

The Four Sworn: Summer Solstice
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Chapter 1

Tendrils of steam rose from the collection of mugs congregated on the tile countertop, the strong aroma of tea and coffee mingling in the air. A gentle and enticing smell of cinnamon wafted up from a plate of buns that Abby placed on the counter amidst the mugs. She dragged a stool toward her as she grabbed a bun and took a seat. Nibbling at the warm pastry, she glanced across the counter at her friend Sara who was flanked on one side by her boyfriend, Joe, and on her other by William. William's eyes lit up his lined face with interest as he eyed the plate of buns. He looked toward Abby eagerly.

"Go ahead." Abby gestured with a casual wave toward him in answer to his unvoiced question. William smiled and eagerly reached for a bun. "Help yourselves, you two." She casually waved at Sara and Joe as she bowed her head back toward her steaming mug.

A lock of her chestnut colored hair fell across her eyes as she sipped her coffee. She pushed it back and tucked it behind her ear. She cleared her throat in preparation to speak but found herself at a loss for words. *How do you broach such a topic?* She wondered. *Where do I start?* Maybe it had all been a dream, a hallucination of some sort. She cast an anxious glance across the counter and carefully looked at each face. Would they all be here if it was a hallucination? Definitely not William Walker, that's for sure. Joe, Sara and Abby hadn't even known William last year. Abby watched them carefully. Each of them seemed much too preoccupied with their coffee and buns, and Abby couldn't help but notice that they all deliberately avoided her eyes.

It was hard to believe that now they were all good buddies, the kind that you get from a shared experience, like a war. And it *had* been a war! A war in Feyland, the land where fairy folk existed. Abby hadn't even considered that fairies were real, let alone living in a realm of their own, and she sure didn't expect to one day have the abilities of the fire vessel, one who could embody the powers of the fire element. Sara, her best friend, was imbued with the power of the air element, and Joe, another local artist, became the vessel for the earth element. William Walker, psychic artist from England, was the water vessel. Out of the four of them, only William had his powers most of his life. The four of them found each other and helped to prevent an overthrow of the fairy realm which, if it had been successful, would have had severe repercussions for the human world, too. The Evil Bad Guy—Thaddeus, was dead. The veil between the fairy world and the human world was kept intact and everything turned out alright, barring a few casualties. Her husband, Dan, was among the wounded. Abby still had a lot of questions about much of what had happened.

They are being much too quiet, she thought as she glanced once more across the counter. She realized that while she was sitting there in silent contemplation, Sara, Joe and William's eyes were now riveted upon her, their bodies stiff and motionless as if they were sitting at attention awaiting orders.

"I, uh, wasn't going to say anything," she blurted out sheepishly. *God, that was stupid*, she chastised herself. But she wanted to say something. Anything.

"How's Dan doing?" Sara enquired softly as she picked up her mug and cupped both hands around it.

Abby started. “What? Oh, he’s good, good,” she answered quickly, her voice a little higher than usual. “He’s...” Abby took a large gulp from her mug, “...recovering. It’s been slow, but he’s doing well.”

“Does he remember anythin’?” William enquired as he wiped his mouth with a napkin.

“No.” Abby’s eyes were misty as she turned her head slightly to gaze out the small window of her kitchen. “He dreams about it,” she whispered, still staring off in the distance. “Sometimes he screams out loud.” She turned away from the window and fixed her gaze on William. “He says he doesn’t remember the nightmares in the mornings either, but afterward he always seems so, so--,”

“Shaken?” Joe asked tentatively.

“More like haunted.” Abby shuddered and closed her eyes for a moment.

“Did it all really happen?” Sara blurted out, setting down her mug to scratch her head, tousling her blonde hair. “I mean, we can talk about it, now that it’s over, right?” Sara looked at the others.

William snorted. “Aye yeah. I start telling people I’m the vessel for the water element and that I helped teh save the world from an evil man from fairyland, and they’ll be locking this old fart away in a loony bin. I’ll not be telling that story anytime soon, thank you very much.”

Joe nodded, his dark eyes solemn. “I agree with William. I don’t think that I would keep my teaching job long if I spoke of my ability and our adventure in Feyland. Even in the native community, the other realms are not spoken of lightly.”

Sara’s face reddened. “No, no, I’m not saying we should call CNN or anything, but we can talk about it, can’t we?” Sara eyed each of them. “To each other,” she added quickly.

Abby felt a rush of excitement. It was the opening she was dreading but also hoping for, but it was even better since she didn’t have to initiate the conversation. “What exactly did you want to talk about, Sara?” Abby spoke carefully, hoping her voice sounded casual.

Sara moved closer, perched on the edge of the bar stool as she leaned further over the counter. “Well, lots of things, really.” Her blues eyes were as big as marbles and bright with excitement. “But the one thing I am dying to know is—do you guys *still* have your abilities?”

William turned his gray head sharply to glance at Sara. He crossed his arms over his chest, his mouth thin and taut. “Well, I’ve always had mine, haven’t I?” He responded gruffly.

Abby rolled her eyes in annoyance. “I don’t think Sara meant that question as an affront to you, William. I think she was directing it at us.” Abby motioned at herself, Joe and Sara with a sweeping, circular motion of her hand. “We’re the newbies, remember?”

William harrumphed in response and returned his attention once again to the plate of cinnamon buns on the counter. Sara continued to stare at Abby. She was sitting in rapt attention on the edge of the stool, her eyes alert. Abby pursed her lips together, her eyes searching the room as she shifted uncomfortably on the stool. She was seeking an answer—hopefully, the right answer—to Sara’s question. Could she confess to Sara she had been too afraid to try? Afraid that she would still possess her abilities and once again lack control over them? Dan’s time in the hospital after he was attacked by Thaddeus, and the four of them defeating him in the battle at the elemental temple, followed by Dan’s slow recovery from the attack had left her exhausted and drained. She was so busy taking care of Dan, too afraid to leave him alone, and even more afraid that if she used her powers around him and—if they worked--that it would remind him of what danger he had faced because of her. After all, Dan never would have been hurt if Thaddeus hadn’t wanted to hurt *her*, to take *her* out of the fight.

Sara looked at Abby, her eyes scanning her face as if reading her thoughts. Sara reached across the counter and placed a hand on Abby's, giving it a gentle squeeze. "I know you are afraid to try, Abby," she said softly. "Out of all of us, you've had the hardest time. But remember what Gabe said to you. You were the only fire vessel that learned to control your abilities, and it is the hardest one to master. You've got to give yourself some credit for being a strong person. You did it before, Sweetie. You can do it again."

Abby looked at Sara, her eyes dark. "I never wanted this. I never asked for this."

Joe cleared his throat. "Abby, none of us asked for this. We were chosen. Why we were chosen, I can't answer that. There are answers I'm sure, but we may never possess them. Maybe it is simply that we have the strength to handle it. Perhaps that alone is explanation enough."

"The water sprite said that we are of 'noble birth' or something like that when it sang to us," Sara interjected. "I wonder what that means."

William snorted. "What didya do, Sara? Memorize the whole damn song?"

"Well, I think it was to give us clues to more than how we had to defeat Thaddeus and restore the veil between our world and Feyland. I think it was to give us clues to why we were chosen to be vessels." Sara tossed her head. "I plan to study it more. I think we'll find the answers." Sara patted Abby's hand.

Abby smiled thinly and then turned toward William. "Aren't you supposed to be taking your show down today?" Abby asked politely.

William looked at her with an eyebrow raised. "Why? Yeh that anxious to get rid of me?"

Abby rolled her eyes. "Gotta throw water on everything. Don't you, William?"

William laughed and smiled. "Yeh, I'm packing up today and tomorrow the movers will be arrivin' to pack the truck."

"Will you be returning home then?" Abby asked quietly.

"Well, some of me work is going to another gallery up in northern Michigan. I can stay for a couple more weeks, so I thought I could do a little sightseeing, check out some of the touristy things before I head back across the pond and home to England."

"What about Rhysdale?" Abby asked carefully. "Won't she be missing you?"

William blushed slightly. "Well, she's almost completely recovered from her injuries. I stayed in Feyland a bit to make sure she was alright, and I can always use the Omphalos to visit her from here."

Joe looked down at his watch. "Hey, we better get going. We've got to get William over to the gallery to pack up, and Sara and I are volunteering there at a new art class for teens that starts today." Joe looked at Sara and then to Abby. "Hey, I've got an idea. Why don't you come along to the class?"

Abby looked at Joe. "You know I'm not good with two dimensional art."

Joe smiled. "You don't have to be. I could give you some clay to toss around, show you how to hand-build a bowl or something. Just come and hang out. You'd be very surprised at how enthusiastic these kids are. It's really contagious." Joe smiled at Abby, waiting for an answer.

They're really trying to help.... Abby smiled back. "Let me check on Dan first and make sure he'll be okay." She started up the stairs as the others moved from the counter and put their coats on. She stopped on the last step. Did they still have their powers? Momentarily shocked by the realization that none of them had answered, she hesitated before making her way down the hall to the master bedroom.

Abby happily donned her sunglasses as she drove to the gallery. While it was still cool and crisp outside, the brightness of the sun shining through the windshield of her van was warming, and it felt good to leave the confines of the four walls of her house. At first she felt guilty leaving Dan home alone, but his enthusiastic urging seemed a little too eager. That made her feel even more guilty, that perhaps she was being too smothering or, even worse, he was getting sick of her company.

Abby sighed. While she knew their relationship was good and stable, she understood that they just weren't one of those couples that would spend every waking moment together. They would never morph into one of those retired couples that appeared to be perpetually attached at the hip and dressed alike when they went anywhere in public. Abby strained to remember if she'd ever even purchased an article of clothing for Dan. Or knit him a sweater. Maybe she would knit him a scarf for Christmas, she thought idly, as she divided her attention between the road in front of her and the fields and trees in the surrounding area. Patches of snow were still evident, most of it fading to muddy puddles in the fields. The box elder trees, sumacs and maples that lined the dirt road were budding, proof that the Spring Equinox had definitely put winter behind them.

Abby caught herself humming as she followed Joe's truck into the Harmon City Gallery parking lot. Sara and Joe hopped out and quickly entered the gallery while William ambled slowly in the parking lot. He stopped and waited for her as she hopped out of her van and strode over to him. She slipped her arm through his and stepped into pace with him as they walked.

"If yeh gets bored with that lot, yeh tell them yeh need teh come upstairs and help me pack or something. It'll give yeh an out, if yeh need one," William spoke quietly, his expression changing as if he were in some sort of pain. "It's hard at first," William added in a softer tone.

Abby raised an eyebrow. "What is?"

"It's hard to leave them while they heal," William added slowly. "But he'll be okay for a bit. Yeh need a break."

"Voice of experience talking, Wills?", Abby asked as she tightened her grip on his arm and nudged his shoulder as they walked toward the building.

"Yep," he replied. "So yeh better listen to yer elders."

Abby patted his arm gently. "You know, Wills, I just might this time. But don't go thinking I'm gonna all the time."

"Nah, yeh like fighting with me too much."

"Yeah, about as much as you do," Abby retorted as she cast him a sideways glance.

William laughed and pulled open the door for her. Abby blew him a sarcastic kiss and made her way down the creaky wooden staircase to the classroom in the basement.

The classroom was full of bright artificial light that emphasized the bold colorful artwork displayed on the walls. Wooden easels and worn heavy wooden stools were scattered at various angles throughout the room, facing toward a large square platform on which Sara was setting up an array of fruit, some empty bottles and an old, black Victorian ladies boot.

Abby looked puzzled. "What's the boot for?"

Sara set the boot down and stepped back to examine the arrangement. "I thought it would be good to help students draw texture and shadow," she answered as she continued to stare at it. "Why, do you think it's too much?" She bit her lip as she took a step back to examine the result.

"I dunno," Abby shrugged. "It's not my area of expertise."

She caught movement at the back of the room. Joe was setting round balls of clay onto an L-shaped counter, dropping each ball with a soft, wet thud. Joe looked up and smiled at Abby. “Are you gonna try some clay work today Ab?”

Abby looked at the platform Sara was appraising again. *Too complicated for me*, she thought. She turned back to Joe. “Sure, why not,” Abby answered. “But I’ve never worked with clay before,” she confessed, a sheepish look on her face.

Joe was rolling a small ball on the counter with the palm of his right hand. “I could do clay all day,” he spoke wistfully. “From the first time I touched it, I knew what I was meant to do.”

Abby nodded. “Yeah, it was like that for me too, the first time I ever held an acetylene torch in my hands. Thank goodness I was drawn to metal-work. I think my father thought I was a closet arsonist.”

Joe and Sara laughed.

“Well, we better get ready. They’ll be trickling in soon,” Joe said as he picked up a box, fished out a smock and handed it to Abby.

Before long, the room was set up and teens were milling around, standing nervously in groups in the midst of the room. Some of the girls were talking while others were taking in the room and checking each other out. Abby sat on a stool at the back counter, watching them and waiting. Sara gave her a nervous smile from across the room as she stood quietly beside the still life on the platform while Joe strode calmly to the front of the room. At well over six feet tall, his long glossy hair and handsome dark features definitely made him stand out from the teens. The chattering and murmuring gave way as a silent hush fell over the room. Several of the young girls cast him appraising looks.

“Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome,” Joe began. “This program is offering instruction in two artistic mediums. I will be leading a clay hand-building workshop at the back counter and my associate Sara,” he turned and motioned toward Sara who smiled in response, “will be leading a still life drawing session.”

Abby watched two of the teen boys nudge each other and stare appreciatively at Sara.

Joe continued. “If you would move into the section you wish to participate in, we can begin once everyone is settled. Any questions?” He looked at each of the dozen or so teenagers’ blank faces. “No? Good! Let’s get to work.” Joe flashed a gleaming white smile as he strode to the back of the room.

After much scraping of chairs, it appeared obvious that the majority of seats at the counter were occupied by girls, and the easels were occupied by the boys, some peeking shyly around their easels at Sara, others openly gawking at her.

I forgot how beautiful Sara is, Abby thought as she watched Sara bend over in front of the still life to rearrange the boot once more. Abby smiled. She had also forgotten how blissfully unaware Sara was about her looks. The crash of a toppling easel caused everyone in the room to jump. Sara rushed over to help a very red-faced boy set the easel upright, while his friends watched and snickered.

Joe sighed and quickly turned his attention to the group of mostly teenage girls assembled at the counter. He gave Abby a weak smile before he quickly moved through the steps of hand-building a stoneware pot. After asking if they had any questions, the group donned smocks and began rolling the clay and shaping it in their hands as he had instructed. The clay was cool in Abby’s hands, but the sensation of touching it, forming it and even its earthy scent was surprisingly relaxing. Soon she had a mostly symmetrical round bowl in front of her. She looked around the room, checking out the other bowls in what she hoped was in a nonchalant

manner. To her left, a young girl was gingerly rubbing her fingers along the sides of her almost perfect bowl. Catching Abby's glance, she gave her a shy smile.

"Why are you doing that?" Abby asked as she peered more closely at the bowl.

The girl cast a shy sideways look as she continued to rub her bowl. "It helps to smooth out the surface, to eliminate fingerprints," she answered simply as she remained focused on her work.

"Oh." Abby glanced down at her bowl. A few minutes before, she had been proud that her first attempt at a bowl was reasonably respectable. Now that she scrutinized it more carefully, it had more bumps and craters on its surface than Mars, and it had so many fingerprints all over it, it would make a CSI team drool with delight. Abby ran a clay covered hand through her hair.

"Well, I suck," she blurted flatly as she scowled at her bowl.

The girl beside her gasped loudly. "No! You don't suck at all," she offered in a reassuring tone. The girl's attention was on Abby's bowl now. She gently picked up the bowl and started to rub the outside.

"See? It smoothes it right out." She handed it carefully back to Abby. "Go on. You try it."

Abby shrugged but took the bowl and began to smooth its surface, mimicking the girl's technique. She was surprised at how effective it was at removing the offending fingerprints and pockmarks.

"Thanks," Abby said as she gave the girl a weak smile.

"Is this your first time working with clay?" the girl asked as she pulled an elastic from her light brown hair and pulled her hair back into a ponytail again.

Abby looked at her and smiled. "It's that obvious, huh?"

The girl smiled back, her dark eyes sparkling. "Just a bit. My name's Aurora, but my friends call me Rory." She wiped her hand on her smock and extended it to Abby.

"I'm Abby. Nice to meet you." Abby quickly wiped her hand and shook Rory's extended hand.

Rory placed her bowl on a newspaper-lined tray and turned back to Abby.

"Not to be nosy or anything, but aren't you a little old for this class?"

Abby laughed. Usually she would have been pissed if someone had been so forward with her, especially someone so young, but Abby could sense there was no malice in the question.

"Yeah, I guess I am. Joe and Sara here are my friends. The three of us are artists, but I do metalwork mostly. They thought I should get out and come today." Abby looked at Rory carefully, trying to detect any sarcasm that may have been directed at her that she might have missed. Instead, she saw a pleasant olive-skinned face with large eyes so dark that you couldn't determine where the irises were, or if she had any at all.

"Cool. What kind of metalwork do you do?" Rory sat attentively and listened as Abby explained the type of work she did, working with found objects and making jewelry. Rory asked the odd question and Abby answered them, marveling at how mature and intelligent this teenage girl appeared to be.

"So how long have you been working with clay?" Abby asked, hoping to divert the focus of the conversation.

"Oh, since I was a little kid, at least five or six years give or take," Rory replied. "I'm trying all things, you know? Maybe find something I'm really good at." She cast an eye toward her bowl and gave it a last brush with her forefinger.

"How old are you now?" Abby asked.

“Seventeen. I’ll be eighteen this year, and I’m graduating in June.” She pulled the elastic back out of her hair and jammed it into a pocket of her jeans. I just gotta figure out where I’m going after high school. You know, like, have a plan.”

Abby set her bowl back on the counter. “Yeah, having a plan is good.”

“Are you ladies done already?” Joe’s voice startled Abby. He picked up Rory’s bowl gently and gave it an appreciative nod. “Great work as usual, Rory,” Joe said as he set the bowl down delicately. He picked up Abby’s bowl next. “Great job on your first piece, Abby! I’m impressed!” he enthused as he turned it over several times before gently replacing it on the tray.

Abby gave Rory a sideways look and a conspiratorial smile. “I may have had a little help.”

“Well, great job, ladies.” Joe picked up the trays and placed them on a wire shelf behind him. “I should have these fired and ready for glazing for next class,” Joe said.

Abby took off her smock and grabbed her coat and bag.

“Are you gonna stick around and wait for Sara and me to finish up?” Joe asked as she put on her coat.

Abby looked up. “Um, yeah. I just thought I’d go up and see how William’s doing with his packing. I’ll see you guys upstairs. Is that okay?”

Joe nodded and smiled. “Sure, no probs. Won’t be long. Class is almost over.” He glanced quickly at his watch.

Rory stood up and placed her smock on the counter. “I gotta jam too, Mr. Asine. I’m meeting my grandma after class.”

“Okay, see you next week, Rory.” Joe gave her a little wave.

Rory returned the wave as she strode out of the room behind Abby. Abby gave Sara a little wink as she headed for the stairs. Rory was standing at the staircase, buttoning her olive-drab military jacket.

“You gonna be here next week?” Rory asked.

Abby watched as she fumbled with her bag. “I dunno. Maybe,” she answered hesitantly.

“Well if you are, maybe after class you could show me some of your work up in the gallery?” Rory looked at her expectantly.

“Yeah, I could do that. Sure.” Abby walked carefully up the dark stairs. “Hey, thanks for your help today, Rory.”

“No problem. Well, I gotta fly. Catchya later.” Rory bolted up the stair and out the main gallery door as Abby reached the top step.

Abby strolled past a sign that read EXHIBIT CLOSED! She made her way into the main gallery room. Wooden crates, cardboard and packing noodles were scattered everywhere amidst the artwork that was hanging on or stacked precariously against walls. The sound of William muttering was coming from the furthest corner of the room, his torso almost completely immersed inside a crate. Unwilling to face his wrath for startling him, Abby wandered over to the front window and sat down on the sill as William emerged, still muttering from the crate and wiping his brow with his hand. Catching sight of Abby he stopped muttering.

“Get tired of playing in the mud?” he asked.

“No. Well, I finished early, I guess.” Abby turned her gaze out the window.

“Well, I think it’s time for a bit of a break. I’ll see if I can get that girl, what’s-her-name, to scare us up some tea. You want one?” William asked.

“What? Oh sure, thanks.” Abby spoke absently as she continued to gaze out the window. She saw Rory standing just off to the side of the gallery entrance. She was looking across the

road, waving frantically. Abby followed her gaze and caught sight of a slender, tall, gray-haired woman on the other side of the street.

Must be the kid's grandma, she thought, observing the similar olive complexion and high cheek bones. From Abby's perspective, the woman didn't look like she was in any particular hurry to join her granddaughter. Rory's grandma turned slightly toward the street, and Abby noticed that her mouth was moving rapidly and she was gesticulating rather wildly with both of her hands. She was obviously having an animated, intense conversation with someone. Abby craned her neck to see if she could catch a glimpse of who she was speaking with, but her body was blocking Abby's view.

"Hey Abby, I got us some tea and biscuits." William's voice echoed loudly in the cluttered space, and it jolted Abby from the scene outside the window. She smiled as William brought the tray over and set it down on the windowsill beside her and pulled over a chair.

"You know, Wills, they're called cookies over here," she teased as she bit into one.

William took up a biscuit, dunked it in his tea and stuffed it ravenously in his mouth, chasing it down with a large gulp of tea. "I don't care what yeh call 'em, just as long as yeh can eat 'em," William declared as he joined Abby in gazing out the window.

Rory was standing on the curb as she waited for her grandmother to cross the street. The old woman greeted her and gave her a big hug and kiss on the cheek. Smiling and chatting, they wandered up the street together, followed by their shadows cast long behind them by the bright spring sun. *Whatever had her bothered certainly isn't a problem now*, Abby thought, wondering what had made her so agitated. As she was about to turn away from the window a motion on the sidewalk caught her eye. *The shadows of the two women moved*. The shadows merged together into one humanoid blob and slithered across the road and out of sight. Abby blinked twice, not really believing what she just saw.

"Oh shit!" William blurted loudly, his tea cup rattling as he hurriedly set it back on the tray as he jumped out of his chair. "Excuse me language," he apologized, blushing.

Abby gave him a reproachful look and watched him continue to stare out of the window. "What is it? Did you see that too?" Abby stood up and leaned forward, trying to follow William's gaze. She immediately noticed what caught William's attention. Those leather pants. That vest. And a black fedora hat that looked like it had once been a prop in the Blues Brothers movie. It made his head look like it was all hat on a wild grizzled beard. But there was no mistaking who the diminutive man was.

"Gabe." They uttered in unison as they watched him bolt across the road in just enough time to make the signal. Gabe, a man from Feyland who had been their—for lack of a better word—handler. Sara thought he was a gnome, but Abby wasn't so sure. Whatever he was, he was heading straight for the gallery. Abby and William almost bowled each other over to get to the door as he entered. He scowled at them silently, his beady blue eyes like cold shards of glass.

"Hope you two wasn't planning to spend the day staring out the bloody window," he said gruffly, his eyes darting from one to the other. They stared back at him mutely. Abby remembered to close her mouth.

"Where are Sara and Joe?" Gabe demanded impatiently.

Abby and William pointed down the stairs to the classroom area.

Gabe straightened his hat. "Well, we're gonna need 'em," he stated flatly. "You've got work to do."

Abby snorted. "What, are we saving the world again?"

Gabe fixed her with a long piercing stare. “Maybe. But you’ll be savin’ a life first. Yeh got time for that?”

Taken aback, Abby nodded silently as Gabe stood glaring at William. She couldn’t help but wonder why she had picked this particular day to leave the house.

Chapter 2

The sound of chairs scraping along the floor and a rising murmur of voices signaled that the classes in the work room had finished. As the teens drifted up the staircase, a couple of them halted in their tracks as they caught a glimpse of Gabe. One young boy chuckled when he saw Gabe’s fedora and then elbowed his friend in the side, but his laugh was abruptly cut short by a glare from Gabe. Lowering their eyes, the boys hurried past him and out the front door in silence.

Joe and Sara were in quiet conversation as they followed the stragglers up the stairs. Sara beamed brightly at Gabe and moved toward him with both arms out and bent down to embrace him quickly and plant a light kiss on his cheek. Though Gabe grumbled, he blushed slightly and attempted to smile in return, but the result was the corners of his mouth lifted up, pushing his cheeks up so far that his eyes completely disappeared into his beard. Gabe spied Abby’s raised eyebrow and resumed his usual gruff expression. Joe diplomatically stepped forward and shook his hand in greeting, and then Sara and Joe both stepped back to stand with Abby and William like soldiers standing in formation awaiting orders.

Abby gave Gabe an acknowledging look and a nod which he pointedly ignored. She cleared her throat. “Gabe was telling us that he has something for the four of us to do,” she began. “Isn’t that right, Gabe?” She nodded again to him to resume.

“Yeah,” he replied, crossing his arms over his chest.

Abby took a deep breath and counted to ten in her head to keep her temper in check. The gallery was much too public and far too flammable a place to lose her temper.

“Is this ‘thing’ you need us to do urgent or can we meet somewhere more private to discuss it?” Abby persisted. *Geez, he’s not making this easy*, she thought.

“Aye, yeah, we could meet later,” Gabe answered.

“We could meet at my place,” Sara offered brightly. “I have some of those jam-filled cookies you like.”

Gabe nodded, and, after setting a time to meet at Sara’s later, he slipped quietly out the door.

“Breathe,” the old woman instructed quietly in a firm voice a school teacher would use to instruct a room filled with children.

“Focus on the flame,” she continued. “Breathe steadily in and out,” her voice mimicking the cadence of the flame as it grew and ebbed, its increase in size increasing the illumination in the tiny room.

The ebb of the flame cast Rory’s face deeper into shadow. She gave a shallow nod while maintaining the steady rhythmic breathing, her eyes riveted to the flickering flame of the pillar candle on the coffee table in front of her.

Rory was sitting cross-legged in the middle of the worn, overstuffed floral couch. The worst of the wear spots were covered by several multi-hued knit blankets draped over the back. Rory's grandmother, Marie, walked carefully to the window.

"Good," she said approvingly. "Keep your focus, now deepen your breath." She pulled the curtain open a few inches and peered outside before pulling the curtains closed once again. "Breathe in for two beats, out for two beats. Rory, you must clear your mind."

Rory began to squirm slightly on the couch. She was breathing deeper, but her breathing had become quicker. Sweat began to bead on her forehead. "Grandma, it's getting..."

"You can do it," her grandmother coaxed. "Relax, just let go—"

"No, no, NO! I can't do it!" Rory cried out, tears formed in her eyes just as the candle flame started to get higher and brighter and brighter until -

FOOM!

The flame shot up to the height of the ceiling before winking out abruptly, the only light in the room coming from the cherry red end of the candle wick.

"Oh no!" Rory wailed. "I'm so sorry Grandma!" She started to get off the couch.

Marie yanked open the curtains and then hurried over to the couch. She sat beside Rory and gathered her up in her arms, giving her a big hug.

"It's okay, child. It's okay." She stroked a hand reassuringly over Rory's hair. "Everyone has problems concentrating at first. Why even your mother had her share of problems, and she was the most gifted member of the family! Don't be so hard on yourself."

Rory swiped a hand down her cheeks, chasing away the tears. She looked up and her eyes widened in horror. "Oh I'm so sorry about the ceiling—"

Marie looked up at the ceiling and saw the blackened scorch mark the flame had left. It was at least two feet in diameter.

"Well! That's definitely a first!" she declared after a brief moment. "You sure don't do anything by half measures, Aurora!"

Aurora smiled weakly, her dark eyes welling with tears.

"Come on! I'll make us a nice cup of relaxing tea and you can drink it and tell me what the problem was, alright? We can't fix the problem if we don't know what it is now, can we?" Marie rose from the couch and walked into the kitchen, where, by the sounds of the tap running and the clanging of pots, it was evident she was preparing tea. In what felt like no time at all, she brought out a steaming mug and pushed it into Rory's hands. She brought her own mug out with her and settled beside Rory on the couch.

Rory took a sniff and then a cautious snip. "Your chamomile blend?"

"Of course," she replied, as if the question was absurd. "Nothing but the best here."

Marie took a sip of her tea before setting her cup down on the coffee table beside the pillar candle. She cast the candle a baleful look before picking it up and walking to the sideboard and stowing it away inside.

"So, what broke your concentration?" Marie asked carefully. "You were doing quite well."

Rory took another sip of her tea. "Well, I guess I just thought too much about it."

"What? I don't understand, dear."

"Well," Rory set her tea cup down on the table, "I was thinking about how much I have to live up to. You are so incredibly talented and Mother was such a rising star in, in—"

"The Family Business?" Marie offered helpfully as she resumed her place on the couch.

"Seriously, Grandma? Is that what you call it?" Rory looked at her incredulously.

Marie nodded. "There's nothing wrong with what we do. Do as you will---"

“As long as you harm none,” Rory finished. “I know, Grandma, I know. And don’t give me the speech about how we are born into this life. I know that one too.”

Marie looked at her granddaughter with concern. “Then what’s bothering you, child?”

Rory swallowed back a lump in her throat. “My birthday is coming soon,” she whispered as she stared at her hands in her lap. “I will have to choose by then, won’t I?”

Marie placed a hand gently over Rory’s. “Yes, child, you will.” She lifted her hand and lifted Rory’s chin so that their eyes were level. “I know you will make the right choice for you, and that’s all that matters to me. You need to stop thinking so much. You are much too hard on yourself.”

Rory gave her grandmother a thin smile. “I wish Mom was here.”

“I do too, child,” Marie replied. “I know she would be proud of you. And you will be a fine witch, too, regardless of your choice.”

Rory looked out the window. “I hope you’re right, Grandma. I really do hope you’re right.”

As they both sat there in silent contemplation, neither of them noticed that the odd shadow at the side of the curtain elongated and then slithered down onto the floor. It melted into a pool in front of the door before sliding under a crack at the bottom and out of the house.

Sara yawned as she turned onto her road. After Joe dropped her at home, she immediately hopped into her own truck and made a quick trip back into town. She stopped at the grocery store to pick up some cat food and a few extra items she didn’t really need but thought looked good at the time. She was bone tired but also looking forward to having the company at her place. Plus, it would be a good opportunity to ask Gabe a few more questions. She had been thinking more about why they were chosen to be elemental vessels, and she had a few theories she wanted to run past him.

The approach of another truck on the dirt road caught her attention and she automatically slowed down and drifted back over to the right. Most people in her neighborhood would do, as Sara put it, ‘The Pothole Slalom’, driving slightly over the center of the road and looking ahead for potholes, and dodging either left or right to avoid them. It was only polite, though, to move back to the correct side of the road when approached by an oncoming vehicle.

“Great, just great.” Sara said miserably as she recognized the rusty, two tone blue and white Ford pick-up as the one belonging to Harvey, the creepy, new boyfriend of her closest neighbor. Her neighbor, Amanda, was waving frantically to Sara from the passenger side of the cab while her boyfriend, Harvey, rolled down his window as he pulled alongside her on the road.

“Sara, did you hear the news?” Amanda blurted excitedly. “They found that girl that went missing two days ago.” Amanda leaned back and looked at Sara with wide, heavily made-up eyes.

“Is she okay?” Sara dared to ask. She had met the girl once at the gallery about a year ago. “Katie, right?”

“Nah. She’s dead,” Harvey said casually, smirking at Sara.

“Harvey! That’s no way to tell her!” Amanda thumped him lightly on the arm as she leaned closer. “They found her body in Lee’s field. The cops think she was dumped there. One of his neighbors said he was pretty shook up about finding her. Said she had been tied up and tortured. Awful isn’t it?” Amanda leaned back in her seat and pulled down the visor and gave her make-up a quick check before pushing it back up. “I’m so glad I have Harvey staying with me now,” she added, giving Harvey a squeeze on the arm and then pushing a stray lock of his greasy-

looking hair off his forehead. “It’s not a good time to be a woman living alone with a murderer loose. You’re alone there in that house of yours. Aren’t you worried, Sara?”

Harvey turned toward Sara and ran his tongue slowly over his top lip. “You don’t have to be alone,” he said quietly.

Sara looked at him and tried to control the revulsion she was feeling as she tried to focus a smile toward Amanda. “I’m okay. Thanks for your concern Amanda.” She turned toward Harvey. “I can handle myself,” she said, giving him an even stare.

“I bet you can,” he responded, giving her chest an appraising look before locking his eyes on hers.

Sara had enough. “Well, thanks for keeping me informed, Amanda.” She plastered a smile on her face as she put her truck into drive. “I gotta go. I’m having some company this evening, and I have to get ready.”

“Okay! See you later, Sara! Don’t be a stranger now!” Amanda yelled and waved as Sara pulled away, waving in return. She watched the truck carefully in her rear view mirror as they continued away from her and down the road.

Sara slowly pulled into the center of the road and continued to drive home. *Amanda is really scraping the bottom of the barrel now*, she thought as she shuddered. Amanda never really had the greatest luck when it came to men. She had been married three times that Sara knew of and had a string of men constantly parading through her house. Amanda was a peroxide blonde who wore a lot of make-up and clothes much better suited to a teenager than a woman of her age, whatever that was. Amanda always prided herself in being able to snag younger men, but the quality of those men appeared to drastically go down the closer she got to fifty, which was probably a lot closer than she wished.

Sara pulled in her driveway, cautiously looking around her house. Sure, she worried about being a single woman living alone in the country. And sure, it sucked to be lonely at times, but there was no way she was ever, ever going to be so lonely that it drove her to latch onto the nearest warm body for comfort. She was certain about that. Grabbing her purse off the seat and the keys out of the ignition she loaded up her arms with her grocery bags and headed for her front door, putting Amanda and Creepy Harvey quickly out of her mind as she strode into the kitchen to feed the cats and prepare for the arrival of Gabe and the others.

Abby was about to knock on Sara’s front door when it instantly opened and Sara stepped out from behind it, smiling and beckoning her in with her free hand.

“Am I the last one here?” Abby asked, as she looked around the room. Her eyes fell on Joe and he gave her a shy smile and a wave. William saluted her with a tea-filled mug before taking a large gulp.

Sara smiled. “No, Gabe’s not here yet.”

“I am now.” Gabe’s voice registered loudly behind Abby, causing her to jump.

“Geez, Gabe!” Abby said irately. “You scared the crap outta me! Quit sneaking around!”

Gabe smirked at Abby while she took the seat offered her by Sara. She glared at him as he tipped his Detroit Tigers baseball cap at Sara in greeting. Sara smiled widely and passed him a mug of tea and passed around a plate of cookies as they made idle small talk.

William cleared his throat. “So, Gabe,” he began, “what exactly are we doing? Do we have a mission? Or a case?”

Gabe snorted. “Call it whatever yeh want. The Queen has been told by her seers that Shadow People have increased their interest in yer area. They’re not sure why—“

Abby raised a hand. "Excuse me for interrupting, Gabe, but what are Shadow People?"

Gabe sighed. "Shadow People are what we call 'em. Humans call them Demons."

"Holy shit," Abby whispered. "Demons are real? Is Hell real, too?" The four of them leaned forward in their chairs, awaiting Gabe's answer.

Gabe set his tea mug on the end table and ran his hand over his forehead in frustration. "Hell? What? How the feck should I know? That's religious stuff that is. Shadow People or Demons—," he enunciated with emphasis, "come from the Shadow Realm."

"Is that part of Feyland?" Sara asked.

"No, Lady Sara," Gabe answered, giving her a shy glance. "They come from a different realm than ours."

"Do they come through the Omphalos?" Abby asked.

"No!" Gabe gave Abby a level look. "It's a different realm, isn't it? So they use different portals. But that's not what you're—"

"Ooh really?" Sara enthused. "I didn't know there were different types of portals. How many types are there?"

Gabe lifted his hat and ran a hand through hair as gray and bristling as steel wool.

Joe, sensing Gabe's mounting frustration, stood up and lifted both his hands, palms up to the group.

"Why don't we save our questions for discussion after," he said in a slow, even tone. He turned to Gabe, gesturing toward him with one hand. "Gabe, why don't you finish what you were saying and we will hold our questions until after?"

Gabe nodded and took a deep breath as Joe resumed his seat. Sara nodded eagerly while Abby looked at Gabe with wide eyes. William eyed the cookies and nodded in assent.

"Okay, so the seers have told the Queen that there has been a greater than usual amount of Shadow People, or Demons, active in your realm. They believe that the Demons may be looking for a Potential."

As Abby's hand shot up, Gabe shot her an irritated glance and continued. "A Potential is one who is about to become a witch but hasn't chosen their magic yet. Sometimes they can be influenced into making their choice. The seers believe that one of the most powerful white witches ever is fated to come from this area. The Queen wants to make sure that the Shadow People, or Demons, don't interfere in that."

"Do we know who the Potential is?" Sara asked. "Does she need us to protect her?"

Gabe smiled. "No, Lady Sara. We don't know who she is, but there are quite a few potentials in this area and we want to make sure that they stay safe until they choose."

Sara remembered her conversation with her neighbors earlier. "Would they kill a girl if she didn't choose their side?" she asked quietly.

"Why would you ask that?" Abby asked Sara abruptly, confusion evident on her face.

Sara cleared her throat. "My neighbors told me today that a young girl that went missing a few days ago was found dead and dumped on Lee's farm today."

"Katie?" Abby asked. When Sara nodded, Abby gasped and put her hand over her mouth. William put his arm around Abby and gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze. She nodded at him with tear-filled eyes.

"Was she one of the potentials?" Sara asked Gabe as he looked at Abby with a look of confusion on his face.

"I dunno," Gabe answered. "How far away is this field?"

“It’s a couple miles north of here,” Sara answered. She grabbed a pen and a notepad. “I can draw you a map.”

Gabe nodded and Sara started to draw a map.

“I am going to check out the field and see if I can sense any Shadow People in the area. I am going to report this to the Queen. In the meantime, I want you all to keep yer eyes open and be vigilant around the young people in yer area. If yeh see anything odd, protect the Potentials and contact me as soon as yeh can.”

“How are we to contact you?” Abby asked. “It isn’t like you have given us your cell phone number or anything.”

The others laughed until Gabe pulled a cell phone from his back pocket and flipped it open.

“Seriously?” Abby gaped at him as Sara rattled off her cell number as he dutifully typed her number into his contact list.

“Yeah,” Gabe replied. “I saw how helpful they were in keeping you four in contact, so I had teh get one.” Gabe typed in Joe’s number next. “I always say, we gotta move with the times.”

William rattled off his number as Joe moved to stand next to Sara. “Sara and I have been teaching teen art classes at the gallery,” Joe said. “It may be good to watch some of the kids and see if they are Potentials. How exactly would we know if they are or not?”

Gabe took the finished map from Sara and gave it a glance. “That’s a good question, Joe,” he said as he folded the map neatly and tucked it into a vest pocket. “Obviously their using magic would be a clue. Other than that, yeh will just have to use yer intuition, yer gut feeling. The four of yeh have your elements as power. They will help yeh figger it out.”

Gabe typed Abby’s cell phone number into his phone and then replaced it in his pocket. After a few cautionary words, he left abruptly.

“Can yeh believe it?” William spoke aloud. “Gabe’s got a bloody cell phone.”

Abby snorted. “Just you wait,” she said acerbically. “Next week the little bastard will be on Facebook, probably shopping for hats.”

The laughter continued until long after the last drop of tea disappeared.

Chapter 3

Abby pulled on her sunglasses and rolled down her window before she backed her van out of her driveway. Even though she was a self-proclaimed 'sun shunner,' she was enjoying the unseasonably warm April day. The sky was a clear blue with only a few cotton ball shaped clouds in the sky and the warm, fresh air was a welcome change from the stifling air inside her house. She was looking forward to getting to Sara's, and she was definitely looking forward to going back to the teen art class at the gallery. It wasn't so much that she was looking forward to the class itself. Rather, she found that she was looking forward to having something to do and to having company.

Abby's husband, Dan, was away up in the U.P., what native Michiganders called the Upper Peninsula, or northern part of the state. William needed a ride up to the gallery where a portion of his artwork was being shown, and Dan willingly volunteered to chauffeur and help him set up for his gallery opening show. Abby sighed. While she was grateful Dan was recuperating and feeling more able to do things on his own, she wondered if his eagerness to leave the house was because he was feeling the strain of being smothered. She was grateful that William had found a friend in Dan and that they had become good friends in such a short time. While she did enjoy William's company, he was one of those people that she could only handle in small doses. The thought of a six hour car ride up to the U.P. with William made her cringe. One thing would be certain if she had to endure being in a car with him for that length of time: one of them would end up dead, and she would definitely end up in jail. Abby suppressed a smile. William may accuse her of enjoying arguing with him, but it didn't stop him from giving it right back to her. He was always a willing participant in any argument they had. She was certain that he enjoyed their arguments, too.

Abby pulled into Sara's driveway and Sara came bounding out the door with a cardboard box under one arm, swinging her purse on the other arm. She opened the side door of the van, tossed in the box and then climbed in the passenger side.

"I've got some new stuff for the still life," Sara breathed excitedly as she pulled on her seat belt and fastened it. "It will add some new elements of texture. Are you going to draw with my group today or are you going to do pottery with Joe's group again?"

"I think I will stick with the pottery for now," Abby said carefully. When she noticed that Sara frowned and looked a little disappointed, she quickly added, "I still have to finish the piece I started, and I already met one of the girls in the class. I think she said her name was Rory. I also promised her I'd show her some of my work in the gallery after class, so it might be a good opportunity to see if we can track down some of these potentials."

Sara fixed her bright eyes upon Abby. "Yes! That's a great idea! When you are done scoping out Joe's group, you can scope out mine. It's like you're undercover, like a mole or something."

"Yeah, undercover artist mole. That's me," Abby said absently, her voice monotone without enthusiasm. She started to remember the real reason she didn't want to be alone that day. A tear escaped her eye and trailed down her cheek. She reached up to brush it away before Sara could see, but it was already too late.

"Oh, Abby! I'm sorry! I didn't mean to upset you!" Sara wailed. She dug into her purse, yanked out a tissue and passed it to Abby who quickly wiped her eyes.

"No, Sara. You didn't upset me," Abby said as she balled the tissue up in her fist. Of course Sara would think she did something wrong. She was sweet that way. "I was just remembering...it will be tomorrow. The day my Callie....," Abby couldn't finish the sentence.

"Callie?" Sara asked. "Your daughter?"

Abby nodded.

“I’m so sorry Abby,” Sara said quietly. “That’s gotta be tough. Are you okay to do this? You don’t have to—”

“I know I don’t,” Abby cut her off. She felt the pain in her heart like it was only yesterday. The elated feeling of pride she felt thinking that her baby girl had slept through the night was destroyed in the instant she found her daughter cold and dead in her crib, a victim of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. Even after all the time that had passed, the pain was still raw and jolted her inside. She took a deep breath to steady herself.

“I know I don’t,” she repeated, “but I need to. I need to keep going. It’s been four years since we lost her. I know I won’t ever forget her, but I can’t wallow in my grief either.” Abby took another deep breath and straightened her shoulders as she clutched the steering wheel with hands clenched so tightly they were white. Abby relaxed her grip on the steering wheel a little. “I know it’s going to be hard to be around those kids knowing that my own daughter will never get to grow up to be their age, but if I can help protect some potentials and keep them from being harmed so they will grow up to have their own children some day, then I will do what I have to.”

Sara smiled at Abby. “I’m so proud of you, Ab.”

“Okay....Uh, why?” Abby asked as she pulled into the parking lot of the gallery and cut the engine.

“I’m proud of you because you are so strong,” Sara answered simply. “And I just know that you are going to figure out who the potentials are.” Sara winked. “You so got this.”

Abby smiled, even though the compliment made her feel slightly uncomfortable. “I hope you’re right, Sara. I really hope you’re right.” She held open the gallery door for Sara and then followed her inside.

In no time at all, Sara began to set up a new still life with an assortment of screws, washers and chicken wire. Sara explained the reasons for the hardware setting as she placed the objects on a raised platform, but Abby tuned out the drone of her voice and started to look around as the various students started to filter into the workroom. Sara and Joe would greet the students as they arrived and they soon began to mill around in the areas where they were intending to work. Abby waved to Sara and made her way to the counter area at the back of the room where Joe had assembled their now fired bowls. She took a seat next to Rory who acknowledged her with a bright smile.

Within a few minutes, Joe passed out smocks, gave some quick tips on sanding the bowls and began to demonstrate how to apply wax resist on the bottom of their work before they glazed their work. After sanding some rough spots on the rim and the base of her bowl, Abby dabbed a brush and began to apply the wax resist to the bottom as Joe demonstrated. As she focused intently on her work, she felt a sensation at her back. She looked up from her work and saw that Rory was watching her apply the resist with an approving smile.

“Good job, Abby!” Rory smiled widely with encouragement. “How are you finding pottery class this week?”

“It’s not bad, not too bad at all. I didn’t remember art without fire being this much fun.” Abby returned the smile as she reached for a color chart of sample glazes. After a short but careful deliberation, Abby selected a peach-colored glaze and, with Rory’s guidance, she used what appeared to be a giant pair of tongs to dip her prepped bowl into a large pail of glaze. The glaze saturated the porous clay, beading and slipping off the wax covered base like water off an oil slick on an asphalt road. She used the tongs to empty the glaze that had pooled inside the bowl before setting the glazed bowl on the tray Joe gestured toward while he was helping

another student. Once she was done, she resumed her seat at the counter and set to watching the other students, attempting to do her undercover work as inconspicuously as she could.

Identifying potentials (or was it *potential* potentials?) would have been much easier if Abby knew what to look for. Gabe had said that their elemental powers would help them to find those with power within them, but Abby wasn't sure how to do that. When she reached inside to touch her power, she could feel a stirring inside her, a touch of something familiar that didn't feel like it quite fit. At other times it was a fluttery feeling, like a warm tap had turned on inside her and was filling up the entire cavity of her core. On other occasions she could feel the warmth flowing around her in a warm bubble, as if she was cocooned in a safe heat shield, but she was stumped as to how she could tap into it to use it without setting fire to something or flinging a fireball. How could she feel someone else's power when she could barely understand how to feel her own?

As she sat there trying to tap into her power, she felt a strange sensation as if someone was reaching a finger out to touch her and the tip of a finger had grazed the skin on the back of her neck. Abby jerked up straight and turned her head abruptly to see if someone was standing behind her, but there was no one standing there and no one even remotely in the area. She scanned the room quickly, her eyes casting into the corners of the room for something that she may have missed. She found nothing. The feeling of the touch was gone, but the feeling of something, some *presence*, still lingered in the room. As she turned back to the counter, Joe was looking at her, his eyebrows raised slightly as if he too had felt what was in the room. He moved his eyes slowly from left to right, repeating the visual scan that Abby had done. He met her eyes again, shrugged slightly and moved further down the counter toward one of the students that was waving her hand impatiently in the air as if her life depended on it.

Abby wiped her hands on her smock before removing it and setting it on the counter. She wanted to stay and see what she could discover, but there wasn't any reason to stick around since her art project was done for the day. She smiled awkwardly at Rory who had just finished setting her glazed piece on the tray.

"Hey, if you are finished, do you think you could show me your work in the gallery upstairs?" Rory began to pull off her smock and set it on the counter. "I got a half hour or so to kill before I meet my grandma to take her to grab some groceries." She smiled widely at Abby, and Abby was surprised to see that smile reached up to her eyes as she bounced slightly on the balls of her feet. Abby smiled. Saying no to her felt like it would be akin to kicking a happy puppy. Abby returned her smile.

"Sure, I have some time to spare." Abby picked up her purse and motioned to Joe. She pointed upstairs and he nodded in acknowledgement as she walked toward the stairs and waited while Rory grabbed her backpack and her coat.

Abby didn't want to look impolite or arrogant by going directly to her work, so she gave Rory a short tour of the gallery and the work of the community artists. She pointed to some pen and ink work done by Sharon, a local artist who had lived for a few years in New Orleans before returning to Michigan. An entire wall of the big gallery was occupied by Nik, an exceptionally talented oil painter. Abby felt comfortable and relaxed as she led Rory through the sections of the gallery, indirectly introducing each artist as she identified their pieces and spoke of the medium that was their craft. The main room was empty with the exception of a few crates scattered in the center of the room, most likely the arriving work of the incoming featured artist of the month. The gallery was home to many of the local artists, but the main room was reserved for a featured artist who would show their work for a set period of time. Most of the time, the

gallery alternated between having a local artist and a guest artist from another state or even another country, which was how William ended up coming all the way from England to show his work. Some of those artists would also teach a few classes during their exhibit schedule. It was good for the gallery and it helped to promote art in the community too. The only time there was no featured artist of the month was between Thanksgiving and Christmas. During that time, the local artists would get space to show their Christmas work. It was a great time of year for the artists in the community to get together to trade and barter their work. Hey, it was easier than fighting the crowds in the malls, and you ended up with amazing gifts.

Abby finally stopped in front of the space where her artwork was set up slightly off into the farthest corner of the room. An antique oak-framed display case with large glass sides held three shelves of jewelry. Prominently displayed on those shelves were large silver cuff bracelets set with cabochons of a variety of stones. One shelf held delicate silver rings with gemstones on one side and on the other sat big, thick silver rings intended for men, set with chunky turquoise in hues of blues and greens. Abby's eyes drifted to a particular ring that held trapped in its prongs a favorite stone of hers.

The other students, having finished their classes, began migrating up the stairs, mingling in groups and strolling through the gallery, drifting in to examine the artwork in the gallery. Abby didn't have to turn around to feel their approach. Her skin began to tingle as they drew nearer.

Rory followed her gaze to the opal the ring. "Opals are supposed to be stones that have fire trapped inside them," she said as she stared at the case.

Abby chuckled quietly. "Yes, I've heard that before, too."

"I also heard that it's bad luck to wear an opal if it isn't your birth stone. Is that true?" Rory looked toward Abby for a response.

A group of students were walking past them. Abby recognized one of them as Jill, a bubbly blonde girl who was a regular attendee of gallery classes. She was talking and laughing with two teenage boys that had also been students in Sara's class. Jill glanced up at Abby and smiled and gave her a little wave. Abby smiled and nodded in return as they passed by. Abby felt the tingling on her arms; felt it creep up her arms into her torso. Rory was still waiting for her to respond when that sensation of being touched overcame her once more. It was different this time; more intense, hair-raising and disturbing, like someone forcing your hand into a bag of live snakes. She could feel it, wriggling and writhing over her as if it was in the room, everywhere and nowhere, waiting, waiting and watching to see her reaction to the energy it pushed at her. It was repulsive, revolting, and she wanted to pull back, pull away, but the fire in her reached out to touch that energy as if it was deciding whether it was friend or foe. Abby started to see waves in front of her eyes; her vision fogged over with a haze as if any moment she was going to pass out. The haze spread out like condensation on a mirror in a steamy bathroom, a fog that she just couldn't wipe away. She rubbed her fists in her eyes in an attempt to focus, and then she saw something move on the periphery of her vision, like the shadow of a mouse leaping into the corner. Whatever it was didn't try to hide. It stopped and remained motionless for a second before it moved its inky darkness sideways into the corner and up the wall, disappearing into the ceiling. She knew it was gone. The haze immediately lifted, her eyes became clear and her vision returned to normal. The uncomfortable, repulsive sensation left with it. Abby took a long deep breath and let it out slowly as she gave the ceiling one last look.

"Hey, Abby, you're starting to freak me out. Seriously, are you okay?" The sound of Rory's voice suddenly registered in her head. She opened her mouth to reassure Rory that everything was fine just as Rory reached out and gave her shoulder a shake. As soon as her hand connected

with Abby's shoulder, Abby felt something ignite a flame inside her with the intensity of some power that wasn't hers, yet didn't belong to the disturbing blob thing. This was something new. It was raw, and it was too much. She closed her eyes and let the darkness take her.