Inside the straw home, the three pigs sat around the kitchen table. The howling began outside the door, and the oldest brother cried out, ‘This house will not keep them out, we must leave now.’ Realizing that the straw house didn't have another exit, the middle brother began to cry.”

A soft voice beside me began to speak. *“The little pig said, ‘Don't fear brothers, I have made this home in honor of the Air of the east, the Fire of the south, the Water of the west, the Earth of the north, and with a request of the blessing of the Goddess. We'll be safe.’ As he spoke these words, the howling of wolves began to softly fade away.”*

In unison, the little voice beside me, and I finished the story, *“And in the end, everything was all right because the little pig listened to his grandmother.”*

Laughing, I pulled my sister into a hug. “How long have you been eavesdropping, Meg?”

Meg pulled away and gave me a stern look. “You can't blame me. You keep calling all of my friends down here. You interrupted our tea party. If you're through telling stories, we can go play again.” With that, she turned on her heel and stomped away in a huff.

“I'll leave you both to talk. I want to see what this party is all about.” Cole winked at us and followed after my little sister.

I stood up and began to follow her, but a hand clamped on my shoulder. “Let her go back to her friends. I can answer all of your questions.”

“No, Mae we can handle this. We'll —” a familiar woman's voice called from behind me.

An intense feeling overwhelmed me. My vision blurred. As everything seemed to spin around me, small voices were talking, but the words spoken made no sense.

Suddenly, the world went black as I collapsed to the ground.

CHAPTER TEN

“Just give her time to adjust. We've given her a lot to take in,” I heard Gram say.

I tried to sit up to see who was talking, but my body was just too weak. Fighting against the exhaustion I felt, I pushed myself up onto my elbows. As I began to give up my efforts, strong hands gripped my shoulders and helped me to sit up the rest of the way.

“Take it easy, you have been through a lot,” said the soft voice of my grandmother.

When my eyes focused, they locked with the Air Elemental, they called Breeze, and, instantly, my memories rushed back. I was pummeled with years of contained images and sounds. Like a pitcher being filled with liquid, I absorbed an overwhelming number of memories.

As the barrage of information slowed, I could see everyone around me. I was surrounded by the dolls from my childhood. Bay, with her silly giggles and her plans for adventures. Daisy, who had listened patiently to the secrets and dreams I shared with her. Breeze, the one that always had the answers to my worries and fears. And now, Blaze, who had been my strength and comforted. She had a dragon-like spirit that scared off any *creatures* in the night.

“I don't understand. How can this be? These are just my dolls. What magic are you using, Gram, and why?” I asked, still fighting the clouds of confusion.

“You are correct, Mara. You do have a toy version of each of them. Not soon after Meg was born, you became more vocal about the elements. The more you

spoke of the magic around you, the more scared I became. Honestly, I was growing suspicious of your mother and her commitments. To protect you, I made an elixir that would hold your memory of the magic until it was safe.”

Gram knelt down next to me. “We agreed it would be best,” she said.

Each elemental nodded, confirming her story.

“Why didn't you give me my memory back when she left? Why wait until now? Why wait until it was too late for me to learn anything?” A strong feeling of hopelessness consumed me.

“Mara,” Blaze spoke, “you already know everything that you need to. It is inside you, as it always has been. We have been with you the whole time. You just didn't realize that we were here.”

I sat silently, embracing my memories. I had no words to tell them how I felt about the secrets that were freed. Small things that I had always felt began to make more sense. An image of my mother, brushing my hair while she asked me questions about the time I spent talking to myself, returned. Even then, I knew I wasn't supposed to tell her, but I didn't know why.

I wanted to scream, to strike out at everything in front of me. Still, no matter how strong the urge to fight which boiled inside me, I was equally consumed with immense sadness and defeat. Tears streamed down my face, and I did the first thing that made sense – I fell sobbing into my grandmother's arms. I needed her above all.

Calmly speaking as she stroked my hair, Gram said, “Let it out, my love.”

In the warmth of her arms, I cried. Every bit of emotion I had been holding back for so long came rushing out. Minutes went by before the sobs escaping my body began to slow. I was left with a fantastic sense of understanding. The peace I was feeling was not only from the love of my grandmother but from the elemental magic swirling around me and pulsing through my veins.

Composed, I stood up from the floor and offered my hand to my grandmother. “I know why you did it, Gram. You had no choice. I understand what the promise we both made means.”

With a look of relief, she smiled and kissed my cheek. “I hoped you would understand. Now, we need to make plans to fulfill our promise.” Gram

immediately began to gather bottles and bags. “Cole, can you carry this box to the kitchen?” she asked, and then handed him her supplies.

Turning towards me, my grandmother put her lavender journal into my hands. “I have been writing everything you need to know down since you were a small girl.”

Slowly leafing through the book, I could see her wavy handwriting along with small drawings and diagrams. I stopped on a page that said *Memory Potion*. It read:

Memory Potion

- Rainwater collected on the eve of a full moon
- Two cinnamon sticks soaked in vanilla bean oil for at least six days
- Crushed lavender leaves
- Pinch of sea salt
- Combine all ingredients at sunrise and place half into a small vial.

Upon consumption of the potion, refill the bottle with the remaining liquid and keep in a safe place.

!! Warning !!

This spell will not erase – only contain – the memories.
Memories can be returned only with the remaining potion if the herb of memory is added.

“This is the spell you used, right? Do you have any more of the potion left?” I questioned.

Bay danced around on the table, spinning her long blue ponytail. “She has the ingredients to make more. Now, get your nose out of the book. You have much to remember.”

“Ignore her.” Blaze glared at the Water elemental. “She is easily excited.” Taking the book from me, she handed it to Gram and said, “Come with us.”

“Why not go to your favorite picnic spot? Let's stay close, today,” Gram

suggested.

Bay spun around excitedly. "I love picnics...and dancing...and tea with cookies...and..."

"Stop, we don't have time for games," interrupted the commanding voice of Breeze. "We'll have time for fun later. Today, we need to help her not only recall but also *understand* all of her memories."

A soft whisper in my ear said, "Don't worry about them. My sisters are just anxious. We missed spending time with you."

Looking at the source of the voice, I saw the calming green eyes of an old friend. "Thank you, Daisy," I whispered back. "I have missed you, too."

In all the confusion, I had completely forgotten about Cole. Looking around, I found him sitting in the living room. I smiled at him, and he winked at me.

"Cole will be fine. I have a list of things for him to do. After all, we still need to finish getting ready for tomorrow's Lunar Festival." Gram handed me a small, white picnic basket.

My grandmother was a superwoman. After calming my meltdown, she was able to whip up a snack in the blink of an eye. *How did she do this without being noticed?* I wondered.

"Just a little treat. Enjoy your time with elementals," she whispered and kissed me on the cheek.

"Thank you." I accepted the basket. "Can we spend some time together when I return?"

"Later. Go enjoy the afternoon," Gram said.

I wanted to tell her I needed more answers...that I had so many questions, but I held back my words. In my heart, I knew she had done the right thing despite the doubt taunting me. An endless battle raged inside me. I had to decide whether to listen to my heart or to let my mind control me.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I followed Blaze into the backyard. We took the same path that Young Marina had taken in my memory. Flowers and fruit colored the lush trees along our route. This time, there were no sounds coming from my grandfather's workshop. The silence was deafening.

When we approached the largest green tree, images of tea parties flashed in my mind. My time with the elementals had been filled with laughter and magic. A familiar sensation washed over me as I set the picnic basket down and pulled out the soft yellow blanket. Daisy was quick to help me spread it out.

Bay flopped down, and asked, "What did she pack us to eat? I'm starving from all of the work I've done, today."

Blaze harrumphed at her.

I pulled the treats out one-by-one. I laid out fresh cheeses, a variety of cubed bread, and a container that held deep red slices of tomatoes sprinkled with basil, sea salt, and olive oil. The last items I found inside the basket were a bottle of white grape juice and a small tin that I knew held tea biscuits.

Bay clapped. "She didn't forget what I liked!"

We munched on our food, savoring the flavors, and Breeze began to speak. "When your great-grandmother was a child, the Goddess decided to reward her for her help in saving the magic. My sisters and I were sent to guide the ancestors of Genevieve Silver as they learned how to use the elemental magic. With Mae, we found our time here was an easy job of magical play. By the time your mother was born, we realized, to keep your family safe, we needed to be

silent observers. The four of us never appeared to Eliza in our fae form. Instead, we kept our contact to the basic elements that we represent. When she turned fourteen, we knew our reservations had been correct.”

“This isn't the time,” Blaze scolded. The gold of her eyes grew dark, and the red streaks of her hair began to burn with fire. “We'll have plenty of chances to discuss the path of Eliza, but today, we've got a small amount of time to help Mara connect again.”

Blowing a burst of wind to put out the flames Blaze was emitting, Breeze agreed, “No need to become upset. You're right. The story can keep for another day.”

Blaze turned to me, staring hard and said, “Now, show us what you have inside you.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, not hiding my frustration. “I have nothing, but confusion and jumbled memories inside of me.”

Without notice, Blaze threw a ball of fire in front of me onto the picnic cloth. The small ball erupted and began to burn the yellow fabric. I stared at the fire, unsure what to do. In response to my inaction, I felt a small gust of wind blow past me towards the now growing fire. The flames danced and flicked at the wind as if inviting a new friend to the party.

Closing my eyes, I held my hands out and lowered them over the fire. “Wind of Breeze, Fire of Blaze, Water of Bay, and Stone of Daisy, I call upon you to contain these flames.” Opening my eyes, I noticed it began to flick at me, but my words had done nothing. The fire grew stronger.

Taking a deep breath, this time, I held out my hands and placed them closer to the fire. “Winds of Air, flames of Fire, drops of Water, and salt of Earth, I command you to come to me.”

Plunging my hands into the fiery flames, I felt the red-hot heat lick my fingers, but it wasn't hurting me. Instead, it rushed towards me like hot lava flowing down a mountain. In the palm of my hand, it formed into a ball.

Clasping both hands together, I felt the power of fire rush inside my veins. As the warmth ran through me, I opened my now empty hands. Only small, white tendrils of smoke remained.

No sooner had I recovered from the fire than the earth under me began to shake, and the ground split open. The blanket began to sink into the crevice. Once again, I recited the command.

The earth stopped shaking, but now, there was a ball of mud. It grew larger as it rolled at me. I wrapped my fingers around the cold, soft soil, and shivered as it ran throughout my body like an army of worms.

Feeling a mist on the back of my arms, I turned to face what I expected to be a sphere of water. Instead, I stared at a ten-foot wave that was being swayed by a strong wind. I was not prepared for such a sight and my hesitation cost me the precious moments I needed to stop it.

The swell crashed down on me and pulled me into the center of it. As I was spun and twisted through the watery cage, I could not speak for fear of drowning. Realizing how the other elements had responded, I held out my hands and willed the water to consume me.

After several long seconds, the waves slowed. They gently rocked me down to the ground, cradling me as if I was a small baby. As it set me down, small droplets danced around me, and a warm breeze dried me off.

Holding my hands out again in front of me, I strongly spoke, "Winds of Air, flames of Fire, drops of Water, and salt of Earth, I command you to come to me."

The water and the air around me pressed against my palms before they burst inside me. I gasped at the contrast of ice and warmth that ran through my body. As white smoke emitted from both my hands, I knew I had passed the test.

We spent the rest of the time talking about the lessons they had taught me as a child. My first priority was to always be safe and to use my magic carefully. Though we spoke for a few hours, the conversation still felt rushed. It was as if they were trying to teach me seventeen years of knowledge in one afternoon.

When Daisy settled on my lap with a sad expression on her face, I knew what was coming.

"I won't see you again, will I?" I questioned, hoping I was wrong.

With a soft smile, she answered, "Not for a while, but we are always with you. We'll be in the air you breathe, the water you drink, the warmth of the fire, and the ground beneath you. We've always been here to remind you what you

already have inside.” She kissed me on the cheek and said, “You know what the next step is, Mara. Follow your heart. The Goddess has blessed you.”

“Enough of this sentimentality, Daisy,” Blaze chided. “She needs to be strong now.”

“And to use her intuition,” said Breeze.

“Oh, and to never forget her joy,” Bay added.

“More than just *being* strong, she has to know she *is* strong,” Daisy said.

“Most importantly,” a divine voice whispered, “she needs to remember she is loved.”

The elements clasped hands and spun until they formed white streams of smoke. As if saying farewell, they twirled around me one last time.

“I won't forget my promise,” I whispered as they faded away.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I sat out under the tree, thinking, unaware of the time. The rustle of leaves from behind stirred me from my contemplations. The sun was beginning to set, which shocked me when I realized how long I'd been alone.

The scent of lavender and vanilla enveloped me as Gram sat down next to me. Without a word, she took my hand in hers. We sat in silence as the sky changed from orange and pink to a star-filled black.

"It's time to come inside, love. Cole and Meg are waiting for you."

"I'm not ready for this, Gram," my voice cracked. "I can't be who they think I am...who you think I am."

"It isn't who we think you are that matters. It is who you *are*." Gram stood and held out her hand to help me up. "We have a big day tomorrow. Let's get dinner and make plans."

I took her hand, and we walked back to the house. Stopping, I grasp on her tightened. "Wait," I said. "I think we need to make more of that memory potion, tomorrow. If something happens, I want to be able to keep my promise to protect the magic."

"See, my girl, it is what is inside you already. Tomorrow morning, we'll make more, in case it is needed." She smiled at me before she gently tugged my hand. "Now, let's go eat."

When we arrived home, we found Cole and Meg playing a card game at the kitchen table.

“Cos,” Meg cried out, “you cheat. You can't play that card!” Meg threw her cards onto the discard pile, and shouted, “I win! You cheated!”

“Winning isn't cheating,” Cole corrected. “You're becoming a horrible poor sport.”

Gram interrupted their argument. “Let's clear the table. The lasagna is ready, and the garlic toast is going to be dried out if we wait much longer.”

Never wanting to miss a meal, Cole hopped up and went for the plates. “Come on, Meg, we'll play again after dinner.”

Meg followed after him begrudgingly. “Why would I want to play with a cheater?”

“Because you know you love me.” Cole grinned and tousled her hair.

Dinner was exactly what we all needed. The warm vegetable lasagna oozed with cheese while the garlic bread was crispy and buttery. Eating and laughing, Gram went over her mental checklist of the things we needed to finish in the morning.

With the meal finished, the dishes cleaned up, and everything put away, we settled in the living room. Meg and Gram snuggled on the overstuffed purple love seat. Cole and I chose to sit close together on the red couch.

“Everything is ready to go.” Gram smoothed Meg's hair. “In the morning, we can load up the truck and head out about nine. I want everyone to bed early.” Eyeing me, she repeated, “*Everyone.*”

Yawning, I agreed, “I'm exhausted already. I think I'm going to make it an early night after I take a warm bath.” Resting my head on Cole's shoulder, I asked, “You won't be too mad if I head off now, will you?”

Glancing towards my grandmother and sister, who looked like they would nod off at any moment, he chuckled. “You all have had a long day. We should all hit the hay.”

Agreeing, Gram stood up and kissed us both on the head. “Come on, little

one,” she said, tugging gently on Meg’s arm. “You will be the star of the stage tomorrow.”

“Can I sleep with you tonight, Gram?” Meg asked, “Mara will toss and turn, keeping me up all night.”

“Of course, you can. I would miss your cold feet if you didn’t.” Gram laughed as she led my little sister off to bed. However, she stopped before they reached the kitchen, she gave us a stern look. “Off to bed soon, little ones.”

Cole saluted. “Yes, ma’am.”

“We will, Gram,” I promised. “Sweet dreams.”

When we were alone, Cole held out my arm to examine the healing wound. It was now a red line, not the deep cut of yesterday. “I should have known magic was infused in Gram’s healing tricks. I guess you will learn her secrets, too.” Kissing the inside of my wrist, he said, “Go take your bath. I’m going to get ready for bed myself.”

I gave Cole one last kiss and reluctantly said, “Goodnight. I’ll see you in the morning.”

It seemed like days since I had been in my room when, in reality, it had only been a few hours. I looked at my dolls on the shelf. Seeing the replicas of my living guardians, I felt a warm comfort.

I turned on the water to fill the large tub and reached for Gram’s special bubble bath. Vanilla and lavender filled my senses as I opened the container. I dumped in a generous amount of the white powder and swirled my hands through the warm liquid.

Stripping off my clothes, I slipped under the water, allowing the stress of the day to float away. I slowly ran my hand back and forth, gently splashing the fragrant fluid around me. I let the memories of my time with my secret friends fill my mind.

A soft knock on the door interrupted my ruminations. “Are you ok in there? You have been in there a long time,” Cole called.

"I'll be out in a minute," I answered quickly.

How long had I been in here? I wondered. My prune-like fingers confirmed I had extended my soak longer than planned. I yanked the chain of the tub and watched the water flow down the drain.

Drying myself off with a fluffy pink towel, I concerned whether or not I really had the magic inside me. I lifted my right hand above me, swirled my pointer finger, and commanded, "Air, come to me."

A gust of warm air hovered above. The breeze obeyed my movements. Delighted by the elemental magic's response, I directed the air to contain me. As I moved it up and down, the moisture on my skin slowly evaporated. Circling my head, I felt my hair lift and drop as the air fell between each strand.

"Thank you, Air," I whispered.

No longer wet, I pulled my nightgown over my body. Twisting my hair into a long braid, I couldn't believe how soft and dry it felt. Before I left the bathroom, I slipped into my robe.

I found Cole waiting for me on my bed. He was dressed in flannel pajama bottoms with a tight white T-shirt. *Will my heart stop skipping like this after we were married?* I wondered, drinking in the sight of him. *I hope not.*

"I just wanted to say goodnight. I was starting to worry about you," he said. "You were in there almost an hour."

"Sorry, I was lost in my thoughts. Hey, didn't we already say our goodnights?" I teased. Then, I sat down next to him and kissed him on the cheek.

"We did, but I wanted to make sure you were ok. I can't believe everything that happened today. It seems so surreal." Cole hugged me. "We have a big day tomorrow. You should get some sleep."

When he let go of me, I wrapped my arms around his neck, kissing him long and passionately. "Can you sleep up here with me? I don't want to be alone," I murmured in his ear.

"I don't think Gram would be a fan of that, Mara." Cole slipped out of my arms.

"I meant you would sleep in Meg's bed. Gram shouldn't have a problem with that arrangement." I smirked. "I just don't want to be alone."

"She shouldn't have a problem with that arrangement," Cole agreed.

I took my robe off and slipped under the covers. Cole tucked my blankets in around me before he kissed me tenderly. "You should be warm enough now. I love you, future Mrs. Sands."

Once he had climbed through Meg's mound of stuffed toys and snuggled under her blankets, I called over to him, "Sleep sweet, future Mr. Stone."

Drifting off to sleep, I heard his soft laugh as he called back, "We'll need to discuss that later."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I was woken by the gentle shake of my grandmother. “What time is it?” I asked, wiping the sleep from my eyes.

“Shh, don't wake Cole.” Gram motioned at my sleeping boyfriend. I waited for her to say something about our sleeping arrangement, but instead, she handed me a long red sweater and motioned for me to follow her. “We need to be quick if we want to make the memory potions. It will be sunrise soon.”

The kitchen was warm, and the smell of fresh bread and muffins filled the air. Gram had clearly been up for hours, baking. Today was the day of the Lunar Festival.

“Gram, this can wait,” I said, feeling guilty. My grandmother had so much to do already. She shouldn't have to worry about this. “Let's just do this tomorrow. One more day won't change anything.”

“Shush, we don't have time for you to overthink the situation. I have everything gathered.” She patted a white wicker basket. “Bread is baked and everything else is loaded in the truck. Let's go.”

My grandmother led me through the backyard. We walked past the large tree, where my magical picnics had been held, to the edge of the property, and into Starten Forest. Suddenly feeling scared, I grabbed Gram's hand and held it tightly.

“It's ok, love,” she comforted. “Just a little way further. You're safe.”

The dark green trees of our backyard ended and the crimson timber of the eastern Starten Forest began. The woods had twisted and gnarled with long,

black limbs. Black flower petals and red leaves blossomed along the darkened branches. The ground was covered with the color of blood where the red leaves of summer had been shed.

An uncomfortable feeling washed over me. Something inside me warned we were being watched.

We continued to walk until we reached an open area. In the middle of the clearing, a large, gray stone table stood waist high. In the center were the words *Cosain an draíocht*, surrounded by inscriptions of ruby-colored names.

As I moved forward to inspect it, I recognized the same names that were on my grandmother's chest. When I came to Mae Silver, I stopped for a moment and traced it with my finger. The elegant shapes of the glittery red letters were scrawled in her handwriting. She had written her name here.

“Hold out your hand, Mara,” Gram commanded.

Hesitating for only a second, I extended my hand. When I did, Gram pulled it into hers. In her other hand, she held up a silver dagger that twinkled with emerald-colored gems on the hilt. My eyes widened when I saw it.

With a quick movement, she sliced the tip of my finger with the blade. Gasping, I pulled my hand away and tried to stop the flow of blood. However, she grabbed my hand back and held it tightly.

“Sign your name in the stone,” she calmly said. “It will heal the pain.”

Listening to her words, I carefully began to sign my name with my bloody fingertip. The stone quickly absorbed my blood as a warm sensation traveled up my arm and into my neck. My autograph changed to a smooth, red-colored stone while a feeling of peace settled over me. The hesitation and doubt I had been carrying drifted away.

“You feel it don't you?” Gram asked.

Looking from my finger to my bloody signature, I felt like I was just in another one of my dreams. Wordlessly, I met my grandmothers stare with wonderment.

“The pure magic we protect has been unleashed in you. You should no longer feel incomplete. It is time for you to embrace your destiny. Trust what you feel.”

Gram lined the table with different colored glass bottles, labeled in her

elegant handwriting. Then, she handed me a small bowl and a grinding stick. “Place the mortar on the table. We’ll do this together.”

With the two bowls, side-by-side, she handed me a purple bottle, labeled *Lavender*.

“Open this bottle and begin grinding the leaves,” Gram directed.

“How much do I use?” I suddenly felt unsure of myself.

“You know what to do. Just listen to your heart.”

With a deep breath, I shook some of the lavender into the bowl and began to grind it. The air around me grew warm and the crushed purple leaves began to swirl around the bowl. Adding more, I heard a small hum.

The sound was my grandmother. She hummed a soft song as she ground the herbs in her bowl. Glancing over, I saw the lavender in her mortar swirling. It emitted a small smoke as she crushed it with her pestle.

“What am I doing wrong? Should I be singing, too?”

Gram held the bottle back out to me, “If your heart sings, sing. If you feel the urge to dance, dance. Just focus and listen to the magic around us.”

I took the bottle of lavender from her, again. Warm magic radiated from her body and ran over my skin. It felt like someone was patting my hand.

Closing my eyes and slowly breathing, I began to focus on everything around me. The gentle swirl of my herbs softly sang to me, and I felt the need to twirl around. Embracing the feeling, I danced as I added more purple petals to the mortar. As if in response to my energy, the bowl began to emit long waves of iridescent tendrils. They lifted the crushed herbs and spun them.

I looked over at Gram. She was watching me with an approving smile. Then, my grandmother handed me a clear bottle that contained cinnamon sticks soaking in oil.

“Two sticks for this spell,” Gram said. “That is, unless you feel different.”

I took the cork off the bottle and the strong smell of vanilla and cinnamon engulfed me. I pulled one stick out, and something instinctively told me to break it in half. As it snapped, I heard *YES* crackle on the wind. Recorking the bottle, I gave it back to Gram, who smiled proudly.

Simultaneously, we crushed the cinnamon and lavender together until red

tendrils formed. I picked up the blue bottle, labeled *Rainwater*. I let three drops slowly fall from it. The red puffs rose to meet them. As they connected, they turned into a long, beaded chain of water droplets.

“As the sun begins to rise, center your heart on this potion. Let your heart speak of the good that will be done with it. Don't dwell on what will be taken away. Instead, rejoice in what will be protected. Does it feel finished to you?” Gram asked.

I stared into the swirling bowl and felt the magic of Blaze, Breeze, and Bay. I listened longer and instantly knew what it lacked. “We are missing Earth. The magic of Daisy isn't here.”

Gram laughed, and then handed me a brown bottle, labeled *Sea Salt*. “We will add a pinch as the sun rises to complete our potion.”

I poured a small amount into my palm and rubbed the coarse salt between my fingers. Sparks of power shot through my hands. The magic inside and around me was intoxicating. Sharing this moment with my grandmother made it even more important.

The dark sky was lightening, and the soft orange and pink hues of the morning sky were peaking. When the sun began to rise, we added the salt, making our bowls erupt with silver, red, blue, and green vapors. A song of joy came out of them as the smoke changed into a bright, violet light.

“The Goddess?” I asked under my breath.

“Yes, isn't she wonderful,” Gram said, her eyes brimming with tears of joy.

We hugged and danced around the table, soaking in the magic around us.

Squeezing me tightly, she whispered in my ear, “The power inside you is strong and pure. Just trust yourself.”

As the smoke of the potion stilled and disappeared into the morning sky, we filled four small vials with the purple liquid.

“This is enough to be used on two people. After a vial is consumed, you must fill it again, but add a pinch of crushed rosemary. This is, then, put away in a safe place for when, or if, the memory should be returned.”

Pausing, Gram looked as if she were deciding whether to continue or not. Then, she spoke softer, “If the memories should never be returned, the second

vial shouldn't have rosemary. Instead, two pinches of dried devil's claw ought to be used. This will not harm the person who drinks it, but it will completely erase their memory and magic.”

After we gathered everything, Gram held her hands to the sky and said, “Your blessings fill our hearts, and we thank you for the gifts. Bright blessings.”

“Bright blessings,” I repeated as we clasped hands and headed back to our home.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

When we returned home, Cole and Meg were dressed and waiting in the kitchen. Cole had scrambled some egg whites with fresh parmesan, asparagus, and chives for us.

"A man that cooks," Gram said. "Chester would burn water if I let near my stove."

Cole scored even more *fantastic boyfriend* points when he offered to clean up while we got ready.

"Mara, it's time to go," Gram called up to me. "We're leaving with or without you."

I had spent more time than usual getting ready. The Lunar Festival was my favorite time of year. With one last look at my dress, I felt confident in my choice. The knee-length red summer dress and my black cowboy boots would be comfortable enough for work and still dance in later if the mood struck. I had styled my long, black hair with loose curls and pulled the sides up and out of my face.

I joined my family, who was already seated inside our silver pick-up. The bed of the truck was loaded with the boxes full of items we would be selling. As I slid in next to Cole, Meg began grumbling about being squished. Cole picked her up and put her on his lap, silencing her complaints.

"Let's not be cranky, today. It's an important time for our town to join together and celebrate," Cole whispered. "Besides, it will be even more special,

tonight, since you'll be in your first Lunar Dance."

Meg's frown was replaced with a bright smile. She excitedly began to chat about the upcoming dance she would perform.

By the time we arrived on Main Street, the wooden trade stands had been set up at the end of the street, and the stage was ready for the night's performances. We made our way to Gram's booth. While most of the shops were simple wood stands with a tabletop to present their goods, Gramp had designed a store for Gram, making it stand out.

Soft music welcomed visitors to my grandmother's shop. Once they entered, they were awed by the beautiful details, such as ivy vines and small flowers ornately carved into the chestnut wood. When they were finally ready to shop, there was a variety of homemade items to buy. There were shelves filled with bottles of tonics and elixirs, deep bins for the loaves of bread and pastries, and a rack for dried herbs. It always felt magical to me when I was a child. Unloading Gram's merchandise, I felt the same feeling return.

Once everything was set up, Meg said, "I have a present for you, Mara."

I carefully opened the pink tissue paper that she had used to wrap the gift. Inside, I found a yellow note with words written in Meg's childlike handwriting:

Sister for Sale – Beware

Her screams at night may give you fright.



Taking her mock price tag from me by the attached purple ribbon, she said, "Now, put this on so we can see if we have any takers."

I picked her up and tickled her. We laughed until she pleaded for me to stop.

"Now, what will you do if there are takers for your sale?" I asked.

"Hmm, we may need to rethink this," she replied thoughtfully. After a moment of consideration, she added, "We won't sell you – this time."

Laughing, I picked her up again and spun her around. Meg squealed in delight.

"I see you girls are already up to mischief," Cole said as he joined us. "It looks like Meg has put you up for sale." Turning towards my little sister, he asked earnestly, "Will you trade me Mara for two scoops of ice cream?"

"Make it three, and you have a deal!" Meg exclaimed.

"Wait," I said. "You just said that you weren't going to sell me!"

"Right, but he made a really good offer."

I couldn't help laughing as I watched Cole lead my sister towards the ice cream stand.

The rest of the morning was not only busy with customers but with attempts to keep Meg amused. By two o'clock, the crowds had died down, and most people had gone home to rest before the evening's events. We snacked on the picnic lunch Gram had brought and watched Meg practice her dance to pass the

time.

Looking around the stand, I smiled. We had already sold out of many items. Before the night was over, we would have little to take home.

As the sun began to set, some of the shops started to close in anticipation of the night's activities. We boxed up the small amount we hadn't sold. While Cole loaded the truck, Gram and I prepared Meg for her performance.

When we removed the braids from Meg's hair, soft curls were left. Gram piled them high on top of my sister's head and twisted a band of baby pink roses across her head. Her costume was a long-sleeved, blue velvet dress with layers of white ruffles puffing out of the short skirt. Her knee-high socks sparkled with a soft, silvery glitter.

As I laced up her black dance shoes, she whispered to me, "What if I forget my steps, Mar? I'm so scared I won't remember and embarrass myself."

Taking her face in my hands, I whispered back, "When I went on stage for my first dance, I was scared, too. But Gram said something to me, which helped. She told me the moon was watching with an open heart and a smile. The moon would feel the love I sent her. And, you know what happened? I danced for the moon. If I missed any steps, I didn't notice. So, dance for the moon, Meg, just dance for the moon."

Wrapping her arms around me, I held her for a long time. My little sister was growing up before my eyes. All I wanted to do was to hold onto her and keep her safe.

The warm feeling I had didn't last as a sudden cold surrounded me. I turned to see where it was coming from. From the look on Gram's face, I could tell the source – a woman standing in front of her – was not a friend.

"Mae, it has been such a long time. What a nice surprise to see you still running your little stand." The woman scanned her icy eyes around our store. She wrinkled her nose, clearly unimpressed.

"You know, as well as I do, Blanche, that this isn't a surprise. I'm sure, if you

are here, that you are up to no good,” Gram coldly responded to her. “Why don’t you crawl back up the mountain you came from?”

Blanche was tall with short silver hair that was smartly styled, and she wore dark eye makeup with deep red lipstick. She appeared to be the same age as Gram but looked as if she had never done a day’s work in her life. Her black dress was long and tight with a deep slit up the right thigh. On most women her age, a dress like that would seem ridiculous. However, despite the dress having obviously been made for a much younger woman, she looked surprisingly stunning in it.

“I see time has not made you any smarter, Mae. I just came to see the lunar festivities. I was told one of my new granddaughters would be performing her first Lunar Dance. Since the girls will soon be coming to live with us, I thought it would be nice for me to show my support,” she said with a smile on her face that didn’t entirely hide the contempt she obviously felt towards us.

“You will have nothing to do with those girls,” Gram spat back at Blanche. Small flames of fire began to spark from her hands. “I suggest you leave and take your machinations elsewhere.”

Looking at my grandmother with pity in her eyes, Blanche twirled the diamond ring on her finger and said, “You never seem to learn that you cannot insult my family and get away with it. What a joy it will be to take away another of yours.”

Turning on her heels, she called back to us, “Goodbye, girls. I’ll see you soon.”

Confused by the conversation, Meg held me tighter. “What was that lady talking about?”

“Never mind her,” I said as I tried to pull Meg’s attention from the retreating woman. “Just another mountain crazy coming to stir up trouble. Full moons can do that, remember? Stay here while I get some lipstick from my bag. You need a little color for the stage.”

Grabbing my bag, I whispered to Gram, “Bring Meg the potion. I’m going to finish getting her ready. Would it be safe to assume that woman is Cedric Drygen’s mother?”

Nodding, Gram sat down on the small stool and sighed. "I'll be over in a minute. I just need to compose myself."

I kissed Gram on the head before I left her to her thoughts. Stopping, I looked back at her and whispered, "Goddess, please protect my family."

With the final touches, my little sister looked even more beautiful than usual.

A whistle came from the entryway. "Who is this little angel before me, and what has she done with Meg? Stand up and give me a twirl," Cole said.

Twirling around, she beamed at his praise.

"Nice, nice, but something is wrong. I must say that there is one thing missing."

The smile on her face quickly turned into a worried frown. Hesitantly, she asked, "What? What's missing?"

Walking around her, as if scrutinizing her, Cole began, "Well, the outfit is perfect. Yes, very nice. Your hair is lovely – thanks to the fine talents of Gram. Yes, and Mara has done a wonderful job on your makeup, but something is just, well..." he stopped, and looked as if he was trying to think of the right word. "Something is just off."

"What!" Meg exclaimed. "What is wrong?"

Cole held out his hand, revealing a small velvet box. "Go on, open it." He winked at me.

Meg gasped as she saw her gift. Nestled inside the white satin of the box was a silver chain that held a silver heart pendant. The center of the necklace held a moon made from a blue stone.

"It is beautiful," she said softly as she stared at it.

"Well, let's see how it looks on you." Cole put the necklace on her. "Now, I can say you are the prettiest dancer at the festival."

"Isn't it beautiful, Gram?" Meg asked our grandmother as she joined us. "Cole gave it to me."

"What a nice gift." Gram smiled. "I have another present for you." She opened her hand and sitting on the palm was an even tinier version of Bay.

The petite elemental sat with a big smile on her face.

"Bay!" Meg exclaimed. "I thought you were going away."

“Now, how could I miss your first dance? I taught you everything you know.” Bay giggled. “And, most importantly, I had to be here for your first drink of moon water.”

Holding the small vial that I had prepared that morning, Bay held it out for Meg to take. “Drink this and let me know what you think.”

“Wait,” I interrupted, taking the vial before my little sister could. “Meg, this isn't exactly moon water. It is a potion that will make you forget everything you know about the magic around us and inside you.”

“Mara, why would you want me to forget about the magic?” Meg turned to Gram and held out her little hand. “Gram, do you want me to forget, too?”

“Meg, when Mara was a few years younger than you, I didn't give her the choice she's giving you. Instead, I made the decision and took the magic away from her. You'll understand better when you are older, but we are responsible for protecting this gift. Sometimes, the best way to do that is by taking away the knowledge we have of it.”

Meg's eyes widened in confusion. The elementals had been her friends, and now, we were going to take them away. Anger flashed on her face for the briefest moment. Slowly, her shoulders slumped, and she bowed her head. I held my breath, unsure of what to do. When Meg lifted her chin, her eyes were brimming with tears.

Gram touched her cheek. “Mara's right. It is your choice, Meg.”

“Listen to your heart, Meg,” I encouraged.

“Will it be gone forever?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “It will not be gone forever, and I promise you that the minute Gram and I feel it will be safe for you, we'll return all of your memories. Please, trust us.”

“I trust you,” Meg said.

Gram pulled us both into her arms and hugged us tightly. Releasing us, she took the vial from me and handed it to Meg. “Cosain an draíocht.”

As if she understood, Meg nodded and took the top off the bottle. “Protect the magic,” she replied and took a small sip. Within seconds, a big grin covered her face. “Yum,” she said before drinking the rest in one big gulp.

“Come, rest for a minute. You want to save your energy for the dance.”

Sleepily, Meg fell into my arms. I felt tears running down my cheeks as I held her. “I’m sorry, Meg. This is the only way I know for you to be kept safe.”

Gram took my sister from me. My grandmother cradled Meg as she sang softly to her, just as she had done with me. Quietly, she told me, “We’ll refill the vial later. For now, just place it in the silver pouch inside my bag. There is another potion in the red pouch.”

Though she said nothing further, I knew from the look she gave me what Gram thought I should do. Taking a deep breath, I prepared myself for what would come next. “Cole, let’s go for a walk.”

We walked by the different stands and looked at their merchandise. Anything you could think of could be found. The different smells filled the air. Ostrich burgers, popcorn, fresh fudge, and a variety of pickled items mixed with the various perfumes and craft smells.

When we reached a quiet area away from the people, we sat down on a bench.

Cole said, “I know why we’re here. Hand me the vial. I’ll drink the potion, too.”

I started to speak, but he stopped me. “I know too much. You don’t have to explain.”

As he put the drink to his lips, I instantly knew this was the wrong decision.

“Wait!” I cried, ripping the vial out of his hand. “No, you can’t drink this. I need you. Maybe I’m being selfish, but I would be lying to you every day of our life together if you drink this.”

“I would do anything for you.” Cole took the potion back. “I’ll keep it with me. If I feel that you all would be safer with me not remembering, I’ll gladly drink it. Just make sure I never forget you.”

Wrapping my arms around him, I whispered, “I love you, Cole.”

“I’m proud of you for letting Meg make the decision on her own,” he said. “I

understand why the Goddess has blessed your family. You are three amazing women.” Cole laughed and corrected himself, “Well, two women and a girl.”

Snuggling back into his arms, I sighed. I felt so lucky to be with Cole, and no dark thoughts of doubt could even sneak into our moment of peace. Gram was right; I needed to listen to my heart.

For a while, we just sat on the bench, staring at the sky, and enjoying the moment.

We cannot stay in this moment forever, I begrudgingly thought.

As if he read my mind, Cole jumped up. “We should start back to check on Meg and Gram.”

Cole and I didn't discuss the reason why we had gone on the walk anymore. I felt at ease with the decision we had made. Hand-in-hand, we walked by the shops that were still open, pointing out things we thought would make a nice wedding gift.

“Honestly, Cole.” I laughed as he tried on the most outrageous top hat. The black atrocity was a model of a fifty-story building, complete with glass windows. On top of the building, hung a giant monkey with a bride slung over its shoulder. “There is no way I'm marrying you if you wear that hat,” I exclaimed.

Dramatically, he put it down “For you, I'll even get rid of my dreams of wearing a monkey hat on our wedding day.” With a chuckle, he pulled me into his arms and softly kissed me.

Our moment of affection was interrupted by a loud shriek. “Cole! Cole Sands! Where have you been hiding yourself?”

Cole let go of me and turned to greet the loud voice. My irritation increased as I realized the owner was Jessica Harvey.

Jessica had always had a crush on Cole and never seemed to take the hint that he was not interested in her. Hugging him, she oohed and awed over how great he looked. Pouting playfully, she complained how long it had been since they'd last seen one another.

Clearing my throat, I brought Jessica's attention off Cole and onto me.

Her eyes look me up and down. With a perturbed sigh, she said, “Hi,

Marina.”

Dismissing me, she focused back on Cole as she twisted her long, blonde hair coyly around her finger. “You must tell me everything you’ve been up to since we last saw each other, Cole?”

Interrupting her desperate pleas for attention, I grabbed Cole's hand. “We have such great news, Jessica. I'm sure you will be so very happy for us.” Continuing to use my overexcited voice, I pulled Cole close to me. “Cole and I are getting married. Won't it be wonderful?”

I grasped her hand. “I have the best idea. You could be in the wedding. Why you could be a bridesmaid? No, wait – I have it!” Turning to Cole, I said, “Darling, wouldn't she make the best maid of honor?”

Focusing my attention back on Jessica, I said, “It will be so much fun. You can help me plan everything, down to the tiniest detail. What do you think of pearl earrings? Too much? I agree. I think simple is better.”

I continued with my ramblings about our sensational wedding until Jessica politely excused herself, claiming she had to meet some people. As the girl scurried off, I called after her, “Goodbye, Jessica. I'll be in touch soon. We have so much to discuss.”

Jessica stormed away from us and didn't look back.

Laughing, Cole asked, “My, my, did I detect a hint of jealousy?” He pulled me back into his arms and held me tightly. “No need for that. You’re the only girl for me. Except, I did appreciate her acknowledging how fantastic I look.”

“Oh, Cole, you are just so dreamy,” I said in a mock Jessica tone. I began to twirl my hair around my finger. “I am overcome by your manliness.”

“Not only dreamy but manly? How kind of you to notice.” Cole flexed his biceps before scooping me into his arms. “I would love to stay here talking about how great I am for the rest of the evening, but we’d better head back. Meg will be performing soon.”

Cole set me down. Then, with one final kiss, we began our fast-paced walk back to Gram and Meg.

Back at the stand, Meg was practicing her dance and Gram was sipping tea.

“Did you have a nice nap, Meg? Are you ready to dance for the moon?” I asked.

Meg gave me the thumbs-up and then continued concentrating.

Kissing Gram on the cheek, I whispered, “He didn't drink it. It didn't feel right.”

She squeezed my hand. I knew this was her way of telling me she understood.

“Ok, I'm ready to dance. Mrs. Ward brought us some of her famous *Stupid Chicken Soup*. There is even some left for you and Cole,” Meg said cheerily.

Nothing was more comforting than Mrs. Ward's recipe. The barbecue sauce-flavored broth with pieces of chicken, pureed potatoes, red peppers, garlic, and fresh basil made the most unique tasting concoction.

Cole and I enjoyed a bowl of soup while Meg went over the upcoming events of the evening. Gram pretended to be cleaning the shop, but I could tell she was deep in thought.

As she arranged the small amount of inventory left, I overheard my grandmother softly whisper, “Goddess, please give us the strength we need to face these imminently dark days.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Gram brought Meg to wait at the stage with the rest of the young dancers. A sea of girls in silver and blue dresses with bouncy curls greeted my sister. All of them were anxious for the event to begin.

Cole and I found seats several rows from the stage. We grew impatient as the time seemed to pass slower as our excitement increased before Meg's performance. Once the girls were brought up onto the stage, Gram joined us. We clapped happily, knowing the show would finally start.

As the lights flashed and the music began, the dancers came out in groups of five. When Meg's group joined the stage, Cole cheered loudly. Looking down at us, Meg gave us an exaggerated wink.

My sister's performance was vibrant. She jumped, twirled, and danced as if she had been in the spotlight her entire life. Gram looked on with a bright smile. I squeezed her hand, and she grasped mine tighter. I could see how proud she was of Meg.

As the dance ended, a bright splash of purple and silver twirled onto the stage and leaped at heights that astonished the crowd. My mind drifted back to my dance classes. The words my teacher would call out to us rang in my ear.

"Posture, ladies, posture!" the voice from my past demanded. "Sauté, Sauté, Chassé – No! No! No! Back to the barre! We must practice the basics again!"

With a seemingly endless pirouette, my old dance instructor, Ms. Lilianna, commanded the stage. When her twirling stopped, she bellowed, "Thank you, thank you! Tonight, we celebrate another year of family, friendship, and

community. My little dancers have, once again, delighted me, and I hope you!”

The audience clapped and cheered in agreement.

“Each year, after the night's performance, one student is selected to perform the last dance.”

Behind her, the young dancers returned to the stage in a choreographed soft tap. The girls surrounded their teacher in a half-circle. With anticipation, they waited to see if their name would be called.

“Now, to perform the solo Dance of the Moon, I ask Meg Stone to join me.” Ms. Lilianna held her hand out towards my little sister.

Meg's face widened in surprise. Hesitantly, she took her teacher's hand and was led towards the bright blue spotlight in the center of the stage. The other dancers moved in a line to the back of the stage as the soft music began.

Meg extended her arms to the sky before she began her dance. Her expressive performance made me feel like she was dedicating it to the moon. I looked over to Gram, who had tears glistening in her eyes. This tiny little dancer before me was so elegant and talented. Watching my sister's graceful movements, I felt so proud and awed. With a final bow, Meg's dance ended when she dramatically collapsed to the ground as if put into a slumber. The audience roared with delight.

Walking out to take her hand, the teacher praised my sister's talent. “Ladies, come join us.”

The other performers took their places, with Ms. Lilianna and Meg in the middle, and began soft tapping and clapping. Dancers from each end of the line moved forward to the front of the stage, clasped their hands together, and gave a deep bow before waving and dancing out of view. When Meg and Ms. Lilianna were the only ones left, they both gave a final low bow, and then the lights went out.

The audience was now on their feet with applause and cheers.

Suddenly, the spotlights began circling the stage. In anticipation, we watched as a soft mist covered the platform, and the light stopped in the center. This was different. Ms. Lilliana must have added a new dance to the program.

A tall man appeared abruptly out of the haze, carrying one of the dancers. As

he moved forward, I recognized the child in his arms – it was Meg. She didn't look scared, but rather, thrilled. As my eyes moved to the face of the man, I gasped. His dirty blond hair was longer than it had been when I last saw him, and his rugged face was no longer clean-shaven. Instead, he wore a short beard.

Taking my hand, Gram whispered with disbelief, “This can't be. He drowned in Sparrow Lake.”

The man stopped at the center spotlight and said with a laugh, “Yes, friends and family, I have returned from the dead, just in time to see my daughter, Meg, in a dance that will be talked about for years to come. I know you'll all have many questions for me, but first, let me reunite with my dear ones.”

As he exited the stage with my sister in his arms, I ran to her. When I reached Meg, she exclaimed, “Mara, he isn't dead. Our father is alive. Isn't this wonderful? Now, maybe, she will come back.”

Pulling Meg to me, I spoke to the man in front of me. “If you are Elliott Stone, where have you been for the past eight years?”

Taking my hand and pulling me towards him, he whispered, “Caterpillar, I have missed you so much. Trust me, and I'll tell you everything.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

People didn't only surround Elliott Stone, but they flooded him with questions.

Gram sent them all away while she thanked everyone for their concern. "This is a shock to us all," she said, "but I think it would be best for us to have a family discussion, privately at home, before we share anything."

As the five of us rode in the truck together, there was a dead silence. By the time we pulled onto our property, Meg was sound asleep in Cole's lap.

"Carry her into my room, Cole," Gram directed. She turned towards me. "Mara, go grab Meg's favorite stuffed animals – the wolf and sheep. You know how upset she'll be if she wakes up and they're not with her."

I was confused why Gram would suggest the stuffed animals since they were mine, not Meg's. I nodded, anyways, and went to my room as she directed, not wanting to contradict her. My mind raced as I climbed the ladder. *What is she trying to tell me?* There must be something more she wanted me to see or do. *Does it have to do with Elliott?*

I picked up my gray wolf and propped it up by my lamp. I carefully examined it, trying to decipher the message Gram was trying to give me. I couldn't see anything out of the ordinary. There was nothing that would help me out, so I set the wolf down, again.

I picked up the small lamb. As I inspected every inch of it, I noticed the tiniest bit of red on the bottom of its white foot. Oddly, it didn't match the rest of the thread. Lightly tugging on the out of place filament, I felt a small movement.

I continued to gently tug on it until it slowly began to break free. After I had pulled it a few inches, it stopped.

I tugged harder, but it would not budge. Squeezing the small foot, I felt something hard inside. Taking a small pair of scissors from my nightstand, I carefully began cutting the fabric around the small opening. With my nails, I pulled on the red string until the hidden object popped out. At the end of the string, there was a small silver cylinder that was no bigger than my thumb.

Twisting the cap off the container, I found a rolled-up piece of lavender paper. Eagerly, I spread it out and read the tiny words:

As grandmother lay in her bed, with her
big eyes and her big teeth, Red knew that it was a lie.
Removing the glamour before your eyes, Red, will not come easy.

Burn an incense made of the dried petals from the agrimony flower, dragon's
blood resin, and spiny needles of a juniper tree.

Before lighting the incense, the wolf – in disguise – must consume two small
petals of the yellow rue.

– BE WARNED –

Too much rue will reveal the truth,
But death will come to the one ingesting.

After reading the note several times and having memorized the ingredients, I carefully rolled it up and put it back into the cylinder. With the animals in hand and the container tucked safely inside my boots, I stopped at my jewelry box to look at my father's picture. Yes, the man downstairs was – in appearance – my father, but why would he return, today, of all days? I knew the answers to my questions would be revealed whether I was ready or not.

Climbing down the ladder, I could see Elliott sitting at the kitchen table, drinking from a coffee cup. When I reached the second to the last rung, Cole pulled me into his arms and greeted me with a kiss.

“Anything you need me to do, just let me know,” Cole quietly whispered in my ear as he gently set me down.

Kissing him on the cheek, I whispered back, “Put on your best face. You’re going to meet your future father-in-law.”

Cole and I walked, hand-in-hand, towards Elliott. When he saw me, his eyes lit up. “Marina, my dear, wow, you are so grown up. Who is this?” He gestured at Cole. “Please, join me. Come tell me all that I have missed.”

“This is Cole Sands. You knew his father, Thomas,” I responded.

“Yes, Cole, my boy. You have grown, as well. How is your family?” he asked with a bright smile.

“I would rather know where you have been,” I said, trying to control my anger. “If you have been alive, why did you wait almost eight years to return?”

Elliott slumped in his chair and slowly began to explain his absence. “The night before I drowned...” he paused and restarted. “The night before I left, I was on my way home from working in Chester's woodshop when I was met by Cedric Drygen and a few of his men. Drygen told me I had been playing house long enough with Eliza and that he was going to reclaim what was his. Of course, I put up a fight, but I was no match for the four of them. They overpowered me. Lying on the ground, I stared into Drygen's cold eyes, knowing I had failed my family. Just as Drygen was about to drive his knife into my heart, he changed his mind. Instead, he sent a warning and drove it into my shoulder blade.”

Unbuttoning his shirt, Elliott pointed to the long, ragged scar.

“Laughing, he warned me that the next slash of his knife would kill me, but not before he killed both you and Meg in front of me. I begged him to spare you both. I told him I would do whatever he wanted as long as you weren't harmed. As he moved to drive his knife into my leg, Eliza appeared and told him to stop. She promised him that I would leave and never come back if he spared me. His final blow was to kick me hard enough to break a few ribs. As I writhed on the ground, Cedric and Eliza must have thought I was in too much pain to see him kiss her passionately before he left.”

Stopping, as if the memories were causing him pain, he took a deep breath

and continued, "When Drygen left, I asked her if she loved him. Your mother promised she was pretending in order to save us all. Slowly, she unveiled her plan. In the morning, I would go fishing on Sparrow Lake, as usual, but this time, my boat would be overturned, and my body would not be found."

"Why didn't you go for help?" I asked. "There are so many people that would have protected us."

"My thoughts were only of keeping you and Meg safe. So, I followed her plan." Continuing his story, he looked at me with tears glistening in his eyes. "The morning I left, Eliza woke me before dawn. She had already packed me a small bag. She wouldn't let me wake you and say goodbye. When I asked to, at least, take pictures of you girls, your mother refused. She said it would look suspicious if any of my things were missing. I insisted she allow me to take more food than she had packed, or I wouldn't leave. Angry that I was questioning her, Eliza stormed out of the room. I quickly grabbed the first picture I could find of the both of you – one I didn't think she'd notice was missing."

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a worn photo of me holding Meg when she was born. "I kept this with me as a reminder that everything I did and would need to do, was always to keep you safe."

Shaking, he stopped and took a long drink of his coffee before continuing his story, "Eliza brought me to Chester's boat. As I was pushing it into the water, she stopped me. She coldly told me that, if I failed, your death would be on me. I was to leave Starten and never return. I loved you girls so much that I left, but only until I could figure out how to save you."

Elliott's voice was tight as he said, "To make it authentic, your mother took a knife and cut my hand. She said my blood on the boat would make it seem as if I was hurt. It would help explain why I drowned. Our goodbye was cold, and I knew the woman I had fallen in love with was no longer there. Not that it mattered. I didn't leave for her, but rather, to keep you both safe."

Looking haggard, Elliott ran his hand through his shaggy hair. "It turned out Eliza was right in her plan. When the boat was found overturned with my blood smeared on it, looking like I had struggled to live, everyone believed it to be true."

“It was very convincing,” I replied bitterly.

“At first, I just hid in the Starten Forest where I could watch over you all,” Elliott said, his eyes shying away from me. “Eliza played the stricken widow perfectly. It was difficult to watch, but the thought of actually leaving you girls was even more painful.”

“So why did you leave?” Gram asked tersely.

“A few times, I was close to being caught. It made me realize I needed to leave town, so I had a secure place to plan my return. I settled in Great Winds. It’s a small town where people never settled long enough to question me, but plenty of information still comes into town about the Drygens. When rumors about your mother's remarriage and her recent return to Starten reached me, I knew it was time for me to come back.”

With a look of shame, he turned towards Gram. “Mae, I wish I had told you everything. If I could have changed the way things happened, I would have.” Unable to finish his apology, he wearily laid his head into the palm of his hands.

I wanted to question him more, but Gram stared hard at me. It was as if she were willing me to keep silent. I instinctively obeyed.

“We can't worry about what should have happened. You are here now. Cole, move your things out of Elliott's room. For the time being, you can sleep in Meg's bed,” Gram said firmly.

With a look of surprise, Elliott responded, “No, I couldn't impose. I can get a room at Miss Adilene's boarding house.”

“You are not leaving these girls again. Your clothes are still hanging in the back of the closet. You look about the same size, so they will fit.” Gram stood up, signaling there would be no more discussion. “It has been a long day, Elliott. I think it’s best for us all to get some rest. We can talk more in the morning.”

With a relieved look on his face, he said, “Thank you, Mae.” Turning from her, he reached across the table and rested his hand on mine. “Can you give me a chance to be a father to you again?”

Confused, and wanting him to be my father more than anything, I squeezed his hand and said, “I'm glad you're home. I have missed you.”

“I'll make it up to you, Caterpillar,” he said. “I promise.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Cole relocated his things to my room. When he disappeared to organize Meg's side of the loft for himself, my father went into his old bedroom to sleep.

Once we were alone, I softly began firing questions at my grandmother, "Do you think he's really my father, or is this just a trick? Will we be safe? What are we going to do?"

Putting both her hands on my shoulders, she just stared into my eyes. After a few minutes of silence, Gram said, "I don't know if he's Elliott, but I do know that you're safe. You found what I sent you upstairs for, I presume?"

I nodded.

She continued, "Once we're sure Elliott's asleep, we'll make a protection potion. Now, we need to gather supplies. Let me see what I sent you to get."

I pulled the cylinder out of my boot and handed it to her.

As my grandmother read it over, she said, "Yes, that's it. We can do this. We'll need to get the juniper tree needles and rue flower petals. I know of a place, not far from the binding circle, where you can find both. For tonight, it will need to wait."

Gram went into the pantry. She came back out with a small, silver book. Flipping through the lavender pages, she muttered, "Yes, this will do."

Handing me the open book, I read the page she'd left for me to see. *Rabhadh Fola* was written on the top of it in a deep red ink. At least, I hoped it was ink.

The spell needed two white candles, burdock root, salt, and sage. All

ingredients were items we had in the pantry. Just as I finished reading, my grandmother returned with her arms full.

“Here, let's be quick.”

Gram placed the white candles on the table and lit each one. She directed me to stand on the other side of the table, across from her. Handing me a large metal utensil, she said, “Put the sage on the spoon and hold it over both flames.”

She then took a knife and scraped some of the burdock root onto the piece of silverware, which was starting to get hot. “Hold out your other hand,” Gram ordered.

I hesitated, knowing what was next. When she raised her eyebrows at me, I grimaced. Sighing, I submitted and held out my hand.

With a quick slice, she cut my finger before placing it over the spoon. As my red droplets dripped onto the heating mixture, Gram cut her own finger. It wasn't long before our blood mixed together.

My grandmother took a pinch of salt. I cringed at the thought. The pain the mineral caused when it came into contact with an open wound was not appealing.

“With this blood, I bind this salt to me. Once the barrier it forms is crossed, I request your warning.” Gram offered me the bottle of salt. “Now, you do the same.”

Pinching the tiny white crystals between my fingertips, I was surprised there wasn't a stinging sensation. Feeling confident, I repeated her words. As I finished, a spark of hot electricity ran through my arm.

Gram dropped the red-tinted salt onto the spoon and nodded for me to do the same. As soon as the mineral left my hand, the burning tingle stopped.

Next, my grandmother took the bubbling mixture from me and poured the hot contents into a vial, labeled *Waning Gibbous Moon Water*.

Calling out in a quiet voice, she said, “Goddess, your blessing is needed on this night. Please protect this home from harm. Bright blessings

Blowing out the candles, I repeated, “Bright blessings.”

“Now, take this and sprinkle it around the floor outside Elliott's door. It will dry quickly, so he shouldn't be alerted. It will warn us of anyone crossing the

boundary you outline, and it will last until the next sunset.” Gram began to clean up the table. When I didn't move, she said, "Go on."

“I don't understand why Blaze and the others can't be here to watch him,” I argued.

“Mara, go on. The Goddess sent them to teach us to trust the magic we have inside us. They cannot interfere with our path.” Gram let out a long sigh of frustration before grabbing my hand. “There are many things that can't be explained. You just have to begin to trust your instincts.

Squeezing her hand, I nodded and left to complete the task I was given. I stopped outside the bedroom door, listening. I heard soft snoring, so I began to sprinkle the liquid. Each red drop that fell was absorbed into the wood quickly. The herbal metallic smell filled my senses.

Just as I finished creating the barrier outside of my parents' room, Cole came down the stairs. “I'm officially moved into the loft. What do you need now?”

“If you could go start the kettle, we can make a cup of tea before we go to sleep.” I cupped the potion bottle in my hand. Quickly kissing him, I sent him on his way smiling.

Once I knew he was gone, I continued to sprinkle the potion in front of Gram's bedroom door and went outside. The crisp night air felt pleasant on my skin. A small breeze picked up, and I inhaled the sweet scent of the various trees in bloom. It had a calming effect on me.

Renewed, I warded all the barriers to our house, beginning with the patio door and onto encircling all the downstairs windows. When I reached the bedroom my father was in, I stopped and stared at him through the part in the curtains. He was lying under a deep chocolate-colored bedspread, and his chest slowly lifted as he breathed. He looked at peace.

I hated myself because of my desire for the sleeping man to really be my father. Seeking peace of my own, I called out, “Air, blow away my fear and give me the wisdom to follow the truth.” When the response I wanted didn't come, I sighed and tried again, “Breeze, I need you. Please, tell me you're still with me.”

Sadly, there was no warm gust of wind to tell me the elemental was present. Instead, I heard the click of the moss beetles, and the crackle of leaves as the

birds settled into their nests.

Looking towards the sky, I spoke to the crescent moon before me. “Goddess, please send them back to me.” Taking a deep breath, I reminded myself to be strong and continued my task alone.

Once all the downstairs windows and doors were protected, I went back into the house. The warmth of the kitchen comforted me. Cole and Gram had already poured themselves some tea and sounded as if they were having a serious conversation. I stayed quiet and listened, not wanting to interrupt. And, truth be told, I wanted to hear what my boyfriend was thinking about everything.

“Mae, we can't just let someone stay here simply because he claims to be their father. How do we know he's telling the truth?” Cole asked heatedly.

Grabbing his wrist, she said, “This isn't the time for you to become overprotective.”

I noticed the tattoo on his wrist was now just a faint silver outline. Keeping still, I remained hidden in the shadows, letting their discussion continue.

“Our family is strong enough to overcome anything that we face. I warned you when you asked my permission to marry Mara that the path before you would not be easy. Find the resolve you had inside you then and trust me...trust her.”

Putting his hand over hers, he said, “I love and trust you, Mae. I just can't fathom the thought of ever losing her. I really don't know what I would do without Mara.”

After a few minutes of their silence, I joined them. Nonchalantly, I grabbed myself a cup of tea and pretended that I had just returned without having heard their conversation. “It is so nice outside tonight.”

I set my mug down on the table next to Gram and put my arm around her in a half hug. Gram held my arm as if hugging me back and I slipped the remaining portion into the pocket of her sweater. She patted my arm, letting me know she understood.

“You both missed a beautiful night sky. The stars are so bright, and the moon has a devious smile,” I said, sounding wistful.

When I sat down at the table, I noticed how much everything was distressing

Cole. His eyes were dark, and he was not full of the sunshine that I usually felt radiating from him. It worried me.

“We had a busy day. Cole, you look so tired. Why don't you go get ready for bed? Sleep will make you feel better,” I suggested.

Looking haggard, Cole hesitantly agreed. As he walked past me, I grabbed his hand and kissed the inside of his wrist. He wearily smiled at me.

“I love you, Mara.” Then, with a soft chuckle, he added, “Mae, I love you, too.”

Gram shook her head at him but grinned, nonetheless. “Off to bed, young man. You look like you haven't slept in weeks.”

Waving her off, he climbed the loft ladder. Once I knew we were alone, I updated Gram on the path I took as I sprinkled the potion. Afterward, I decided to share my fears with her.

“Why can't I feel the elements anymore? Why couldn't they stay?” I questioned, trying to hold in my frustration.

“Mara, I told you, they were sent to guide us, so we could find our inner connection. We are the protectors of the magic,” Gram said, enunciating the *we*. “Stop blocking what you have inside you. When you were young, you could control the elements on your own. You didn't need to find your connection. You, most of all, just needed to learn to control it, which they taught you how to do. Even when you were not aware of the magic, it was still within you.”

She stood up and went into the pantry. When she returned, Gram carried a four-wick candle. Placing it in the center of the table, she said firmly, “Light this candle.”

I started to stand up to go get matches, but my grandmother put her hand on my shoulder and stopped me. “I want you to light the candle. Focus and look inside yourself.”

As if to show me what she wanted, Gram stared at one of the candle's wicks. After a few seconds, a small flame ignited. The flicker of bright orange and yellow grew until it rose above my head. Then, as quickly as the fire began, it vanished.

“Light the candle.” Gram lightly squeezed my shoulder.

Staring at the candle, I tried to focus, to remember what I once knew. Discouraged, I said, "I can't do this."

"Stop this nonsense. You can." Gram slammed her hand down onto the table in front of me. The uncharacteristic aggression scared me. "Your doubt is the only thing keeping you from connecting with the elements. It's the only thing that will keep you from succeeding. You saw what Breeze, Blaze, Bay, and Daisy could do. Now, trust yourself, Mara. This is the time to remember."

Closing my eyes, I thought about Blaze. Words from my past filled my mind. "Mara, you cannot call that much fire. You will burn down the forest. The elements will listen to your command. Kindly dance with them."

I opened my eyes, knowing what I needed to do. Once again, I focused on the wick of the candle. Each breath I slowly took made a small spark. With one deep breath, I whispered to myself, "It is inside you."

As I exhaled, a spark lit all four wicks. They burned with vibrant orange and red flames. I didn't need to look at my grandmother to know she was pleased.

"You just needed to regain your confidence." Gram grabbed my hand and patted it. "Now, off to bed, love. Tomorrow, we'll deal with the past."

Agreeing, I stared at the flames and silently released them. The fire died out, and a small thread of white smoke swirled towards me.

"Thank you, Fire," I said. Hugging Gram, I left to get some sleep.

When I entered my bedroom, I found Cole in a deep slumber. He was still dressed in the same clothes that he had worn all day, including his shoes. I untied and removed his sneakers from each foot. Then, I covered him with a blanket from the end of Meg's bed.

Cole didn't stir once.

Kissing him on his cheek, I softly whispered, "Sleep sweet, love."

Cole let out a soft moan, and then resumed snoring.

I don't think I could love him more than I do today, I thought wistfully.

Feeling no energy to change into my pajamas, I took my boots off and fell into my bed. The metal cylinder I had been hiding dropped to the floor. Picking it up, I hid it back inside my pillowcase before laying my head down on it. Unable to fight the exhaustion that was overcoming me, I drifted off into a

dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Stop making that noise, Meg!” I cried.

I didn't want to wake from the sleep I had just fallen into. Still, the loud murmur and clanging bells didn't stop. Angered, I threw one of my pillows in the direction of Meg's bed.

“Please, go back to sleep,” I pleaded.

“Mara, it's not Meg. Wake up.” Cole climbed onto my bed, and over me, to look out the small, round window. “Those are sirens outside.”

Trying to understand what was going on while I begrudgingly woke up, I stood on the bed beside him. The soft mattress and my height deficiency didn't allow me to reach. “What do you see?” I questioned.

“It's fire trucks. I see smoke and flames. I can't tell exactly where it's coming from, but it's close to my home.” Hopping off the bed, he frantically put on his shoes. “I need to go there.”

Following suit, I put my boots on, as well. “Are you sure it was your house?”

“No, but I'm not going to sit here and wait.” Cole rushed towards the ladder.

Grabbing his hand, I stopped him. “Let me go with you.” Feeling his hesitation, I said more forcefully, “I'm going with you.”

Sighing, he agreed. “Ok, but we are going now.”

We had just reached the front door when Gram called out to us. “Cole and Mara, where do you think you are going?”

We both turned around, shamefaced. In our haste, we had not thought of letting anyone know our plans to leave. My chagrin passed as I took in Gram's

outfit. The mismatched brash combination of a lime green sweater, gardening jeans, and red garden wellies were not something she would typically wear. This wardrobe choice confirmed she had planned on doing the same thing as us.

“Gram, I think the fire trucks are at my house.” I could hear the panic in Cole's voice. “I need to go now.”

Just as I was about to agree with our need to move quickly, a sharp jolt of electricity shot through my body. The intense pain it caused sucked the air from my lungs. The grimace on Gram's face told me she had felt it, too.

When I saw my father exiting his room, it registered in my brain that the spell had worked. The pain must have been our notification of the magical barriers being crossed. As I stared at Gram, she closed her eyes and slightly nodded, confirming my belief.

“What is going on, Caterpillar? Why are you all awake?” Elliott asked, looking disheveled and confused.

Interesting, I thought to myself. *Why would Elliott be in the same clothes from last night?* Looking down at my own outfit, I realized he could be thinking the same thing about me.

“There is a fire coming from the direction of Cole's house. We are going there now,” I responded.

The surprised look on his face turned to concern. “I'm coming with you.”

My father threw on his boots and coat. He looked me over, and then handed me a sweater from a hook. “It's cold out there. Put this on.”

My heart stilled. This man before me seemed so real. He had to be my father. *Or do you just want him to be Elliott Stone so badly that you'll risk your family's safety?* I wondered. Pushing the thought away, I forced myself to focus on what was important. Cole needed me.

I opened the door and stepped outside. I felt another set of jolts as Cole and Elliott crossed the barrier behind me. Glancing towards Gram, I noticed she stopped.

She called to us, “Wait, we need to wake up Meg.”

In the confusion, I had forgotten about my sleeping sister. “You go ahead with them, Gram. I'll get Meg, and then we'll join you.” I kissed Cole on the

cheek. "I'll be there soon." Wanting to reassure him, I added, "It'll be ok."

As Gram tried to reenter the house, I held her back. "I won't be long. Please, watch over Cole," I whispered.

She nodded and was out the door. With surprising speed, my grandmother raced down the road towards the men. It wasn't long before she caught up to them.

That child could sleep through an explosion, I thought.

Meg was buried under the covers, clearly in a deep sleep. I climbed onto the bed to wake her. In a quick movement, I ripped back the blankets, ready to pounce on her. Instead of my sleeping sister, I found pillows.

Tearing the comforter off the bed completely, I expected to find her awake and hiding. However, the bed was empty, and frustration filled me. We didn't have time for games.

"Meg, don't hide, right now. Gram and Cole need us." I forced myself to speak calmly and not to sound angry.

When my sister didn't respond, I called out a second time and stopped to listen for her giggles. Again, there was only silence. I checked under all the blankets strewn on the floor and even crawled under the bed. Meg was nowhere to be found.

Feeling panicked, I rushed into Gram's walk-in closet. I pulled out everything Meg could be concealed behind or under. Helplessly, I searched every possible hiding space. There was still no sign of her.

"This isn't funny, Meg. Please, don't do this now," I pleaded.

Giving up on the closet, I decided to inspect the rest of the room. I lifted the lid on the trunk at the end of the bed, but it only held blankets and photo albums. With a final desperate thought, I decided to look in the bathroom, but Meg wasn't in there either.

There really was no place for her to hide. Still, I continued my search. I knew my efforts were futile, yet I opened the cabinets anyway. Their emptiness filled

me with disappointment.

Composing myself, I tried to remember all of Meg's favorite hiding places. I stared out of the bathroom, scanning the bedroom with my eyes. The search stopped when my gaze landed on my stuffed animals. The sheep and the wolf were propped up on the nightstand. There was something white in the arms of the wolf.

I raced to inspect it and found a white scroll with a silver ribbon tied around it. I removed the string and unrolled it. My heart sunk as I saw the embossed snake design on the paper. A sick feeling filled me as I read the dark words.

“

My Darling Marina,

You can stop your frantic search for Meg. I bet you felt quite a fright not finding your little sister sleeping soundly in the bed. Of course, you shouldn't worry. My sweet child is finally where she belongs – with me. She is now in the loving arms of her mother.

How silly of your grandmother to forget that I know all of her little tricks. A blood alarm may work on that fool, Elliott, but anyone with half a brain would be able to counter it. She underestimates me – I'm much stronger than the weak little girl she tried to raise me to be.

Now, back to the important matter at hand. I was so devastated by how you treated me at our long-awaited reunion. As hurt as I was, I couldn't blame you entirely. I understand that living with that woman has turned you against me. She always clung to her silly beliefs. I fear she will continue to do so until her dying day. Don't worry, darling. I'll do my best to try to forgive you for your coldness. We certainly haven't been apart long enough for you to forget what a wonderful mother I was to you both.

Enough of the nonsense you have been spoon-fed by her. You will come to me, and you will learn what your gift can truly do. Please choose wisely, Marina. I may not be able to get over the deep hurt you have caused me if you make the wrong choice again. We

don't want Mommy to become too angry now, do we? As you should know by now, the results can be intense – one may even dare to say fiery.

When you are back in my arms, We'll build our future together. The true legacy that was always planned for our family will begin. Under my guidance, your new marriage will make such a powerful union. How lucky for you that you have chosen so well the first time. Sometimes, we are forced into situations, and our real path is blocked. Nevertheless, we can always find the way – Goddess be damned!

How exciting it will be to see what is formed from the mixing of Sarah's and my bloodlines. Such a combination will ensure my grandchildren will be even stronger than you both. Our raw magic will combine to stop even the coldest goddess. Of course, none of this will happen until you submit. All of this is better discussed face-to-face. Don't you agree?

You will come to me soon, my dear Marina. I would hate for any more little accidents to happen. Don't keep me waiting.

Mother

I read the note twice, trying to understand it. *How could I be so stupid as to not watch over Meg? Who is this monster that claims to be my mother?* Dropping the letter, I fell to my knees and began to cry. Beating my fists against my legs, I screamed as the world around me seemed to be crashing down.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

My screams were silenced when strong arms wrapped around me. I struggled against the person holding me. The more I fought to break free, the tighter the arms held me.

“Stop, child,” Gram’s soft voice soothed.

Realizing it was my grandmother, I stopped fighting and collapsed into her arms, sobbing.

“It will be ok, Mara. I’m here.”

“She’s gone, Gram. She took, Meg.” I pulled myself out of her arms and handed her the note. “It’s my fault. If I hadn’t –”

Gram interrupted me. “We are not doing this now. You need to calm down and collect yourself. This isn’t the time for self-pity.”

As she read the note, Gram’s eyes blazed with anger. When she finished reading, she shoved the letter into the pocket of her sweater.

“Mara, you need to focus your energy. We need to help Cole.”

“No,” I screamed. “My little sister has been kidnapped by a monster!”

Gram gripped me by my shoulders and spoke in a slow, tranquil voice. “We must go to Cole. Eliza will not hurt Meg. You know how charming your mother can be. Your sister will think that she is on a grand adventure.”

“Ok, Gram. Let’s help Cole,” I relented. I was not convinced Meg was safe, but the rush of Air that she was wrapping around me allowed me to control my hysteria.

On our fast-paced walk to Cole’s house, I thought about Eliza’s letter. “Gram,

what did she mean about Cole? He doesn't have the gift of magic, right?"

My grandmother pursed her lips.

She isn't going to silence me now, I thought. "Gram, you promised no more secrets. Why do they keep surfacing? I need to know everything if I want to keep my promise. Don't I?"

"Mara, there hasn't been enough time to tell you everything. I'll tell you the short version on the way. One day, you'll know more than you want to know. Sometimes, ignorance can be bliss, Mara."

Gram took my hand and squeezed it gently as she told me the story of how her mother received her gift. "The time my mother grew up in was much different than the one we live in now. People had forgotten about the Goddess and nature. They worried about their day-to-day lives. The old ways were considered fantasy and were stories for movies and books.

"One day, four friends were studying in the library when they met a group of strangers. Breeze, Blaze, Bay, and Daisy had come to town in search of help for the Goddess. They had a book about the magic of nature that they shared with the girls. Inspiring interest, they began to practice the craft as it was described in the guide."

"Your mother was one of the girls, right?" I asked.

"Yes, my mother, Genevieve, was one of them," she answered. "She took her oath seriously. All four girls were committed to the magic, together, and their power grew strong. As they grew older and began their lives of being wives and mothers, they still came together to honor the Goddess. At first, Genevieve Silver, Lucy Andrews, Michelle Elliott, and Camille Black were always careful not to flaunt the gift."

Her voice saddened as she continued her story. "But such a gift is tempting to misuse. My mother said Camille changed soon after she married Brandon Drygen. She started using her newly learned skills to increase her husband's influence in the community. She would stop at nothing to make sure anyone in their way was made to realize how powerful she had become. She destroyed many lives in the name of greed and money."

Gram stopped when we were less than a block away from Cole's house. The

flames were consuming his home and filling the sky with black smoke. "This isn't how I wanted to tell you, but it will have to do. The three women came up with a plan and decided to bind Camille's magic. This angered her, but the Drygen family didn't need magic anymore.

"Camille never forgave the women for what they did. The betrayal she felt fueled her anger. In retaliation, she began directing her rage at her closest friend, Michelle. Camille made it impossible for her to live here. One day, Michelle and her family left town and were never heard from again."

"Is the lady that showed up at the Lunar Festival Camille's daughter?" I asked.

"Yes, Mara. Blanche grew up with a hatred for the Silver family that I could never understand. The Drygens own most of the town and have all the money they could ever need. Blanche had the gift, but it was not enough for her. She wanted what, in her mind, was stolen from her family."

"What does this have to do with Cole?" I asked impatiently. I wanted to run to him and protect him from the pain I knew he felt, not be there, listening to stories about the Drygens.

"Lucy's daughter, Olivia, never showed any interest in taking the oath. When Olivia died in childbirth, Lucy raised her granddaughter. The child was Sarah. The same Sarah, whose son is Cole Oliver Sands."

My eyes widened as I met my grandmother's eyes.

"The legacy your mother has set her mind on is the pure magic of Genevieve and Lucy combining. Your mother is naive to believe we are the only ones with access to the magic. Our family has been blessed with an understanding, a bond with all elements, and an awareness of the dark and light forces around us."

"Does that mean Cole can connect with the elements?" I asked.

"Like you, his gift was taken from him. I don't know where his potion is being kept. I don't know if Cole will be able to tap into his gift without his memories? It is up to you to help him."

Gram hugged me and swept my hair from my face. "Go to Cole, Mara. He needs you."

CHAPTER TWENTY

When I reached Cole, he was staring through tear-filled eyes at the front of his completely engulfed home. The firefighters were barely holding back the flames as they struggled to keep the fire from spreading. I didn't think they could contain the inferno for much longer.

I took my boyfriend's hand into mine. "I'm here, Cole."

"It will all be gone, and I can't stop it. There isn't a damn thing I can do to save my home." The water that had filled his eyes broke loose, and large tears flowed down his cheeks.

My chest tightened. *Cole is my rock. He is the strong one.* "We can stop this, together, if you trust me." I led him to the backside of the house where the fire had not touched it yet. "Come with me."

When we reached an isolated area, I began. "I don't have time to explain everything to you, Cole, but your family has the same connection to the Goddess as mine." "What are you talking about?" he asked angrily. "My home is burning. I'm losing everything, and you want to talk about stupid magic?"

Make him understand, Mara, the voice of Gram rang in my mind.

I held my hands up to the sky, and cried, "Air, I call to you. I plead with you to recall your power that is feeding the flames before me. Fire, I call to you. Return your flames to the soil. Earth, I call to you. Please, absorb the heat of the flames and smother them. Water, I call to you. Devour and wash away the

darkness that summoned you. The anger is no longer welcome here. In the name of the Goddess, I call the Light.”

When nothing happened, I turned my attention towards the distraught man beside me. “Connect with me. Connect with them.”

Cole didn't respond. He just silently stared at me as if I had lost my mind.

With no response from him and my own lack of certainty in what I was doing, I tried to connect the way Gram had instructed me. I didn't have a book telling me what was right. I had to trust myself and learn to release all doubts.

Taking a cleansing breath, I tried again, “Air, Fire, Water, and Earth, release the anger that surrounds us. In the name of Sarah, protector of the magic, I ask you to save this home.”

The fire still burned strong. I knew that if I could not reach him soon, it would be too late.

“Cole, trust me.” Taking his hands in mine, I stared into his eyes and said, “I call to the spirits of Genevieve Silver and Lucy Andrews. Bless this union of your protectors before you. In front of the Goddess and the magic that runs through our veins, I pledge my eternal commitment to protect the magic.”

These words seemed to spark a response. Small threads of white smoke danced and weaved, encircling us in a figure-eight. Cole's eyes widened in surprise as the wisps surrounding us grew stronger.

I gripped Cole's hand tighter. With confidence, I commanded the elements. “Your protection is called. Fire, return to your home. Air, rescind the life you breathe into the flames. Water, pour down on us. Earth, stand strong.”

Clouds formed above us, and the boom of thunder sounded. With renewed vigor, I began repeating my pleas, “Air, Fire, Water, Earth, and Light of the Goddess...hear my pleas.”

As a drop of rain fell on my cheek, I felt my strength rekindling. “It's time to show faith, Cole – in me, and in us. It's now or never.”

With a small nod, Cole began chanting the words with me. “Air, Fire, Earth, Water, and Light, come to us.”

As we finished the words together for the third time, the rain poured down. Cries of joy rang out from the crowd at the front of the residence as they

welcomed the rain. Soon, the flames that had been consuming the house began to retreat.

Cole cupped my face between his palms. He looked at me as if he had honestly never seen me before. "How did you know this would work?"

"I didn't. I just knew I had to do something, so I listened to my heart. You've always been there for me. It was my turn to be strong for you."

Cole swept me off my feet and spun me around. "My beautiful girl, thank you for not giving up on me."

We laughed as the rain poured down on us. The smoky wisps danced away from the smoldering building. Though the fire had been completely extinguished, damage lay in its wake.

"I see you have found your connection, Cole." Gram lifted our hands to the sky, and spoke, "Water, the rain you gave served its purpose. We release you." Gram smirked as the clouds parted and the rain slowed. "We wouldn't want to flood the town, would we?"

With the emergency averted, the firemen called it safe before they departed. Now, there was nothing left for us to do, but try to salvage Cole's belongings. The only people that stayed were nearby neighbors, who came to our aid with boxes. They even helped us gather anything that wasn't ruined by the flames or water.

"I'm sorry I was so angry. As I'm looking at these *things*, I realized there's nothing in this house that I want or need," Cole whispered to us. "Anything meaningful to me is here, right now. You are my family, and your safety is all that matters to me."

Stopping and looking around, Cole had a confused look on his face, "Wait, where is Meg?"

Gram handed Eliza's message to Cole, and apologized, "I'm sorry she included you in all of this. She never could do things simply. How a child of mine ever became so cruel, I'll never understand."

I watched Cole's face as he read the note. Unsure how he'd react, I forced myself to wait patiently until he finished. When he was done, he gave the letter back to Gram with an expressionless look on his face.

“So, Eliza started this fire?” Cole gently shook his head. “Why would she bother to burn down my house?”

“Maybe a distraction? Maybe revenge? Cole, there’s no use trying to understand any of the choices my daughter makes.” Gram marched to the center of the clean-up crew. “Elliott, please get my truck. We are moving Cole in with us tonight.”

Elliott stopped filling boxes, gave Gram the thumbs up, and headed towards our house.

Gram called out to those still sifting through the rubble. “Thank you, everyone, for helping. It's not safe to be digging around in the dark. Go home and sleep. These things can wait for another day.”

Reluctantly, our neighbors finished their tasks. As they left, Cole was met with words of concern, hugs, and handshakes from our soot-covered friends. Their support was moving.

Not soon after everyone had left, Elliott returned with the truck. The bed was filled with empty boxes. “I thought these might be useful.” Stopping and looking around, he faltered, “Wait, where is Meg?”

With a disgusted look on her face, Gram handed him the note. Once again, Eliza's hate-filled letter was read.

Elliott's face crumpled. “I came back too late to protect my girls. How did I fail them again?”

Gram took his hand. “You are here now, and we'll bring Meg home.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

We loaded the truck with as many boxes of the salvaged item as it could hold. I thought we would return to our home and begin planning a way to save Meg, but Gram had other ideas.

"I don't trust my daughter. We should gather your things from the cottage," Gram said.

Couldn't Eliza start a fire at our house, too? I wondered.

As if reading my mind, Gram replied, "Eliza is not strong enough to burn down our home. We'll be safe there."

"Why don't I take this load back to your place, Mae? It sounds like we'll need room in the truck," Elliot offered.

"You are right," Gram agreed.

Cole and I headed for the cottage behind the main house. As Gram gave my father instructions on where she wanted everything, we entered the small home where my boyfriend lived. The structure was warm, and it always smelled like pinecones mixed with vanilla. It was very welcoming.

The great room was an open area, defined only by the furniture. The basic kitchen consisted of a stove, refrigerator, sink, a yellow table, and large sturdy wooden chairs. The living room took up most of the space with pale blue couches, featuring white throw pillows, and accent tables.

I had been in this part of the cottage many times, but never further. I stared at the lavender door that led to a master bedroom. I imagined it to be overflowing

in Sarah's favorite pastel colors.

When Gram joined us, I realized how we must have looked. My eyes fell on Cole, and I chuckled. "Before we pack anything else, we should clean up," I remarked. "We look like a bunch of wet dogs, left out in the rain to play in the mud."

I was relieved when Gram and Cole laughed. After the intensity of the evening, we all needed a light moment to ease our stress. It didn't take long before we had cleaned off most of the ash and mud that covered us. Cole brought us dry clothes from behind a secret door. It felt nice to change into them.

Renewed, we began to box the items Cole thought were important. Since it was Sarah's space, his choices were based more on it being his mother's rather than being needed. I couldn't blame him.

While Cole sorted through kitchen utensils, Gram began looking around the cottage. "Where did you keep your mother's things, Cole?" Gram asked. "I know your stepmother wouldn't have allowed any signs of Sarah to remain in the house."

"Rosalind had tried to throw out all of her stuff, but I was able to save a few things. They're here, inside my bedroom. I keep them in a wooden trunk." Cole's voice weighed heavy with sadness. He put a spatula into the box. "I think this is all I want from here."

Gram ran her aged hands along the light wood walls as if searching for something. "Cole, did Sarah spend much time here?"

"She would come over to be alone and draw, sometimes." Cole eyed my grandmother with curiosity. "Why the questions, Gram?"

Gram's brow furrowed as she went towards him. "This is important. Are there any hidden spaces that you remember playing in as a child? Do you recall spending time with your mother in this cottage?"

Cole shook his head. "No, I never really came here as a child."

Gram's eyes locked with mine. It felt like she was trying to get me to understand what she was seeking. I knew my grandmother was looking for something, but I had no idea what she wanted. *Why would she be asking about Cole being here as a child? What am I missing?* Gram was speaking more in

riddles and gestures than just telling me what to do. This was something I would talk to her about later.

"Show me the chest with her belongings." Gram went towards the lavender door.

Cole opened it for her without hesitation.

Excited to see if we could solve the mystery, I followed them into the bedroom.

Cole brought Gram to Sarah's chest. Inside the room, I copied Gram's previous movements. I ran my hands against the walls while I watched Cole removing his mother's personal items from the box.

When he pulled out a lilac sweater, he stopped and held it to his face. I knew he was breathing in the scent, trying to remember his mother. I understood what he was feeling. I had done the same thing many times while I had longed for my own parents. For the briefest moment, grief flooded his face. Leaving him alone with his memories, I focused on searching the room.

When I reached the open closet door, I began my inspection. The shelves were stacked with boxes above the hung clothing. My eyes scanned every inch of the space until my gaze hit the floor. In the corner of the light tan rug, I noticed a small red spot. Upon further examination, I found it was a piece of red thread.

"Cole, Gram," I called out, "Can you come here? I may have found something."

Lifting the rug halfway towards myself, I discovered what it was hiding. A brass ring was beneath it, stuck in the wooden floorboards.

"What did you find?" Cole knelt down to take a closer look. "Hey, how did I not notice that before?"

"It looks like a trap door," Gram said from behind us. "Open it, and let's find out where it leads to."

I moved back, beside Gram, allowing Cole ample space to pull up the wooden door. As he lifted it, the silken threads of spider webs that covered the opening began to stretch.

"Mara, there are flashlights in the box that I just packed on my bed." Cole

ran his hand through his hair, leaving strands of the web in his dark locks. "How did I not know this was here?" he muttered to himself.

Shaking off the urge to remove the red threads from his hair, I went to find the light we needed. It didn't take me long to complete my task. I brought back the silver flashlights that had been buried under my boyfriend's books, along with other odds and ends.

"I noticed you're bringing your doll collection with you." I teased Cole about the plastic figures I had seen.

"I keep telling you – they are collector's items, not dolls." Cole accepted the light I handed him.

Gram shined the light down the hole onto a circular staircase. "What are we waiting for? Lead the way, Cole."

We followed Cole down the steep staircase. As we walked, I counted each step in my head. *Three...seven...twelve...Big spider! Don't scream. Sixteen...twenty...twenty-six.*

At step twenty-six, our descent ended with a concrete floor. We flashed the lights around, inspecting the area. We stopped when our beams landed on a hanging light bulb with a long chain extending from the side of it.

"There's a light." Cole rushed towards it and pulled the chain. The small bulb illuminated the room.

I stared in amazement at the space around us. Under the light, there was a circular table, much like the one Gram and I had used to cast the memory spell. This table was a light gray marble with etchings of the elements on the surface. In the center, an intricate image of the Goddess, holding a quarter moon in her arms, sparkled in the light.

"She made this." Cole traced his fingers along the surface.

My heart, once again, ached for him. I wanted to remove his hurt, though I knew I never could.

Gram began searching one of the cupboards lining the wall. "Sarah fully

stocked this room with supplies.” She nodded her approval while sorting through the neatly arranged items on the shelves. “Very impressive. Her grandmother, Lucy, would be extremely proud if she could see how prepared Sarah was.”

Gram picked up a bundle of tree branches. They had many brown needles with specks of green that hinted at the color they had once been. “This is the juniper tree needles we need. If you come across yellow rue, put it aside.”

Each of us continued to look through Sarah’s things.

I stopped at a cabinet with the tree of life carved on its outside. Opening the door, I was amazed by rows and rows of neatly labeled bottles. I reached inside to inspect one that shimmered from the pink liquid it held. In my haste, I knocked over several of the containers.

“No, no, no,” I muttered under my breath. Attempting to catch the falling items, I bumped the back of the wardrobe. Instead of my hand hitting the side of the wood and stopping, it moved. *Oh Goddess, no. I can't break Sarah's stuff.*

I leaned in closer to see the damage I had caused. Much to my relief, it wasn't broken. It had been a false back. I tried not to knock over anything else as I slid the panel out of the way. Hidden behind it was a square, silver box. Picking it up carefully to inspect, I saw the name *Cole* inscribed on the top.

“I found something,” I exclaimed.

I walked over to where Cole was leafing through a book. Gram was next to him, placing bottles and herbs into a box.

“This is for you to open.” I handed the container to Cole.

Quickly, he took the lid off the box. It held a silver ring with a square, purple gem in the center. As Cole picked up the ring, I felt an odd pulsing sensation being emitted from the blue ring that I wore.

Gram pulled me away from Cole. “He needs to do this alone.”

Reluctantly, I agreed, and we retreated to the opposite corner of the room. Away from Cole, my grandmother showed me the items she had found, including the yellow rue.

Still whispering, she said, “He will have to choose whether he will make the promise or not – just like you did.”

Did we really have a choice? I wasn’t certain of the answer. It seemed our

lives were predetermined.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

While we waited for Cole, I allowed myself to take in my surroundings. The furniture in the large, round room was centered around the stone table. In each section, there was a distinct feeling of purpose and meaning. As you came down the circular staircase and entered the chamber, you were greeted by bookcases and large chests that held herbs, potions, and spells. It gave off an air of secrets and knowledge.

Following the curved design of the space, clockwise, I stopped at a small sitting area that held two red wingchairs with a small, square bronze table between them. The table held a large, white candle surrounded by four smaller candles. Behind it was a large, abstract painting filled with streaks of red, orange, yellow, white, and gray.

The art provoked odd feelings from inside me. If I stroked my fingers along the colors, I was confident I would feel the biting sting of a burn. Even with the intense sensation, it surprisingly still seemed inviting, offering warmth and comfort.

Continuing my inspection, I paused at the next area. This space contained a silver water fountain with a statue sculpted to resemble a splash of water, rising from its base. The burst of water held an elegant woman's hand that cupped a large tree, presenting it for all to see. It was not running, but I could almost hear the flow of the calming liquid. Shaking off the call that was luring me to relax and rest, I continued scanning the room.

The final section was to the right of the staircase. This space held a wooden table and a green chair. They appeared to be sized for a child. The wall above them was covered with a collection of art while the floor below had hand-painted flowers. Unable to fight off my curiosity, I stepped closer for a better look.

Most of the paintings were of trees in various stages of life. The flowers were all in their brightest bloom. The gentle strokes of detail and bold colors of green, brown, orange, and red were definitely the work of Sarah. As I absorbed each picture, a sense of change, growth, and new life surrounded me.

In the center of the works was a black and white circle of sketches. These sketches were of Cole as he had grown. They began with him as a small baby with bright eyes smiling, a toddler chasing a butterfly, a young boy with a toothy grin, proudly showing his catch – a trout that was almost as big as he was – and a young man, pushing a girl on a swing.

I ran my fingers over the image of the girl and smiled. Sarah had captured the feeling of pure happiness I had felt that day on the swing. I was filled with a sense of deep love and echoes of giggles vibrated in the air.

I was brought back to the moment by Gram's soft touch. Squeezing her hand gently, I turned my attention towards Cole. We watched quietly as he looked into the box. After a few minutes, he softly whispered something, and then closed the container. As he came over to join us, I noticed he had put the ring on his small finger.

"I was here before," Cole murmured.

Cole looked as if he had seen a ghost. Words that were probably never truer. The pain I had seen in him after Sarah's death had returned.

I took his hand and guided him to one of the red chairs. Like a small child, he collapsed into it and buried his face in his palms.

I knelt in front of him. "Cole, I know this is overwhelming, but I need you to talk to us – to me."

Cole lifted his head. Tears fell from his deep blue eyes. "It was so real. She was standing in front of me, telling me how proud of me she was and how sorry she was for not being here for me now."

Frantically, he jumped up and started pacing. “When I opened the chest, I saw four girls reading a book. This image quickly changed to a woman. I didn't know her, but she felt familiar. As she proudly promised to protect the magic, her blue eyes and soft curly blonde hair that fell down her shoulders made me think I should recognize her.”

He shook his head slightly. “She stared right at me and smiled as she took the oath. It was like she was talking directly to me. As quickly as she came, she disappeared and a vision of a young mother, holding her new baby in her arms, replaced her. This lady kept saying to the infant, 'Sarah, don't be afraid of your path. Be braver than I was, my baby.' The child must have been my mother and the woman holding her, my grandmother, Olivia.”

Cole stopped as if he was debating whether to continue or not. Gram and I both watched quietly while he ran his fingers through his dark hair. Finally, working out whatever was troubling him, he proceeded.

“Then, the image changed to two teen girls fighting. It was our mothers. When Eliza turned to walk away, my mother pulled on her arm, begging her to not go with him. She kept saying, 'Don't go to him. Remember your promise.' The cold look that Eliza had in her eyes told me nothing would change her mind.”

Sitting back down, he spoke softly as he told the next part to us. “All of a sudden, a brilliant ray of colors shone into my eyes, and my mother stepped out of the light. Her long blonde hair sparkled with a glittery shine, and her blue eyes twinkled with bits of turquoise. My mother told me she was sorry she wasn't there to teach me everything, but she was proud of the man I had become. She said I would always be safe with the both of you by my side, and if I never forgot my promise.”

He looked up, meeting my gaze. “As I began to question her, she started to leave. At the last moment, she turned around and told me my magic was safe in the hands of the Goddess. Her final words to me were, 'I'm proud of you, Cole. I know you will continue the oath our family took. I love you.' Then, she was gone again.”

“Cole, I'm sorry you're finding out this way,” I said, trying to comfort him.

The guilt I felt over my mother's attack on his home had begun to sink in. Even though I didn't bring on any of this, I still felt responsible.

Gram interrupted me from further apologizing. "Cole, did you take the oath?"

Though I knew my grandmother was asking a valid question, she had additional motives in cutting me off. There was no way she'd let me take responsibility for what had happened. However, that didn't stop my sense of ownership for what my mother had done.

"Of course," Cole answered. "Tonight, when you called the elements, I felt a connection...a need to protect. To protect you, the elements...well, to protect everything. I cannot explain it, but I didn't question taking the oath. It was more of a feeling as to why it took me so long to do this. Together, we'll keep the promises we made, and together we'll fight against anything and everyone that threatens our gift...even if that means facing Eliza."

Hugging him tightly, I said, "Cole, I can't ask you to get any more involved in what will happen next. It will not be safe. We don't know what she is capable of doing."

"Stop. I couldn't be any more involved than I already am. I love you, Mara. I love your family as if they were my own. Soon, they will officially be mine. Together, we'll stand against Eliza and whatever she throws at us. We'll get Meg back. You and me."

"And me." Gram took both of our hands.

"I'll be there, too, Caterpillar," a voice promised. Standing on the bottom step behind us, Elliott stood watching.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Elliott walked towards us with a long, confident stride. “All of the boxes are unloaded. I put them in your room, Mara.” He held his hand out to me.

My heart stopped when I saw what rested on his palm.

“This was on the floor under the loft ladder. I believe it’s yours.”

In the chaos of being woken by the fire, it must have fallen out of its hiding place. I took the small, silver cylinder from him, trying to act nonchalant. “Thank you. Did you happen to open it?” *Please, please, please, say no. Why didn’t you put it somewhere safer than a pillowcase?* I scolded myself. As the words repeated in my head, I hoped he would say no, but life was never that simple.

“I did look inside, and I understand why you have it. There isn’t anything I can do to change the decisions I made in the past, but I’ll do whatever it takes to make it up to you. I’ll not fail you, again,” Elliott asserted. His words seemed so sincere, but as much as I wanted to believe him, I wasn’t ready to risk trusting him, yet. “If you want, we can make the potion, right now. I’ll do whatever is necessary to earn your trust.”

“A conversation for later, Elliott. Let’s leave Cole and Mara to finish up here,” Gram said, stopping him.

I was thankful that Gram was not one to dwell on the ‘should-haves’ and, instead, focused on taking action. At the same time, I wanted to run to Elliott and throw my arms around him. In the end, I was comforted by the warm hug of my

grandmother.

Hugging her back tightly, I breathed in the familiar scents of vanilla, cinnamon, and lavender.

She whispered in my ear, “It will be ok, love, but Cole needs you. I’ll handle this. You have always been strong and now isn’t the time to forget that.” Releasing her hold on me, Gram turned to Cole with open arms. “A hug for an old lady?” she teased.

Cole welcomed the hug, just as I had. “I always have a hug available for an old lady. Since it’s just us here, you’ll have to do.”

I could not make out what Gram said to Cole, but whatever it was, it made him laugh.

“We’ll see you at home soon.” Gram took Elliott’s arm. “Come, we have plenty of things we can take care of at the house.”

I watched as they began their climb up the circular staircase. Once they were out of sight, I turned to Cole and said, “She will keep him busy. Now, we can focus on you. We need to find your magic.”

Cole and I decided to look through the bookcases. After a while, it felt hopeless. Obviously, we were going about this the wrong way.

“Cole, what did Sarah say about your magic?”

“She just said it was always in the Goddess’s hands,” he answered, not hiding his frustration.

As I wandered around the room, I played the words repeatedly in my head and a thought finally came to me. “I think I might know where to look. Come, let me show you.”

Cole and I went to the water fountain. His eyes brightened as he inspected the sculpture’s hand. “The tree of life – this must be where she has hidden it. This is the first thing, tonight, that has made sense.”

Taking ahold of the metal tree, he jiggled it. It moved as if it was loose, but his attempts to pull it free made no impact. Not giving up, Cole decided to twist

instead of a yank. This time, I could see progress.

Cole tugged harder. Several more times and one mighty pull caused the tree to pop out. Attached to it was a large, silver cylinder that looked like the one Elliott had returned to me. Opening it revealed a light-yellow note and a crystal vial, filled with blue and silver liquid.

Cole unrolled the message and held it out for both of us to read:

“

My Dearest Cole,

If you have found this, either you have been extraordinarily inquisitive, or I'm no longer with you. Knowing you, my child, it is the latter.

I feel confident that you are not alone in your search and that you are now, ready for answers. When you were young, your connection to the magic, especially Water, was so strong. This scared me, and I didn't feel like I could keep you safe.

To protect you, I bound your gifts. I took the magic from you, knowing, one day, that it would be restored. Soon, you will have everything I took from you back. Such knowledge, so quickly, will be difficult, but I know you will be able to handle it. Please rely on Mae and Mara. Mara's connection to Fire and Mae's connection to Air will be necessary for what the future holds.

Mae, if you are reading this, I have always known how strong your connection to Air is. Your wisdom and extensive knowledge will be needed. Please, take care of my boy and help him understand what our families promised.

If I've never told you this, Cole, I'm so glad that you and Mara found each other. I know you will continue to protect the magic, together. Please, take care, my love, and always remember the promise first made by my grandmother. I hope it is a legacy you and, one day, your children will continue.

At night, when you see the moon, think of my love for you and know that I'm watching.

Love Always,
Mom

When we finished the letter, we both looked at each other with tears glistening in our eyes.

“She always told me how much she loved you, Mara,” Cole said. He handed me the cylinder and the note. “I guess it really is now or never.”

“You probably should take a seat before you drink it. There's no way I can carry you,” I warned.

“You are right.” Cole sat down in one of the red chairs. Putting the vial to his lips, he toasted, “Cheers.” After a long drink, Cole handed me back the empty crystal. With a big grin, he said, “I'll see you soon, Mara. I hope I'll have all the answers we need when I return.”

I noticed there was a little of the blue liquid left in the vial. As I watched Cole drift off, I wondered what would happen if I drank the rest of the potion. I justified the risk since it was such a small amount. Going against my better judgment, I decided there was nothing I could lose by trying.

I tilted the crystal vial back and let the final drop land on my tongue. The strong berry taste filled my senses, and the room began to spin. Suddenly, I felt so dizzy that I had to sit down. Unable to make it to the other red chair, I collapsed to the floor, drifting off into sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

When I woke up, it took me a moment to recall what I did, and then to figure out where I was. To my surprise, I had woken in Cole's home. The house he had grown up in, not the cottage. The same building that we had watched burn tonight.

As everything came into focus, I saw Sarah and Cole in the kitchen. They were decorating cupcakes with a bright white frosting and blue gemlike sprinkles. Cole was putting more icing into his mouth than on the treats.

"Cole, we need frost the cupcakes, too, sweetie." Sarah moved the bowl away from her greedy little boy.

"Look how good I'm decorating this. I've barely even had any to eat." Cole held up one of his creations. The sugar coating was piled unevenly and so high that the toppings teetered precariously.

"Maybe, next time, you should just not get as much on your nose." Sarah laughed as she wiped off his face and kissed him on the head. "What am I going to do with you?" she teased with her brightest smile. Clapping her hands together, she said, "I know. Let's finish up here. I have a surprise for you."

As they continued their task, I could see where Cole got his personality. They both emitted a strong feeling of warmth and love. Being around them was like drinking liquid sunshine. They both radiated joy. The bond they shared made me smile. Cole was truly loved by his mother, and it was apparent he felt it. His deep affection for her was just as evident.

With the last cupcake frosted, Sarah sang out, “Cole, it's time to share my special surprise with you. Well, actually, it is for Bay, but I wanted you to see if you think she would like it.”

“What is it, Mom?” An eager grin spread across his face.

“I made her a special drink. Here, would you taste it and tell me what you think?” Sarah held out a small glass tube filled with the blue and silver liquid.

“It's so shiny.” Cole eyed it curiously. “Will I like it?” Without waiting for her answer, Cole greedily took a long drink and started to smack his lips. “Well, it is good, but it's blackberry. She would like strawberry much better, so I think we're going to have to try again, Mom,” Cole declared.

“Cole, you know you're the one that likes strawberry.” Sarah swept Cole into her arms and tickled him.

His giggles were soon replaced by a big yawn. “Why don't we go sit down, and I'll read you a story.”

“Ok.” Cole sleepily rubbed his eyes. By the time they made it to the living room, Cole was already fast asleep.

Sarah held him in her arms, gently rocking him. “I'm sorry. She's out there watching. This is the only way I know to keep you safe. I hope, one day, you'll understand and forgive me.”

Watching her hold him, my thoughts drifted to my little sister. *Was she safe and warm? Was she scared?* A loud knocking on the door startled me, drawing my focus back to the moment.

Sarah called out to the visitor, “Come in.”

The person who entered was none other than my mother.

Eliza wore a pink and white dress with a matching headband. Her dark red hair hung loosely down her back. Her makeup was softer and more playful than the last time I'd seen her. She looked young, vibrant, and, as always, devastatingly beautiful. Looking at her, I understood why she received so much attention. She was stunning.

“I was just taking Cole up for a nap.” Sarah greeted Eliza with a kiss on the cheek. “I'll be right back.”

Eliza watched as Sarah climbed the stairs. When her friend was out of view,

she picked things up around the house to examine them. Once in the kitchen, my mother took her finger and scraped it through the frosting bowl. After she tasted the sugar coating, giving a sound of approval, she continued her inspection. It appeared she was looking at everything, but not finding anything of importance.

When Sarah returned to the kitchen, she held out the plate of cupcakes to Eliza. "Did you want one?"

"Of course not," Eliza snapped.

My mother never would allow herself to eat sweets. She was too vain to even gain an ounce of weight and possibly lose her position as *the most beautiful woman in Starten*. The fact she even tried the sugary concoction was enlightening.

Did my mother have a secret sweet tooth? I wondered.

As quickly as Eliza angered, she composed herself. "The topping is good though. I'll need to get the recipe. Marina is always begging me to make something with her." My mother sighed dramatically and rolled her eyes. "Five began her needy year, and I hoped by six it would have passed. I can't bear another year like this one. This phase has to end."

Hearing her words gave me a sinking feeling in my heart.

"So, what brings you here, today, Eliza? It's been a long time since you've just stopped by to say hello." Sarah changed the subject. "The last time I saw you was at Cole's seventh birthday party, months ago."

"I know. I know. I have been meaning to come over more often. You just know how it is with children. Marina keeps me so busy." Eliza sat down on the kitchen stool as if even talking about me exhausted her.

Sarah sat next to my mother. "I understand. They do keep us busy. Still, she is such a darling child and definitely smart for her age."

"Oh, yes, she's very bright but so demanding." Eliza released another dramatic sigh.

I had an urge to blast her off of her seat and onto the floor.

"Lately, it's always 'Mommy, look at me. Mommy, I need you.' Honestly, this is the first moment of relief I have had from her incessant need for attention today. So, I took my opportunity for freedom, and I thought I'd come to talk with

you."

Her comments stung like a slap across the face. *Was I really that needy as a child? Being away from me was freeing?*

Eliza leaned closer to her friend. "Sarah, a mutual friend of ours is in need and I hope you will help."

"Which friend?" she asked guardedly.

"Don't play dumb, Sarah. You know who I'm talking about," Eliza snapped. Again, my mother quickly composed herself, and then she sweetly began once more, "He just needs a small favor, which we both can provide. All he needs is for us to create a small, tiny spell that requires magic from Water and Fire."

"I'm not going to help him. He will just use it to hurt someone." Sarah's eyes blazed with anger.

"Don't tell me you believe all of the lies spread about him, too," Eliza said in a soft, convincing tone. "You have the wrong idea about him. He has always been persecuted here because of his family name."

Sarah firmly maintained, "Eliza, I'll not help Cedric Drygen."

Taking a new tactic, my mother put her hand on her friend's. "Sarah, it's a small favor. If you help me, just this once, I'll never ask you to help him again. Besides, it's a small spell to shield him from harm. Now, isn't that what our magic is for? Aren't we supposed to protect people?"

"He needs protection from harm? I find that hard to believe," Sarah scoffed. "What does he really need it for?"

"Well," Eliza hesitated.

I could see the wheels in her mind spinning as she tried to figure out how to convince Sarah to submit.

"It's a protection of sorts. Cedric needs to protect what is rightfully his. As I already said, all he needs is a small Fire and Water spell. Obviously, he'll compensate us greatly for our efforts. Wouldn't you like more than what you have here? He can make our lives so much easier."

"Eliza, I'm happy with my life. There's nothing I need that Cedric can get me," Sarah insisted. "Aren't you happy? You have Elliott and a beautiful, healthy daughter. What more can you want?"

Eliza sulked. "I'm sick of living in my mother's home. This town is so small, and everything here is stifling. I need so much more than what this place offers." She stood up and stormed away. "If you're not willing to help me, I guess I'll have to find another way. Don't think I won't forget that we are no longer friends, Sarah Sands."

"Stop, Eliza." Sarah grabbed her arm. "Of course, we are still friends. I just need to think about it. Can I give you my answer tomorrow?"

Instantly, changing from an angry to an appreciative friend, Eliza gushed, "I knew you would help. Thank you so much, Sarah. You are such a dear friend." My mother hugged her tightly before releasing her and rushing towards the door. "Thanks again. I must go now, but I'll come back tomorrow to make plans. I knew I could count on you."

As I watched my mother walk out the door, my heart broke, again. Watching her leave the house, I began to question myself. *Why did I miss her when she left?* She was never really a mother. My happy childhood memories were always of something I'd done with my grandparents. *Was it just the fact she had left me?*

My grandmother had always taken care of me. When I was sad, it was Gram who comforted me. When I was hurt, it was Gram who made me feel better. What was I clinging to? After all, the idea of the perfect mother certainly wasn't Eliza.

Pushing my pity party aside, I turned my focus back onto what was happening around me. Sarah had returned to the kitchen and pulled out a small book from one of the drawers. The cover had streaks of red, silver, white, and yellow on it.

When she sat down and began to write in it, I guessed it was her journal.

Sarah didn't write for long before there was another knock on the door.

Sarah opened the door, and, to my surprise, my grandmother stood in the doorway, holding a basket of produce.

Gram was wearing her denim overalls. Her brown hair was in two long

braids under a big red hat that she wore to protect her skin from the sun. She was even wearing her work boots. She called this outfit her *dirt-digging clothes*. Coming to see Sarah must have been an impromptu thought. My grandmother would never have gone to visit anyone dressed this way.

“Sarah, can I come in?” Gram held up the basket. “I brought you some vegetables and fruit that I just picked.”

“Come in, Mae,” Sarah welcomed her and graciously accepted the gift. “What a nice thought. Cole loves your strawberries.”

When they were inside, Gram looked around and asked quietly, “Are we alone?”

“Cole is upstairs sleeping. I gave him the potion, as we discussed. Great timing, too. You just missed my surprise visitor.”

“Eliza?” Gram questioned. “What does my daughter need now?”

“She wants me to help her with a spell for Cedric,” Sarah said.

“What kind of spell?” Gram asked with a disgusted look on her face.

“She claims it’s just a simple Water and Fire spell meant to protect Cedric from harm. When I pressed her for the real reason, she insisted it’s to keep what’s his from being taken away. I have no idea what the spell is really for, but I’m not going to help her with it.”

“Chester told me he had heard at the club that Drygen had been fighting with Sam Heart about who owned land up north. They both had a claim to it, but the Drygens wanted all of the property,” Gram said. “I wonder if that’s what the spell is for.”

A small voice from upstairs shouted, “Mom. Mommy.”

“I’ll be up in a minute, Cole,” Sarah called up to him. “Mae, thank you for coming and for the gifts. How’s Marina doing?”

“She is such a joy for us. My only concern is that she’s becoming stronger in her magic. I have instructed her to not tell Eliza or Elliott about anything yet,” Gram said with sadness in her voice. “I made a potion for her. It looks like I’ll be giving it to her sooner than I had hoped. It’s just getting too dangerous for her to learn more about her magic with Eliza around. I cannot fathom how a child of mine could be so selfish? I fear I’ll never know the answer to that question,”

Gram said as she walked towards the exit.

“Does Elliott know what is going on?” Sarah stopped Gram as she opened the front door to leave.

My grandmother shook her head. “I have no idea what Elliott knows. He always seems to be snooping around, looking for something, but I'm not sure what he's seeking. I guess only time will tell. I'll see you later, Sarah.” Gram kissed her on the cheek and left.

While I watched my grandmother walk away, Cole came down the stairs. Sarah immediately picked him up and held him in her arms.

“Did you have a nice sleep, my love?” she asked, and then covered his cheeks with kisses.

“Yes, Mommy.” Cole's eyes lit up. “Can we eat one of those cupcakes?”

Their warm laughter rang out as she tickled him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

I woke to the sound of Cole calling my name as he gently shook me. "Mara. Mara."

I opened my eyes and smiled at the sight of him. "What a lovely way to be awakened." I stretched and sat up.

Cole frowned as he held out the empty vial towards me. "Did you drink some of this, too?"

You didn't think this one through, I scolded myself. "I did." Pausing to find the best way to explain my actions, I decided to go with the truth. "I'm not sure what came over me. It just seemed like a good idea at the time."

The scowl on Cole's face turned to a big grin. "I'm glad you did," he said with a chuckle. "Did you see everything?"

"Do you mean, did I hear my mother wanted nothing to do with me, or that you love frosting?" Sadness washed over me.

Instead of responding, he drew me close and kissed me.

My anger subsided as I melted into his arms. Regret replaced it. "You're not mad at me? They were your memories, and I didn't ask you first. I'm sorry. I had no right to them."

"Of course, I'm not mad. Actually, I'm glad you were brave enough to follow your instincts. I just wish I had been able to do the same when you drank yours."

Again, Cole kissed me. His touch was soothing, and I didn't want to leave the comfort of his arms. Holding me tighter, he ran his fingers through my hair.

Sensible as always, Cole broke away as our kisses grew more passionate.

Letting out a long breath, he said, "It's getting harder and harder to be a gentleman."

"Then, don't." I slipped my hand into his.

"Soon, you will be my wife, and then all bets are off. Today is not that day." Cole affectionately squeezed my hand. "I guess it's time to go back and face another parent. We need to find out if that's Elliott and why he's really here. Do you think he is your father?"

Exhaling, I knew I couldn't hide from all of the questions – his, or mine. I needed to admit to Cole what I was feeling. "I'm not sure what I think. I want to believe he's my father, but everything is so complicated right now. Why show up now? How could he have stayed away for so long? Was he here to distract us while Eliza took Meg? Could they be working together?"

Feeling frantic, my words flew out at a rapid pace. "I'm worried the spell won't be effective. If Elliott read it, he might be able to counter it? Maybe we should use another? I wonder if your mother has one around here. Perhaps, something that will work better."

"Calm down, Mara." Cole led me to the red chair and motioned towards it. "Sit a minute so that you can regain your composure."

He went to a cabinet and pulled out several bottles. Then, he shook the contents into a small piece of cloth. Cole tied the fabric before handing me his creation. "Take this and slowly inhale. You need to calm yourself."

I took a long breath, allowing the fragrant lavender and peppermint to fill my senses. After a few minutes, I set the pouch down. "Where did you learn how to make this?" I questioned. "Did your mother teach you? I thought you were never here."

Cole picked up the herbs and held them out to me. "Mara, stop, take in the scents, and release your worries. My mother made these pouches when I was sick or scared. She had herbs in our pantry, just like Gram. Of course, nothing like what she has here."

I settled back and allowed myself to soak up the soothing treatment. Slowly, my mind stopped racing. After a few minutes, I was relaxed enough to start making sense.

"I'm not sure what that was all about, but I'm collected now," I apologized.

"Good." Cole smoothed my hair out of my face and kissed my cheek. "Now, we can try to find a new spell to use on Elliott, and all of your questions will be answered. I promise."

As we looked through the bookcases, I began to worry again. We found nothing magical. Most of the books were just stories about the Goddess or plants and herbs.

"I watched my mother write in a journal when I was little. I wonder if it's around here." Cole patted the walls of another cupboard, looking for a hiding place.

With renewed focus, we searched every cabinet and bookcase, looking for the missing notebook.

"I'm not sure we're going to find it here, Cole," I called.

That was when he motioned for me to join him in the red room. "Does this look familiar to you?"

As I drew closer, I understood what he meant. "The painting looks like the cover of the journal we saw your mother writing in."

"Let's take the picture down and see what's behind it," Cole suggested.

We took ahold of opposite sides and lifted the large portrait. It was much heavier than it looked. Setting it down gently, I turned to inspect the wall. To my dismay, there was nothing to see behind the painting, other than a square that was lighter colored than the rest of the aged wall.

Disappointed, Cole said, "Nothing there. Let's put it back up."

We started to rehang the canvas when something caught my eye. "Wait! Put it down," I said. "There's something on the back."

Once it was back on the floor, we could clearly see a small hole in the frame.

"You're right. I think there is something here." Cole carefully tore away the paper backing. He pulled out a red journal and held it in the air. "We found it. Good eyes, Mar."

We returned the painting to its spot on the wall and settled, together, on one of the chairs. Flipping through the pages of the journal, we found many spells. There was even one similar to Gram's, but none seemed exactly right.

When we turned the next page, we both looked at each other.

"This is it, Mar," Cole said in a whisper.

Labhair an Fhírinne

Prepare three small white candles as follows:

1st wick: dip in the dried petals from an agrimony flower

2nd wick: dip in dragon's blood resin

3rd wick: dip in the ground spiny needles of a juniper tree

**Prepare a yellow tri-wick candle by dipping each
pith into the ground acorns of the white oak.**

Grind two small petals of the yellow rue and pour into liquid.

Serve this beverage to the one whose truth is in question.

**Be cautious, as too much rue will reveal the truth,
but death will come to the one ingesting it.**

Light the candles

Your target will Speak the Truth.

Remember everything is not always as it seems.

"I think you're right," I agreed.

"We have most of these ingredients already," Cole said excitedly before returning to the cabinet. He held up a large clear bottle, labeled *White Oak Acorns*. "We have everything we need now. Let's get this to Gram. She'll know what is best."

Cole continued digging through the cabinets and added more items to the box Gram had packed. While he finished loading them, I continued to look through the journal. When I came to a page with *The Protectors* written on the top, I paused for a moment. Slowly turning the page, I read the name *Silver*, written in elegant calligraphy. This page held the names Genevieve Silver, Mae Silver Veracor, Eliza Veracor Stone, Marina Stone, and Meg Stone.

The page after that had *Drygen* scrawled in dark lettering. It was surrounded by the names Camille Black Drygen, Blanche Drygen, and Cedric Drygen. Oddly, Cedric had a snake drawn through his name. Underneath it, there was

wording I could barely see. As I held it closer, I could vaguely make out the faint writing. It looked like *Miles*.

I turned to the next page and slowly traced my finger over the name *Andrews*. This page was a little different. Instead of just listing the names of Lucy Andrews, Olivia Andrews, Sarah Andrews Sand, and Cole Sands, there was a delicate portrait of each included. I could see Cole's eyes came from his great-grandmother. His grandmother, Olivia, looked so sad in the sketch drawn of her. When my eyes fell on Sarah, I just stared at her, studying her features. *Why did she have to die so young?*

Cole rested his chin on my shoulder. "Wasn't she so beautiful?"

"I'm sorry." I quickly handed him the book. "I should have called you over to look with me."

"I'll go through it another time." Cole handed the journal back to me. "Did you find anything else interesting?"

I flipped another page. I smiled and held it open for him to see. "You made it into the journal."

"Such a fine specimen." Cole chuckled at his joke. Then, he turned to the next page.

I was surprised it was blank.

"This book is about the original protectors of the magic, including our great-grandmothers. I wonder why there isn't anything for Michelle Elliott's family," I said.

"Another mystery." Cole took the book from me and added it to the overflowing box. "We should go home. Gram has been alone with that man for far too long already."

"We are back, Gram," Cole announced as we entered the kitchen.

The smells of the delicious food Gram was preparing engulfed the room. The aroma caused a tinge of sadness to wash over me. *Meg should be here with us*, I bitterly thought.

“Dinner will be soon. Now, tell me everything you learned today, and I might feed you,” Gram called from the stove, stirring a pot.

Cole snuck up behind her. As he did, he quietly pulled a spoon from the drawer to sneak a taste. Of course, there was no fooling my grandmother. It was Cole who got the surprise when Gram slapped his hand lightly.

My grandmother put the lid on the pot and turned the temperature down. “Ok, show me what you found,” she said, wiping her hands on her apron.

As Gram sifted through the boxes, I filled her in on the day's events, including my decision to try the potion.

“Only you, Mara, would be brave enough to try something like that. Did you both see the same things?” Gram questioned.

“It started with my mother letting me frost cupcakes,” Cole began. “Then, she gave me the potion to drink.”

“Afterward, Eliza showed up, insisting Sarah help Cedric, and then complained about how horrible it was to be my mother.” I blinked back the tears I didn't plan to shed. “Then, when she'd gone, you showed up, Gram, and talked with Sarah.”

“Before all of that, my mom wrote in her journal,” Cole interrupted, correcting me.

“You're right.” I smirked. “Then, Cole woke up and begged for a cupcake. Cole and Sarah laughing together was the last thing I saw.”

“I must have woken you up too early,” Cole said. “After I ate the cupcake, she gave me a plastic dolphin named Bay. I think she did that in case any memories came back. Is that correct, Mae?”

“That is exactly what she did,” Gram confirmed. She looked amused as she smoothed her apron. “We did the same thing for Mara with the dolls. I didn't want to take a chance on anything. Everything had to be explainable as nothing more than a vivid imagination.”

“Um, Gram, Mara and I have been thinking. We're both concerned the spell you're planning to use on Elliott might not be useful anymore since he had the cylinder.” Cole handed her the journal after opening it to the truth spell. “We found this, and we both think it will work.”

Gram accepted it and began to read to herself. After a few minutes, she energetically commented, “This is what we need. The other spell would have only told us if the person was not Elliott. This will not only confirm his identity but give us clues to anything he is potentially hiding. Good instincts. Both of you have made me proud.”

Soaking in Gram's praise, Cole looked around and asked, “Where is Elliott?”

“He went to check on the animals. Then, I asked him to take care of some things in Chester's woodshop for me,” Gram explained. “He should be gone for a while. Why don't we gather up the supplies for this spell and prepare it? We can try it after dinner.”

When we had gathered up the items, Cole said, “I'll go find Elliott and try to keep him busy.”

Gram stopped him, taking his hand. “Cole, we need all of us for this. You're just as important as we are.” Redirecting her attention towards me, she added, “Mara, go get a mortar and pestle for each of us from the cupboard on the patio.”

As I went to get the items, Cole called after me, “Don't bring one for me. I packed one of my mom's along with the bottles of herbs.”

When I came back, the table was already set up with bottles and candles. Cole stood across from Gram, and I took the spot to the left of her. Handing my grandmother the mortar and pestle I had collected, she gave me a bottle, labeled *Dragon's Blood Resin*, and one white candle. Cole held the bottle of agrimony flowers and a candle.

“Let's, each of us, prepare our candles. Remember to have an open heart and listen to it for direction.” Gram poured a generous amount of the juniper needles into her bowl and began to grind the brown sticks into smaller pieces.

With a look of hesitation, Cole held the bottle tightly. Then, after carefully removing the cork, he began to pour the yellow petals into the blue granite bowl that once belonged to his mother. As he ground the dried flowers, a silver thread bounced between his bowl and my grandmother's dish, stringing them together.

I poured the small, dark brown and red chunks of dragon's blood into my bowl, and a tiny spark of fire sizzled. It continued sparking as I crushed it into a red powder. When the silver thread grew from the residue, I felt static in the air

along with the strong presence of the elements around me.

With a powerful voice, Gram said, “Goddess, we prepare this spell with pure hearts and a strong determination to protect the sacred magic you have granted us. We ask your blessing and guidance.”

My grandmother swirled her white candle just above the greenish-brown powder. The fine dust rose and began to follow the circles she made as the tip of the wick greedily consumed the ground juniper needles. When her vessel was empty, she set the candle down on the table in front of her.

Cole and I met eyes and began to recreate the same magic that Gram had by circling our candles above our bowls. Just as hers had, our candlewicks siphoned up all of the powder we had made. When every speck of dust was absorbed, we set the candles in front of us on the table, as well.

Gram handed each of us a pale-yellow nut from the bottle, labeled *White Oak Acorn*. She then set the biggest yellow candle centered in the middle of us before pressing its three wicks down. Cole and I watched while she ground the acorn nut into a tan powder.

This time, Gram was more methodical in turning the seed to dust. She started to the right before returning to the center. Then, she ground the pestle towards herself and returned to the center. Continuing this pattern, she worked clockwise.

We followed her movements. As we turned the acorn into a powder, it changed to a silver color and rose from the bowls. The three wicks of the candle stood up as if summoning the acorn dust. The fine lines of particles arched and trailed from our containers to one of the tapers. Once again, the candle greedily siphoned all of the powder we had created.

With the candles prepared, Gram handed me the bottle of rue petals. “Only take two small petals. We want the truth, not to kill him.”

Suddenly feeling scared about the possibility of killing Elliott, I handed the bottle to Cole. “You pick the petals. I’ll grind them.”

Carefully dumping the petals into his hand, Gram and I watched as he sorted through them, putting the larger petals back. Holding a palmful of small, yellow pieces out towards me, he said, “Mara, trust yourself like you taught me.”

As I ground the smallest petals, I focused on thoughts of my father. The man

I remembered from my childhood — the man who loved me. Closing my eyes, I prayed to the Goddess. When I opened them again, the yellow ash I had made was above me in the shape of a butterfly.

Gram held out a small crystal vial, and the yellow image flew into it. Corking it, she closed her eyes. “Thank you, Goddess, for your blessings.”

When she reopened her eyes, Gram began clearing the table as if nothing unusual had just happened. “Cole, let's start setting the table and, Mara, why don't you prepare the salad. Elliott should be home soon.”

Cole and I exchanged looks of amazement. Only my grandmother could have something so marvelous happen in front of her and then worry about getting a meal ready.

Kissing me on the forehead, Cole whispered, “She’s an incredible woman.”

While Cole set the table, I began to chop the vegetables. The fresh smell of cucumbers, carrots, celery, radishes, and crisp leafy lettuce permeated the air around me. It reminded me of my youth.

I recalled Gram teaching me. She’d taught me how to grow the vegetables and when to pick them from our garden. The warm breath of her voice in my ear as she guided me to properly use the knife and the best way to cut each item came back in a flood of memories.

“I think we have enough for the salad, Mara.” Gram interrupted my daydream.

Before me, I had a rainbow of chopped vegetables.

Gram nodded at a bowl. “Put the extras in there. Tomorrow's breakfast will be bursting with veggies.”

Smiling, I took the bowl from her and set it down. “I was thinking about how you taught me to make a salad. I was caught up in the memory.” Hugging her, I whispered, “I love you, Gram. I never needed Eliza to come home and be my mother. I always had you.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

By the time Elliott returned, dinner was ready, and Cole was eager to dig in. After we enjoyed the fresh vegetable salad, drizzled with raspberry vinaigrette, Gram brought us each an individual chicken potpie. The buttery crust of the pies held a creamy gravy full of carrots, peas, potatoes, celery, and chunks of savory pieces of chicken.

“Mae, thank you for making this. I have been dreaming of the day I would come home to you all, and I would be lying if I didn't admit your cooking was sadly missed while I was gone.” Elliott took a big bite and groaned his delight.

At, Cole told stories of our childhood and the mischief we had gotten into together. It felt like we really were a family, eating a typical evening meal. I was even able to push back my anger and sadness about my sister not being here, with us, and my fear of what tonight would reveal. However, a silence eventually fell over the table.

I wasn't sure what had caused the change. Maybe it was because the meal was so delicious that words would have taken from the enjoyment of eating. Or, perhaps, it was because we all knew there was a larger issue hovering. In the end, it really didn't matter.

When we had eaten every crumb, I began to clear the dishes. As I returned to my seat, Elliott was the first to speak.

“I think it's probably time we try that spell. I don't want to wait another day for you to know, in your heart, whether I'm your father or not. I failed you before, and I don't want you to doubt me anymore.”

Elliott looked sad but resolute. “Of course, I don’t blame you – any of you. Who would ever believe the story I told you? It sounds crazy and made up, even to me. After all, what kind of man leaves his family?”

He closed his eyes and sighed deeply before he continued. “That is what happened, and I need you to know I’m Elliott Stone. I’m your father. If there’s a way I can prove that I’m the man I say I am, then let’s do it now.”

"I hope you are my father," I said softly.

Gram went into the pantry and returned with a bottle of her special zizzleberry wine. The drink was a mixture of blueberries, raspberries, strawberries, and blackberries. Her secret was to add zest from limes and oranges.

I had no idea she had that bottle, let alone, where she hid it. I thought the last of the wine had been used for the Winter Moon celebration months ago. I was happy to see her hidden treasure.

Cole gathered four glasses for Gram to pour us each some of the wine while I collected the tray of candles we had prepared earlier. Arranging the candles on the table, I placed one of the white candles in front of each of us and the large yellow candle in the center. Then, I patted my pocket, confirming I still had the crystal vial of rue powder.

“Mara is going to add something to your wine before we toast, Elliott,” Gram said with a serious look on her face. “If you want to back out now is the time.”

Elliott slid his glass towards me. “I’m ready.”

I removed the cap from the vial and carefully sprinkled the powder into his drink. Listening to my instincts, I stopped when I had emptied a little over half of the yellow rue into the glass before him. A small whirlpool formed in his wine and the powder began to swirl around until it disappeared. I looked to Gram for confirmation that everything was going as planned and I saw her brown eyes faintly flicker with silver as she stared at the drink. *How many times has she done something like this without my notice?* I wondered what else I had missed.

“Before we toast, Mara, will you light the candles?” Gram asked with a devious smile. She must have realized that I had seen her stirring the powder into Elliott’s drink.

I guess it was my turn to show her that I could also connect with the elements.

I nodded and closed my eyes to focus my energy on the yellow candle before us. As the wicks of the candle lit, the flames grew strong and burst high above us. Breathing slowly, I forced myself to contain my emotion and control the blaze. This tactic effectively lowered the flames. Then, I carefully lit each of the small, white candles. This time, I had more control, and the candles flickered softly.

Elliott stared at me with wide eyes full of surprise. “It looks like I have missed a lot.” He flinched as if the words caused him physical pain. “I’m not going to miss any more things in your life, Caterpillar. I promise.”

I held up my wine. “A toast to the truth.”

With conviction, Elliott held up his drink, looked deeply into my eyes, and vowed, “To the truth.”

Gram and Cole raised their glasses, and we all took long sips.

The sweetly tart flavor that I usually savored, and delighted in having, didn’t taste as delicious tonight. I knew there was nothing wrong with the wine, but rather, my fear and anxiety were souring any enjoyment.

We continued to consume our drinks as we watched the candles in silence. Nothing seemed to be happening. The anticipation built as we each sat waiting in anticipation.

Just when I was beginning to feel the frustration inside me hit the boiling point, the flames blew out. Light strands replaced the burning fire.

The soft wisps of the extinguished flames rose above us. Soon, they grew thicker and covered the ceiling. Eventually, a thick mist-like haze enclosed the entire room, and I could no longer see in front of me.

I reached out to put my hands on the table to steady myself and found nothing but air. Standing up, I waved my hands frantically in front of me, hoping to find Gram, Cole, or even Elliott. My attempts were futile. I was alone.

“Where are you, Cole?” I called out. “Gram? Elliott?”

There was no response, except for the hollow echo of my words.

Panic filled me. I needed to get to the light. I walked forward through the hazy air until I smacked into a wall. Then, I slide across the cool barrier. I couldn’t decide if I was more afraid of the mist or what was hiding in the darkness.

I banged my arm on a hard object. Pain never felt as sweet. I had found a doorknob and yanked. It opened, and I hesitantly walked through it.

My eyes adjusted to the bright lighting, and I found myself in the main lobby of the town library.

Great. Wrong door, I thought bitterly.

I went back to, and through, the door. Instead of returning to the mist, I was still in the library. Frustrated, I tried again. After several unsuccessful times, I gave up my attempts to return home.

“You are supposed to be here,” I said aloud.

Agreeing with myself, I decided to trust that the spell would lead me to the information I was seeking.

The building was empty, except for a small light shining in the archives. When I reached the back corner of the library, I saw four girls sitting around a large book, intently reading it.

“Viv, I found it. We should definitely try this one,” the redheaded girl said with excitement to the girl beside her.

The dark-haired girl had pale white skin and soft brown eyes. I couldn’t shake the feeling that I knew her. She seemed so familiar to me.

“Good idea, Camille,” Viv said to the redhead, and then turned towards the other two girls. “Let’s meet up tomorrow night, and we’ll attempt it.”

“Michelle has to ask her mommy if she can come play,” Camille said, mockingly turning towards the girl next to her. “Isn’t that right?”

A spark of anger grew in the girl’s violet eyes, and she retorted, “I don’t have

to ask anyone. I'll be there."

"She's just teasing you, Michelle," a quiet voice came out of the fourth girl. Nervously, she kept twirling her long, blonde hair. "I'll be there, too."

"Lucy, can you bring some candles from your mother's shop?" Viv asked the nervous girl. "I think I know the perfect spot for us behind my house in the forest. If you all sleep at my house, we'll be able to slip in and out, undetected."

"Here's the list of items we each need to get." Camille handed a slip of paper to each girl, "Let's meet early tomorrow afternoon and make a day of it."

As the girls hugged and said their goodbyes, I realized what I had seen. Viv was actually my great-grandmother, Genevieve. I had just watched the original protectors making plans to cast their first spell.

In awe, I watched as each one left the library. They all left quickly, except one – Michelle. She took her time cleaning up and returning the books to the shelves. Something inside told me to follow her. So, when Michelle exited the library, that's what I did.

Thick fog greeted me as I passed through the door. Taking a deep breath, I cautiously walked into the dense air. When it cleared, I found myself on the front porch of a large, blue house. Instead of the teenager I'd been tracking, I heard two women having a heated discussion. After a few minutes, I realized I was looking at an older Michelle. The tall redhead yelling at her was Camille Drygen.

Camille coldly hissed, "I know what you all did, Michelle. You need to reverse it." Pacing back and forth, she continued her rant, "This is my life that you're ruining. You need to give me back my magic. My life depends on this."

Michelle put her hand on Camille's arm. Her despair was apparent. "You know we can't do that. We made a promise...you made a promise. We cannot let you continue to use this gift the way you have been."

Camille twisted her wrist and dug her long, polished nails into the flesh of Michelle's arm. "You will return my power. You will give me back what is mine."

Michelle jerked herself away from Camille. "I don't have the power to do that alone."

I flinched at the sight of the blood flowing from Michelle's wound. I touched my arm, recalling the painful cut that had just healed.

"Then, you need to convince them, or I'll destroy your family," Camille snarled.

"You can't do this. You made the same promise we made to protect," Michelle argued.

Camille slapped her across the face. "You will make it happen. You will return what is mine, or I'll stop at nothing to take away everything you love. This isn't a request, Michelle. You will make it happen."

A surge of whitewashed over me, and I found myself inside a house. Michelle was sitting at a table with a man. He had sandy blond hair and a kind smile.

"We are leaving tonight. I cannot risk what Camille will do to you or our unborn child. I spoke to Viv, and she gave us some money to help us leave. You know she will not give up until she gets what she wants. She's a Drygen now."

Another wave of white washed over me. This time, it took me a moment to find Michelle because she had aged again. I saw her braiding the hair of a small girl, who I guessed to be around seven years old.

The girl began to bounce up and down as she begged, "Please, let me go. I promise I won't go far, Mommy. I'll be careful."

Michelle kissed the child on the cheek. "Don't be gone long, Eva."

As the happy child opened the door to go outside, the sun glowed intensely. I raised my hands to shield my eyes from the glare. With no relief, I closed my eyes and waited for the light to soften.

The sound of laughter told me I was no longer in the same place. I opened my eyes and saw a large group of women looking in the direction of one person – Michelle. She was a mature woman now. Her dark hair was pulled up in a delicate bun. She wore a dazzling smile on her face as she sat next to a young woman who was holding a baby boy with curly blond hair.

"He looks so much like your father." Michelle tickled the belly of the grinning baby. "Don't you, Elliott? You're going to be just as handsome as my Samuel, aren't you?"

Elliott? Is that my father? A wave of nausea rolled through me.

Overwhelmed, I needed to sit down. I turned to find somewhere to sit and ended up face-to-face with a woman and a boy. Panicked, I swung back around to see Michelle and the woman, Eva, with the baby. Instead, I found myself in front of an even older, silver-haired Michelle with a teenage boy.

I concentrated on the youth beside her. I knew without a doubt that it was my father. *Why would he keep the fact that he is the grandson of Michelle Elliott from us?*

"Elliott, our family has hidden too long. I should have stayed and fought, but I let fear guide me," Michelle confessed. She took Elliott's face into her hands. "You need to go home and protect the magic. One day, you will have a daughter, and she will be blessed with the gift."

"Ok, let's all go back, then," Elliott pleaded. "I don't want to leave you both. We can go back together."

"No, Elliott, no one will know you are my son," Eva said. "It is safe for you to return. However, we cannot. Do you understand everything we told you, tonight?" With those words, she held out a small, silver box to him.

Elliott opened the container and pulled out a silver ring with an emerald stone. After he gazed into the box, he held the ring in front of him and said with determination, "I know what I need to do now. I promise to protect the magic at all costs."

The candle in the center of the table they were seated at knocked over, and the blaze began to spread. Soon, the room was filled with fire. I could feel the heat, but the flames licking at my skin didn't burn. Reaching through the ignited wall, I felt a cool breeze.

I stepped forward into the fire, praying, "Goddess, please protect me."

Thoughts of being burned alive came to mind, but I was pleasantly surprised when I found myself sitting at Gram's kitchen table. Everyone was in the places they had been seated before the mist rolled in.

Gram stood up and gave me a long hug and released me with a kiss on my cheek. "I love you, Mar." She then turned towards Cole. "Let's make some tea, and then we can all talk."

Cole looked at me.

I felt all the questions he was asking without saying a word. Nodding, I let him know I was going to be ok.

Giving me one of his warm smiles, he winked and went with Gram.

Elliott and I stared at each other for a long time.

“So, you're the grandson of Michelle Elliott?” My tone was, once again, much colder than I had intended. “You are, also, a protector of the magic?”

Feeling the emotions of the day crashing down on me, I choked back my tears. “And, you really are my father, Elliott Stone?” As I spoke the words, my vision blurred, and then everything went black.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“**M**aaaaaa. Maraaaaa,” a soft voice whispered my name.
I opened my eyes and was greeted by a blinding light. Shielding my sight with my hands, I tried to gather my thoughts. Blinking rapidly, I struggled to see who had woken me.

“Follow me,” the voice said happily.

Lowering my hands, I, once again, attempted to see who was calling me. The light softened, no longer blinding me with its brightness, and I could see Starten Forest surrounding me. Luscious green trees held heavy branches. Their trunks were covered with a dark green moss that spread down and across the ground.

Unexpectedly, a blue orb bounced around me. Giggling, the glow transformed into a young woman, who stood as tall as I did. I instantly was mesmerized by her sparkling silver eyes. Suddenly, the girl spun, around and around, whipping her long, blue hair and blue dress.

I stepped back to avoid being knocked over. My toes squished into the soft moss.

“Don't you recognize me?” The girl twirled again, and her dress sparkled like a thousand fireflies in the night sky.

“Bay?” I questioned as I continued to stare at her. “This can't be real. I have to be dreaming.”

In response to my doubt, she reached out and pinched my upper arm roughly.

“Ouch!” I cried out loud, swatting at her. “That really hurt.”

“Ha! It can't be a dream. You don't feel pain when you are sleeping!” Bay

laughed and began to shape-shift. She transformed from the young woman back to a blue bouncing light, and then into the small dollish form that was familiar to me.

As I stared wide-eyed at her, she returned to the young woman who had just pinched me.

“Stop wasting time and come with me.” Bay grabbed my hand and quickly ran through the forest, dragging me behind her.

Before I could protest, images of trees and forest creatures flashed around me as we moved at lightning speed. Abruptly, she stopped, and I crashed into her.

“You came at the best time!” Bay exclaimed before disappearing into a large oak.

Dumbfounded, I circled the tree to find an entrance.

Bay poked her head out of the solid trunk. “Tonight is the Gealach Nua. Our celebration of the coming new moon. We’ll have so much fun.”

Once again, she disappeared.

“Wait!” I pounded on the trunk. “I can’t go through a tree. I’m human.”

“You are always the doubter, Mara. Stop believing everything you see,” Bay’s hollow voice called to me.

I can’t walk through solid objects, I thought bitterly.

I stared at the spot where the girl had vanished. A strange sensation of familiarity overcame me. I felt as though I had been here before. Pushing away my thoughts, I closed my eyes and stepped into the tree.

Bu-dum. Bu-dum. Bu-dum.

The sound of my blood pumping filled my ears. An electric pulse flowed through me and into the inky void. My head told me to panic, but a soft voice inside reminded me to connect with my feelings. Listening to my instinct, I continued forward. Abruptly, strong hands grasped my wrists, and I was jerked out of the blackness into a large cave.

Waterfalls flowed into pristine pools. The sound of the water splashing, and the smell of a summer rainstorm filled my senses.

“I told you that you could come through.” Bay dragged me into the center of

the room.

Now I could see small, blue lights playing in the water and sliding down the waterfalls. "Where are we?" I asked.

My voice seemed to draw the lights attention. They quickly moved towards me. Feeling apprehensive, I grabbed Bay's hand.

"It's ok." Bay squeezed my hand, reassuring me that I was safe with her. "Everyone, I want you to meet Mara. She is the human I told you about."

Bay pushed me forward. Before I knew it, lights surrounded me.

"She's not that pretty," a childlike voice whispered.

"I think she is beautiful," another said. Something lifted my hair. "Look at her long, curly locks."

"The Goddess has blessed her, so she must be special," a male voice stated.

"Enough! Everyone, step back from Mara now!" Blaze ordered as she entered the room.

Looking around, I realized I wasn't the only one in awe of her.

Blaze walked towards me. The crimson beads of her long dress sparkled brightly, and her dark red hair shimmered with streaks of gold. It was piled high on top of her head in the most magnificent up-do.

Each ball of light took their human form and bowed to her as if she was royalty.

"Mara will be with us for a while. Let's not overwhelm her," Bay said kindly to everyone.

With her words, they dispersed, returning to the waterfalls to, once again, splash and play. The calm, soothing energy emitted from the Water elementals made me feel like dancing, and I yearned to join them. The tranquility was replaced with an intensity I didn't expect as Blaze grew closer. She made me feel like I needed to be serious and determined.

"I knew this day would eventually come, and it really is the perfect time. You must have pleased, Danu, for her to allow you to visit us." Blaze clasped my hand.

"Danu?" I whispered to Bay.

With a giggle, she whispered back, "The Goddess, silly."

Was I brought here by the Goddess? My body tensed.

"Follow me. I'll give you a tour. There is plenty of time to play. Bay will join us later," Blaze said and led me away."

"Wait, won't Gram be worried about me?" I suddenly remembered where I had been before I woke in the forest. "She will think something bad happened to me."

Blaze snickered. "Mara, your body is at home and your family thinks you are sleeping from the exhausting events of the day."

"That can't be." I jerked my hand away from her. "Bay pinched me to prove I wasn't dreaming."

"Mara, your doubts tire me." Blaze sighed. "You're not dreaming. Your soul, your spirit, your being is here now. The shell that normally holds it is sleeping peacefully. Taking away your memories of the magic has set us back. I thought the confident child you were would have returned with your memories. It appears I was wrong to have had such hopes."

Blaze took my hand back and stared deeply into my eyes. The golden specks in hers flickered like flames. "Trust us. Remember the young girl inside you. She believed in the magic and knew that there was so much unknown left to learn. Listen to your heart and push back the negative thoughts clouding your mind."

"I don't know why I let fear continue to control me. I'll try to remember who I was as a child, Blaze." I forced a smile.

"I know you will find your confidence, Mara. Now, brace yourself to be amazed," she said.

Blaze led me out of the cavern of crystal pools and waterfalls into a brightly lit corridor. Gray stone glistened around us as water ran down the walls.

We continued down the corridor, along the stone wall. It slowly transitioned from gray to an orangish-red with specks of gold. The cool air around us grew warm. It felt like a hot summer night when the wind blew just enough to make the heat bearable.

At the end of the hallway, we entered another stone cavern. This room was filled with candles of many colors, and at the top of each wick, red and orange flames flickered.

"Everyone, come meet Mara," Blaze commanded.

I looked around, expecting to find colored lights, but there was nothing in the room. It was just an empty space. "There is no one here," I whispered to Blaze.

As I spoke those words, the flames left the candles and floated towards us. I moved back from the advancing fire. I stopped my retreat when I realized it had eyes. Again, the whispers started.

"The Goddess sent her here?" a loud voice asked with obvious irritation.

"Stop, you're scaring her," a booming male voice said, silencing their chatter.

Obediently, the flames stopped and took their human forms. Eyes in varying shades of gold, with flecks of dark colors, stared at me.

How many different shades are there? I wondered.

An attractive young man stepped out of the group. His chin-length hair was asymmetrically cut, showing off his strong jawline. The longer side, which slightly covered his left eye, was dark red, almost black.

"Welcome, Mara. I'm glad to meet you finally," the mysterious man said in a husky voice. Then, he picked up my hand and kissed it.

His warm mouth lingered against my skin, and the sensual act took my breath away. When he slowly pulled away from my hand, I felt somewhat dazed. As he softly wet his lips, a strong desire to kiss him washed over me.

"Kai, she is engaged to be married." Blaze poked her finger into the man's chest. "This means she isn't available."

Here icy words seemed more than just a warning. I felt a hint of jealousy in her tone.

I forced myself to snap out of the spell I had fallen under from his touch. "Thank you, Kai. I'm glad to meet you, too." Remembering the rest of the Fire elementals were staring at me, I quickly turned and said, "And I'm glad to meet each of you, as well."

Once again, Blaze cut my introduction short by taking my hand and leading me out of the room. In a stern voice, she called over her shoulder, "Everyone

will be able to get to know Mara, tonight. She will be staying for the celebration.”

The group buzzed with murmurs of approval.

Blaze dragged me from the warmth of the Fire elementals' room, and a cool breeze blasted me. She led me up a seemingly endless staircase with Kai in tow. As we climbed, I began to count the steps in my head, hoping to distract myself from the tempting Fire elemental beside me.

One hundred forty. Two hundred seventy-six. Why am I not tired yet? Four hundred eighteen. Oh, it looks like we're at the top. Five hundred and ninety-nine.

The last step led to the most magnificent blue sky I had ever seen in my life. Hundreds of colored birds were flying and diving around each other. My eyes fixed on a large white cloud, where a blue bird nestled in the bits of fluff.

When I made eye contact with the azure blue-eyed bird, it winked and began to fly towards me. When it reached the halfway point, it began to spin. As it turned, the cerulean bird began to transform into a young woman.

Breeze landed before me and gave me a big hug. “Mara, I'm so glad you are here!”

I held the Air elemental tighter. I wanted to soak in the love she emitted.

As we released our hug, she took my hand and called out to the sky, “Everyone, come welcome, Mara.”

This welcome was much different from the other elementals I had met. The brightly colored birds formed the words, *Welcome* and *Greetings* in the air before they landed and took their human forms. All of them had blue eyes, but their hair color ranged from white, highlighted with bright colors, to a deep purple with red streaks.

“Thank you, everyone, for the warm welcome,” I said with a smile.

I was instantly swept into the arms of an Air elemental and hugged. One-by-one, they wrapped me in a tender embrace before I was passed to the next

individual. I was filled with not only a feeling of love and family but a sense of knowing. The tingle in the air murmured secrets. I didn't understand the meaning of the words, but I wasn't afraid or nervous.

"Enough, Mara will see everyone, tonight." Blaze rolled her eyes, obviously annoyed by the display of affection. Cutting my introductions short, she curtly said, "Breeze, meet us later." Then, she led me away from the Air elementals towards the top of a large tree.

The branches of the trees softly swayed in a zephyr. However, when we reached the edge of the platform, one of the leaves began shaking frantically.

"Pick me up," it called.

I looked to Blaze for approval. She nodded.

Carefully, I plucked the leaf from the tree. "Now what?" I whispered to it.

"Now, you jump," the childlike voice giggled.

Looking down, I could only see large white clouds.

"Go on now. I'll keep you safe," the leaf coaxed.

Sure, I'll just jump into the nowhere because a plant is telling me to.

"Always the doubter. The gift is wasted on you." Blaze glared at me.

"You're wrong." I closed my eyes and stepped off the platform.

I had expected to fall fast. Instead, I just slowly floated. The clouds felt soft and slightly damp as I drifted through them. The blue and white sky mesmerized me. Throwing my arms back, I basked in the descent.

I had just relaxed and began to trust the moment when I was brought back to reality. Before I could react, my guide slipped from my hand.

"See you later," the leaf called as she disappeared into the clouds.

Panic filled me. I was certain to plummet to my death as my slow, tranquil descent turned into a rapid freefall. The clouds around me dissipated and I could see the green grass below.

Trust us, Blaze's reminder played in my mind.

I controlled my breathing and focused on the word *trust*. As I chanted the word, I felt a feeling of peace fill the spaces within me. I embraced the sensation of falling and submitted to the fact that I would soon hit the ground. I braced for impact.

Splat! I was shocked when I set down into a large pile of mud. Standing up, I immediately slipped and fell. By the time I exited the mound of dirt, I was covered head to toe. I wiped the grunge off and found myself, face-to-face, with Daisy.

"Now, that was an entrance." Daisy's bright green eyes twinkled as she scraped some of the sludge from my cheek. "Everyone, let's clean up Mara," she called.

With those words, soft leaves swept and brushed me. Within minutes, I was tidied up and ready to greet my cleaning crew.

"Thank you." I laughed. "I think I'm clean enough now."

The leaves fell to the ground and took their humanlike forms. Elementals with light brown or blonde hair and eyes in shades of green circled me. This time, there were no insults. Instead, there were only curious stares and sincere smiles.

A gust of warm wind blew from above me. I looked up to see Blaze making her elegant entrance.

Irrked at her gracious descent after my embarrassing fall, I snapped, "Thank you for your assistance, Blaze. The leaf you told me to trust dropped me."

The Fire elemental threw back her head and laughed. "You needed a reminder that I would never let you get hurt." She eyed me up and down. "I'm not sure what the fuss is. You look fine."

"I'm sorry, Mara." A brown-haired girl stood timidly in front of me. She trembled as she continued her apology, "I wouldn't have let you get hurt, either."

Recognizing her voice as my free fall guide, I looked into her teal eyes and felt such sincerity that I could not be mad anymore. I took her hand into mine. "It's ok. Next time, I'll remember to bring my own parachute."

Relieved by my response, her face lit up, and she hugged me.

"Lily," Daisy addressed the girl, "now that you have apologized, don't you think we should let Mara get ready for tonight's celebration?"

Blaze pushed through the Earth elementals and grabbed my hand. "Come

with me, Mara. You have one final stop." Turning towards Daisy, she said, "Gather Bay and Breeze."

I turned and looked back at the Earth elementals. They smiled and waved at me. In the few minutes we had spent together, they already felt like family. Tears filled my eyes as I was reminded of Meg. The thought of her being scared and alone stole my breath.

Sensing my sudden mood shift, Blaze squeezed my hand. "We are almost there."

For the first time since I arrived here, I felt slightly comforted by her. I blinked away the tears forming in my eyes and took a deep breath.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Blaze and I walked through the forest, deep into the serenity of the chestnut brown and green trees. If I wanted to hug the trunks, I would need arms that were ten times the length they were now. The long branches held emerald leaves that were as big as my head. The familiar sound of birds chirping and the soft clicking of the silver moss beetles comforted me.

Reaching the edge of the woods, we stood before a wall of transparent multicolored water that flowed from an unknown source. Blaze reached out, parted the liquid sheet as if moving a curtain and walked through it. Following close behind her, I felt the soft mist of the waterfall as we entered a room that stilled my heart.

The room was wide-open, packed with silver framed mirrors, much like the one in my grandmother's bedroom. Like her looking-glass, the silver frames had a nest-like design surrounding the polished metal centers. Additionally, the room smelled of lavender, cinnamon, and fresh-cut grass mixed with the hint of a summer rainstorm. The scents alternately filled my senses without overpowering them or bleeding together into one complicated fragrance.

In the center of the room, there were four silver chairs. Each seat had a unique design engraved on its high back representing an element. They were positioned around a large, granite stone. The smooth top was a lilac color with streaks of dark blue, yellow, pink, and white running through it.

Blaze walked towards the seat with the flames on it and sat down. "Mara, come sit in the center."

I was afraid to speak. Instead, I nodded and did as she directed.

Out of nowhere Daisy, Breeze, and Bay appeared. They took their corresponding places in the circle.

“Mara, you are at the seat of Danu. Close your eyes and focus your thoughts on connecting with the spirit around you.” Daisy gave me a smile of encouragement.

Listening to her words, I closed my eyes and slowly began breathing in and out. My grandmother's prayers came to my mind and I softly spoke them, “Air, I ask you to clarify my thoughts. Fire, I ask you to burn away my fear and doubt. Water, wash away my anger and sorrow. Earth, I ask you to ground me in the goodness around me and strengthen me. Spirit of the Goddess, I ask you to guide me.”

A gust of elemental magic spun around me. I was cocooned in strong, warm winds, swirling droplets of water, blades of grass, and embers of fire. An overwhelming sensation of being hugged by Gram washed over me. Tears of joy filled my eyes.

Then, it was all gone.

My heart ached for the feeling to return, and I pleaded, "Send the magic back."

Looking around, I gasped in surprise. The chairs were empty. I was alone.

I had little time to drown in my sorrow before the room began to glow. I searched for the source of the illumination. I found the mirrors along the outer walls were radiating light.

"Everyone likes tea," a faint voice said.

I cocked my head and listened. There was a soft hum from the center mirror, and I heard the voice again.

"Purple is my favorite color today."

“Meg,” I cried. It was undeniably my sister talking. I dropped to my knees and began tapping on the mirror. “Meg, I'm here. It's Mara!”

I realized she couldn't hear me, so I sat back. I quietly watched, hoping for a clue as to where she was, and how I could save her. As I had seen hundreds of times before, Meg was preparing a tea party for the stuffed animals. Her role was the gracious hostess.

For this tea party, Meg was dressed in formal attire.

I bet she hates that outfit, I thought bitterly.

To confirm my suspicions, she tugged on the puffed sleeve of her lavender tea dress and blew out a breath of hot air. This sent one of the large curls that framed her soft face up and then back into her eye. Grumbling to herself, Meg stood beside the small, circular table occupied by stuffed animals dressed in the same attire as her.

She picked up a teddy bear and tugged on the bow around his neck. "When we have tea in my home, you won't have to wear this choky tie."

Kissing him sweetly on the head, Meg set the bear down and focused on the bouquet of white roses in the center of the table. My little sister rearranged them before she adjusted one of the cups and saucers. When everything met her satisfaction, she turned her attention towards her guests.

"One lump or two?"

As her imaginary friends silently responded, she pretended to drop sugar cubes into their cups.

"What a lovely dress you have on, Ms. Ellie." Meg complimented a pink elephant and served her several cookies.

"Mr. Ribbet, this does have the flies you requested," she said seriously to a green frog in a black suit.

I smiled as I watched my sister's interaction with her stuffed animals. I noticed how much older she looked. It seemed, just yesterday, that she was a toddler, running through the house.

Come now and read, Mara, I heard as I reminisced about the times my little sister brought me her favorite book. She would insist I read it, over and over, until my voice felt raspy.

"Miles, come here before your tea gets cold," Meg called out, interrupting my memories.

The echo of her voice told me she was in a large room. I wished the area around her would clear up. I had no clues telling me exactly where she was being kept. A small, brown table with child-sized chairs was not unique enough to help.

"Patience, Meg," a female voice purred. "He wanted to look his best for you."

Blanche Drygen entered. Her short, silver hair was perfectly coiffed.

"How lovely of you to take time out of your kidnapping to look so lovely, Blanche," I growled at the image. My eyes narrowed when I noticed a small child holding the woman's hand.

The boy had dark brown hair and large green eyes. He looked to be about five years old. Like Meg, he was overdressed, but he looked comfortable in his black suit with a small lavender bow tie.

"Isn't your brother handsome?" Blanche asked.

As if on cue, the boy did a small turn to show off his outfit.

Your brother?

The boy stepped towards me, and I was better able to examine him. He looked so much like Meg that I had no doubts. Miles was Eliza's son.

"Are you the reason she left us?" I questioned the boy, knowing he wouldn't answer.

The boy moved out of my line of sight, and Blanche stepped back into view. "And you, also, look pretty, Meg. Isn't it nice to finally be dressed up like a reputable young lady with fine clothing?"

Meg clenched and unclenched her fists. I knew my sister, and this was taking every ounce of will she had inside her not to tell Blanche what she really thought.

"Go on, Meg. Tell her that we have better things than money," I encouraged.

Instead, in a cold, rehearsed way, she said, "Yes, Grandmother Drygen. I'm very lucky that you have taken me away to such a lovely estate and taught me how finer people live."

The small boy stood next to Meg, and pensively asked, "Did I present myself right, Grandmother?"

“Very nice job, Miles. Your manners are always impeccable. Now, enjoy your tea with Meg.” Blanche patted the boy on the head before she walked away.

I kept my eyes trained on the brother I didn’t know we had, but I could hear the click of the woman’s shoes striking the hard floor and a door shutting.

Miles looked towards Meg for direction.

She pointed to the only empty chair. “I was saving the best seat for you.”

Miles sat amidst the stuffed guests. He wore a big grin as he sipped the pretend tea. "Meg, can I ask you something and will you promise not to get mad?" The child bit his lip as he waited for her response.

Meg set her teacup down and narrowed her eyes at the small boy. "How many times do I need to tell you that, in my family, it's ok to ask questions?"

Miles blurted out, “Grandmother said you would teach me your magic. She said you have more magic than Mommy inside you. Can you tell me your secrets?"

Meg shook her head and sighed. “Miles, I keep telling you. Magic is pretend. Mommy is playing a trick on us when she makes fire appear.”

Miles slumped in his chair.

Seeing his disappointment, Meg jumped up. “Ok, Miles. I will teach you how to make magic." Twirling around and knocking everything in her path over, she called, “Wind and Air, come to me.”

Miles laughed as our sister threw stuffed animals so that they could fly through the air.

“Water, sprinkle your magic on us.” Meg giggled, dipped her fingers into a glass of water, and flicked the moisture onto Miles.

“Enough, enough.” Miles wiped the water droplets off his face. Then, he grew serious. “I like you, even if you don't have magic inside you, Meg.”

“I like you, too, Miles, even if you are my bratty little brother.” Meg smirked. “You are in luck. Mara taught me how to be a good big sister.”

“Will she like me, too?” Miles timidly asked.

“She will *not* like you, Miles." Meg grabbed his hands. "She will *love* you as much as I do. So will Gram. She will make us yummy treats and tuck us into bed. Cole will teach you to play kickball, and he’ll take us swimming. He tells

the best stories about the King of the Snapping Trout.”

Miles pulled away from Meg and sat down at the table. “They will never let me go with you.”

Meg wrapped her arms around the younger boy. “I’ll always take care of you, Miles. Gram and Mara will find us and take us both home.”

With those final words, the mirror lost the image. Tapping on the reflective material, I began calling out to my sister, “Meg, I’m here, and I’ll come to take you home. I promise.”

Knowing she couldn’t hear me, I felt the anger and frustration beginning to grow inside me. I decided to find something to smash the looking glass with, hoping I’d get to Meg. Turning around, I smacked into the elementals.

“Bring the image back! I need to find my sister!” I shouted.

“Mara, we can’t bring the image back. It was a gift from Danu for you. Meg is safe, though, and she’s with Miles, who you can see she loves already.”

“How is a small boy being there going to comfort me? She is with those horrible people while I’m wasting time running around magic land. I need to go to her now. He can’t protect her.” My breath quickened, and I began to shake.

The elementals just stared at me.

“Show me how to get back home!” I barked, trying to push past them.

Bay hugged me tightly. “Mara, we still have the celebration. You can’t leave, yet.”

“I cannot stay here another minute.” I broke out of her arms. Please, tell me how to go back. I need to find my sister.”

The room lit up with a blue light. It was the mirror I had watched Meg and Miles in.

“Is this the way?” I rushed towards the looking glass.

Daisy nodded and gave me a sad smile.

The mirror crackled as if warning me to turn around.

I have to save Meg, I told myself. Not wasting another minute, I walked through the object.

Instant regret filled me as my skin felt electrified. Each second in the blue aura meant excruciating pain. With a final push, I was through the barrier. A

final bolt of energy rushed through me, and I collapsed to the ground.

The blue mirror continued to zap me. I rolled away from it and tucked into the fetal position. Rocking the waves of energy away, I held myself. Slowly, the light faded, and I watched as my entrance wholly dissolved. It was now just a stone wall.

Unable to stand, I crawled to the center of the small, circular room and sat myself up. I closed my eyes. *What have you done, Mara?*

When I opened my eyes, a second mirror appeared. I crawled towards the silver light. When I reached it, I tried to go through it, but it was just a mirror. I rested my cheek on the cold glass.

I didn't know how much time had passed before I felt sturdy enough to stand again. At first, I stumbled, but soon, my legs felt strong. Circling the room, I pushed on every inch of the wall and floor, searching for an exit. To my dismay, there was no way out.

Impenetrable stone surrounded me. The ceiling was, at least, forty feet above me and appeared to be the same hard rock. Feeling defeated, I sat down in the middle of the floor and began to cry.

"I never asked for this gift. Nothing good has come from it. My mother is obsessed with power and convinced my father to fake his death. My grandmother has been stuck raising their children. Families are hiding their gift and running away to keep themselves safe. Others are kidnapping children, trying to steal more magic. What good has this *gift* been to my family?" I demanded.

"Mara, pull yourself together," a voice snapped at me.

I turned, ready to fight when I caught the image of Sarah Sands in the mirror. I gasped. "You're dead."

Sarah glared at me.

I had never heard her use a stern tone, let alone, wear such a look of disapproval. *Your future mother-in-law will think you're crazy if you don't pull*

yourself together, I scolded myself. Embarrassed, I quickly regained my composure.

"If you are done with your tantrum, Mara, we can talk."

I nodded.

Sarah stepped through the looking glass and took my hand. In an unexpected move, she pulled me into her arms and held me close.

I smiled. Her familiar scent – citrus and frosting – brought me back to her kitchen where she'd always made fresh orange juice and cinnamon rolls for us. Abruptly, she released me and returned to the mirror, bringing back from my thoughts.

"I'm sorry. Come back," I cried out.

"I can't be in that world for very long. Are you calm now?" Sarah asked.

I knew this sweet, kind voice.

"You were never a burden on Mae. She loved her girls. Even if Eliza and Elliott had not disappeared, your grandmother would have been just as much a part of your lives. Our families were blessed with a gift, but it is, also, a big responsibility. You are just learning what it means, and I regret any part I had in holding that from both Cole and you. We did what we thought was best at the time. Now, it is your responsibility to unite the families and honor the gift."

Taking her words to heart, I felt guilty for my meltdown. "Sarah, I spoke out of anger. I just don't understand why everything is such a mess. My sister is scared but putting on a brave face for that little boy. How am I supposed to feel about him? He must be the reason Eliza left us if she really is his mother."

Sarah's blue eyes filled with tears that she blinked away. "Miles is your half-brother, Mara. Eliza was always rash in her decisions when it came to Cedric. You can't blame the boy for your mother's mistakes."

"I don't blame him. I will take him away, too." I crushed my fist into my leg.

"You cannot face her full of fear and anger, Mara. You must go with strength, love, and trust of the Goddess that is inside you. Don't rush off to save Meg and lose yourself."

With those last words, her image disappeared, and I found myself staring at my own reflection. My own brown eyes seemed sad and lifeless. The dark

circles surrounding them were deep and somewhat alarming. Seeing what Sarah must have seen, I felt determined to be the person that Gram raised, not this broken shell before me.

Gram would never sink into sadness and anger. She would say, “No time to worry, we have much to do,” and then tackle whatever was in her way. I would become the person she believed I was. Furthermore, the Goddess saw something in me that was special. I would honor the gifts she gave me.

As I felt my determination build, my reflection changed to rippling water. The image reminded me of the choppy waves on Sparrow Lake. At first, the small swells were calm, but the speed and intensity of the water grew. I found myself being splashed as the waves slapped against the mirror.

I shouldn't feel water, I thought.

I moved away just in time to watch the mirror shatter, and the violent flood burst out towards me. The room filled with rushing water. Frantic, I searched for an exit. Behind the broken mirror, I only found solid rock. Anger built inside me as I banged on the hard walls.

“Damn! Damn! Damn it!” I cried.

Soon, it reached my knees and, what seemed like seconds later, I was wading through waist-high water. I struggled to keep my head above it. It was bad enough that the water was filling the room so rapidly, but then, it felt alive. The cold waves were like hands tossing me back and forth. I was in a game of Ping-Pong, and I was the ball.

Eventually, I found myself pulled under the icy fluid and surrounded by thousands of bubbles. I frantically kicked my feet to escape.

When I broke the surface, I focused on the times I spent with my grandfather, learning how to swim. I began to feel less scared as I recalled his calm voice and gentle words, telling me I would be safe. As I floated in the rising water, I realized it was responding to my emotions.

"Let me out!" I screamed in anger.

A massive wave crashed on top of me. I laughed at my foolishness and the water calmed. However, my brief moment of peace didn't last. Before I knew it, I had almost reached the ceiling, and with no exit, I began to panic. At this rate, I

would be trapped and drowned within minutes.

Feeding off my fear, the water tossed me around again. It rose up my neck and over the top of my head. I was going to drown.

No, I scolded myself. You are the granddaughter of Mae Veracor and the great-granddaughter of Genevieve Silver. You are the descendant of strong women. You have nothing to be afraid of.

In response to my words, the water retreated a little bit, and I was able to tilt my head back above it.

How am I going to get out of this?

A small, silver rock shined in the ceiling. I reached my hands up and touched it. The stone was solid, but not as hard as I expected. Desperately, I began clawing at the soft rock. As I tore at it, the material crumbled in my hands. Feeling confident, I dug my short nails into it with all the power I could muster, tearing at the heavy sandy material.

I blinked away the small particles covering my face. Laughing at the irony, I mused, *If I keep this up, I'll bury myself alive, instead of drowning.*

Thoughts of giving up and just letting myself sink away crossed my mind. Then, damp soil replaced rock, and I was motivated to try harder. The black earth was like the soil in my grandmother's garden.

Finally, the small hole I had dug into the ceiling was just enough for my hands to fit through. Concentrating every bit of energy I had inside me, I continued my escape until I felt small roots. Tugging at the plant in my hand, a warm breeze blew over my scraped and bleeding fingertips. I patted the area, hoping I was touching the soft, damp moss of Starten Forest and not pursuing another trap.

My efforts of removing the soil and moss around me were not wasted. I was quickly able to reach my arms up and through the hole that I had made. Struggling, I pulled myself out of the water. I laughed as I felt the breeze on my dirt-covered face.

Digging my elbows into the ground, I was able to heave half of my body out of the hole. Panting and shaking from the effort, I rested my cheek on the ground. *Don't give up now*, I thought.

Reaching out around me, I anchored my fingers into the earth and made my final effort to claw myself out of the watery cave. Wriggling and writhing, I dragged myself onto the large roots of a tree.

You freed yourself, I thought proudly before embracing my exhaustion.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-NINE

As I lay, staring at the ground, I had so many thoughts running through my head that I could not straighten them out enough to focus. *Why am I so drained if this is just my soul? Isn't my body at home, resting, right now?*

A warm breeze blew over me, and I braced myself for a scolding from Blaze.

“Are you going to just rest there all day,” a deep sultry voice asked. The words ran through me like a hot wave, and I knew it was Kai.

Not moving from my resting spot, I replied, “I’m taking a rest after my near-death experience. A break seemed appropriate after digging myself out of the watery tomb I was trapped in.”

“Isn't that a bit dramatic? You look alive and well, other than all the dirt covering you. Come on. Here, take my hand, and I'll help you up.”

As if my mind had no control over my body, I rolled over to face him and accepted his outstretched hand. When our fingers touched, I felt the same heat run through me that I had the first time we met.

Kai yanked me hard, and I crashed into him.

Stepping back, I stood face-to-face with the handsome elemental. For the first time, I noticed the color of his eyes. They started as golden orange at the black pupil and then spread out into streaks of deep red and yellow. The urge to kiss him once again filled me. Before I knew what was happening, I found his warm lips on mine.

Kai pulled me close against his body and gently kissed me. My fingers

caressed the nape of his neck. As his long hair touched the back of my hand, Cole came to my mind and I, suddenly, felt repulsed at what I was doing.

I pushed Kai away. "No, I'm in love with Cole."

Kai moved closer to me and stroked my cheek. "He isn't here, and I am." Coaxing me back into his arms, the attractive guide slowly trailed his lips along my jawline and neck.

Again, I felt myself falling under his spell.

This is just a dream. It isn't my body, I justified.

Kai kissed me again.

Just a few more seconds and I will stop him. Cole won't mind. Wait, Cole will be angry.

Fighting back my desire to let him continue, I shoved him away and slapped him across the face. "I'm engaged to Cole. You're using magic on me and trying to confuse me."

Kai traced his finger along my lips. "I used no magic on you, Mara. Fire is passion. I can feel it inside you. When you are in Danu's realm, you are free."

When Kai leaned in to kiss me again, I shoved him away. "Stop. I need to go home." I distanced myself and put my hands out to block any further approach. "Show me the way back now."

"You think you are ready to go home, Mara?" He looked at me with pity in his eyes. "Your emotions are all over the place. I bet you are like this with the mortal boy. Do you kiss your Cole passionately, and then strike him?"

"You know nothing about me. Take me home or I will..." I faltered. *What can I do?*

"Seriously, Mara, how are you going to be calm enough to face what is coming? You can't even control your urge to kiss me again."

Anger built inside me, and I realized he was right. I did want to kiss him again, which only made me feel guilty. I loved Cole. There was no doubt in my heart about my love for him, but the passion Kai awoke in me was irresistible.

"I don't want to kiss you again," I lied unconvincingly. "In fact, I need a shower to wash your disgusting handprints off of my body."

Mocking me, he said, "Oh Mara, you are right. You do need a shower, but it

isn't to wash me away.”

“Can you please just show me how I can get home?” I asked sweetly, trying a new tactic.

“No.” Kai's voice was void of emotion.

Rage built up inside me. I screamed at him, “Show me the way! I need to get to my sister.”

Again, he shook his head. “Mara, you are not ready to leave here. Your emotions are a mess. If you go back before they are under control, you will have no chance of getting your sister back.”

Defeated, I flopped to the ground and blinked back my brimming tears. The soft sounds of the forest played all around me. Every emotion I had rushed through me to break open the dam holding back my tears.

Kai sat down in front of me, quietly watching me.

“I know I need to control my emotions, but I don't know how to,” I admitted. Unchecked tears continued to flow down my cheeks.

The handsome elemental stood up and held his hand out to me.

In response, I moved backward, not wanting to throw myself into his arms.

“Mara, I promise I will not kiss you again unless you ask me to.” Kai offered his hand out to me again. “Friends?”

The serious look on his face convinced me to believe him. As I touched his hand, I felt a warmth flow through me, but this time, it felt affectionate, not romantic.

“Friends.” I released his hand. “Now, will you help me. I need to save my sister.”

“Trust me, and I will help you use your emotions so they will not harm you,” he promised.

Accepting the fact that I had to trust someone, I allowed Kai to lead me back through the forest. When we reached the tree where I had begun my tour of the elemental's home, excitement filled me. Kai was going to help me.

Instead of returning to the elementals, Kai led me deeper into the forest. We walked until we reached a trail lined with unique birch. Each tree had a slender white trunk covered with a thick, peeling bark that exposed its green inner bark. Crowning the trees were long branches covered with hundreds and hundreds of small, salmon-colored leaves. Even more, shed foliage canvased the path we were on.

Feeling calm, I followed without speaking. I began wondering how I was going to learn to control my anger and fear in such a peaceful place. Feeling frustrated with myself, I sighed.

As if reacting to my unspoken thoughts, the branches of the trees leaned in and blocked the path.

I whipped around to escape and found that we were surrounded. My heart began to beat fast. "Is being trapped part of the plan?" I asked with a bit more anger in my voice than I had intended.

Kai just looked at me with an emotionless face. His nonresponse infuriated me.

"You are not helping me at all," I said.

Slap. One of the tree branches struck me. The smart sting of the deep red mark angered me even more.

"Stop!" I slapped at the branch.

Instead of retreating, the tree became more aggressive and began to whip my legs. The sharp slaps continued as I fought back. I looked at Kai and saw how calm he was.

You're feeding the anger, I realized. So, instead of fighting, I accepted the pain and focused on breathing. As my frustration began to subside, the attacks lessened. When I was completely devoid of negative emotion, the trees rose and opened the path again.

"So, you can learn." Kai smirked and took my hand.

I looked at him, hopefully.

"No, you are still not ready to go home, yet."

I controlled my reaction. I chose just to simply nod before we continued our walk.

Our pace was casual, and I began to enjoy the scenery. The sky above was an azure blue with birds of many colors, soaring through the soft, white clouds. I wondered if these were real birds or Air elementals.

“Is that Breeze up in the sky?” I asked.

Kai laughed. “No, just birds.”

The trail began to incline slightly, and we found ourselves at the end of the path of trees. We stood in front of a rocky road of black stone. The rocks looked sharp, so I searched for another way to go.

“Giving up already?” Kai wrinkled his brows at me.

Not wanting to give him the satisfaction of lecturing me, I stepped off the dirt path and onto the dark, jagged trail in front of us. As I expected, the ground sliced at my feet. The sandals I wore offered little protection. Every step agitated me, and I felt a slow rage building inside me, once more.

“How much farther until we are out of the rocks,” I asked impatiently. “My feet are killing me.”

Just as before, Kai ignored my question, which only made me angrier. Before I could tell him what I really thought of him, I felt a sting on the top of my foot.

“Ouch,” I cried out in pain. Looking to see what was attacking me, I realized the rocks were smoking, and flames were starting to slap at my feet and legs. *Damn it*, I thought to myself. *“You’re a slow learner. You are burning yourself.”*

I pushed back the pain and continued walking. I tried not to pay attention to the fiery sparks that were still licking at my skin or the sharp edges of the rocks cutting into my feet. My focus was on the endless path ahead of us. Eventually, the fire slowly stopped burning me, and I was able to ignore the fact that the rocks were still uncomfortable to walk on.

As we continued, I began to think about how my feelings were affecting the world around me – how they were only hurting me. Proudly, I comprehended that I was capable of controlling my environment. I could prevent the fire from feeding off my anger by simply releasing it. At that moment, I realized that was what would be necessary when I faced Eliza.

I released Kai's hand and excitedly spun around to share my epiphany. However, one second of taking my eyes off the trail cost me. The ground

underneath me shifted, and I was falling off the edge of a cliff that had come out of nowhere.

CHAPTER THIRTY

I reached out to stop myself from dropping into the unknown. My hands dragged down the side of the mountain. They didn't catch, but they slowed me.

Panic filled me. *This is another test. You can stop this*, I told myself. *You can stop the fall. Just breathe and think.*

I looked around but didn't find any solutions. There were only the birds from earlier, soaring high above in the sky, and a deep blue void below me, which I guessed was water. An idea came to mind, and I focused on not stopping the fall, but rather embracing it. If it was water below me, I was going to land in it, and I might as well try to do it without hurting myself.

I remembered Gramp's stories about how his older brothers would dare him to jump out of trees into the lake. He ended up wowing them with the amazing tricks he could do. Of course, Gramp was quick to warn me that jumping into the water was exciting but could be perilous if not taken seriously. With his advice on my mind, I held my body straight with my hands to the side, and my toes pointed downward. Now, all I could do was take a deep breath and brace myself for the plunge.

I landed hard with a big splash and bulletted through the clear liquid. As my descent slowed, I was surrounded by hundreds of small bubbles. I felt my panic return. I wasn't sure what direction was up. I swam towards the surface, but soon, realized I was only going deeper.

Straining to hold my breath, the tightness in my chest became unbearable.

My lungs burned, and I was sure, at any moment, they were going to explode. Waves of black washed over me, and I felt myself slipping into the darkness. Unable to fight anymore, I let the void consume me.

Suddenly, I was ripped from the serene peace the abyss offered me. Arms wrapped around my body and swam us towards a light. As we broke the surface, I gasped for air and sucked in every ounce of oxygen I could.

Kai wiped my hair out of his face. "I would give your dive only an eight for form, but definitely a ten for style."

"You save my life." I threw my arms around his neck tightly. I held on to him as if he was a life vest. I trembled as he held me close.

"You are safe, Mara. You will always be safe with me."

Once again, tears flowed down my face. I was safe in Kai's arms, and I didn't want him to let go of me. An image of my fiancé flashed in my mind. I should have let go of Kai and simply thanked him. Instead, I clung onto him tighter as I pushed away thoughts of Cole.

After I reluctantly let go of Kai, and we left the water, I realized we were on the shores of Spartan Lake. It was very close to the area where I had learned to swim. Hand-in-hand, we walked through the forest and thought I should have felt awkward, being with Kai was comfortable.

When we reached the tree line, Kai bowed to me. "After you."

He won't kiss you unless you ask, I reminded myself and stepped closer towards him. "Kai, I changed my mind. I —"

Bay burst out of the woods and spun me around. Releasing me, she jumped up and down. "You returned!" she squealed. "I'm so glad you are back. Thank you, Kai, for convincing her not to go, yet."

Kai leaned in towards Bay and whispered something into her ear. Her eyes grew large, and she blushed.

Guessing Kai was being his usual flirty self, I sighed as I found myself feeling a little bit jealous. *You are being stupid, Mara. You are going to marry*

Cole. Kai isn't interested in you. He is just a big flirt. Stop thinking about him.

I brushed past Kai and linked arms with Bay. "I need help getting cleaned up if I'm staying for the celebration. I'm a mess."

"Bye Kai," Bay called as she pushed me into the tree and into the other realm.

The Water elementals were playing and splashing, just like the last time I saw them. Bay clapped her hands together to get their attention. The elementals stopped what they were doing and looked towards her.

"Everyone, we need to prepare Mara for tonight's celebration. All hands on deck." Bay leaned close to me. "I learned that command from a band of pirates."

Before I knew it, I was being tugged and pulled on. I didn't have time to feel embarrassed or shy as they removed my clothing. Soon, I was covered with bubbles and water. My hair was washed and conditioned, emitting a fragrant citrus and berry scent that invigorated me. For the first time, I was excited for the events to come.

After I was dried off and dressed, round two of *Make Mara Presentable* began. My thick hair was brushed and yanked. Finally, I was poked and prodded as makeup was being applied to my face and arms.

"Close your eyes." Bay rubbed a soft brush on, and around, my eyes. After a few minutes, she handed me a silver hand mirror. "Ok, you can open them now. What do you think?"

I stared into my hazel eyes. They were a deep brown surrounded by purple eyelashes and silver eyeshadow. The eyeliner was a combination of the two colors and ended on the outside of my eyes in the soft design of the infinity symbol.

"Wait!" Bay took the mirror from me. "I forgot the final touches. Pout out your lips for me – like this." Bay contorted her lips and made a silly fish face in demonstration.

I giggled at the absurdity. Then, I imitated her with my best guppy impersonation. I knew I must have looked just as silly because Bay's chuckles

joined mine. Once we were able to control our laughter, she delicately painted my lips. When she finished, she led me to a full-length mirror.

I was shocked by the reflection staring back at me. It looked like my face, but I had never thought of myself as beautiful before. I was dressed in a lavender halter dress that fell to my ankles. It had starlike flowers throughout the chiffon material. My feet were bare, but my toenails had been painted an eggplant purple to match my fingernails. My nails looked longer and healthier than they had been when I exited the flooding water earlier. Returning to inspect my face again, I took in the way the glamorous makeup made me look, and I smiled as my dark red lips pouted.

"The final touch." Bay placed a crown of star-shaped flowers on top of my head.

For the first time, I saw my hair. They had tamed my wavy locks, making them smooth and shiny. I felt like a princess from the silly stories of my childhood.

"You look amazing," a deep sultry voice behind me said. Chills ran through my body. "I have a present for you."

I turned to face my greatest temptation. I couldn't help but beam as I saw him. Kai was dressed in a fitted, charcoal gray suit with a white shirt and a deep purple tie. His hair was smoothed back, which made his handsome facial features even more prominent. He held out a pair of silver strapped sandals for me.

"Take a seat." Kai motioned to a nearby bench. "We can see if these will fit."

I sat, and he knelt in front of me. I felt ridiculous.

Just put on your shoes, and then go. You have a boyfriend. A fiancé. But he isn't here. I hated myself for such thoughts. *No! You love Cole. You are reacting to the magic.*

"I can try them on myself," I insisted.

"Don't be silly. You are a princess, tonight, and will get the royal treatment." Kai held his hand out, waiting for my foot.

Had he read my mind? No, he probably figured it out by your childish behavior in the mirror. Go on and get this over with, I, once again, scolded

myself.

I stuck my foot out for him to slip on the sandal. I warmed from the sensation of his touch, which sent a shiver through my body. When he fastened the strap on the first shoe, I pulled my foot away and held out my hand. "I think I'll be able to put the other shoe on myself." I grabbed the other shoe and slipped it on. "See, all good here."

As if on cue, Bay and the other elementals came in to gush over how wonderful I looked. Catching a glimpse of Kai watching us, I saw a sadness in his eyes. Before I could ask what was wrong, I was swept off by another group of Water elementals to begin the evening's festivities.

We took the same path as my first tour through the caves. A crowd of elementals met us, each dressed in elegant gowns or stunning suits. The excitement around me filled my heart with such joy that I was able to forget to be sad or worried about my family.

As we ascended the steps up to the Air elemental platform, a warm breeze blew over me. Kai was behind us, and I could see the sadness in his eyes was gone. He had returned to his normal self and was flirting with everyone within his range. The giggles and fake protests of *Oh Kai* from his fan club rang out. Another twinge of jealousy filled me.

I focused on the excitement around me rather than the feelings I was not allowed to have. The trail of partygoers led us to our destination. When Bay and I reached the top of the platform, we were greeted by Breeze, Daisy, and Blaze.

"You all look so amazing." I hugged my friends tightly.

The four of them always looked beautiful, but tonight, each of them was truly magnificent. They all wore their hair up in the same fashion as mine, and the dresses they wore were different colored copies of the one I was wearing, as well. Despite our similarities, I knew I must have looked like a little girl playing dress-up when compared to them. They glowed with beauty and magic. I would have been envious if I was not so enchanted.

“Off to the celebration.” Blaze took my hand and stepped off the platform.

Instead of the anticipated drop, we walked on air. Well, it was not really air, but more of an invisible walkway that shimmered with soft rays of colors. Below us, I could see all of Starten, easily finding my home.

The windows were lit, and I imagined my grandmother fussing about inside. She’d be cooking and cleaning in between checking on everyone. I dismissed the thoughts of my family. I knew they were safe and together. Turning my attention towards the row of lights in the northern mountains, I tugged on Blaze’s arm.

“Is that the Drygen’s mansion?” I whispered.

Her response was only a quick nod.

I stared at the spot that seemed to grow larger. The Drygen’s property was a fortress.

How am I going to save Meg? Is she crying and scared, right now? Are they treating her well?

Breeze stepped next to me and forced her magic around me. I smiled and tried to brush away my worry. I concentrated on the energy around me. I would figure out how to get my sister back when I was home.

The ground below us became less opaque and turned cloudlike. A mist grew, and we were encompassed by it. Ahead, the elementals began to disappear. Fear filled me.

Suddenly, I was jerked away from Blaze and greeted by an animated Bay. “This is the best part...well, almost the best part. We are just about there.” Her excitement washed away my anxiety.

I was swept up by the anticipation. The closer we got to the vanishing point, the clearer it became. The elementals weren’t disappearing. They were going down a steep slide. However, it was no ordinary slide – it was a colorful rainbow.

“We are next.” Bay squeezed my hand and pulled me onto the slide with her.

I landed hard, and the colors around me blurred as I glided downward. The sound of Bay’s laughter was contagious. After a short journey, we fell in a soft bit of white fluff. My side ached from our giggles.

Bay stood and brushed herself off. Twirling around me, she cried, “And now,

the celebration begins.”

The rainbow slide ended in a softly lit room filled with hundreds and hundreds of twinkling lights. Bay led me to the rows and rows of tables piled with colorful food. She handed me a plate and began to load it with bright vegetables, crackers, and cheeses.

When we reached an area of pasta and bread, I tried to stop her from adding more food on my dish. “Bay, there is no way I can eat all this.”

My sister flashed to mind. Meg would have been overwhelmed by all of the choices here. She would’ve had a difficult time not overdoing it herself. She would have exclaimed, “It all looks so delicious, Mar. I can’t choose just one thing!”

“Don’t be silly,” Bay interrupted my daydream and continued stacking my meal even higher. “You will need energy for all of the dancing.”

I gave up the fight and allowed her to keep adding more. When we reached the drink table, I was faced with too many options. I eyed the bubbly, pink drinks and creamy, orange beverages. The Tree of Life ice sculpture was streaming a rainbow of liquid.

Bay took a large mug and held it under the trickle of color. When it was overflowing, she handed it to me. “Try this.”

I took a small sip. The flavors of the drink were almost indescribable. At first, I thought it was cherry flavor, but then, I tasted an orangey citrus that was followed by a hint of banana, fresh cucumber, blueberry, and ended with vanilla lavender. Taking another sip, I found the same experience of flavors. Before I could question Bay, she whisked me off to a table for Water elementals to eat our food.

Just as I had finished one plate, I was taken to another table of elementals where I was given more to eat and drink. The conversations and the various meals made the evening exciting. I was surprised that I was able to eat so much without being full.

When I was brought to the last table, I was given a tray of desserts. It included blackberry-orange cookies like my grandmother made and a flute of what turned out to be zizzleberry wine. Before I had time to get sad, I heard the sultry voice of Kai calling for our attention.

“Tonight, we are here to honor the Goddess and the coming new moon, Gealach Nua,” he shouted and pointed to the sky behind him, which I hadn’t noticed before. The stars twinkled against the black tapestry of night.

Kai continued, “Tonight's celebration is even more special because we have Mara with us. Our thanks should be given to her and her family's commitment to protecting the magic. Without her great-grandmother and the original protectors, we may not have been here today.”

While he spoke, a sliver of the moon peeked out from behind him and made its appearance. The tone of the audience became somber.

Blaze stepped beside Kai. “The new moon has arrived and with it, new beginnings. We appreciate all that has been given to us, and we dance in honor of our mother, Danu.”

Upon her final words, the moment of reflection ended, and the music began playing. The crowd cheered and started to dance. Bay dragged me to the middle of the floor, where we twirled and spun for what seemed like hours. I think I danced with almost everyone in the room, being passed from one elemental to another.

When the fast music changed to a slow song, I found myself face-to-face with Kai.

Offering his hand, he asked, “May I have this dance...Friend?”

“I would be honored,” I said sarcastically as he pulled me into his arms.

Kai held me close and twirled me around the room. I felt dizzy and closed my eyes as I gripped on tighter to him. When the music finally stopped, I looked around and found we were alone.

“Where is everyone?” I asked.

Searching for the other elementals, I realized the rows of food and tables were now gone, too. We were no longer in the celebration area, but rather, in the spot where I had clawed myself out of the flooding water.

“Why are we back here?” I said, sharper than I had intended.

Kai led me to a rock. “Mara, take a seat. I have something to tell you. It might be difficult for you to hear this, but you need to know I will be here for you.”

“What is it? Did something happen to Meg? Is it Gram?” I sat down.

Kai settled next to me. Tears glistened in his eyes as he took my hand.

My heart fell.

“Mara, your family is fine, but it has been decided that you can't go back home.”

Fighting back my urge to rage, kick, and fight, I closed my eyes. Calmly, I released his hand. “Why won't you let me go home?”

“It isn't safe there for you anymore,” Kai informed me. “This is your new home. I promise you will be happy here.”

“Who do I need to talk to, to change this decision? Who made this ridiculous choice?” I demanded. To my surprise, my emotion was more controlled than ever before.

“The decision was made. It is final. You will just have to deal with it,” Kai said sharply.

My thoughts began racing. “Can I, at least, talk to Blaze about this?”

“Mara, you are here to stay. Your family is there, and they don't need you. Try to enjoy life with us and forget them. Period.” Kai wrapped his arm around my shoulder.

Defiantly, I stood up and faced him. “I'll not stay here against my will. I'll go home to my family. Despite what you think, they need me, and I absolutely need them.”

Proud of myself for keeping my cool. I stormed away from him and headed towards the elemental's home. No one controlled my destiny, but me.

When I reentered the tree, I discovered the Water elementals were not there. I was confused by the empty room. I went to the circle of chairs and sat on the

rock in the middle.

“Danu,” I appealed, “if you are listening, I need your help. It’s important for me to be with my family. How can I honor my commitment to protect the magic from here? Please, I beg you. If you are listening, I must return home.”

The tears forming in my eyes dried as the air around me began to swirl, and a lavender light surrounded me. The light was blindingly bright, but as it softened, I was stunned to be faced by a shimmery image. The vision before me was a stunning woman, wearing a flowing gown. Her long, silvery hair was wavy, and the sides were braided, exposing her delicate facial features. She held a small, brown cat in her arms. It purred as she carefully stroked the long fur of her content pet.

“Mara, you are home with me,” the silky voice said, “but you are correct. You are needed in the human realm more than here. You were given a huge shock, but you were able to handle your anger. Instead of lashing out, you chose to seek help.”

“So, this was another test?” I asked, trying to hold back my tears.

“Dear Mara, every day is a test. A test of your strength, a test of your emotions, and a test of your commitment to the promise you made. You have pleased me greatly and, my sweet child, I see great things to come for you.”

With those words, she disappeared.

I found myself, again, in Kai's arms. Letting go, I tried to push him away.

However, he held me tighter and said, “I'm sorry, Mara, for deceiving you, but you were able to control your emotions and follow your instincts. Do you think you are ready to do the same when it is time to face your mother?”

Submitting to his embrace, I just breathed in his scent and thought about his question. *Will I be able to stay calm and collected when I face her?* I wasn’t sure I would be able to keep my anger under control.

“Kai, I don't know if I'm ready to face her yet,” I whispered sadly.

“Knowing that you might not be ready tells me that you are,” Kai said, releasing his hold on me.

Taking my face between his hands, he tenderly kissed me. This time, I didn't want to push him away.

Grasping my hand, Kai said, "It's time to go back to your family, Mara."

Looking around, I realized the scenery had changed. We were back in the Starten Forest, standing where I had first woken.

"Lay down and sleep," he said, pointing to the green, mossy earth, "You will soon be back to Cole and your family."

"Will you stay with me until I fall asleep?" I boldly asked him as I obeyed his instructions.

Though he didn't answer me directly, he lay down beside me.

I rested my head on his chest and drifted off to sleep. As I slept, I dreamt of dancing with Kai and the other elementals. A warm breeze blew my hair as Kai twirled me, around and around.

When he stopped spinning me, the handsome elemental took my hands, knelt before me, and fervently said, "Mara, stay. I want you here, with me, always."

Behind Kai, Cole stood, looking at me intently with pain in his eyes. "Come home to me, Mara," he pleaded.

Looking from one young man to the other, I didn't know my answer. Kai stood up and walked over to stand beside Cole. How could I choose? I wanted them both.

"You have to choose," Kai said firmly. "You must decide which of us you want to be with. You cannot have us both. Decide."

"Wake up, Mara," Cole said softly as he began to walk away.

"Wait! Come back," I called after him. Watching him leave me, I knew my decision. There was no one I wanted to be with, except him. "Cole, it is you who I've always wanted to be with!"

Kai bowed graciously and disappeared, but Cole kept going further and further from me. Realizing I was losing the love of my life, I ran after him. "Cole, stop. Don't leave. I choose you."

I was too late. I didn't catch up with him, and he was gone. Cole had left me.

Sinking to the ground, I understood it was because of my hesitation that he was gone, and I was alone. "Cole, I'm sorry," I said as I began to cry.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-ONE

“Wake up, Mara, I'm here,” I heard as I felt my body being shaken.

I opened my eyes, but everything was fuzzy. As the blurred shape took form before me, I saw the deep blue eyes of Cole, watching me with concern.

“You didn't leave me,” I said with a cracked voice.

I reached out to him and stroked his face. It was rough with a light stubble that hadn't been there the last time I'd seen him. *How long have I been gone?*

“She's awake!” Cole cried out as he embraced me. He began to cover my face with kisses. “Of course, I wouldn't leave you. I've been here the whole time. I'm not going anywhere.”

“Stop smothering her, Cole.” Gram swatted him away.

Cole reluctantly stood up. “Ok, I'll get her water, but I'll be right back.”

Gram sat beside me on the couch bed I was resting in. She hugged me and whispered, “Wasn't it wonderful?”

Surprised, I could not respond with more than a nod.

Gram patted my hand. “Rest, love. We'll talk after you are cleaned up.”

“Caterpillar, I was worried.” Elliott stood over me. “I thought we had lost you because of my secrets.”

Sitting up, I felt a bit dizzy, but I wanted to show him that I was ok. “I understand why you did it. You thought you were keeping us safe. Let's stop

thinking about our mistakes and move forward.” *Are you telling yourself this to ease your own guilt, Mara*, I wondered smugly.

“Yes, clean slate. You have missed so much while you were asleep. Mae and I have been trying to figure out what gift I was blessed with. We’ve determined that Earth is my element.”

Gram joined us and handed Elliott a pot with a wilted flower.

“Watch this.” He closed his eyes and held the container tight.

The blue petals began to quiver, and the green stem straightened. Before my eyes, I watched the small, dying flower bloom eight large petals with soft blue and yellow centers. The plant filled the area with the scent of vanilla.

“You should see the garden, Mar,” Gram praised. “Elliott has been busy connecting with the Earth.”

“It sounds like I’ve missed a lot.” I twisted myself to allow my feet to touch the floor. “How long have I been asleep?”

“Six days.” Cole returned with my water and sat down beside me. “Six long days. You can never be gone like that again.”

“Cole, you know she didn’t have a choice on how long she was gone,” Gram chided. “The Goddess had much for her to learn, or she would not have kept her there as long.”

“How did you know?” I asked, shocked that she knew where I was.

Instead of answering my questions, Gram laughed. “You need to go take a warm bath and come back to the land of the living before you start asking questions. You are starting to grow moss.”

I tried to stand up, but my legs felt wobbly. Cole caught me before I fell. Then, he wrapped his arm around me and guided me to my grandmother’s bedroom.

“I didn’t think you would want to attempt the loft stairs.” He smirked.

When we entered the bathroom, Cole turned to leave.

“Wait,” I stopped him. “I can’t do this alone.”

“Gram wouldn’t approve,” Cole argued. “Let me get her to help you.”

“No, I want you to stay. I need you to stay,” I said firmly. “It’s not like you’ve never seen me without my clothes off. I know you used to sneak a peek when we would skinny dip in the lake.”

“That was a long time ago, Mara, and you were much...” Cole hesitated, trying to find the right words, and ended with, “less.”

“Less?” I asked, laughing. “Less what?”

“You know.” He motioned up and down me.

“Ohh, less,” I repeated with more seduction in my voice than I had planned.

I poured bubbles into the bath that was running. Unsure of what I was doing, I removed my clothing. No time to be shy now. Instead of watching me undress, Cole chose to be a gentleman and turned his eyes away. Irritated by this, I splashed him.

“I don’t want you to do anything, but am I so hideous that you won’t even look at me?” I asked harshly.

He turned back towards me and looked deeply into my eyes. “Of course, I want to look at you. There is nothing I want more. Well, there is more, but there’s time for that, Mar.” Cole took my hand, not averting his eyes from mine, and guided me into the soapy water. “Sit and relax.”

When I slipped under the sudsy water, he took one of the pink washcloths and gently washed my neck and back. I let the warm water and his soothing touch calm me. My cruel mind refused to give me a rest, and I began to wonder about Elliott’s magic.

“Cole, what did Elliott mean about having a connection with Earth? Don’t we all have that gift?”

“Gram says you’re unique in being able to call all four elements. Usually, a person has a stronger connection with just one,” Cole explained. “She’s been teaching us how to find ours.”

“So, what is your connection?” I asked, trying to absorb, yet again, more information that was foreign to me.

“My skills are not as strong as your father’s because I didn’t want to leave your side, but I’m still practicing my gift.” Cole moved his fingers above my head as if he was playing the piano. A drop of water landed on my cheek.

Before I could protest, I was covered with a warm rain-like shower. As the water poured over me, I took the opportunity to shampoo and condition my hair. Ignoring his chivalry, I stood up, covered in suds, under the rain shower and wrapped my arms around him.

“Cole Oliver Sands,” I whispered in his ear, “I love you, and there is no one in the world I would ever want to be with, except you.” Then, when he kissed me, I realized the passion I felt with Kai was nothing compared to the love I had for Cole.

Cole pulled away from me and quickly looked up and down my body. “Definitely not less anymore. You are lovely.”

Does Cole know I kissed Kai? I worried. Should I tell him?

He handed me a towel. “Come on, Mar. We better get you dried off and dressed before Gram makes me *less*.”

Laughing, I took the towel and covered my body. “Cole, you could never be less to me.”

All dried off, I accepted the long T-shirt Cole handed me and slipped it over my head. The scent of fresh-cut wood rushed at me. *How does Gram's T-shirts still smell like him?* I wondered.

“We should get you off to bed,” Cole suggested.

Yawning, I nodded my agreement and followed him up the ladder to my bedroom.

He went straight to Meg's bed. Seeing my sister's empty space tugged at my heart, but I pushed back the sadness. She was strong and, thankfully, not alone.

“Don't sleep there. I don't want to be alone.” I climbed under the covers of my bed.

I was glad when Cole joined me, and we snuggled under the blankets. It was strange that I was so tired. *Hadn't I been sleeping for almost a week?* It didn't matter. Sleep consumed me.

Before I knew it, I was woken by the sound of Gram calling my name.

With a dreamy look on his face, Cole pulled me into his arms and hugged me tightly. "I haven't slept that well since you fainted. I wish we could just stay here all day."

"Tempting, but Gram is beckoning. Let's go down to breakfast, and I'll tell you about my..." Words failed me. I could not call it a dream. Not knowing what to name it, I settled with, "my slumber."

"Slumber?" Cole sat up with a look of interest on his handsome face. "I can't wait to hear all about it, except I need to shave, first." He stroked his chin. "I'm beginning to look like a Drygen."

"Don't be long," I called as I began my descent to my grandmother.

Gram greeted me with a big hug. I held her tightly and inhaled her vanilla lavender scent. I knew I was where I was supposed to be...home. As she released her hold, I tightened mine.

"Enough of the mushy stuff, Mara." Gram finally broke away. A glint of a tear had formed in her eyes, but she blinked them away. "While Elliott is out tending to the garden, tell me about your experience."

While Gram started cooking, I sat on a stool next to the kitchen island, telling her an abbreviated version of the events.

"Is there anything that happened that you might want to tell me that you won't be sharing with Cole and Elliott?" Gram asked with a devious smile. "You can tell me anything, and I'll keep it just between us." My grandmother looked more like a schoolgirl excited about some juicy gossip than the stoic person I have always known.

"There isn't anything to tell," I lied.

"You want me to believe you were in the home of the elements and there isn't anything you want to share with me?" Gram grinned at me. "From my experience, the elementals can be quite persuasive."

"They were all welcoming. One of the elementals, Kai, became my guide," I explained, trying not to reveal any of the guilt I was feeling. "When we first met,

he did kiss me, but I told him right away that I was engaged, and we agreed just to be friends.”

As I looked into her brown eyes, so filled with love and acceptance, I decided I had to be honest with her about everything. “Gram, when Kai first held out his hand to me, all I wanted to do was kiss him. He was so charming and exciting. When he looked at me, it felt like he could read my deepest secrets. I was so tempted to forget everything and just fall into his world. Please, don't tell anyone. Cole would never forgive me if he ever found out.”

“Mara, there isn't anything to be ashamed of,” Gram assured me. “I'm sure Kai was very charming, and the experience of being so close to the Goddess does encourage temptations. However, you followed your heart, and I'm glad you told me. We'll keep it just between us. I see no reason to let guilt convince you to confess. It would only upset Cole unnecessarily. Sometimes, it's better to keep your experiences in the elemental world to yourself. Of course, you can always feel free to break that rule and share your stories with me.” Gram winked and patted my hand before returning to the stove.

I felt relieved after confessing to Gram. I knew she was right. Cole didn't need to know something that would never happen again.

My mind played over everything that had transpired since Eliza returned. There were so many unanswered questions.

“Gram, Sarah's letter said you had a strong connection to Air. Was she correct?” I questioned, “Is that how you always know what is going on around us?”

My grandmother smiled. “Sarah was right. I do have a stronger connection to Air than the other elements. As far as my gift allowing me to know things, I think it's more from a strong intuition. I have the same sensitivity my mother had, which I, also, see in you.”

“What do you think my connection is to?” I wondered. “Do you think Fire?” As I asked my question, I thought about the times I had called Air.

Before I could change my mind, Gram said, “You and Meg are special. I think you have a connection with all four. Initially, Meg seemed to be strongest with Air, but I have been thinking Earth, lately. When you were young, yours was different every day.”

“You will never believe the size of these carrots. They're going to be as big as my arm.” The loud booming voice of Elliott filled the room and stopped our conversation.

Gram shook her head in disbelief. “Elliott, what are we going to do with carrots the size of your arm?”

“We can feed the town.” He grinned sheepishly. “We might need to start canning the abundance. I have been tending to the apple trees.”

“Mara, set the table. Elliott, go get cleaned up, and no more practicing on produce. It will be difficult to explain away the sudden overgrowth of vegetation.” Gram cracked several eggs into the bowl and whisked rapidly.

As I set the table, I listened to the sounds of the house. I could hear her soft humming along with the clicking and sizzling sounds of food being prepared. The sounds of home comforted me.

Once the table was ready, Gram handed me plates of French toast, crispy bacon, cut fruit, and an egg scramble full of vegetables. We laid the meal on the table just in time for Cole and Elliott to join us.

I struggled to call Elliot my father, even with the knowledge he'd been telling the truth. It was strange to consider calling someone *Daddy* after believing he was dead for such a long time, and I had already mourned his loss. Now, faced with this new reality, I bounced between wanting to bring back my father and realizing I had to accept Elliott, the man, as a new part of my life.

“Mar, take your seat.” Cole patted my chair. “I'm starving, and I want to hear about your *slumber*.”

Cole's handsome face was clean-shaven. His eyes were bright and full of joy. The darkness I'd seen earlier had faded.

Rest heals everything, I thought.

"Go on, Mara. Tell us about your sleep," Gram encouraged.

In between bites, I described my experiences in the elemental world.

Cole's laughter became uncontrollable at my depiction of my drop to meet the Earth elementals. "I would've loved to see you covered with mud."

"Can I continue?" I raised my eyebrows with mock annoyance.

When Cole composed himself, my family listened quietly as I told them everything from the rainbow slide to seeing Sarah. Cole's eyes glistened with tears at the mention of his mother. When I told them about seeing Meg in the mirror, Gram's eyes narrowed at the mention of Blanche Drygen.

When my story was over, I felt it was time for me to ask some questions. "Gram, did you know about Miles?"

With a sour look, she answered, "I suspected Eliza was with child not long before she left, but no, I didn't know for sure."

"When we get Meg, we must take Miles. Meg promised him he'd be able to come live with us."

"We will." Elliott reached over and took my arm. "Cedric Drygen won't take anything else from my family. No matter what it takes, we'll bring both children home."

Tears welled up in my eyes from the intensity in his words.

The rest of our meal was finished with small talk. The avoidance of the bigger issues we faced was disturbing me. Finding out how the bacon was made to be so crunchy or talking about the flavor in the syrup was not going to help us get my sister home. Trying to control my irritation, I focused on breathing.

"I got it!" Cole jumped up. "I know how we can get them both back, safely."

Cole outlined a plan to get to the Drygen estate by going off the main roads. He described our secret path. We, then, spent the better half of the evening working out details. The four of us would be making the trip to bring Meg and Miles home before the next sunrise. Today would be a test in putting all the pieces together.

"Gram and Elliott, can you make any potions we'll need? Mara and I are going to the library to see if there is any information on the Drygen's estate.

There's a section on the town's history. It might have something that can help." Cole paced back and forth.

I put my hand on his arm to stop him. "You need to calm yourself." I turned towards Gram and Elliott. "We *all* need to calm ourselves. The most important thing I learned while I was with the elementals was that my emotions feed everything around me."

My grandmother took both Cole's and my wrists and quietly whispered a prayer, "Goddess, bind both before you in love and commitment to their promises. Bless and protect them from the darkness they may face."

The air blew, and a bright lavender light glowed before us. The shimmery image of the Goddess slowly came into view. Her beauty took my breath away. It was more than her physical attractiveness that moved me. She emitted love, grace, and peace.

"My child, Mae, your request for a binding and protection for Mara and Cole is granted. Your commitment and faith to the Light have been noted over the years. Be safe, my children. The darkness can seem stronger than the light."

Danu faded away, and we all stood dumbfounded.

"Was that?" Cole stammered.

"Yes, it was Danu. Isn't she amazing?"

Gram gasped as a small spark emitted from the ring on her finger. The once dark blue stone had a silver sunburst in the center that stretched throughout the gem like a star. The silver design pulsed, and then turned white.

I examined the change in the ring. "Gram, it is beautiful. What does it mean?"

My grandmother lifted my hand up and gestured towards the band I wore. "She has blessed us."

Each of our rings had remained the same color, but all bore the same silver star.

Gram said with a delighted tone in her voice, "We are bound, and we can focus on bringing my grandchildren home."

With renewed determination, we dispersed, eager to put our plans into action.

I stopped and looked back at my grandmother. She was writing in her

journal. As the pen strokes filled the paper, she cried. Teardrops fell slightly, smearing the ink.

Gram looked up and our eyes locked. I could feel her mixture of emotions. It isn't every day that the Goddess appeared to grant your request.

Cole tugged my hand. "Come on. Let's leave her to her writings."

I put my hand to my heart and mouthed, "I love you."

Gram covered her own heart, and then waved us away.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-TWO

When Cole and I arrived on Main Street, we blended into the crowd, playing the role of the happy couple. Everyone was still respecting Gram's wishes for our privacy, so our well-wishers' polite comments were limited. There was the occasional "Isn't it nice to have your father home?" and "How is your family?" We handled it politely as I tried to fight my urge to cringe at each inquiry.

When we entered the library, I felt like I could breathe again. It was a place to expect quiet, and most people would defer to the demand for silence...most people. Avoiding eye contact with the other patrons, Cole and I headed straight for the local history section, located on the shelves furthest from the door. Hidden deep in the recesses of the building, I left my fiancé to search on his own.

"Cole, I'm so so glad to see you here." The unmistakable shrill of Jessica's voice rang throughout the large room. "Why are you hiding in the back of the library, all by yourself?"

I peeked through the shelving in time to see her run her fingers up and down his arms.

I fought my urge to push the bookcase onto her. I grabbed the first book off the shelf and flipped it open. *Perfect*, I thought.

"Cole, I've found exactly what I want our *wedding* –" I faked my shock at seeing Jessica. "Oh, I didn't know you were here. What a lovely surprise."

Jessica wrinkled her nose at me, but I continued my performance. "I'm so glad you're here. I've just been so busy that I haven't found the time to reach out to you. The hectic life of a budding bride-to-be."

I grabbed Jessica and drug her to a table. I pulled out a chair and practically shoved her into it. Before she could flee, I pushed my chair next to hers, trapping the annoying girl. "Since you are here, you can help me with the wedding plans. It is almost divine intervention that you arrived today. We can go over everything."

Jessica gave me a terse smile. "I was just..."

"I know time does get away from us, doesn't it? But you are here now." I pointed at a page inside the book with a photograph of four girls. "Don't you think it would be fabulous if the bridesmaids wore outfits like these?"

The girls in the picture had long dresses with big shoulder pads. The fabric was covered with bright colors and black geometric shapes. Each girl wore their hair slicked back into a tight bun that made their dark eyeliner and hot pink lipstick stand out. I held back my laughter as Jessica squirmed away from me.

"Won't it be fabulous?" I scooted closer, not giving her a chance to escape. "I think they'll make a perfect bridesmaid's dress. Of course, you will get first pick as the maid of honor."

I shoved the book away and positioned myself to be face-to-face with Jessica. "What do you think about food for the reception? Should it be a simple BBQ or formal dinner?"

"Stop!" Jessica jumped up, knocking the chair over. "We are not friends, Marina. I don't plan to be in your wedding or wear that horrendous dress. I absolutely don't care what you will be feeding your guests."

I gasped. "I didn't know we weren't friends, Jessica." Fluttering my eyelids, I blinked back imaginary tears and turned towards Cole. "Did you know this?"

"I thought we were friends, too." His eyes widened in surprise. "Jessica, I can't believe you would pretend to like us. That's so hurtful." Cole wrapped his arms around me. Though I shook with laughter, he pretended to soothe me. "Don't cry, Mara."

I called Water to fill my eyes before looking up at him. "I just can't believe

this. She always pretended to be so nice to you."

"I guess we were both deceived, Mar." Cole shook his head sadly.

"I didn't mean you, Cole. *We* are friends." Jessica grabbed his hand.

Cole pulled away from her and jerked me up into his arms. "You should go now, Jessica. You are right. We are not friends."

Anger flooded her face. Without a reply, she turned and stomped off.

"You are so bad." I laughed.

"Me?" He leaned in close and whispered in my ear, "You, my dear, were jealous."

"Jealous of her?" I replied, "Never."

Cole raised his eyebrows at me and then kissed me on the cheek. He picked up the book I had been showing Jessica and said, "Before we get back to work, let's see our fabulous wedding fashion." His face grew dark. "Did you look at this?"

"No, it was the first book I grabbed." I leaned in to examine it.

The text under the photo read: *Genevieve Silver, Lucy Andrews, Michelle Elliott, and Camille Black. New Moon Celebration.*

"Wow, it's them." Quickly, I flipped through the remaining pages, looking for anything that might be beneficial. "This is interesting, but there's nothing to help us with Meg. We should check this out to look through, later. Maybe I missed something with the Drygens' name?"

Continuing our mission, we searched the shelves without finding anything useful.

"We're going to be here all night." Resting my head against my arms, I fought back the urge to cry and stared at the books in frustration. "Please, help me," I said, barely above a whisper.

As if in response to my plea, a small, blue light appeared before me.

Your eyes are playing tricks on you, Mara, I thought, blinking several times in hopes of clearing my vision.

When I returned my gaze towards the light, I noticed it by the bookcase. I went closer to investigate, and it flashed close to a brown book with the title, *Animals of the Forest*.

Original title, I thought as I picked it up.

It was an encyclopedia of the different types of creatures that lived in Starten Forest. Disappointed, I shoved the book back into its spot. However, it wouldn't budge. A thin, black book with a silver serpent on the spine was blocking its return.

I handed the title-less journal to Cole. "I may have found something."

The book turned out to be the history of the Drygens. At the end of it, there was even a chapter detailing the construction of their Estate. Thankfully, it included plans and diagrams.

Cole slipped the journal into the waist of his pants. "We don't need to draw attention to me checking this out."

On our walk home, I informed Cole about the light, and he told me about a book he found. It was about the gypsies who frequently passed through Starten. I wasn't sure why, but fear filled me.

Am I prepared to face Eliza? I wondered. Will I be able to save my family from her? Is my magic strong enough?

I knew Gram and Elliott had a firm grasp of their gifts, but I wondered about Cole. "How did you know your gift was Water magic?"

"Lucky guess." He shrugged nonchalantly. "My memories of an elemental, named Bay. She was always around me and, sometimes, she would speak to me at the lake. I really don't have much control over it, yet. But I can do this." Cole summoned three balls of water and began to juggle them.

"Show me what you can do, Mara." Cole dropped the water formations on the ground, splashing me.

"I can light a candle and I, once, asked Air to blow-dry my hair. I really haven't learned my gift. Everything I did was the elemental I beckoned at work,

not me. How will that help us?"

Cole stopped and placed his hands on my shoulders. "Mar, there's so much you can do. You're just not confident. When my home was burning, you called a rainstorm to put out the fire. Just concentrate on one element and see what you can do."

Taking his advice, I thought about Breeze and the air that surrounded her. I focused on summoning Air and watched as Cole's hair started to whip around. I smiled and sent a strong wind towards him. I laughed as he struggled to keep his footing.

"Now, try another element," Cole called over the howling wind between us.

I held out my hands and focused on forming a ball of fire. A flame the size of a marble appeared in my palm. I willed it to grow larger. When it reached the size of a grapefruit, Cole held his hand above mine and called a rain shower to wash over them. Steam rose as he doused the fire.

"See, you had it in you all along." Cole grinned. "Now, let's get home to Gram and show her what we found."

When we entered the house, I was overwhelmed by the conforming aroma of chicken soup and baked bread.

Elliott smiled and greeted both of us with a hug. "Did you find anything useful?" he asked. "Mae has gone to Chester's woodshop to gather some things."

"We did." Cole handed the book to him. "In the end, there is a section that describes the Drygen estate. There's even a map, just as we'd hoped."

Elliott took the journal and inspected the plans. "This looks correct."

Jumping up, he rifled through a drawer before he returned with several sheets of paper. Meticulously, he traced the plans. I watched over his shoulder with curiosity as he added notes.

"This is the most direct route up the mountain. It ends on the backside of the property." In contemplation, Elliott tapped his pen on the paper. "Cedric's room is on this side of the house. Hmmm...This is interesting. There appears to be an

external entrance hidden here.”

Elliott's excitement confused me. *It sounds as though he's been there before*, I realized. *I wonder when, and why.*

In response to my look of surprise, Elliott quickly explained, “I wanted to keep my eye on him to make sure you were safe.”

I wondered what else he had watched during his *death*. *Did he watch us as we grew?* Another thing we would need to discuss, once Meg was back home.

Elliott continued to draw on the map. “The master suites are here, and the old nursery was this section. My guess is this is where Meg is being kept.”

The men took over planning the routes we would take. They even made backup plans for good measure. As they worked, I glanced around, trying to decide how to distract myself. For the first time, I noticed the countertops were filled with a ridiculous number of baked items.

“Why is Gram baking so much?” I questioned, as I popped one of the fresh tea biscuits into my mouth. “There’s enough here for everyone in town, and then some.”

“She’s been cooking since the day you slipped into your deep sleep,” Elliott answered. “She told me it calms her.” He snorted in amusement. “If you think this is a lot, you ought to check the freezer. She has it filled to the brim with meals. We have enough food to last for months.”

Gram must have been really stressed, I thought as I turned towards the pantry. The shelves were stocked with rows of small bottles. *How did I miss this abundance and variety of elixirs, tonics, and potions?* I continued my inspection, even when Gram returned.

“Quick, take this,” she called out. Her arms were full.

I took a box from her and almost dropped it from the immense weight. I was astounded she’d been able to carry it and the other box with seemingly little effort. The next box weighed even more than the first.

“Gram, these are way too heavy for anyone to carry. How did you carry one...let alone two?” I asked with concern. “You should have asked us to help.”

“Shush,” she replied, “Light as a feather. Come, let's unload these, and then finish up dinner.”

Why are we preparing like this? It's as if a hard winter's coming, and we need all the stores we can get. What is she up to? “Gram, why are we stocking the pantry? Elliott said that you also filled the freezers with meals for months,” I grilled her.

“While you were sleeping, I kept busy,” Gram said casually. “Now, we have plenty of meals and can focus on Meg when she comes home. Don’t forget that Miles will be living with us. He will need a lot of our time to adjust to his new life. We have years of love and family to make up to him. Not to mention, a wedding to plan. Haven’t I always taught you to be prepared?”

I accepted her answer and continued unpacking the boxes without further inquiry. After all, Gram was a planner, and her thoughts were logical.

While I had worked on the pantry, Gram finished our meal. My stomach growled at the tempting smells. My task completed, I found that she had begun cutting vegetables for our dinner salad.

“What are you cooking?” I asked, taking the knife from her to resume cutting the vegetables. “It smells so delicious.”

“I haven’t made this recipe in a very long time. It was Chester’s favorite.” Gram added mushrooms to the caramelized onions she had simmering.

Noticing the soft smile on her face while she stirred the food, I wondered if she was thinking about my grandfather. He had been gone over ten years, but it seemed like yesterday when he was last here. I could almost smell his woodsy scent as I imagined how he’d look after a day of work. He always came in the house with a big smile, covered with bits of sawdust, and the occasional wood chip in his hair.

The first thing he would do was to sneak a taste of whatever Gram was cooking for dinner. Gram would scold him for being a mess, but he’d have a twinkle in his eyes as he whispered something into her ear while he wrapped her tightly in his arms. In response, she would touch his face and whisper something back to him that made his eyes light up. Then, he’d give her one last kiss before she sent him off with a command to ‘wash up for dinner’. Grams always stopped on his way out of the kitchen to turn back, and say, ‘Olive you, Maesi’.

My memories of the past were interrupted by warm arms wrapping tightly

around my waist and a soft kiss on my neck.

“When are we eating, I’m starving.” Cole picked up a chunk of cucumber and popped it into his mouth.

I set the knife down and twisted around to face him. “You’re always hungry. Dinner will be ready soon.”

Cole laughed and kissed me again.

Sinking into his arms, I felt content just to be held by him. I looked forward to the day we’d be married, and our new life together would begin. I wanted a marriage like my grandparents had.

“Dinner is ready, lovebirds,” Gram said. “Can I break you up long enough to set the table?”

Cole released me and swept Gram up in his arms. He twirled her around. “Mae, don’t be jealous. You know I’ll always love you best.”

Gram slapped him lightly on the arm. “Put me down.” When he obeyed, and finally set her back on the floor, she grinned. “Go on. Do as I asked, or you won’t be eating.”

“Anything for you, Mae.” Cole kissed Gram on the cheek before he went off to set the table.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

While we ate our salads, Cole explained the plans that he and Elliott had devised. Getting there would be the easy part because many challenges awaited us once we were on the estate. We'd have to watch for Drygen staff that may be patrolling and any changes to the property that didn't match the maps.

Gram carried out a large casserole and herb breadsticks. As she dished out fresh pasta with chicken, caramelized onions, and mushrooms covered in a cream sauce onto our plates, her eyes misted over. "For my dear, Chester – gone, but not forgotten."

We all raised our glasses of water and toasted.

Silence filled the table as we finished the delicious meal. However, my mind wouldn't stay quiet. It kept drifting to the days ahead of us. Finally, pushing back my thoughts of worry, I tried to enjoy the feast before me.

Swallowing her last bites of food, Gram asked, "Mara, can you serve the dessert? It's in the fridge on the patio."

The enclosed room was lit by small, twinkling lights. A long, lavender bag hung on the front of the refrigerator. Interested, I went closer to inspect it. When I did, I noticed a hook with a small, white note attached to the top, that read, *For Mara*.

"Go on, open it," Gram called from behind me.

"What is it?" I whipped around to see the brightest smile she'd had on her

face in a year.

“You'll see.” Gram waved her hand for me to hurry up and open it.

I removed the bag from the hook and spread it out on the table. I slowly unzipped the lilac cover, stopping when white fabric showed. I knew before I finished what she was giving me.

“Gram, you shouldn’t.” I choked back tears. “This was your dress. You wore this when you married Gramp.”

Gram removed the garment from the bag and held it up to me. “And now, I want you to have it. Try it on and see if you like it.”

I slipped into the gown. The top had wide shoulder straps that connected to the ruffled bodice. Upon closer look, you could see the ruffles were actually small flowers with a pearl in their centers. The soft fabric fell from my waist to just below my knees.

“Let me help you.” Gram tied a light gray ribbon around my waist. “Oh, Mara, you look even more beautiful than I imagined.”

I caught my reflection in the window. I knew this was the only dress I could wear to marry Cole. It was more than just a symbol of my grandparents' love. It felt like it belonged to us.

“Are you sure? I know how special this is to you.”

“Nothing is as special to me as you and Meg.” Gram fussed with the shoulder of my dress, and then hugged me tightly. “I'll be proud to know you wore it to marry Cole.” Shaking off the sentiment, Gram released her hug. “Now, let's wrap this up and bring the dessert out before Cole comes looking for us. I swear you are going to have a full-time job feeding him.”

“We will be busy. You don't think Cole Sands is going to whisk me away from you, do you?” I slipped off the gown and handed it to her.

She smiled softly and rehung the dress. Unspoken words hovered in the air.

Does she expect me to move into Cole's cottage and leave her after we get married?

My grandmother handed the garment bag to me.

I set it on the table and took her hand. “Gram, please, let's not rush back. I'm scared. I know I need to focus my energy on not being afraid, but it's too much.”

"You have always been your own worst enemy, Mara." Gram hugged me. This time she stroked my hair, and prayed, "Goddess, we ask for your continued spirit and guidance. With hearts of love, we will unite our family." My grandmother cupped my face between her hands. "Marina Addisyn Stone, I promise you that we'll bring Meg home." She ended with a kiss to my cheek.

I felt the essence of the elements encircling me. It soothed me.

With our dessert in hand, we returned to Cole and Elliott.

After we ate the decadent spiced apple cake, Gram insisted we rest before our mission.

Cole and I snuggled together in my bed. We didn't speak, but neither of us slept, either. I kept reminding myself that I was not alone. The four of us would bring Meg home.

Someone gently shook my shoulders.

I looked at the clock groggily. It was a little after midnight. Yawning, I glimpsed at the person who woke me. I gasped at the inky figure lurking in the shadows. Instinctively, I jumped out of bed to find myself trapped in the corner as the stranger approached.

"Wait, it's me, Marina." A flashlight illuminated Elliott. He was dressed completely in black, including the tight-knit cap he wore on his head.

"You scared me." I swatted at him.

"I'm sorry, Caterpillar." Elliott held his hand out to me.

When I accepted it, he pulled me into a long hug. A wave of emotions flooded me. For the first time since his return, I was confident this man was truly my father.

"Mae sent up some clothes for both of you. I put them over there." My father gestured towards the dark attire laid out at the foot of Meg's bed. "I'll let you wake up sleeping beauty over there." Elliott beamed at me and left the loft.

My heart felt full of love. Thoughts of bringing Meg home made me smile. Both kids would be brought into a house of peace, love, and family. I couldn't

imagine a better place to grow up. Even with the sadness of Father's *death*, my grandfather's passing, and my mother disappearing, we always felt safe and loved.

"Wake up, sleepyhead." I kissed Cole on the cheek.

"I wasn't sleeping." He rubbed the sand from his eyes. "I was just checking my eyes for cracks."

"I see." I grabbed his hands and pulled him up. "Were you just practicing your best impersonation of a sleeping giant? You could have shaken the birds out of the trees outside."

"Yes, I'm glad you appreciate my talents." Cole wrapped his arms around my waist.

I resisted the urge to push him back onto the bed, so I could snuggle into his arms. "It is time to rescue Meg. Our clothes have been laid out for us."

Not bothering with modesty, we both undressed and dressed, again, in our all-black outfits, which included black boots and caps.

Meeting my grandmother and my father in the kitchen, I felt silly. *We all look like a bunch of raccoons*, I thought to myself.

"Mara, come, let me braid your hair." Gram handed me a cup of tea. "They will see you coming for miles with that tangled mess."

Catching my reflection in the mirror, I saw what she meant. My hair was a fright. "Thanks for telling me that I looked so crazy, Cole."

"Crazy is why I love you." Cole chomped a hunk of banana bread and then held it out as if offering me a bite.

I shook my head. I was too nervous to eat anything.

Once my hair was braided, we grabbed the bags my grandmother had prepared for us and headed out.

Outside of my grandfather's woodshop, Gram pointed to a set of four-wheel bikes. "We'll take these until we get to the base of the mountain. Then, walk the rest of the way. Cole, do you feel comfortable driving?"

“Yes, ma'am.” Cole clicked his heels together and saluted.

Gram chuckled. “Good, let's go.” In a surprisingly agile move, she hopped onto the back of the four-wheeler that my father was already on. “Get on the back of Cole's bike, Mara. No time to dillydally.”

The loud roaring noise filled the air as the bikes were started.

“Hold onto my waist,” Cole shouted over the rumbling sound. “It will be a bit bumpy.”

And, off we went.

The bike lurched forward, and we rode north towards the Drygens’ Estate. We passed Starten Lake, and then passed the tree where I’d last seen Kai. We continued deeper into the forest until we reached the edge of the mountain. Stopping, we hid the bikes in an area of thick brush.

Thoughts of trout, snapping their warnings at us, crossed my mind.

We began our hike up the cliff on a path that seemed as if it had not been used in many years. The rocky walk was full of overgrown and slippery foliage. The forest felt eerily quiet, and a chill ran through me.

“The road will clear the higher we go,” my father said. “Just follow where I'm walking, and we shouldn't run into any surprises.”

Heeding his warning, I watched my grandmother as we climbed the steep slope of the mountain. *No one would know she was going to be sixty-five years old*, I thought. She was keeping the steady pace set by my father – the same pace I struggled to maintain.

We walked for almost an hour before we came to a level clearing.

“We should stop here and catch our breath.” Panting, my father passed out water canteens from his black bag.

Sipping the refreshing drink, I eyed Gram as she dug in her satchel. I watched curiously as she removed items and shoved them into her jacket pockets. I could hear her quiet prayers to the Goddess.

When she saw me watching her, she smiled and said, “Everyone, join me.”

We gathered in a tight circle and watched with anticipation.

“With open hearts and pure intentions, we ask for your continued blessings on this night,” Gram said confidently. She placed her hands in the center of the

circle. "With the aid of the Air of the east..." The breeze around us swirled, blowing leaves across the ground. "...And the Fire of the south."

I saw Gram nod at me. Listening to my intuition, I held my hand out to the center of the circle. Soft flames flickered from my fingertips, and warmth brushed my cheeks.

"And, the Water of the west," Cole said, obviously understanding what was required. Jutting his hand to the circle caused water droplets to fall onto my arms and face. Cole wore a look of pride as we were sprinkled with moisture.

"Finally, the Earth of the north." My father added his hand, and the ground shook as blades of grass broke through the hard soil.

Gram cried out, "With the blessing of Danu, we prepare our task."

The threads of Fire, Water, Earth, and Air twisted between each of us and hovered above our hands. Our rings pulsed between a soft lavender light and a bright white one. I was sure all of Starten could see us, which made me anxious.

My ring finger stung as if I was being burned. I stared in shock as the metal and stone melted into my skin. Though I could no longer see it, I felt its presence. It was as if it were reminding me of my oath.

Gram took my hand and squeezed it. Her brown eyes were bright and shone with tears of joy. "Bright Blessing, Danu. Our bind is now skin deep." Gram picked up her bag. "Ok, it's time for us to put our family back together."

We marched towards the Drygen estate.

When we reached the top of the mountain, my father whispered, "Be on the lookout for guards."

I tapped him on the shoulder and pointed towards a sleeping man propped against a tree. *I hope all of Drygen's staff are this diligent.*

Gram opened a blue pouch. We watched quietly as small tendrils of smoke slithered from the bag towards the slumbering guard. When they wrapped around his hands and feet, he shifted and opened his eyes. Looking down at his bindings, his eyes widened, and he began to cry out for help. He was silenced as

strands of silver entered his open mouth and nostrils. He struggled for a few minutes before he collapsed.

"Is he ok?" I asked, nervous that we had hurt him.

"He'll be in a deep sleep for many hours and should wake with no idea as to what happened." Gram rifled through his pockets, where she found a small flask and a set of keys. She shoved the keys into her bag. Opening the bottle, she dumped the contents over the man and threw it on the ground next to him. "If he is found, they will think he had too much to drink and passed out," she said with a devious smile.

Once the first guard had been dealt with, we crept further onto the property.

My father insisted we stay behind a tree while he checked the immediate surroundings of the house.

I watched him creep away into the darkness and, suddenly, he disappeared. Panic filled me. *Has he been caught?*

"There is only one other guard stationed at the front." My father appeared from behind us.

I jumped in fright. He had made no sound upon his return. "Don't scare me like that," I hissed.

His green eyes almost sparkled. "I'm sorry." My father wrapped his arm around my shoulders and squeezed. Then, he pointed high up, indicating a set of windows. "We should be able to avoid the guard if we enter over here."

I stared in awe of the house. Realization hit me. *Eliza left our warm home to live in this cold monstrosity.*

The three-story mansion had a long staircase extending to the right from the second level patio. A stairway on the left began on the ground floor and twisted to the third story. Partially open drapes on the end of the middle level caught my attention. Something inside told me it was the room we needed.

"I feel Meg there." I glanced at the stairs leading to the top floor. "How will we get in?"

"I know a secret way. I'll get you to Meg," my father said.

"In case you need it." Gram handed me a pouch like she used on the guard "Open the sack carefully while focusing your energy on the target." Giving me a

small vial with a jade green liquid that slightly bubbled, she added, “This should be sprinkled in the center of a barrier you’re crossing. One drop is more than enough. It’ll detect any magic or warning systems Eliza may have cast. If it turns red, leave the area. Hopefully, my daughter is as overconfident as usual and didn’t protect all of the entries.”

I slipped the items into my jacket pocket. “Don’t worry, Gram. I’ll be in and out with Meg and Miles before you know it.”

My grandmother squeezed my hand.

When I looked into her soft brown eyes, I could sense her worry. I focused all of my energy into sending her all the love I had for her.

“I know you will be cautious.” Gram kissed me on the cheek. “You have always been my strong girl.”

Cole hugged me tightly. His voice wavered when he said, “Listen to Gram and be careful, Mar.”

“I’ll only be gone for a few minutes, everyone,” I promised, embracing my inner Gram. “We’ll be home in time for breakfast.”

I clasp my father’s hand with fierce determination. “Let’s get Meg. One day without her was too long. It is time to take my little sister home.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

We were careful to watch for any signs of movement as we walked down the extended patio of the first floor. Before we entered the enclosure, I placed a drop of the green liquid in the center of the dark stone. The drop sizzled, but it didn't change color. The window coverings were tightly closed, and no sounds inside could be heard. Still, I continued to check for alarms.

“This is the kitchen and staff quarters,” my father cautioned. “Up ahead, there is a long metal pipe that runs up the side of the house. The pole ladder will be how we get to the third floor. Hand me the vial, and I'll place the drops along the way. Stay a bit behind me in case we need to retreat.”

Climbing the pole, I could feel the sadness and anger coming from the building. *How can a house emit such feelings?* A chill ran through me at the thought of Meg having to stay here for even one night.

I was relieved when we stepped onto the landing of the second level. Thankfully, it was all closed up and dark as the first floor. Finally, we reached the third story with no signs of protection spells.

I heaved myself over the patio wall. As we passed the circular stairs, I couldn't help but think it would have been a better way to go. Keeping close to the house and watching for any signs of activity, we arrived at the desired window. This was where I felt Meg was being held.

Peeking inside, I could tell it was a child's room. It was dark, but the small

twin bed was not empty.

“This is it,” I whispered to him. “How can I open the window?”

“No worries, Caterpillar,” my father said. “I have gathered many skills while I was gone. One of which is lock picking, among other stealthy activities.”

My father pulled out a long flat screwdriver and inserted it into the top of the windowpane. Then, he slowly began to lift the window. Stopping, he placed a drop of the potion on the sill and waited to see if we would alert anyone.

“All clear,” he said, handing me the vial, and then hugging me tightly. “We’ll meet you at the tree where we found the guard. I’ll be watching for you, in case you need me.”

“Thank you,” I said, pushing back my fear and climbing through the window.

When I entered the room, I realized it wasn’t Meg sleeping in the bed. The small lump tucked under the dark green comforter was my brother, Miles.

I glanced around the dull room. The space was filled with heavy, dark furniture. It seemed more like an old man’s room than a child’s. There were no toys, pictures, or clues that a young boy lived here. Once again, a coldness filled me. I didn’t feel any joy or happiness in this place.

Kneeling down beside my brother, I stared at him for a few minutes, just watching him sleep. He looked so much like Meg. I instantly felt protective of him. I found myself stroking his dark brown hair away from his eyes. I wasn’t sure how to wake him without frightening him. As I sat, pondering the best approach, he slowly opened his big, green eyes and smiled.

“She promised me you would come for us, Mara.” Miles threw his arms around my neck.

Surprised by his reaction, I could only hug him back. Reluctantly, I let go of him. “Miles, we’ll have so much time to get to know each other,” I promised, “but we need to get you to safety first. Is Meg’s room close?”

“She’s in a room down the hall.” Miles slipped out of his covers. “I know a

secret way we can go. You must be quiet, though. Grandmother Blanche is a light sleeper.”

“Dress quickly, and you can show me the way. Be sure to put on warm, dark clothes.”

While my little brother dressed, I arranged his bed covers to look like he was still there. *Does someone check on him in the middle of the night to make sure he’s warm enough?* I wondered.

“Come this way.” Miles grabbed a small box from his dresser. Then, he grabbed my hand, led me into his closet, and shut the door behind us. “Stay here.”

Miles carefully rearranged items in the tiny space. When he found a small flashlight, he handed it to me. “Shine this here.”

I followed his instructions and watched as my brother slowly popped off a panel of the wood that led to an opening in the wall.

“Ok, come in here, but we need to turn the light off.” Miles motioned for me to follow him.

I entered the musty space and waited while he replaced the panel, hiding any evidence of our entering the passage. Then, my brother guided me through his secret maze until we stopped at a cutout in the wall.

“This is Meg’s room. Wait here until I make sure the coast is clear,” Miles whispered. His little face was serious.

Too serious for a child, I thought sadly.

Miles entered the walk-in closet. He quickly came back to me. “Mother is there. She’s angry.”

I began to enter the closet, but Miles grabbed my arm. He put his finger to his mouth, warning me to be quiet. Guilt filled me as I saw him tremble.

Would Eliza hurt him? Hurt Meg? I couldn’t sit there waiting for the answer. However, when I tried, again, to enter the closet, Miles clutched my arm and shook his head violently. Relenting, I wrapped my arms around him and knelt down. I held my little brother as we listened to the conversation in the bedroom beyond.

“Meg, I’m growing tired of you and your insistence that you have absolutely

no knowledge of magic,” Eliza's icy voice snapped. “Stop this nonsense. You will not continue to be the brat my mother let you turn into. It is time to act like the daughter I always wanted. You could be so happy here if you would stop lying and just tell me what I need to know.”

“It isn't nice to tell stories. You are trying to trick me. I don't know any magic since IT ISN'T REAL! I can't do what you keep demanding me to do,” Meg shouted.

The next noise sounded like she slapped her hands on something hard. I had seen her act like this when upset. Fear filled me as I prepared for the next words that would come from Meg.

Full of anger, my sister shouted, “I'm sorry I'm not the daughter you always wanted, but you are nothing like the *mothers* I already have. I have two mothers that are much better and kinder than you will ever be.”

“How can you speak so harshly to me?” Eliza cried out. Her voice sounded full of despair. “If you want to break my heart and be so cruel, I'll go. You can be alone. I promise I'll not come back.”

After a few minutes of silence, Eliza must have realized her tactics wouldn't work on Meg. She said, with such venom in her voice that I felt the hair on my arms stand up, “I know you have access to the magic I need, even if you won't admit it. I have waited many years, and I can wait a few more days or weeks. Your sister will be along soon enough to try and save you. Marina has access to the magic I truly want. And, thanks to you, she will be happy to give me whatever I want in exchange for your life.”

A thud sounded.

Did Meg knock something over? It was impossible being on the other side of the wall and not able to tell my little sister to behave. I needed Eliza to leave, and Meg engaging her prolonged her goodbye.

“Since you want to be alone, you will be...until she arrives,” Eliza snarled. “I hope you enjoyed your dinner. It will be the last meal you have until I get what I want.”

Her words shocked and angered me. It took every bit of energy I had not to burst into the room and scream at her.

Miles must have felt my anger because he snuggled back into my arms, patting my hand. He silently reminded me that I needed to control my emotions.

Wrapping my arms around him, I kissed his cheek. Knowing my sister was not going to back down, I braced myself for what was coming next.

In response to Eliza's threats, Meg launched another verbal attack. She was so unafraid and so strong in her words that my pride battled with my annoyance. "Mara will never give you anything! I won't let her! I would rather be alone forever, locked up with no food and water, than have you get your way. I'm glad you left us. You would have been a horrible mother!"

"Enough," Eliza screamed. A *Slap* rang through the air. "I'll not take such abuse from you."

My mind raced. I didn't know what happened. *Did Meg slap her? Did Eliza hit my sister?*

Relief filled me when I heard the echoing sound of Eliza's high heels hitting the granite floor as she took her leave. I relaxed further when the door slammed shut in her wake. With the *click* of the door being locked, I stood up to go to my sister. That was when Meg's cries filled the room, confirming she had been injured.

"Let me go alone and be sure it's safe." Miles stopped me from rushing to Meg.

It was clear to me that our little brother had wisdom beyond his years. I nodded and watched him enter the closet and slowly creep into the room. I trailed behind him, hiding in the shadows.

Miles climbed onto the bed and stared at our sister. Meg was lying face down on the bed with her head buried in the pillow to quiet her sobs.

"Don't cry, Meg." Miles lay beside her and hugged her. "Everything is going to be ok. Soon, we'll be with your family, and you won't be afraid anymore."

Meg popped up and angrily wiped her tears away. "I don't think they are ever going to come. If they do, she'll never let us out of here."

"Don't say that!" Miles left the bed. "You promised me they would come and take us home. You said they would love me and that we would be so happy together. You made a promise, and you always keep your promises, right?"

Miles went to her dresser and pulled out dark, warm clothes, just as I had instructed him to do earlier. "Put these on," he said with such conviction that Meg didn't argue. She just followed his directions.

While Meg dressed, Miles fixed her bed up, just as I had done in his room. Taking her hand, he pulled her into the closet. When she saw me, she stared as if she was looking at a ghost.

"Mara," she asked timidly, "Are you really here?"

Pulling her into my arms, I fought back tears. "I'm so sorry I let her take you. I should have been more careful and not let you out of my sight."

We both just held each other while our brother watched us with a big smile.

Tugging my shirt, he warned, "We really should hurry. I don't want them to find out that we left our rooms."

"Do you know a way for us to get to the back of the house without anyone knowing?" Reluctantly, I let go of my sister. "Everyone is waiting for us by one of the large trees at the far edge of the property. Can you get us there without being seen?"

"Of course," Miles said. He sounded so much like Meg that I wanted to laugh. "We just need to be careful. Follow me."

Meg bragged, "Miles can get us anywhere we need to go. He is super sneaky like that."

With a look of pride at her compliment, Miles smiled and led us into the inner walls of the house. We followed our brother as he guided us through the twists and turns of the dark passageway. When we reached another hole in the wall, he carefully opened the panel and peeked out.

"Be quiet," Miles said as he led us into a hallway inside the mansion.

Following him, we headed towards the patio doors.

"Wait." I pulled the vial of green liquid from my pocket and placed a drop in front of the exit. The green liquid sizzled as I held my breath, praying silently in my head. Slowly, the liquid turned red and spread into a large circle that slipped under the doorway.

"We can't go out through here, Miles," I said with frustration. "She's put a protection spell at this entrance. Is there another way?"

Scrunching his face as if he was deep in thought, he announced, "I got it! I think I know a way."

Once again, we climbed back into the walls of the house.,

As Miles led us through the corridors, I wasn't sure what direction we were facing. *Is he leading us closer to Eliza's room?* My heart felt like it was going to beat out of my chest.

"Let me check this way. Can I have your green stuff?" Miles asked. He looked like a little man with the serious expression he wore.

"Just put one small drop in the center of the area that we will cross." I gave him the potion.

"Don't worry, Mara," Meg whispered, "Miles will get us out of here. He is really smart for being just a kid."

I squeezed her hand. "I have no doubt he will find a way."

With those words, Miles dashed out. When he returned, a big smile was plastered on his face. "She would never think anyone would go this way. Let's go."

Our little brother brought us out of the walls and into a hallway. I felt exposed in the wide corridor, but after a quick walk, we entered a small storeroom. The space was full of cleaning supplies and other housework equipment. Miles opened a door to an empty cupboard. Peering over his shoulder, I saw it was a laundry chute. I had read about them in books, but I had never seen one before.

"Where does this lead?" I asked him while thinking, *this doesn't look safe.*

"Right to the laundry pile. It is usually full of sheets, since Grandmother Blanche has all the beds changed, every day." He wore a sad look on his face.

Why would clean sheets upset him?

"Even if no one has slept in the bed, she makes Hazel take everything off and remake it with clean sheets. She makes her do it for all fifteen of the rooms in the house! We never had those many visitors." Shaking off his gloomy thoughts, he forced a smile and pointed at the chute. "You should go first, Mara, since

you're the biggest."

Miles spread his legs and arms out, and then crouched a bit. "You will need to hold your arms and legs out like this, and you want to slowly move down the tube. If you go very slowly, it isn't as scary."

"Great demonstration," I praised. I held out my hand. "Can I have my green stuff back? I'll check the area when I get to the bottom."

Reluctantly, he returned the vial to me. "Remember, go slow."

I climbed into the chute. Before I started down, I looked at Meg and Miles. Both were watching me with mischievous grins. "Come on, you two. We don't want to be found."

Heeding my own advice, I began my descent into the dark space, using the technique Miles had just shown me. The cold metal was more slippery than I had expected. Once Meg and Miles entered the tube, specks of dirt dropped on me and covered my face. Misjudging my strength, I took one hand off the wall for the briefest moment to wipe the dust from my eyes. Suddenly, I found myself slipping. Unable to stop, I began to fall.

I stifled my screams as the silver of the walls blurred past me. I must not have been very high up when I stumbled because I landed quickly in a large basket full of dirty linens, making an *oomph* sound. When Meg was in reach, I held my hands up to help her down. Before I could assist Miles, he jumped around me and into the pile of laundry.

Quickly climbing out of the basket, he held out his hand. "Green, please."

With an amused smile, I handed him the potion and let him check our exit. His grin told me the coast was clear.

As we left the stuffy laundry room, the cold air hit my face. The night sky twinkled with stars, and I felt a sense of relief. Soon, we would be far away from this wretched place and with our family.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

As Miles led us across the property, dodging from tree to tree, it was eerily quiet. Apprehension nagged at me. I was terrified the guard had woken, and that we would bump into him.

When we arrived to find the guard still out cold, Meg stared at him with wide eyes.

"He's just sleeping," I promised, "but let's move away from him, just in case."

I glanced around, hoping to see my family. My heart fell when I couldn't find them.

A soft rustle came from the brush across from us. I pulled Meg and Miles behind a tree to hide them. "Wait here," I whispered.

Leaving the children, I crept towards the moving bush. Within the foliage, two shining blue eyes stared at me.

"Damn it, Cole," I hissed when I recognized who it was. "You scared me."

Cole crawled out from the undergrowth and grabbed me tightly. "Mar, I was starting to freak out. You were in there for a long time. Gram and Elliott went down the mountain to make sure the path was still clear when you returned." He glanced around nervously. "Where are they? Didn't you find them in the house?"

Meg and Miles left the safety of the tree. They held hands as they came to join us.

Cole's expression turned to surprise, and his smile lit up his face. "He looks just like Meg."

"Uncanny, isn't it?" I agreed.

Cole scooped them both into his arms and gave them a big bear hug. When he finally put them down, Miles stepped back. Realizing his behavior had frightened the boy, he held out his hand. "I'm sorry – that was probably too much for a first meeting. I was just so worried about all of you. When I saw you were safe, I was overwhelmed with excitement."

Miles accepted his hand and shook it. His posture was formal, but his intense gaze watched Cole wearily. "I'm pleased to meet you, Cos. Meg has told me all about you."

Cole grinned and bowed. "I'm glad to meet you, too, Miles. Now, we should be on our way. This place gives me the willies."

Miles crooked his eyebrow and studied my fiancé as if he was from another planet.

Meg took Miles by the hand and whispered to him, "You don't have to be so proper now. We aren't like the Drygens. You are in our family now, and we like to hug."

Miles beamed at his new sister. "I have a lot to learn."

"It's ok. I'll teach you. Now, come on." Tugging on their clasped hands, Meg moved to action.

Cole guided us off the property and down the path.

Turning to look at the mansion, I felt relieved to see it was still dark. No one was chasing us. "Thank you, Goddess, for your blessings and protection," I said clearly, as I looked at the bright moon.

As if in response to my gratitude, the stars seemed to twinkle.

We reached the flat area where we'd received our blessings earlier that night. There was no sign of Gram or my father. My heart, once again, felt like it had dropped. Anxiously, I searched for any signs of them. There were none.

Cole must have sensed my apprehension because he said, "They're probably down the mountain, keeping watch by the four-wheelers." He gave me a

reassuring touch. “Don't worry, Mar. They will be waiting for us below.”

The trek down the mountain seemed longer than the trip up had been. I wanted to run ahead to check on Gram and my father, but my somber mood appeared to have rubbed off onto my siblings. Miles and Meg were quiet, and their melancholy reminded me they were just little kids.

My realization made me feel contrite. I needed to protect them, not add to their worry. They already knew we were in danger. I didn't need to add to their concerns.

Focusing on my breathing, I tried to lighten the mood. “Miles,” I said, “Did Meg tell you about Gram's delicious cooking?”

His eyes lit up as he said, “She did. She said Grandmother makes the best cookies in the entire world and that she even makes licorice ice cream with red...*sprinkles*.” He hesitated before saying the word ‘sprinkles’ like it was a bad word.

“Yep, I told him she’s a good cook,” Meg confirmed. “I can't wait to have some, again. The Drygens forgot to add flavor to the meals they fed me, and the veggies were not like Gram’s.”

Amused, I asked, “Meg, won't it be fun to have a little brother? You'll be busy showing Miles so many new things.”

Continuing our walk, I held Cole's hand and listened to Meg describe all of the things she planned to show Miles. He responded with many questions, and I could hear the excitement in his voice. It made me sad to think of the life he had before Meg was brought to him. *No child should have to endure such an empty and cold existence*, I thought.

As we approached the end of the path, I saw movement and stopped abruptly.

“What is it?” Cole whispered to me, glancing around nervously. “What did you see?”

“I'm not sure, but I thought something was down there,” I whispered back.

Slowly, we resumed our descent. It wasn't long before we were met by Gram and my father. Unfortunately, they were not alone.

“How nice of you to join us,” Eliza icily purred as she appeared, dragging my grandmother behind her.

My mother had a handful of Gram's silver hair twisted in her clutched hand. My grandmother wore a brave face to hide the pain, but I could see the agony she really was in. A dark bruise shadowed her eye, and her face was covered with small, bleeding cuts. Running to help her, I was stopped in my tracks by Cedric, yanking my father out of the darkness and into our view.

Cedric Drygen had a long silver knife pressed against my father's neck as he roughly shoved him forward. Blood ran down his swollen and bruised face, indicating my father had been severely beaten. Even though he was probably in great pain, his expression only showed anger. Struggling against his adversary, my father continued trying to break Cedric's tight hold. However, his efforts were fruitless.

“Careful, Elliott,” Cedric taunted. “You wouldn't want to cut yourself accidentally.” Then, he pressed the blade harder against my father's neck, breaking the skin and causing a small drop of blood to form.

“Stop!” I moved towards my father. “You're going to kill him.”

“Oh, Marina.” Eliza dragged my grandmother forward, blocking my line of sight. “Your father died a very, very long time ago. Who would really miss him if he died again?”

“You are no longer my daughter,” Gram growled.

With a look of hate in her black eyes, Eliza slapped my grandmother with the back of her hand. The force of her strike sent Gram reeling to the ground.

Without hesitation, Cole ran to my grandmother, where she lay crumpled on the dirt. He put his arms tightly around her and whispered quietly into her ear.

Responding to his words, she leaned on him for support and sat herself upright.

Cole wrapped his arms tighter around her.

“I'll never understand what happened to turn you into this person. You were not raised this way.” Gram's voice was filled with sadness.

Eliza stood over her defiantly. “Your mother, Genevieve, created me. She brought this pain to the Silver family. She should have left Camille Drygen alone. You think you know everything, but if you would've left my magic alone, we would not be here today, Mother.”

Gram said in a defeated tone, “You are so consumed by the darkness you allowed inside of your heart that there is no hope for my daughter to return. You truly are a Drygen now.”

Eliza shouted at her, “You will not talk to me like this. You will show me the respect I deserve.”

Snorting at her, Gram said, “You'll never have my respect.”

My mother's rage boiled. She shoved Cole away from my grandmother and pulled her up by her hair. Shaking and slapping her, she screamed at her. Her words were so full of anger and venom that they were incomprehensible. They were just hysterical ramblings about winter, snow, and all of the ways she had been wronged by my grandmother in the past, the present, and even the future.

“Stop!” I threw a ball of fire at Eliza. It grazed her face but didn't injure her. “I'll give you what you want. Just leave them alone.”

I shocked myself. *How did I so easily form fire and throw it? Where did that come from – inside me? Am I capable of being just as dark as her?*

“No, Mara,” Gram cautioned.

Before she could finish her warnings, Eliza struck her and sent my grandmother spinning. With a thud, she hit the hard ground.

I held up another ball of fire. “Don't make me use this.”

I had Eliza's attention now. “You think your little ball of magic scares me, Marina?”

“I'll give you what you want. I'll release the binding that was put on your magic.” I extinguished the flames and blew a breeze at her. “I have the power you seek.”

Eliza's eyes brightened.

“I'll only do this if you stop hurting Gram. And, you must promise to leave us alone once this is done.”

“Fine.” Eliza's cold black eyes pierced through me. She pointed at my

grandmother, who was lying motionless on the ground. "I'll agree to your demands, but only if you bind her magic, also."

Confidently, I stepped closer to Eliza. "Deal, but how do I know you will keep your promise and leave us alone forever...all of us?"

"My word is not enough?" Eliza asked with a smirk.

Don't fight her, I warned myself. I shrugged, feigning indifference. "Fine. I will take your word as an oath, but Miles is part of the deal. I want him to come to live with us – permanently."

"Whatever you want, Marina." She spun around and marched towards my grandmother. Standing over her, she said, "You are going to return everything she stripped from me."

Why didn't she protest about Miles? Come to think of it, she didn't even acknowledge him. How can a mother willingly give up her child? My mind raced with all the realities of her promises. *She's not going to keep her promise, even if I kept mine. She will never leave us alone, and she'll only keep my brother to hurt us. There's no way I'm letting her take him from us.*

Calming myself, I said, "We need to go to the forest behind my house."

Eliza raised her eyebrows.

"It's the only place with enough magic to cast this kind of spell." I looked up at the moon, trying to process my thoughts, and an idea came to me. "We must go before the sun rises, or I won't be able to break the binding."

"Cedric, put them in the back of the truck," Eliza ordered. Then, she turned and pointed her long, sharp fingernail at me. "You will ride in the front with me, my darling daughter. We have so much to catch up on."

Cedric Drygen threw my struggling father into the bed of the truck and began to tightly bind his wrists and legs with cord. He growled and punched him in the face. "You're lucky the girl is here and wants you alive. If it was up to me, I would feed your bloody carcass to the animals." He gave my father one last kick in the ribs as he hopped out of the truck and turned to glare at my grandmother. "I wouldn't try anything stupid, old lady, or I'll make you sorry."

Gram crawled into the back of the truck while Cedric watched. I stood back, expecting him to do something to make it difficult for her to get into the truck's

high box herself. Instead, he just scowled at her.

Next, Cedric picked up Miles and tossed him in, next to my father. My little brother straightened up and looked at his father with sadness in his eyes. The depth displayed in his expression was haunting. Still, it didn't seem to have an effect on the cruel man.

When Cedric went for Meg, she resisted.

"I don't need your help." She kicked him in the leg, and then scrambled towards the truck.

Unfortunately, my sister hadn't been quick enough. Cackling as Cedric picked her up by the waist of her pants, he said, "You need to be taught manners."

He dangled her in the air as she struggled to break his hold. A scar under his eye glowed in the moonlight. It gave him a more notorious appearance, but it didn't deter my sister's defiance.

Kicking and clawing at the air, Meg screamed, "Let me down now! Let me down, or I'll scratch your eyes out!"

Laughing, he ignored her.

Miles tightened his fists and rushed to Meg's defense. "Put her down."

"You are threatening your father?" Cedric snarled.

Miles hesitated and looked towards me.

I shook my head slightly. The movement was almost undetectable.

Understanding, Miles unclenched his fingers and sat back down.

"Stop playing, Cedric." Eliza dragged her long, red nails along his beard and kissed him on the cheek. "She is of no use to us, anymore."

Cedric threw Meg into the back of the truck. She quickly scrambled towards my grandmother and fell into her arms, sobbing. Gram wrapped her arms around Meg and whispered into her ear. In response to the private words, Meg hugged her tightly and tried to choke back her tears.

Cole offered his hand to Miles. When he took it, he jumped into Cole's arms and held onto him tightly.

What kind of life did Miles have to make him so afraid of his father? I wondered.

My father was no longer struggling against the ropes that bound him. He'd closed his eyes, lying still. I wasn't sure if he was sleeping or just resigning himself to the situation. Either way, it alarmed me.

"I'm going to ride with them in the back. I need to make sure Elliott is ok, or I'll not be able to concentrate on breaking the binding," I said firmly.

Eliza's cold stare met mine. I gazed back while concentrating my thoughts and reached out with my mind. I needed to make sure everyone was ok.

Her black eyes bore into me as if she was searching for the truth. Finally, she nodded. "Fine, you can ride with Elliott, but your boyfriend rides with me."

Unsettled, I began to change my decision when Cole turned towards Eliza with his most flirtatious smile and said, "I would be honored to ride with you."

For half a second, I thought Cole's charisma would be a benefit to him. I was wrong. Cedric jumped into the bed of the truck and roughly knocked Miles out of his lap. Then, he reached for my fiancé, clutching him violently.

Ripping his wrist out of Cedric's bruising grip, Cole held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. "I said I would come with you," he asserted with mock indignation. "There's no need to be so rough, Mr. Drygen."

Cedric shoved him out the truck, and sneered, "Save your charm for someone else, pretty boy." Then, he jumped down and walked towards me. Standing uncomfortably close, his eyes scanned my body before they settled in a penetrating gaze on my breasts. "Do you want assistance getting into the truck? I'm sure I could help you," he leered.

Quickly hiking myself into the box, I replied, "All good here. No help needed."

Shutting the tailgate, he quipped, "Pity. Maybe another time."

Eliza glowered at him as she entered the cab, but she didn't add to the conversation.

My eyes met Cole's, and he winked. I smiled supportively at him before taking a seat near my father. Cedric started the truck and revved the engine. With a maniacal cackle, he peeled out and knocked me down onto my father, who groaned in pain.

"I'm sorry." I gently touched my father's bruised face. Turning towards

Gram, I whispered, "Do you have anything to help him with the pain?"

"Untie him," Gram directed and searched the lining of her jacket. She slid a miniature glass jar with a blue gel into my hand. "Rub this on his cuts. Elliott, it will sting, but you'll feel better."

Loosening the ties on his wrists, I coated his wounds with the icy gel. My father winced, drawing back slightly from each touch, increasing my concern. *Be strong, Mara*, I reminded myself. I apologized as I continued to lightly rub the ointment on his broken skin. "I'm sorry this happened."

"It's ok, Caterpillar. It's just a few scratches." My father held out his roped hands. "Can you untie me, so Drygen won't get to throw me out of the truck when we reach our destination? He would enjoy that too much."

With my father untied, I took notice of our location. Cedric was taking every opportunity to make the ride as uncomfortable as possible for us. Hitting large bumps and erratically swerving, we were tossed around. I was knocked back into Gram, causing her to groan in pain.

"I'm sorry," I apologized.

"That maniac is going to get us killed," she growled.

Tears filled my eyes when I saw how much pain Eliza had actually inflicted upon her own mother. *No time for tears, Mara. It's time to take care of Gram.* "Here, let me fix you up a bit." I rubbed the gel over the cuts on her cheeks. I flinched when she hissed in pain.

Once I finished, she took my hand and held it. "Eliza will not honor her promise."

"I know, Gram." I hugged her gently. "Don't worry about that right now. I have a plan."

"How could I worry with you in charge?" My grandmother sighed and released some of the tension I felt in her body. "I know things will turn out as they should." Gram pulled out of my hug and held my hand.

We rode in silence for several minutes before Miles scooted out of Cole's

arms and knelt in front of us. "Grandmother Mae, are you ok?" he asked nervously.

"I'm just fine, Miles. Silvers are not weak." She held out her hand to the small boy. "Come, sit with me."

Miles hesitantly accepted her hand.

I watched as his fear and uncertainty washed away.

He nestled into Gram's lap, and she wrapped him in a big hug. When she kissed him lightly on the cheek, his body stiffened. It was as if he worried about what would happen next. Despite his reaction, our grandmother didn't release him. Instead, she held him tighter until the stiffness in his body, finally, weakened. He wrapped his arms forcefully around her neck as he melted into her embrace.

"Can you do me a favor, Miles?" Gram relinquished her hug.

"Mmhh." Miles' green eyes widened in anticipation.

"Do you think you can call me Gram? Grandmother Mae makes me sound like a little old lady."

Miles beamed at her. "Gram," he asked in a whisper, "can I live with you now?"

Tears glistened in our grandmother's eyes as she kissed him on the cheek again and held his face between her aged hands. "Miles, I would love nothing more than for you to live in our home."

"I told you they would love you. Didn't I?" Meg grinned.

Miles slid off Gram's lap and hugged Meg. She whispered something to him, and they both beamed as they looked at our grandmother affectionately.

"Miles, I'm sorry I wasn't able to be there for you, but I am now." Gram took a vial from her pocket and handed it to Meg. "I brought this for you. Drink it and tell me what you think?"

Meg inspected the vial, which I knew held the memory potion. I silently watched my sister drink the liquid. I was thankful Gram had thought to restore her memories. There was no guarantee that tonight would go as planned.

Meg returned the empty container. "We need to make some of that for Miles. It was so delicious." She let out a big yawn. "I missed you, Gram," she said,

snuggling into our grandmother's arms and drifting off to sleep.

Gram smoothed my little sister's hair. "I missed you, too, my little dancer. I missed you, too."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

We continued the bumpy ride in silence as the truck drove towards our home. When we arrived, Cedric drove past the house and over to my grandfather's woodshop. Slamming on the brakes, he sent us sliding into the back of the truck cab.

"Now, the fun begins," my father whispered to himself.

Having parked, Cedric turned the engine off and hopped out of the front.

After Cole exited the black truck, he held his hand out for Eliza. "It's a long step down. Let me help you."

Eliza accepted his offered hand and allowed him to help her out. "You always had such nice manners, Cole. You should teach them to my daughter."

"I'll try." Cole smiled.

Cole and I are going to have a conversation about being too nice to the enemy, I thought bitterly.

Cedric lowered the tailgate, and roared at my father, "Stone, why aren't you tied up like I left you?"

I stood in front of my father. With hatred in my voice, I responded, "I untied him. If you want me to unbind Eliza's magic, you'll watch your tone, Cedric. My family has had enough of your threats."

Stepping forward, I glowered over him. "You might want to be very careful when you decide your next move. You haven't forgotten that Eliza is my mother, have you? I'm afraid my temper can be just as volatile as hers."

Holding my hand out, I concentrated until I formed a small ball of fire in it. Bouncing the flame on my palm, I icily said, "Eliza isn't the only one who can play with fire."

With those words, I made the fireball grow until it was the size of a grapefruit. I threw the orb towards Cedric, aiming for his feet. The ball landed before him and sizzled in the grass.

"No need to get yourself worked up." Cedric raised his hands in submission and stepped backward. "Always having a woman fight your battles, Stone? Seems like nothing has changed."

"Don't take the bait." I grabbed my father when he began to lunge at his nemesis. Then, I threw another ball of fire. This time, it grazed Cedric's leg. "The next one will not miss." Turning to glare at Eliza, I added, "If you want me to unbind your magic, you need to put a leash on him."

"Cedric, be nice, darling," Eliza purred, dismissing my threats. "We'll be done with them soon."

Cedric snorted. "Not soon enough."

Jumping off the tailgate, I helped my family get out of the vehicle. Gram handed a sleeping Meg to my father before accepting my assistance.

Eliza stared at the exchange and tightened her grip on Cole's arm. "What's wrong with her?" she asked without a hint of concern in her voice.

"She's tired. She probably hasn't slept well with all of the threats she's been receiving recently." I locked eyes with Eliza and gave her a long, hard stare. "Lead the way, *Mother*."

I thought I saw a glimmer of sadness flash in her eyes before they turned dark, and she sneered, "Cedric, get our son."

As Eliza stormed away, I felt a pain in my heart. Reality hit that I had been praying for an idea, not a real person, to return to my life. My self-pity was halted by the gravelly voice of Cedric.

"Let's go. One trick from you and your precious family dies, starting with the old lady." Cedric grabbed Miles roughly and slung him over his shoulders.

"Please, put me down, Father," Miles begged. "I'll walk beside you. I can keep up."

Storming behind Cedric, I ripped Miles out of his grasp. My brother's shoe hit his father on the back of the head as I pulled him over the cruel man's shoulder and into my arms.

Cedric whipped around and tried to jerk Miles back by the foot. However, when he saw the cold look of anger in my eyes, he released his hold. He sneered at me before storming off towards Eliza.

Miles hugged me.

"Don't worry. I'm here. I won't let him hurt you." Carefully setting him down, I wiped the tears from his eyes and kissed him on both of his cheeks. "Take Cole's hand. You'll be safe."

Miles looked at Cedric and then to me. His eyes widened in fear.

I smiled at him. "It will be ok. Go on. Trust me."

The smell of lavender blew from the nearby bushes and comforted me. When we reached the crimson red forest, Gram took my hand. I weaved my fingers between hers and then turned to check on the rest of my family. Meg rested on my father's shoulder. Gently, he stroked her hair.

Groggily, my sister opened her eyes and smiled at me.

As we gazed at each other intensely, I knew she understood everything that had happened. I mouthed to her, "I love you."

With a sleepy grin, Meg winked and gave me the thumbs up.

Finally, we arrived at the stone table where Gram and I had made the memory spells. Out of the corner of my eye, a small flash caught my attention. When I turned to look, I saw a small, lavender light blink again. I gasped.

Gram squeezed my hand, confirming she had seen it, too.

The glow had flashed over a large nest-like opening in the ground coverings. The same nest from my dreams. A pulse emitted from my ring finger.

Gathering my confidence, I called out, "We need to go over here."

Eliza's eyes narrowed to a suspicious glare when I stepped into the center of the nest.

A cold rush of air enveloped me, and everything around me changed. I was no longer in the forest. I was standing inside a large nest of silver twigs. The ground surrounding it had a cover of soft white that shimmered with pastel colors and flecks of silver. Above me, the moon was full, and its light shined down on me.

“Listen to your heart,” the soft voice of the Goddess called to me.

Small bubbles of blue, red, green, orange, and silver floated around me. I held my hands up towards the sky above me. “Air, Fire, Water, and Earth, I call upon you. Your guidance and support are needed. In honor of the Goddess, I’ll keep my promise, but now, I ask for your assistance.”

The balls of light clung to my skin, sending a warm sensation through me. The magic intensely pulsed inside me. A blinding white light washed over me, and I was back in the circle, again.

Cole looked at me with concern on his face. I smiled reassuringly at him and stepped towards the outer ring. “Eliza, you’ll need to stand in the middle of this circle.”

Stepping into the nest, Eliza glided past me and into the center. “I hope you know what you are doing,” she hissed.

Me, too, I thought before sending a stream of colored light towards her. Trying to contain my surprise, I took a deep breath and watched as they surrounded her. *Listen to your heart,* I reminded myself.

“Gram, Cole, and Elliott, come into the circle,” I beckoned.

Elliott set Meg down and kissed her on her forehead. Miles took her hand, and my father affectionately tousled his hair.

One by one, the adults entered and joined us. When Cedric tried to follow, I held up my hands. “You need to stay out there.”

Startled, he stopped, but his disbelief quickly faded to anger. “This better not be a trick,” he snarled. Standing on the edge of the nest, he glowered at us.

I ignored Cedric’s threat, and I addressed my siblings. “Meg and Miles, move over by the table. We’ll need to focus, so you’ll need to be silent. Don’t move or interrupt me.”

Hoping they understood that I needed them to stay away in order to remain

safe, I turned back towards my family and began the unbinding. “Danu, with an open heart, I request the binding placed upon Eliza to be released.” I sent a stream of magic towards Gram. “Air, may your strong winds renew the pure magic.”

A powerful gust encircled my grandmother. She nodded at me, and then directed the air into the center, where it joined the colored lights twisting around Eliza.

“Fire, your gift of cleansing warmth is called upon.” I formed a ball of fire in my hand. From within the ball, long threads of Fire drifted outwards to surround Eliza.

The elements slowly lifted Eliza off the ground.

Reassured that my instincts were correct, I turned towards Cole. “Water, please, wash away and renew the magic that Eliza promised to protect.”

Cole held out his hands, and a stream of water droplets left his fingers. They floated above Eliza and showered down on her.

My eyes met my father's. “Earth, the blessing of your new life and growth are called upon. May the gift of new beginnings fill Eliza's heart.”

The ground below us shook and began to crack. A white flower grew from the ground underneath Eliza. The stems grew tall and wrapped around her legs and body. Soon, she was elevated even higher off the ground.

“It's working!” Eliza began to laugh uncontrollably as the colors of the elements spun around her.

“With the blessing of the elements, we ask for the gift of forgiveness and renewed faith. Goddess, we call upon you and ask you to undo what was done.” I lifted my arms towards the night sky.

A large crack sounded as a bolt of white lightning struck Eliza. Her body shook and convulsed before she went limp. The leaves of the flower surrounded her and formed a tight cocoon. *Did I kill her?* Unsure of what my next step should be, I faltered.

Gram stepped forward. “With the bindings I cast removed, Goddess, our request is complete. Thank you for the blessings you have bestowed upon us.”

The shell shook as it cracked and slowly opened. Gently, it lowered to the

ground. Eliza stepped out of the broken casing and laughed maniacally. "Cedric, it's back. It's really back. The magic is no longer bound. I'm, finally, restored."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Eliza's eyes grew dark, and the tips of her fingers glowed with green fire. Turning to face my grandmother, she cried, "You took what was given to me, and it can never be repaid."

"You were bound because you were using your gift selfishly. You didn't keep your promise to protect the magic. You were taught – no, you *vowed* – harm to none, and yet, your castings for the Drygens were used to hurt people." Gram released long tendrils of Air that flew at Eliza.

The magic struck and reeled her backward. When she gained her footing, she charged at my grandmother.

"Stop," I screamed, throwing a fireball at Eliza, and redirecting her attention towards me.

Cedric's large knife glinted, alerting me that he was entering the circle. In an attempt to stop him, I threw my fireball. This one stuck his thigh.

Cedric howled in pain, but the injury didn't stop him from rushing forward. Just as he reached me, he was tackled by my father and Cole.

While I was distracted by their fighting, I was knocked down by a cold electricity that surged through my body. The dark shadow of Eliza covered me. I looked up to see hatred in her eyes.

"You always loved her more," Eliza screamed. Her cries seemed to feed the flames blazing from her fingers. She threw more of her magic at me. This time, I was knocked into the center of the circle. "I was your mother, but you always ran to her."

Eliza's body glowed as the magic forming from her hands grew larger. I scrambled to stand but stumbled. The power she emitted kept zapping me. The agony threw my balance off and sent me to my knees. I gasped for air.

Don't give up, I scolded myself.

I refocused my magic on fighting what was running through me, and a warm wave of relief washed over me. However, the comfort was momentary, and I faltered, again, from the pain. Her magic was so strong. I didn't know how to push it out of me, and I collapsed. Again, I tried to tap into the magic inside me.

"Stop! Mara, your magic will only feed hers as it runs through you." Gram sent ribbons of air in my direction. "Her magic is dark now."

Eliza screamed and cast tendrils at her mother's healing gusts of air.

Once again, I tried to stand. My attempts were stalled as I was brought to my knees, again and again, by the excruciating pain.

"What's wrong, darling?" Eliza purred. "Are you having problems standing?"

Unwilling to back down, I tried, again, only to fall.

Eliza cackled with glee at my agony. Her sinister laugh filled the air as she loomed over me. "You were so eager to save everyone else that you forgot yourself." Eliza reeled back to heave her magic at me with more force.

The bolt of electricity she flung knocked the wind out of me, and I was thrown back, hitting my head against the ground. The pain running through my body was unbearable, and I gasped for breath. Blackness rushed over me, and I fought not to slip into it.

A hard kick to the side of my leg jolted me out of the darkness. I tried to pull myself away from the sharp blows that repeatedly struck me. *Stand up, or you will die!* I scowled at my weakness and struggled to rise to my feet. I would have to fight her, or she was going to kill me.

I pulled myself upright and focused all the energy I had left inside me on blowing Air at Eliza. The wind I was able to push at her tossed her backward, but it was not far or hard enough.

"Fire and Air?" Eliza cried with delight when she landed on her feet. "Marina, you really are full of surprises." She continued to taunt me. "Too bad

you won't be around to show me everything you are capable of.” She sent another bolt of electricity at me.

Just in time, I dodged her attack by rolling out of the way. Frustrated that she narrowly missed, Eliza screamed and began heaving multiple flashes of her magic at me. Calling Air to me, I created a barrier to stop it from hitting its mark.

“You're no match for me.” Eliza held her hands into the air. A fluorescent green blazed from her fingers, and she sent balls of her dark power at me. She wore a cruel smirk upon her bitter face.

She was right. My magic was not going to be strong enough to fight her. Every attack I repelled only seemed to feed her. When I missed blocking one of the bolts, I found myself struggling to stay standing, again, as sharp pins vibrated through me.

Eliza laughed. “Goodbye, Marina.”

This time, she held the magic in her hands until she formed a large orb that sparked with green fire. When she released it, the ball grew as it sailed towards me. Realizing I was not going to be able to stop it, I braced myself for impact.

Meg's screams resonated through the air, and I realized why when my grandmother shoved me out of the way. Crashing into the wall of the nest, I regained my composure and rolled over. Moments before Eliza's magic struck, I watched Gram cast a ball of white light at her estranged daughter.

Eliza was not prepared with a counterattack and was, unexpectedly, struck in the chest. It sent her flying backward. She landed outside of the circle, on top of Cedric. She shrieked in pain and rolled off of him.

Cedric stood up with a panicked look on his face. The knife he clutched dripped with blood, staining his hands. A spot of red grew around Eliza's midsection while the white glow of Gram's magic continued to pulse through her.

“Cedric, help me,” she rasped. As she tried to stop the blood that flowed from her, the blackness of her eyes melted to a soft green.

Cedric cut a strip of fabric off his shirt and drove the knife into the ground. “I can't stop the bleeding, Liza,” he whispered, his voice now breaking with

emotion. “We are so close to having it all, baby. Hang in there. You can't leave me. We can stop her.”

Eliza touched his face tenderly. “You still can. Don't let her control your future.” Her hand slipped away, leaving a bloody imprint in its wake. Her eyes closed, and her breathing slowed.

Cedric began to scream and pounded on the ground. “It's not your time. You're not meant to die.”

Cole took the knife from the ground. “Let go of her, Cedric.”

“She can't die!” Cedric cursed and dove at Cole.

Gram opened her blue pouch. Small tendrils of smoke slithered from the bag and blew towards Cedric. The strands wrapped themselves around his hands and feet. When he fell to the ground, the strands of silver entered his nostrils and open mouth. Soon, his cursing and cries ended. Cedric was silent.

Miles ran to Eliza and knelt down. He took her hand into his. The devastation in his youthful face was heartbreaking.

I went over and crouched down beside my little brother. I took our mother's hand from him and slipped the ring off her finger. Then, I handed it to the small boy. “This is yours now.”

Unsure what to do with the ring, he slipped it into his pocket. He leaned forward and kissed our mother on her cheek. Then, he whispered something inaudible into her ear.

Her eyes opened, and she looked at us. In a faint whisper, she said, “You will never be able to defeat her. She is stronger than you.”

Those were the last words she spoke. She slowly closed her eyes and as her final breath left her body, sadness washed over me. The sorrow I felt was not because she was gone, but rather, it was for Miles and Meg. My pain was, also, for my grandmother, who had lost her only daughter.

I remembered how broken I felt when my father had *died*, and when Eliza had disappeared. My father stood over my mother's body, and the grass around her grew. Soon, she was surrounded by flowers. “Goodbye, Eliza,” he said, his voice slightly cracking.

“Is he dead, too?” Miles tugged at the bottom of my father's jacket as he

pointed at Cedric. His green eyes filled with fear.

“No, Miles.” My father picked him up. “He's just sleeping.”

“He won't let me stay with you.” Miles began to cry. “Grandmother Blanche won't let him.”

“No, son, you are never going back there.” My father hugged him tightly. “Gram, Mara, Cole, Meg, and I will never let you go.” He turned to face my grandmother. “Isn't that right, Mae?”

Seeing his face turn white with fear, I looked to see what had alarmed him.

My grandmother was lying on the ground.

“No,” I screamed and ran to her. I fell to the earth next to her. She was ghost-white and shivering. “Gram, tell me what to do. How can I help?”

Gram gripped my hand. I could feel Eliza's dark magic running through her. I hugged her tightly, ignoring the electricity.

“Please, Goddess, help me,” I pleaded through my tears.

Cole took her from me. She looked like a small child in his arms. “You're going to be fine, Mae. Let's get you home.” Turning towards my father, I stopped him from trying to pick up Cedric. “Leave him, Elliott.”

“Come on, Daddy.” Meg took his hand.

Flowers grew around Cedric and vines secured him to the ground. I watched as a crown of pink flowers surrounded his head. Glancing up, I caught the smirk on my little sister's face.

Noticing I was staring at her, Meg smiled and shrugged.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

When we arrived home, Gram insisted on being laid on the couch. I covered her with blankets and sat next to her. I held her icy hands tightly in mine.

“What can we do to stop the magic running through you?” I questioned. “Tell me which spell to cast or what potion to make.”

Panic filled me. It was horrific to watch my strong grandmother in such a feeble state. There had never been a day in my life when I’d seen her sick or unable to take action. She was my rock. I needed her strength. Worse, it was my fault she was...dying.

“Mara, love, there isn't anything you can do to stop this. The only thing you need to do is to take care of them for me.” Gram weakly motioned to my family, scattered around the living room. She grimaced as she saw their somber expressions. “Help me up,” she insisted. “My last moments in this world will not be lying on a couch.”

“No, no, no!” Meg cried out and ran over to her. “Gram, don't die. Please, please, don't die and leave me.”

Our grandmother opened her arms and embraced Meg, holding her close. “My little dancer, it will be ok. Dry your tears. You need to be strong now.”

Gram winced in pain as she struggled to stand. I knew what she was experiencing – the waves of cold electricity were still rolling through her body. Still, she pushed past the pain and hobbled, with my assistance, towards the

kitchen.

“Put the kettle on, and let's have some tea,” she said, sitting at the table.

I wasn't sure if she truly wanted the beverage or if she was too weak to go on.

“It'll take the chill out of these old bones.”

I wiped away my tears. They wouldn't help her and they, certainly, wouldn't help my siblings. Instead, I pulled down the container of Gram's special herbal blend and biscuits.

“Miles and Meg, come join me.” Gram patted the tabletop.

I laid out the cups and set the teapot on the table in front of my grandmother.

Meg and Miles sat one on each side of her as she told them, “When I was a little girl, my mother would make me a cup of her special tea.”

I filled our cups, inhaling the familiar orange zest of the brew. As she must have known it would, it soothed me, easing away some of the darkness. Then, just as my grandmother had always done, I added a splash of milk to each drink.

Gram weakly placed a biscuit on the saucer. She picked up her teacake. “Now, take your cookie like this and give it a long dunk. Don't wait too long, though, or it'll disappear.” Taking the soaked biscuit out of the tea, she popped it into her mouth.

Laughing, Meg and Miles copied her.

“Elliott and Cole, come have a cup of tea with us.” Both men were standing by the sink. They looked more frightened than the children. “Mara, you haven't touched your drink, yet. You don't want it to get cold.” The look on her face beseeched me to be strong.

Dipping my biscuit in the tea, I let it soak before I popped it into my mouth. “Delicious,” I said with a forced smile.

“Now, Miles, there is one thing you should know about Mara,” Gram said earnestly. “She needs to be reminded not to be too serious. Can you promise to remind her to have fun?”

Miles threw his arms around her neck. “I promise, Gram.”

“I knew I could count on you.” She hugged him tightly.

“I love you, Gram,” Miles whispered.

“And I love you, little one.” Our grandmother squeezed him, one last time, before letting go of him. She held him in front of her and brushed the hair out of his eyes. She kissed his cheek and said with a crack in her voice, “Miles, my angel, I’m a bit tired now, and I think I should go lie down. I want you to know that my love for you will never end. Can you remember that?”

My brother nodded, and his eyes brimmed with tears. Gently, he kissed her on the cheek. “I’ll always remember, Gram.”

Elliott took Miles by the hand and said, “Let me show you Chester’s woodshop. You will be able to build so many things there.”

Weakly, Gram grabbed my father’s hand as he walked by.

He released Miles and knelt down beside her.

In a soft whisper, meant only for him, she said, “Protect them all for me. You must choose to protect them over saving yourself.”

Elliott stood up and kissed Gram on the head. His voice was filled with love and gratitude. “Thank you, Mae, for everything. I’ll not let you down again.”

My grandmother nodded. She struggled to stand, but Cole caught her as she faltered.

“Mae, if you wanted me to sweep you off your feet, you only had to ask.” Cole scooped her up before she collapsed.

Too weak to argue, Gram rested her head against his shoulder. She gave him a fragile smile as he carried her to her room. As he laid her on the bed, she put her hand on his cheek. “Cole, I need you to take care of my girls. Can you do that for me?”

“Don’t talk like that, Gram,” Cole said, his voice breaking with emotion. “You’ll be here to keep me in line for many years to come.”

She gripped his hand desperately. “Can you promise me that you will...when the time comes, then?”

Cole hugged her tightly. “I promise, Gram.”

“You know you were the grandson I always wanted. Never forget how proud I have always been of you.” Gram’s voice was now barely above a whisper. “Now, I need to rest. Mara and Meg, come lay beside me.”

We climbed into her bed like we had done many times before. Both of us

rested our heads on her shoulder. Snuggled against her, I strained to hear Gram's words.

“Mara, in my journal, you will find a key to Chester's safe. He left enough money to take care of you for many years if you spend it wisely. Meg, you're still a little girl. There'll be plenty of time for you to grow up. Can you both do as you are told and remember everything I taught you?”

Crying softly, Meg nodded.

Unable to speak, I squeezed Gram's hand, confirming I would do as she asked.

“Good.” Gram closed her eyes, and prayed, “Goddess, watch over my girls and guide them. I invoke the elements and pray for their guidance and strength.”

I could feel her breathing begin to slow. Holding her tighter, I held back my tears. “Gram,” I whispered, “I promise to remember everything you taught me.”

Then, she was still. I choked on my sobs as I struggled for composure. *She can't be gone. I need her with me.*

A warmth grew from Gram's body, and I watched in awe as a violet light filled the room and surrounded us. The hand of the Goddess extended before us, beckoning the spirit of my grandmother. Lifting from the body lying next to me, she accepted the outstretched hand. Gram looked over her shoulder at us and smiled before she walked into the light.

Suddenly, the room around us glowed even brighter. The radiant white light was overpowering. Then, it was replaced with hundreds of small, colored lights, and I knew we were surrounded by the elementals.

Crying harder, Meg held onto Gram's body.

Taking her hand, I whispered, “She's gone, Meg, but she went to a better place. One full of love and light. One day, when it is our time, we'll join her.” Picking up my sister, I hugged her tightly. “She will always be in our hearts.”

When I set her back on her feet, she took my hand in mine, and we left the room to rejoin our grieving family.

EPILOGUE

Gram left us more than the food she prepared and basic necessities. Somehow, she managed to leave notes around the house to remind us how much she loved us. Despite those things, the house was not the same without her.

The night we went to get Meg and Miles, she knew how everything would end. Gram had foreseen the future and done her best to prepare us for life without her. The reality of that fact was both admirable and heartbreaking.

Just where she told me, I found the small key to my grandfather's safe in the lavender journal she was always writing in. As I turned the cover to read it, a small envelope fell out. On the outside of it, my name was written in Gram's handwriting. I inhaled the sweet scent of lavender and vanilla, and I began to read her letter:

“

My Dear Mara,

In Chester's workshop, you will find a safe behind my grandmother's armoire. Chester made sure there was enough money for us to live comfortably, and I have only added to it. The amount in there would make the Drygens look poor, but no one must know about it. Money makes people act funny. You will be safer to live your life simply, as we always have done.

When I thought I would never have any more children, my heart was saddened. However, I knew the Goddess had something better

in store for me. Little did I know, it would be in the form of a dark-haired girl with more magic in her heart than I had in my whole body. And a sassy ball of fire, who reminded me to savor every bit of life. A boy with a heart of gold that showed me love could be endless. And, the boy – who I had loved even before we met...the same child who will need you now, more than ever.

You have all blessed my life and my heart. Keep your promise to protect the magic and you will never go wrong.

Love Always,
Gram

As I finished, Meg and Miles came down the loft stairs. Both had somber looks on their faces.

“Now, there will be none of that.” I put the letter back into the journal. “We're going to celebrate Gram's life, so come, eat the pancakes that Cole has made for you and try not to spill on your clothes.”

“You sound like her, Mara,” Meg said sadly as a tear dropped from her eyes.

Hugging them both, I said, “She's still here with us. Gram is in our hearts – always. So, let's be strong and honor her memory.”

Breakfast lifted our spirits, and we were ready for the celebration. The town had banded together and planned a festival to commemorate Gram's life. We would not mourn her passing, but rather, rejoice in the life she gave us.

When we arrived on Main Street, I was shocked to see the crowd. I knew my grandmother had been well-liked, but I'd never seen an event like this before for anyone. Everything had been decorated as if it was the Summer Moon Festival, and hundreds of people had come to celebrate. My father had even set up Gram's stand, and Mrs. Everstone was behind it. She handed out cookies and slices of bread with jam my grandmother had made.

“Mae once told me that life was our gift from the Goddess and what we did

with it was our gift back to her,” said the voice of Mrs. Ward from the stage. “In my sixty-two years, I’ve never met anyone as giving and kind as Mae Silver Veracor. My wish for everyone here is to remember the love she gave us. I pray we will carry it on.”

As people went up on the stage to speak about their memories of my grandmother, they each told a story of how she influenced their lives. When I saw the next person in line, my heart stopped. Wearing a dark red dress and matching red lipstick, there was no mistaking the silver-haired woman about to speak was Blanche Drygen.

Miles and Meg both grabbed my hands and moved closer towards me when they recognized her. As I tried to reassure them, I searched the crowd around us, looking to see if there was any other danger around. It appeared we were surrounded only by the friendly faces of friends and family. There was no sign of Cedric or anyone else unfamiliar to me.

As Blanche tried to accept the microphone, to take her turn, my father stepped in line and took her place. Smiling at her, he said, “Excuse my interruption. Everyone, Mae would appreciate all of your kind words. Nevertheless, we all know she wouldn’t want us to spend the day talking about her. Instead, let’s eat, be merry, and spend the rest of our time together celebrating the woman we all loved. That really is the only way to tell her we got the message she taught us – so let the party begin.”

The band began to play, and the crowd cheered. Soon, the dance floor was flooded with people moving to upbeat music. Blanche, however, stormed off the stage and smacked right into Cole.

The cold look in his eyes surprised me. It made me feel more relieved that my father had interceded, preventing her from speaking.

Cole clutched her arm and whispered something in her ear. I watched as she went white with fear and broke away from him. By the time he returned to me, the anger from his eyes had faded.

“She is gone and shouldn’t be back today.” He picked Miles up and took my hand. “Now, let’s paint the town red for Gram.”

Laughing, we joined the crowd and began to dance. Tugging on my hand,

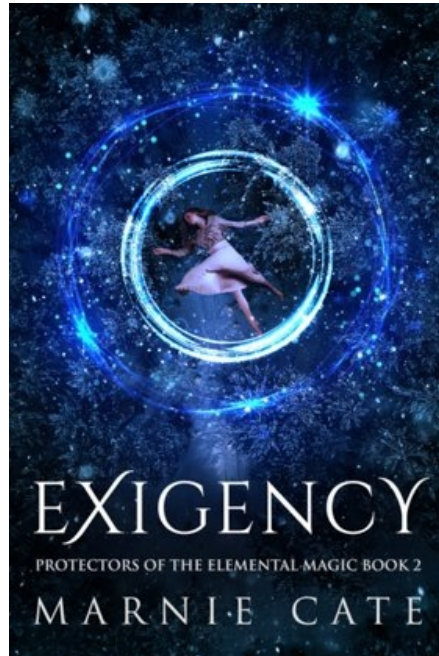
Meg whispered, “They are here, Mar. They are over there.”

As I looked towards the light posts, I saw Breeze, Blaze, Bay, and Daisy twirling and dancing in merriment. When they saw us, they waved.

Smiling, I took a deep breath and said confidently, “Bright blessings, Danu, Bright blessings.”

Today was not the time to worry about what we would face tomorrow. The Drygens would be our problem for another day. In this moment, all we could do was celebrate my grandmother's life – and we did.

Next in the Series:
Exigency
(Protectors of the Elemental Magic Book 2)



Mara Stone's world was shaken, but she's a fighter. As she rebuilds her life, the web of her family's secrets continues to unravel. Facing new adversaries while having to confront her fear of losing everything she holds dear, Mara learns what it truly means to Protect the Magic.

Trapped in the cold world of Snowstrum, Mara and Cole are faced with a choice. Will they choose to be true to their promises, or fall prey to their greed and follow their own desires instead? Will magic be enough to free them from the icy fortress imprisoning them?

The second book in the Protectors of the Elemental Magic series, *Exigency*, is a compelling tale of fantasy, magic and coming of age.

[Exigency](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Marnie Cate is a writer of coming of age and urban fantasy novels. Born in an Irish mining town in Montana, she always had a flair for the dramatic and a vivid imagination, and spent her childhood lost in the elaborate worlds she created with the help of her dolls.

One day, Marnie Cate was struck by a powerful image in her mind. This seed created the world of Starten and the complicated world of goddesses and their touch on the mortal world.

Inspired by the actress Dame Judi Dench, she pursued her dream of sharing the stories that were brewing in her mind. With the urging of friends and family, she wrote in every spare moment she had.

After countless weekends spent at the local coffee shop, typing away and people watching, Marnie finished her first novel, *Remember: Protectors of the Elemental Magic*. With the world of elemental magic and the humans they lived in released, the stories have just begun.

Her book, *Chasing Caitlyn*, has inspired Marnie to expand her writing genre to include Adult Fiction. When not writing, Marnie is drinking coffee while spending time with her family and her beloved kitty. She lives in Arizona.

To learn more about Marnie Cate, visit her [author page on Next Chapter's website](#).