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Traci Hall

SOMETHING
WICCAN
THIS WAY COMES

A RHIANNON GODFREY STORY

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Something Wiccan This Way Comes

Traci Hall

Dedication

To Greg, Bri, Des, Mom, Sheryl, Trena and all of my family and friends who never doubted this day would come! xoxoxoxox

Chapter One

“Well, Suzanne?” Rhiannon Godfrey asked. “What do you think? Do I look hot enough to melt Jared’s socks off?” She picked up the hem of her silver, floor-length dress and twirled, beyond nervous about her very first dance, with her first ever boyfriend.

The spirit sighed softly. “You are a beautiful young lady. Why would that affect Jared’s stockings?”

Rhee stopped spinning and shook her head. “Sometimes I forget that you lived a hundred years ago. Forget the socks. I was just asking if I look, you know, *awesome*.”

Suzanne’s giggle held a wistful quality. “I think you look lovely. The silver of your dress makes you shine like a moonbeam.”

Whoa. Rhiannon stopped checking herself out in the mirror and addressed her invisible friend. “A moon beam? That’s pretty cool.” A chilly rush of air fluttered the curtains. “Do you miss dressing up? Dancing?” Even though Rhee had asked a bunch of times what Suzanne’s current existence was like, the spirit was tight-lipped. Secrets of the dead, she supposed, were secret for a reason.

A light touch brushed Rhee’s forehead. “I envy your joy of life. You make me wonder what my life would have been like had I lived beyond eighteen years. I might have danced.”

“I’ll dance with you,” Rhee promised, hating to hear the sadness that lingered in Suzanne’s voice. “The second we can figure out how to get you a solid body, I’ll twirl you around until you get dizzy.”

The spirit didn’t need words to exude happiness, and the feeling vibrated around the four walls of Rhiannon’s attic bedroom. “Soon?”

“I’m trying, Suz. I’m trying.” None of her scientific books from the Institute of Parapsychology covered how to turn a spirit into a flesh-and-blood person. Sooo...she’d

resorted to witchcraft, without much luck. Rhiannon knew that Mrs. Edwards, being a very talented psychic who was training Suzanne to be Rhiannon's spirit guide, would *so* not approve.

The spirit whirled through the bedroom, fluttering curtains and knocking over pillows. A loud screeching noise came from the pile on the bed, and an orange bolt of energy jumped straight into the air.

Thor bristled like a porcupine as he landed in the center of the bed. His puffed tail flicked back and forth as he glared at the chilly air, then his ears went back and wham—the angry kitten attacked the curtains with a vengeance, clawing and yowling.

Suzanne waved the curtains back and forth. “Here kitty, kitty...” the spirit teased.

The cat spat, his back hunched even as he slid down, shredding the second set of curtains in a week. Rhee sighed, knowing she was going to end up with extra chores for sure. “Suzanne, be nice to Thor.”

“But cats make me sneeze. I don't like them.”

“You're *dead*. You can't be allergic to anything. Why do you keep forgetting that?” Rhee exhaled with exasperation, then rescued Thor, who was dangling by three claws from the curtains while meowing pitifully. “C'mon sweetie, maybe next time you'll catch the nasty ghost.”

The air froze and Rhiannon's curls came undone, spilling red down her back.

“I am not a ghost!”

Rhee grinned at the affronted tone in Suzanne's voice. “Might I remind you that, according to *The Book of Psychic Phenomenon*, you are nothing more than an entity of ectoplasmic energy?” Rhiannon figured that the people who had written the book had never met an entity like Suzanne, who definitely had personality to go with the invisible-to-the-human-eye ecto-package.

The wind stopped blowing and Rhee's curls were carefully pinned back in place by gentle, unseen hands. “I am sorry. I am tired now. But I will return this evening so that you can tell me about the dance. I'll even pet the nice kitty.”

Thor growled as an invisible finger scratched behind his ear.

“Just stay out of trouble while I’m gone, got it? Mom didn’t like it when you reorganized her cupboards.”

A cool breeze took Rhiannon’s breath away. “I was just trying to help,” Suzanne said from what sounded like the opposite end of a long tunnel. “I want your mother to love me. Will she?”

Rhiannon’s stomach clenched as she thought of what her mom would say to a suddenly solid Suzanne. Pushing aside the feeling of foreboding, she told the spirit, “Of course she will! Duh. My mom loves everybody.” Rhee set Thor down and brushed a few stray orange cat hairs from her silver gown.

“Have a good time. But Rhiannon, be careful. Trouble has a way of finding you.”

Unease flickered at the spirit’s warning, but Suzanne was gone. Rhiannon bent down so that she was staring eye to eye at Thor. “Why does she always have to have the last word?”

There was a quick knock on her door, and before she could say “come in”, her mom was already there.

“Fast bird? Don’t tell me that cat caught another one. He’ll be dangerous when he’s older.”

Rhiannon’s lips twitched. Last word. Fast bird. Her mom was sweet, but a little on the wacky side. “You know what happens when you try to read my thoughts. You get the wrong thing nine out of ten times.”

Starla shrugged, a sheepish look on her pretty face. “I can’t help it, sometimes your thoughts just pop in my head. And Mrs. Edwards told you that it wasn’t my fault—it’s our mother-daughter connection. If you weren’t telepathic, I wouldn’t be able to read your mind.”

“So it’s my fault?” Rhee grinned.

Her mom walked over to the vanity table and picked up the moonstone amulet that hung from a delicate silver chain. “Fault, schmault. Will you be wearing this tonight? You should—oh, honey, I think I’m more nervous than you are. Bless the Goddess, Rhiannon, you look beautiful.”

Rhiannon felt her cheeks go hot. “You’re just saying that because I look like you, Mom. From my obnoxious red hair to my size-seven feet.” She took the crescent shaped amulet and set it back on the table. “I’m wearing the silver heart from Jared. I won’t need any extra protection tonight. This is all about fun with friends and dancing—” her stomach jiggled, “—and being with my guy.”

Starla eyed the amulet before shrugging. “Speaking of Jared, shouldn’t they be here any minute? It was so *nice* of his parents to offer to drive.”

Rhiannon heard the hurt in her mom’s tone, and her defenses immediately rose. “Mom, going to the winter dance with Jared *Roberts*, in a burgundy van that has Celestial Beginnings painted with gold glitter on the side, well...that isn’t the statement I want to make. I know dad’s car doesn’t have four-wheel drive, and I’m not letting you drag me to the dance through the icy streets on a toboggan. We talked about this already.”

“Sled dogs can be very romantic,” Starla said with a small smile before turning for the door. “So long as we get enough pictures before you go—the coven will want to see how wonderful you’re doing here.”

Rhiannon applied light bronze gloss to her lips, shivering at the word *coven*. “Please tell me you cleaned up the altar in the living room?” Jared knew her parents were Wiccan, but his parents didn’t. Not officially, anyway.

Her mom’s eyes narrowed with annoyance. “Yes. But Rhee, honey, the grand opening of Celestial Beginnings was two weeks ago. People know that I own a New Age store.”

Fingers trembling with adrenalin, Rhiannon managed to cap the tube and put it in her purse without dropping it. “Fine. But they don’t have to know you’re a witch.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” her mom said quietly.

Rhee swallowed the guilt she felt at making her mom feel bad in order to make her point. “You made me come here from Las Vegas so that I could have a chance to ‘blend’ and be normal.” She snorted. “Well, you bought a haunted house, so that plan pretty much went up in smoke. What would’ve happened if Melody and Bonnie couldn’t keep a secret?”

She patted her mom's arm, willing her to understand. "I would have been laughed out of Crystal Lake High if anybody would have found out about what happened that night. The last two months have been quiet. I've studied, made friends and learned how to play monopoly. Don't screw it up for me, okay, Mom?"

Starla covered Rhee's hand with her own, her bracelets clinking together like chimes. "We wanted you to have a chance at normal. We didn't want you to completely smother your own personality!" She sighed. "I guess you've forgotten all about how the Goddess came to your rescue?"

Rhiannon turned cold at the memory of the evil spirit she'd banished, with the help of her friends from the Institute of Parapsychology. "How can I forget when you bring it up all the time?" She wished she *could* forget the malevolent presence that had held Suzanne's spirit captive in this house for a hundred years.

"There's still time for you to change your mind and spend part of the winter break in Las Vegas. Tisha would love it if you stayed with her."

Bracing herself for another familiar argument, Rhiannon pulled her hand from her mom's. "Tisha's awesome, but she's also the High Priestess, and I'm not staying with her. If I went—which I'm not—I'd stay with Matthew and Tanya at the institute. But Jared promised he'd teach me to ski over winter break."

"I say thanks many times over that you've made friends, but you are forgetting your spirituality. What about—"

Her dad shouted from the second floor. "Ladies? Do you need to take your separate corners?" He came out on the landing, his fists pumping against a fake opponent. "Got your gloves? Wait for the bell!"

"Dad!" She loved her parents, but *why* did they have to be so embarrassing?

Her mom gasped and Rhee knew her mother had caught that last thought super clear. "Sorry. I wish you'd stop *eavesdropping* in my head without permission."

"Beauty is as beauty does, Rhiannon Selene, remember that. Miles, do you have the camera ready?" Starla turned her back and climbed down the narrow stairs, leaving Rhiannon to deal with the sting of her disapproval.

Well, she thought with a twinge of rebellion, I can't always be perfect. I won't always do what you want, and sometimes...sometimes you are embarrassing. So there. Rhiannon grabbed the silver handbag that was just big enough for her cell phone and lip gloss before following her mom down the stairs.

Starla's flowing skirts and layers of beads practically screamed Wicca. Rhiannon had heard some of the kids at school make sarcastic comments—namely Janet and her posse of wannabes—but for the most part, they'd left the Godfrey family alone. Which could all change if more of the good citizens of Crystal Lake figured out what her Mom's shop really was. A supply store for witchcraft.

Rhiannon was enjoying being normal for the first time in her entire freaky, psychic life.

Sure, sometimes it could be boring, but dating Jared, the hottest freshman in school, more than made up for any milliseconds of longing for her old life. Thanks to email, she, Tanya and Matthew stayed in contact practically every day. Rhiannon didn't have to be at the institute to know what was happening with her friends.

She stopped at the bottom stair and peeked into the living room to see if her mom was still mad. Why did growing up mean arguing with her parents?

Her dad was waiting by the large fireplace, digital camera in hand. "It's all clear, Rhee. You look gorgeous, and everything will be just fine. Let's get a picture of you and Mom in front of the fire."

"Thanks, Dad," she said, glancing in the corner to make sure that the Goddess altar had been hidden away. It had been her parents' idea to give her a normal teenager experience, but they were totally clueless when it came to their own practices. In the small town of Crystal Lake, Wicca wasn't any more socially acceptable than being a psychic phenomenon. Yet they wanted her to embrace the Wicca traditions and deny the science that made up her genetic code.

No wonder she was all screwed up.

Starla fiddled with Rhee's shoulder strap. "Are you sure about the moonstone?"

Rhee folded her hands at her waist and fake-smiled for the camera. “Yeah. Why are you so freaked out? This is what you wanted for me.”

“It’s just that, honey, you’re growing up so fast, and—”

Rhiannon had to really work to keep her smile in place as her temper started to heat. “I’m not a baby.”

“I know, it’s just—”

“What’s wrong, Mom?”

Miles whistled and gave an exaggerated wink to lighten the mood. “I’m looking at the two most beautiful women in the entire cosmos. What could go wrong?”

Rhiannon giggled, her dad snapped the picture and the doorbell rang. She jumped, her tummy flipping like an Olympic gymnast.

Starla quickly gave her a one-armed hug, and Rhee pretended not to notice the thin shine of tears in her mom’s eyes as she chattered. “Dad’s right, honey, you’ll have so much fun. I just wish we could have chaperoned.”

Rhee blinked a few times, hoping she masked her thoughts quickly enough. Starla, as pretty and fun as she could be, just wouldn’t blend with her broom skirts, beads and jingly bracelets. And her dad? His tendency to wear all black, with his dark hair and goatee, well, he didn’t look a thing like the other dads. Her mom would be broken-hearted if she knew that Rhee hadn’t turned in the signed chaperone sheet on purpose.

“Well, like I said, there are plenty of chaperones already, so stop worrying. And Jared’s parents said they’d give me a ride home too.”

“You have your cell phone? We’ll be waiting up.”

The doorbell rang again and Rhiannon strangled her purse strap instead of her mom. Who knew that dating could be so stressful? “*Yes.*”

“I know we said to cut down on the telepathic thoughts, but maybe a brief zip would be all right, so I know you’re okay.”

Rhiannon escaped her mom’s hug, blew out a breath and walked to the door, trying not to trip in her heels. “Fine, Mom. Just chill, geez.”

Opening the front door, Rhee smiled wide, hoping her nervousness wasn't written all over her face. "Hey Ja—"

She did a double take. "Matthew?"

"Hey."

She looked down, noticing his suitcase. "What are *you* doing here?"

Chapter Two

“What kind of greeting is that?” Matthew demanded with a grin, his arms folded across his chest.

Rhiannon immediately noticed the white lines of tension around Matthew’s lips. *Oh sure, he’s smiling, but it was about as real as the smile she’d just given her dad’s camera. What on the Goddess’s green earth could be wrong?*

Starla nudged Rhee aside and opened the door all the way. “Matthew? Merry meet, my young friend, come in, come in.”

Rhiannon watched her mom casually peek out onto the front porch, probably checking to see if he was alone. “Miles,” Starla said in her best Earth-Mother tones, “get Matthew’s suitcase, would you? Matthew, would you like some tea? It’s a cold night.”

Pulling Matthew into the living room was like tugging on dead weight. “You look like crap,” Rhee whispered. “How’d you get here?”

Matthew rubbed one hand over his eyes and mumbled, “Bus.”

“Greyhound comes to Crystal Lake? No way.” A giggle escaped at the thought.

“I had to pay extra,” Matthew admitted with a real smile.

There was an awkward silence as Rhee waited for Matthew to explain just why he’d shown up on the Godfrey’s doorstep. Her dad cleared his throat and her mom was about to launch into maternal mode when Matthew finally spoke. “Um, I was hoping I could crash here for a few days.”

After a brief second Starla gushed, “Well, of course, Matthew. You’re always welcome in our home, for as long as you’d like.”

Rhee got a funny feeling in her stomach, and her dad’s eyebrows hiked up his forehead. She had no idea what was going on—Matthew hadn’t mentioned being unhappy at the institute.

Matthew's shoulders slumped in visible relief. "I'm so glad that you said that, Mrs. Godfrey. You see—" he raised his face, "—I'd like to move in."

"Move in?" Rhiannon blurted. What the heck? This was too strange.

Miles, the epitome of reason and calm, asked, "Does Dr. Richards know you're here?"

Matthew's fair skin turned even paler and Rhiannon's heart lurched. Had Matt run away? His voice was low as he answered, "I, um, I left a note."

Her dad scratched his goatee. "I see. And when will Dr. Richards receive this note?"

Rhiannon felt sorry for Matthew. When her dad used that soft interrogation technique, you were lost and you might as well spill everything.

Matthew squirmed, then straightened his shoulders. He was sixteen, not quite a man, but definitely not a boy. Just then, Rhiannon caught a glimpse of the adult he would become. He answered firmly, "Tomorrow, when I don't show up for telepathy class. Which has been a huge waste of everybody's time."

Then he leaned back against the couch, a lock of hair over his forehead, and was a teenager again. "Mr. Godfrey, I'll help you with the farm. I won't eat very much and I'll take out the trash." Matthew swallowed, but didn't drop his gaze from her dad's. "I want to be normal too."

Rhiannon sucked in a surprised breath. Normal? She was barely hanging on to the idea of normal. Besides, she knew for an absolute fact that Matthew's greatest wish in the world was to be a ghost hunter. He'd come to the institute because he could start fires with his temper. He'd been little, and recently orphaned. But so far, no matter what sort of tests Dr. Richards had done at the institute, they just couldn't find any other psychic talent Matthew possessed.

"I thought things were getting better, Matt. Did something happen? Did you have an argument with the doc? Or Mrs. Edwards?" Rhee walked over and put her arm around his shoulders. No matter what else was going on, her friend was hurting. She wanted to help.

Matthew shrugged her off. "I don't want to talk about it."

Her temper sparked. “You came here, Matt, without even asking, and you don’t want to talk about it? We talk about everything!”

“This isn’t your business, Rhee.”

Her mouth fell open, so she quickly snapped it shut. Shaking with hurt, she pointed her finger at his chest. “Not my business? I thought we were friends. You don’t get to treat friends like that. You’re supposed to share stuff!”

Matthew turned and stared at her, as if he was somehow *blaming* her.

For what? Her anger built, a shimmering heat inside her. Lately, her temper seemed to have a mind of its own, and it was getting harder to control it. “I apologized for not telling you everything about Suzanne.”

“I’m not talking about that.”

“Well, what are you talking about then? Normal isn’t easy, you know. You can’t just snap your fingers and *voila!* you’re suddenly not who you were.”

“I’ll fit in—it can’t be that hard, not if you can do it.” Matthew jutted his chin defiantly. “I need to learn to do ‘normal’. You hide that you’re psychic and telepathic, like it doesn’t matter! I can’t do *jack*. I’m tired of living like a lab rat.”

Rhee stepped closer, fury clouding her vision with red. The couch shook and Matthew jumped to his full height, glowering down at her, and somehow she saw the hurt beneath his accusations and the red faded to pink confusion.

Her dad slipped between them. “Let’s calm down here. We have a guest room on the second floor, which will do for now. I think a good night’s sleep will help put things back in perspective. But we should call Dr. Richards, just to let him know you’re safe.”

Starla, her very being radiating sympathy, asked, “Are you hungry? I have leftover vegetable soup and homemade corn bread. It will only take a minute to reheat. I can make tea while Miles shows you your room...”

Left like a forgotten celebrity as her parents rushed around to make Matthew comfortable, Rhiannon knew that despite feeling bad for whatever was going on with her friend, he was going to screw up her carefully balanced life.

What would it be like to have Matthew living in her house? She was used to being an only child, and she liked it that way. Sharing a bathroom with someone was, well, personal. Would her parents really let him stay?

It would be like getting an instant sibling, only weirder, because she used to have a major crush on Matthew—before she met Jared.

The doorbell rang and Rhiannon’s stomach dropped to her toes. “Jared!” she said aloud. For the last month the dance had been first thing on her agenda. Hair, nails, dress, shoes, pictures... *See, Matthew’s here for ten minutes, and he is already messing with my head.*

She opened the door and there *he* stood. Tall, gorgeous and sooo awesome. “Hi,” she breathed. “You look great.” He did, too, with his black suit and white shirt. He wore a silver bolero tie and black dress cowboy boots.

“Thanks.” Jared grinned and blushed at the same time. “You look pretty amazing yourself.”

She realized, a little too late, that his parents were standing right behind him. Rhee cleared her throat, hoping her cheeks weren’t splotchy with embarrassment.

“Hi, Mr. and Mrs. Roberts.”

Mrs. Roberts, a blond woman of medium height who wore a tight smile, nodded, piercing Rhee with her sharp green eyes. “Hello, Rhiannon.”

“Won’t you come in?” Where the heck was her mother when she needed her?

Starla poked her head out of the kitchen. “Rhiannon? Oh! Please, come in, Mr. and Mrs. Roberts, how wonderful to see you. I’ve made tea.”

Rhiannon didn’t need to be psychic to feel the chill radiate from Jared’s mom toward hers. Starla paused, but just for a second, before saying, “Why don’t I go and get the tray? I’ll meet you in the living room.”

Jared, who had been over often enough to know the layout of the farmhouse, led the way.

Mr. Roberts, a large man with graying hair beneath his cowboy hat, said, “Tea? Uh, isn’t that kind of a girlie drink?”

Rhiannon heard Jared mumble something under his breath. It sounded like “don’t be a jerk”, but it *could* have been anything. She hid her smile behind her hand, grateful that Jared didn’t really take after either one of his parents.

It was hard to see what Jared’s mom and dad had in common. Mr. Roberts could be gruff, a little rough around the edges but nice, while Mrs. Roberts was an ice queen. What did you call it when someone was nice on the outside, but you could tell they were just being polite? And not trying very hard to hide it?

For example, Rhiannon noticed the way Mrs. Roberts sat on the very edge of the plump seat, like she was royalty or something and had to be ready just in case her court arrived.

Condescending! Rhee snapped her fingers. Mrs. Roberts was acting like a condescending bitc—

“Hey!” Rhiannon squealed, rubbing the spot on her arm where someone had psychically pinched her.

Jared asked, “Are you all right?”

“Fine,” Rhee answered, wondering where her mom had learned that little trick.

“Welcome, welcome,” Starla said as she entered the living room, carrying a large tea tray in her hands. “We were just taking pictures before the fireplace, I’d love to get some of Jared and Rhiannon both,” she added with strained good cheer. “My husband will be down in a moment. Rhee, honey, will you help me serve?”

“Sure.” Rhee handed Mrs. Roberts a cup, then Jared and finally she gave one to Mr. Roberts.

He took the fragile cup and laughed heartily, like a rodeo Santa Claus. “I don’t drink tea, but I might start, Gina, if you’d serve tea in these things, ha ha.”

Rhiannon looked at the cup and sucked in a breath. Her mother had used the Moon Goddess tea set, complete with practically naked frolicking women.

She heard Jared snicker and turned to glare at her mother, who ignored her and calmly took a sip of tea.

Mr. Roberts set the cup on the mantle and looked around the living room, tucking his thumbs into his front pockets. “I remember this place before you all bought it. Kind of a, well, a fixer-upper, but you’ve done it up nice.”

Rhiannon fidgeted in her seat next to Jared on the couch.

Starla nodded. “Thank you. We love it here.”

Mrs. Roberts smiled as if it hurt her to move her mouth. “I’ve always thought this was a charming house. I’ve never understood why it kept getting put back on the market.”

Rhiannon wasn’t about to tell them it was because the place was haunted, and not everyone got along with ghosts. Even subconsciously. What would they say if they knew it was still haunted by a Roberts ancestor?

Not even Jared knew about Suzanne.

Chuckling, Mr. Roberts said, “The people before you were practically giving this place away. We almost bought it for our son, Brian.”

Mrs. Roberts lifted one blond brow. “He’s in college. To be a doctor. But to put it quite simply, we felt he’d want something brand new, with less upkeep, once he starts his practice.”

Rhiannon figured that Mr. and Mrs. Roberts didn’t realize that Jared had already told her Brian was flunking one of his classes. If Brian ever turned out to be the new local doctor, then *she* planned on never getting sick.

“This house suits us perfectly. When we were looking to move, it was almost like this house chose us.” Her mom took another sip of tea.

Mr. Roberts coughed behind his fist. “Uh, right.”

Squeezing Jared’s hand, which was resting between them on the couch, Rhiannon wondered why his parents had to be so judgmental. Or maybe the better question was, how did Jared turn out so cool, when the rest of his family was sooo creepy?

Mrs. Roberts lifted the cup, examining the almost-see-through dress of the goddess. “This is very interesting... I assume you carry this in your shop?” Normally Rhiannon didn’t read other people’s minds, but this time she couldn’t help it.

Mrs. Roberts' thoughts were crystal clear. *"My God! She sells, and uses, this...pornography? Wait until I tell Betty."*

Starla's face paled at Mrs. Roberts' insulting tone. Rhiannon watched her mom puff with injured pride as she answered, "Yes. Celestial Beginnings. You'll have to come in." *I dare you to step one foot in my store!*

Biting her lip to keep from groaning, Rhee looked from her mother to Mrs. Roberts to see how Jared's mom would react to the invitation. "I could never come inside—Janet tells me that you sell books on witchcraft."

Rhiannon stopped listening for the conversational subtext and choked. That was a direct hit—score one for Mrs. Roberts. Jared smacked her on the back.

Starla narrowed her eyes, and Rhiannon's first instinct was to hide behind the couch. Her mom rarely got mad, but, well, Mrs. Roberts could probably get on the Pope's nerves. But then again—Rhiannon shot a thought to her mom, making it loud and clear. *"Don't ruin things!"*

"Weelll, I provide—"

Rhiannon heard the last stair squeak and glanced up with relief. Her father entered the living room before Starla could give Mrs. Roberts a wart on the end of her snobby nose.

"Witchcraft? Actually, she provides a fabulous service for those fascinated with angels. It's become very trendy, as I'm sure you know. My wife is brilliant for taking advantage of the latest fad." Rhiannon watched in awed silence as her dad leaned down to kiss her mom on the lips before straightening and holding his hand out in greeting. "I'm Miles Godfrey, so nice to finally meet you."

Rhee just barely stopped herself from bowing down and kissing his feet. Things would be fine now, and they could leave. Who needed pictures? She got up, pulling Jared to his feet.

The stupid stair squeaked again and she tensed.

She'd forgotten all about Matthew.

Matthew followed her father into the living room. He'd taken off his coat, of course, and his hat. His hands were shoved into the front pockets of his jeans and he was walking around in his socks, just like he'd always lived with them in the cozy farmhouse.

Jared stiffened and put his hand at the small of her back.

Well, crap, Rhiannon thought. Now what?

Mrs. Roberts carefully put her cup down on the tray. "Hello," she said to Matthew, her eyes taking in everything from his haircut to his socks.

He lifted one corner of his mouth in a shy smile and Rhiannon remembered just why she'd had a crush on him. Like, he was completely cute.

"Hello," he said to everyone. "I'm Matthew Campbell."

Mrs. Roberts pursed her lips. "Are you related to Rhiannon?"

Mr. Roberts pushed his cowboy hat back off his forehead, interest sparkling in his eyes.

"We've never met before," Jared said, his hand possessively against her lower back. "Are you a cousin?"

Rhiannon held her breath, unable to speak in the face of impending disaster.

Matthew smiled his most charming, angelic smile and Rhee knew she was toast.

He joked, "No, ma'am, we're not related at all. We're roomies. I just moved in today."

Chapter Three

Looking out into the dark night from the rear passenger window of the Roberts' SUV, Rhee was certain that nobody in the entire history of dating had ever left the house so fast.

Jared kept his voice low as he asked, "Are you sure you still want to go to the dance? I mean, since your friend is at your place. How long is he staying?"

Rhiannon curled her fingers inside her pink cashmere mittens. "I want to go to the dance! Really, and Matthew, he just came today. He'll probably just stay through Christmas break."

Okay, this was the part that got tough. How to lie, without really lying, to your boyfriend... Jared didn't know about the Institute of Parapsychology. He knew her parents were Wiccan, and that was bad enough. He just thought that she'd been home-schooled, which is how she'd explained her friendship with Matthew in the first place.

"Wow. So even kids that are home-schooled get breaks? Awesome." Jared nudged her with his shoulder.

Mrs. Roberts said from the front passenger seat, "I thought home-schooling was for troubled children. The ones that can't make it in a *real* school."

Rhiannon bristled with anger, but Jared put his arm around her shoulder and said, "Not anymore, Mom. Besides, it was perfect for Rhiannon's family, since they traveled so much."

Mr. Roberts huffed. "Didn't you say your dad was an accountant?"

"Uh-huh. But my mom..." What had been the story they'd decided? And Matthew thought normal was easy. What did he know? "My mom was in advertising. She gave lectures all over."

"Your mom is cool," Jared said. "To give all that up just so you could have roots."

Mr. and Mrs. Roberts didn't say another word.

Rhiannon breathed a sigh of relief when they finally pulled up in front of the school.

"Thank you for the ride," she said as she opened the door and stepped outside. Her breath made puffs of marshmallowy air in the cold.

"We'll be back at midnight to pick you up," Jared's mom replied coolly. After a stern glance toward Rhiannon, she added, "Be good, and Jared, you call me if you need us to come and get you sooner."

She'd just been insulted, but she was so glad to be out of the car that she didn't care.

"Jared, about Matthew..." she tried as the Roberts' car pulled away.

"Let's talk inside. You're freezing! Your teeth are even starting to chatter."

Rhiannon bit her lip. Jared didn't sound mad. She didn't know much about dating or boyfriends, but probably living with another guy, especially one that wasn't related to you, that you used to *really* like, might be against the rules.

She snuggled deeper into her down coat. It was December and had to be about ten degrees outside. "People really enjoy skiing? Don't they get, I don't know, frostbite?"

"You'll be great. Just two months ago you rode a bucking bronc at your first rodeo, so what's a little kick in the air? I think it's great that you're willing to try new stuff. Besides, after skiing we can drink hot chocolate and sit in front of the giant fireplace at the lodge. We'll be really warm—" his breath tickled her ear and she leaned in, "—just you and me. You'll forget all about the cold."

His husky voice sent a different kind of shiver down her back. "Sounds fun."

Jared grinned his lopsided grin and opened the door to the gymnasium. "Oh yeah."

The blast of heat immediately unthawed her nose and Rhee looked around in surprise. Somehow, the decorating committee had banished the smell of hot lunches and tennis-shoe sweat. The scent of fresh pine was everywhere, probably from all of the new-cut trees that surrounded the stage and dance floor.

Shiny silver and gold stars hung from the ceiling, bobbing around the disco ball in the middle. "I can't believe this is the same place we play volleyball. It's like magic." Rhiannon tugged on Jared's arm.

“Amazing,” he agreed with a grin.

“Rhiannon!” Bonnie waved from across the gym. “Over here!”

Jared grabbed her hand and led the way to the punch table. Her friends were all helping themselves to drinks, a mysterious red liquid with green sprigs bobbing across the top of the huge bowl.

Waggling his brows, Corey gave Rhiannon a Styrofoam cup and joked, “Hey Jared, my man, what did you bring to spike the punch?”

Jared laughed, patted down his coat pockets and said, “Dang. I knew I was forgetting something.”

“Better watch him, Bonnie. Corey’s a wild man,” Rhee said.

Bonnie smiled and her entire face lit up. Rhiannon remembered the first time they’d ever met; her friend had come a long way from the frumpy girl in oversized clothes. Gone were the days that Bonnie let her mom buy her clothes in the plus department just to hide her busty figure.

“You look great, Bon. Green is good on you.”

Bonnie pretended to fluff her hair, which had been styled so that the blond layers framed her face. “Why, thank you. I should have known *you* would pick a silver dress.”

She hid a smile. Bonnie knew Rhee’s secret—well, one of them anyway—that Rhiannon’s parents had named her after the Celtic moon goddess. So far she’d managed to hide her psychic gifts from her friends, but it was getting harder the more she let her guard down.

Bonnie whispered, “Wait ’til you see Melody, she really went all out.”

“Yeah? Where is she?”

“Bathroom,” Bonnie said, mimicking applying make-up.

Just then Jared’s friend Caleb walked over with his date, Felicity. “Hey, wassup?”

Jared shrugged out of his coat. “Nothing yet, we just got here. How ’bout you?”

“Same thing.” Caleb reached for a glass and the ladle from the punch bowl. “I was hoping these dances wouldn’t be so boring once we hit high school. Want some punch, Felicity?”

Felicity lifted one half of her mouth in an almost-smile and put her arm through Caleb's. "Not yet. Come on, Caleb, let's go find the rest of our friends."

Ouch. Rhiannon looked at Jared to see how he would take the snub, but he was oblivious. She glanced at Caleb, who gave his girlfriend a sharp look before saying, "Hey Jared, I saved you both seats at our table."

Unbidden, Felicity's thoughts crashed through Rhiannon's mental barriers and she winced. "*God, I don't want to be stuck sitting with that loser, I'm just not going to, no matter what Caleb says.*"

"Rhee? You want to?" Jared asked.

Rhiannon gulped past the sick feeling in her stomach. So what if Felicity hated her guts? She was here with Jared. "Uh..."

Caleb said, "We're actually at a table right next to Bonnie and Corey."

Felicity sneered and Rhiannon got, "*I know he's just being nice, cause Jared's his friend, but puhlease.*" Okay, this was getting creepy. Why was she picking up Felicity's thoughts? How was the girl getting past her barriers?

Felicity continued giving Rhiannon her fake smile, but now she'd raised her eyebrows, too, and Rhee realized she still hadn't answered the question.

Was she so distracted about Matthew showing up that she couldn't maintain her protective shields? The last thing she wanted was to spend the entire night sitting at a table full of people who couldn't stand her. Jared bumped his hip into hers. "Earth to Rhee..."

"Sorry. Sure, sounds great to me." *I'm going to get shredded. Just to please Jared, I am going to bravely face an entire pack of lions in their den. And by the time the clock strikes midnight, I'll be picking what's left of my self-esteem off the floor. Ugh.*

Or maybe this has nothing to do with Matthew. Maybe it's because— Jared interrupted her train of thought. "Here, let me help you with your coat. You look warm."

"I'm fine," Rhiannon fibbed, but she let him take the coat.

Caleb snatched another glass of punch from Corey, who was still talking, of course. "All I'm saying is if someone is gonna spike the punch, I want in on it."

“You invited me to this dance, Corey.” Bonnie tapped her foot. “You are so not drinking, got it?”

Corey rolled his eyes. “This is Crystal Lake. There is nobody cool enough to mess with the punch.”

Jared and Caleb started laughing and Caleb said, “Next year. There’s always next year. I like the way you think, Corey.”

Rhiannon blinked. Here they all stood, the popular kids and the not so popular, and everybody was getting along.

“If Caleb doesn’t leave within the next five seconds, I’m going to scream.”

Okay, scratch that. Everybody but Felicity was having a good time. Rhiannon looked around the gym, wondering if she would pick up other random thoughts, and saw Melody coming out of the bathroom. “Oh, wow...what is she wearing?”

Shaking her head and giggling, Bonnie said proudly, “She wanted to be a Sugar Plum fairy. She had it in her head that she was going to dress up her way. I helped with the wings—aren’t they awesome?”

Rhiannon didn’t know what to say as her friend glided across the gymnasium on pink ballet slippers. Melody’s skirt had been made out of what had to be hundreds of colored scarves that floated around her slim legs, and the bodice of the costume looked like a corset tied with iridescent ribbons.

Glitter sparkled from Melody’s bare shoulders, and a tiara flashed from the rich chocolate color of her hair.

Rhee held back the laughter, but just barely. Melody was never afraid to be whatever she wanted to be. Well, except for herself.

Melody stopped in front of them and curtsied. “What do you think?”

“*Très chic*,” Rhiannon clapped with approval. “But why the costume?”

Melody lifted one shoulder. “Why not? It’s not like I have a date to impress or anything.”

Smiling, Jared elbowed Caleb. “My guess is you won’t be without dancing partners. Mel, you look hot.”

Felicity snickered and rolled her eyes before pulling on Caleb's arm. "Let's go. I want to mingle."

Rhiannon gasped as Felicity's latest snarky comment rang through her head. *"It's no wonder she doesn't have a date, she's a freak. I can't wait to tell Janet how stupid Melody looks. God, if I didn't like Caleb so much, I'd laugh my butt off right here. What is Jared thinking hanging with these losers?"*

Jared pried the Styrofoam cup from her hand. "Geez, Rhee, you've poked a hole in it. Stronger than you look, huh?"

She nodded, beyond angry at the girls who thought they could pick who was cool and popular and who wasn't. "Yeah." Rhee tried joking. "That's me. Superwoman."

Jared pulled her back and whispered in her ear. "Hey, are you mad about sitting with my friends?"

"No!" Rhiannon told her umpteenth fib of the day. "Besides, I don't plan on sitting much, Jared Roberts. I want to dance." She shimmied her shoulders. "I've never been to one before."

Jared laughed, "Okay, but this is Crystal Lake. You'll be doing a lot of line dancing to Christmas carols."

"Line dancing? How do I do that?" Rhiannon hated that her voice came out high-pitched. Just when she thought she had everything under control, somebody had to screw it up. "Line dancing."

Felicity exhaled dramatically. "Any moron can line dance."

Melody opened her mouth, but Bonnie handed her some punch. "Drink this, then let's go see what's taking the band so long."

Handing it right back, Mel said, "I don't want it."

Corey wiped his hands on his pants. "Being as I'm the moron who can't line dance, I'll go check on the band."

Melody tossed an angry look at Felicity. "I'll go with you. I need some fresh air."

Bonnie followed them. "You both know perfectly well that they always give lessons before the dances start."

Rhiannon watched as her friends deserted her, or at least that's what it felt like. Melody and Bonnie stopped to talk to Mrs. Bing and Mr. Hill, and who was that guy with the red hair? It was such a bright copper color. A band member? He glanced up and caught her staring, so she quickly looked away.

"That was mean," Caleb told his girlfriend.

"Sorry," Felicity said with a smirk. "Guess we'll have lots of wallflowers tonight."

Jared must have finally gotten a clue, because he put his arm around her shoulders and said, "Not something my girl will have to worry about. Come on, Rhee, I'll show you some of the steps."

They left and Rhiannon whispered, "I'm sorry," as Jared pulled her toward an out of the way spot.

"Don't be. If my friends can't be decent, then they aren't really my friends."

Rhee knew things would be easier on Jared if she would give up her so-called loser friends, but she wasn't about to do that just to be liked by a bunch of hypocrites.

She offered an olive branch. "Caleb's nice, though."

"Yeah. It's mostly just the girls who, you know, have a problem."

Their eyes met and Rhee didn't need to be telepathic to know that they were both thinking of Janet. Dating pretty much sucked when your boyfriend's family collectively thought you were wasting their oxygen.

She started giggling. "You know, we're kind of like Romeo and Juliet."

His lips twitched and Rhiannon's nervous stomach eased a little. "Yeah?"

"Well, except for the fact that my parents actually like you. Come on, show me where to put my feet so I don't make a bigger fool of myself."

"Deal. Uh, I just have one last question, and then we'll start." Jared took her hand, but wouldn't look at her. "When you say Matthew is an old friend, well, what kind of friend was he?"

Rhiannon was grateful for the near dark of the gym. Hopefully it would hide her blush. "Not like that. I told you, you're my first boyfriend. Ever." There, that wasn't a lie

at all and she didn't need to reveal the silly crush that she *used* to have on Matthew. Which would only hurt Jared's feelings.

Jared leaned over and kissed her cheek. "Lucky me, huh? Okay, stand like this."

Rhiannon thought she was the lucky one, but she wasn't about to argue. "If you would have told me about the line dancing thing, I would have bought silver cowboy boots to match my dress, you know."

He laughed and pulled her into his arms.

The hours flew by and before she knew it, it was almost midnight. "My stomach hurts from laughing so hard, Jared. This has been so fun." Well, her feet hurt too, from stomping in strappy heels. Who knew that you could do-si-do to "Jingle Bells"?

"Best dance I've ever been to," he said as he twirled her around. "The slow ones are my favorite."

"No getting too close, or Mrs. Bing will be right over." Bonnie grinned from within the circle of Corey's arms as they danced nearby.

"The chaperones have been pretty cool," Rhiannon pointed out. "Even the creepy red-headed guy. And did you see Mr. Hill dancing with Mrs. Sheraton?"

Jared laughed. "That was funny. I think he might have broken her toe."

Green eyes flashing, Bonnie asked, "Did you catch Caleb dancing with Melody?"

Shoulders tense, Rhee ignored the uneasy feeling she was getting. "Yeah. She's really good. Jared danced with her too. And she's helping everybody who wants to learn. She finally got my feet untwisted."

Jared's hand pressed into her waist. "To think Melody was worried about not having a date. She's done pretty good. But so have you, Rhee. You're a fast learner."

Rhiannon's cheeks burned, but she blamed it on the heat in the cafeteria. "Don't be bad, Jared."

Her guy grinned and backed her up a few steps for privacy. "I like all your friends, actually. What's crazy is that I've *known* them forever, but never *knew* them until you came. You've made some positive changes around here, Rhee. Wanna go find some mistletoe?"

“We’ve been under the mistletoe ten times already. Your lips should be chapped from kissing.”

Jared shrugged, his eyes sparkling. “Nope. Not happening.”

She hid her smile in his chest. Could life get any better?

A shiver raced up her spine and she was filled with an immediate sense of dread. Felicity’s thoughts broke into her head. *“I knew Janet would take care of that stupid twit. I am so breaking up with Caleb, too, first thing tomorrow. How dare he dance with her?”*

Alarmed, Rhiannon searched the crowded gym for anything out of the ordinary.

It took just a second to find Jared’s twin sister, Janet, standing nose to nose with Melody – directly beneath the spinning disco ball.

Chapter Four

“What?” Jared asked as he followed her through the crowd.

“Hurry!” Rhiannon sensed that the two girls were about to get into a real fight.

“You ripped my costume on purpose!” Melody yelled, pointing to the ragged edge of her skirt.

“I did not.” Janet lifted a torn scarf and waved it in the air. “This is what happens when you play make believe. The stuff falls apart. Couldn’t you afford a real dress?”

Bonnie elbowed her way to Melody’s side. “That was mean and so not true. We spent hours making that skirt. By *choice*.”

Snorting, Janet let the scarf fall to the floor. “Who would want to look like a fairy?”

Rhiannon stepped next to her friends, not sure what to do. She looked around and noticed that none of the adults were paying attention. “What’s going on?” Rhee stood next to Melody, and it was like she absorbed Melody’s anger into her own body. It put her on edge.

As usual, Janet’s two puppets, the ones Rhiannon called Mutt and Jeff ’cause she couldn’t tell them apart, stood on either side of Janet.

“Butt out, Rhiannon,” Mutt said.

Snickering, Jeff added, “This is between Janet and Melody. We don’t want you putting any *spells* on us.”

The crowd of teens laughed uneasily. Felicity jumped in with her two cents, fanning the flames of Rhee’s temper. “Yeah, I hear your mom is selling witchcraft books. Where’s your broom, Rhiannon?”

Rhee clenched her teeth as the laughter got louder and more mean-spirited. The atmosphere in the gym had changed somehow. Between Mutt, Jeff and Felicity, not to

mention Janet herself, she was going to blow a gasket before the night was over. Why was it so hot in here?

Waving her hand in front of her warm face, she deliberately opted to go for cool, calm and collected instead of kicking butt. “You have no clue what you’re talking about.” Then she took a step back, hoping that other people would too.

But she’d forgotten that Bonnie was no longer a doormat. Her friend snapped, “Celestial Beginnings is *New Age*.”

Rhiannon put her hand on Bonnie’s arm and tried to pull her back. Bonnie flinched and gave Rhee a funny look.

Jabbing her finger at Janet and her friends, Melody fought back. “You people are so stupid. My costume has nothing to do with witches. The Sugar Plum Fairy is from *The Nutcracker*. A Christmas play.”

Janet glared. “I know perfectly well what *The Nutcracker* is. I’ve actually seen the play performed on Broadway. Where’d you see it? Channel 7? Or do you even have TV in your trailer?”

Melody gasped and Rhiannon felt her friend’s hurt as if it were her own. In the blink of an eye, Melody had her hand raised and drawn back, aimed at Janet’s face.

Rhee grabbed her friend by the wrist, desperately sending mental blue clouds to calm her before she did something she would regret. Not that Janet didn’t have it coming. But still.

Janet pushed Melody backward. “Go ahead, slap me. Guess who will end up in juvie? Not me. Maybe you can visit your daddy while you’re there.”

Melody paled and nobody in the crowd even snickered. Rhee swallowed, sick to her stomach. Heat was building from her toes and she was on the verge of losing control. What was going on?

She could feel the itch in her fingertips and she fought the sensation back.

Jared inserted his body between Melody and his sister. “Knock it off, Janet. Did you really ruin Melody’s costume?”

Janet sneered at her twin. “Sticking up for the underdog again? You know what Daddy says. You lay down with dogs, you’ll get fleas. Better be careful, Jared...”

Rhiannon’s gaze clashed with Janet’s. The skin on her scalp tingled and the band abruptly stopped playing, as if they too sensed something in the air that bordered on chaos. She teetered on the edge of control, and one step could send her sprawling into the dark side of her nature. If Janet dared to say...

It was quiet, the kind of deep quiet that never brings holiday joy or world peace.

Janet didn’t *have* to raise her voice, but she did—the girl was always looking for an audience. “Yup, better be careful...of *who* you’re lying down with.”

By the Goddess, that was enough! Rhiannon was tired of Janet insinuating that she was a tramp, especially since it was so far from the truth. Rhee welcomed the anger that flowed through her veins like lava and she pushed past Melody and Bonnie, reached over Jared’s shoulder and lunged for Janet. The wench was going down. “You have been out to get me since I first moved here—you hate the fact that Jared likes me. You are jealous—yes, jealous. I’ve made some friends even though you’ve tried to make everyone else hate me too. It’s time someone stood up to you—I’m gonna—”

A loud groaning sound thundered above them. Rhee looked up and watched a splintering crack make its way across the ceiling.

The foil silver-and-gold stars swayed and some even dropped to the gym floor. Kids ducked to avoid being stabbed by the five-pointed cardboard weapons. “No,” Rhiannon mumbled with regret, immediately anger-free. What had she done with her temper?

The heavy disco ball separated from the ceiling with a hair-raising twang. It fell a foot, then bounced up, hanging by two cables.

Cables that were unraveling fast.

Janet stood directly underneath the dangling ball. Rhee clenched her fists tight and begged whoever was listening to stop the ball from falling. She’d never be mad again. She jumped when the ball fell another foot.

“Move, Janet!” Rhee shouted.

But her nemesis seemed glued to the floor as she stared up at the ceiling. So, in fact, did everybody. Confused, Rhee waved her hands at the mesmerized crowd. “Back up—before you get crushed.” What was the matter here? They were acting like they’d been hypnotized. Maybe someone really had spiked the punch.

Rhee pushed a giant speaker over with a crash, snapping Mr. Hill and Mrs. Bing out of their fog and into action as they realized the danger. They herded the kids away from the center of the floor, leaving Janet, Rhee and Jared in the middle.

Twang! Rhee’s heart thudded against her rib cage. The heavy disco ball only had one thin cable left. Rhiannon had no choice but to use her psychic powers to slow the ball down, or Janet could die. No matter how much she disliked Janet, she didn’t ever want to hurt another person, even by accident. She’d learned her lesson after the Maddie Johnson fiasco.

But if Jared saw her, it could ruin their friendship.

She had to save his sister. “Janet,” she said, hoping that Jared would get her to safety.

Jared yanked at Rhee’s arm, but she shrugged him off and closed her eyes, concentrating on holding that one cable until someone got Janet out of the way. *Pling*. Her powers weren’t working! No way could she be responsible for Janet getting hurt.

Rhiannon ran toward Janet, tackling her to the ground and rolling them both out of the way before Janet got cremated.

Boom! The ball hit the laminated floor with an echoing thud. Rhiannon felt the sting from flying pieces of the shiny ball as it separated into shrapnel on contact. She covered Janet’s body with her own and listened to the screams, filled with regret.

Rhiannon accepted the damp towel from Mrs. Bing, her science teacher. “I don’t think you’ll need stitches, but keep the pressure on. Where is the ambulance? I just don’t understand what happened.” She checked her watch, then patted Rhiannon’s shoulder.

“Parents should be here any time. It’s a quarter ’til midnight. Usually they start showing up by now.”

Mrs. Bing hustled away, and Rhiannon blinked back tears. “Is Janet okay?” she asked her friends Corey and Bonnie, Melody and Broomstick and Meat. There was no sign of Jared. Not that she could blame him. His sister could have been killed, and it was all her fault.

Guilt was three thousand times more painful than the cut on her head.

“You saved Janet’s life, Rhiannon,” Bonnie said emphatically. “Why are you worried about a stupid bump on her head? Your scalp is bleeding. Look at your legs, all covered with cuts. You could have really been hurt.”

Her dress was up around her knees. The gorgeous silver fabric had been no match for the sharp fragments of the disco ball. “Good thing it’s winter, huh? No shorts,” she tried to joke.

Melody’s face looked washed out in the bright light of the gym. “Not funny. You could have really been...”

“Smooshed,” Corey interjected.

Rhee gulped. “Nice visual, Cor, thanks.”

Melody waved her hand over to where Janet was seated. She was surrounded by her friends, and, Rhee noticed, Jared was right there for her. She had no right to expect Jared to pick her over his twin. Especially since she was responsible for the accident in the first place.

But it still bugged her. He hadn’t even glanced her way. And it wasn’t like he knew the disco ball falling was the result of her bad temper.

The cafeteria doors slammed open and her mother flew in from the cold. “Rhiannon? What happened? There’s an ambulance outside!”

She hadn’t felt so happy to see her mom since, well, that time in the pasture when Starla had saved her from a bad spell. If her mom knew that she was dabbling in witchcraft without help now...Rhee pushed the thought aside to examine later. Maybe even never. “Mom...over here.”

Miles and Matthew were right on Starla's heels. Matthew looked fabulously mussed, like he'd been sleeping and had rushed out the door before combing his hair.

Melody breathed out, "Who's that?"

Rhee didn't have time to answer before her mom descended like an avenging angel. Starla immediately pulled her into a hug and Rhiannon enjoyed it for all of two seconds before remembering she was in front of her friends. "Mom, knock it off."

"What happened to your head? And your legs? You're all bloody. I knew you should have worn your amulet. You shouldn't have come. I had a bad feeling, didn't I, Miles? And just look at what happened—what happened?"

Corey and Meat snickered and Rhiannon glared at them from over her Mom's shoulder.

Her dad patted Starla on the back. "Calm down, hon. Hi Melody, hello Bonnie. Everybody."

Matthew made his way to her left side, and Rhiannon gratefully let him help her up from her seat. She was starting to feel a little woozy, but it was more from her mom's chatter than blood loss. "Gotta go, see you," she said to her friends.

"Not so fast." Bonnie grabbed her arm and quickly hugged her. "Be careful, Rhee, your birthday's coming up and you need to be in tip-top bowling form."

Melody flashed Matthew a brilliant smile. "Will you be at Rhiannon's party? I'm Melody."

Rhiannon was surprised by the itty-bitty sting of jealousy when Matthew smiled back at her friend. "I'm Matthew." Then he swung his smile toward her, and the jealousy was gone. He teased, "I'm a pretty good bowler. I don't know if Rhiannon would want me to show her up."

Her friends all laughed, and Rhee stuck her tongue out at him. "With that kind of a challenge, how can I say no?"

"Rhiannon?" Mrs. Bing's voice carried across the gym. "The paramedic needs to look at that cut on your head before you leave."

Her mom got that Mom Panic in her eyes, but her dad said calmly, “That’s a good idea. What happened here?”

Mrs. Bing smiled distractedly. “Rhiannon saved another student’s life by pushing her out of the way when the disco ball dropped from the ceiling. Trust me, we’ll be checking into how that happened. Forty years, and we’ve never had a problem.”

Starla gasped and her bracelets jingled as she brought her knuckles to her lips. “Rhee?”

“I’m okay, Mom. I really am.”

The paramedic looked her over and agreed. “Keep the wounded area clean, add a topical antibiotic and you’ll be as pretty as ever. That was a very brave thing you did.”

Rhiannon squirmed, feeling five times the imposter. But it wasn’t like she could blurt out the news that her nasty temper had caused the ball to plunge in the first place. “Uh, thanks. I’m kinda tired, though. Can we go home?”

The paramedic gathered his bag. “You bet. But just to be on the safe side, why don’t you stay awake for about an hour or so?”

She was so drained that keeping her eyes open for ten minutes seemed freaking impossible.

Starla perked right up, obviously glad to have a Mom Job to do. “Certainly. We can play cards, I’ll make tea. Not chamomile. Maybe some orange spice with lemon zest. Or—”

Miles nodded. “I’m sure we can think of something to talk about.”

Rhiannon didn’t miss his *we definitely are going to talk* look.

“Hey, where’s your date?” Matthew asked.

Bonnie sighed loudly and pointed across the room. “Over there.”

He whistled. “Wow. Who is he with?”

“That would be his twin sister, the evil Janet,” Corey said.

“What happened to her? That paramedic guy is calling for a stretcher. And her parents look really mad.”

Rhiannon wished she was already home, safely tucked into her bed, snuggling with Thor. “Um.”

Matthew and her dad repeated, “Um?”

“That’s the student that Rhiannon saved,” Melody explained. “But Rhee doesn’t know her own strength, I guess. I think you even impressed the football coach with that flying tackle.”

Starla stopped fussing with Rhiannon’s coat and looked up. Blue eyes gazed into blue eyes with complete and total understanding. “Janet Roberts? Oh, honey. Well, I’m sure things will calm down, and then Jared will call you.”

“Call me *what*, Mom? That’s the problem.”

“What are you talking about? You said that Jared’s great.” Matthew helped her put her arm into the bulky sleeve of her coat.

Corey charged into the conversation with his fake Valentino voice. “Don’t worry, baby, everything will work out fine.”

Smacking Corey lightly on the arm, Melody said, “I don’t know why what Janet thinks bothers you so much, Rhee. She’s stupid. Even Jared told her to chill out.”

Limping for the door, Rhee sent a last glance toward Jared, who stood back as Mr. Hill and the red-haired chaperone helped the paramedics get Janet on the stretcher. “How much of a chance do I have if his whole family thinks that I’m a witch?”

“You didn’t have to stick up for me. I was handling it.” Melody shrugged. “But thanks.”

“Believe it or not, I was trying to stop a fight—not end up in one.”

“Rhee, you were in a fight?”

She didn’t want to explain, but she knew her mom would get it out of her eventually. “Not really. But I was mad at Janet, for making fun of Melody’s costume. Then she said something nasty about Jared and me...can we please talk about it later?”

Matthew tightened his grip on her elbow. “Not cool. Hey, Jared is looking this way, want to go say something? He looks ticked.”

“There is nothing to say.”

Rhiannon reached the steel door and opened it wide. Along with the tide of concerned parents and cold air came the thought, “*Why couldn’t the ball have landed right on top of you? I hate you!*”

Rhee whipped around and saw Felicity standing next to Janet. *Obviously I’m not the only one with anger issues.*

Chapter Five

They all got into the burgundy van, which was still warm from her parents' drive to come and get her. And that was weird.

"How did you know I needed a ride, Mom? Jared's parents were supposed to bring me home, and I didn't call."

"It was so awesome," Matthew said excitedly. "We're sitting there, you know, watching T.V. and waiting for you to get home, when all of a sudden your mom jumps up and yells, 'Now, Miles, we have to go!' and then we were in the car. Your mom just had this thought that you were hurt or in danger or something."

She heard the pride in her mom's voice. "And I was right. Come on, Rhiannon, aren't you glad that we came?"

Rhee exchanged a glance with Matthew. She couldn't fib. "Yeah. I am. Thanks." She was losing control of her temper and the control over her psychic powers. Other people's thoughts were barging in with no warning, and now her mom had randomly picked up on the way she was feeling. "Hey Mom, did you get a vision? Or was it just, like, a feeling, sort of more like when I was younger?" *Before I'd learned to mask and block my talents.* Maybe dabbling with the Wicca spells was somehow diminishing her psychic control. If she wasn't careful, she might be an open book for anybody. Or worse, she'd have no protective shields, either. If only she hadn't promised Suzanne that she'd try and make her real. The entire night had an eerie quality to it that she couldn't explain.

Her mom turned around to look at her from the front passenger seat. "No vision. Just you, and you were afraid, and then in pain. I knew you were going to need your amulet."

"Mom, some dumb necklace wouldn't have changed anything."

"Rhiannon." Her dad's tone held a warning.

“Sorry. I love the necklace, I do. But Mom thinks I shouldn’t leave the house without it.”

Matthew leaned in to be part of the conversation. “This must be a regular argument. Mom wants to protect child. Child wants to be free from parental rules.”

Smacking Matthew on the arm, Rhee giggled. “You sound like such a dork. Arguing with your parents is so...normal.”

Matthew’s expression was one of exaggerated heartbreak and an obvious ploy to worm his way into their house. “I wouldn’t know. It sure sounds fun, though.”

After a second of shocked surprise, they all started laughing. Rhee wondered how you could miss something you never had, but it was obvious that Matthew missed his family terribly. By the time they reached the farmhouse, Rhee didn’t feel like arguing anymore.

Rhiannon opened the door of the van, stepping out into the crisp night. She walked a ways, loving the crunchy sound of ice beneath her shoes. “Heels actually work like an anchor,” she said in wonderment.

Matthew took her elbow. “You’re kinda accident prone. Just let me help you to the house.”

“I’m fine,” she said, shaking off his arm, only to slide on a patch of hidden ice.

Matthew caught her before she hit the ground and Rhiannon’s senses all froze. This was Matthew, her friend from earliest childhood. His blue eyes were clear and sharp as an icicle and he, judging from the hard muscle beneath her hand, had been working out. She didn’t blink, and she couldn’t look away. His gaze was steady too.

The fact that she even noticed his muscles made her blush, which absolutely broke the spell. She wiggled and he set her upright. His voice sounded odd as he muttered, “Okay? You do it then. Be careful.”

He stepped ahead of her and jammed his hands inside his coat pockets.

Rhiannon was left to follow behind. Had that really been a spark of mutual attraction? And dang it, even if it was, what could she do about it now? She had Jared. Maybe. Either way, she was so *over* her silly crush.

Once inside, Rhiannon was quick to shimmy out of her coat and get it hung up. The fire in the living room blazed, inviting her to come and curl up on the couch. Suddenly the events of the past five hours seemed overwhelming and she wanted nothing more than a shower and sleep, even though she knew her parents were going to demand every detail of her bizarre night.

Maybe the spray of warm water would wake her up. "I'm showering," she called as she raced toward the stairs to her room, ignoring the stretch of the cuts on her legs. She didn't wait for an answer, slipping off her shoes and taking the steps two at a time.

Her room was her refuge. Tears started at the back of her eyes as she recalled the look of blame Jared had given her when they'd left the gym. Felicity's horrid thoughts, the impact of her hate, were still strong. And Janet...would she be okay? Rhiannon hadn't realized Janet was so badly hurt that she needed a stretcher. She pushed open her bedroom door at the exact instant the tears started falling. Then she tripped over a bundle of orange fur, flying forward on her hands and knees. "Ouch! Dang it, ugh." She lifted her hands, adding rug burns to her collection of injuries for the evening.

Thor forgave her for waking him up and brushed against her legs, purring loudly. "I had a horrible night," she informed the cat through her tears.

A cold breeze whirled around her neck and face, cooling her hot cheeks. "Rhiannon? May I come in?"

"You're already here, Suz." Rhiannon closed her eyes, burying her face in Thor's fur, secretly glad to have the spirit around.

"You are sad. I was worried that you might be sad. The dance was not awesome?"

Rhiannon sniffed, but kept her leaking eyes shut. "You knew I'd be sad? Why didn't you say something? Man, you and Mom both."

"I warned you to beware of trouble."

Rhee sat up, eyes wide open. "Did you know what was going to happen tonight?" If Suzanne could see the future, this was the first Rhiannon had ever heard of it.

The spirit whirled around the room, as if she were agitated. "Nooo, not exactly. I visited your friend, Matthew. He is sad too."

Frustrated, Rhiannon got to her feet, carrying Thor in her arms. She knew from past experience that pushing Suzanne to answer a question she didn't want to was a lesson in futility. "Leave Matthew alone."

"You are hurt! What happened?"

Invisible fingers traced the cut on Rhee's head, but she stepped back, still a little ticked that the spirit had evaded the seeing-the-future question.

"It's nothing." She gathered her flannel pajama pants and a comfy T-shirt. "I'm gonna shower, then everything will look, and feel, a ton better." Her head ached, actually, and some of her mom's tea was sounding good.

"Rhiannon! Don't go. I'm lonely."

Rhee knew that Suzanne always said that to make her feel guilty. Well, tonight it wasn't going to work. "Not now. Play with Thor. I've got to get this make-up off and get out of this dress, which is totally ruined. My legs look like the first time I ever shaved with a real razor. Some first dance of my life, that is all I'm saying." She peeked into the vanity mirror and shrieked. "By the Goddess, I look awful!" *And I thought Matthew was flirting with me? Not! He just felt sorry for me, duh.*

The couch was every bit as comfortable as she'd thought it would be. Sitting next to her mom, covered with a crocheted afghan and holding a cup of aromatic lemon zest tea, she finally felt some of her anxiety lift.

"But what if Janet is really hurt? I mean, it would be all my fault." It had taken her half an hour to tell them the story.

Her mom shook her head. "No. I don't think you caused the crack in the ceiling or the ball to break. You have been so good about your temper lately, I even told your dad how proud I was of you. I think working with Mrs. Edwards and Suzanne has given you a goal, a focus for all of your energy."

More guilt to pile on, Rhiannon thought as she sipped her tea. *Mom wouldn't be so proud if she knew that I was researching magick for a way to make Suzanne a real*

person. Although she'd hoped that the Wicca would be more helpful for controlling her outbursts of temper. It hadn't—she'd just gotten better at hiding it. Would she ever be able to fit all the pieces of herself together?

Her dad agreed. "You would have had to intentionally want Janet hurt, and from what you said, you didn't do that. You tried to save her from being one with the floor. I think it was just a coincidence that the accident happened at the same time Janet provoked you and your friends. Anybody would have gotten mad at how they were treating Melody. Some anger is healthy, Rhee. You can't keep it all bottled up inside."

"Well, what about hearing Felicity's thoughts? She was horrible, and there's no way I'd want to deliberately hear that kind of junk."

"It's possible that Felicity has some psychic powers too, maybe untapped, that you picked up on because of your own talents."

Rhiannon looked at her mom, surprised. "That's true. Dr. Richards says that teenage girls are a hotbed of supernatural energy."

Her mom smiled. "Does that explain the sudden mood changes? The inability to pick an outfit or an eye shadow?"

"Ha ha." It wasn't her fault she had see-sawing hormones. "And what am I going to do about Jared? He didn't look too thrilled with me. And I swear when I tackled Janet, I had extra strength."

"Adrenalin," her dad explained. "Mothers have lifted cars to save their kids—it's a proven fact, Miss Scientific."

"I think you should ask Dr. Richards and Mrs. Edwards. They're gonna be here tomorrow," Matthew said before biting into a cinnamon cookie.

"They are? Are they making you go back to the institute?" Rhiannon was surprised when she felt a little disappointed at the thought.

Matthew shrugged, finished chewing and swallowed. "Dunno. Dr. Richards just said it was very important that he talk to me. Whatever he says to me, though, he can say in front of all of you. I'm tired of...well, I'm just tired."

"We'd be happy to give you privacy, Matthew. Unless you really want us there."

Rhiannon heard some of the old resentment her mom felt toward the Institute of Parapsychology, specifically Dr. Richards, come out. She guessed her mom had good reasons. But Rhee had always loved the institute and its philosophy of science.

She understood it better than magick and Wicca practices.

Logical explanations were more solid than making a wish holding a rock on the second full moon of the year, if it fell on a Tuesday. Or whatever.

But since she'd experienced what could only be magick when she'd tried a banishing spell back in October, she was now secretly reconsidering her options.

Secretly because if she decided, after studying, that she didn't want to become a Wiccan, then her parents would be majorly disappointed. Plus, if her mother found out that she using magick to make a spirit into flesh and bone, Rhee would be grounded until she was a hundred.

Scientifically, Rhiannon was sure it couldn't be done. Magically, she and Suzanne might have a shot. There was nothing wrong with hedging her bets.

The cup of tea she was holding slipped a little, bringing her back to the conversation. Matthew was saying, "I'd really appreciate you being there. I'll need all the help I can get to convince Dr. Richards to let me out. He's my legal guardian, you know."

Whoa! And here she thought she knew everything there was to know about Matthew.

"Appointed by the state?" Her dad leaned forward, pinning Matthew with his solid gaze.

Matthew looked at his fingernails, as if suddenly interested in anything but the conversation. "Um, no. I guess that my parents appointed him, before they had their, uh, accident."

Rhiannon noticed that Matthew's ears were turning red. Was he lying? She refused to read his thoughts; he was a friend and deserved that privacy.

Of course, her mom got up from the couch and put her arm around Matthew's shoulders. Wounded birds, crazy bees, even flies were safe with Starla Godfrey. She just couldn't bear to see anything hurt. "It will be all right, Matthew. Miles and I will help in any way we can. Why, you were practically a baby still when your parents died."

Matthew mumbled, cheeks red now too. “I was six. And they’re good to me, Mrs. Edwards and the doc. It’s just that, I’ve been having these weird nightmares, and I’m not sleeping well. It’s like I should be doing something, but I don’t know what. And Dr. Richards won’t tell me anything about my past. Just that I was a patient of his, brought in by my parents when I was around four. I guess I was starting things on fire when I got mad.”

Rhiannon joked, “You must have gotten pretty spoiled, huh? Don’t let the baby cry or poof! There goes the dog.”

Her dad arched his brow at her before saying, “It’s a good thing that your parents looked out for your future.”

Shrugging, Matthew’s face returned to normal color. “Yeah. I guess my mom had a little bit of the Irish sight. All I have is a picture of them.”

All bad jokes aside, Rhiannon felt the bite of threatening tears. Poor Matthew. “What else do you remember?”

Matthew got to his feet, his eyes narrowed as he stared into the dancing flames of the fire. “Well, that’s another thing that Dr. Richards won’t explain. I can’t remember what my parents looked like, or a house that we lived in, pets, nothing. Yet I hear this haunting music like a soundtrack in my head. Don’t you think that’s weird? I mean, it’s like my memory has been wiped clear of everything before I came to the institute, except that.”

He faced them, fear etched on every feature. “I didn’t exist.”

Chapter Six

Rhiannon woke up with the morning sun shining through her skylight and bathing her face. Snuggled down by her feet, Thor was purring loud enough for three cats. Sun or no sun, it was winter and cold. Turning her head to the right, she could see outside her window. The maple tree was bare of leaves and covered with a fresh layer of frost.

“Brr! Come on, Thor. If I have to get up, so do you.” She shoved back the covers and buried her feet into fuzzy slippers. Grabbing a robe she kept slung over a chair, she hurriedly shrugged it on, then ran downstairs to the bathroom.

Which was occupied.

At first she was startled by Matthew’s deep voice, until she remembered the night before with perfect clarity. *Ugh.*

“Hurry up!” she yelled through the door, just because she could. What would it be like racing to the bathroom hoping to beat Matthew *every* morning?

Weird.

“I’m just about done. Hold your horses.”

“Hey!” Rhiannon yelled, her bladder screaming even louder. No way was this sharing a bathroom thing gonna work out. She couldn’t break the door down, but maybe she could tempt him out to the hall. “Speaking of horses, I’ll let you feed Moonstone, but only if you freaking hurry up.”

Matthew opened the door, the steam from his shower clouding the mirror. He brushed his damp hair off his forehead, his eyes twinkling mischievously. “Deal.”

“I hope you left some hot water,” Rhiannon grumbled as she brushed past him, pushing him out on the way.

“Are you always this crabby in the morning?”

“Just when I have to pee, now move it.” It felt wonderful slamming the door in his face. Maybe the next time he was in her bathroom space, she’d start spouting feminine hygiene. If the look on his face was anything to go by, he’d be out in seconds flat.

Absolutely priceless.

Ruffling Matthew’s normally smooth feathers had brightened her day considerably, so she hustled through getting dressed in jeans, two pairs of socks, a turtleneck and a heavy sweater.

By the time she made it down the stairs for breakfast, she was grinning from ear to ear. Until she noticed Matthew sitting in her seat, eating a steaming bowl of oatmeal and buttered toast. Her oatmeal, her toast.

Starla looked up. “Morning, Rhiannon. Ready for breakfast? Your dad’s already fed Betsy and Moonstone for you. We thought you might like a chance to sleep in.”

People were messing with her routine, and she didn’t like it. At all. “Oh. I guess I’ll sit in *Dad’s* chair then.”

“There’s plenty of room, honey. Do you want cream for your oatmeal?”

“You know I like cream, Mom. And brown sugar.”

Her mom put a bowl in front of Rhiannon. “No more brown sugar, Matthew used the last of it. I’ll go to the market as soon as I clean up breakfast. Want to go?”

Rhee glared at Matthew, who had his head bent over his bowl, shoveling food into his mouth like he was starving. Which he wasn’t. “No, I don’t want to go. Maybe you should ask Matthew.”

Smiling, her mom said, “I did! He’s coming.”

Rhiannon rolled her eyes, totally disgusted with life in general. “I have stuff to do.”

Matthew looked up at that second and caught her eye. He grinned, then stuck his tongue out. “Baby.”

Shocked, Rhee forgot to breathe. The she laughed, so busted. “Okay, point taken. There’s a reason I’m an only child.”

“I always wanted a lot of children, but the Goddess blessed us with just Rhiannon. She knew what She was doing, I suppose,” her mom teased.

Matthew finished off his oatmeal. “Can you imagine a houseful of kids all like Rhiannon? Wow.”

Her mom came over and hugged her shoulders. “I would love every minute of it.” Then she plopped a kiss on top of Rhiannon’s head. “Your cut looks a lot better today. Did you use the aloe cream I made? On your legs too?”

Matthew noisily pushed his chair back and rinsed his bowl out in the sink. “Can I do the dishes before we go?”

Rhiannon giggled. “Sibling rivalry. You get to win, Matthew. I hate doing dishes.”

The phone in the kitchen rang and Rhee glanced at the clock. “It’s only nine, who could be calling this early?”

“You could answer it and find out,” Matthew suggested sarcastically.

“Mom, aren’t you taking him to the market? You could auction him off to the highest bidder.” Rhiannon walked to the phone, deciding that having someone to nag at everyday could be fun.

“Hello?”

“Rhiannon! Have you checked your email today?”

“No Mel, but then again, I just woke up.”

“Don’t be snotty. Do you know that Janet seems to have found a new best friend in Felicity? She’s tearing up the Internet, trash talking you.”

Rhiannon glanced at her mom, who was busy looking for her keys. Rhee saw them poking out from beneath a stack of indoor gardening magazines and mentally pulled them out a little farther so that her mom could see them. And leave, taking Matthew with her. She didn’t need for them to hear her latest humiliation. “Cool,” she told Melody.

“Cool?” Melody spluttered. “I don’t think so!”

Her mom spied the keys. “There they are! I thought I already checked beneath those. There are days when I just know I’m heading toward early dementia. Ready, Matthew?”

Rhee waved as the two walked out into the living room, and waited until she heard the front door close, before she screeched, “You’ll have to start at the beginning. I quit listening after trash talk.”

Melody took a loud, deep breath and spieled, “Okay, turns out that Janet is fine, even though she made a huge scene after you left, telling anybody who would listen that you deliberately pushed her.”

Rhiannon’s stomach tightened. “Yeah?”

“Well, then she reminded everyone that you made her horse shy back in October when she took that nasty spill. Remember?”

As if she would ever forget the hate campaign Janet had launched in Crystal Lake High, telling everybody that Rhee’d deliberately put something beneath Janet’s saddle so that her horse would toss her off. Chills broke out along Rhee’s spine, despite the fact she was dressed for forty below. “What does this have to do with Felicity?”

“Everything. Felicity was totally backing Janet’s story, and when the Roberts got there, they completely freaked. They believed Janet when she told them you had hurt her on purpose. Well, mostly it was Mrs. Roberts who was making a scene, but she even told Mrs. Bing that they were gonna sue.”

“Sue? As in my parents? That’s so stupid. There were witnesses! I pushed Janet out of the way of a falling disco ball. I should have let her get smashed.” Rhiannon sat down on a stool by the wall. “What am I gonna do?”

Melody snorted. “I don’t know. People heard you yelling at her. I’ve been trying to tell your side of the story, but you know people just love the dirt, even if it is a lie.”

Rhiannon heard the bitter tone in her friend’s voice. “I thought you looked really great last night. I’m sorry about your skirt.”

There was a lengthy pause before Melody said, “Thanks. And thanks again for having my back.”

Uncomfortable, Rhee fidgeted with the phone. She wasn’t a hundred percent buying her parents’ theory that the accident wasn’t her fault, but something had been cosmically off in the Crystal Lake High gymnasium last night. “Hey, that’s what friends are for. You’re doing the same for me.”

“Bonnie, Corey, everybody at our lunch table is on it. You’ve got some other friends, too, that are being cool. Like Caleb. I was surprised that he’s so decent, especially since he’s dating rotten Felicity.”

“So, Felicity is the one bad talking me on the Internet? Not Janet, or Mutt and Jeff?”

“Mutt and Jeff have real names you know.”

Rhee smiled. “Don’t know and file me under don’t care.”

Laughing, Melody said, “Hey, Janet’s staying offline, trying to keep her nose clean, even though we both know she’s behind everything. But you might want to call Jared, just to see how things are.”

“You’re right. I’ll call Jared and then check email. Thanks, Mel.”

Rhiannon clicked end, then quickly dialed Jared’s number before she chickened out. The phone rang five times and she was just about to hang up when Mrs. Roberts answered the phone. “Rhiannon? Don’t call this house anymore.”

The hang up, and then the dial tone, rang in Rhee’s ears like a bee trapped in a glass jar. The Roberts were obviously checking their caller ID this morning.

It took her a second before she realized that she was crying, and that she’d just been dumped by her boyfriend’s mom.

She dropped the phone to the countertop and went to the computer.

“Rhiannon!” her mom called as she burst through the front door, her arms laden with environmentally correct bags. “I found the cutest little bowling pin buttons for your birthday party, come and see.”

Rhee got up from the computer in the living room, her eyes scratchy from not crying. She was so not giving Janet or Felicity the power to bring her to tears. Not anymore. They weren’t worth it.

“I hope you saved the receipt. I’m not having a party.”

The smile slipped from her mom’s face as she continued on toward the kitchen. “Come in here, Rhee, and talk to me.”

Matthew waited until Rhiannon started walking, then fell in step behind her.

Her mom had set the bags down on the counter and was holding one of the buttons that had a bowling pin on it. “I thought we could write people’s names on them, just for fun. I asked Matthew, and he said it sounded great.”

“You aren’t listening to me,” Rhee said with what she thought was a wealth of patience. “The party’s off.”

“But Rhiannon, we’ve had twenty kids RSVP.”

Taking a deep breath, she tried again. “Janet and Felicity have started a huge smear campaign against me. They’ve got people believing that I pushed Janet for no reason. How can they all forget the lethal disco ball? I don’t get it.”

Her mom set the button down. “How do you know this? Honey, it just can’t be that bad.”

Rhiannon crooked her finger. “Come here, and I’ll show you. Email beats *he said, she said* gossip. You can re-read the ugly things people are saying about you all you want. And you have proof, even though most of the kids are being jerks and keeping their names anonymous. Cowards.”

Matthew brushed his hair out of his eyes and Rhee could see him doing the brilliant analyst thing. “It’s group hysteria, which is kind of interesting.”

“Ha!”

“When it isn’t happening to someone you know,” he amended.

Rhee snorted, sat down at the computer and read some of the horrible things aloud. “This is from Felicity: ‘Rhiannon Godfrey is a spoiled bitch. She came to Crystal Lake and treated us all like we were dumber than dirt’.”

Her mom gasped.

“There’s more,” Rhee said. “Like this one: ‘Rhiannon should have drowned, she had her nose so far up in the air’. Or, this is a personal fave: ‘She’s a stuck-up snot who should go back to wherever she came from’. It’s not as nasty, but it gets the point across.”

Matthew put his hand on her arm. “That sucks. What can we do to stop it?”

“Melody thinks I should tell my side of the story. Mom, I think you should put a hex on the entire Roberts family.”

Starla inhaled, her hand to her heart. “You know I can’t do that—you’re not serious, are you?”

Rhiannon was close to losing it. “Why not? Janet is horrible. Matthew, I told you that trying to fit in was too hard.”

He blinked. “Why can’t you just call Janet and ask her to stop doing this? Well, you’d have to call Felicity too.”

Rhiannon stood up so fast she knocked her chair over. “Get a clue, Matthew. We were sheltered so much being at the institute. We were protected from jerks like this.”

Her mom put the chair back up. “*Life* is like this. It isn’t easy. You won’t always be the most popular, or the best liked, or the prettiest or the smartest. This issue has nothing to do with why you were at the institute.”

Whoa, Rhiannon thought, *her mom hadn’t taken a shot at the institute?* “Right. The issue is that Janet hates me. And even worse, she’s gotten everyone else to hate me too.”

Matthew spoke calmly. “I’ll still be at your party. So will your true friends.”

Being a guy, Matthew had no idea that speaking calmly to an upset female only made her more upset. Rhee ground her back teeth together before she threw a mental temper tantrum. The picture above the fireplace shook at the thought.

“Don’t do it, Rhiannon,” her mother warned.

“You guys don’t even know the worst part.” Rhiannon sniffed and scrubbed her cheeks with her palms. “Jared’s mom broke up with me.” That really, *really* hurt.

“Ouch.”

Her mom’s chin lifted indignantly. “Of all the nerve!”

The phone rang, and Rhee picked it up. “Hello?”

“It’s Melody. I thought you should know—Janet and Felicity’s moms are calling the other moms. They’re telling everyone your whole family is into witchcraft. Black cats and full moon kind of stuff. You need to be careful.”

Chapter Seven

Rhiannon closed her eyes and sent a quick prayer to the Moon Goddess for patience as she hung up. “We’ve made the Crystal Lake phone tree.” She couldn’t take anymore, not today. It wasn’t even noon yet. “It’s like the reverse of what happened in *Practical Magic*.”

Her mom looked at her sympathetically. “I’m reading you like an open book, honey. Forget about those people. Things will calm down. We still have Dr. Richards and Mrs. Edwards coming. They’ll be staying for a few days, since they’re driving over. What is it? An eighteen-hour trip from Vegas?”

Matthew stuck his hand in the front pocket of his jeans. “Felt like ninety hours on the bus.”

Rhiannon sighed. “I went from making a few friends to being universally hated. Just like that, and Janet gets her way. It *so* isn’t fair.”

“I know it. Do you want me to call Gina?”

“Unless her name is being tossed into a vengeance spell, then no. Leave Jared’s mom alone. I need to come up with a plan.”

“If you cancel your party, you’re just giving more power to Janet,” Matthew pointed out. “I think we should go bowling, have a great time and not spend one second thinking about them. This social stuff is stressful.”

“Ready to go back with Dr. Richards?” She stuck her tongue out at him and crossed her eyes.

Matthew grinned. “Nope. I can handle it. I hope he lets me register for school.” He turned to Starla. “If it’s okay that I stay.”

Her mom shoed them out of the kitchen. “Go on, I want to hear what the doctor has to say before I make a decision. Rhiannon, could you put a fresh candle on the altar?”

“It’s really hard to pretend that you’re normal when your parents are witches,” Rhee said under her breath to Matthew.

“You *have* parents, Rhiannon. You should be glad for that. They love you, they take good care of you and they’re letting you figure out what you want. They totally support you spending summers and breaks at the institute, so that you can continue your paranormal studies.”

She felt like a butthead for nagging about her parents, especially since he had none and it suddenly seemed to be bothering him. Which reminded her... “How’d ya sleep last night? Nightmares?”

Rhee switched out the old candle for a new one. Since she’d been studying the Wicca traditions, she felt very comfortable mumbling the ritual chant before lighting the new wick.

“Matthew?” she prompted.

“Sorry. When are you going to tell your mom about practicing Wicca?”

Rhee whirled and put her finger to her lips. “Shh! Don’t make me regret telling you—she can’t know. Besides, I’m only doing it to help Suzanne, which I really don’t think is going to work. Almost every spell I try ends up backfiring. And the ones that work I’m not sure if it’s because I finally got the magick right, or if I’m subconsciously using my genetic skills.”

“You have options,” Matthew said seriously.

Rhiannon tried to lighten things up. “My favorite screw up so far is trying to light a candle and then melting the whole thing. I swear I almost caught my room on fire, and then I couldn’t remember the spell for rain, so I had to use the kitty litter to put out the flames. I’m just glad it was clean.”

Matthew’s shoulders slumped, even as he laughed. “You have it all.”

Rhiannon looked at him, surprised. “How can you say that? You read those emails. And now the moms are all out in force telling everyone that my family is a bunch of witches. You know that Mom can’t do anything bad like *really* put warts on people’s noses, or turn someone into a frog. She does kitchen magick. Home and hearth and all

that junk. But these stupid rumors, which are close enough to the truth, could hurt Mom's business."

Matthew sighed, leaning against the arm of the couch. He looked so cute, all casual in his jeans and flannel shirt. "I've always wanted to be a ghost hunter. And I can do all the technical stuff, the photography and the tape recording, but I can't *feel* anything. I can't see an aura, or an orb, or even a silhouette. I suck at the one thing I want the most."

Rhiannon stayed quiet, sensing that Matthew needed to talk. Maybe she could finally find out what was really bugging him.

"You know that Mike guy, the one that Dr. Richards has been tutoring?"

Rhee tapped her bottom lip. "In his twenties, a teacher or something?"

"Yeah, well, we've been emailing and he's really cool. He told me I should go out on my own."

Her shoulders tensed. "You're only sixteen, Matthew. You can't even get your own apartment. Have you ever met him?"

Matthew gave her a weird look, "It's not like he's some perv. Dr. Richards has been mentoring him. I guess he lives in Seattle and Dr. Richards flies up there every once in a while. Well, even he's way more advanced than me. What good is starting fires when you get ticked? I've thought about becoming a fireman. I mean, I could fight the thing that I hate most about myself."

Rhiannon hated hearing her friend so depressed; she hadn't realized how much he'd been thinking about it. "That's horrible. When was the last time you started a fire?"

Matthew turned very, very pale. "I can't even do that anymore. I was twelve, maybe thirteen, the last time, and I had to really concentrate to make this tiny little flame that was just embarrassing. I'm a psychic loser."

"You aren't a loser at all, geez."

He stood up and paced the living room floor. "Oh yeah? How would you feel if suddenly all your powers were gone?"

Rhee opened her mouth, then snapped it shut. Her talents were so much a part of her that she couldn't imagine her life without them. She could open drawers, doors and

windows, make her bed with a single thought, get a book or pencil—she used her powers every day. “Oh,” she finally said.

Matthew stopped right in front of her and Rhee looked up. Matthew was almost six feet tall, while she was about five-seven. His blue eyes were intense as he said in a flat voice, “You asked about my nightmares. I did have another one last night, but I think it’s a good thing.”

Rhiannon’s mouth was dry and she swallowed before asking, “How? How can they be good?”

“They started happening when I stopped taking the special ‘vitamins’ from Dr. Richards.” He grabbed her hand, his emotions intense.

Her head snapped back as she was suddenly consumed with unpleasant images of flames, of a child screaming, of pain and hurt. She smelled smoke and the horrible stench of burning clothes and furniture. Flames licked up flower-patterned curtains while the rod fell to the ground in a shower of sparks. Her hand throbbed like a burn from touching a hot pan.

She blinked, pushing Matthew away. “Don’t do that! Why did you do that?”

“I didn’t do anything! What are you talking about?”

“Why am I reading your nightmare?”

He looked lost—he hadn’t sent the images on purpose.

“Matthew, oh wow, I am *so* sorry.”

Just then a cold breeze burst through the living room and the Goddess candle flickered out. Rhiannon rubbed her arms, the smell of fire still in her nostrils.

“Suzanne?”

“Mrs. Edwards is coming! She’s coming, Rhiannon, and we can ask her how to give me a body.”

A different chill chased up her spine. “You can’t do that! You can’t tell her, she’ll send you over to the other side. We talked about this, Suzanne.”

Matthew asked, “Suzanne’s here? She blew out the candle?”

Rhiannon impatiently held up one hand, the palm of which was red. “Suz, you have to go. I didn’t call for you. Do you want to leave me for good? You have to be careful.”

“I want to be loved. I want to dance.”

“You are loved.”

“What did she say?” Matthew asked excitedly.

“Go away. Mrs. Edwards and I will call for you when it’s time.”

“I’ll stay here, Rhiannon. I’ll be good. I’ll be so quiet no one will know that I’m here.”

Rhiannon crossed her arms over her chest. “Matthew already knows you’re here. You blew out the candle. You aren’t being careful.”

“Matthew can’t see me. He can’t hear me. What do I care about Matthew?” Suzanne whirled around Matthew, lifting his hair.

“He’s my friend.” A tiny spark of fear lit in Rhiannon’s stomach. Suzanne was getting out of control, all because Rhiannon had agreed to try and make her solid. The idea of being real again was taking over the spirit’s common sense. If spirits had common sense to begin with. “Go, Suzanne. Now.”

“I’m your friend, Rhiannon.”

Suzanne’s lonely voice touched Rhee’s heart and melted the fear. “I know. But if you don’t listen, how can I stand up for you?”

The Goddess candle flickered back to life. “I am sorry. I will go.”

Rhee felt the immediate absence of the spirit, as if a life force had been sucked from the room by a cosmic vacuum.

Matthew had a bemused look on his face. “I take it she’s getting stronger? I felt her lift my hair.”

“That’s what it’s like living with a ghos—spirit, I mean. I have to constantly be on guard.”

As Matthew’s expression turned to alarm, Rhiannon quickly pointed out, “She would never hurt me. She’s just so confused. I mean, she was locked in this house for a hundred

years, trapped by her evil fiancé's soul. And now she wants to live again. Can you blame her?"

"No. But she's *dead*. I'm thinking she needs to stay that way. Dabbling in something you have no understanding of could be very dangerous. That's one of the first lessons Dr. Richards ever taught us. What happened to your shields?"

Rhee shrugged. "I guess I just don't use them. Suzanne is normally great about respecting the boundaries."

Matthew laughed, still a little shaken up by Suzanne's surprise visit. "I can see that's really working out."

Rolling her eyes, she said, "I never promised her I could do it. I just said that I would try."

"So you're practicing magick without really believing in it and screwing up spells. Your spirit guide is off the charts, and you're lying to your mom."

"Ha. You totally forgot the witch campaign. Aren't you paying attention?" Rhee tried to joke, but it just wasn't funny. "My life is being flushed down the toilet."

Matthew's eyes flashed with humor. "At least you're never bored."

"I was never bored at the institute, either. Early morning classes, then Tanya would come for the afternoon sessions, and sometimes we'd stay through dinner." She thought of Suzanne's most common complaint and asked Matthew, "Did you miss me and Tanya when we went home at night? Or were you glad to have your own space?"

"The institute is my home. I don't remember anything else. When Mike agreed that I could handle being on my own, I got nervous. It seemed so drastic. But Doc won't give me any answers, Rhiannon. Not about the nightmares, not about my past. I'm questioning everything. What if those vitamins weren't just A through zins?"

Rhiannon shivered and rubbed her arms through the layers of clothes she had on. "Dr. Richards would never do anything to hurt you."

Matthew chewed his bottom lip. "I know. I think."

"Hey! How about we do a Google search?"

"Huh?"

Rhee sat down in front of the computer, ignoring the hate mail and concentrating instead on finding out about Matthew's past. "Matthew Campbell," she said as she typed.

"Date of birth?"

"Uh, August twenty-sixth."

"Where?"

"Federal Way, Washington."

"Isn't that near Seattle?" Rhee asked the question as soon as it popped in her head

"Yeah," Matthew fidgeted behind her, watching as she typed in the information.

"So?"

"Just asking," she said, wondering if that was true. Sometimes she got a hint of intuition, not that she could see the future or anything, it was more like a hunch that proved to be correct almost all the time.

"Okay." She hit send, and they waited. "Matthew Campbell is a pretty popular name. Who knew?"

She scrolled down until she found it. "There you are, born at Mercy Hospital. Healthy male born to Luke and Margaret Campbell. Ten pounds? You were a chub."

"Luke and Maggie."

"Your mom liked to be called Maggie?" Rhiannon turned to face her friend, who had gone that icky pale again.

"Yeah, I think. Doc didn't keep that away from me. It's...I need to sit down."

Rhiannon watched as Matthew literally sank to the floor on his knees. "Matthew? What's wrong?"

"My head hurts." He pressed his fingers against his eyes. "Really bad."

Alarmed, Rhiannon said, "Matthew?" he groaned and she saw dots of sweat break out on the back of his neck. His lids were squeezed shut and he made an injured sound.

"*Mom!*" she thought, and shouted, at once.

Starla ran from the kitchen. "What's wrong? Rhiannon, not so loud. Have you ever heard someone yell in stereo? Matthew?"

“We were looking up his history, and then he just...dropped.” Rhiannon was scared. “Should we call nine-one-one? The ambulance? Dad?”

Her dad came in from the barn, using the back entrance through the laundry room. The sound of Miles stomping the dirt off his feet had Matthew cringing.

“Hurry, Dad, Matthew’s sick.”

Between the three of them, they managed to get Matthew laid out on the couch. Starla pressed a cold cloth against his forehead. “There, keep your eyes closed, now.”

Rhiannon sat next to Matthew on the couch, letting him crush the bones in her hand as he fought the pain. “Should we call the ambulance?”

“No,” Matthew mumbled beneath the cloth. “It will pass. I used to get these all the time. I forgot about them. This is what I get for skipping those vitamins. It took Mrs. Edwards almost six months to find the right combination to stop the headaches from coming.”

Rhiannon bit her tongue. Now wasn’t the best time to remind Matthew he’d thought Dr. Richards and Mrs. Edwards were drugging him. “What can we do for you? Exactly how long have you been without your vitamins?”

“I started skipping them, every other day, about a month ago.”

Her mom removed the cold cloth, dipped it in cool water and wrung it back out. “I’ll need to get some crystalline water, probably turquoise, for his head.” She patted the cloth in place, her bracelets quietly subdued as if they understood the need for silence.

Rhiannon wondered what was going on, and yeah, her imagination came up with a hundred and ten scenarios, each one creepier than the last. Was Matthew sick? As in, mentally ill? Was there a certain reason that only he had been raised at the institute, surrounded by doctors twenty-four seven? That his parents had made Dr. Richards his legal guardian?

Her stomach tensed right before there came a pounding on the door.

Chapter Eight

Miles answered the door, clearly expecting it to be Dr. Richards and Mrs. Edwards. “Hello. Merry meet— Jared. Come in.”

Rhiannon jumped up, wrenching her throbbing hand from Matthew’s grasp. She patted her hair, catalogued her outfit, and immediately wished she’d worn her silver sweater instead of the navy blue. Oh well.

Her dad called from the foyer. “Rhiannon, Jared’s here. Come into the kitchen, so that Matthew can rest.”

Good plan, Dad. Matthew didn’t need any more stress at the moment. “Coming,” she answered. “Be right back, okay?”

Matthew lifted one corner of the cloth, his blue eyes squinting against the light. Rhiannon immediately dimmed the switch and shut the curtains with her psychic thoughts. “Better?”

Starla gasped. “Jared’s here. Be careful, Rhiannon.”

Matthew nodded slowly and added his own warning, “Yeah, watch that guy. Want me to beat him up for you? Just say the word.”

Rhiannon giggled softly. “Okay, hero. I’ll schedule that for when you’re feeling better.”

She went into the kitchen, dreading the upcoming confrontation with every single step of her boots. She noticed that her dad had put the teakettle on to boil and that Jared had taken off his coat. Her dad was nowhere in sight.

“Hi,” Rhee said cautiously.

Jared looked up from shredding his napkin. “Rhiannon. My mom won’t let me use the phone. I snuck out and rode Rocky over.”

Rhiannon got down two mugs. It didn't sound like he'd put the stamp of approval on his mom's break-up. Did that make it not real? "Mom made brownies. Remember when she was trying to make those awful muffins? Not even our horses would eat them. And Rocky will eat pinecones."

Jared scooted his chair back and stood next to her. "Yeah." He tugged on her long ponytail. "I really like being with you."

Rhiannon knew it was stupid and girly, but she smiled and asked, "Really?"

He reached out with one finger and swept her bangs to the side. "Absolutely." Leaning forward, he brushed his lips across hers.

The teakettle screeched and they both laughed. "Orange spice? Or do you want that blackberry blend mom put together?"

They both chose the blackberry and things were normal for about two minutes as they sat opposite each other at the dining table.

Rhiannon wondered if she should bring up the phone-tree thing. Jared had to know about it, especially since his mom and sister were the ringleaders. She tapped her fingernail against the side of the mug, knowing it would break a personal promise if she probed his mind.

She opened her mouth to break the silence but Jared blurted, "My mom says I can't see you anymore."

Rhee snapped her mouth shut. She felt the sting of dumb tears and pinched the skin between her finger and thumb so she wouldn't cry. She hated the Roberts family! She did, she did, she thought, staring at the wall clock.

The clock fell off the wall and hit the floor with a smack.

Jared jumped up. "What was that?"

Rhiannon was slower getting to her feet. Temper, temper. She was losing it. Maybe she and Matthew could get matching straitjackets or something. "Just the clock—it does that sometimes."

Jared walked over and picked up the clock. He examined the back and said, "Yeah, I see where the plastic hook is cracked."

At the moment Rhee didn't especially care what he thought and was tempted to tell him more than he wanted to know. How would he react if she made the clock float back up to its spot on the kitchen wall?

Her mom stuck her head in the kitchen and mouthed the word *behave* at Rhiannon. Out loud she said, "My goodness, did that thing fall again? Miles, you really need to buy me a new clock." Then she left.

Rhiannon sat back down, trying on some arrogance just to show Jared that he didn't have the power to hurt her. Arrogance was difficult to pull off, so she tried belligerence instead. "You were saying?"

Jared sat down too and picked up the mug. Rhiannon noticed his hands trembling but hardened her heart. She'd been kidding at the dance that they were like Romeo and Juliet. She had no intentions of allowing him to sneak over whenever he thought his mommy wasn't looking, so if he thought he could continue their relationship hiding out at school, he had another thing coming.

"I think we should break up." Jared's tone was even and calm, despite the fact that he wouldn't look at her.

Oh. Well then. Now what? How was she supposed to handle her first heartbreak? Her mouth opened and she said, "Okay. It's probably for the best anyway, since your mom and your sister are telling everyone that my family practices witchcraft."

Rhiannon's stomach burned and her eyes itched. "Actually, it isn't okay at all. But if you're so weak that you can't stand up to your family, then you aren't the boyfriend for me." She knew that was unfair, and didn't care. "You do realize what's being said about me on the Internet?"

He stared into his mug.

"Oh. That's great. Do you think I pushed your sister too? Is everyone forgetting the fact she was about to become part of the gymnasium floor?"

He finally raised his eyes. "I saw you."

Rhiannon made a rude snorting sound. "Yeah. So did a lot of people, who seem to be forgetting exactly what happened."

“No. I mean I saw you make the cable break. You closed your eyes tight, and the cable broke, and then you pushed Janet out of the way. Too hard, ’cause she sprained her arm. I saw you do it.”

Rhiannon gulped, suddenly nauseated. “You think I somehow am responsible for the disco ball falling?” Her voice had a slight squeak to it. “And what would be the point of that? I won’t even *touch* on the logistics of it.”

By the Goddess, had he somehow guessed her psychic powers? She’d been so careful. She hadn’t wanted normal, she’d never wanted normal. Why was it killing her inside that she was losing her chance at it?

Jared’s cheeks turned pink. “I don’t know *how* you did it. I think you wanted to save my sister so that you could prove you were just as good as she is. You did it to make people like you.”

Rhiannon wrapped her hands around her mug before she did something truly horrid. “You really think that I wanted her approval—your family’s acceptance—so bad that I’d be willing to put her in danger? That makes no freaking sense. We’re in the ninth grade, Jared. We were *dating*. It wasn’t like we were gonna get married and have a zillion babies, for crying out loud.” Pausing, she gulped a painful breath and continued when she should have shut up. “As a matter of fact, your family is so whacked that I seriously doubt you’ll find any girl willing to marry you. Your family thinks that because good old Abediah’s cart broke down here and he decided to build a homestead, which turned into Crystal Lake, you’re all entitled to everything.”

Jared’s shoulders stiffened, but Rhee was on a roll. Hadn’t her dad said that venting your anger was healthy? “I thought you were better than they are. Guess not. And by the way, you might want to tell your mom to lay off her little gossiping phone tree. If she thinks she can spread vicious rumors about my family, she’ll be slapped with her own lawsuit.”

Jared sucked in a breath and blinked.

“Yeah,” Rhee said, hand on her hip. “I know about your mom’s threat to sue the school and my family. I’m gonna tell you right now that I didn’t push your sister out of

the way so that I could be more *popular*. I was trying to save her. And while I'm really sorry about her sprained arm, I didn't come away without my own cuts and bruises." She pointed to the purple wound on her head. "I think you should go."

Jared's face was white and his voice was low and gravelly. "Yeah. You're right. I just thought that I needed to come and tell you myself instead of letting you hear it from my mom. I made a deal with her, you know. That I'd break up with you if she'd stop the lawsuit."

Rhiannon's stomach pitched and her heart seemed stuck in her throat. She'd said all those awful things, and he'd been looking out for her family? Her knees went wobbly. "Oh. I'm sorry, Jared. I guess—" When would she learn to think before spewing?

He hurriedly put on his coat, taking his gloves from the pockets. "Rhiannon, I think you're the coolest girl I know. All the things you just said, well, some of it's true. I don't know that standing up against my family is something I can do. I am a Roberts."

Rhee's heart was breaking into little pieces as he continued. "I saw you close your eyes, and I watched the cable break. But if you say you didn't do it, I believe you. You're so pretty and funny and smart. The thing is, you're *different*, Rhiannon, in a way that I can't explain."

He met her gaze and held it, his green eyes watering a little.

Rhiannon wiped her own cheeks with the back of her hand. "Too different for you?"

She wondered if he would answer.

He did. "Yeah. I'm sorry."

Rhiannon sniffed and took a deep breath, trying to work past all the different parts of her that were hurting. "Me too."

He left, and Rhee wanted to sink into the ground and disappear.

Any chance at ever being normal had just walked out the door.

"Honey, are you okay?"

Her mom and dad came in the second that Jared left.

Rhiannon didn't bother trying to hide what happened. She wiped her nose with a napkin her mom handed her and cried, "No. I'm not! You ruined everything for me with your New Age store. You wanted me to fit in, well, how can I do that when you don't hide who you are? I'm supposed to keep my gifts hidden, while you flaunt yours. What were you thinking, Mom, bringing out the Moon Goddess tea set? No wonder Gina Roberts has it in for you."

Her dad rubbed her back as she buried her head in her arms on the table. "Rhee, that isn't fair."

"How isn't it fair? Huh?" Rhee spoke into her sweater sleeve.

"Well..."

"I'm sorry, Rhiannon. I shouldn't have used that tea set, you are absolutely right. I had out the earthenware set, but the minute I saw that woman's nasty green eyes, something came over me. I'm sorry, really, baby."

Rhiannon listened to the sound of her mom reheating the water for more freaking tea. If you had a problem, her mom firmly believed that tea could fix it. "This is one problem that your tea won't fix, Mom. Jared broke up with me to make his mom drop the lawsuit. We need to countersue—she's being slanderous. The only problem is, you *are* a witch, you *do* sell witchcraft supplies, and so it's not like we can say she's lying. And Jared knows it."

Her mom sat down in the chair opposite her. "Would it be so awful if we told the truth?"

Rhiannon lifted her head and glared at her mom. "I don't know, Mom. Would it? How would my supposed friends feel if I told them I could unlock their locker combos from fifty feet away? Or make a kid's backpack fly? Hmm." Rhee put her finger on her chin as if deep in thought. "Gee, I guess they'd think I was a *freak*. Which is why I never went to a real school in the first place."

"Rhiannon!"

"No, Dad. It's true. If this doesn't prove that I belong back at the institute, I don't know what does. Jared says he saw me break the cable, and I couldn't explain that what

he really saw was me trying to hold it together. He thinks I'm responsible for what happened, and he's right on the money there—my anger caused the accident. I can't stay here." Rhiannon rubbed her temples, tired of crying, tired of being a misfit and tired of all the lies. "I want to go back to Vegas with Matthew."

Her friend's voice came from behind her. "But I don't want to go back. Even with all the crap that's happened to you, you're living. You are taking part in everyday minutia that makes up life. At the institute we're protected. We're shielded from the day-to-day. We don't have *this*."

Rhiannon got up and faced Matthew. "We gave speeches all around the world on psychic phenomenon, we're educated beyond your average high-school level. We don't need the drama." She was hurt by his lack of support.

Matthew shrugged, looking faintly silly with the cold cloth stuck to his forehead. "But that's just it. It isn't a drama. It's life, like your mom said. Why do you think Suzanne wants it so bad?"

Rhee's eyes flew wide open and Matthew quickly glanced at her mom and dad to see if they'd caught his mistake.

Miles arched a black brow. "Suzanne has said she misses being alive?"

Rhee crossed her arms over her chest and blew her bangs out of her face. "Duh. She's dead. Of course she misses things. Like dancing. Eating chocolate cake." *Breathing.*

Starla sighed. "That's so sad. I guess I never thought of it like that before. Suzanne is just...Suzanne. The spirit that haunts our house."

Rhiannon was the first to feel the whoosh of cool air spin around the kitchen. The clock fell off the wall again and the newspaper fluttered to the floor.

"You called me?" The spirit's tone was delighted.

Tapping her foot, Rhee answered, "No. Mom did."

"I love Mom."

"She's *my* mom, Suz. Please go away."

“You’ve been crying. Crying, crying. Is Jared never coming back? He has the height of my father and the same nose.”

“Were you eavesdropping?” Rhiannon shook her head. “I’m telling Mrs. Edwards, and that’s final.”

“Nooo!” Suzanne whirled around the chairs, ruffling the tablecloth.

Rhiannon noticed that Matthew had that glazed look in his eyes again, while her dad just picked up the newspapers and put them back on the counter, setting the toaster on top. It was like having a tiny tornado in the kitchen.

“Suzanne!” Starla raised her voice. “Settle down.”

The rush of air immediately stopped. Rhee did a mind probe and realized that Suzanne was really gone. “Wow. Can I learn how to do that?”

Uncertain, her mom patted her hair back in place. “Uh, yeah. It’s called a Mom Voice. I recommend you wait a good twenty years.”

Chapter Nine

“Dr. Richards, would you like a second helping?” Starla already had the salad tongs out, ready to pass the bowl down. “And what about more chili?”

Dr. Richards accepted the dish. “This is the best chili I’ve ever had. No meat, you say? Excellent.”

Mrs. Edwards took another cornbread biscuit from the breadbasket and proceeded to slather it with butter. “Delicious. This has been a lovely lunch. I’m so glad you waited for us.”

Rhiannon glanced at the dented kitchen clock. It was almost three in the afternoon—her teachers from the institute had arrived at quarter after two. Rhiannon and Mrs. Edwards were sharing her large attic room, Dr. Richards was taking the guest bedroom and Matthew had been relegated to the couch.

It was kind of like one giant sleepover. Rhiannon hoped that Mrs. Edwards didn’t snore.

The subject of why they were here exactly—Matthew’s disappearing act—hadn’t been brought up yet.

Rhee watched Matthew polish off his third bowl of chili and smiled into her napkin. *His headache must be gone, she thought. I wish mine was.*

Mrs. Edwards glanced over and said, “Your head hurts?”

Rhiannon had forgotten she was in a room with a powerful psychic. Which meant she was mentally open for Mrs. Edwards to wander right in.

The plump Irishwoman put her butter knife to the side of her plate. “Tsk, tsk. I wasn’t wandering—you put the thought out there. Have you forgotten the etiquette of psychic behavior 101?”

Mrs. Edwards had a terrific lilt to her voice so even when she was chastising you, it sounded like music.

“Sorry.” Rhee grinned. “It’s been a horrible day.”

Dr. Richards smiled at Starla and Miles. “Let’s finish this fine meal and then we can talk about what is happening. I can’t digest my food properly if the table conversation is too serious. My! Is that your kitten?”

Rhiannon turned, along with everyone else, to see Thor jump onto the counter near the stove. “The burner’s hot!” Rhee cried, sending a mental image of a hand to scoop Thor down to the ground.

He didn’t like the ride and arched his back, hissing and spitting once his feet hit the ground.

“Ingrate.” Mrs. Edwards laughed. “I see you’re practicing your skills at home.”

Rhiannon exchanged a look with her mom. “Yeah. I can do it at home, but not at school. Not that I would want to, but—”

Dr. Richards interrupted. “Wait—not yet. I’m almost finished. The sun is shining, and I’d like to walk around your property. Say hello to Moonstone and Betsy. Then when we come in, we can sit in front of a roaring fire to melt the sting of cold. Perhaps we have hot chocolate?” He sent an imploring gaze toward Starla.

Rhiannon wanted to laugh, but bit her tongue. Dr. Richards acted like an old-time forgetful professor. He was sharp as a tack.

Her mom was not taken in by his tricks. “I even have homemade whipped cream for on top.”

The doctor leaned back and crossed his arms over his round stomach. “Country living at its finest. My thanks for the meal.”

He was so predictable that Rhiannon waited to the count of five, knowing he would hop to his feet. He did. “Let’s walk, shall we?”

Doc was a true leader, Rhee noted, and everyone put on their coats. As they tramped around outside, Dr. Richards in deep conversation with her dad about the nesting habits of bees, her mom walked beside her.

“He’s as wily as a fox.”

“I know, Mom. But he’s a brilliant scientist. He can be cool.”

“So can the fox. How do you think he keeps getting in the hen house? Weren’t you paying attention to the fables we read to you as a child?”

Rhiannon laughed sadly and the sound echoed around her. “It’s been an awful day, Mom. This growing up is hard. I think Jared broke my heart.”

Her mom grabbed her hand and squeezed. “I’m sorry. Will it help if I remind you that the Goddess is there for you? Life is multi-faceted. Pain, joy, hurt and love—being able to experience each of those emotions is what allows us to grow as human beings. I was impressed by how well Matthew grasped that.”

Rhiannon kicked a piece of gravel with the toe of her boot. “Are you going to let Matthew stay?”

“Do you want him to? It would change all of our lives. Although change is another necessary thing for growth. He seems like a nice boy, but you’d be getting an instant brother. I’d need to double our groceries.”

Rhee laughed with her mom. “Maybe triple.” She paused, thinking, then said, “I want to help Matthew find out about his past. It’s like he’s blocking it, maybe on purpose.”

Starla pushed open the barn door and the warm scent of cow, horse, hay and apples rushed toward them. “That thought crossed my mind too.”

Rhiannon nodded, *her* mind already skipping ahead to her pets. “Hey Betsy! I have sugar cubes for you, and you too, Moonstone.”

Matthew came running up behind her. “Let me feed Betsy.”

The horse whinnied and Betsy mooed, flirtatiously batting her long lashes at Matthew. “She loves me,” he said.

“She’s sucking up for her sugar cube, dork.”

Rhiannon was able to scratch behind Moonstone’s ears when the white horse craned her long neck over the stall door. Moonstone blew a kiss in her ear and Rhee laughed. “What do you want, huh, sweet girl? I promise I’ll take you out riding tomorrow.”

Dr. Richards chuckled in his jovial way. “You’ve settled in quite nicely, Rhiannon. This move has obviously been good for you.”

Rhee stopped scratching her horse, thinking about everything that she’d experienced in the last twenty-four hours. Hurt all over again, she advised, “Don’t give my spot away at the institute just yet, Doc. I might be moving back.”

Her mom’s hot chocolate was superb. The best. With whipped cream and nutmeg. So why was she feeling so sick to her stomach? Nobody was taking her feelings very seriously. They all nodded like wise old owls at the mention of her way important break-up. None of them were giving the Roberts’ threats any importance. And her mom said she was in no way, shape or form, moving back to the institute on a permanent basis.

Rhee was being condescended to and ignored, all while being trash talked throughout Crystal Lake for being a witch, or—Jared’s suggestion—a popularity-seeking attention grabber. And her boyfriend had dumped her to save her family from a lawsuit, brought by his family. Well, and because she was *different*. He didn’t even know exactly how right he was. Her life really truly sucked.

“Rhiannon? Are you listenin’, dearie?”

She looked up and into Mrs. Edwards’ green eyes, which were magnified a hundred times behind thick lenses.

“Wool gatherin’?”

The kindness in the medium’s voice almost made Rhiannon start crying again, which wasn’t fair. She should be a dried up husk by now. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be, luv,” Mrs. Edwards said. “I remember my first heartbreak.”

Rhiannon gasped, shocked by the idea that Mrs. Edwards had ever experienced anything to do with love or a relationship. She was older, she’d probably been married. It wasn’t that the woman was unattractive, or too old, or too fat... She just seemed, well, solitary. “You do?”

Mrs. Edwards glanced at Starla and the two women shared a smile. “I don’t think a girl ever forgets her first heartbreak, do you, Starla?”

Rhiannon was surprised again when her mom agreed. “Well, Lynn, my heartbreak’s name was Bobby Hanson. He was captain of the track team, and he was as fast as the wind. In more ways than one.” She winked. “Which is why he broke up with me. But I refused to be pressured into...you know. It was the right choice, but it hurt horribly at the time. Especially when he told all his friends that we’d done *it* anyway. The liar.”

Rhiannon switched her gaze between her mom, ew, who’d had crushes and boyfriends before Dad. Ugh. And Mrs. Edwards, who was nodding sympathetically. “Boys. Mine was Hugh MacAllister. Bright red hair he had and sparklin’ gray-green eyes. He broke up with me because I was ‘strange’. Too closely related to the fey people in Corker County. Hugh didn’t care for it much when I told him I’d ‘seen’ him out walking with Peggy.”

Rhiannon sighed. Getting dumped because you were a freak she totally got. “Did you ever find your true love?”

Mrs. Edwards smiled. “Aye, and more than once. I was married three times, and I loved each husband dearly.”

They all laughed and Rhiannon didn’t feel so alone. “Then why would you get divorced?”

“I didn’t. They died. And being as they were married to a medium, they all knew to move on toward the light. I didn’t need them checking on me, I told them. Dying is just another stage in our life’s journey. ’Tis nothing to be afraid of.”

Rhiannon leaned forward. “So why don’t they all go, then? Why wouldn’t Suzanne leave when we banished the evil spirit of Adam?”

Mrs. Edwards pursed her lips in thought. “I think Suzanne formed an attachment to you. She was only seventeen or eighteen when she died.”

“Is that healthy?” Starla asked, worry in her features.

Rhiannon wanted to know the answer too.

“Spirits can often be trained to become powerful guides for a medium. Suzanne didn’t want to leave this plane of existence because without the evil presence of Adam, all the things he blocked her from experiencing are new. I think she’s trying to see what she can do, and what she can’t. Rhiannon, has she been obeying your rules?”

Rhiannon shrugged. “Sort of. But she’s older than me, why should she have to obey me? She’s not a dog or a pet.”

Mrs. Edwards reached out and grabbed Rhiannon’s hand, her expression very serious. “Listen to me, Rhiannon, luv. Suzanne is not a human being. She’s been a spirit for a hundred years, and she was quite young when she died. You have to control her. Spirits can be manipulative and seek to get their own way. You have to be firm. Threaten her with banishment if she will not comply.”

Rhiannon’s skin chilled. She hadn’t been controlling Suzanne. Suzanne was her *friend*.

“If you ladies are done chatting about your love life, I’d like to get started with why we’re here.”

Smiling at Dr. Richards was easy—he’d just saved her from confessing what she was trying to do for Suzanne. Rhee understood what the medium was saying, but Mrs. Edwards didn’t know Suz like she did.

Matthew looked pale, but resolute, as if he wouldn’t leave the room until he had his answers. And if that is what he wanted, Rhiannon would support him. She was tired of being in the hot seat.

Her mom and dad sat next to each other on the couch, holding hands, Rhee was surprised her mom didn’t have a notebook and pen out to take notes.

Mrs. Edwards sat back in the plump recliner, while Matthew and Dr. Richards shared the other couch. She fluffed the pillow she was sitting on, totally comfy on the floor. Mugs of half-finished chocolate covered the various tables, the Goddess candle shone bright and the fire rippled behind the hearth. Thor crossed the floor and curled up in her lap. The entire atmosphere shifted into getting down to business.

“Matthew asked us to stay,” her mom said. “And we agreed. I might have some questions of my own, on his behalf.”

Dr. Richards looked taken aback, but recovered well. He was used to dealing with Starla in her mama tigress role. “Of course. Matthew is, in this instance, first priority.”

The doctor splayed his hands, as if asking for a favor before he even started speaking. The gesture was so unlike something he would normally do that it caught Rhee’s attention. “Matthew, I know you have questions, just as I know you have been frustrated with my attempts to avoid answering them.” He paused. “I am a teacher. I’m also a student of the paranormal and a scientist. But my most important role is that of legal guardian to you. I hope I have shown you how much I care for you.”

Dr. Richards stopped and removed his glasses, wiping the lenses. Sliding them back up the bridge of his nose, he continued. “When you care for someone, and you are responsible for that someone’s well-being, sometimes one chooses from the heart instead of the head. What starts out as protection, becomes a prison, when that was never the intent.”

Confused, Matthew mumbled, “What?”

Mrs. Edwards chimed in. “What the doctor is trying to say is that he loves you, as if you were truly his son. He made decisions that he has come to see might not have been the best. Failure as a parent is difficult.”

Starla interrupted. “Hardly a failure, if the child’s best interests were at heart.”

Whoa! Since when is Mom a champion for Dr. Richards?

“Does this have something to do with the vitamins? I had a headache today,” Matthew complained.

“Poor luv! It’s been months since you’ve suffered one.”

“I made him a compress soaked in turquoise and amethyst water to stop the migraine,” Starla informed Mrs. Edwards, one mother figure to another.

Thor purred, completely oblivious to the fact that they were going to find out the truth of Matthew’s past. Eventually.

“The vitamins? How about the *nightmares*?” Rhiannon prompted. She refused to let them go off on a tangent, especially since this was so important to Matthew.

“Rhiannon!” Matthew grumbled.

“Oops. Sorry.”

“Nightmares?” Dr. Richard asked, concern in his voice. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Yes, darling, what are they about?” Mrs. Edwards leaned forward and exchanged a glance with the doctor.

“Funny thing is I don’t remember them. I wake up in a cold sweat, tangled in the covers, with my throat parched and scratchy, like I’ve been screaming.”

Rhiannon quickly looked down at Thor, masking her thoughts. Matthew didn’t remember the content of his nightmares?

So how was *she* picking them up? Dr. Richards and Mrs. Edwards had always said that the mind was a powerful tool, even without psychic abilities. Maybe there was a reason Matthew couldn’t remember the nightmares.

Rhee was making her own list of questions for Mrs. Edwards, once they got to the bottom of Matthew’s problems. If anybody could give her the real scoop on this psychic business, it would be the medium.

“Oh dear! That sounds horrible.” Was that relief she heard in Mrs. Edwards’s voice? No—that just didn’t make sense...unless Matthew was right, and Dr. Richards and Mrs. Edwards were hiding something. But drugging him?

Dr. Richards gave Matthew’s hand a pat. “We worked for months trying to find the right medicine to stop your headaches. Do you remember when you turned thirteen? And you wanted to stop taking your prescribed pills? You wanted to be a man, and men didn’t take pills. To this day I don’t know where you got that, but it stuck with you.”

Rhiannon tilted her head and the name *Mike* popped to the forefront.

Matthew scrubbed his hands over his face and asked quietly, “The vitamins were medicine? The same prescription, only you had to get them packaged differently. That must have cost a lot of money, and time, too.”

Dr. Richards' face went ashen. "I know it seems sneaky, but you had to have the medicine. When you were thirteen and decided to just quit taking it, you had these nightmares."

Matthew said boldly, "You should have told me the truth. I could have accepted it, eventually."

Mrs. Edwards sighed. "We couldn't wait. It was during one of your nightmares that you set the west wing of the institute on fire."

Chapter Ten

“What?” Rhiannon was pretty sure everybody asked the question at the same time. Matthew’s voice was the loudest and held a distinct note of panic.

“Why don’t I remember that?” Matthew jumped to his feet and started pacing the room behind the couch.

Dr. Richards swiveled around, keeping his eyes on Matthew. “Part of the drug you get is a memory suppressant.”

Matthew stopped in mid-step, kind of like Rhiannon’s heartbeat. Stopped, then drop-kicked into action so fast it hurt. Matthew was in front of Dr. Richards, towering over his mentor, who remained seated. “You’ve been drugging me? Why? For how long? Oh, God.” Matthew sank back to the couch, his head in his hands.

Mrs. Edwards had tears in her eyes, and they glinted in the flashing firelight. “Darling, we had a reason. Truly, what we *didn’t* have is a choice. Matthew, you are a fabulous human being. You are more than bright, you’re funny and kind and handsome.”

Matthew looked up and his expression was hard. “I’m sensing there’s a ‘but’ coming.”

Rhiannon cringed and gathered Thor in her arms. He gave a single protest, just because, then went back to sleep.

“When you came to us, you were a child of six. You’d been traumatized by your parents’...accident. You had horrible nightmares, and nothing we could do comforted you. In the morning, you woke up exhausted without remembering a single thing.” Mrs. Edwards dabbed a napkin beneath her glasses. “To say nothing of the spontaneous fires that broke out. Luckily, they were small and easily extinguished. You never got hurt.”

Dr. Richards added, “We were worried you were going to get sick. Then you just stopped eating, and I knew we had to take drastic measures. You resisted hypnosis, even

at six. The only alternative we had was giving you a calming drug to help you sleep. The side effect is a memory suppressant.”

“Within six months you were a laughing, happy child. No more fires. You were gaining weight and confidence. But every time we tried to change your medicine or wean you from it, you got the nightmares. When you had the nightmares, you subconsciously started fires.” Mrs. Edwards held out her hand toward Matthew. “Please don’t be angry. We were looking out for your health and safety.”

Matthew deflated and sat back against the couch. Rhiannon saw that her mom was leaning into Miles, crying softly. If Matthew really wanted to move in, it would be no contest. By the Goddess’s mercy, she was ready to give him her attic room.

“Okay. I can accept all of that. But why didn’t you tell me when I asked? Why did you avoid my questions? Why did you keep training me in the psychic arts when you know I’ve got no talent?”

Rhiannon pointed out, “You do too have talent. You told me yourself you know how to work all of the equipment.”

Mrs. Edwards nodded. “You’ll have the skills you need to work at the institute if you want.”

Dr. Richards patted Matthew’s knee. “You see, I believe that the memory suppressant may also be suppressing your natural psychic abilities. I just haven’t found the right combination to suppress the fire starting and the nightmares, while allowing you to access your other talents.”

Matthew sat up straight, immediately excited. “Really? You think I may have some psychic abilities?”

Snorting, Rhiannon gave Thor a good scratch behind the ears. *All of this drama and all Matthew cares about is maybe having latent psychic abilities.*

Dr. Richards held up a finger. “Hold on. I never told you this before because I didn’t want you to get your hopes up, only to be sorely disappointed.”

Rhee understood that, it was the same reason she wasn’t telling her mom about practicing Wicca. Well, one of the reasons anyway. Suz being the other.

“But if there’s a chance, I’ll go back to the institute right now. I want to be a ghost hunter or a medium, or a clairvoyant—can you imagine seeing the future? Or I could be like Tanya and practice psychometry, with touch. There are so many things I could do!”

Mrs. Edwards laughed softly. “Calm down, Matthew. You can be a ghost hunter without seeing them. You have the tools to practice what you wish. You’ve been trained in almost everything.”

“And failed. But if I can—”

“I think that changing your environment will actually be good for you,” Dr. Richards interrupted after a glance at Starla and Miles.

When her mom nodded, Dr. Richards went on. “Maybe for the rest of this school year. Then you and Rhiannon can both come back to the institute for the summer.”

Matthew hopped to his feet, barely able to contain his happiness. “But I want to keep training. I can put up with the nightmares, I can...”

Dr. Richards pulled Matthew back down. “You can’t put other people in jeopardy. In the past your nightmares have brought on fires. If you were allowed to stay here, and I think it would be a positive environment for you, you would have to agree to take your medicine.”

“No,” Matthew said stubbornly. “I don’t want to take the medicine. I want to go to the institute. I’ll sleep in a steel-plated room, with fire extinguishers in every corner. I feel like I’m supposed to figure something out, maybe the psychic stuff inside me is trying to come out! I can’t smother it any more. I want it too badly.”

Rhiannon felt a chill pass through her, but it was gone as quickly as it came. Thor opened his kitten eyes and hissed, then struggled out of Rhiannon’s arms. She let him go and randomly wondered if she had to give the kitten back now that she wasn’t dating Jared anymore.

She just as quickly decided that he couldn’t have Thor back. She loved the crabby cat, and a gift was a gift.

Her mom and dad exchanged a look, then Starla suggested, “Could we try maybe reducing the medicine? We can install extra fire alarms throughout the house. I agree that the nightmares are trying to tell Matthew something. Something he needs to know.”

Rhiannon shot her mom a smile, but Starla was still in a staring contest with Dr. Richards, who seemed to be struggling for an answer.

The sound of the telephone ringing broke the tension, and Rhee was quick to run for it. Anything to ease the thick emotion hanging in the living room as her mom and Dr. Richards fought over what was best for Matthew. “Hello?” she answered cheerfully, totally forgetting almost everybody hated her.

“Rhee? It’s me, Bonnie. It’s all over the Internet that Jared dumped you. Are you okay? Janet posted this huge bulletin on MySpace, all about how Jared finally wised up and saw what a freak you were. God, I hate her. Why didn’t you call me?”

Feeling incredibly sick to her stomach, Rhee reached deep for some pride. “Gossip in Crystal Lake spreads faster than a wildfire.” Rhiannon realized what she said, and gave everyone behind her an apologetic glance. “Sorry,” she said to Matthew.

“Who are you talking to?” Bonnie asked.

“Uh, we’re kind of in the middle of a family pow-wow.” And since it looked like she was gonna have an instant brother, that made everyone in the room family.

“About the witchcraft stuff? My mom told Janet’s mom to stick it where the sun don’t shine!”

Rhiannon almost dropped the phone. “No way—*your* mom said that? That is so cool.”

Giggling, Bonnie said, “I know. Totally shocked me too. But I guess Corey’s mom listened to Mrs. Roberts’ garbage and then asked Corey what he thought about it. Corey’s mom works at the feed store part-time, and if she doesn’t agree, then she’s worried she might lose her job.”

The brief flash of happiness fled and Rhiannon said, “I totally understand if Corey can’t hang out with me.”

“What? Get out of here! Us Losers stick together. Corey’s mom is just gonna tell Mrs. Roberts whatever she wants to hear, and Corey can do what he wants.”

Rhiannon had an uneasy feeling sitting in her stomach. “Have you heard from anybody else?”

“Yeah, Meat and Broomstick are totally in, and Melody, she wouldn’t give in to the Roberts family, not after they fired her mom just because Mrs. Roberts was jealous.”

“Which sucked.” That had happened right before Rhiannon moved to Crystal Lake, over the summer. Melody still had a chip on her shoulder that weighed a thousand pounds at least.

“Some of the kids are planning on coming to your party, no matter what their parents say. Others are totally freaked, and some have been absolutely forbidden to even speak to you. Their parents have them all worried you might put a spell on them. Well, we know you would never do that.” Bonnie’s voice dropped to a whisper. “Especially after what happened the only time you tried a spell.”

She rolled her eyes. Bonnie had no clue that Rhiannon had been secretly practicing Wicca. When had she turned into such a liar? And yeah, while the banishing of nastiness spell they’d tried to work on Janet had obviously misfired, it didn’t mean the whole magick thing was bunk. Right? Now was *so* not the time for this conversation. “Hey, Bon, can I call you back? Someone’s beeping in on the other line.”

“Sure. Maybe we can get together for pizza later.”

“I think we’re gonna be busy, but I’ll call ya.” Rhiannon clicked over. “Hello?”

“People like you should be burned at the stake!” Click. Rhiannon held out the phone like it was a poisonous snake. She swallowed, then put the receiver in the holder.

The phone rang again, and she just stared at it.

“Honey? Aren’t you going to answer that?” Starla asked.

“I don’t think we should, Mom. I have a feeling things are about to get really ugly.”

In an effort to keep the mood light, they decided to go out for dinner. Rhee texted Bonnie that pizza would have to wait, and ran upstairs to get her coat. Suzanne swirled through the curtains. “You’re leaving?” the spirit asked sadly.

Rhiannon tried to cheer her up. “Yeah, just for dinner. Hey, Mrs. Edwards will be sleeping in here tonight. I’ve got the inflatable mattress. But the cool thing is, we can talk, all three of us. Like we’re having a slumber party.”

The curtains flew, and it was obvious that the spirit wouldn’t be swayed from her mood. Suzanne’s ghostly fingers ruffled Rhee’s hair, and she shivered. Suzanne’s voice went from sad to angry. “Why is Matthew going to live here? I don’t like it. He doesn’t belong here.”

“Suzanne—were you eavesdropping on our conversation?”

The spirit tore through the room and disappeared. Rhiannon grabbed her coat and left, not in the mood to soothe Suzanne’s ruffled feathers. But teaching Suz about big ears and closed doors would have to be put on the To Do list—no eavesdropping allowed!

The others were waiting for her in the minivan, which held them all comfortably. Chinese had been everybody’s vote, so they drove to the only Chinese restaurant within thirty miles.

They pulled into the jammed parking lot. A Saturday night out was a big deal in Crystal Lake, population six thousand. Four thousand of which were dairy cows. Rhiannon’s stomach rumbled and Matthew laughed.

“Hungry?” he asked.

“Starving,” she confirmed. Salad and chili had been hours ago, with lots of emotional upheaval all day, which seriously burned calories. And wasn’t it a *CosmoGIRL!* rule that when a girl got dumped she got dessert no matter what?

Still off-balance over the exchange with Suzanne, she followed Matt into the Chinese restaurant. Rhee inhaled the scent of soy sauce and stir-fry veggies, and relaxed.

Big mistake. She was slammed with at least five people’s thoughts, and not one of them was nice.

Rhee halted, stunned, at the threshold, but Mrs. Edwards pushed her all the way in. “Block it, Rhiannon, you know how. We can practice later if you need to. Don’t let them see you falter.”

“But, they *hate* me, they hate *us*.”

A German man with a thick accent owned the Chinese restaurant. He gave them the eye, but then he must have practically decided money was more important than a person's religious practices. He shrugged, grabbed six menus, and said, "*Ja*, follow me."

He led them back to a private banquet room with its own door, and Rhiannon wanted to throw her arms around the burly guy and kiss his cheek. They wouldn't have to be in the crowd of angry eaters.

Starla raised her eyebrow in surprise. "You, chicken? I never would have thought."

"Uh!" Rhiannon huffed. "I'm not chicken. And stay out of my head."

"We got the chicken, all kinds," the man assured her.

"Thank you," Mrs. Edwards said smoothly.

They all sat at the round table, and Rhiannon waited for someone to say something. Anything. Dr. Richards was polishing the lenses of his glasses, Matthew was playing with his chopsticks and her mom and dad were building houses out of the sugar packets from the center of the table.

"Hellooo?" Rhiannon finally said. "Is nobody gonna mention the fact that we got the cold shoulder, no, worse than that, a deep freeze, a communal snub, the second we walked in here? Huh?"

The jar of soy sauce bounced on the table.

"Calm down, honey. What can we do about it?" her mom asked, head tilted to the side.

"We can order a platter of cat innards, with a side of monkey brains." Matthew balanced a packet of red mustard on his chopsticks. "To be served in a steaming cauldron and garnished with eye of newt."

"We're vegetarian, Matthew. Stop helping." Rhiannon shot him a glare. "Don't you want to sit by someone else?"

"What's your problem?"

"I'm pissed off!" she shouted, collapsing the house of sweetener, breaking the chop sticks in Matthew's hand and exploding the soy sauce container.

“Language,” Miles warned. “Watch your temper. You can control it, you’ve been doing a great job these past few months.”

Rhiannon felt the anger build and build, one sugar packet at a time. “I’m trying,” she said through gritted teeth. “I never wanted to feel this way, so freaky, again. Ever. I was so close to fitting in, and now everything is ruined.”

Matthew tried to grab her hand, but she clamped her fingers around his wrist. “Don’t touch me.”

“Ouch!” Matthew pulled back.

He gulped and lifted his wrist so that everyone around the table could see the imprint of Rhiannon’s fingers burned into his skin.

Chapter Eleven

The owner opened the door. “Everything is all right, *ja*?”

Dr. Richards answered in German, and Rhiannon figured he was making up some kind of believable excuse for the mess and the noise. She wished him the best of luck.

The man took their orders and left them alone again.

“Matthew, I’m so sorry,” Rhiannon said at the same time her mom and Mrs. Edwards hopped up from the table saying, “Let me see that!”

Mrs. Edwards wrapped ice in a linen napkin, while Starla said a healing chant to relieve some of the sting.

Rhiannon burst into tears, a teenage hormonal disaster.

Her dad came around the table and pulled her into a hug. “Sh, Rhee, hush now. Everything will be okay.”

“How can you say that?” she asked into his chest.

He rubbed her back. “All things are cyclical.”

“Whatever!” Did he not get what she was going through? She pulled away, grabbing a napkin to wipe her face. “Matthew, I am so sorry. I don’t know how I burned you.”

Dr. Richards walked around and eyed the burns with clinical interest. “Has this ever happened before, Rhiannon?”

“Of course not.” Then she remembered the funny looks she’d gotten the night of the dance from Bonnie and Melody, when she’d tried to stop her friends from knocking out a few of Janet’s teeth. Had she burned them? “Maybe. The night of the dance.”

Matthew acted like his wrist didn’t hurt, but Rhiannon could see the red aura emanating from around his skin. “Don’t worry about it, Rhiannon. It was an accident.”

Rhee took her seat. “Yeah. Just like the disco ball, right? Too many coincidences usually lead to it so *not* being a coincidence.”

Dr. Richards sat back down and folded his napkin in his lap. “You’ve had a rough day. Very stressful. I think we should enjoy our fine meal, and put all questions off until tomorrow, when we can look at things without being so...” he paused, “...emotional.”

Her cheeks stung with embarrassment. This time when quiet settled around the table, she didn’t bother breaking it.

When her crispy tofu and lo mein arrived, she found she no longer had an appetite. Even the smell made her stomach turn. What was the matter with her? Was she losing her mind? A psychic’s gifts were mental. Where did they put the crazy psychics so that they didn’t hurt anyone?

Oh, that’s right, she glanced guiltily at Matthew. They drugged them, taking away a part of the person’s soul.

Matthew dug into his sizzling beef with pea pods. Miles teased, “Better eat meat whenever we go out, since you won’t be getting it at our house. Any chance we can bring you over to our side?”

Laughing, Matthew said, “No way. I’m a dedicated carnivore.”

Rhiannon supposed it was a good thing she’d grabbed his left wrist. Goddess forbid she’d interrupted his ability to eat mass quantities in one sitting.

“Eat, Rhiannon. It will make you feel better.”

“I can’t, Mom.”

Dr. Richards pointed his chopsticks at her. “You should eat, just to bring up your blood sugar. I can’t imagine what all that internal heat is doing to your metabolism.”

Rhiannon picked up her fork. “I’ll try.” At least Dr. Richards spoke her language. He made sense, and didn’t say “just because”. Or things were “cyclical”. She wanted explanations. To her surprise, once she got past the first two weird bites, her system remembered it was famished and she ended up eating everything on her plate.

She finally leaned back in her chair. “Yum. I do feel better.” The tiny headache that was starting between her eyes receded, and she took a sip of water. A Chinese waiter brought the bill, along with a bunch of fortune cookies.

“Wonder what mine’s gonna say,” Rhiannon mumbled.

“Play with fire, you might get burned?” Matthew joked.

“Ha ha.” She cracked it open and read, “The winds of change are coming.”

Matthew started chuckling, opening his own cookie. “Mine says ‘the truth lies in your past’.” He dropped the fortune to the table. “God, that’s kinda creepy. Anybody else get one that’s right on?”

Rhiannon watched her mom drop the cookie to the table unopened. “I’m ready to go, actually. Miles, leave an extra big tip, would you?”

Smiling, Rhee thought, “*Chicken!*” and watched her mom’s eyes narrow.

They walked the gauntlet from the restaurant to the car with their chins held high. Dr. Richards and Mrs. Edwards were aloof, but polite. Rhiannon saw her mom smile at people she knew, only to get openly snubbed. Her dad’s expression was neutral as he led the way, and Matthew walked behind her, his hand, brave guy, on the center of her back. Of course, there was a coat protecting him. This was so *X-Files*.

Rhiannon thought of the color blue, determined to stay cool. She could figure this out tonight, maybe, with Mrs. Edwards, and get the true dirt on some of the real life downsides to being a psychic. Like burning your friends.

They all breathed a sigh of relief as they made it outside basically unscathed.

Until they saw the van. Someone, in full view of the people sitting by the windows, had painted dark brown crosses all over the gold glittery writing.

Starla gasped, then quickly brought her knuckles to her lips, keeping the cry inside. *Blue*, Rhiannon thought frantically, *blue*.

Mrs. Edwards’ voice was firm. “You’ll need to file a police report. Even if they don’t take it seriously, it could be the first in a chain of evidence.”

Wow, Rhiannon thought. Then she remembered that Mrs. Edwards worked as a psychic sometimes for various police departments, from Las Vegas to Los Angeles.

“Chain of events?” Starla whispered, and Rhiannon stepped closer to her mom.

Dr. Richards sighed, folding his hands in front of him. “This is horrible. Adversity can bring out both the prince and the beast in humankind.”

Miles looked from the van to the restaurant where all of sudden the diners were way interested in stuffing their faces. Rhee inhaled, long and slow, and envisioned a nice white fluffy cloud that she could—wait, it wasn't a cloud, it was a marshmallow, and she was going to force it down the customers' throats until they choked.

"Rhiannon!" her mom yelled, disappointment in her voice. "Behave. Right now you are unpredictable. We don't need any more trouble."

Matthew looked from her to her mom. "What did I miss?"

Mrs. Edwards lifted one shoulder. "It had something to do with marshmallows."

"I want to be psychic," Matthew complained again.

Dr. Richards shook his head. "We're negotiating that, but you have to take your medicine."

Flipping his cell phone closed, her dad said, "The police are on their way."

A breeze picked up and the strong, unmistakable odor of soy sauce wafted beneath Rhee's nose. She stared at the van, blinked, then walked over and ran her finger across one of the crosses. Sniffing the black goo, she started to laugh. "Kikkoman's finest soy sauce. One good rain, Dad, and the van will be as good as new."

Rhiannon turned toward the diners and waved. If she wasn't already in so much trouble, it might be kind of fun to mentally knock over the salt and pepper shakers or something. But people were obviously listening to Mrs. Roberts' claims of witchcraft. Rhee would be labeled a witch, in addition to being a psychic freak, and she'd have to move to Alaska or something.

Alaska was even colder than Crystal Lake. She shivered, and Matthew suggested that they all go back inside the restaurant.

Nobody thought that was such a great idea.

The cops arrived, flashing their blue lights even though her dad had stated there was no emergency. Officer Bob got out of the car on the passenger side, lifted out his walkie-talkie, adjusted the belt at his expanded waist and barked, "What we got here?"

Officer Julianne, who Rhiannon knew from the high school, got out of the driver's side.

Rhee liked the tall policewoman, who'd given a few lectures on the dangers of drinking, drugs and speeding. "Hi," Rhiannon called.

Officer Julianne blinked. Her thick, brownish gold hair was pulled back into a braid that dangled down the center of the winter cop coat. "Rhiannon? Is this your family's van?"

"Yeah." Rhee rubbed her nose, which was going numb from the cold winter night.

"Why aren't you folks waiting inside?" the policewoman asked.

Matthew answered a little belligerently. "We came out after dinner and found the van like this. All those people there," he waved at everyone in the window seats, "must have watched someone do this. But they didn't stop it, they didn't warn us, and they didn't exactly *invite* us to come back inside."

Rhiannon heard the underlying anger in his voice. Matthew had been so laid back that she was sort of surprised to hear it, especially now, when neither one of them could afford to lose their tempers. They each knew the consequences if they didn't. Would it be worse now that Matthew wasn't taking his medicine?

Officer Julianne looked from the window, where the customers had an odd lack of interest in the flashing blue lights. "I see. Is there any reason that someone would want to paint—" she sniffed at the goo, "—soy sauce on your van?"

Officer Bob chuckled, like he thought that was a pretty good prank. One to tell the fellas down at the station.

She couldn't hold her tongue, no matter what, and she burst out, "It is all the Roberts' fault! They're accusing my family of being witches. Calling everyone, emailing, everything."

Officer Julianne put her hand sympathetically, yet calmly, on Rhee's shoulder. "Did you see any of them here tonight?"

Rhiannon looked down at the officer's black boots. "No."

"I see." Officer Julianne gave Rhiannon's shoulder a last pat. "Well, this is vandalism, but a run through the car wash should clean your van right up."

"Ha ha." Officer Bob laughed. "Can we go now?"

“No,” the policewoman answered with strained patience. “These people would like to make an official report. Isn’t that right?”

Miles nodded.

Officer Bob blurted, “Over soy sauce?”

“It isn’t about the soy sauce,” her dad insisted.

“It’s just a kid’s prank. What a waste of paperwork.” Officer Bob climbed back into the car. “Hurry up, Julianne. Got the heater runnin’.”

Rhee sensed the shift in Matthew as he seemed to gather his emotional resources. Was it her imagination, or was the red aura spreading over Matthew’s body? Was he even aware of what he was doing?

The engine in the cop car suddenly revved like crazy, as if someone was stepping on the gas, with the gear in park. They all stumbled back until Officer Julianne grabbed them and pushed them to the other side of the van.

They heard a loud *bang!* as the engine blew and huge puffs of smelly gray smoke spewed from beneath the hood of the police vehicle. Officer Bob quickly scrambled out. “What the hell? What was that?”

Rhiannon peeked over her dad’s shoulder and saw flames flickering. “Fire,” she yelled. “Get away from the car.”

Officer Bob ran as if his life depended on it and joined them on the safe side of the van. Rhiannon, on all fours, crouched down by the tire, focused all her energies on putting out the fire.

She knew it was a risk, getting caught using her psychic abilities in public, but the car could blow up, seriously injuring—or worse—all those silly people in the restaurant. And as mad as she had gotten over the dumb prank, she didn’t want them to die.

Mrs. Edwards joined her, and together they put out the flames beneath the hood of the police car until it was simply belching smoke.

Officer Bob took his fingers out of his ears and opened his eyes, confused. “It didn’t blow.”

Officer Julianne gave Rhee and Mrs. Edwards a long, calculating look that made Rhiannon squirm. “No,” the officer affirmed. “It sure didn’t. Must have burned itself out.”

Starla decided enough was enough. “I’m ready to go home. I think we’ve put on quite the show for whoever wanted to embarrass us, don’t you?” This time Rhee squirmed beneath the power of her mother’s gaze, ten times more squirm-inspiring than the police officer’s.

Officer Julianne said, “We’ll call for another car, and I’ll make sure to file this for you. If any kind of vandalism happens again, let us know. Especially if you find you’re directly targeted, say—” she pointed to the glittery gold writing on the side of the van, “—for religious intolerance. Crystal Lake may be small, but most of us aren’t stupid.” She jerked her chin toward Officer Bob.

Starla lifted her hands in surprise and Rhiannon was grateful that the heavy down coat muffled the clink of bracelets. “You’re familiar with Wicca?”

“Actually, my sister moved to Salt Lake about ten years ago and converted. Married a nice guy, she’s got two kids. It was a difficult transition for the family, mainly my mom, until we all understood it better. Some of the traditions are similar, and it isn’t like Pammy doesn’t let her kids open gifts at Christmas time with Grandma. A little compromise never hurt.” Officer Julianne’s eyes twinkled in the glow of the restaurant lights.

Her dad stroked his goatee. “Hmm. You are absolutely right. Thank you.”

Officer Bob snorted. “I’m gonna wait inside.”

The door smacked closed behind him and Officer Julianne shrugged. “I won’t lie to you. This *is* Crystal Lake, a small town with big opinions. Just don’t try and fight fire—” she glanced at the charred ruin of the cop car, “—with fire. Obey the law, and we’ll do the rest. Too bad you had to go up against the Roberts’ though. Old Abediah Roberts founded Crystal Lake, you know.”

Rhiannon bit her tongue so she wouldn’t blurt out the secret that old Abediah was a murderer. “Don’t you think it’s weird that nobody came out to help when the car caught

on fire? Hmm?” It had been the same at the dance, like people were unaware of the danger around them, caught in a bubble of inertia.

Officer Julianne sent her a sympathetic look that made Rhiannon feel all of about twelve. “Honey, there are people in the world who just watch things happen, and there are others, like you, who make things happen. Your kind are the leaders, the movers and the shakers.” Officer Julianne wiggled her hips and grinned. “The ones that accomplish the most. Those folks in there are gonna go home and talk about what happened for months, ’cause it’s the most exciting thing that’s happened in Crystal Lake since the country fair. That’s a fact. It’s not every day that an engine suddenly explodes. You didn’t have anything to do with that part, did you?”

Rhiannon’s cheeks burned. “No!” She kept the fact that she thought Matthew did it to herself.

“These engines are old, and with the cold weather, they break.” The officer said her goodbyes and followed her partner inside.

“What a nice woman,” her mom exclaimed.

“Yeah, she was. She was kinda hot too.”

“Matthew—you are soo, oh, gross.”

“What? Can’t a woman be the strong one in a relationship?” Matthew nudged her shoulder with his and Rhee rolled her eyes.

“I’m tired, can we go?”

Her dad said, “Hop into our chariot, and I’ll fly thee home.” He opened the driver’s side door and got soy sauce all over his hand. “Right after we run through the automated car wash.”

Chapter Twelve

Home was a wonderful thing, Rhee thought as her dad drove up to the farmhouse. At first it was dark, but as soon as she was close enough, Rhiannon imagined the light switches turned on, and the windows suddenly looked warm and inviting.

“I wanna do that,” Matthew said.

Her mom shook her head. “Rhiannon, you are using your psychic gifts a lot lately. I thought we agreed to cool it?”

Dr. Richards peered over his glasses. “Have you been consciously aware of using your talents?”

Rhiannon jumped out of the van. “Sorta. It’s a short cut, that’s all. And who cares when it’s just us? Or would you rather walk into a dark house?”

She raced Matthew up the stairs. He stopped at the door. She opened it with her mind and burst through, laughing all the way.

She came to an abrupt halt.

Matthew bumped into her and steadied himself by grabbing her shoulders. Mrs. Edwards and Dr. Richards, who had been talking about something stopped in mid-conversation and her mother’s tinkling laugh cut off as if she’d been a tape recording.

“By the Goddess!” Starla cried, pushing her way through from the back. “What is all this?”

Rhiannon chewed her bottom lip, thinking furiously. Was there any way at all for her to keep Suzanne out of trouble now?

Probably not. Rhiannon closed her eyes, bowed her head. “*Suzanne, why did you do this?*”

“*I’m lonely,*” came the reply. “*I want the family to love me too. Isn’t it pretty?*”

Rhiannon slowly re-opened her eyes and nodded as she looked around the staircase and living room. Every candle the Godfrey family owned was lit. Placed in groups and singly along the bottom of the stairs, it looked like an old-fashioned church service. The mixed scents of cranberry, pine and lavender hung like incense in the air, so heavy that you could almost taste it. The flames looked different somehow, an iridescent blue. And there was no smell of smoke. “Yes, it’s very pretty,” she answered out loud, appealing to everyone’s good manners. “Don’t you think?”

“Yes, it is beautiful,” her mom agreed. “Why is Thor sitting on the mantle? Is he wearing a blue ribbon? And, oh dear, those are my mother’s pearls.”

Her dad muttered, “Dangerous. What if the house had burned down?”

Matthew grinned. “This is really cool!”

Mrs. Edwards and Dr. Richards exchanged a look that Rhiannon knew didn’t bode well for Suzanne.

She was right. Suzanne whirled around the room, agitated because she wasn’t praised for her efforts.

Dr. Richards put his hand on Rhee’s shoulder. “She’s powerful.”

Somehow, Rhiannon felt like she was being blamed, which was so unfair. She turned so that she was facing the group, her back to the staircase. “She just wants you guys to love her, is that too much to ask?”

Mrs. Edwards pursed her lips.

Her mom, seeming to get that Rhee felt totally against the wall, spread her hands out. “I adore Suzanne, I do. And this is a lovely welcome after an awful evening out. My goodness, it’s only eight o’clock on a Saturday night, and I am exhausted. But Suzanne, darling, if you are listening, this is too dangerous for you to do again.”

The cool breeze ruffled around Starla’s scarf and Rhiannon’s eyes blurred. “Thank you, Mom.”

Crisis averted, she thought, but she thought it too soon.

Mrs. Edwards said in her commanding voice, “Suzanne, please wait upstairs for Rhiannon and myself. We’ll be up shortly, luv, to discuss your behavior. You haven’t been following instructions.”

Rhiannon pressed her hands over her ears as Suzanne wailed, “Noo! I want to stay. I’ll be *good*.”

The medium wouldn’t be swayed. “Now.”

Suzanne swept out of the room so fast that the candles all went out.

“Why are you so mean to her?” Rhiannon demanded.

Mrs. Edwards’ lips pressed even tighter together until they were one thin line across her face. “I don’t expect for you to understand, dearie. You’re too young and inexperienced.”

“What?” Lifting her chin in the air, Rhiannon stood up straighter, stung by the rebuke.

“Come now, that was not meant as a personal attack. It is a rule for all psychics and mediums that they never let the spirits have complete control. It makes our job too hard. It would be like agreeing to babysit an invisible, mischievous child.”

Her shoulders relaxed. Rhiannon had sometimes felt that way, exactly.

“I’ll help you, Rhiannon.”

Rhee knew she was probably in over her head, and she could use the help. It still sucked.

Suddenly everyone was busy discarding coats, mittens and scarves and hanging them up in the closet by the front door. Starla started gathering up all the candles, putting them back where she wanted them. “It really was pretty,” she whispered to Rhiannon.

“I know. But dangerous, everyone was right.” She went over to the mantle and picked up her sleepy-eyed kitten, taking the pearls off from around his neck and handing them to her mom. “I like the blue velvet though—I think I’ll make Thor keep it on.”

Rhiannon set the kitten on the ground and he yawned. *And maybe Suzanne won’t be so upset.*

“You want another pet? I don’t think so, Rhiannon. A horse, a cow and a cat are plenty.” Her mom added the pearl necklace to the others she was already wearing.

Rolling her eyes, Rhiannon walked to the answering machine, which was blinking maniacally, like a red alarm. “I think Dad should check the messages,” she said, so not wanting to hear anything more about burning witches at the stake.

“Throwing me to the wolves, under the bus, Rhee?” He laughed.

“Yeah. So, are we gonna talk about what happened tonight?”

Matthew, Mrs. Edwards and Dr. Richards joined them in the living room. Dr. Richards sighed and sat heavily into the overstuffed recliner. “I admit to being curious about something, Rhiannon,” the doc started.

At his serious tone, Rhiannon looked up from where she was doodling on the pad of paper next to the phone. She had a feeling she wasn’t going to like what he said.

“Like what?”

“Did you deliberately explode the engine in the police car? Do you realize how dangerous that was? People could have gotten hurt. And if you’re really trying to fit in with the residents of Crystal Lake, I don’t think showing off your psychic prowess is the way to go about it.” He exhaled, his expression concerned.

“I didn’t—” She stopped. She’d been so busy watching the red aura around Matthew, just maybe her temper *had* slipped. Blaming Matthew was hardly fair, since he admittedly hadn’t caused a non-nightmare related fire for years. Had it been her? Rhee knew better than to get distracted. “I didn’t mean to,” she finished lamely.

She was turning into a basket case. “I never thought about doing anything to the car, or the engine. I mean, I was mad, of course, but I thought I was controlling it. Guess not.”

Rhiannon walked over to the couch and sat down, pulling her favorite blue afghan over her lap. “I’m sorry. I feel like a walking health hazard. I never know when I’m gonna go off.”

Her mom immediately jumped to her defense. “If she didn’t visualize it happening, then how can we be sure she’s doing it?”

Mrs. Edwards cleared her throat. “Who else could be responsible? Miles doesn’t carry the psychic gift—you can pick up and rarely send telepathic thoughts, but only with Rhiannon. Matthew...”

At her pause he jumped in. “I’m defective.”

The medium plowed on. “Dr. Richards doesn’t have the skills to make something explode, not without the usual tools anyway, and I know I didn’t do it. That only leaves Rhiannon.”

Rhee felt cold and sick and jittery. “I’m really scared. I haven’t felt this out of control since I first learned I wasn’t like other people.”

Her mom sat next to her, putting her arm around her and squeezing. Starla glared at Mrs. Edwards. “Why is this happening now? Does it have anything to do with the accusations of witchcraft? I can close the shop tomorrow. It isn’t as important as Rhiannon’s health.”

“Not necessary,” Dr. Richards said. “Rhiannon is going to be fifteen in a few days. Her body is changing, inside and out. Her powers themselves are growing and maturing. I hate to say this, since I know how you feel about it, Starla. But I think she might be better off staying at the institute for a while. We could do some retraining of her skills. Teach her new ways to block unwanted and uninvited thoughts.”

Rhiannon swallowed, and she could hear her heart beat in her ears. This is what she had wanted, her chance to go back to the institute. Why didn’t she feel happy? Her mom’s arm tightened across Rhee’s shoulders.

Since moving to the farmhouse, they’d become a closer family unit. And she *had* made a few great friends. Would it suck so bad being a loser? Maybe not when she was hanging out with the other so-called losers. Her friends.

Her mom stayed silent. Either she was in shock, or she was giving Rhiannon the opportunity to think things through.

Going back to Las Vegas on a permanent basis had the stink of failure. She’d be running back to safety, with her tail between her legs.

She looked up, met the gazes of her mom, dad and finally Dr. Richards. “I can’t give up my school year—” She was interrupted by Matthew’s clapping so she sent him a *shut-up* glare. “But I think it’s a great idea if I stay over winter break.”

“What about your ski trip?” her mom asked.

“Jared broke up with me, Mom. I’m new at dating and all, but I’m pretty sure that means the trip is off.”

“I’ll teach you to ski,” Matthew offered. “I’m pretty good. On the bunny hills.”

Rhiannon laughed. “Just my speed. Is that okay, Mom? Can I go back for the two weeks of break?”

Starla looked at Miles, who shrugged and said, “We can close the shop for at least a week, and stay with Tisha and everybody to celebrate Yule. I have some clients I can check in with. We’d need to find someone to watch the house and feed the animals. Rhiannon, can Melody or Bonnie do that?”

Excitement bubbled in her chest. She was getting a reprieve, a chance to make herself stronger before coming back to deal with the residents of Crystal Lake. “I’ll ask them. Corey will help too.”

Dr. Richards’ cell phone rang and he pulled it from his cardigan sweater pocket. “Dr. Richards here,” he answered.

The doctor nodded, then laughed. “Michael! I believe you might just be the answer we were looking for.”

He nodded again, giving everyone in the living room a thumbs-up sign.

“Michael?” Rhiannon whispered to Matthew, who was perched on the arm of the couch next to her. “Mike, your email bud?”

Matthew shrugged. “I haven’t checked email for two days. He doesn’t know that I’m here, anyway. I never told him where I was taking off to.”

Dr. Richards folded up his phone and tucked it back in his pocket, a huge grin wreathing his lined face. “You will never believe this. Michael was offered a job in Crystal Lake, as a substitute teacher. He starts after Christmas break.”

Matthew laughed. “Awesome—I can’t wait to actually meet him.”

Dr. Richards sent a sly look toward her mom and dad and Rhiannon wondered what he was up to.

“You know, he’d probably be more than happy to stay here and house sit while you’re gone. I’ll vouch for him—he’s a wonderful young man. Psychically talented too, but he doesn’t put that on his resume. Ha ha.”

Her mom tilted her head and asked, “How did he know about Crystal Lake? We’re almost three hundred miles from Seattle, and such a small town. This is a crazy coincidence.”

Dr. Richards exclaimed, “Oh no... No coincidence. I’ve talked about Crystal Lake often enough, how beautiful and rustic it is. In fact, come spring time I hope you’ll let me visit so that I can go fishing.”

Rhiannon shivered at the thought of the deep, dark lake.

“Give him a break? Is that what you thought?” her mom asked.

Rhiannon giggled. “Way off, Mom. I was thinking of the lake—so not one of my favorite places.”

“Yes.” Starla sighed. “I know. Although I thought that with Adam’s spirit banished you’d get over that.”

Her dad asked, “What do you think, Starla? I can make up another guest room by clearing out that junk next to the laundry room. If we like Michael, maybe he can stay until he finds an apartment or house of his own.”

“Excellent!” Dr. Richards said.

Rhiannon chuckled at the look her mom sent the doctor. Kind of a hold-your-horses-buster look.

“Miles, you know I like to help out people in need. But let’s review what has gone on today.” Rhee loved when her mom let her sarcasm get the best of her, which wasn’t often. “I hardly think that a new teacher is going to want the stigma of staying with witches.”

“But Mike’s not like that,” Matthew said.

Dr. Richards nodded, then peered with surprise at Matthew over his glasses. “How do you know?”

“We’ve been emailing since I was thirteen—you gave him my email so that I could help with some research he was doing toward his master’s degree. He’s cool, so we’ve kept in touch.”

“Oh, yes. I remember.” Dr. Richards’ brows drew together in V, and Rhee wondered if he really did.

She asked, “How old is this guy?”

The doctor leaned back and crossed his ankle over the opposite knee. “Let’s see, twenty-eight? Thirty? Something like that.”

“Just for the week, then, that we’re gone,” Miles suggested. “I’d feel better about leaving if I knew someone was staying in the house, considering what’s been going on today.”

Starla sighed, the sound soft and fluttery. “All right. Why don’t you see if he can come and stay early, so that we can show him what needs to be done before we leave? But if he’s not comfortable, then we won’t go. I was looking forward to celebrating winter solstice in our home, but family is more important.” Starla stood. “I’ll call Tisha and tell her. Rhiannon can go back to the institute this coming weekend, when school break officially starts. Can you handle one week of school, Rhiannon?”

Rhee heard the teasing in her mom’s voice but she also heard the serious part. If she pushed it, she could leave for Vegas tomorrow. She wasn’t a quitter.

“Yeah, I can handle it. I have my party too.”

Matthew lightly punched her arm. “Decided not to cave to the peer pressure. Very awesome.”

The praise felt good after such a hard day. “If you plan on coming to my party, I have a few ground rules. Number one: You have to buy me a present.”

He pushed her on one arm, while Starla pushed on the other.

“Hey!” Rhiannon laughed. “Rule number two: You have to be nice to my friends.” Which he would, she knew.

Traci Hall

“Is that all?” Matthew teased.

“Nope. Rule number three is: You can’t beat me on my birthday.”

Chapter Thirteen

Rhiannon snuggled into her blankets, totally comfortable on the air mattress she'd put on the floor of her bedroom. Mrs. Edwards looked younger with her face scrubbed and her long silvery hair brushed out and falling around her shoulders in waves. The moonlight splashed through the skylight window, softening the shadows of night.

She and the medium were quietly discussing the pros and cons of being a psychic.

"The most difficult thing in my experience, luv, was balancing the normal, like marriage and children, with the abnormal—going to my child's first parent teacher conference and realizing that the young Miss Trentfield was having an affair with the principal."

"Ew!"

Mrs. Edwards chuckled. "I didn't ask to see it, I just did. But it wasn't my concern, you see. So I had to pretend each time I saw the young lady that I didn't know. That was hard."

"I didn't know you had kids."

"Yes. Two. A son, who lives in Ireland, and a daughter."

Rhiannon shifted so that she was lying on her side, her head propped on her hand. "Where does she live?"

"I don't know."

Sitting up so fast she snagged her hair in the crook of her elbow, Rhee asked, "What? Why not?"

"She didn't like being the daughter of a psychic. She grew up, married a politician, and shut me out of her life."

Rhiannon felt the sadness coming from Mrs. Edwards as if it were her own pain and sorrow. After a few seconds she asked, "Do you regret being a psychic?"

“I couldn’t *not* be a psychic. It was not ever a choice, dearie. It is who I am. It is who you are.”

She pulled her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around her shins. “Yes, but there is more to me than that. Isn’t there?”

“Oh yes! Just like there is more to me than gray hair—” she lifted a strand and then let it fall, “—and glasses. The best advice I can give you is to understand that you are many things, not just one thing, and it is the combination that makes you unique. That, luv, is true for everyone.”

“What do you think Suzanne was like when she was alive?”

Mrs. Edwards leaned back into the pillows at the headboard, fluffing them until they were just right. “Ah. Suzanne.”

The chill wind that came spinning into the room announced the spirit’s arrival. Well, that and Thor hissing. “Hi, Suz,” Rhiannon said.

“Welcome, Suzanne,” the medium greeted.

The spirit’s voice was excited and happy as she said, “I am so pleased to be here. Thank you for finally calling to me. This is *awesome*.”

Rhiannon burst out laughing. “Did you just say ‘awesome’? Next thing I know you’ll be singing Black-Eyed Peas. You amaze me, Suzanne, you really do.”

The spirit laughed and Rhiannon watched as her vanity chair was pulled out from the table. As if Suzanne was going to sit and stay awhile.

“Did you like the candles? They were so pretty. Mom adores me, Rhiannon, she said so. Matthew thinks I am cool. I wish they could see me.”

“I wish *I* could see you.”

“I can see you, Suzanne.” Mrs. Edwards smoothed the edge of her comforter down.

Rhiannon whipped her head around. “You can?”

“You can!” Suzanne sang happily. “Am I pretty enough to knock someone’s socks off?”

Mrs. Edwards scrunched up her nose. “I have no clue what you are talking about. I see that you have picked up on some of Rhiannon’s slang.”

“I like slang. Rhiannon said she would teach me to dance.”

“She did?”

Rhee winced under the piercing stare of the medium.

“Oh yes. We are going to be happy forever.”

Mrs. Edwards cleared her throat. “You look lovely in your gingham dress—was it a favorite before you died? How can you be happy with Rhiannon forever? Rhiannon will someday pass on, as well. She is human.”

“I am aware of this. You needn’t speak to me like that.” The vanity chair creaked and Suzanne’s voice changed from that of an excited teenager back to one of a demure, young, turn-of-the-century woman. “Perhaps when Rhiannon passes, she can choose to stay here with me. We can live here forever and ever.”

Rhiannon sucked in a totally freaked-out breath. “Um, I don’t plan on dying any time soon.”

A cold caress brushed Rhee’s cheek, and Mrs. Edwards gasped in surprise as she stared at the vision only she could see. “Suzanne?”

“What? I did not make it so.”

Rhee was getting really creeped out as she noticed Mrs. Edwards swaying side to side in the bed, her eyes tightly closed. The medium stayed in that position for five minutes and finally Rhiannon couldn’t take it anymore. What was she seeing? Crawling closer to the bed on her hands and knees, she was going to shake the medium out of her trance. “Mrs. Edwards?”

“Noooo,” the medium moaned from the back of her throat as Rhee brought her hand to Mrs. Edwards’ shoulder. “Nooo!”

Rhiannon gulped, fear making her take quick, shallow breaths, guaranteed to send her hyperventilating. “Mrs. Edwards?” The room was dark, a cloud passed over the moon, plunging the attic bedroom into deepest night. Rhiannon shivered and yelled into the medium’s ear. “Snap out of it!”

Just like that, Mrs. Edwards’ eyes flew open, startling Rhiannon so much that she fell back on her butt.

Suzanne giggled.

“What did you see? Mrs. Edwards?”

The cloud passed, allowing trickles of moonlight to shine down in the bedroom.

“Screw that,” Rhiannon muttered and mentally flipped on the light switch, immediately dispelling any shadows that were tempted to stay.

“Language, luv. Oh dear. I...I was quite overcome.”

“Totally out of it,” Rhiannon agreed. “What did you see?”

The medium grasped Rhee’s hand. “I don’t remember the details, but darling, you are in danger. You have to stay away from the bonfire.”

Rhiannon’s head swam and she felt heat at the soles of her feet, licking up the back of her calves, catching her silver dress on fire. She shook her head. She was wearing SpongeBob flannel jammies, not a dress.

Mrs. Edwards gave Rhiannon’s hand a pat, muttered, “I’m bloody exhausted,” and within a second, maybe two, she fell back into the pillows, deeply asleep.

“Lucky you,” Rhee whispered. “With fortunes like that, I’m surprised anybody ever came back for a second reading. And, by the way, how am I supposed to sleep at all? Ever?”

She crawled back to the air mattress and shut off the light. She’d forgotten about Suzanne, who said softly, “Mrs. Edwards is very intelligent.”

Rhiannon whispered back, “Yes. Did you show her a vision? Am I in trouble?”

Suzanne laughed. “Rhiannon, you are always in trouble.”

A light touch brushed her hair back from her forehead, and Rhiannon closed her eyes.

“I’ll protect you, Rhiannon. You go to sleep.”

“Night, Suz, thanks.”

When Rhiannon woke up, her roommates were gone. No Mrs. Edwards, no Suzanne and no Thor. She sat up, stretched and untangled the silver chain from her hair. She

stopped and looked down at her chest. The moonstone amulet was hanging around her neck. The crescent-moon-shaped pendant, having been blessed by the High Priestess of the Vegas coven, held special protective qualities.

Had her mother put it there? Suzanne?

The way things were going, she could use all of the protection she could get. In between the amulet and avoiding any bonfire parties, she should be set.

The smell of blueberry pancakes wafted up the stairs and her stomach rumbled. A quick stop at the bathroom where she brushed her teeth so she didn't kill anybody with her morning breath, and then she'd go down to breakfast. This was her house, after all, and if she wanted to spend a Sunday lounging in her PJs then she was gonna do it. It was the perfect kind of day for curling up on the couch in front of the fire with a book and her secret stash of Twinkies.

"Morning," she said to everyone as she took a seat at the dining room table.

"Greetings," her mom answered with a plate and a kiss. "You're in a lovely mood this morning."

"Slept great," she said, grinning. "Everybody else?"

Then she got an eyeful of Matthew. He had purple-black circles under his eyes and his mouth was bracketed with white lines, as if he were in a great deal of pain. "Migraine?" she asked, lowering her voice.

"I don't understand," Mrs. Edwards looked worried. "He took the medicine yesterday."

"It could take some time to rebuild in his system," Dr. Richards said.

"Have you tried an herbal remedy?" Starla's bracelets chimed. "Amethyst water is excellent for a headache, and smoky gray quartz is good for blocking nightmares. I can make a tea, or an amulet, even a dream pillow."

"Oh my. Well, I tried chamomile. It didn't help."

Rhiannon watched her mom pull out what looked like a cookbook, but was in actuality a book filled with homeopathic recipes. "That would be too weak, let's see what else we have in here..."

“I’m sorry, Matthew,” Rhee said as the two women talked. “Would you like another compress?” Not that Rhiannon had ever made one, but it couldn’t be that hard. It was just crystal water, of which her mom had tons of recipes, and a cool cloth. Maybe.

“No. Thanks.” His voice was quiet, kinda like it hurt to talk.

“Pass me the syrup?” Rhiannon asked.

He did, and the sleeve of his flannel shirt rode up his arm, revealing his wrist.

“Thanks, Ma—where are the burns?”

“Huh?” Matthew looked down at his wrist. “They’re gone.”

They both looked at her mom. “Did you do this?”

Starla shook her head. “The chant was to relieve the pain, not make the marks disappear altogether.”

Dr. Richards got up from his chair and examined Matthew’s wrist. “Hmm. This is interesting. I’ll have to document it. Miles, do you mind if I spend some time this morning using your office?”

“You are welcome to it,” her dad said. “Second floor next to the room you’re staying in. The computer is already on. And Rhiannon, I went through the messages left on the phone. Melody, Bonnie and Corey all called, they want to get together. Maybe you could invite them over, and let them get to know Matthew.”

Rhiannon glanced toward her miserable-looking friend. “I don’t think Matthew’s up to that today, Dad. But I’ll call them. Did we get lots of prank calls?”

“Garbage. The only reason I’m saving the tape is just in case things go too far. I plan on dropping it off with Officer Julianne today.”

Rhiannon cut another piece of pancake, dipping it in syrup. “Hey, Dad? Are there any bonfire parties coming up that you know of?”

Mrs. Edwards inhaled.

Her dad shook his head. “No, well, we could celebrate the winter solstice with a bonfire, if you want. Maybe when we get back from Tisha’s.”

“No! No, I was just curious.”

She didn't miss the silent warning Mrs. Edwards sent her way. Why didn't the medium want to bring up the vision she'd had the night before? Rhee stuck the bite of pancake in her mouth and chewed.

"I already spoke to Michael this morning, and he's agreed, very happily, to come and housesit."

Matthew let out a soft moan and blood spurted from his nose.

Chapter Fourteen

“Do you think Matthew will feel better today? I still can’t believe he spent all yesterday sleeping, he barely even woke up to tell Dr. Richards good-bye.” Rhiannon tucked the silver amulet beneath her turtleneck where it wouldn’t show. She was nervous enough about school today without wearing any type of jewelry that might set people off.

She’d dressed very conservatively, considering she hated the country look, but she’d chosen a periwinkle top with a tan suede vest and plain blue jeans. Normally she made a point to dress trendy, but after all the horrible things kids were saying about her being a snob, she didn’t want to offend.

“Mom?”

Starla finally looked up from the book she was studying, *Wicca for the Solitary Witch*, and pushed a tendril of hair behind her ear. “What?”

Rhiannon rolled her eyes. “Matthew. Will he be okay?”

“Of course, honey! I’m just reading up on a healing spell I can do this morning. There are times when I miss the guidance of Tisha terribly.”

Besides being the High Priestess of the coven her parents had belonged to in Las Vegas, Tisha and her mom were best friends.

“Email her, or call her, she’ll help you.”

Her mom tapped her lower lip with a clean, blunt fingernail. “I know she would, honey. I just don’t want to bother her with all of this. She’d worry.”

“Having our van painted with soy sauce is more funny than harmful, Mom.” Which was true, at least now that it was over. What was scary was thinking about what could happen next. “But maybe you should tell her about the prank calls.”

Her mom blinked, concern on her expressive face. “I wonder if you should go to school today.”

Rhiannon tried on her bravado and said, “Nobody will hurt me.” *Not physically. Jared will be there, and every time I see him my heart will ache. Felicity and Janet will make my life a living hell, and...* “Things will be just fine, Mom. I’m wearing my amulet.”

“Praise the Goddess, and may She protect you today.” Her mom got up and gave her a kiss.

“Stop freaking out. Pretty awesome that Mrs. Edwards can stay for the week. I wonder if Matthew will change his mind about going to the institute with us.”

“He seems so excited about finally meeting his, well, it wouldn’t be a pen pal...an email pal? But that’s fine, Rhee. He can drive down with your father and I. Oh!” Starla smacked her forehead. “I made you something, to guard against heartache. You’ll still feel the sting, but it should be bearable.”

Her mom grinned and tucked the thin braided strands of a willow charm into the front pocket of Rhiannon’s jeans. They both jumped when they heard the horn blast from the front of the house. “Sounds like Dad’s ready,” Rhiannon said.

“Be careful today, Rhee.”

They’d almost arrived at the school when Rhiannon worked up the courage to ask her dad, “Do you think that I’m a bad person?”

He was so surprised he jerked the steering wheel to the left. “What? Of course not.”

Rhiannon pulled at a loose thread on her backpack. “I mean, I like it a lot better when you drive your regular old car instead of the van. I know that mom is proud of her business, but I sometimes wish she could find something else to do, like write murder mysteries or do interior design.”

She felt some of her worry lift when her dad laughed. “Murder mysteries? Honey, your mom is doing what she was meant to do. She is your mother, first and foremost, which she takes very seriously, as you know.”

Rhiannon smiled.

“She takes incredible joy in her faith. She hurts no one and she helps anybody she can. She truly believes that one good deed deserves another. This accusation of witchcraft

seems very outdated to her. Living in Vegas, in a community of other Wiccans, has left her...unprepared for this kind of hate.”

She looked out the window, noticing the puffy gray clouds. Would it snow again? She jumped when her dad put his hand on her arm.

“You and I are much more pragmatic than your mom—she’s always been a dreamer. You found your reality, even with all of your supernatural talents, in science. I found mine with numbers. I’m happy being an accountant, don’t get me wrong, but your mom makes us not take ourselves too seriously. Don’t you think?”

“Yeah.” She laughed. “Mom was the first one out making a snow angel when it snowed two inches last week.”

“She was right when she said she wanted to enjoy it while it was there.”

“It melted that afternoon and we haven’t had snow since.” Rhee exhaled. “I’m trying to be the best person I can be, I am. But it seems like every time I turn around I’m in more trouble.”

Her dad pulled up in front of the school, and Rhiannon’s stomach immediately tensed. Lots of kids were hustling inside, out of the cold. There was no sign of Bonnie or Melody. She’d have to walk in by herself.

She could do it.

“You’re a teenager, which is another word for trouble,” he teased. “Don’t worry about things you can’t control.”

Rhee opened the passenger door and the cold air immediately attacked her nose. “Thanks for the pep talk. See ya this afternoon.”

“Have a great day, honey. Things will work out just fine.”

Things will work out just fine, she thought with a smirk. Who was her dad kidding? She’d had such a crappy morning she was almost ready to go home sick.

Which she was. Sick of putting up with other people’s bull.

She'd been pointed at, whispered around, she'd even had a note thrown at her, which she hadn't bothered reading. It had taken every ounce of self-control to pay attention to Mrs. Bing in science class as she droned on and on about DNA.

Science was normally Rhiannon's favorite subject, even though she could take the senior test right this second and ace it.

But she couldn't concentrate because Jared was sitting in the seat in front of her. She inhaled his Tommy cologne. Stared at the dark blond curl at the base of his neck, where his hair met his collar. Every time he moved, she was in agony. He would never kiss her again. Never talk to her or hold her hand. They'd never go to their special spot in the clearing and whisper secrets. He wasn't her champion any more.

The stupid charm her mom made obviously didn't work. It seemed to her that the whole magick thing was really hit and miss. So much depended on how much you believed in it. And since she *didn't* so much...she'd realized that she was reaching out (mentally) to touch Jared's hair and snapped her attention back to Mrs. Bing. Bad. No touching. No thinking. *Bad.*

So now here she was at lunch, sitting all alone at the Loser table, because all of the other losers were nowhere in sight. The friends she'd thought she had were nowhere to be found.

Which wasn't entirely true.

Meat and Broomstick were sitting on the stage steps with their sack lunches. Losers. Jerks. Chickens.

Rhiannon pulled out a cheese stick and started peeling the layers back. For once she didn't feel like bawling. It was worse than that. She felt like laughing hysterically. She just wished that she had a book or something so she didn't look like such a dork.

Or maybe a book would make things worse. She wouldn't be aware of anyone sneaking up behind her...

"Rhiannon! Gee, are you sitting here all alone?" Janet's voice grated on her last nerve, but Rhee didn't even blink.

“Yeah. But there’s no room for you, so just move along.” Rhee changed the cheese stick for a yogurt, slowly opening the top like she didn’t care her enemy was standing over her.

“Even your loser friends think you suck. How does that feel?”

“You should probably ask Mutt and Jeff if you want an honest answer. I don’t have any loser friends.”

Mutt growled. “You don’t have any friends, period.”

Jeff laughed. “Nice one.”

Out of nowhere Rhiannon was hit with, “*Hate her, hate her. How can Caleb stand up for her? Even Jared dumped her!*”

She almost choked on a spoonful of banana yogurt before turning around. “Felicity? Hey, say hi to your boyfriend for me, would you?”

“Funny.” She sneered. “Caleb hates your guts.”

Rhiannon arched one brow and half-smiled, sending a thought toward Felicity. *Oh yeah? How sure are you of that?*

Felicity’s skin turned white beneath her make-up. She grabbed Janet’s arm. “Come on, let’s get out of here before her *friends* get back.”

Narrowing her eyes, Rhiannon deliberately pried into Felicity’s head. She stayed for a second, then she jumped up from the table and ran for the girls bathroom.

She stepped into the hallway, noticing the crowd of girls, mostly freshman, gathered outside the bathroom door. Rhiannon opened her mind, scanning the group until she hit pay dirt. “*I can buy three new downloads with the money I got from Janet,*” was the thought that caught her attention.

Rhiannon elbowed her way to the front. She stopped in front of a huge girl who probably could have been on the senior guy’s wrestling team. Rhee looked all the way up at her and said, “I need to use the bathroom.”

The girl snickered. “This one’s closed.”

“No, it’s not.” Rhiannon kept the girl’s gaze steady as she used another part of her brain to make the doorknob very, very warm beneath the girl’s hand.

The second she let go, Melody had it yanked open from her side. She flew out with her fist raised, catching Rhiannon on the cheekbone.

“Ouch!” Rhee cried out with surprise as she fell backward.

Bonnie stopped and looked down, then pushed Melody off of Rhiannon.

“Melody—you got Rhee, oh, are you okay? That darn Janet locked us in the bathroom and paid Godzilla over there to hold the handle.”

“Hey!” the girl tree trunk said.

Rhiannon got to her feet and glared. “Don’t go there. You got your money.”

She blushed. “That was supposed to be a secret! Who told you? Janet?”

Turning her back on the girl’s blustering, Rhiannon checked out her friends. “You guys okay?”

Melody reached forward and lightly touched Rhee’s cheekbone. Wincing, she said, “I’m sorry, I thought...”

“Nice right hook, Mel. Next time save it for Janet, I promise not to stop you.”

Bonnie took Rhiannon’s arm. “Let’s go get some ice. Have you seen Corey?”

“Nope, but now I get why Meat and Broomstick wouldn’t sit at the table with me. They didn’t want their butts kicked.”

“Corey!” Bonnie cried out. “I think we should try the guys’ locker room.”

“Sounds like a good plan.”

Rhiannon started walking away when a hand dropped on her shoulder. “Hey!” She whirled around, prepared for the worst from wrestling girl.

“Are you okay?”

She wasn’t in any way prepared for Jared’s concern.

“Who hit you?” he demanded.

Rhiannon forgot how to speak English.

Melody said, “Me. It was an accident. Your stupid sister locked me and Bonnie in the bathroom so that Rhiannon would have to sit alone.”

Bonnie, sweet Bonnie, said, “Your sister is the true witch around here.”

“I know. It seems to run in the family. Rhee, you’re hurt.” He raised a bent finger toward her face.

Yeah, she wanted to tell him. *I’m hurting something bad.* “Don’t touch me.”

He dropped his hand to his side as his cheeks turned bright red. “Sorry.”

Rhiannon gulped. “We’ve already apologized, we don’t have anything else to say.”

She forced her feet to move away, to step forward. Melody and Bonnie flanked her, giving her strength. She stuck her hand in her pocket and pulled out the braided charm.

“Wow. I thought you were a goner,” Melody whispered. “I hate the Roberts, all of them, and even my heart was getting mushy.”

Bonnie cleared her throat. “Let’s find Corey, and then let’s figure out a way to pay Janet back.”

“I thought you were done with revenge, spells, or thinking unkind thoughts,” Melody teased.

Bonnie stopped in her tracks. “Those girls messed with the wrong girl when they locked me in the bathroom. And if even one hair on Corey’s head is hurt...” Bonnie made a fist. “They’re toast.”

Chapter Fifteen

Matthew was sitting on the couch and playing Game Boy when Rhiannon got home from school. He looked up as she and her dad walked in, and immediately turned the game off.

“What happened to your face?” he asked as he got to his feet.

“Can’t a girl get into a brawl without everybody making a big deal out of it?” She laughed at her own joke, but neither her dad or Matthew thought she was that funny, she could tell.

“Lighten up. Melody did it on accident. She thought I was Janet.”

Matthew’s eyebrows lifted. “Uh-huh. Janet is tiny and blond. You’re tall and a redhead. I can see where that would be a common mistake.”

Her dad snickered.

Rhiannon put her coat away, dropping her backpack by the door. “Oh sure. Laugh at the new kid’s jokes.”

Her mom came out of the kitchen with a steaming plate of cookies, which she almost dropped when she got a look at her daughter’s face. “By the Goddess, what happened?”

Rhiannon grinned and pumped up her muscle. “I’m trying out for football.”

Nobody laughed. “This is a tough crowd.”

“Rhiannon Selene...”

“Geez, Mom, Melody accidentally decked me.”

Matthew drawled, “Melody thought Rhiannon was Janet.”

A smile tugged at her mom’s lips.

“Don’t you dare laugh,” Rhiannon warned, walking toward the tray of cookies. “Mmm, peanut butter. My fave.” She snagged two and plopped down on the couch.

Her mom set the plate down on the coffee table and asked, “Does it hurt? It looks like it hurts.”

“Nope.” She bit into the warm cookie.

“Well, how else was your day?”

“I was mocked, ridiculed and my friends were locked in the girls bathroom, and the boys locker room, Melody and Bonnie and Corey, respectively.”

Matthew finally laughed.

Rhiannon rolled her eyes. “Corey got the worst of it. He was stuck in a bin of dirty socks and sweaty jock straps.”

“Gross.” Matthew laughed harder.

“Aren’t you supposed to be sick or something?” Rhee asked with a glare.

“Your mom made this herbal junk—”

“An infusion, Matthew.”

“Sorry, an infusion, and the headache disappeared.”

“Where’s Mrs. Edwards?”

Her mom sighed. “Napping. Poor woman didn’t sleep well last night.”

No kidding. Rhiannon hadn’t either, thanks to Mrs. Edwards’ tossing and turning.

“Any prank phone calls today?” Rhiannon asked, noticing the not-blinking answering machine.

“None,” her mom confirmed. “This has all blown over, just as we predicted it would.”

Rhiannon wished she felt a little more relieved, then remembered the conversation she’d had earlier with her dad. Her mom believed in rainbows and unicorns. “Cool. I have some homework to do online. The sooner I get it done the sooner I can whip Matthew’s butt in Cranium. But you guys have to play too.”

Her mom’s nose wrinkled. “You laugh at me when I hum.”

Her dad gave Starla a quick kiss to the top of the head. “You sound funny, that’s why.”

Rhiannon grabbed her backpack and went to the computer. “Uh, Mom, why aren’t you in the shop?”

Starla immediately started fussing with napkins and the cookie tray. “It was slow. People know where to find me if they want something. I mean, the barn’s just behind the house.”

Rhiannon crossed her arms over her chest. “Uh-huh. And the real reason would be?”

Her dad exhaled, sending her a look to be patient.

“Fine. We had a broken window is all, and it was too cold to be in there all day.”

Rhiannon’s stomach tensed. “As in, someone broke the window? Like with a rock?”

“More like a book.”

Chills raced up her arms. “What book?”

Her dad shook his head. “It’s nothing.”

Matthew said, “I don’t know, I think the *History of the Salem Witch Trials* would be kind of interesting.”

Rhiannon dropped into the computer chair. “You’re kidding. I’m sorry, Mom.”

“Don’t be. It wasn’t your fault. I’m going to go start dinner.”

Her dad followed her mom into the kitchen, and Rhiannon heard him whispering to her. Was he telling her that everything would be okay? ‘Cause, really, she was starting to wonder if her dad was just making it all up.

She logged on and the old screen popped up. “Look, Matthew. I never logged out. Wanna see yourself as a baby again?”

“Yeah.” Then his face lost color and he sat on the couch. “No. Why don’t you do it? I don’t feel good.”

“Hey, you just rest, I’m gonna do some homework.” She turned her back on him, thinking back on his headaches. Each time he’d gotten a bad one, he’d been thinking about his past.

What if his nightmares were his body’s way of getting beyond the memory suppressant? What could have happened in Matthew’s past that would be so awful that Mrs. Edwards and Dr. Richards both thought it was okay to drug a six-year-old kid?

One way to find out, she thought.

Matthew's voice startled her as he mumbled sleepily from the couch, "What're ya working on?"

"Don't worry, hot stuff. I got Health class under control. Take a nap or something, would you?"

Matthew Campbell, she typed in, along with his birth date and place of birth. Then she hit a newspaper search for any articles during the year he was six. Because, and this was way odd too, she had no clue how, exactly, his parents had died. She'd always assumed it was a car accident.

After tapping into his nightmares, she wasn't so sure.

Tanya popped on IM. *Hi babe. How R U? Whassit like livin with the Mattster?*

Rhiannon laughed. *So far so good, 'cept he hogs the bathroom. ☺*

Couldn't believe it when I found out he left. Surprised?

Rhiannon smiled, picturing her pal with magenta hair and purple eye shadow. *Duh. Got so much 2 tell ya. Might get burned out of C. L. & J dumped me.*

No! Jerk. Cause of the evil twin?

Worse. Rhee paused. He thinks I'm different. LOL he has no clue.

LMAO. His loss, baby. Whadya talking bout burned?

As in, at the stake.

No kiddin? Whadya do?

Wasn't me this time. Mom's store, Jared's mom and the Moon Goddess tea set.

LOL. Doc says you're comin for a visit? YEAH!! I'll see if Germaphobe will let me stay at the institute.

Rhiannon snickered. Tanya's mom was even weirder than her mom. *Can't wait 2 CU. Hey, do you know anything bout Matthew's past?*

She waited, tapping her fingers impatiently until Tanya answered. *Nope. Don't tell me he's got secrets <g>*

Don't we all? Gotta go—homework.

Stay away from anybody with a torch, babe ☺

Rhiannon shook her head, smiling, as another email popped up. She didn't recognize the name, MURLYN@73html.com. Cautiously, she clicked it open, prepared for something nasty. Instead it read, *Searching for secrets? Check the maiden name of the mother. Shaughnessy.*

What the heck?

Rhiannon felt a tickle at the nape of her neck, a kind of pushing at her head. Was someone trying to break into her thoughts? She stood, turned around and checked the living room.

Matthew was quiet, his eyelids fluttering as he fell deeper into sleep.

Her mom and dad were still in the kitchen, and she couldn't detect Suzanne's presence.

She tiptoed upstairs to check on Mrs. Edwards, unsure as to why she would suspect the medium of tapping into her brain uninvited. But who else was there? She edged open her door, adjusting her eyes to the darkness.

Mrs. Edwards was a comforter-covered lump in the center of her bed. Thor was sleeping next to her, almost as if her were guarding the medium from interruption.

He blinked his golden eyes, and she slowly backed out of the room.

It must have been her imagination.

One creepy email and she was ready to see danger in every corner. Now she could add paranoia to her list of mental ailments. But what did that mean, check the mother's maiden name?

Rhiannon sat back down at the computer and updated her newspaper article search, carefully typing in the name, *Margaret Shaughnessy.*

The hits were immediate.

The Irish heiress and her husband, the famous Irish flutist Luke Campbell had been killed in a tragic accident ten years ago.

Their Seattle home had caught fire.

It was so hot, she was burning hot, fire was everywhere she turned, singeing her eyelashes and scorching her feet. The flowered curtain dropped to the floor, sending sparks flying as soon as it hit the ground with a crash, sparks that sizzled her skin. She tried to scream, but the sound was trapped in her parched throat.

Mama! Daddy! And there was someone else, a shadow who watched as everything burned and melted. Someone in the shadows, laughing as everything went up in smoke. Why? Come help!

The phone, I know how to dial nine-one-one. Crawling over the hot floor, trying to breathe is so hard. Stop, drop and roll. Where are the 'stinguishers?

The phone is so hot it burns! I use my blanket, my smoking blanket, to punch in the numbers but then the fire bites my leg and I drop the phone, screaming for mama.

“Rhiannon—wake up!”

She opened her eyes, prepared for the sting of hot embers on her skin. “No—”

Her mom shook her arm. “Rhiannon, baby, you’re scaring me half to death.”

Rhiannon heard another moan and peered around her mom to where her dad was dumping water on the rug, little puffs of black smoke and blue-gray steam drifted into the air.

“What happened?” She stood up, but had to lean against her mom since her knees immediately buckled. Her voice was scratchy and raw as she croaked, “There was really a fire? I didn’t dream it?” She sniffed, but didn’t smell smoke.

Mrs. Edwards was bent over Matthew on the couch. Matthew was caught in his nightmare and nothing Mrs. Edwards said could coax him out.

Things became crystal clear in that moment.

“Matthew did it. Matthew caused the fire.”

Mrs. Edwards turned, glancing quickly at the small fire Miles had under control. She said over her shoulder, “It’s happened before, during his nightmares. We’ll have to change the dosage of his medicine, poor luv, he’s suffering.”

Matthew let out a low, pain-filled groan.

Rhee hardened her heart, pressing for the truth.

“No. That isn’t what I meant. Tell me the truth, Mrs. Edwards. Matthew started the fire that killed his parents, didn’t he?”

Chapter Sixteen

Her mom gasped. “My goodness, oh, well, that would explain everything,” she said as she took hold of Rhiannon’s hand and squeezed. “Poor baby...”

Stomping on the now squishy carpet, Miles said, “If it weren’t for Mrs. Edwards calling for help, I—” Her dad’s voice clogged and he put his fist to his lips. “We owe you, Mrs. Edwards, a huge debt. I can’t think about what might have happened. Rhee, your mom and I were both out at the shop...”

“Thank Thor, Miles. And Suzanne. I was sleeping so deeply, it took both of them to wake me up.” Mrs. Edwards continued lightly patting Matthew’s cheeks. “Now it’s your turn, luv, come on out of it,” she crooned.

Rhiannon could see how much the medium loved Matthew, could see how worried she was for him. Protective...

“I’m right, aren’t I? That’s the real reason why you gave him the memory suppressants. You didn’t want him to feel guilty. That explains the nightmares, everything. ’Cause subconsciously he knows what he did.” Rhiannon leaned into her mom’s hug as tears fell from her eyes. How would a child accept the responsibility for the deaths of his family? How could anybody, no matter how old they were? Even if it was an accident.

“I don’t blame you, Mrs. Edwards. Not at all.” Rhiannon sniffed. “Suzanne? Come to me.”

Within seconds the spirit was there. “Are you hurt, Rhiannon?”

Rhee let the spirit check her over as she said, “No. Thanks for waking up Mrs. Edwards. You saved us.”

“I love you, Rhiannon. I love my family. Do you see how much you need me?”

“Yes,” Rhee answered with relief. “Thanks, Suz.”

Suzanne whirled happily around the room.

Mrs. Edwards slowly got to her feet, her knees cracking as she stood. Two rosy splotches of color stained her ashen face. “We can’t talk about this here. Shall we go into the kitchen?” She gave Mathew one last look, totally filled with concern, before she led the way.

“Suzanne, will you please stay with Matthew? Brush his forehead and cheeks, like you did for me the other night. Protect Matthew.”

“I don’t want—” Suzanne knocked over a picture frame, but Rhiannon ignored her and went to the kitchen with the others.

Starla put the teakettle on and got an assortment of teas out of the cupboard. Then she put a plate of cookies in the center of the dining room table, but Rhee didn’t see how any of them could possibly eat. Rhiannon sat in the chair next to her dad, who took her hand in his.

“Your mom couldn’t wake you up. Thank the Goddess that the fire was small.”

Chilled, Rhiannon wished the tea would hurry up. “Are we sure Matthew did it?”

Mrs. Edwards nodded. “There was no one else in the house.”

Should she tell them about the psychic pull at her head she’d felt after reading that strange email? *Too coincidental*. The pull had to be from Matthew... Maybe his talents were fighting to come through. Mrs. Edwards had said that you are who you are. If Matthew was filled with psychic ability, it was totally possible that his body was letting him know. Although she completely agreed with him that uncontrollable fire starting wasn’t the best talent to have. But if he had others...

Her mom gave each of them a mug, and it took a few moments for them to settle in. Rhiannon inhaled the cinnamon spice, wrapping her hands around the steaming mug for warmth, and possibly courage.

“I dreamed Matthew’s nightmare with him.”

Mrs. Edwards gasped. “How?”

“I don’t know. I accused Matthew of sending the images to me on purpose, but he said he wasn’t. It was awful...” Rhiannon grabbed a napkin, knowing she was gonna

need it. How many tears did a person shed over the course of a lifetime? Enough to fill an ocean?

Her dad scooted closer to her and draped his arm over her shoulders. Rhee was grateful for the contact as she continued. "I saw what happened, through Matthew's eyes. He was hurting so badly... He was burned, but I've never seen any scars on him. We've gone swimming together, so I've *seen* him. I would've noticed."

Mrs. Edwards' hands were shaking. "What else?"

"The flowered curtain falls, it drops, and sends more hot embers into his skin. He's crying for his mama and daddy." Rhee had to pause and clear her throat of tears. She took a sip of tea, but it didn't make her feel better.

It didn't help that her Mom and Mrs. Edwards were crying too. "He crawls across the burning floor, remembering how to 'stop, drop and roll', something they teach all kids in kindergarten, right? He wants to call nine-one-one, and he burns his hand on the phone. He uses his smoldering blanket, and pushed the buttons through the pain, until he, I think he passes out..."

"May the Goddess ease his pain," her mom whispered with her eyes tightly closed.

The hair on the back of Rhiannon's neck rose to attention as she remembered something else. "Matthew called for his mom and dad, but there was someone else in the room. Wasn't there?"

Mrs. Edwards pushed her mug away. Her voice was thick with suppressed emotion as she sighed, "Yes. Maggie and Luke Campbell were also raising Maggie's little brother. He had just turned eighteen. His name was Ian Shaughnessy."

Murlyn, whoever he was, had led her to the truth. Why?

Starla opened her eyes and inhaled sharply. "Maggie Shaughnessy, oh dear. I remember now. I never would have put it together."

"What?" Rhiannon asked impatiently. "Put what together?"

Mrs. Edwards began, the lilt in her voice heavy. "Maggie and Ian Shaughnessy were the only children of Gregor Shaughnessy, the richest man in Ireland. After his death, the new orphans were passed around with friends of the family, but the money was always an

issue. It was said to be cursed, as nobody had ever heard of an honest Shaughnessy.” Mrs. Edwards chuckled sadly. “Maggie married Luke Campbell the second she turned eighteen, and they raised her young brother, Ian, who I believe at the time was around eleven, maybe twelve.”

“How sad. A curse?” Rhiannon sipped her tea, which had gone lukewarm.

“Yes. It goes along these lines.” Mrs. Edwards scrunched her brow, as if searching her memory, and then said like an old-time story teller:

*“Twas a Campbell who laid the Shaughnessy curse long ago
Vowing vengeance and bad fortune on his deserving foe
Have riches, have land, Lord Campbell decreed
You’ll never have power, true love or honesty
For stealing my magick, and my beautiful bride
Your progeny will suffer long after you’ve died
Lord Campbell regained his magick flute and his wife
And returned to his castle, where he lived a good life
On his deathbed, he amended the lifting of the curse
Would happen when a Shaughnessy put love before the purse.”*

“Whoa, that is so cool. But it happened so long ago, don’t tell me you really believe that?”

“Aye, just like I believe that Maggie and Luke would have broken the curse if they’d had more time.”

“Instead, the curse got them.”

The medium shook her head.

“Why didn’t they stay in Ireland?” Rhee asked, seeing a sour look on the medium’s face.

“Too many painful memories. And Ian, he wasn’t the best lad, despite his sister’s care. He strutted his Shaughnessy name, proud of his ancestors. He blamed Maggie a bit for not wanting to expand their holdings, but Maggie wanted happiness more. After the

fire, we found out that Ian had booked a flight for Ireland the very next day. He never made it.”

“The Shaughnessy curse got him too?”

“Oh, lass, who knows? Either way, it is ended now. Ian was the last of his line.”

“What about Matthew?”

“He’s a Campbell, through and through. And even though Ian wasn’t the best sort, Maggie was the loveliest woman. She could predict the future. But as it is with everyone who has that gift, her family’s future was a blank slate.”

“She couldn’t tell what her brother was really like?”

Mrs. Edwards sighed. “I’m not sure. I only know that when they came to Seattle, Maggie went to one of Dr. Richards’ seminars—she was curious about her abilities, yes, but mostly she was concerned about what Mathew could do. Fire starters are rare, and of course, Dr. Richards helped them. They invested in top-of-the-line alarm systems and had fire extinguishers in every room.”

Then she laughed out loud. “They were part of the décor, quite cleverly disguised. For even though Maggie had inherited all the Shaughnessy money—Ian couldn’t get to his share until he turned eighteen—she and Luke lived simply. They loved Matthew with everything they had. In fact, Luke would sometimes calm his son by playing that old Irish flute.”

“He still had it—the same one?” Rhiannon felt a rush of excitement.

“Oh yes, Luke could play that instrument to make you weep, he was that good. He even made some CDs, Irish music compilations that sold quite well. Their lives, Maggie always said, were blessed. But there was a dark cloud Maggie saw, though she didn’t understand it. She arranged for Matthew to be raised by Dr. Richards and myself at the institute should anything happen to them. Six months later, they were dead.”

Everyone jumped when Matthew yelled, “Why didn’t you tell me this? Ever?”

Rhiannon watched as Matthew held on to the wall for support. Her dad got up, prepared to catch him if he fell.

Matthew, tears pouring down his face, pushed Miles away. “Don’t! Damn it, I’ve never heard that much of my history before. Ever! Why couldn’t you have told me at least a part of it? I hate you! I HATE YOU!”

Matthew tore out of the house in his socks, headed toward the barn.

Mrs. Edwards made to follow, but Miles shook his head. “Wait. We don’t know how much he heard. I think...”

Rhiannon, her heart tearing apart, said, “I’ll go. Poor Matthew.”

“Hey,” she said a while later. “Scoot over.”

Matthew was sitting in a pile of hay, his face buried in his arms. His shoulders shook and he acted like he didn’t hear her.

“Listen to this,” Rhiannon said, hoping that it would help. She felt a little fear in her stomach that it might make things worse, but it was time, she instinctively knew, for Matthew to face his past.

She pressed the button on her boom box, filling the barn with the heart-wrenching sounds of the Irish flute. “It’s called ‘Matthew’s Song’. Your dad wrote it for you.” Rhiannon didn’t care that she was crying, she was so worried about Matthew. While she had been upstairs getting dressed and grabbing boots and a coat for him, her mom had downloaded the music off the computer and put it on disc.

Matthew looked up, his nose red and his eyes bloodshot. “This is the sound track I hear in my head, remember I told you? They loved me. My parents loved me. I sometimes wondered, because I couldn’t remember them. I killed them.”

Rhiannon couldn’t speak past the lump in her throat. After a few seconds she said, “It was an accident. You didn’t know, you never would have deliberately hurt them. I was there, I saw what happened through your six-year-old eyes.” She wiped her nose with her sleeve, cursing herself for not remembering freaking napkins.

His face was so horrible and drawn, she knew she would never forget it. If she lived to be a hundred, Matthew's pain was etched into her soul. She reached out her hand. "We didn't know if you heard everything."

Matthew pushed her away. "How could they have kept it from me?"

"How could they have told you? Look at this from their point of view. Right now you feel like your world has collapsed beneath your feet. You're shocked and blaming yourself. You're sixteen. How would you have reacted at six?"

Matthew buried his head, letting the flute music flow over him. "Where did you get this?"

"Internet. Mrs. Edwards says that your dad actually left the magickal flute at the institute. They've been saving it for you."

"Magickal flute? I don't care about some stupid flute. I've got the Shaughnessy curse running through my veins." He stood up, kicking hay and the barn stalls. "No freaking wonder I have nightmares. How can I ever look at myself again? Every time I do I'll see a murderer!"

Rhiannon curled her legs toward her chest and hugged her knees. "You have to forgive yourself."

His blue eyes were wild, the pupils black and large. "I'm leaving. Mike was right, I need to get far away from anybody that I care about. I'm gonna grab my crap and just start walking. I can't stay here! I set a fire in your living room. I'm a danger to everyone around me." He gave the barn wall one more kick.

"I brought your boots. Maybe you won't break your toe if you put them on before you kick anything else. If it makes you feel better, keep kicking, but Matthew, you can't run away."

Moonstone whinnied and Rhiannon could hear the horse stamp in the stall. Not to be forgotten, Betsy moored pitifully.

Rhiannon stood up, brushing hay from her legs. Matthew reminded her of Betsy during a thunderstorm, all freaked out and scared and needing comfort. "I don't think

you're a murderer. I feel so sorry for you. I can only imagine how you feel. But running away isn't the answer. You've got to be surrounded by people who love you right now."

"Watch out," he sneered. "It might kill you."

She wiped her eyes, trying to be strong enough so that Matthew could lean on her. "I brought your coat. Are you cold?"

He raked his hand through his wild blond hair. "I should have died in the fire with them. What could they have done that would have made a six-year-old so mad? I killed them because I didn't get to watch television? Why, Rhee? Why did I do it?"

She heard the desperation in his voice and understood it so well. She licked her dry lips and shook her head. "Dr. Richards said that sometimes our powers grow faster than we can learn to control them. I almost dropped a disco ball on Janet without realizing what I was doing. I burned your wrist. Don't forget the cop car exploding. I didn't mean to do those things..."

"You didn't kill anybody."

Rhiannon had the hardest time picturing Matthew as a vengeful child. "It was an accident."

She walked toward her pets, hoping that Matthew would follow. He did.

Patting Betsy's ears kept her hands warm, and the unconditional love of her cow healed a lot of the hurt that she kept inside. She could only hope that it would work for Matthew too. "Sometimes, when I'm feeling stressed out, I like to brush them. Wanna do Moonstone?"

Matthew paused and she could see he was torn between kicking more stuff, or petting the horse. "I don't know how."

Rhiannon exhaled. "I can show you. Moonstone especially loves her mane being brushed."

She showed him the basics, mentally telling Moonstone to buck up and be nice if Matthew accidentally pulled her hair, since he needed to do this. He was hurting. The horse tossed her gorgeous head and winked one inky black eye.

"I think she likes you."

He brushed carefully.

“She’s not made of porcelain.” Rhee giggled.

“I don’t want to hurt her. I don’t want to hurt anybody. But I do.”

Finally brave enough, Rhiannon offered him a hug. She’d been afraid to touch him before, afraid of receiving any more of his pain.

“Thanks, Rhiannon.”

They pulled back from the hug, their arms still around each other’s waists and their eyes met. Rhiannon sucked in a breath, noticing the depth of Matthew’s blue gaze, the enlarged black pupils, his parted lips. If she met him halfway, would he return her kiss?

He immediately dropped his arms and gulped. “Not a good idea, Rhiannon. I mean, I...”

Embarrassed, she grabbed Betsy’s brush and entered the cow stall. “You’re right. Not a good idea.”

Then why did she find the thought of kissing Matthew so appealing?

They worked for hours, the sound of Matthew’s dad’s flute filling the barn with love and loss.

Chapter Seventeen

“Happy birthday to you! Happy birthday to you! Happy birthday, dear Rhiannon, happy birthday to you!”

Rhiannon clasped her hands over her heart in pure drama queen fashion and bowed from the waist, grinning at all her loser friends around the cafeteria table. “Thank you, thank you...”

Melody handed her a chocolate cupcake. “You get your presents at the bowling alley, but I figured your sweet tooth shouldn’t have to wait.”

“Yum. You guys are awesome. Matthew’s coming this afternoon, so at least that makes seven.” Rhiannon had told Matthew that the only thing she wanted for her birthday was for him not to do anything stupid. As in run away. He’d been so quiet over the past two days that she’d been scared he might do it anyway, the only thing he wanted to do was listen to his dad’s music and play Game Boy. He was afraid to go to sleep.

“Matthew is so cute!” Melody laughed. “I want him on my team, for sure.”

Meat and Broomstick made kissy noises. “No makin’ out in the bowling alley,” Meat said.

Melody tossed her straight, deep brown hair over her shoulder. “You don’t have to worry about it.”

Corey flexed his fingers. “Can’t wait to show you my back spin. Better watch out.”

Rhiannon arched one brow and plopped her hip against the table. “I’ll have you know that I was the strike queen at the institute.”

“Where?” Corey asked.

She felt the blush creep up her neck. “The bowling alley, uh, it was named The Institute.”

Bonnie said, “Weird. But whatever, I’ve been on a league since I was ten. You losers don’t have a chance.”

Melody warned, “I can bowl a strike with my eyes closed.”

Broomstick joked, “I don’t want to be anywhere near her if she’s closing her eyes.”

Of course Janet and Felicity had to ruin the moment. “Is somebody having a birthday? Bowling parties are so second grade.” Janet snickered.

Felicity glared at them all from beneath her bangs. “Baby party. Totally.”

Rhiannon rolled her eyes. “Since you weren’t invited, it shouldn’t bother you.”

Janet laughed. “Nobody’s gonna show up at your lame party. My mom made sure of that.”

Crossing her arms, Rhiannon grinned past the sting of Janet’s barb. “Yeah, I’ll remember to send her a thank you note for keeping out the riff-raff. Thanks to her lies, the only people at my party will be my real friends.”

“Ain’t that sweet?” Janet fluffed her blond waves, her green eyes sparkling with malice. “We have a present for you, don’t we, Felicity?”

“Definitely. We’ll make sure you get it at the bowling alley.”

Her stomach hip-hopped. “Don’t bother,” Rhiannon said.

“Oh, it won’t be a bother. In fact, my mom’s even offered to drive us over. We decided to get some kids together, bowl a few games, maybe eat some pizza. We’ll see ya there.”

Felicity and Janet gave each other high fives and walked off, still laughing.

“Oh, no,” Bonnie groaned. “Now what are they planning?”

“Maybe you should cancel the party. We can bowl another day,” Broomstick said, his Adam’s apple bobbing nervously.

“Wuss,” Rhiannon chided. “She doesn’t scare me.” *Liar, liar...*

Bonnie took the cellophane off of the chocolate cupcake and handed it to Rhiannon. “You better eat that. I was so tempted to squish it in Janet’s face—if she comes back, I don’t think I could stop myself.”

Rhiannon looked over Bonnie's head at Melody. "Remember when she used to be the nicest one of us? We've ruined her."

Corey smiled from ear to ear. "Nope. I think she's perfect."

Looking around the gym, Rhee was amazed at how many of the kids still wouldn't look her in the eye. She could pretty much tell which ones were guilty of crappy Internet gossip just by the way they squirmed.

After hearing about Matthew's past, that stuff just didn't seem so important.

She was surprised when Caleb and Jared passed by, which they had to have done on purpose, since the loser table was in the back, and out of the way of the popular crowd.

"Happy birthday, Rhiannon. Hi, guys," Caleb said to the rest of the group.

"Thanks, Caleb. What's up?" Rhee forced herself to act nonchalant, and no way did she let her gaze land on Jared.

She'd deliberately picked her trendiest Seven jeans, loaded with embroidered peace symbols and hearts, and a long sleeved tunic. She proudly wore her amulet, in addition to some wooden chunky bracelets and light silver hoops. She looked good, and best of all, she was being true to herself. She'd kept her wavy, waist-length auburn-streaked hair down, enjoying the feel of it against her back. She'd dressed for confidence.

She knew she'd need it.

"Nothing much. You still headin' over to the bowling alley after school?"

Rhiannon worked to keep her smile in place. Was she being played?

"Uh-huh. Course, thanks to some rumors that have been going around, the party's gotten a little smaller. But you know what? I've never had a birthday party like this before, so I'm just going to enjoy it."

Caleb grinned. "You're cool, Rhiannon. Very. Felicity says we're supposed to go over too." He leaned closer. "I'll try to make sure nothing gets out of control, okay?"

Rhiannon chewed her lower lip. "Should I be worried?"

He shook his head. "No. They just want to make you uncomfortable. Believe it or not, Felicity was kinda ticked when she didn't get an invitation in the first place."

Jared finally spoke. "Yeah, Janet too."

“But they hate my guts.”

Melody jumped in. “That’s not the point. In popularity-speak, the most popular kids get invited to *every* party. They don’t get excluded. Right?”

Caleb and Jared both nodded. “Right.”

“Great.” Rhiannon brushed her hair away from her face. “I appreciate the warning, Caleb. Nice to see you have the guts to deliver it.”

Caleb’s eyebrows hiked upwards and he glanced back at Jared. Jared glared at Rhiannon, but she just shrugged and acted totally unaffected.

“I’m not a coward,” Jared said quietly.

“What do you call it?” Rhiannon challenged. Then she held up one hand. “You know what, I’m sorry. That was out of line. I don’t get why this whole popularity thing is so important, and I don’t care. But you guys should get out of here before you find yourselves lumped in with the losers.” She turned her back on them, knowing she was being rude.

But she could feel the old itch of anger building from her toes, and she so didn’t want to go there.

They called out “Bye” and “See ya” while Rhiannon got herself under control. She hoped.

Melody was wearing an impressed expression. “Wow. Jared is furious.”

“So?” Rhiannon inhaled once, twice.

“After the way he dumped you, you can be as horrible as you want,” Bonnie said in her defense. “I bet he’s sorry he let his family win that battle.”

Corey shook his head. “You were ruthless. Anybody can tell the guy still has the hots for you.”

“You’re such a romantic, Cor.” Rhiannon started gathering her garbage. “I’m so ready for break.”

“I’m jealous you get to go and visit Tanya. She was really cool,” Melody said.

“I’ll send you a postcard.” Rhiannon knew that if she didn’t start controlling her powers, the only place that her friends would be able to visit her at would be the loony

bin. She wished that she could turn off her emotions when it came to Jared, but he'd hurt her. She still hurt. And his wishy-washy, one-minute-he-cares-and-the-next-he-doesn't routine was enough to make her *really* crazy.

They had to pass Janet and Felicity as they walked out to the hall. Janet waved her fingers. "See ya later!" while Felicity kept her lips tightly pressed together, but she was thinking *hate you hate you hate you* loud and clear.

"I want to die," Rhiannon said as she saw her parents join the car line in front of the school in the Celestial Beginnings van, which was embarrassing enough. But the balloons and streamers they'd tied all over it was really over the top.

"I think it's great!" Corey said, slapping his hands together for warmth.

"Forgot your gloves again?" Bonnie asked as she clucked her tongue.

"You're sure Meat and Broomstick have a ride?" Rhiannon asked again.

Melody bobbed her head. "Yup. I checked with them both just a second ago."

Filled with foreboding, Rhiannon said, "They're totally not coming."

Bonnie blew out a puff of air when she exhaled. "Yes, they are. Stop being paranoid."

"Why should I be paranoid? Let's count the reasons, Bon. I feel like I'm walking into a trap. This is gonna end up so Stephen King, I can feel it."

Melody giggled. "That would be so cool. But I don't think he wrote a story that took place in a bowling alley."

Corey wagged his brows. "Give the man time—he's a genius."

The van pulled up to the curb, and her mom rolled down the passenger side window. "Hi honey." She waved at everyone else and smiled. "Hello!"

Matthew opened the side door and said, "Pile on in, one-way ride to a great time."

Rhiannon walked over to her mom's window and whispered, "What? I hate your fake smile. Do you know how fake it is?"

"Nothing," her mom whispered back, looking furtively over her shoulder.

“You can’t lie for beans, Mom.”

“Fine. We just got a call from the bowling alley that they’ve had to move our party from the party room. Seems someone called the manager and told him that we weren’t going to have the thirty people we’d promised.”

“Mrs. Roberts?”

“Don’t even get me started. So the manager said that he’d try and put a few table together for us, or we could do this next year.”

“Next year? He really said that?” This was insane.

“Well, then he proceeded to tell me that he didn’t ‘hold with no witchy stuff in his establishment’, to which I handed the phone to your father.”

Rhee looked around her mom to her dad, who shrugged. “Happy birthday, baby.”

A really uneasy feeling was starting at the back of her neck. “Maybe we should cancel. I mean, it’s just us, and we can have fun at home.”

Matthew leaned forward so that his head was in between Miles and Starla. “If you chicken out I swear I will lose all respect I have for you. Which is considerable.”

Rhee reached across her mom to push Matthew in the forehead. “Moron. I never wanted a brother, Mom.”

“Don’t hit, Rhiannon. It isn’t nice. Sit back, Matthew. We need to let her decide what she wants to do. That Gina Roberts woman has absolutely gotten on my last nerve.”

Rhee exhaled, examining her options.

Matthew made chicken noises.

She wasn’t a quitter.

Really pathetic? She’d have a chance to see Jared, if he actually showed up.

“Fine. But I get the newest shoes.”

She jumped in next to Matthew and Melody, closed her eyes and said a quick prayer to the Goddess that nothing would go too wrong.

When they pulled into the bowling alley parking lot, Rhiannon saw that her prayer had *so* not been answered.

The good citizens of Crystal Lake, Rhiannon looked closely, mostly the Roberts family supporters, were picketing the front of the bowling alley.

“I don’t believe this,” her dad said in shock.

Her mom’s mouth was hanging open in surprise, but that look of incredible annoyance was fast taking over.

“What’s going on?” Melody asked from the other side of Matthew. “I can’t see!”

“We can’t bring the children through a picket line,” her mom said furiously.

“What do the signs say?” Bonnie raised her voice so that she could be heard from the very back.

Rhiannon’s heart thumped in her chest, a slow, hard beat. “No witches in Crystal Lake,” she read.

“That’s not too bad,” Matthew said.

She read the next one and burst out laughing. “Burn the bitch on the broomstick.”

“It doesn’t say that!” Starla exclaimed.

“It does, Mom. The guy in the railroad style coveralls. See him?”

“Oh.”

Miles flipped out his cell phone and dialed a number he now knew by heart. “Hello, may I speak to Officer Julianne? Hi. Yes, this is Miles Godfrey. We’d like help crossing a picket line in front of the bowling alley. Of course we’ll wait.”

Chapter Eighteen

“My mom’s coming down,” Melody said as she passed the cell phone to Bonnie.

Rhiannon looked around the inside of the van and started laughing. “What a birthday surprise, huh guys? Are you sure you don’t want to go home?”

Corey rolled his eyes. “No way! I’ve always wanted to crash a picket line. I can’t believe my mom is coming down here too. Who knew that the people in Crystal Lake would ever get so worked up over a New Age store?”

Mrs. Edwards said calmly, which was incredible, since she was squished in the back of the van with Bonnie and Corey, “Crystal Lake is a quaint little town. Perhaps they feel threatened by something different.”

Starla sniffed. “Riding on broomsticks. Please, that is simply archaic.”

“We have to be careful. Officer Julianne should be here any time.” Miles, as usual, was the voice of reason.

Bonnie clicked end and handed the phone to Starla. “My mom is on her way. She’s furious.”

They passed the time in the van mocking the picket signs and the shivering people holding them. “There’s twenty,” Rhiannon counted.

“This is so silly,” Bonnie complained for the tenth time. “Oh good, here’s my mom.”

“I’m not sure I wanna leave the safety of the van,” Rhiannon half-joked.

Matthew made more chicken noises, so Rhee opened the side door and got out. The afternoon weather had a bite to it and she wrapped her scarf around her neck. Bonnie, Corey, Matthew and Melody all tumbled out. Matthew held out a hand to help Mrs. Edwards, which Rhiannon thought was especially nice, since he wasn’t speaking to her. He was still too mad that she’d never told him the truth. He refused to listen that he wasn’t ready for the truth.

Her mom and dad got out and greeted Bonnie's mom.

"Darlene! I'm so sorry about all of this," her mom said.

"You're sorry? I'm positively mortified that the town I grew up in could treat people like this. Please don't judge everybody by this paltry showing of cowards." Darlene had deliberately raised her voice, waving her hand in the picketer's direction.

They all looked up like a pack of deranged lions, then herded together in a tight knot.

"They're forming a game plan," Matthew said.

Rhee brushed a tendril of hair off her face. "You know, this is what really makes me mad. I mean, we all know that Gina Roberts is the one behind this, but is she out here freezing her butt off? No. She has the little people do it for her."

"Rhiannon!" Her dad raised one black eyebrow.

"Sorry." Only she wasn't. Not even a little bit.

Darlene crossed her arms over her ample chest. The raspberry-colored down coat she wore wasn't slimming, but it was...bright. "Your daughter has a valid point. You never see Gina getting her hands dirty. It was that way when we were girls too."

Bonnie went over to her mom. "Thanks for coming. We're just waiting for Officer Julianne, and then we can go inside."

Just then a car honked, and they all turned to see who it was. It was Corey's mom, a small woman with fine features who looked like she'd be afraid of her own shadow. She got out of her car, waving to everyone. "Hi! Oh, I think there's snow comin' our way."

Rhiannon watched her mom hold out her hand. "Hello Sue. Nice to see you again."

Sue glanced toward the picketers. "This is a bit of a mess, isn't it? Not a very good birthday present. Happy birthday, Rhiannon. Corey, the gift is in the back of the car, why don't you get it?"

"Thank you," Rhiannon said.

Suddenly there was a loud series of beeps and honks and two cars full of kids pulled into the bowling alley parking lot. Janet and Felicity got out of the back of one of them, waving wildly over at their group. "Hi, all!" Janet called.

"Looks like her arm's just fine," Matthew drawled.

“Ya think?” Melody snapped.

The laughing teens walked right past the picketers, even stopping to talk to them before heading inside.

“I really hate Janet.” Rhiannon couldn’t even remember what the color blue looked like she was so mad.

Matthew slipped his hand in hers. “Chill out, you don’t want to cause a scene.”

She glanced at him, but he was acting all casual. Had he been able to tell she was about to lose it? “Thanks,” she whispered. The feel of his hand in hers was comforting, and...nice. *Just* nice. No crazy crushiness.

Melody’s mom arrived next, pulling into the parking lot in an old truck that choked and coughed when she turned it off. She got out of the car and Rhiannon was surprised at how beautiful Melody’s mom was.

She and Melody could pass as sisters.

“Hello, I’m Starla and this is Miles. We’re so pleased to finally meet you, even if the circumstances aren’t the best.”

“Me too. I’m Skye. Actually—” she laughed and it sounded like music, “—I’m glad I didn’t have to work tonight so that I could be here. Going toe to toe with Gina Roberts isn’t easy, so I’m happy to lend my support.”

“Hi Skye,” Darlene and Sue both said just as Officer Julianne pulled up.

She got out of her car, pulling right up next to the picketers. “Afternoon folks, what ya’ll up to?”

Rhiannon and her friends and family crept a little closer. There seemed to be a lot of mumbling and grouching from the picketers, but nobody was willing to take charge. Having the law show up had calmed them down.

Officer Julianne suggested that they all go home. When there was some more grumbling, she offered to give them a ride to the jail station, where they could do some research on harassment.

They all left, throwing darks looks, but not their signs, as they did.

“I’m sorry about this,” the policewoman said, walking toward Rhiannon and her group with a shrug. “There are some good people here in Crystal Lake...”

Rhiannon quickly told the officer what had happened that day at school, which her mom was just hearing for the first time.

“Isn’t that a threat?” her mom asked with concern.

Shrugging, Rhee answered, “She never specifically threatened me with anything more than a birthday present. I’m hoping this was it, so now I can enjoy my party.”

Officer Julianne sighed. “I was never fond of high school games like this. I wasn’t any good at ’em. C’mon, I’ll walk inside with you.”

Rhiannon was pretty sure that the only reason the manager took their money and gave them two lanes—even though they’d reserved four—was because of the policewoman at their side.

He looked really embarrassed, too, when he showed them their party area. Two card tables had been put together with a thin pink plastic table cover and eight Barbie party hats. He shrugged. “Was all we had.”

Rhiannon narrowed her eyes and thought, “*Liar.*”

He jumped as if he’d been stung by a bee. “I’ll go get some napkins.”

Trying for funny, Rhiannon said, “Well, Mom, way to go all out.”

Starla burst into tears. “This isn’t what I ordered!”

“I know that, Mom—geez, don’t cry. That’s just what we need is for Mrs. Roberts to see you all upset. I was kidding.”

“But I had silver cups and stars and moons and ...”

“Oh yeah? Hey, those look really great.” Matthew said.

“Where are they?” Rhiannon turned around to where Matthew was pointing. “Figures. Janet is wearing my tiara.”

Officer Julianne wrote everything down, but they decided not to press charges for the silver cups and spoons. Rhiannon thought the officer was really cool, especially when Mrs. Roberts summoned her over and spoke, emphatically, for ten minutes.

She was polite, then in turn gave Mrs. Roberts a definition of the words slandering and stealing, pointedly looking at the tiara in Janet's hair.

They heard the end of the conversation. Mrs. Roberts said coldly, "I'll have you know I'm very good friends with Bud Johnson, your boss."

Officer Julianne just flipped her thick braid and grinned, resting her hand on the holster of her gun. "Isn't that a coincidence? My daddy and Bud go huntin' every weekend. And wasn't your maiden name, let's see, Bender? Benjamin? Barton? Yeah, Barton, right?"

Mrs. Roberts was turning a horrid shade of green and her lips were pressed tight. Rhiannon could easily imagine steam coming out the woman's ears.

"Old Bud, he's told me some stories."

Mrs. Roberts gasped, and she brought her hand over her heart.

"I'll be seein' ya, ma'am." And out the door she went.

"I thought she said wasn't any good at high school games?" Matthew patted his hand over his heart. "She just slam-dunked Mrs. Roberts. No contest! Was her dad the town drunk or something?"

Rhiannon lifted one shoulder, then turned to check the bowling score. "I don't know. Who's winning?"

Melody said in awe, "Officer Julianne didn't even break a sweat. I want to be just like her."

"She's cool," Bonnie agreed. "Gives me hope that someday I might progress beyond the loser title."

Bonnie's mom sucked in a shocked breath. "Bonnie! You're not a loser. I hate it when you say that."

Skye laughed. “I was a real loser in high school. Full-blooded Indian twenty years ago... Nobody would talk to me, unless it was a slam about the reservation. You guys have a much better grip on the situation.”

Rhiannon grinned at Skye in disbelief. “But you’re so beautiful!”

Melody’s mom shook her finger, “No, Rhiannon. I was *different*. That’s all anybody ever took the time to see.”

Totally getting that, Rhee bobbed her head in agreement. “My turn?” she asked Matthew.

He shook his head. “Not yet.”

Sue said quietly, “I had my book. I buried my nose in it, so that nobody would see I was lonely.” Rhiannon figured that Corey must take after his dad, since his mom was so timid.

“I ate.” Darlene patted her rounded stomach. “And never lost the habit.”

“Now you’re up, Rhee.” Matthew tapped her shoulder.

“Are you listening to the parents’ conversation? I forget sometimes that they used to be our age.”

“You’re supposed to be thinking frivolous birthday-girl thoughts, not trying to solve the puzzle of the human psyche.”

“Am I winning?”

“Corey’s got you by two. He has a wicked back spin.”

Rhee paused and adjusted her grip on the bowling ball. “Yeah, he mentioned that. I, uh, haven’t seen Caleb.” *Or Jared.*

Mathew snickered. “I know who you’re really looking for. You should be glad he isn’t here. It shows he isn’t a part of what his family is doing.”

Rhee squinted one eye, concentrating on the pins. One—two—three steps, release. “Whew!” She watched the ball roll perfectly straight down the alley.

“Did you cheat?” Matthew whispered in her ear.

Rhee whirled around. “What? I don’t cheat.”

He gave her a half-smile. “I was just checking. I mean, who would know?”

“I would, moron.” She peeked over her shoulder and then looked back. “A strike. Ha.”

“Hey, Rhiannon, what if you messed with Janet’s game, just a little. Just as payback for the picketers.”

“My mom would kill me.” But oh, the idea totally appealed to her sense of fair play.

Janet and her friends were all over on the other side of the alley, eating off of her silver plates, using her cups and using her silver tablecloths. How fair was that?

Not.

“I can’t,” she said again, in a way that suggested one more nudge would change her mind.

Matthew went for the kill—he knew her that well. “She’s wearing your tiara.”

“Okay, but I can’t get caught. That crowd is full of witch haters, I don’t need to get busted using supernatural powers.”

“Rhiannon and I need to talk—we’ll be right back,” Matthew told everybody at the tacky little tables. Rhee saw her mom, dad and Mrs. Edwards exchange a look, but the other moms were oblivious.

“Mom is so gonna know it was me. Whatever happens.” She looked down at her bowling shoes. “These things are so ugly. Why can’t they make bowling shoes look less like clown shoes? Is there a rule that says that they have to be ugly?”

Matthew pulled her faster, taking her elbow. His steps were huge as he led the way to the opposite side of the bowling alley, where the lockers and the bathrooms were. Mrs. Roberts gave them a nasty look, but Rhee ignored it, hissing at Matthew’s back, “Busted, you know that?”

“Don’t you have to go to the bathroom? Do your thing from there.”

Rhiannon frowned. “My thing?”

“Start small,” Matthew suggested. “Make her trip when she throws the ball. Have her shoe come apart, or the ball fly backward.”

“I can’t let her get hurt.”

“She owes you! This is payback.”

Just then Felicity walked out of the girls bathroom.

“Hey,” she smiled, eyeing Matthew. *How does such a freak end up with all the hot guys? I don’t get it.*

Rhee tensed. “Hmm. Great surprise, picketing against witches. Ha ha.”

Just wait. Felicity smiled wider. “Glad you liked it. You’re blocking the exit, can you move?” *Hate her hate her.*

Rhiannon didn’t get why she was the object of Felicity’s hate, and they weren’t on good enough terms so that she felt comfortable asking.

Why had she thought, *just wait?*

“I can’t do it,” she told Matthew. “I mean it. I’ll feel better, I know it, but I just can’t.”

Matthew rolled his eyes. “You think you can drop a disco ball on the chick, but you can’t even untie her shoe. I don’t think you were responsible for that stuff, I really don’t.”

Her cheeks grew warm and she felt kinda good about that. “Thanks, Matthew.”

He sighed, looking dejected. “If I had powers, I would make her slide all the way down the alley, with her fingers stuck in the bowling ball.”

“Nice.” Rhee giggled as they rejoined the others. Despite Janet, she was having a terrific time.

Suddenly Janet and all her friends started clapping and singing happy birthday.

Rhiannon wasn’t feeling any joy coming her way as they came, in a large group, her direction. Her friends surrounded her, with the parents at the outer edge.

They clapped, they sang and then Janet stopped, beckoning Rhiannon forward. Rhiannon’s silver tiara was in Janet’s hand.

“Happy birthday,” she said, holding the tiara out.

Uneasy, Rhiannon broke free of her protective circle, wanting her tiara and wondering what in the heck Janet was up to.

Mutt and Jeff popped out from behind, a big whipped-cream pie in their hands.

Felicity snapped a gleaming pair of scissors, reaching to the side of the wall where a rope dangled.

Rhiannon's fingers clasped her tiara as she slowly looked up toward the ceiling.

"Pay back for the disco ball," Janet said, grabbing the tiara back as Mutt and Jeff creamed Rhee in the face with the pie.

Rhiannon spluttered, wiping her eyes. "Argh!" she managed to say.

Then she heard the snap of scissors as Felicity cut the rope that was connected to the hidden bucket of green slime.

Chapter Nineteen

“I’m not going to school.”

“Honey, there’s only two days left before the break.” Starla patted her arm and Rhee jerked it away. Her life had gone from bad to worse in a matter of hours.

“No. I am green. *Green!*” Rhiannon glared at the mirror. “I hate Janet! I hate her! Why is she such a bi—”

The mirror rattled and Starla warned, “Careful. You don’t need seven years of bad luck on top of everything else, Rhee.”

Blue. Blue, blue, blue. Where was the freaking calm she was supposed to be feeling? All she saw was green—she stepped away from the mirror before she broke it.

“I have green skin, green teeth and instead of auburn highlights in my red hair, they’re green. I don’t like green. I even have green fingernails.”

Starla clucked her teeth. “Honey, it’s practically faded.”

Rhee whirled and narrowed her eyes, daring her mom to tell the truth.

“To a lighter...green.”

“Why did we have to move here? Do you realize that my picture is all over school and the Internet? Me with whipped cream and me covered in slime. I can’t face any of those people again.”

“Yes, you can. They’ll forget.”

“Really? Never!” Rhiannon chewed her bottom lip, her mind thinking of several ways to pay Janet back. “I’ve been thinking about this all wrong,” she told her mom.

“Thinking about what?”

“Payback. No way is she gonna get away with doing this.”

“Rhiannon, what goes around comes around. Remember the times three rule.”

“That’s not working out for me, Mom. I’m resorting to dirty fighting.”

“Remember what happened with Maddie Johnson?”

“The girl I thought was my friend and she wasn’t? Yes, I know. And I feel bad, I do. But Janet really does have it coming.”

Her mom stood up, her bracelets clanging. “I can see that you’re thinking of something, and I won’t like it. Don’t do it.”

Rhiannon held out her hands, “See these? They’re green. They’re green, and it’s Janet’s fault. I could secretly put anise seed in her food, she’d have the runs for days. Or I could sabotage her locker, super-gluing her combination shut, or even better, making her super glue her hands to the lock of her locker, so she’d be stuck.”

Her mom sighed. “I’m going to go check on Matthew. He’s sleeping again. Whatever is going on with him, it sure is making him tired. At least he hasn’t had any more nose bleeds. Has he talked to you about it?”

“Nope.” Her mom wasn’t going to condone her payback plan. Got it. “He said he’s not ready. But you know, I keep remembering that there was someone else there, in the shadows of his nightmare. I think it could be important.” And while Starla thought Matthew spent a lot of time sleeping, Rhee knew for a fact that he was using an alarm to wake himself up after half an hour at a time. He wasn’t getting enough rest.

Her mom tilted her head. “It was a nightmare. I bet you were feeling Matthew’s fear.”

Rhiannon rubbed her arms against a sudden chill. “I don’t know, Mom. I wonder...what if—”

“Blessed be, Rhiannon, stop coming up with all of these maniacal plans! You’re giving me a headache.”

“I’m still not going to school tomorrow. If Mrs. Edwards wants, we could leave for Las Vegas tonight.”

The medium answered from the doorway. “I’m not ready. I won’t be ready until Saturday morning, like we planned.”

Rhiannon sighed. “Fine. I’m going to take another shower.”

“But it’s your fifth one tonight!” her mom protested.

She ran down the stairs, but stopped when she heard moaning coming from Matthew's room. Instead of going into the bathroom, she turned left instead.

"Matthew?" She knocked. No answer. She tried again, "Matthew?" She gripped the handle and it was hot to the touch. "Matthew!"

Using her mind, she opened the door wide, then screamed. Matthew's bed was surrounded by flames, while he was sleeping in the center of it.

Everybody came running—her mom and dad each had a fire extinguisher, which they put to immediate use. Rhiannon tried to levitate Matthew out of the room, but he was too heavy.

"Mrs. Edwards, I need your help." They held hands and focused on lifting Matthew out of the smoke-filled room, laying him flat in the hallway.

He didn't stir.

"That was a strange fire," Mrs. Edwards said as she straightened Matthew's legs.

Rhiannon bit her lip and brushed Matthew's bangs off his forehead. "He's cool to the touch. The flames were bluish, and they didn't smoke, not until they were hit with the fire extinguisher. And they didn't smell, did you notice that?"

"I need to call Dr. Richards. Matthew can't stay here." The medium's eyes filled with tears. "I'm worried for him."

Matthew's eyes popped open, and they fixed on Mrs. Edwards. Matthew said, in a voice that was too high to be his, "Lynn. Protect my son."

Mrs. Edwards gasped. "Maggie? Luv, is that you?"

"He's in terrible danger. You must re-evaluate what you know—you're wrong, so wrong." Then Matthew's eyes closed, and his mother's spirit was gone.

The air turned cool, and at first Rhiannon thought that her parents had opened the window in the bedroom, but then Suzanne said in her ear, "I think it is good for Matthew to be gone. He doesn't belong here. He's taking my place."

Mrs. Edwards looked up, her expression concerned. "Your place, Suzanne?"

“Mine! I am going to be real. Rhiannon is going to make me solid, and I will be loved. I will have a mother and a father and a sister.” Suzanne swirled and lifted Mrs. Edwards’s glasses from her face. “What do you think of that?”

Mrs. Edwards quickly snatched her glasses back. “It is impossible for you to be real.”

“Nooo! You are lying. I saw Matthew’s mother inside his body. I remember Adam in Tanya’s body, before you captured him. I will be solid!”

The spirit raced like an out of control wind, up and down the hallway.

Mrs. Edwards grabbed Rhiannon by the hand and tugged. “You must control her, now. She will become as dangerous as Adam—is that what you want?”

Rhiannon squirmed under the condemning gaze of her mentor. “I...can’t always. I just... She’s so lonely, she breaks my heart.” Rhee looked down.

“Lonely.” Mrs. Edwards inhaled. “We will have to leave tomorrow, all three of us. You need to be separated from Suzanne, and I’ve got to find out what is wrong with Matthew. I really thought that once he knew his history, the nightmares would go away. Instead, he’s more a prisoner of them than ever. Oh, Rhiannon.”

Sighing, Rhiannon admitted, “I know. I’m in trouble.”

Suzanne screeched. “Don’t take Rhiannon away!”

Thor came running down the stairs, his tail straight in the air. He leaped from the third stair, sailing through the air with his claws out, his ears laid back and hissing for all his little body was worth.

He was heading right for her and Matthew, otherwise it would be funny, she thought as she snagged the cat from the air.

“Ouch!” His claws had shredded her thumb, and she stuck the bleeding digit in her mouth. “Leave Suzanne alone, Thor.”

Mrs. Edwards got to her feet. “That cat is very smart. Smarter than I was, I think.”

They pulled into a reserved parking spot in front of the Institute of Parapsychology. “I’m not happy,” Matthew said for the tenth time in five minutes.

“We get that. You think I’m the Queen of Thrilled? I’m green. You lose, whiner boy.”

“I was gonna meet Mike.”

“You’re still gonna meet Mike, just in two weeks, instead of five days. Don’t be a baby. You’re getting everything you want. You get to go to school, and your precious Mike might even be your teacher. And you get to live with me. Your life should be whole.”

They got out of the car, each carrying their own small suitcases, and walked toward the entrance of the glass and black building.

Mrs. Edwards smiled. “It is so nice, my luvs, to hear you getting along so well. Get the door, Matthew, would you, dear?”

Rhiannon shared a smile with the medium. Mrs. Edwards had basically put Suzanne on probation. If the spirit didn’t behave, she’d be banished. Suzanne had totally trashed Rhee’s bedroom, but Mrs. Edwards told her to clean it up. Then they left.

Of course, Rhiannon was also on probation, having confessed to dabbling in some magick spells, looking for one that might make Suzanne solid.

Now Rhee was going to spend her winter break researching the dark arts—and all the reasons why they were called dark. One essay on why the dead should stay dead, one essay on why a medium should not be allowed a spirit guide until they could control it and so on. Mrs. Edwards had tons of opinions on the danger of blending black magick with supernatural power.

Rhiannon was certain to hear them all.

“It doesn’t matter if your intentions were good,” Mrs. Edwards had admonished. “The deed itself is wrong. Did you hear what Suzanne remembered? What if she tried to take over your body? Possess you? Did you even think of that, dearie?”

Feeling sick at just remembering that conversation, Rhiannon followed Mrs. Edwards inside the Institute of Parapsychology.

She inhaled, absorbing the onslaught of memories in the glass and steel construction, the mirrored elevator doors, and especially the receptionist behind the large black desk. “Nancy!”

It didn’t matter that the elderly woman with the chocolate-colored skin was blind—she was a powerful psychic and knew people by scent and energy.

“Rhiannon? Oh, dear...I just knew that there was a reason I brought an extra Twinkie today. Here it is. But is that Matthew too?” She chuckled as she reached into her drawer. “Come here, children, and I’ll tell you a secret. I bought a whole box.”

Rhiannon laughingly took one of the sweet white sponge cakes filled with cream inside. “I’ve missed you, Nancy.”

“We’ve missed you around this place, too, child. Not near as many mishaps to keep us on our toes.”

“Are you saying that I was the troublemaker?” Rhiannon demanded with a giggle.

“If the shoe fits, child, if the shoe fits... Now go on, I got to get some work done, come see me again. Ah, Mrs. Edwards, your messages are in your box. One is urgent, I believe. Yes, very important.”

“Thank you,” the medium said, scooping up the pink messages that Nancy printed out from the computer.

“Bottom one,” Nancy said with a nod.

Mrs. Edwards pulled the bottom message. “What is so important about this? It’s just from, oh dear. Yes.”

“Are you okay?” Rhee asked.

“Fine.” Her voice was dazed. “I’m a grandma, imagine that.”

“Congratulations!”

They walked to the elevators, pausing in front of the mirrors. “I still look like a leprechaun,” Rhiannon complained.

“Too tall to be a leprechaun,” Matthew teased. “You’ll have to be a green bean.”

“I used to like you.”

“I know.” He smiled and for a minute Rhiannon saw beyond the shadows under his eyes.

“Let’s go surprise Tanya first.”

Mrs. Edwards checked her watch as the elevator dinged on the third floor. “She won’t be here for another hour. Why don’t you go play ping-pong or something? I’ll be in my office, on the phone. How wonderful!” She was so focused on her messages that she didn’t even look up or say goodbye.

“I didn’t even know she had kids.”

“Yeah, her son lives in Ireland.” Rhiannon jumped up and down. “I can’t believe how much I missed this place!”

“My room, drop off the luggage, then I’ll kick your boot-ay in ping-pong.”

“You’re still having that delusion?”

Matthew pushed her. “Ha ha.”

“I’m sorry about you not meeting Mike,” she said.

He winced and rubbed his forehead. “Not Mike.”

Rhiannon narrowed her eyes. “What?”

Matthew’s expression cleared. “What?”

“Never mind, you’re obviously losin’ it. I’ll make room for you in the loony bin. Can you believe how mad Mrs. Edwards got about Suzanne?”

“I can’t believe that you thought you could get away with it. Suzanne is getting really powerful. But then, you are very powerful, so if she feeds off your energy...”

“Very vampirish, ew.”

They walked down the hall, their footsteps echoing around them.

“Where is everybody?”

“Dr. Richards is following the college schedule for his students, so most of them are on break.”

“Do you think you can forgive them? I mean, Mrs. Edwards and Doc both love you.”

Matthew wiped his forearm over his forehead. “Geez, you just can’t let this go, can you? I want my own room, I want my dad’s flute. I want peace, which I am not getting from you.”

“Sorry,” Rhiannon muttered.

He pulled his key from his front pocket and opened his bedroom door. “What the hell?”

“What? What is it?”

“Someone’s totally ransacked my room!”

Chapter Twenty

Rhiannon peeked over Matthew's shoulder. "How can you tell? Your room is always a mess." In fact, it looked just the same to her as it always did, just...sloppier. Matthew was brilliant, but nobody could ever accuse him of being clean freak.

"Ha ha. Look at the posters on the walls."

"They've always been crooked, Matthew."

He gave her a *whatever* look. "The corners are ripped. And the comforter on my bed is on the wrong way." He dropped to his knees, lifted the blanket and peered underneath. "See?" He pulled out a box. "The tape's been cut."

Feeling a little strange, Rhiannon sank to her knees and eyed the plastic storage box that Matthew had obviously sealed with gray duct tape. "Hmm. Whatchya got in there?"

He blushed, which was really cute. But since that time in the barn when they'd almost kissed, which would have been a major disaster, she no longer felt anything toward Matthew except friendship.

"Journals, stuff like that."

"You're blushing. You got girlie mags in there?"

"Rhiannon!"

"Okay, okay... Why would someone want your journals?"

Matthew pulled out a four by six picture that was in a wooden frame. "Wanna see my parents? This is the only picture I have."

"Duh," Rhiannon said as she accepted the frame. "Why don't you keep it out?"

He shrugged and she studied the photo.

"Your mom is gorgeous. Look at all that red hair! But your dad is blond, that's where you get it. I think you should keep this out on your dresser."

He clamped his lips shut and shook his head, taking the picture and stuffing it back in the box. “No. But at least now I know why it made me so sad to look at it. I killed them. They loved me, and I killed them.”

“Knock it off, Matthew. It was an accident. You were a kid—you didn’t ask to be a fire starter, did you? No, just like I didn’t ask to be a psychic mess. But there we are. We can’t change it, and we can’t ignore it.”

He traced the picture with his finger. “I used to keep it out. I imagined that my mom would talk to me, or sing to me. Stupid stuff. And I heard the flute music, but now I know that was a real memory. One of the few I can claim.”

Rhiannon heard the pain in his voice and covered his hand with hers. “Not stupid. The ones with your mom are probably real memories too. We know that both your parents loved you, Mrs. Edwards said so. You’ll feel better once you get over your grudge toward her, you know. And Dr. Richards too. We need to go and tell him about someone getting in your room, and you should probably ask him some serious questions about your mom and dad.”

“I want my dad’s flute.”

“Exactly. Wanna take another look around, see if you’re missing anything?” Rhiannon walked over to the dresser, running her finger through the inch thick dust on the top. “This is seriously gross, Matthew. As your really good friend, I’m going to help you clean it up. Once. It will be my birthday present to you.”

“My birthday is in August.”

“A Yuletide gift, then.”

He stood up and walked around, picking up various socks and T-shirts and tossing them in the hamper. “There. It’s clean.” He skimmed his stack of CDs and DVDs. “Everything’s here.” He exhaled, rubbed his chin and then stuck his hands in the front pockets of his jeans. “Let’s go.”

“It’ll be okay.”

“I don’t like the idea of someone going through my stuff. What if it was Dr. Richards?”

“Don’t be a dork. Dr. Richards wouldn’t have cut the tape and left evidence.”

“Maybe somebody wanted me to know that they’d been through my things.”

Chills settled in Rhiannon’s stomach. “Now that is truly weird. Maybe Doc will have the answers.”

They walked down the hall and took the stairs up to the fourth floor. Rhiannon knocked, and Dr. Richards called, “Come in!”

As soon as she opened the door she saw that Dr. Richards was just finishing jotting down something in his notebook. He sighed, put the pen down and looked up.

His face immediately split into a happy grin. “Rhiannon! Matthew!” He got up and came around the desk, motioning for them to sit in the overstuffed chairs.

“Hi, Dr. Richards, how’ve you been?” Rhiannon gave him a hug and then sat down.

“Just fine, just fine. Uh, why are you green?”

“Long story,” she said with a casual wave.

His eyebrows arched as he swung his gaze to Matthew. “What’s wrong?”

Matthew ignored the doctor’s outstretched hand and leaned against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest. A hunk of blond hair dangled over his eyebrow. Rhiannon had to bite her lip to keep from laughing. Matthew could be the poster boy for pissed-off teen.

“Other than the fact that you’ve kept my whole entire life a secret? Oh, nothing.”

Dr. Richards sighed. “Please, Matthew, take a seat. I’ve already spoken to Mrs. Edwards, and she told me that you were very upset. What can I do?”

“Stay out of my room, for one thing. Why’d you go through my stuff? You had no right to be in there.”

The doctor held up his hands. “What are you talking about? I wouldn’t betray your privacy.”

“You are the only one that has a key to my room.” Matthew flipped his hair back, but held on to his sullen expression.

Told you he didn’t do it. She settled back to watch the show.

Matthew's head snapped up and he narrowed his eyes at her. Rhee tapped her lower lip, realizing that he'd caught her message. Oh yes, Dr. Richards had been very right about Matthew's untapped talents. She'd be willing to bet a month's allowance that Matthew would end up stronger than any of them.

If they could just get past his fire-starting habits.

Dr. Richards said, "Should we call the police? Is there anything missing?"

Matthew dropped his crossed arms and jammed his hands in his pockets. With his left hand, he pulled out his room key, spinning it with his fingers. "Nothing was missing. Not that I noticed."

Rhiannon saw that Dr. Richards was hurting too. "Matthew, quit being a brat and come sit down. Doc, we want answers. We know about the Shaughnessy curse, we know you have Luke Campbell's magick flute, and I, for one, want to know if Matthew is rich."

Matthew choked. "What?"

She grinned. "Didn't you pay attention? The part about Gregor Shaughnessy being the richest man in Ireland?"

Stumbling to the chair next to her, Matthew finally sat. "No. I was caught up in the cursed part. Being as I killed my parents, it seemed to fit."

Dr. Richards sat down behind his desk and picked up the pen. "You're not cursed, Matthew. Don't even think it."

"Oh yeah? Then I guess I'm just a murderer."

Rhiannon watched the doctor think as he clicked the top of the pen. *Click*, thought. *Click*, thought. *Click*. "I want you to read something. And yes, Matthew, you are a very rich young man."

"I knew it." Rhee elbowed Matthew.

"I can't take that money. It's...tainted or something."

Rhiannon glanced at her friend and realized that he was serious. His face wore an expression of supreme disgust. "Matthew..."

Dr. Richards got up and rustled through an ancient file cabinet. He finally found what he was looking for, and pulled out a single manila file. He passed it to Matthew, who looked like Dr. Richards was handing him a poisoned apple.

“Read through that, Matthew, while I go and get the flute. I keep it hidden safely away.”

“Why would you do that?” Matthew asked. “Or is it in a fire-proof box so that I can’t ruin that too?”

Dr. Richards pursed his lips and gave Matthew a disapproving look. “Steel, lined with velvet. This flute is very, very old. It truly should be in a museum. It’s said to create magick by the person who plays it.”

Matthew rolled his eyes, but Rhiannon picked up the excited yellow flash in his aura. “Magick. Not even Rhee believes in magick, and she’s a witch.”

“*Wiccan*. And I’m not, not really.”

“Can you two just behave for a few minutes? I’ll be right back.”

“Did you hear the exasperation in his voice? Did you? Matthew, he loves you as if you were his own son. He’s raised you the best way he knew how. Cut him some slack, would you?”

“You’re turning into a nag. To think I used to think you were so cool.”

“Open the file, what does it say?”

Rhee read over his arm and gasped. “That doesn’t! I mean, oh...Matthew. I never knew there was that much money.” She blinked, wondering if she needed glasses. “Are there really that many zeroes?”

Matthew gulped, then rubbed his eyes. “No way. Impossible! Stocks, bonds, charities, and...”

“And that’s just off the interest. You’ll never need to touch the principal,” Dr. Richards said as he came back in the room. “I’ve let the management company handle the investments and such, following the plan your parents put in place.”

“Can I buy a Viper?”

Dr. Richards looked alarmed and immediately said, “Well! I, I’ve been having a modest amount put into your savings account. You’re only sixteen, Matthew. My. I suppose that you’re at the age. A Viper? No. You can’t. It’s dangerous.”

Rhiannon noticed Matthew’s glazed eyes and punched him in the arm. “Earth to Matthew.”

“I’ve never touched a cent of that money, Matthew. I was able to support you just fine, I thought. Have you ever wanted for anything?”

Matthew blinked and Rhee could tell the second he was back to himself. Not that she could blame him. Finding out that you’re rich as Midas might knock a guy loopy. “Should I pay you back?” he asked seriously.

Rhiannon laughed, she couldn’t help it. “That would be like me offering cash to my mom and dad back, dork. I think, as the son in this relationship, you just have to make sure you take care of Dr. Richards and Mrs. Edwards in their old age.”

Surprised, the doctor laughed. “Oh, well, I’m fine. I’ll set up an appointment next month with the management company. Will that be all right? But only if you’re ready.”

Matthew said, much more subdued, “Okay. You’ll come too, right?”

Looking delighted, Dr. Richards answered, “Of course.”

Rhiannon knew then and there that the tear in their relationship would heal.

“Here it is. The Campbell flute. An historical object worth a lot in monetary value, but the family history, well, you can trace your ancestors all the way back to Lord Cardaith Campbell, around the year eleven hundred.”

Matthew sucked in a breath, set the file aside and accepted the steel box.

“You heard my dad play?” he asked. “In person?”

Perching a hip on his desk, Dr. Richards smiled. “Yes indeed. He was very talented. And handsome. You’ve got the look of Luke.”

Rhiannon felt almost like an intruder as they talked.

“My mom, what was she like?”

Dr. Richards cleared his throat, as if searching for the perfect words to bring a mother back to her son. “Beautiful. Inside and out. She was incredibly generous, quick to

laugh and she lived her life to the fullest. She enjoyed cooking for her family and would have dinner parties. She took care of her younger brother, Ian, even though he was constantly getting in and out of trouble.”

“Did you like him? My uncle?”

“I never met him. He was a teenage boy at the time I met your mother, and rarely home.”

“Mrs. Edwards already told me that he was angry with my mom, for not caring about the money, or getting more of it.”

Dr. Richards sighed. “From what I understand, Ian Shaughnessy was the spitting image of his father. From the copper bright hair to the inbred arrogance. If there was one dark shadow in your mother’s life it was the little she could do to change her brother. It didn’t help that she married a Campbell, descendent of the Lord who had placed the original curse.”

A memory niggled in Rhee’s head, but then it was gone.

She put her hand on Matthew’s arm just as he opened the steel box.

He carefully picked up the antique flute.

Rhiannon gasped as memories and images flooded her head.

Tall, blond Luke, playing for a happy crowd, beautiful Maggie singing along. Love, bright and golden, surrounded them. Matthew as a baby, reaching for his dad and the flute, laughing and cooing, his blond hair so like his dad’s. Maggie, smiling and dancing to the sounds of the flute, crying when the music was enough to break her heart. Matthew as a toddler, wrapping his fingers around the instrument, blowing into the mouthpiece and giggling at the funny noise. Rhiannon became aware that she and Matthew were somehow linked in these memories. It was as if he was borrowing her power...

Chapter Twenty-One

Rhiannon snapped them out of it by releasing Matthew's arm.

Matthew stared at her, his mouth hanging open. "What was that?"

"I don't know. I mean, that's happened before with Suzanne, and now it keeps happening with you. Every once in a while when we touch, I get your thoughts and memories. Not with anybody else. But who cares? Dr. Richards can figure that part out later." Rhiannon grinned. "Did you feel how much they loved you? They were never afraid of you, never. They had nothing but love in their hearts."

Matthew swallowed, but Rhiannon saw the shine of tears in his blue eyes. "They should have been afraid. Look what happened to them."

Tears spilled down his cheeks, and Matthew hurriedly wiped them away before carefully putting the flute back in the box. Then he picked up the file, and tossed it on Dr. Richards' desk. "I don't want that money. It's blood money."

"Matthew, we can talk about all of this later. You are learning so much... Will you stay here, with me, now that you know?"

Matthew chewed his bottom lip. "Nope. I want to go to school. I want to be in Crystal Lake."

Sighing, the doctor bowed his head. When he looked up, Rhee saw that he was valiantly trying to be there for Matthew. "You just missed Michael."

Interested despite himself, Matthew asked, "What do you mean? He was here?"

"Yes. He said he had some business to take care of before starting his new job as a high-school teacher."

"Teaching is tough, having a bunch of kids constantly bugging you. What is Mike like? Is he cool?"

“Michael is indeed ‘cool’. He’s gotten his master’s degree, and he’s working his way toward becoming a professor. Here. I’m not prepared to offer him a job just yet, but in a few years it’s nice to know I’ll have someone that I can train to—” he looked at Matthew, “—maybe take over for me.”

“Awesome!” Matthew grinned. “I mean, not that you’d retire—you’re not that old—but that Mike would be here. That’s great. He likes basketball, and bowling and all the same stuff I do.”

Dr. Richards’ smile spread over his entire face. “I’m glad you’re excited. I want the two of you to get along. Funny, though, that I didn’t know about you two emailing. When I asked him about it, he said that he’d never intended for it to be a secret.”

Rhiannon watched as Matthew paled.

“Matthew?”

She quickly got to her feet. “You okay?”

He shook his head. “Got dizzy for a minute. Let’s get lunch. I feel like I’m on emotional overload.”

“Keeping one’s mind and body healthy is important. You two go ahead, I have some work to finish up. Hmm, Rhiannon. Mrs. Edwards tells me that you will be doing some essays while you’re here. Would you like to explain before you leave?”

Rhiannon’s cheeks grew warm. “Uh. Not really.”

He looked down his nose and she caved. “Okay. I had this obviously lame idea that I could use magick to make Suzanne solid. She was lonely, and she wanted to dance. I love her, Doc. She’s my friend. But as Mrs. Edwards pointed out, Suzanne is getting more manipulative. Well, that and the fact that Suzanne is dead, and needs to stay that way. I guess I need to listen to the experts.”

His lips twitched. “You understand the consequences if Suzanne cannot be controlled?”

Rhiannon looked at the floor. “Banishment. But I feel like it’s my fault! I’m the one who lost control. Couldn’t she maybe come and live with Mrs. Edwards?”

Dr. Richards shook his head. “We’re not talking about that right now. I want to see your essays as soon as they are done. And I’ll meet you tomorrow at nine sharp to start your re-training. You have got to have your shields in place.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Oh, last thing. Your mom called. You forgot your cell phone.”

Matthew snickered. “I knew there had to be a reason the drive here was so quiet.”

They left the office, and Rhiannon sensed that while Matthew was conflicted about tons of stuff, the memories of his parents’ love was bringing him some of that peace he was looking for.

They took the stairs down to the second floor cafeteria and immediately heard a screech guaranteed to set off the alarms.

Rhiannon braced herself as Tanya flung her arms around her neck at about fifty miles an hour. They spun, laughing and hugging.

Stepping back, Rhee exclaimed, “Tanya! You’ve got orange hair!”

“Me? You’re all green!”

Laughing, they kept their arms around each other’s waists. Tanya said, “Thanks for the note, Mattster. Take off without telling me, you’re such a jerk.” She grinned and flashed her tooth jewelry.

“Is that a diamond?” Rhee leaned in.

“Nope, stick on. Just enough to give my mom a cow.”

“I’m not a jerk. And I couldn’t tell you, it was a spur of the moment decision. I s’pose Rhiannon’s told you everything, anyway.”

“Don’t sound so disgusted. I was under the impression that we three didn’t keep any secrets. You’ve been holding back, Matt.” Tanya shook her spiky hair and winked.

Rhiannon watched as he rocked back on his heels and crossed his arms. “You’re right. Wanna order a large everything-but-no-meat pizza, go to the game room and hash it out over ping-pong?”

Should a person be this happy? “Loser has to pay for pizza.”

Tanya snorted. “No way. I always lose. We’re splitting it fair and square.”

“Actually, since I’m a gazillionaire, I think I’ll treat my girls to lunch.”

“What?” Tanya shrieked. “You’re not even gone a week and you come back rich?”

“You have no clue,” Rhiannon added.

They ordered their pizza, and took it back to the game room, each person sitting in their favorite seat. Rhiannon had the denim beanbag chair, Tanya took the rocking recliner and Matthew lounged over the whole couch.

Rhiannon took a huge bite of pizza, wrapping the cheese around her tongue and pulling.

Tanya giggled and picked black olives off her slice, eating them separately. “I’ve missed this, the three of us hanging out.”

“Do you think your mom would let you stay tonight? It’s Friday.” Rhiannon formed a possible rescue plan.

“Maybe. If I threaten to hide the Lysol cans again, she might. Any particular reason, or you just miss me?”

Rhee laughed. “I miss you, I do. But I really miss your devious mind.”

Tanya chewed, narrowing her eyes as she gazed from Matthew to Rhiannon. “You guys need to bring me up to speed. I hate it that I don’t know what’s going on!”

“Are you sure this is going to work?” Tanya breathed in the dark.

“Ha!” Matthew spluttered. “You’re asking the Goddess of Bad Spells if her plan is going to work? Geez.”

Rhiannon said indignantly, “Listen, bud. I’m trying to help you out so that you can get more than a half hour’s sleep at a time.”

“Maybe I won’t have the nightmares, now that I have my dad’s flute.”

She heard the hope in his voice and reached out to pat his arm. They were all sleeping in sleeping bags on the floor in the game room.

“That tickles,” Tanya said.

“Oops, I was trying to pat Matthew.”

“I don’t think you should touch me. We might do that mind meld again.”

Tanya raised her voice. “Mind meld? How’d you manage to leave something that cool out of the previous conversations? We’ve been talking for hours and hours.”

“Yeah, I know. But we’ve been through a lot of crap.”

Tanya sat up and Rhee could barely make out her friend’s shadow in the dark. “Okay, I’m gonna list important things and you guys are gonna tell me what’s missing.”

Rhiannon and Matthew groaned.

“I know you two are tired of thinking about it, but you have to be fair. Okay, first of all, Matthew is the descendant of Gregor Shaughnessy. At the age of six, you accidentally—sorry, Matthew—started a fire that killed your family.”

Tanya paused as she heard Matthew’s quick intake of breath.

“Just for the record, that doesn’t feel right to me,” she added sincerely.

“I’ve been having problems with it too.”

Matthew sat up, bumping Rhiannon’s head.

“Ouch!”

“Sorry, what do you mean you’re having problems with it too? There was nobody else.”

Rhiannon sighed. “When I had your nightmare I remember seeing a shadow, and you called for help.”

“Why didn’t you say something?”

“I didn’t want to hurt you any more than you were already hurting!”

Matthew’s voice was low and angry. “I’m getting really freaking tired of people deciding what is good for me or not. Would it kill you to be honest?”

Stung, Rhiannon muttered, “No. Sorry.”

Tanya said, “Okay, there was a shadow in the nightmare. You already told me that you heard him calling for his mom and dad—maybe he was seeing his uncle Ian?”

Rhiannon’s stomach clenched with fear. Why fear? Was she afraid for Matthew? “Maybe. There’s no name in the nightmare. It could have been a neighbor, anybody.”

“Keep going, Tanya. Maybe Rhee will *remember* something else she hasn’t told me.”

“Don’t be mad—”

“Stop arguing, guys, I’m trying to connect the dots. So now Matthew’s rich, but he also has the magick Campbell flute and the Shaughnessy curse to deal with. He wants to go to Crystal Lake high school, where his friend and Dr. Richards’ protégée is going to substitute teach. Matthew is gonna live with Rhiannon, and right now Rhee and me are going to stay awake and guard Matthew so that he doesn’t start any fires in his sleep. Right?”

“Right. But remember the fires that he starts in his sleep are different, like shiny blue flames, almost supernatural.”

“Which makes sense, if he’s using psychic powers to start them. Don’t you think?”

“Yeah.” Although Rhiannon felt some doubt about that too.

“Now Rhiannon, your family is being accused of witchcraft, and you’re not getting the welcome mat thrown out in Crystal Lake. Your boyfriend’s mom dumped you, but then he came and dumped you in person. Totally a suck-suck situation.”

Rhee exhaled. “Yeah.”

“You feel like your psychic powers are out of control, and you’re wondering if secretly practicing the Wiccan spells and studying the religion has whacked out your psychic meter.”

“You put it so well, Tanya.”

“So you decided to make Suzanne human if you could—completely bad choice there, Rhee—and you got busted by Mrs. Edwards.”

Matthew rubbed his hands together, the sound scratchy in the dark. “You got it.”

“You’re picking up other people’s thoughts, even if you don’t want to, so in addition to writing essays—”

Matthew laughed.

“—you have to relearn how to program your psychic shields.”

Rhiannon punched what she hoped was Matthew's arm. "You haven't missed anything," she said.

"Yes she did! You're green because..."

"Grr...because Janet is the real witch in Crystal Lake."

Tanya giggled. "We need to come up with the best plan of revenge. My specialty."

"So now what?" Matthew asked.

"You have to go to sleep," Rhee told him.

"Just like that." He sounded doubtful.

Rhee and Tanya held hands in the dark and focused their awesome powers of persuasion on their friend.

"I am kinda tired," he muttered as he lay down, fluffing his pillow.

"Night, Matthew," they said in unison.

He snored.

"That was easy," Tanya said. "He must be exhausted."

"He's terrified of sleep."

"How long do we have?"

"About half an hour, that's when he starts getting fidgety."

It turned out that twenty minutes was long enough.

Matthew started mumbling in his sleep. Tanya got out the flashlight and turned it on, which sent eerie shadows around the room. Rhiannon shivered.

Tanya gave her a nudge. "We won't get answers until you do it."

"I know. But it hurts..." so saying, she reached out and touched Matthew's forearm.

She was immediately tossed back into the burning room.

The flowered curtain, the sparks, the flaring embers that burned her skin. She and Matthew were crawling for the phone. Matthew calls out to the shadow, help me! The phone burns and he drops it, but instead of blacking out this time Rhiannon struggles to keep the image focused. Footsteps, the crackle of boots on broken glass, a young man with a towel wrapped around his head and face, a shock of copper hair showing through. Rhiannon knows that help has arrived, hasn't it? Why is Matthew crying? The young man

lifts his arm. He's holding a hammer, he's swinging down and Matthew cries out, "No Uncle Ian! No!"

"Where is it? Tell me where it is?"

"I don't know!" Matthew sobs. The six-year-old boy covers his head with his arms, just as the hammer connects to his skin. Blinding pain, so much that Matthew blacks out completely. Rhiannon, caught in his nightmare, goes into the darkness with him.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“Wake up! You’re scaring the crap out of me.”

Rhiannon tried to open her eyes, but they seemed stuck.

The splash of cold water as it drenched her face solved the problem. She jumped up, spluttering, “What are you doing?”

“Here, Matthew’s next.” Tanya took a huge fifty-six-ounce Big Gulp cup full of water and poured it over Matthew’s face.

He woke up swinging and the girls jumped back, out of reach.

“What happened? Did I start a fire?” He looked at the empty cups that they had filled for just in case. Just in case he started heating things up.

“No,” Tanya said, her skin splotchy with fear. She swallowed and rubbed her eyes. She’d obviously been crying, because her eye make-up was in rivulets down her cheeks.

“Your uncle tried to kill you.” Rhiannon folded her arms over her chest in a protective gesture.

“Huh?” Matthew swayed.

“It’s true,” Rhiannon cried. “He came after you with a hammer. Don’t you remember?”

He shook his head. “No. Oh, God, I feel kinda sick.”

“Don’t puke, ew.” Tanya handed him an empty cup.

He sank to his knees in the middle of the soggy sleeping bag. “I can’t—why can’t I remember? Why can you see this and I can’t?”

“I don’t know,” Rhiannon said, calming down, thinking of blue, light blue. “He was searching for something. He asked you where ‘it’ was. And you didn’t know, and then... I hate him. He might be your uncle, but I hate him.” So much for the color blue. She was red hot with anger on behalf of the defenseless child Matthew had been.

“He’s dead.” Matthew’s tone was bleak.

Rhiannon blurted, “I don’t think he is. His head was wrapped in a towel, like he was protecting himself from the smoke of the fire. In fact, I think that we need to go online and do a huge search on Ian Shaughnessy.”

Mrs. Edwards’s voice boomed throughout the room. “What, pray tell, are you dearies up to?”

Matthew chose that moment to hurl.

By noon the next day, Rhiannon’s hand was cramped from all the writing she’d done. Spirits were dead. Spirits had to stay dead. She *so* got it.

She’d come across an interesting article on the banishing of spirits. The only way to get rid of one who wasn’t interested in traveling on was to trap them in a trained medium’s body. Tanya had done that with the evil Adam just a few months back. An untrained medium, or a weak medium—Rhiannon knew she fit both criteria—could be possessed by the spirit.

Had the tugging she’d felt at the back of her head that day she’d read the Murlyn email been Suzanne trying to take over her body?

Rhiannon bit the end of her pen. She just couldn’t believe it. Suzanne was her friend.

Guiltily, Rhiannon re-read what she’d just written. Spirits were dead. Spirits could be manipulative. Spirits, while some could act friendly, were not friend material. Any medium who got caught up in the spirit’s world was a danger to others.

She rubbed her tired eyes. Mrs. Edwards had been so mad at them last night that she’d threatened to send Matthew back to his room.

When Rhiannon had explained what she’d seen in Matthew’s nightmare, the medium had turned an awful grayish yellow color. Then she’d gotten dry sleeping bags from the storage room and made herself at home.

They’d all slept pretty rotten, but Matthew hadn’t started any fires. Why was it that he couldn’t remember his nightmares? Now that he knew what happened? He’d already

confessed that he hadn't taken his medicine in days. And he'd flat out told Mrs. Edwards that he wasn't planning on taking it again until he remembered everything.

The medium had simply nodded and whispered, "Perhaps it is time. I only hope that you are strong enough for whatever it is you're searching for."

And when they'd told her about Ian, she'd cried. "They found his body, luvs, he *is* dead. Matthew, I'm so sorry."

Matthew had shrugged bitterly. "I don't remember it."

Tanya's whisper scared her half to death. "Psst!"

Rhiannon turned around. "What?"

"Aren't you done yet?" Tanya tapped the doorframe with her inch-long purple fingernails. "I cut levitating class early so that we could do the research."

Rhiannon glanced at the clock. "Mrs. Edwards said they found Ian's body. Why do the research?"

Snorting, Tanya said, "So? Ian sounds like a total jerk. What if he knew enough to fake dental records? We can't just leave Matthew hanging like this! I mean, if we find out that the jerk is alive, that is one less person he has to feel guilty about...killing."

Her stomach clenched into a tight fist. "Okay. I have a few hours until my afternoon appointment with Dr. Richards. He's making sure I'm back up to where I was before I left for Crystal Lake."

Rhee got up, putting her essay into a neat little pile, thinking again how much she cared for Suzanne, even though she couldn't handle her. "Do you happen to know of anyone in the market for a strong-willed spirit?"

Tanya laughed. "Suzanne should be so last on your list of worries."

"I know. I talked to Mom this morning and she said that they had some more vandalism. Nothing that wouldn't wash off, she told me. It gives me the creeps that people can be so horrible. I'm totally worried about Moonstone and Betsy too."

"One thing at a time, Rhee baby. Ah, the computer lab."

Rhiannon followed Tanya inside, noting that several other people were studiously pecking away at the keyboards. “Guess not everybody went home for break,” Rhee said quietly.

Tanya grinned. “Losers. Here, you take that computer by the window. I’ll be right next you. This reminds me of old times, Rhee.”

“Yeah. But somehow I was always the one to get caught,” she grinned back.

They sat down, logged in and Rhiannon decided to check her emails. “I hate not having my cell phone.”

“I thought you didn’t have any friends left, so what do you care?” Tanya teased.

“Listen, just ’cause I’ve been doing a little whining doesn’t mean I don’t really have friends.” Rhee held up her hand and waved her fingers. “Bonnie, Melody, Corey, you and Matthew.” She dropped her hand. “Pathetic.”

“Not bad for a freak of nature.”

Rhiannon giggled, “Takes one to know one.” She choked on her laugh. “Oh no. Not this guy again.”

Tanya got up and read the email over Rhiannon’s shoulder. “MURLYN@73html.com?”

“Yeah, full of interesting wisdom that I totally forgot about. He’s the one that put me on the maiden name thing for Matthew.”

“Hmm, maybe he’s just trying to help.”

Rhiannon clicked *open* on the little envelope, then she read out loud, “Matthew is a murderer, you could be next. Die by fire, little witch.” Rhee rubbed her arms, which had broken out in goose bumps.

“Maybe not so helpful. Ew. Should we tell Mrs. Edwards or Dr. Richards?”

Rhee chewed her bottom lip. “I dunno. Let’s decide after we do our search.” Tanya sat back down in front of her computer, and the girls raced to see who could find the most important news the fastest, just like in the old days.

Rhiannon went to a worldwide search, around the time of Gregor Shaughnessy’s death. “I got Ian.”

Tanya peeked over at Rhiannon's screen. "He's a puny little kid! The little freak's all dressed in a black suit."

Rhiannon rolled her eyes. "He's going to his dad's funeral."

"Oh. Is that Matthew's mom? She's pretty. How old?"

Searching her memory, Rhee guessed. "Fifteen? Sixteen? So Ian would be eight or nine."

"If he was alive he'd be about thirty, then. I sure hope he dresses better."

"Tanya!"

Going back to her own screen, her fingers doing a certain kind of magick as they stole across the keyboard, Tanya said, "That was smart, by the way, doing a world search."

Rhee preened under her friend's praise.

"I narrowed it to Ireland. I win. Ha!"

"What?" Rhiannon scooted her chair over and peered at what Tanya found.

"What do ya think of that?"

"Sh. Let me read." Ian Shaughnessy, heir to the Shaughnessy fortune and curse, seemed to have a penchant for taking things that didn't belong to him, Rhee figured he was simply living up to his Shaughnessy reputation. "No wonder Maggie moved them all to the states right after she married Luke. Her baby brother was gonna end up with his neck stretched."

"Very poetic, Rhee."

Rhiannon pushed her hair back behind her ear. "These pictures are grainy." Who did he remind her of?

"Well, what do you expect? They're old."

"This doesn't help us any," she said as she stared at the blurred features.

"Don't worry, the afternoon has just begun."

The overhead speaker announced a call for Rhiannon and she glanced around the computer lab until she found a house phone.

She picked it up and answered, "Hi Mom."

“How—never mind, dumb question. Sweetie, I’ve been thinking. Maybe I should sell something besides New Age and Wicca items. I know that now you’re busy and everything, but I just wanted you to, well, not worry. By the time you come back from Vegas, everything will be back to normal. I was thinking something along the lines of fresh herbs. I could take up basket weaving.”

Her skin started tingling all over, like the time she’d been bitten by fire ants.

“We’ve never been normal. What happened? Is everything okay?”

“Oh, we’re fine.” Rhiannon knew with every fiber of her being that her mom was lying. “Do you want me to reach inside your head and find the truth? Or will you just tell me what’s going on?” Maybe that was a little harsh, but dang it, she was worried.

“Here’s your dad. He wants to talk to you.”

“Mom!”

“It’s me, honey.”

“No fair! I can’t read *your* mind. What’s going on, Dad?”

“There was some trouble at the barn.”

“Is everyone okay? Moonstone? Betsy?”

“They are all fine. Your mom’s been worrying about you, and she’s really put a lot of thought into what you said.”

“What brilliant thing was that?”

He chuckled. “About us being openly Wiccan, while we asked you to hide your psychic abilities.”

“Oh.” Rhee bobbed her leg against the chair. Her mom was willing to give up the shop? “Is it because Crystal Lake is being so closed-minded?”

He sighed into the phone. “I don’t think your mom realized that not everyone is as accepting as she’s used to. It came as a shock to find that you were losing your friends just because she was following her dream.”

Rhiannon felt terrible. So she’d been right...hadn’t she? “I don’t know what to say.”

Her dad gave a small laugh. “I’m sure when you think of it, it will be brilliant.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Rhiannon looked at the calendar above Dr. Richards' desk and groaned. "It's only Tuesday? This has been the longest four days of my life."

Dr. Richards smiled at her. "You've worked very hard. Cramming about two weeks of study into three and a half days."

"I deserved a few hours off on Sunday afternoon—besides, you and Mrs. Edwards liked the movie too."

"Well, it's no wonder you're exhausted. But you've done it. You've managed to block everything I've put against you."

"Tanya was the hardest, since she's my best friend. I had to really work at blocking her out. Hey, do you think I'll finally be able to keep my mom out of my head?"

He laughed and straightened his coat vest. "Education can only do so much."

"I want to go home. My mom needs me, but I don't know what to say. I don't want her to have to give up her dream."

"Have you told her that?"

Rhee rolled her eyes. "No. *I'm* still figuring it out. 'Cause what are the options? If she keeps the store, we're gonna be the first family burned at the stake in four hundred years. Christmas is coming up, which is a huge Christian holiday. A perfect excuse to roast non-believers."

"Rhiannon... Have you thought about inviting the people of Crystal Lake to your family celebration?"

"The Winter Solstice? But we'll be here." A light bulb went on inside her head. "Duh! Education is what we were missing. We can teach the people in Crystal Lake about Wicca, and then they can back off once they find out we don't boil babies in cat's milk."

“You might want to word it differently than that.” He peered over his nose at her, but she saw him fight a smile.

“It would be perfect.”

“Your mom is still a witch...while you still need to mask your skills. Can you deal with that?”

Rhiannon examined her feelings. “Yeah. But Dr. Richards, I might be getting tired of hiding my psychic powers.”

He tapped his fingers against his desk. “Just be careful who you share with. Not everybody will accept you, as you know.”

Rhiannon ran her fingers through her hair. “At least I’m not green anymore, that’s a good thing. And I’m hated just for being tall, thin and having excellent taste in clothes. Dating Jared really ticked a lot of girls off. Adding in my Wiccan parents was just fuel for the fire—” she shivered, “—so I suppose I should keep my abilities to myself. At least for a while.”

“You’re growing up.”

“No mushy stuff,” Rhiannon smiled and stood. “Hey, you and Mrs. Edwards have to come too. I’m gonna call Mom and tell her the good news. Well, if she wants to do it. I mean, she was sort of looking forward to visiting with her friend Tisha. Hopefully she hasn’t had everything all packed up.”

“Haven’t you talked to her at all?”

“No,” Rhiannon answered guiltily. “I wanted to think everything through, first. That Mike guy should be there too. I’ve been so busy, but now I’m gonna call her and tell her to start planning a party.” Rhee practically skipped from the room, sending Doc a quick wave and went searching for Matthew.

She found him on the couch in the game room, totally absorbed in his Game Boy.

Rhiannon tossed a pillow at his head, and he reached up to catch it before getting smacked.

“How’d you do that?”

“You weren’t exactly quiet.”

“Matthew—I was wondering. Do you have any scars?”

He looked up and blinked his blue eyes. “You’ve finally lost it. I knew you were working too hard.”

“I’m serious.”

“Why?”

“You survived a horrible fire and two hammer blows to the head. I just wanna know, that’s all.”

He sat back and thought about it, then pulled up his feet, taking off his shoes and then his socks. He stuck out a bare foot. “Anything?”

Rhiannon stepped close and plugged her nose. “No. Put your socks back on. Gross.” Pacing the floor, she tried to come up with a logical answer.

“What is wrong with you?” he demanded to know, as if she knew.

“Have you ever cut yourself and wondered why you didn’t have a mark on you?”

He shrugged. “I never thought about it.”

“You never get a cold, you’ve never had any childhood diseases. I think you’re some kind of super-kid.”

Matthew snorted, shoving his feet into his socks, then his shoes. “You’re a freak. You want everyone else to be one too.”

“Stop being so nice to me. I might not take you home with me when I leave tomorrow.”

“Who gets to drive?” Matthew grinned, patting his pocket where his license lived.

“Not you. Mrs. Edwards, probably, and Dr. Richards.”

“Everybody’s going?”

They heard a disgusted snort and then, “A girl has to go home for a few hours a day, and her friends suddenly forget she exists. You two suck.”

They both turned. “Hey Tanya,” they said in unison.

“Where are you going? Back to Crystal Lake?”

“Yeah, cause I had another one of my super-fabulous ideas.”

Tanya didn't look that impressed, in fact, she mostly looked bored as she checked out her fingernails, a hot pink today instead of purple.

"We're gonna celebrate Winter Solstice!"

Tanya's head snapped up. "No. Your family is already being persecuted for witchcraft, you can't give the Crystal Lake any more ammunition."

"But see, that's the brilliant part."

"Not seeing it." Tanya tapped her shoe against the floor.

"We invite the citizens and educate them."

"I don't like it. I'm lying to my mother, and I'm coming with you."

"You don't have to lie. Have Dr. Richards do it."

"Which excuse should we use, Rhee? Educational lecturing on the scientific proof of broom flying as a pastime?"

Matthew busted out laughing. "That's the one. Your mom will zone out right after 'lecturing'."

Tanya smiled, walked over and felt Matthew's forehead.

He swatted her hand away. "What?"

"Well, you laughed. You've been so depressed lately that it alarmed me."

"I'm surrounded by smart-asses."

Rhiannon sat on one side of Matthew, while Tanya took the other. "We love you," Tanya said.

"And we'll help you pack," Rhee pointed out.

Rhiannon had this completely helpless feeling in her stomach. This was supposed to be great news, and she thought her mom was happy, but it was hard to tell through all the garbled talking and tears.

"Mom, stop crying. Of course I mean it, and of course I'll be there. I'm bringing everybody, even Tanya. It'll be a lot of fun. Yes, run an ad in the paper. Send out invitations, stand in the center of downtown and pass out flyers."

Her dad took the phone, sounding a little irritated. “Rhiannon? What did you do to your mother?”

“Daddy, I just told her my idea, you know, that instead of giving up Celestial Beginnings, we should try to educate the people of Crystal Lake on the true meaning and beauty of the Wicca religion.”

She heard him suck in his breath before he said, “Oh. That explains why she’s crying. That was great, Rhee. I knew you could do it.”

Rhiannon’s heart filled with love and pride. “Not that I’m embracing the religion, Dad, but I think that you and Mom should be able to do what makes you happy.”

“Who is this, and where’s my daughter?” he joked.

“Ha ha. Will Mom be okay about not seeing Tisha? Hey, how’s that Mike guy? Is he totally freaked about the Wicca stuff?”

Her dad laughed. “Your mom can catch up with Tisha another time. Mike is incredibly knowledgeable about Wicca and open-minded, but he also sees validity in caution. Remember, he has psychic powers too. He’s very sharp. I can see why Dr. Richards took such an interest in him as a protégé. In fact, Mike was helping your mom box up some things, but he’ll be just as happy to unpack them.”

Rhiannon expected to feel relief, but she didn’t. The idea of anybody taking over for Dr. Richards didn’t sit right with her. “Any fires lately?”

“Not a one. And I was really surprised that there was so little damage to the bedroom Matthew was sleeping in.”

That had interested her too. But with everything going on she hadn’t spent enough time thinking about it.

Tanya waved from the doorway, her suitcase at her side, so Rhee said, “Okay, Dad, I gotta go. See you in two days.”

“Drive careful, they’re forecasting snow. Love you, Rhee.”

“Bye, Daddy.”

She hung up the phone and turned to her friend. “I can’t believe how much I miss my cell phone. And email feels totally different when you’re not on your own computer.”

“Freak.” She laughed. “But with all the traveling I’ve been doing lately, I kind of know what you mean.”

Rhee stood up and stretched. “Let’s go find Matthew. Hey Tanya, I’ve been wondering, are you happy? I mean, you are so smart, you travel, you speak German, French and Spanish, you’re fifteen and you’re on track to be even more psychically gifted than the rest of us put together.”

“You forgot gorgeous.” Tanya fluffed her orange streaks.

Some of the tension eased and Rhiannon giggled. “Gorgeous, definitely. You have a lot going on.”

“My mom’s a screwball who’s afraid of her own shadow. I travel with no less than three bottles of antibacterial gel in my bag, and that doesn’t include the ones she manages to stuff in my suitcase when I’m not looking. She hates the fact that I’m *different*—” the girls shared a smile, “—but loves the money and fame that my abilities give.”

“She loves you too.” Rhiannon pointed out.

“Yeah. She just can’t stand touching me.”

“So. Happy. Yes or no? Or is happy something that is unattainable?”

Tanya paused as she turned the corner and started down the hall toward Matthew’s room. “You tell me. You said you were happy. You had friends, a boyfriend and a cow.”

Her lips twitching, Rhee looked down at her shoes. “I don’t have as many friends as I thought, but I sure found out who the good ones were. And Jared...he’s history too.”

“You still like him.”

“No! Yeah. Maybe. He’s so...honorable. Which is a horrible word to use for a completely hot cowboy.”

They laughed and Tanya pressed. “Janet won’t ever back down?”

“No way. And now that Mrs. Roberts is very anti-me, it’s not fair to expect that Jared and I could ever go to the movies or the bowling alley—” Rhee touched her not-green hair and shivered, “—without it being a spectacle. I mean, what kind of relationship can I expect with a guy who’s willing to dump me so that his mom won’t file a lawsuit against my family?”

Tanya snickered. “True. It’s whacked. I say we come up with a killer plan to teach Janet Roberts a lesson in humility.”

“I want to, I do. But I tried that kind of plan once, and it got me moved to Crystal Lake.”

“Maybe this could get you moved back.”

“Except I like it there. I want a chance to fit in. Even though I’ll never be voted Miss Popularity, I like hanging out with other kids my age. Talking about movies and crushes and schoolwork and rotten teachers.”

“I know what you mean. Mom keeping me enrolled in private school half days kept me grounded. I’ve always known—” Tanya elbowed Rhiannon, “—how to compartmentalize my life. Very organized. At school, I’m Tanya the brain with cool hair. On the lecture circuit, I’m Tanya the teenage psychic phenomenon, and at the institute, I’m Tanya the scientist, pushing the envelope and finding out what my limits are. I can read the future, or past, when I touch an object and search. Trapping angry spirits in my body so they can be sent over was a surprise, but Mrs. Edwards and Dr. Richards worked with me so I was prepared. I catch seconds of psychic thought, usually random, but when I concentrate on one person, I can hear what’s going on with them no matter where they are. I just can’t *hold* it for long.”

Tanya looked embarrassed, but Rhiannon was beyond impressed. “Cool. But I’ve seen your closet. You’re a mess.”

“A girl has to let some things go.”

Matthew opened the door to his room and stuck his head out in the hall. “Are you guys gonna stand out there forever? I thought you were going to help me pack.”

“Whiner.”

“Baby,” Rhiannon agreed.

Tanya walked into Matthew’s room and glanced around at the chaos. “How could you tell if someone was in here? Really Matthew, you make me look like the Queen of Clean.”

“I told you, the cut duct tape.” Matthew had a suitcase on the unmade bed and so far it held three pairs of questionably clean socks.

“What are the chances that you were in a hurry and just did it yourself? You wanted something, and forgot to put fresh tape on it. Unless you found something missing...”

Matthew crossed his arms and blew his hair off his forehead. “Nothing missing. And I know what you’re thinking, how can you believe a guy who can’t remember his nightmares or his past?” He dropped his arms. “Well, I just know.”

“How about we don’t fight. We’ve got an eighteen-hour drive ahead of us. Dad said there might be snow.” Rhiannon bee-lined toward a stack of clean clothes. “Did you get Mrs. Edwards to do your laundry?”

He blushed. “She offered.”

Rhee shook her head, picked up the pile and put it in the suitcase.

Matthew dug out the steel-plated flute case from beneath his bed. “I should bring this.”

“You don’t know how to play,” Tanya pointed out. “Or is this your way of saying you have no plans to come back here?”

He lifted one shoulder, sticking the flute in his suitcase. “The institute is my home. I’m just gonna try something else out for a while. Dr. Richards said I could go to school in Crystal Lake for the rest of the school year.”

“If you took your medicine, which you haven’t been.” Tanya tapped her foot.

“I haven’t started a single fire since I’ve been here.”

Rhee lightly punched his arm. “That’s because me, Tanya and Mrs. Edwards have been keeping watch.”

Matthew touched the steel case and said defiantly, “Maybe I’ll take flute lessons.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Rhee decided that being trapped in a car with two well-meaning adults who knew all of your faults was a form of torture.

Eighteen hours of advice and concern, and she was as pliant as a wet noodle. She'd confessed to the threatening Murlyn emails, Tanya had spilled her guts about checking into Ian Shaughnessy's horrid history, and Matthew blurted that he was worried he was losing his marbles and would be certifiably insane by the age of twenty.

Dr. Richards and Mrs. Edwards took in all the information, and regurgitated directions and advice. Rhee's batteries died in her mp3 player about two hours outside of Vegas, so she'd gotten the worst of it until they stopped for the night at a dive hotel and she was able to buy new ones.

Rhee was so happy when they finally arrived at the farmhouse. It was three in the afternoon, the sky was cloudy and grayish and overcast with the sun vainly trying to break through, succeeding with a ray or two but no more.

It was odd how this felt like coming home, when just months ago she'd wanted nothing more than to be back in Vegas.

Go figure.

Her mom and dad came out to the porch as soon as they heard Dr. Richards honk his horn.

"It looks so festive!" Mrs. Edwards said as she climbed out of the front passenger seat.

Rhiannon noted all of the pine garlands her mother had hung around the porch, decorated with silver ribbons and gold bells. Tomorrow would be December twenty-first, Winter Solstice, and her mom was making sure they celebrated in style. Holly branches

framed the doorway, the bright red berries adding flashes of good cheer, like Rudolph's nose.

Rhiannon walked up the steps and kissed her mom on the cheek. "Are you sad that you won't be spending part of Yule season with Tisha?"

"We've been on the phone for hours!" Starla smiled happily, "A tiny part of me will miss the coven's celebration, but the rest of me is thrilled to be celebrating in our new home. I even made you a wreath of ivy and pine, with silver and blue ribbons for your hair."

Great. Another reason for the people in Crystal Lake to mock me. Her mom lifted one brow, then brushed past Rhee to greet the rest of her guests.

"Tanya! Sweetheart, it is so good to see you again. How's your mom? I love the color of your hair. So bright and happy."

Tanya returned Starla's hug. "I missed you too. Mom's the same."

Starla gave Tanya's cheek a pat. "Welcome to our home. Matthew, come give me a hug. We have your room all cleaned up. And in the hope of having more visitors—" Starla put her arm through Mrs. Edwards', "—we divided the downstairs storage room into two small, but comfortable, sleeping areas. And Mike is using an air mattress in our office."

Dr. Richards asked, "Should we find a hotel? Will it be too crowded?"

"Definitely not! Why, the more the merrier. If there's room in the heart, there's room in the home. Never doubt it." Rhiannon watched her mom literally beam her goodwill.

Dr. Richards bowed his head. "Coming from you, dear lady, I never would."

Wow, Rhee thought from the top step next to her dad, her mom might not win over Crystal Lake, but at least she and Dr. Richards weren't at each other's throats.

"That's nice," her dad observed.

"It took long enough," Rhee answered. "Ten years is a long time to hold a grudge against a man who was simply trying to help me."

"And took away part of the mother role, even if it wasn't intentioned."

It was an old argument and one that was finally being put to rest.

Matthew started dragging suitcases up the stairs. “Where’s Mike? I’m starting to think I’ll never meet him.”

Her dad laughed and helped with the luggage. “He offered to run into town and hand out more flyers for the festivities tomorrow night. He’s also volunteered to get more wood for the bonfire.”

Rhee’s skin prickled.

Miles glanced at his watch. “Matter of fact, your mom’s had a lot of volunteers to help with the baking and with making more wreaths. They should start arriving within the hour.”

“A lot?” Rhee asked, stunned.

“Relatively,” her dad chuckled. “Melody’s mom, Skye, and her grandmother are coming along with Corey’s mom, Bonnie’s mom and Officer Julianne.”

“How are people reacting to the invitations?”

“We’ve had some interest. The phone’s been ringing off the hook, mostly with obscene phone calls.”

“What if this isn’t a good idea?” Rhee had a premonition of darkness.

“It was a great idea. What better way to debunk people’s fear than to show them who you really are?”

“That just makes you vulnerable, Dad. I’m going to stick to Mom like glue tomorrow.”

He grasped her hand and squeezed. “Me too.”

Melody, Corey, Bonnie, Tanya, Matthew and Rhiannon sat on the floor of the living room, out of the way of the women who kept bringing in platters of food to cool before they wrapped the treats in colored cellophane.

Rhiannon tied another silver bow to a wreath of ivy and pine. “These really are kind of pretty,” she said as she admired her handiwork.

“I’m starving,” Bonnie complained. “I swear that was cranberry walnut bread that they just brought in. Who would miss a tiny loaf? I’ll share, even.”

Tanya laughed and set her tenth wreath on her head. “I’m with Bonnie. All of that incredible carb-loaded food is getting to me.”

Rhee nodded. “I know. I’ve been secretly drooling too.”

Just then Starla came in with a long plate of baked goods that she’d sliced and a handful of bright green napkins. “You guys have got to be hungry, you’ve been working for hours.”

Bonnie blinked her green eyes. “You must have read our minds!”

Tanya and Rhee shared a quick smile, which Melody caught. She raised a curious eyebrow but didn’t say anything.

As soon as her mom left, Rhiannon said, “Melody, it is so cool that your mom and grandma are here. And your grandma has the most awesome name! Glorianna Night Skye Lightfoot.”

Tanya agreed, speaking around a bite of iced plum cake. “Totally cool. Do you have a ‘sky’ in your name anywhere?”

Melody’s tawny skin pinkened, and Rhee caught the look of interest Matthew gave her. “Mm. I’m Melody Skye Dancer Lightfoot. Nobody would ever guess my Indian heritage with a name like that, right?”

Rhee plopped a wreath on Melody’s beautiful straight hair. “Why do you think of that as such a bad thing? Most people can’t follow their family tree.”

Bonnie shrugged. “It’s always bugged her.”

“You try being teased about being Indian all your life and see how much you like it.” Melody took the wreath off her head and threw it onto the pile.

Corey waggled his eyebrows and they all knew he was going to break into a really bad song.

“No!” Bonnie and Rhee said at once.

“Hey.” His eyebrows fell into a frown. “Are you guys trying to tell me something?”

Melody giggled at his exaggerated tone. “I suggest a change of subject. Like, I want to know how this thing tomorrow is going to work.”

“Mom said it will be an open house until it starts to get dark. Wiccans celebrate the day from dusk to dusk, so she’ll call everyone together in the living room and she’s going to gift everyone with a wreath and a candle. Then she’s going to give a brief history of the Wiccan religion and what it means to her. After that, we’re going to go out to the bonfire in the pasture—” she saw Melody and Bonnie wince and gave them each a sympathetic nod, “—and she’ll say a prayer to the Goddess and God for peace to everyone.”

“That sounds really cool,” Corey said.

Rhee smiled. “Then I think she’s going to ask anyone who wants to join in a circle around the bonfire to do so. Depending on how many people come, she might state her resolution for the upcoming year, and ask everyone who wants to, to take a turn.”

“Like a New Year’s resolution,” Bonnie said to clarify.

“Yeah,” Rhiannon said. “Only it’s a little more intense. The Wiccans believe that you must act according to your will.”

Corey was wearing a cute expression of confusion. “Aren’t you a Wiccan too?”

Rhee scrunched up her nose. “Not exactly. See, Wicca is about following a path to spiritual enlightenment, and while my mom and dad believe and practice, they don’t want to force me against my will.”

“My mom makes me go to church every Wednesday and Sunday, whether I want to or not.” Bonnie grimaced.

“Me too.” Corey said. “But after my dad died a few years ago, the church was really there for us.”

Rhee paused before saying, “Religion is a sticky subject. I think that if you’re happy in the way you search for spiritual enlightenment, and you don’t harm anyone, it shouldn’t matter.”

Tanya grinned, tying a bell onto another wreath. “I’m Jewish,” she said. “Know any good jokes?”

Matthew popped the last bite of a sugar cookie in his mouth and shook his head, but his blue eyes were laughing. Rhiannon snagged a tree-shaped cookie before he hogged them all.

“Do you think that Jared and his family will come?”

Rhiannon choked on her cookie. “Geez, Tanya, I hope not.”

“But if Mrs. Roberts is the one that pretty much was trying to start a witch burning revival, don’t you think she needs to hear the truth? And maybe Jared will change his mind.” Tanya blew a kiss at Rhiannon.

“People can hear the truth and still twist it,” Melody pointed out.

“I don’t think I could trust Jared again, anyway.” No matter how much she might want to.

“He’s so cute,” Tanya said sadly. “I think I’d give him another chance.”

Rhiannon laughed. “Dork, he’s had a bunch of chances. As he told me just last week, I’m *too* different.”

“Caleb sure has been sticking up for you, though, and he’s not hard on the eyes,” Melody said.

Flustered, she answered, “Caleb comes with Felicity.”

Melody and Bonnie both smacked their foreheads.

“Duh, I thought you were going to call her?” Melody said to Bonnie.

“I tried!” Bonnie said, explaining, “Rhee took off for almost a week, and she forgot her cell at home. So, I had a great conversation with your mom.”

“About what?”

“The benefits of fresh fruit and vegetables to offset Alzheimer’s.”

They all started laughing and Bonnie giggled. “Your mom had just found your Doritos stash.”

Rhiannon buried her face in her hair.

The mantle clock struck eight and Mathew got a weird look on his face. “You know, Mike still hasn’t come back? I’m gonna go and find Dr. Richards. Maybe we should go

looking for him or something. If he's handing out flyers, maybe somebody got mad and, well, you guys remember what the picketers were like at the bowling alley."

Tanya stood too. "We should take a break, anyway. We've done a hundred wreaths, which might be about eighty too many. No offense, Rhiannon."

"None taken. Actually, I'm thinking that the less people who show up the better. Mom says that we'll get a lot of curious people for the open house, but that they'll probably leave before the bonfire." Rhiannon's stomach tensed. She remembered very well Mrs. Edwards' and Suzanne's warnings to steer clear of the bonfire.

But no way was Rhiannon going to ruin her mom's first party with a warning that might or might not be true. She'd be careful. She pulled her amulet out from underneath her turtleneck, just to make sure.

"Want company, Matthew?" Tanya asked.

"Nah, I'm good. See you in a minute." He ran up the stairs, totally at ease in the house.

Tanya shook her head. "You're never gonna get rid of him," she predicted.

"You mean that?" Rhee asked sharply. She couched the question as a joke, since Melody, Bonnie and Corey were all there.

Still staring up after him, Tanya blinked, "Huh? Oh...hey, I forgot to ask Matthew a question. I'll be right back."

Knowing that her friend had just experienced a psychic blip and that she'd have to *so* not die of curiosity, Rhiannon jerked her head toward the kitchen. "Let's go see how far they're getting. You realize if nobody shows up tomorrow, we'll be eating this for weeks."

Corey sighed and rubbed his stomach. "I hope your mom's party sucks."

Bonnie elbowed him, then laughed. "They all seem to be having a great time. This could be really fun tomorrow night. What are we supposed to wear?"

Rhiannon tied her long hair into a ponytail. "It is so hot in here...just clothes. Whatever you feel like. Something that is fun, but warm, you know, in case you want to go outside."

“We’ll have coats, though,” Melody said thoughtfully.

“No more costumes!” Bonnie said.

“Why not?” Rhee defended her friend. “I thought the last one was great. It’s not her fault that Janet was awful and the disco ball fell.” *No*, she thought with a twinge of guilt, *that fault would be mine*.

The phone rang as Rhiannon passed it, and she answered it without thinking. “Hello?”

Static crackled over the line. “Hi, Rhiannon, this is Mike.”

Rhee froze as she felt her mind being probed. She immediately put up her shields, beyond grateful that she’d had re-training. Why had he done that? It was bad psychic manners, to say the least.

“You there?” he asked louder.

“Yes.”

“I hope I didn’t offend you, I feel like I know you from all the stories your mom and dad have told me. And the doc too.”

His relaxed, friendly tone made her wonder if she’d overreacted. She already held a small grudge against him just because he was being groomed to be Dr. Richards’ successor. And he’d secretly cultivated Matthew’s friendship behind Dr. Richards’ back. But that didn’t make him a horrible person. Right? “I’m sorry, I’m just distracted. We’ve got a bunch of people here. Did you want to speak to Mom? Or Dr. Richards?”

“Could you put the doctor on, please? I’m afraid I’ve run into a snag.”

“Are you all right?” Rhiannon asked, filled with immediate concern.

“Yeah, I had this bright idea to rent a truck to get a lot of wood, and it started snowing.” He chuckled. “I’ve landed in a ditch.”

“Oh, no!”

“I’ve already called a tow truck, but I’m closer to Sunnysdale, the next town over from Crystal Lake. I didn’t realize how far I’d driven. Hey, did you hear that I’ll be a sub at your school? I want us to be friends, Rhiannon. I know that it sure would make the doc happy too.”

“Oh, right. Geez, are you sure we can’t come get you?”

“The tow truck is taking me to a hotel for the night, but I promise I’ll be back tomorrow in plenty of time for the party. Your parents are really special people, and I’d hate to disappoint them.”

“Okay, well, hang on and I’ll go find the doc—I mean, Dr. Richards.” She shook her head.

“How about you just pass on the message for me, Rhiannon? My cell battery is getting low. See you tomorrow—I’m really looking forward to it.”

Mrs. Edwards pushed open the kitchen door, looking around the room until she found Rhiannon, who had just hung up the phone. “Is everything all right?”

Rhee started to say yes, but then they all heard a terrified yell coming from the second floor.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Rhiannon broke away from her group of friends and ran up the stairs, almost tripping over Thor as he glared down the hall, hissing.

“Matthew? Matthew!”

She heard pounding from the inside of Matthew’s room, and immediately used her psychic powers to twist the doorknob. It wouldn’t budge.

Dr. Richards and Tanya came out of the office next to her parent’s bedroom. “We tried to get out and couldn’t,” explained Tanya in a rush. “The door was blocked.”

Rhee noticed Dr. Richards’ sharp eyes narrow as he stared at Matthew’s door. Tanya inhaled just as Matthew shouted again, “The door’s stuck—help!”

Tanya and Rhiannon instinctively clasped hands and used their collective mind power against whoever was locking Matthew inside.

After thirty seconds, the door swung open and they heard Matthew as he crashed into the bed. They rushed in, noticing Officer Julianne at the top of the stairs, while Mrs. Edwards and Starla were trying to keep everyone else calmed down.

Dr. Richards held up one hand and waved. “Everything’s fine, under control!”

Then he walked in and shut the door behind them, right in Officer Julianne’s face.

“Matthew? What happened?” Rhiannon saw that his nose was bleeding, he was half-naked and that there were scorch marks around the carpet in front of the door.

He wiped his nose with a T-shirt he grabbed from his suitcase. “I don’t know. I was going to go and talk to Dr. Richards, but I was hot in my sweatshirt, so I was gonna change into a T-shirt. That’s when I noticed that my flute case was lying on the bed. My head got all fuzzy, and the next thing I knew, flames were jumping up the door. I yelled and tried to turn the knob.” He held out his hand, which was burned and blistered.

“The flute case was out? Is the flute still in it?” Dr. Richards’ eyebrows were drawn together in a frown.

“Yes,” Tanya whispered. “I came upstairs to ask about the flute.”

“What’s so important about the flute?” Matthew practically yelled.

“It has, er, supernatural qualities. And it’s an antique, very precious.” Dr. Richards scratched his chin. “Magick.”

Matthew rolled his eyes.

Rubbing her goose-bump-covered arms, Rhiannon asked, “Did you start the fire?” She hadn’t smelled smoke. Which was strange...

Shocked, Matthew stumbled to his feet. “No. I told you I haven’t been able to do that since I was twelve or thirteen.” His expression soured. “Except for when I’m having a nightmare.”

There was a distinct chill in the room, and Rhiannon closed her eyes, finally putting some of the pieces together. Hissing Thor. Scentless, iridescent blue flames. “Suzanne? Suzanne. Come to me, right now!”

The curtains whirled and Suzanne whimpered, “I just wanted to see it.”

Rhee felt nauseas. “See what?”

“The flute.”

“Why?” She saw everyone looking at her curiously; they could only hear Rhee’s part of the conversation.

“It’s pretty. I like pretty things. I like to dance. I could dance to the flute.”

Exhaling, Rhiannon bowed her head. “Have you been starting the fires?”

The curtains jumped and it was as if someone had let loose a mini-tornado in the room. Matthew’s things were knocked off the dresser, the drawers opened and shut and the suitcase was dumped to the floor.

“Suzanne!” Rhiannon raised her voice, relying heavily on her shined-up psychic skills. She had to be the one in control, but it was so hard after you’d been betrayed. “Calm down. Tell me why.”

Matthew's eyes got big and round and he glanced all over the room, searching for what he couldn't see.

Tanya sighed sadly, and Dr. Richards stood next to Rhee, offering his support and knowledge.

Rhiannon asked the question again, firmly. No nonsense. "Why?"

Suzanne answered in a low, wheedling tone. "Matthew is going to take my place. You won't need me anymore. I just want him to go away, and then things will be normal. Make Matthew go away, and I promise I will be very, very good."

Rhee knew her heart was breaking, it hurt so bad. She cleared her throat. "No, Suzanne. He won't be the one to leave."

It was like someone suddenly stole all of her breath in a giant vacuum and then she was falling, gasping for air. As her world tilted sideways, Rhiannon caught a glimpse of the spirit, something she hadn't been able to do since the first time she'd seen her wavering image in the attic window months ago.

Starla burst into the room, a key in her hands, Miles at her heels. Officer Julianne shouldered her way in, too, shouting, "What on earth is going on? Is everyone all right?"

Matthew caught Rhee before she hit the floor, her head rested against his bare chest. The last thing she saw before floating away was a sea of concerned faces.

She dreamed, knowing she was dreaming, and that it wasn't *her* dream. She was trapped in the nightmare with Matthew once again. She wished she could fast forward past the burning curtains, the flying embers and the yells for help. But she couldn't. Each step of the nightmare had to be relived.

Why? She found she was able to rewind, so she went back and looked at the flaming curtains. She saw it then...a clue, maybe? The black candle, tipped to its side, the wick still burning and licking up toward the fabric. Amazed at this new discovery, she shook off Matthew's six-year-old view and looked at the room again, with older, more suspicious eyes.

Newspapers were piled against the walls of the room. This had to be the living room. Why was Matthew there? It was evening, bedtime, she sensed. Matthew was in his pajamas. Probing his thoughts, she realized that he'd been awakened by shouting. He couldn't get into his mama and daddy's room, there was fire. Bad fire, and he went to get the fire extinguishers that were all over the house.

They weren't there.

He tried his uncle's room, he didn't like his Uncle Ian, he was mean and teased Matthew all of the time. He was sleeping. Matthew yelled for him to wake up, but he didn't, and so Matthew took a deep breath and tiptoed inside to shake Uncle Ian by the shoulder. They had to get out of the house, stop drop and roll, just like Mama had taught him.

Matthew popped his thumb out of his mouth and reached out, pulling down the blanket. The boy on the bed wasn't Ian, he had blood all over his head, with his eyes open.

Screaming, Matthew ran from the room and down the hall to the living room.

The curtains are burning, this is the part of the nightmare Rhiannon is most familiar with, and then the shadow comes forward and Ian has the hammer and yells where is it and Matthew crosses his arms over his head—

The sharp scent of vinegar beneath her nose woke her up immediately, making her eyes water. Or maybe she'd been crying.

Her mom was.

They'd laid her out on Matthew's bed. Mrs. Edwards was kneeling next to the bed, the vinegar in her hand. She held it up. "Your mom thought of this, nothing we could do was getting to you."

"I had the nightmare again."

Mrs. Edwards bowed her head. "I know. I've been getting bits and pieces of it myself. But for me, they aren't clear."

Starla pushed forward and wiped Rhiannon's face with a moist, lavender scented towel. "Rhiannon is named after the Celtic Moon Goddess—one of her powers is dream interpretation. This gift is strengthened by water."

Rhee struggled to sit up. "No thanks. I'm good—if those nightmares were any stronger I'd be choking on the smoke." Remembering all the faces before she'd passed out, Rhiannon asked, "Where is everybody?"

"We sent them home. Your dad made up some story about you fainting at the sight of blood. He's fast on his feet, cause he then said that Matthew had gotten his hand stuck in the drawer and the pounding was him trying to get the drawer unstuck and then the drawer had suddenly loosened and poor Matthew popped himself in the nose, which caused the nosebleed."

"Wow," Rhiannon managed. "I'm impressed."

Her dad sniffed. "Officer Julianne wasn't so much, but what could she say?"

"Uh, Matthew didn't set the fires."

"I know sweetie," her mom said and handed her the cloth. "Dr. Richards explained about Suzanne. Honey, I'm so sorry."

"Not those fires. The fire that killed his parents. He didn't do it."

Matthew's blue eyes searched her face and she felt the flush start at the base of her neck and climb up past her ears.

Mrs. Edwards sat back on her heels. "What?"

"Ian started the fires. He killed his sister and her husband and set up little Matthew, fire-starting Matthew, to take the blame."

Blinking behind her glasses, Mrs. Edwards reminded Rhee of a confused, injured owl instead of a wise one.

"Are you...sure?" Matthew croaked, his eyes welling with unshed tears.

"I, yes, I saw...there was a dead boy, Tanya was right, Ian must have faked dental records or something, I don't know how it was done, I'm not a big *CSI* fan. But the body they found burned in Ian's bed wasn't Ian."

Mrs. Edwards gasped and her face went a sick shade of greenish-gray.

Dr. Richards stepped forward and put a hand on her shoulder.

“I’m not a murderer? I’m not a murderer!” Matthew jumped to his feet. “Did you hear that, Dr. Richards? Did you?”

“Yes! Matthew, I’m so glad. Very happy, not that I—” he gave Mrs. Edwards another pat, “—we, ever thought of you as that, but I know you were struggling. As would anybody, and now you don’t have to. Congratulations.”

Rhiannon got up, swaying a little. Matthew swept her up in a hug and danced her around the room. “Thank you, Rhiannon, thank you. I don’t know why you could see what I couldn’t, but I don’t care! I feel free...”

Laughing, Rhee grabbed his hand to stop him from spinning. Then she sucked in a loud breath. “Your hand, Matthew. Where are the blisters?”

He stopped abruptly and Rhee fell back into her mom, who caught her in a tight hug. Rhiannon felt the love from the tips of her toes to the roots of her hair, and sent it back three-fold.

Matthew held out his hand to show everyone. No blisters.

“Not even a red mark,” Tanya whispered. “Oh, Matthew, if you have the power to heal yourself, that might explain why you couldn’t remember your nightmares. Your body was trying to protect you from your mind.”

Dr. Richards paced the room, excitement in his voice. “Yes! Or maybe as a self-protective mechanism to save you from going insane, your very psychic mind and body forged a pact. We’ll have to run tests, and, Matthew, my boy, this could be something scientifically huge. A new phenomenon that could set the parapsychology world on its heels! What if—” The doctor paused, looking Matthew up and down. “Yes, what if the unique thing that makes you a fire starter is the same unique thing that helps you heal? Magnificent!”

Matthew pumped his fist in the air. “Yes!”

Starla, her arm wrapped around Rhiannon’s waist, spoke up. “I think we need to find the real Ian Shaughnessy. If he knows that Matthew survived the fire then he could be looking for him.”

“Ian was all about the inheritance money,” Tanya said slowly. “So why would he go to the extreme and fake his own death too? Then he’d never get his hands on the Shaughnessy cash.”

“Ian was never completely focused on the money.” Mrs. Edwards shook her head. “Well, the money was important, but he wanted to find the key, to put an end to the curse. Ian fancied himself a bit of a magician; he had enough of the family’s psychic skills to do a few parlor tricks here and there. He hated that Matthew was so powerful at such a young age. Ian was jealous of the unconditional love his sister lavished on her boy.”

The medium paused, and the room was quiet except for their breathing.

Her accent grew thicker as she explained. “Ian as a lad was as rotten as Maggie was sweet. Just shy of his eighteenth birthday, and getting his hands on his share of the inheritance, the boy was a terror. He’d joined a dark cult, wanting power and vengeance. The fact that Maggie was willing to give up the search for the key and marry a Campbell and live happy ever after made him furious. Ian called her soft and weak. Choosing to forget her roots. Ian was willing to do whatever it took to prove himself worthy of his evil mentors. They weren’t stupid, they knew who he was, and how much he was worth, they knew who his sister and her husband were.”

“How do you know all of this, Mrs. Edwards?” Matthew, maybe because he was still wallowing in the happy knowledge that he wasn’t a murderer, held out his hand to the miserable medium. “Who are you in relation to Ian?”

She took the offered hand. “It isn’t Ian that I’m related to, luv. I was your dad’s auntie Lynn, which makes me your great-aunt.”

Smiling, Matthew pulled the older woman into an embrace, which she allowed for about three seconds before stepping back.

“We’ll talk and talk, now that you’re able to hear about your mom and dad. That’s the reason that I couldn’t see your nightmares. We’re family, though I’d only met you once as a babe, and the sight was blocked from me.”

She held tightly to both Matthew’s hands and said, “Starla’s right. If Ian is alive, he could come looking for you, especially if he knows you remember what he did. You see,

what Ian Shaughnessy really believed would break the curse is the destroying of the Campbell flute.”

Rhiannon, along with everyone else, turned to stare at the steel case.

“The flute is a thousand years old and made of the lightest, yet strongest wood, the sound it sings so pure and true. It is a talisman for good and beauty in the world, and Ian would see it destroyed so that he could avenge his father, damning the Shaughnessy line through eternity.”

She bowed her head. “That was ten years ago. If he’s still alive, who knows what he’s like?”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Tanya and Rhiannon chose their clothes with care. Tanya picked a green velvet skirt and a white ruffled poet's shirt. She wrapped an orange scarf around her waist and spiked her orange hair. "Any sign of Suzanne?"

Rhiannon quickly glanced toward the center of her bed, where Thor was sleeping peacefully. "Nope. Does this look okay?"

"You look like a medieval princess—or were you going for the goddess look? Either way, the silver sheath fits your figure perfectly. You're lucky to be tall. Nope, forget the goddess part, once the wreath of pine and ivy and holly berries is perched on your head, it will be medieval princess all the way. Very Robin Hood."

"Stop with the goddess jokes. There are times when my mom needs to button her lip. If she really tells the Moon Goddess story tonight, I will officially curl up and die and you'll know why."

Tanya laughed. "Weird about Matthew, huh?"

Straightening her crescent-moon amulet, Rhee joked, "Which part? The magickal Campbell flute, the Shaughnessy curse, the gazillions of dollars he inherits, or the fact that he survived a brutal murder?" Rhee clutched the amulet in her fist. "Actually, that last part isn't funny, it still makes me feel a little sick."

"I can already see a difference in him. He's smiling, he was even smiling over breakfast this morning. He's usually such a crab. He and Dr. Richards are going on and on about all the tests they can run and the studies they'll do."

"I guess he won't be staying here, Tanya. Which leaves an open room..."

"Don't tempt me. My mother makes me crazy. Your mother is terrific."

Rhiannon applied a thin line of silver shadow to her lower eyelid, then put opal moon drops in her ears. "I'm as ready as I can be, and we still have half an hour. Where's

Mike? I mean, Dr. Richards called every hotel in Sunnydale and he wasn't at any of them. I'm starting to get worried. Mom really likes this guy."

Tanya shrugged. "You think he'll be cute?"

"Ew! He's almost thirty."

Rhee and Tanya started laughing, were still giggling even when Matthew knocked on her attic bedroom door.

"Hey," he said as he walked in, looking totally hot in a sapphire blue cable-knit sweater and black jeans and boots. His blond hair was swept back from his face, showing off his magnetic blue eyes. "You two look good," he said with a smile.

"Mm-hmm," Rhiannon grinned. "You look all right yourself."

She glanced at Tanya, waiting for her friend to make a smart-ass comment. Instead, Tanya's pale skin looked like she'd applied to giant circles of blush on her cheeks. The realization that Tanya had a major crush on Matthew hit with a wallop. It seemed right and Rhee wondered why she hadn't noticed before.

Had Matthew?

From the way he was really checking Tanya out, Rhiannon would be willing to say he had. Now she just had to sit back and see what would happen. Or not.

"Hey Tanya, I've got to run downstairs for a sec. I'll be right back, guys. Well, not right back," Rhiannon amended with another grin.

She left her two speechless friends, absolutely delighted for them both. *It looks like the Goddess of Love had managed to strike them both in one fell swoop.*

Happiness bubbled as she went down to the kitchen, letting her nose lead the way. Her mom had huge pots of spiced apple cider brewing. Rhee sniffed, picking up on the cinnamon and a pinch of nutmeg. She pushed open the kitchen door, astounded by all the cakes, cookies, fresh rolls—both sweetened and unsweetened—crocks of butter, fruit and veggie trays assembled and ready to put out on the various tables her mom had set up all over the downstairs of the house. "Wow," Rhee said, completely impressed.

Her mom bustled over, her eyes sparkling in her smiling, flushed face. "Go look at what your dad and Dr. Richards put together, out the back."

Rhiannon walked toward the laundry room exit, not exactly surprised to see that her mom had even decorated the washer and dryer with pine garlands. The aroma was said to bring prosperity and peace, the garlands themselves were to keep out negativity. Rhiannon hoped that for her mom's sake, the magick worked.

Then she opened up the back door and gasped. Her dad and Dr. Richards were outside, and snow was just starting to fall in light, fluffy drops. They'd built a walkway of lights; luminary candles and ropes of pine and ivy garland clearly led a safe path from the house to the shop. "Celestial Beginnings," Rhiannon breathed, her words making puffs in the air. "Daddy, this is beautiful." The renovated barn, complete with a sparkling new window, was lit up with white, silver and blue lights around the roof and the door, which was open in welcome.

He nodded, pleased. "The doctor and I have been working all afternoon."

"It gorgeous—can I bring you some cider?" Rhee saw that even though Dr. Richards' nose was red, he was grinning, absolutely pleased with his work. Maybe every person had more than one part to who they were. He was more than just a scientist. He was a caring father figure and obviously a whiz with garland.

"Nah, we're coming in. I'm sure your mom has a list a mile long for us to do still." Her dad laughed good-naturedly, smacking the doctor on the back.

Dr. Richards went from smiling to stunned to laughing at the gesture of acceptance.

Rhiannon wanted to hug them both, she was so happy. What a beautiful Yuletide gift! Her worlds, which she had kept so separate, were coming together. Before she made such a mushy gesture, she waved and ran back inside.

"Melody! Hello, Skye and Glorianna." Bonnie, Corey and their moms waved too as everybody congregated in the crowded kitchen. "Hello!" Had she ever been so excited about a party?

Mrs. Edwards had already taken everyone's coats, so Rhiannon tried to get everyone under the age of seventeen to follow her. "Be right back, Mom."

"You better—I have things you can help me do."

They all ran for the stairs.

Rhee said, “Red is awesome on you, Mel.” Melody had opted for almost a costume in a simple red gown that hugged her body from the shoulders to the ground. She’d tied silver bells to her black shoes, which peeped and jingled from beneath her hem as she walked up the steps. A string of bells, all colors and shapes, hung around her neck and her beautiful dark hair was braided in a coronet on top of her head.

“Thanks, it was fun making it.”

“As in, you bought fabric and sewed it yourself?”

Melody’s brown eyes flashed with humor. “Yeah.”

“I’m impressed.”

They paraded into Rhiannon’s room, where Tanya and Matthew were standing close together in front of the window, looking out at the snow falling down. Rhee announced, “The cool people are here.”

Bonnie and Corey started laughing. “I’ve never been one of the cool people,” Bonnie said with a smile.

“I told you I’d take ya places, babe.” Corey snuck his arm around Bonnie’s waist.

Tanya eyed the couple. “You two look terrific. Forest green and black. Are those really matching sweaters?”

“Don’t laugh,” Bonnie scolded. “We really didn’t plan this. At least I’m in a skirt.”

Corey huffed, “She wouldn’t let me wear mine.”

They all laughed anyway and Rhiannon warned, “We need to go downstairs and have a great, loud time. Hopefully Mom won’t notice if nobody comes.”

“It’s so beautiful with the snow falling as the sun sets,” Tanya said as she pointed out the window. “And I agree that we need to go downstairs. Because if all those headlights are coming this way, your Mom is going to need all the help she can get.”

Rhiannon walked over and looked out. Her stomach clenched as she saw the rows of cars coming down the drive. “By the Goddess, where are they all going to park?”

Rhiannon tried to keep track of her friends as they were all pressed into service. Rhee imagined she was a tavern wench, doling out ale instead of cider. Hands were always out for more.

Tanya carried a heavy silver platter of cakes, greeting everyone with a smile. Matthew seemed to be helping a lot of ladies find a seat—his blond hair was almost always bent down to a female head. There was no denying his cute factor.

Corey and Bonnie were double-teaming, taking people's coats and finding new spots to pile them.

Melody passed by at one point, collecting garbage. "Where did these people come from? Crystal Lake isn't this big!"

Starla waved once from the kitchen, a smile wreathing her face. "Mike's here! Starting the bonfire. You are all doing great, oh, this is such fun!" Her mom's red, green, silver and gold bracelets loudly agreed.

Everybody was being really nice, and Dr. Richards and her dad, along with Mrs. Edwards and Skye, were helping people back and forth across the lawn to Celestial Beginnings. Rhiannon heard one lady, who she recognized from the picket line, say, "Witchcraft? What nonsense. These people are like those Mother Nature, hug-the-tree people. Wacky, but nice."

Rhiannon tucked that funny piece of gossip away to share with her mom later.

Pausing to wipe her forehead, she looked up in time to see a flash going up the stairs. She blinked, wondering if it was a trick of the light, then she saw the slight movement of the pine garland around the railings.

What was Suzanne doing downstairs with all of the people? What if she made a scene? Real fear twisted her stomach as she thought of what people would say if their cider cups went flying through the air.

Her mom would be really upset.

Rhee discreetly edged away from the crowd of people, moving toward the stairs.

Once she reached the second floor, she saw good old Thor hissing and spitting at Matthew's bedroom. Throwing her shoulders back, Rhiannon marched down the hall and threw open the door with enough mental strength to capture Suzanne's attention.

It sucked knowing that Mrs. Edwards was right and that Suzanne was going to have to go.

She stepped into the room, totally prepared to yell at the spirit.

Confused, she paused and asked, "What?" She pressed her hand to her throat and said, "Geez, Matthew, I'm so sorry! I thought..." The figure bent over the bed, rummaging through Matthew's suitcase, then turned around and grinned.

Rhee's body trembled and she grabbed the doorframe for support. Suzanne's coolness rushed around her, but the spirit was surprisingly mute. "You're not, I mean, you—"

The man grinned wide, showing white teeth in his strong face. His copper bright hair shone like a new penny. "Hello, Rhiannon," he said arrogantly. "I sure have been wanting to meet you. I'm Mike—"

Bristling, her skin alternately hot and cold, her stomach nauseated, she swallowed. "Mike? Somehow I don't think so. Ian."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“Very clever, aren’t you, luv?” He dropped his American accent and laid on the Irish one thick.

Rhiannon got the sense that he was toying with her, and she didn’t much like it. Agitated, Suzanne spun around the room.

“So tell me where I can find the flute, and then I’ll be gone.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Suzanne tugged at the drawer where Matthew had last put the flute.

Mike-Ian chuckled, scratching his chin. “Good girl, Suzanne. You may speak.”

Rhee thought her head would explode as Suzanne burst, “He promised not to hurt you, he did, but you have to give him the flute. It’s magick, and he’s going to make me real again, he’s going to give me life. Then maybe I could visit you. We could be friends. I love you, Rhiannon.”

“Enough!” he said, and just like that, Suzanne’s voice was silent.

Stunned by the man’s power, and the fact that he could make even the spirit mute, Rhiannon gasped. “You made a deal with Suzanne to help you find the flute? It doesn’t belong to you. You killed for it. You tried to kill Matthew.”

“That’s true. I’m not denyin’ it, now am I?” He reached into the drawer, searching for the steel case. “Where is it?”

She could only hope that Matthew had hidden it somewhere where Ian could never find it. Rhiannon tried to come up with a plan, one that would save herself, Matthew and the flute, oh, and her mom’s party.

She knew her mom would so not appreciate having a homicidal maniac at the Winter Solstice celebration.

He lifted his face, and gone was the clear-eyed friendly man who had fooled so many gifted people. His expression hardened and his eyes were like chips of despair, cold and deadly. This was the *real* Ian, and it occurred to Rhiannon that she should probably be screaming her head off.

She opened her mouth, but he pointed his finger and said a chant and suddenly her vocal chords were frozen shut. How did he do that?

Rhee tried to send a telepathic message to her mom, but it came back as undeliverable. Ian shook his finger at her, clucking his tongue before demanding, “Where is the flute?”

She couldn’t speak or send telepathic thoughts, so she shot a glare at him with her eyes. Not very effective, but it was the best she could do.

Suzanne brushed the hair back off Rhee’s forehead.

He said, “I’ll release your voice, but I expect an answer.”

Invisible fingers eased up around her throat and she sucked in a huge breath of air. “I don’t know,” she croaked. “Suzanne, why are you helping him? Why?”

Suzanne fluttered around the room in panicky jerks, and Rhee was amazed, not in a good way, at Ian’s psychic control.

He crossed his arms with smug satisfaction. “Please, Suzanne, explain yourself.”

The air rushed around Rhiannon’s face as Suz said, “He promised to make Matthew go away. I can be real, we can dance. Mike says he loves me.” The temperature in the room warmed.

“Don’t you understand he’s lying to you? His name is Ian and he’s a bad man! He ki—”

Ian shot his hand across the air in a slashing movement, and she was cut off mid-sentence. “You’re not playing nice, Rhee. I think I’ll keep you gagged.”

Rhiannon watched as he pulled himself back from the brink of total wacko, settling his facial features into the not-so-dangerous substitute teacher.

Her eyes widened as she remembered seeing that hair.

He raked his fingers through it and said, “Oh? You remember seeing me? I was at the high school for my job interview. Mrs. Bing thought it would be wonderful if I could chaperone, see how I liked the feel of a small town dance.” He arched his brow and eyed her speculatively. “Too bad I didn’t get you with the disco ball.”

Furious, Rhiannon inhaled, her voice immobile.

How come he doesn’t look evil? It should be stamped on his forehead! He laughed, his blue eyes crinkling at the corners.

“You never realized you were the target, I know. I do a lot of research on my subjects.”

She bristled—it was almost like he wanted a pat on the back for a job well done. *Jerk!* Rhee went over every bit of training she’d ever received, searching for the power to beat him.

“I wanted Matthew away from the institute. I wanted him alone and depressed, so emailing him that he might not be able to trust Dr. Richards was just the beginning. Telling him to leave the institute where I could get him alone, having him come here where he thought he would be safe, and then having you killed. Well, a suicide note would’ve been very believable.”

Using all her strength Rhiannon pitched her power against his and burst the barrier he’d placed on her voice. “How dare you? You still would get *nothing!*”

“You’re strong and clever. I like that.” He walked over and brushed his finger over her lips. “Beautiful and smart. You just aren’t thinking long term.”

She angled her face away so that he couldn’t touch her; he made her skin crawl. “You’re sick,” she sneered.

He smiled, his eyes so innocent looking. “Now, now. Don’t be angry. I was afraid that I might have to come up with something a little more drastic. You are a hard one to pin down! I’ve encouraged the witchcraft rumors in this little ’burb. Just a word here and there. That Felicity is starved for attention and really useful.”

Grr!

He scratched his eyebrow. “I didn’t want to blow my cover with the doc—after all, I’m his protégée. When he dies, and it won’t be long after I come to the institute that he has a nasty accident—then I’ll get everything. Matthew will finally be dead—I have no idea how the little monster survived in the first place, and so, my luv, will you.”

Rhiannon gulped, the frantic pulls of Suzanne tugging her hair weren’t calming her down in the least. Dead? What could she do? He was powerful, but evil. She was strong, but still training. If she took him on, he would smash her to the ground.

Ian stepped back, studying her as if she was a puzzle. “I wonder...”

She threw back her shoulders. “I won’t help you, don’t even think it.”

Suzanne whirled around her shoulders. In fear? In warning?

Ian tapped his heel against the floor as he came to a decision. “I was hoping to get everything. But what I *need* is the flute. With that, I’ll break the stupid curse. That old flute has enough magickal power to get me whatever I want.”

Hoping to keep him talking, Rhiannon mocked, “You certainly got the Shaughnessy curse, didn’t you? Lying, cheating, stealing. Joining a cult for power, puh-lease.”

He raised his brows and Rhee saw a second’s hesitation. “Aren’t you well informed...” Ian waved his hand, as if he could erase the past. “That wasn’t the best plan, I’ll admit. But I was a boy, and still learning. I took all the knowledge those old fools had before I killed them. Now I can do *this*...”

Rhiannon sucked in a surprised breath as Ian shape-shifted into a demonic figure that pretty much scared ten years off the wheel of her life. How was he manipulating human matter?

“Or this.” He elongated his face, gave himself dripping sharp fangs and golden yellow eyes.

“What do you think?”

He wanted her to be impressed? Ew! It took Rhiannon a second to get her brains back in working order. She could never show her fear, so she let her voice drip revulsion. “Mrs. Edwards was right. You dabble in parlor tricks.”

He shifted into his normal self and shrugged, but Rhiannon noticed the flicker of unease in his gaze. “I can’t sustain the image for long, but it should work to get what I want.” He chuckled, buffing his fingernails against his shirt. “But as with all things there must be a sacrifice. I choose you, Rhiannon. A sacrifice worthy of your Moon Goddess. Because—” he glanced at his watch, his handsome face still smiling in friendship, “—in an hour, you’ll die. Just like the witches of old.”

His words gave another piece away. “You’re Murlyn!”

He bowed. “Of course.”

“You won’t get away with this.” Rhiannon couldn’t think of one way to stop him.

Ian stretched up and winked. “Yes, I will. Dr. Richards won’t recognize me as a demon, so I’ll get to keep that contact. I’ve worked a long time building that relationship. Do you have any clue the depths of knowledge your Dr. Richards houses in the institute? Ghosts, spirits, zombies, all of that information will be *mine*.”

Rhee shook her head, keeping her lips pursed.

“Your mother’s new friends will be terrified, they’ll probably throw her in the bonfire. You could maybe burn together, which is sort of sweet in a way.”

She jumped forward but Ian, with one outstretched hand, pinned her against the wall. Rhee struggled and Suzanne whipped the air around Ian’s face, lifting his hair.

He smiled, looking like an angel in a windstorm. “And Matthew, even though he will barter for your life with the flute, will have to die with you. Very fitting for him to burn to death, don’t you think so?”

“Suzanne—are you listening to this? Are you? Go get Mrs. Edwards! Get help!”

Ian chuckled. “Suzanne belongs to me now. She knows you were going to banish her to hell. I’m getting rid of Matthew for her, she’ll forgive me for killing you.”

The pictures flew off the wall and the room dropped to twenty degrees.

Rhiannon struggled against her rope bindings. Ian didn’t trust his psychic strength to hold out against her own power, so he’d added a sailor’s knot around her wrists and

ankles. She sent a quick *thank you* to the Goddess that she'd taken her refresher course at the institute. Now if she could just remember the spell for untying a knot...

Rhee looked out the hayloft window, noticing that the moon was hidden behind a cloud. It was dark, the only light coming from the large bonfire in the middle of the pasture. Would the folks in Crystal Lake allow the Winter Solstice to turn into a witch burning? Flames flickered high, illuminating the people as they came to stand around the bonfire.

Her toes curled as she imagined the heat burning her feet and legs. She was even wearing a dress, just like in that short vision she'd had. She whispered, "Undo what is done, untie this knot," and strained against the ropes. They tightened.

Betsy mooed loudly down in her stall below, and Rhiannon wished that the cow could talk.

Moonstone whinnied and Rhee amended, *Okay, I wish she could talk to a person.*

Or a spirit. Suzanne had known that this would happen, and yet she'd still chosen to do Ian's bidding. Betrayal sat heavy on her shoulders. At least, Rhee thought, she could ditch the guilt, since *her* anger hadn't been responsible for the falling disco ball—that had been Ian, which meant that Rhiannon had really saved Janet's life after all.

A good karmic deed, and if this was her last night on earth, she thought she'd better accumulate some more. Quick.

Bowing her head to the Moon Goddess, she prayed for strength to do what was best, for the good of all. Even if it meant, she gulped, getting hurt.

Opening her eyes, she saw her mom and dad, and all her friends gather around the fire. Were they wondering where she'd gone? Surprised, she saw Mr. and Mrs. Roberts, each holding a candle. There was Janet and Jared.

Jared. He looked so handsome. She wished she could make him smile one more time. Tanya and Matthew were stopping everyone; it looked like they were asking questions, because people were shaking their heads no.

Betsy mooed again, kicking back against the barn wall. Moonstone neighed and kicked too. Rhee's brow scrunched together. Were they trying to call for help? Ian had

covered the barn with a cloaking spell so that Rhee couldn't telepathically call out, or get any messages either.

Felicity was at the fire too, hanging out with Mutt and Jeff. Were they going to cause problems? She still owed them for the green dye. Caleb stayed close to Jared. But why were all the people that hated the Godfreys here? Especially Felicity. Felicity hated her guts.

It was as if she heard her name. Felicity looked up at the hayloft window, and Rhiannon immediately started to struggle, hoping to get her attention. This could be her one chance to save everyone from Ian's bonfire plans.

She closed her eyes, concentrating on breaking the psychic freeze Ian had put on her brain. *Felicity! Can you hear me?*

When she opened her eyes again, Felicity had turned her back. She remembered that Ian had used Felicity and her untapped powers.

Tears filled her eyes, but she refused to cry. No way. With her hands and legs tied, how could she get free? She closed her eyes tight, concentrating on the ropes that bound her. No way could she let Ian and his evil plan ruin everything! A shaft of moonlight came in through the window, and she poured her heart and soul into the spell. "Rhiannon, Moon Goddess, give me the power to break the knot. My family's in trouble, I'm all they've got, give me the power, give me the power, give me the power times three..." Rhee stretched her hands and feet against the ropes, chanting and focusing to get past Ian's spell and to reach her namesake.

The ropes broke with a pop and Rhiannon fell back against the wooden floor of the loft, smacking her head.

Just then the barn door opened. She heard Tanya yell, "Rhiannon? Are you in here?"

Betsy and Moonstone struck up a chorus of noise.

Rhee yelled, "Up here! Tanya, how'd you find me?" But since her mouth was covered in tape, she doubted Tanya heard her. She saw stars from hitting her head so hard, and a warm trickle of something gooey snaked down the back of her neck. She was almost ready to cry. After all of that, it would suck if Tanya couldn't hear her.

Her friend's face peered up over the edge of the loft. She reached forward and ripped the duct tape off Rhee's mouth. "You okay?"

She sniffed back her tears. "I've been better. Mike is Ian."

"What?" Tanya's fake diamond flashed.

"Ian needs the flute. He says it's the only way to lift the Shaughnessy curse. He's wrong, though."

"Let's go find Dr. Richards. No way are you getting tossed in a bonfire."

"I never told you about that," Rhee said.

"I'm psychic too, babe. I've been having dreams about you and fire for weeks."

She scrambled down the ladder after her friend. "How'd you get past Ian's cloaking spell?"

"Your animals. Ian may be powerful, but he's not very smart. Animals can get past psychic barriers. Look at Thor and Suzanne."

Rhee quickly gave her pets a treat. "Extra brushing and ear scratching, I promise, girls. Thanks."

"I heard them," Tanya said. "Like through a fog over my brain. I'd searched everywhere, but totally forgot about the barn. It was like it never even crossed my mind to check it out."

Rhiannon ran for the door. "Ian's magick is strong, he can even shape shift. Not for long periods, but still. He is so creepy."

Tanya pushed open the barn door and the sound of her mother's voice echoed through the suddenly quiet pasture as everyone stopped to listen. With curiosity, and maybe even respect. Rhee was so proud of her mom.

"Tonight we celebrate the birth of new promise and hope. As the days grow longer, we see the end of winter's harshness..."

Tanya tugged on Rhiannon's hand. "C'mon!"

"Oh, yeah. Save Matthew and the flute. Where to?"

“Matthew has no clue he’s even in danger. But I don’t want to split us up, either. Bad stuff always happens when people don’t stick together,” Tanya said as they hustled toward the house. “Mrs. Edwards has the flute, let’s get her first.”

Rhiannon stopped so fast that she almost fell. “You’re sure she’s in the house?”

“No. We were looking for both of you.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Just then, Mrs. Edwards came out the back door of the farmhouse, the steel case of the flute tucked under her arm.

Relief flooded Rhiannon's nervous system. Everything would be fine now. Tanya called out, "Mrs. Edwards!"

The medium glanced at them, waved impatiently, and walked quickly toward the parked cars in the front drive way.

Rhiannon got a weird feeling. Mrs. Edwards wasn't walking the way she normally did, and was that a pant leg beneath her skirt? Going with her instincts she shouted, "Ian! Stop!"

Officer Julianne came around from the side of the house. "Mike?" she called in confusion. "What are you doing?"

Ian, now looking like himself, came to a halt, then frantically met each of their gazes. Narrowing his eyes and flashing a death-head smile at Rhiannon, he turned and ran straight for the bonfire. "Come and get me!"

Chilled to the bone, Rhiannon yelled, "He's got Matthew's flute! It's priceless, Officer. We've got to stop him!"

She and Tanya took off after Ian, and soon Officer Julianne was matching them stride for stride. "Was it my imagination, or was he wearing a wig and a dress? Where did it go?"

Rhiannon huffed. "I can answer later." She ran a few more steps. "It's complicated."

"I can't wait," Officer Julianne said drolly before sprinting ahead.

Rhiannon closed her eyes and concentrated on psychically reaching her mom who had no clue of the evil that was surrounding her sacred circle, wanting to get in. "*Matthew's in danger! Matthew's in danger!*"

Her mom stopped in the middle of her prepared speech and asked, “Matthew’s in danger? Where? Oh, look out! Behind you!”

Rhiannon watched the scene unfold as if it were a movie. Her feet were slow to move forward, like they were stuck in glue.

Mrs. Edwards, the real Mrs. Edwards, stumbled out of the house, her glasses broken on the left side and her normally perfectly pinned hair a mess. “I thought it was Matthew, wanting to see his flute. He was going to play in memory of his father, and then...I was struck on the head. Suzanne revived me, saying you needed me.”

Rhee stopped to help the gasping medium, and they struggled toward the chaos, helplessly watching as Matthew was tackled from behind by a giant demon with dripping yellow fangs and golden eyes. “No!” she and Mrs. Edwards yelled at the same time.

Tanya jumped into the fray, her orange hair glinting like flames as she tried to protect Matthew. Dr. Richards yanked them both away from the demon then grabbed the steel flute case, hitting the apparition over the head with it.

The demon fell to the ground in a pile of black.

Everyone screamed but nobody left. Rhee tensed, ready to save her mom from being tossed into the bonfire, no matter the cost. She edged closer, Mrs. Edwards hanging heavily on her arm.

Officer Julianne lifted the demon up by the hood of black fabric cloak.

“Gotcha!” She proceeded to handcuff him.

Confused, Dr. Richards stepped forward and asked, “Michael?”

The folks around the bonfire relaxed, realizing that they hadn’t really seen a demon...right? It had been a...man...a trick of the light...a...

“This man is a notorious magician!” Officer Julianne said to the crowd.

“Ah,” they sighed in unison, able to grasp that explanation.

Mrs. Edwards let go of Rhiannon and stalked forward, fury in every bone of her body. She pointed at the cowering man, her finger the gavel of justice. “That’s not just a magician, Officer. His name is Ian Shaughnessy, and he’s a *murderer*.”

Rhiannon was impressed with how well Officer Julianne kept her cool. “I’ll take him down to the station.”

“Be careful, he’s very dangerous.” Rhee could tell that poor Mrs. Edwards was thinking about her murdered nephew and his wife. She was so glad that now Mrs. Edwards and Matthew had each other.

The policewoman looked around at the crowd. “You folks should wrap it up here, there’s a snowstorm coming. I don’t want to have to come back and tow anyone out of a ditch, okay?” She gave Ian a shove toward the police car. “I’m gonna be busy tonight.” Her back up arrived, grabbing Ian’s opposite arm.

Mrs. Edwards met the officer’s gaze and Rhiannon swore that something passed between the two women. They nodded once, and then Mrs. Edwards sank to her knees by Matthew’s side as Ian was hauled away.

Matthew lay there, dazed, the steel flute case in his arms and hugged tight to his chest.

Rhiannon and Tanya knelt at his other side, and he just blinked at them before smiling this really dopey smile. “I remember,” he said. “I am the love that lifts the curse. It’s in “Matthew’s Song”. My mom, a Shaughnessy, found love with a Campbell and chose him over everything, and then they had me. I end the Shaughnessy curse.”

Tanya leaned over and kissed Matthew’s forehead. “Let’s go, hot stuff, on your feet.”

Janet walked up, her mom and dad behind her. “Great party. It’s a shame we missed what y’all do for Halloween.”

Rhiannon let her mom lift her to her feet and she stared at her nemesis, who had caused her nothing but trouble.

Mr. Roberts gave his wife and daughter each a nudge from behind. Mrs. Roberts licked her thin, pinched lips and said, “I’m here to offer a formal apology. This was a lovely celebration, thank you for the invitation.”

Rhiannon hid a smile. She didn’t bother reading Gina Roberts’ thoughts. It was obvious her husband had put an end to her nasty behavior, and that was enough.

Janet tossed her blond curls. “I have to reimburse you for the clothes I ruined. I have to pay the bowling alley people, too, only it was more than I had and Daddy wouldn’t give me, well, I’ll be working at that stinking place every Saturday this winter. I’m sorry. And I never did say thank you for saving me from the disco ball, so I might as well just humiliate myself all at once.” She glanced at her father. “Okay?”

He nodded and Janet gave Rhiannon a quick smile. “See ya at school.”

They turned to walk away and Janet tossed over her shoulder a whispered, “freak.” But her eyes were flashing with humor and Rhiannon felt hope that just maybe they’d get a chance to work out their differences. Or not.

Melody growled. “I swear, that girl!”

Bonnie and Corey held hands and shrugged.

“She’ll never really change,” Bonnie said.

Corey wagged his brows and lowered his voice, “Witchy woman”, he sang, then his mom popped him on the head and he jumped. “Sorry, Mom.”

Matthew, who was being propped up between her dad and Dr. Richards until he stopped seeing double said, “You guys really know how to throw a party.”

Starla whispered in Rhiannon’s ear, “That Gina Roberts woman, she is one stressed out lady. Maybe an infusion of—”

“Leave Mrs. Roberts alone, Mom.”

Lips twitching, Starla said, “Fine. I’ll start handing people coats and keys.” She lifted her nose and sniffed. “Snow’s coming—but the dark shadow is moving off the moon. Rhee, look. Isn’t that nice? Happy, happy Yule!”

Most everybody wandered to the front of the house, preparing to leave before the storm hit. Rhiannon and Tanya, who had her arm around Matthew’s waist, turned back to the bonfire. Rhee’s heart caught in her throat as she noticed a familiar silhouette walking toward her. “Jared? Uh, your parents already left.”

“I’m catching a ride with Caleb’s folks, we’ll be leaving in a minute. I just wanted to say, uh, great party. Was the murder thing for real? Folks in Crystal Lake will be talking, that’s for sure.”

Rhee lifted her lips in a half smile. “Nothing new, there.”

“I’m sorry. I know my mom got a lot of people fired up—”

“It was fun.” Had she forgotten how *not* fun it was being tied up in the hayloft? Not so much, but she couldn’t tell Jared the truth. No matter how much she liked him, she couldn’t trust him.

Caleb grinned at her, his eyes flashing with something...knowledge? Interest? *He was kinda cute*, she thought. She smiled back.

Tanya pinched her arm and mental IM’d, “*Stop flirting, we have a mess to clean up, questions to answer, and a murderer to keep behind bars.*”

Rhiannon giggled. “We have to go in. Thanks, guys, for coming. The support was awesome.”

Jared ran his hand through his hair just as the first few snowflakes dropped from the sky. “We called everybody in the phone book and told them not to miss it.” He smiled and his teeth shone in the sudden beam of moonlight that peeked out behind a traveling cloud. Like an omen?

Rhiannon laughed, she couldn’t help it. “You two did that? Called everybody?”

“Yeah,” Jared suddenly leaned in and kissed Rhiannon on the cheek. Her pulse sped and her heart thumped like a bongo drum. “Merry Christmas, Rhee.”

She sighed, her stupid, dumb heart melting faster than the snowflakes on his lashes. “Happy New Year, Jared.”

It was way past midnight as they got the last of the mess cleared away. Dr. Richards leaned against the mantle. “I just can’t believe it. Luke and Maggie knew all along that you, Matthew, were the one to end the Shaughnessy curse. A Shaughnessy and a Campbell, united to produce the key.”

Matthew grinned, the magickal flute in his hands.

Mrs. Edwards, who Matthew was now calling Auntie Lynn, dabbed at her tears. “They’re so happy right now, I just know it.” She patted her heart. “I can feel them.”

Lifting the musical instrument, Matthew laughed with pure happiness. “I can too. Finally.”

Dr. Richards took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. “I was too blind to see through Michael’s disguise. He used me to get close to you. How can you forgive me?”

Matthew leaned back into the couch, shoulder to shoulder with Tanya. “There’s nothing to forgive. You were taken in, just as we all were. The only person who figured it out was Rhee. And she almost paid for it with her life.” Matthew set the flute down on the steel case, then jumped up and grabbed Tanya by the hand, swinging her in a circle in the center of the living room. “Do you know how lucky we all are?”

Tanya tossed her orange hair and laughed. “Yeah, I’m totally agreeing with that, Mattster.”

Rhiannon, who was sitting next to her mom, felt the sudden chill seep into the warm room. Thor hopped up from his spot on the back of the recliner and hissed. It could only be Suzanne. Her stomach clenched.

Mrs. Edwards stopped talking and lifted her head. “Rhee?”

Heart heavy, Rhiannon stood and asked, “Suzanne?”

A desperate feeling of sadness overwhelmed her as Rhiannon absorbed the spirit’s emotions for the last time. “Yes, I am here. I am willing to be banished.”

“Not to hell, Suzanne, I don’t believe in such a place.” Rhee mentally sent the spirit all the affection she could, going over the plan that she and Mrs. Edwards had come up with. Even though it was the right thing to do, it was hard.

Mrs. Edwards took Rhiannon’s hand and said, “Suzanne, I have found a guide to help you cross over. Someone you loved, so many years ago.”

“I love Rhiannon. I simply wanted to dance. I am lonely.”

Rhee let out a small laugh. “You won’t be anymore, I promise. Would you like to dance before you go? Matthew? Would you please play the flute?”

From the corner of her eye, Rhiannon saw Matthew shrug and say, “But I don’t know how.”

Dr. Richards reminded him, “It’s a magick flute, Matthew. Place your fingers over the keys and open your heart. You’ll see.”

Matthew hesitated, but then took a deep breath, his shoulders thrown back as he closed his eyes and believed.

At first the sounds he made were soft. The notes hung in the air as he gained confidence, the tones pure and heart-wrenchingly magickal.

Rhiannon watched in awe as Suzanne slowly took shape. Her hair was a dark chestnut, pinned into a bun at the back of her head. Her eyes were deep brown, her lashes long and thick, and her smile was bright.

She wore a blue gingham dress; her hands were long-fingered and soft. She lifted one and asked in surprise, “You can see me? Can you? Yes! I see it on your face!”

Rhiannon smiled, even though she felt like crying. “You’re very pretty Suzanne,” she said as she held out her hands to dance. The spirit wasn’t quite solid, similar to a hologram and Suz’s substance was like trying to hold on to Jell-o. Rhee looked around the room, and saw that everyone could see what she was seeing. Her mom had tears streaming down her face.

“Thank you, Rhiannon.” The spirit sighed. “I’m so sorry. Will you forgive me?”

Rhee was getting a better understanding of what it must have been like for the spirit stuck between life, as in Rhiannon’s, and death, as in Suzanne’s. Her throat seemed clogged with emotion as she nodded. “You’ll be happy, Suz. That’s all I wanted for you.”

Mrs. Edwards’ lilting voice broke in. “Your mother’s here, Suzanne, come to take you home.”

Suzanne stopped and whirled, her semi-solid figure dissolving into mist, but the delight in her voice echoed in the air. “Mother? Here?”

Rhiannon and Mrs. Edwards quickly joined hands, their heads bent together as they wished Suzanne a good journey. “Follow the light, Suzanne,” Rhee called.

“Good-bye, Rhiannon, good-bye! Stay out of trouble. Oh Mother, how I’ve missed you!”

And just like that, Suz was gone.

Emptiness opened up like a black hole in Rhiannon's heart, taking her by surprise. She was stunned by loss, as if she was missing a piece of her soul. Unable to move, Rhee stayed on her knees, her head bent.

She didn't know how much time passed before she was able to slowly open her eyes. The people she loved most surrounded her in a protective circle. Hands joined, they swayed softly back and forth, washing her with healing affection.

Losing Suz hurt, she'd loved her. Jared had broken her heart. People she'd thought were her friends weren't, but she'd made some new ones too. Life was all about taking chances, braving the risk of being rejected. It all boiled down to being true to who you are. She lifted her chin and got to her feet.

Rhiannon Selene Godfrey, she thought as she raised her arms within the circle, a witch's most powerful tool. A mix of magick and science, a believer in dreams, but with my feet grounded in reality. *How can I blend all my parts so that I fit in my own skin?*

Searching the depths of her being for an answer, she realized that denying science wouldn't make her a better person, just like denying her spirituality didn't take away her psychic ability. What was she so afraid of?

Intense humiliation? Been there.

Heartache? Done that.

Maybe she was growing up.

About the Author

Traci Hall is new to the YA publishing world—but far from new when it comes to understanding the teen brain—which is most complex. ☺

Having barely survived being a teenager, Traci decided to raise them as well. Character studies, their feeding habits, and even their lack of hearing skills, has challenged her in ways she never imagined when the bunny, er, died.

Happily married *forever* to the same great guy, who shares Traci's dedication to reliving the worst of their teen years, Traci has two teenagers, an Xbox, Playstation and wireless internet for all five of their computers. Traci spends a fortune on those chicken soups that you just need to add water to (minus the veggies, of course) and Cream Soda. Easy Mac, brownies and delivery pizza make up the rest of the menu at Chez Hall. At any given time there are four to twenty teens just hangin' out.

She wouldn't have it any other way!

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Look for these titles by Traci Hall

Now Available:

Her Wiccan, Wiccan Ways

Just one spell. Problem solved. How hard can it be?

Her Wiccan, Wiccan Ways

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A Rhiannon Godfrey story.

Rhiannon Godfrey is a psychic prodigy, but her parents don't see things her way. They think she needs a "normal" high school experience—she wants to stay in trendy Vegas. In the small farming town of Crystal Lake, being Wiccan doesn't exactly help the Godfreys blend in.

Beyond angry, Rhiannon neglects to inform her parents the farmhouse they just bought is haunted. Instead, she decides to use the resident ghost to prove that she belongs back in Dr. Richards's Institute of Parapsychology. Not that dispelling ghosts is her area of expertise, but really, how hard can it be?

And then there's Jared Roberts. Totally hot. For a cowboy, that is. Only problem? He comes with an evil twin sister, the shallow and popular Janet. Janet's only goal is to make Rhee's life miserable. So when she and her friends decide it's time for a little payback, Rhee goes to her mother's book of spells. Janet needs to be taught a lesson, and what harm can come from a few words?

Just one little spell.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Her Wiccan, Wiccan Ways:

High School. Just saying the words out loud made her stomach clench and her head ache. She only had two days left until her real torture began.

She must have been doing some really bad things for all this rotten crappy stuff to be happening to her. Hadn't she been punished enough already?

Her mother had dealt the tarot cards, her father had done a numerology reading, and that was that. She had to go to school.

Rhee had no choice but to give her parents the cold shoulder, on principle. And with Tanya still in England, she had to relent and talk to Matthew over email. Which had been

a stupid idea, since all he wanted to do was tell Mrs. Edwards and Dr. Richards about the farmhouse being haunted.

Nobody understood where she was coming from.

She got off the edge of her bed, her bare feet sinking into the plush white area rug they'd placed on the wood floor.

Her parents hadn't liked the idea of tearing down the partition in the attic, so they'd painted and cleaned instead. Rhee was now the proud owner of a closet she was afraid to go into, but at least it had a door and a lock. She wished they'd let her take a sledgehammer to it.

"Where are you, Suzanne?"

Rhiannon sat down in the recliner chair next to the window. The spirit hadn't been heard from since the shelf incident.

Too unsettled to read a book, Rhee got up and paced the room.

"I suppose I could go and search the storage barn for clues on who used to live here. Dad's been cleaning it out, and Mom said he found some cool stuff."

The gauze curtains at her window fluttered. Rhiannon glanced around hopefully. "Suzanne?"

Nothing. She stared at the drapes, but they didn't budge. It must have been her imagination.

"Girl, you have got to get out of this house. You are talking to yourself *and* seeing things."

She grabbed her black Doc Martens and quickly laced them up. She ran down the stairs two at a time, listening for her mom and dad. She didn't want to tell them where she was going—in fact, she didn't want to talk to them at all.

Ever.

The barn was open when she passed by, and she poked her head in the door. *All clear.*

"Hey, Betsy." She scratched behind the cow's ears. "I wish you could go with me to check out the outbuildings. I'm looking for treasure."

Rhiannon felt a little silly talking about treasure, but what the heck. She was bored.

“So, are you ready to move into a new place? Dad’s getting the best of the barn thingies all ready for you. You can live like a queen.”

Betsy’s tail swished and her eyes closed.

“Are you lonely? Do we need to get you a king cow?”

Betsy cracked open one eye and chewed her cud while blowing hot air through her nostrils.

Rhiannon laughed. “I’ll take that as a no. Well, you’ll be happy, Betsy, that’s the important thing. And Mom will be happy, opening her store in here once everything has been fumigated. And Dad is already happy, pretending to be Farmer John. Which just leaves me. Unhappy. Why did we have to move?”

The sound of her dad’s riding mower close to the barn cut off her pity party.

She waved good-bye to the cow and ran to the outbuilding that was being used as a place to pile all the unwanted stuff.

Rhee paused outside the unpainted structure and eyed the padlock. Did she really want to paw through someone else’s junk?

“Yes,” she answered herself. She focused on the shiny new lock until she heard the click. Imagining the lock open made it happen for real.

She pushed open the squeaking door, then used her telepathy to switch on the light. Rhee had to work with what was available—in this case, it was a forty-watt bulb when a hundred watt was needed.

“Dang.” Craning her head back, she saw boxes as high as the ceiling tilting precariously to the side, defying gravity. Dust motes danced like bugs in front of her eyes, the smell was musty and...just plain old.

She could see where her dad had added to the previous stacks, right up close next to the door. The Godfreys needed to have a garage sale. Garage included.

Rhiannon made her way, carefully, through the trail that led to the back. The light didn’t shine very far and the shadows flickered and moved, which gave her the creeps.

“Where to start?” Rhee didn’t care for the way her voice echoed around her. In hind sight, it hadn’t been such a great idea staying up all night and watching Stephen King movies.

“Shake it off, Rhiannon. Movies are pretend. Ghosts aren’t scary.” *Liar, liar, pants on fire.* She forced herself to think about Suzanne. Where could she find the spirit’s secrets?

“The oldest stuff will be in the way back, of course. I mean, how old is the farmhouse? A hundred years? That’s a lot of junk.”

She heard a sound to her left and whirled. A box at the top of a stack teetered, then tottered, and Rhiannon held her breath. With a flick of her mind, she pictured the box safely balanced and exhaled. She should have been filled with relief, but she knew she wasn’t alone. *Stop psyching yourself out! One too many horror movies, Rhee.* Mind-numbing fear was just a heartbeat away. “Suzanne?”

There is nothing to be afraid of. Rhee carefully walked between the boxes, her steps slow. If she gave in to fear, she’d never find the answers she needed. She peeked around the box, looking for whatever made the noise. A falling leaf? The sound of the boxes settling? *Nope.* Two yellow eyes peered at her from a dark crevice. The eyes grew wider and she couldn’t stop a scream as the thing darted toward her.

“Ah!”

She tripped over her own feet and landed hard on her backside as a rat the size of a full grown cat scampered by her. It was close enough that she could see its whiskers twitch and its tail slide like a worm across the packed dirt floor.

Rhiannon exhaled, her temper rising as the scare wore off, leaving her to feel a little ridiculous. “Come back here, you dirty rodent!”

Didn’t rats carry the plague or something?

Using all of her concentration she focused on the brownish gray fur of the quivering rat. Slowly, it slid her way and she turned it, raising it about a foot off the ground so they’d be eye to eye.

“Listen, pal. You got me. I coulda had a heart attack, and I’m only fourteen.”

The rat’s nose wiggled and its little eyes darted back and forth as it tried to get out of her psychic hold.

Rhiannon’s anger ebbed. “Okay, so maybe I scared you too. We can make a deal, all right? You stay out of my way, and I’ll stay out of yours.”

The rat's body became very still, as if it understood her perfectly. "Wouldn't that be a riot? Being able to talk to animals? Well, I have enough problems, bud. You have no idea."

She released her grip on the rodent, who, once free, took a minute to sit back on its haunches and stare at her with its beady, black eyes.

"Scoot!" Rhiannon said.

The rat took off.

"Well." She stood, brushed her butt off with both hands and headed toward the door and the farmhouse.

It was obvious she just wasn't cut out to be Indiana Jones.

Rhee was so focused on getting the heck out that it took a second before she noticed the stack of junk in front of her was swaying. One box fell to the left, and the other was falling to the right. In what seemed like slow motion, Rhiannon could only watch as the box came straight for her head—she was as powerless to move as the rat had been in her psychic grip.

I'll be crushed to oblivion!

Rhee felt two hands in the small of her back push her out of the way and she skidded forward, landing on her hands and knees. She turned just in time to see the box crash and burst open like a ripe watermelon.

Home is where the heart is. Until the truth comes knocking.

Life on the Move

© 2008 Megan Reilly

Casey Smith and her dad move around a lot, so packing boxes, driving all night, and moving into a new apartment in a new town is nothing, well, new to her. While it's weird that her dad is so restless, she's never really minded before—after all, there's nothing she can do about it.

But this time is different. This time they've moved to a place where she almost fits in. She's even made some friends, including Ethan, a gorgeous guy who could turn out to be more than just a friend—if only she could be sure she'll have time to really get to know him.

Just when her life is starting to have all kinds of possibilities, a knock comes on the door.

And everything Casey has ever known is turned upside down.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Life on the Move:

In movies and after-school specials, teachers always make the new student stand up and introduce themselves to the class. That's never happened to me, not once. I can't say I'm not glad.

Eventually it was time for lunch. I didn't like lunch. I knew most kids would say it was their favorite class of the day, but I thought it was wasted time. Starve me and send me home thirty-five minutes early and I'd be happy. Anything not to have to face the politics of the cafeteria. Too bad it wasn't an option.

This one had long tables with attached benches, arranged in rows that filled the room, and smelled like moldy bread. I didn't have any lunch money, or any lunch either. So it really was wasted time. I picked an empty spot at the end of the table in the corner of the room and put my head down on the table. Maybe they'd think I was sleeping and no one would bother me. In any case, I wouldn't have to look at them all, sitting there, laughing and eating and generally having a good time with their friends.

It didn't work. About halfway through the period, I could feel eyes burning into my skull. I didn't care for being watched, so I got up and walked out of the cafeteria. No one stopped me. I wandered the halls for several minutes until I found the bathroom and went inside. The floor was sticky, but I didn't care. No one else was in there. I stepped into a stall and slammed the door, standing there where no one could look at me and wonder who the freak was and where she'd come from.

The bell rang. I didn't want to go to class, but I didn't have a choice. I couldn't stay in the bathroom forever. The muck on my shoes made a squelching noise against the tile floor in the halls, but there was too much noise for anyone to notice. One more, I thought. It was a promise to myself, a mantra I repeated over and over in my head while watching the minutes tick off on the big industrial clock on the wall. One more, one more, one more.

The bell rang. I found my next class in time not to be late, but that meant I had to linger in the doorway until all the seats were taken and I could figure out where to sit. No one looked at me too strangely. Must be the same kids from the other classes I had, although no one looked familiar. The bell rang and I was still standing near the door. The teacher, a small man with wire-rimmed glasses and gray hair, looked at me curiously. "New kid," I said, ducking into a seat in the back.

He nodded. "Do you have a notebook?"

I pulled it out of my bag and removed the pen I'd stuck into its spiral.

"We're writing in our journals today." The teacher sat down at his desk after he gave the instruction and began to mark papers.

I almost snickered. Journals were almost the same as pop quizzes, representing that the teacher had no plan and no clue what to do and maybe a hangover, but they had to keep the kids busy and quiet for an hour. I flipped my notebook open and uncapped my pen, pressing it between my lips. I started making lines on the page, not writing. I didn't have anything to say, and teachers never made kids turn in journals, anyway. It was busy work, plain and simple.

I glanced around at the other kids in the classroom. They all wrote diligently. It made me frown and wonder what kind of weirdo classroom I'd wandered into. I fought the

temptation to pull out my schedule card and check to see if they'd mistakenly put me into the smart kid class.

The kid across the aisle from me looked up. Maybe having felt me looking, or maybe looking for the right word. He met my eyes and I felt something like a jolt. I was too used to not being looked at. Being invisible, day in and day out. He smiled. He had sandy hair and freckles and blue eyes like something from a painting. I tried to smile back, but my lips wouldn't work. He looked away.

Better that way. I started to shade in the lines I'd drawn on the page. If I pressed hard with the ballpoint and filled in every hint of white space, the color was almost precisely the same shade as the eyes of the boy across the aisle. For some reason this encouraged me and I kept coloring.

A loud noise from the front of the classroom startled me. The teacher had whipped shut his own spiral notebook. Maybe he hadn't been catching up on his grading. A teacher who kept journals with his students? That was a new one. Must be a frustrated novelist. What could be better than to write all day and get paid for teaching? It probably worked out pretty well.

I didn't get it, though. Only half an hour had gone by, leaving us about twenty minutes before the final bell rang and we were free again at last. My confusion didn't last long, though, because the teacher's eyes searched the room as he asked, "Who will read for us today?"

I tried to scrunch down in my seat. I hadn't anticipated this. A teacher who made kids read their journals out in class? It didn't make any sense. Except, no wonder those kids had all been writing. If they didn't, they were bound to be randomly called upon and humiliated in front of the entire class. The threat of humiliation is a huge motivator of high school students no matter where you are.

Of course the teacher nodded to me. "What's your name?" he asked, as though he should already know it.

"Casey," I said, and he marked it down in his grade book. "Smith," I added.

He nodded. "Why don't you start us out? Read us something from what you've written."

“She had her hand up.” I pointed out a brunette wearing a blue sweater and sitting in the front row. The teacher shook his head. Yeah, I hadn’t thought it would work. He must know I hadn’t written anything, because I didn’t know how it worked, and now I was going to get to be his example. Like the kids weren’t already laughing at me without his help. I sighed and picked up my notebook, holding it up for the class to see. Someone snickered and my chest tightened. The teacher cleared his throat, and there was silence again.

“I had a bit of writer’s block today,” I said. I could feel my face getting hot. “So I was thinking about the color blue.”

“What were you thinking about it?”

Man, this guy did not give up. “Um, I was thinking about all the things that are blue. Like the sky, and blueberries, and ballpoint pen ink, and those slushy drinks from 7-11, and eyes.” I looked down at my desk as I said this. Making it up as I went along.

“Eyes,” the teacher seized upon.

Couldn’t he see his work was done? I was embarrassed. Move on. “Yeah, you know. Blue eyes. How they’re all different shades, some light enough to freak you out, others dark blue like a starless sky at midnight.”

“Starless skies,” the teacher said. “Interesting.” He crossed his arms, and I could tell he was done with me. I dropped my notebook back onto the surface of my desk and melted against the back of my seat. “Theresa,” the teacher said, and I stopped paying attention as some girl in the front with brown hair started reading in a pretentious voice, like she thought she was so interesting.

The kid across the aisle was looking at me again. I guess he knew his eyes were blue. I gave him a wry little smile and shrugged my shoulders, then averted my eyes. A couple more boring essays went by and I kept scratching pictures in my notebook, not paying attention. Until the kid across the aisle raised his hand, volunteering to read from his journal.

“Ethan,” the teacher said, acknowledging him. So he had a name. With his attention directed elsewhere, I took the opportunity to study him. All the other kids were doing it.

“A stranger here,” he began in a clear voice, and my heart sank like the core of a nuclear reactor after a containment breach. My eyes focused on the surface of my desk, swirled as it was with caramel colored lines, simulating wood when it was plastic. “Mystery. Enigma. What does the future hold? The present, the past, the familiar, the lost.”

Megan gets lost in books. Literally.

The Ankh of Isis

© 2008 Christine Norris

The *Library of Athena*, Book 2

Megan Montgomery is looking forward to a nice, quiet Easter holiday. No school, no homework, time with her friends. Then her father informs her Mr. Hemmlich, a potential client and archaeologist, is coming to stay with them for the entire week. Her dreams of goofing off go up in smoke—until Hemmlich arrives with his handsome teenage son in tow. Things are definitely looking up.

Megan's excitement quickly turns to suspicion when Hemmlich starts asking questions about the manor and its builder, Sir Gregory. Is it just admiration for Sir Gregory's work? Or could Hemmlich know about the Library of Athena, the secret room full of magic books hidden deep beneath the manor? It shouldn't be possible.

But then again, if she can get sucked inside a book...

Enjoy the following excerpt for The Ankh of Isis:

"I rather like this temple," Rachel said. "It's got a certain...mysterious charm to it."

"I'm surprised you like anything that reminds you of Ancient Greece," Megan said with a teasing smirk. She wrapped an arm around her friend's shoulders. "You would think you had had enough of it."

Rachel feigned surprise. "I can't imagine why you would say such a thing. I mean, I only helped you cut off a Gorgon's head. Then I was forced to fly on the back of some mad mythical horse."

"His name is Pegasus."

"Whatever, it was perfectly terrifying. *Then* I was almost captured by some bull-man creature and eaten—"

"Minotaur."

"—*and* had to face a Sphinx who threatened to eat me if I didn't answer her silly riddles." She took a deep breath. "It doesn't make the temple any less interesting."

Megan snorted. “Well, when you put it that way...”

Tucked into the far corner, in the shadow of one of the columns, was a plain oak wooden door with a brass knob. Megan pulled the key from her pocket, put it in the lock and turned it. She swung the door open and allowed Rachel to enter.

Rachel’s voice echoed in the dark. “Brr. I’d forgotten how cold it is in here.”

“Bailey says it’s climate-controlled,” Megan explained. She flicked a switch, and torch-shaped electric lights came on to chase away the gloom. “The rocky cavern underneath the house keeps the books at precisely the right temperature and humidity levels to preserve the books.” She picked up two pair of white cotton gloves from a holder on the wall next to the door. She handed a pair to Rachel. “If you’re going to touch the books, put these on.”

“Why?” Rachel took the gloves. “We didn’t have to before.”

“We didn’t know any better last time. They keep the oils on our hands from damaging the paper.”

Rachel pulled on the gloves and took a few steps inside. The Library was an oak-paneled room three times the size of the temple outside. Polished wooden floors reflected pools of light. A wide, carpeted aisle ran down the center of the room and away into the distance; on either side stood row upon row of bookshelves, filled with more books than one could hope to read in three lifetimes.

Above them arched an elegant domed plaster ceiling. Today the dome looked like a perfect spring day—robin’s-egg blue with white fluffy clouds floating across it. It was sort of a timepiece. The ceiling would change as the day wore on, the clouds fading and the sky darkening until it was a deep, midnight blue, spattered with golden stars. A crystal chandelier, ten feet in diameter, hung from the top of the dome to cast its light over the room.

The Library of Athena. Megan thought there was something solemn, something sad about this big room. At the same time, she was glad it was here, a secret place that was just for her, as it had been for Sir Gregory. How many other people had their very own library, let alone one filled with books about magic?

And how many people believe in magic anyway? Anyone who came down here would probably be more interested in the scrolls or the rare first editions...or only editions, in some cases.

Megan hadn't believed in magic herself before her first-hand, near-death experience with it. Now she was a true believer, and she took her job protecting the Library seriously. She felt it was up to her to be responsible, to care for the Library as best she could.

Rachel walked slowly down the aisle, stopping to read the cards in brass holders mounted on the end of every case. The handwritten cards indicated what was shelved there.

"I don't know what's down here we could use for our papers," Megan said.

Rachel reached the fifth set of shelves, turned right and disappeared down the aisle.

"Rachel..." Megan said. She pulled the door shut and followed her.

Rachel hadn't gone far; Megan found her in front of one set of shelves halfway down, scanning the titles.

"Looking for something in particular?" Megan asked, her suspicion reflected in her voice.

Rachel picked three books from the shelf. "I'm doing my paper for Livingston's class on Ancient Egypt," she said. Rachel tucked the books beneath her arm and walked away from Megan, through the stacks.

Megan chased after her. "I think we should be careful about using books from here..."

Rachel shot a look over her shoulder. "Come on, Megan. There's way better books here than at the school's library. Who am I to pass up a great resource?" The stacks emptied into a narrow open area with several reading tables. Rachel pulled out a chair beneath the nearest one and sat. She opened her pack and got a notebook and pen from inside. "The books are definitely more interesting here. I don't want to turn in the same old boring paper everyone else has."

Megan sat next to her. “Um, well, I guess you can look. Like I said, I don’t know what you can actually use. Some of these books you’d have a hard time explaining in the bibliography.”

She picked up one of the books. “Like this one—*Secret Spells of Ancient Egypt: A Translation of Papyrus found buried beneath the temple of Osiris.*”

“What’s wrong with that?” Rachel said. She opened the notebook and started writing. “It’s not like hieroglyphs are some big secret. Everyone knows that the Egyptian priests used their own brand of magic. If you’re worried about me telling where I got it, I’ll just say I found a copy online at the British Museum or something.”

“No, you can’t lie. Livingston will see right through you. And I’m not worried about that. This copy is *handwritten*, by Sir Gregory, from a manuscript he *personally* discovered.” Megan said. She laid the open book down in front of Rachel. She pointed to the title page. “Look here, it says it was translated in 1936, by Sir Gregory Archibald.” She scanned the translation. “I’d love to see the look on Livingston’s face, but how would you explain it?”

Rachel’s face fell. “I see your point. Not that one, then.”

Megan picked up the next book. “But you could probably use this one. *A Guide to Egyptian Gods and Goddesses.*” She flipped through the book quickly. “It’s just a reference book. I recognize this one—there’s another one like it upstairs.” Megan handed it back to Rachel. “It’s a little on the old side, but I think you can get away with it. If Professor Livingston asks, you can tell her you borrowed it from me.”

Rachel flipped through the book, but didn’t really look at it. “Wonder what it’s doing down here, if it’s not that special?”

“I guess even Sir Gregory needed a handy reference book or two,” Megan said with a shrug. “Down in the potion section I found three books on herbs. Nothing particularly special about any of them, they were just about how to grow them and what they look like. Of course, there was also a book from 1735, detailing many useful potions containing hemlock and wolfsbane.”

Rachel’s eyebrows went up. “Really?”

Megan nodded. "You wouldn't believe some of the things they used it for. Poisons, medicines...a potion to turn someone into a brown toad."

Rachel knit her brows together. "You're serious."

"Oh yeah. I mean, that's just what the book said. I didn't try it or anything." She gave Rachel a sidelong glance. "Although I'm pretty sure there's some wolfsbane in the storeroom."

Rachel's mouth fell open.

"I'm kidding, I'm kidding," Megan said, and laughed. *Sometimes, Rache, you make it way too easy.* "I don't know how to get into the storeroom. It's in the vault, remember? Only Bailey can get in there."

Rachel set the reference book aside and picked up the third one she had selected. It was a large, ring-bound volume with an odd-looking hard cover. "I picked this one up because it just looked so cool." She ran her fingers over the front of the book. "It feels like it's engraved." The face of the book was covered with columns of hieroglyphs. In the center was a large scarab, sporting a pair of wings and a ring around its head, like a halo.

Megan looked over Rachel's shoulder, then reached around and rapped her knuckles against the book. "It's not engraved, it's carved. The cover's made of wood."

Rachel laid the book open on the table. The pages were made of a smooth, light brown paper. Each was filled with hieroglyphs, and drawings of Ancient Egyptians, like the slides Professor Livingston showed during her lecture on pyramid art.

"This book *is* cool." Megan's eyes were wide. She rubbed a page between her fingers. The paper was so thin. "I wonder what kind of paper this is."

"Maybe it's papyrus or something," Rachel said. "Look here." She pointed to a small piece of paper taped inside the back cover. Megan recognized the handwriting as Sir Gregory's.

"The Book of the Dead," Rachel read. "Funerary Spells of Ancient Egypt."

Megan was intrigued. "Awesome. I'll bet Archibald probably found it in some musty old tomb." The thought was exciting; sometimes she wished she could go on an expedition to Egypt. The movies just made it look so cool.

“Book of the *Dead*?” Rachel asked with a nervous look. “So if I read this, can I bring some mummy back to life? You know, like in the movies?”

Megan gave her an ominous look. “I don’t know. Maybe.” She couldn’t keep a straight face—she covered her mouth as she giggled. “Sounds ridiculous, doesn’t it? Are you sure you don’t want to borrow it?”

Rachel shut the book and pushed it away. “No thank you. You can never be too careful. I’ve seen what’s in some of these other books. I’ve been *in* one of the other books. I’ll take my chances with this nice safe reference book, if you don’t mind.”

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