



CHAPTER one

The silver bell above the door chimed, a soft sound that complemented the singing coming from the café's small kitchen.

I looked down from my perch on a ladder across the other side of the dining room, where I was hanging fairy lights. The woman who entered was tall, brown-haired, and wrapped in a vivid red coat so bulky it hid the shape of her body. Her complexion was pale, her face angular and, aside from the color of her coat, she looked no different to the half dozen other women who'd entered the café since we'd opened yesterday.

But the psychic bit of me—the bit that had caused so much damn heartache in the past—began to stir.

This woman was trouble. The sort of trouble I'd been running from for the past twelve years.

Her gaze swept the room, no doubt taking in the mismatched furniture, the bright prints and old plates that covered the walls, and the small teapots of

flowers that decorated each table.

What she thought of it all, I couldn't say, because when her gaze finally met mine, all I could see was her fear and anguish. The force of it was so strong, it wrapped a fist around my heart and squeezed tight.

I don't need this, I thought. Not now, not again.

I hardly think this woman's problems are going to be that bad, Lizzie. The comment ran through my mind so clearly it might well have been said out loud. *It surely can't hurt to at least hear what she has to say.*

Isabelle—the singer in the kitchen and my closest friend—was not only a spirit talker gifted with telepathy, but also my familiar, and *that* meant we had constant access to each other's thoughts. Not all witches had familiars, of course—only those of us born to blueblood families. I had no idea why that was, but I suspected it had something to do with the greater power most bluebloods could call on. Familiars were usually of the animal or spirit kind, but I was at best a less than average blueblood witch, so of course my familiar was always destined to be something so far south of the norm it was yet another disappointment to my family.

I had a very long history of letting my family down—one that had started with my birth.

You say that with such surety, I replied, mental tone dry. Anyone would think precognition was one of your gifts.

Her sharp snort echoed through my brain. *It doesn't take precognition to make a statement like that. I was with you twelve years ago, remember? Nothing could ever be as bad as that. Nothing.*

The woman took several tentative steps forward and then stopped. "I'm looking for Elizabeth Grace."

Her voice was as uncertain as her steps. I hooked the unstrung portion of fairy lights onto the ladder and then climbed down. "Please, just call me Lizzie. What can I do for you, Mrs.—?"

"Banks. Marjorie Banks. And I'm sorry to come here so late, but I saw your light on and I just thought—" She paused, and then continued in a desperate

sort of rush, “I just thought you might be able to help me find my daughter.”

A runaway, Belle said. That’s hardly dangerous.

Maybe.

Well, if you wanted to avoid any chance of the past repeating itself, we should be running an ordinary café rather than playing about with psychometry, dabbling in readings, and selling charms.

Psychometry isn’t magic. And it wasn’t as if the charms we were selling did anything more than grant the wearer a greater chance of collecting good fortune rather than bad.

But those charms still contain real magic, even if we don’t advertise it, Belle said. *And it’s a sad fact that those without psi skills often align them to magic. Besides, it’s not like psychometry or charm making are your only skills.*

No, but it wasn’t like I was much more than the sum of those two, either. Hell, my lack of magical strength was one of the reasons behind my estrangement from my family.

That, and my sister’s death.

Cat’s death, Belle stated, mental tone tart, was hardly your fault.

But it *was*, if only because I’d tried to save her myself rather than informing my parents.

Your parents would not have listened.

But I could have at least tried. If we’d both insisted, Mom might have investigated—

My input wouldn’t have made any difference. I’m your familiar, and one of the lowly Sarr witches besides.

Unfortunately, there was a bitter edge of truth in that statement. There were six lines of witches—three of whom were considered “royalty,” and three who were rather disparagingly described as “commoners.”

Like most of those from the lower witch houses, Belle hadn’t always viewed my family in such a dour light. In fact, she’d held the so-called bluebloods of

witchery on something of a pedestal. That had all changed in the aftermath of Cat's death.

I stepped clear of the ladder and brushed some dust from my hands. "How old is your daughter, Mrs. Banks?"

"Please, call me Marjorie. And she's sixteen. She went out with friends last night, but she hasn't come home and I know—" She paused again, and swallowed heavily. "Something has happened to her. I can feel it."

The certainty in her tone had my gaze narrowing. Underneath the pall of misery that hung around her body like a heavy cloak were flashes of hazy purple, and *that* was usually the sign of an untrained talent. Of course, her certainty could also be nothing more than the deep connection of a mother to her daughter.

Either way, this really *wasn't* something I should be getting involved in. "Mrs. Banks, you really need to report this to the rangers—"

"I *have*," she said. "And they're looking, but it's not enough. I know it's not enough—"

She broke off, obviously battling tears. I hesitated, then walked over and tentatively put an arm around her shoulders. She stiffened briefly, and then her body sagged and she started sobbing. I didn't say anything; there was little that *could* be said other than the usual useless platitudes, and she'd undoubtedly already heard those from the rangers.

After a while, she pulled back and dug a tissue out of her purse. "I'm sorry. That was very ill-mannered of me."

"But totally understandable." I kept my voice soft. I had a bad feeling a full breakdown was only one harsh word away. "How about I make us pot of tea, and then you can tell me about your daughter?"

Hope flared in her brown eyes. "Then you'll help me?"

I hesitated. "I don't know if I can." Which was an honest enough answer, but not something she wanted to hear right now. As her face began to crumple again, I quickly added, "But I'll try."

Do you want me out there? Belle said. *Or are you going to use the reading room?*

I hesitated again. When we'd decided to offer psychic readings as well as the usual café fare in an effort to establish a point of difference from all the other cafés in Castle Rock, we'd set up a small rear room strictly designed for that purpose. As such, it was not only a soothing space to be in, but also one that was magically well protected.

But most of those spells had been specifically designed to counter arcane forces, and wouldn't actually repel the dark, desperate energy Marjorie was emitting. It was the sort of energy that could draw even darker emotions to it, and I really didn't want to risk infecting the warm, safe environment we'd created in the reading room.

I think it might be wise if you are, Belle, just in case things go ass up. Out loud, I added, "Mrs. Banks, do you mind if I call my friend in to help me when I attempt it?"

Marjorie frowned. "Is it necessary? I really don't want the whole town knowing I've come to you for help. It would be... inconvenient."

"Belle is co-owner of the café," I said, "and the soul of discretion."

Your parents wouldn't agree with that.

My parents didn't agree with a lot of things, especially when it came to the two of us. They hated Belle almost as much as they hated the fact they'd bred a daughter so low down on the scale of magical ability that I might as well have been born to one of the more common lines.

"If you really think it's necessary—"

"It *is* if you want a better chance of the reading being successful."

"Then I agree."

"Thank you." I cupped a hand under her elbow and escorted her across to a table. "How do you like your tea? And would like something to eat? Belle's just baked a fresh batch of rather decadent red velvet cookies."

She wiped a tear from the corner of her left eye. "That would be lovely,

thank you.”

“Cookies for three please, Belle,” I said, and made my way behind the counter to make a large pot of tea.

When that was done, I wasted several more minutes studying the multitude of cheery china cups and saucers, trying to decide which ones to use. Like most of the items in the café, we’d salvaged them from various secondhand stores, and they all had a history and a presence the sensitive could feel. While most people would scoff at the thought of something as simple as a cup making any sort of difference to a person’s mood, I knew from experience that the *wrong* choice could have an unsettling effect in this sort of situation. Even though the holiday season was still over a month away, I eventually selected cheery Christmas ones for Belle and me, and a more ornate white and gold cup for Marjorie.

“Right,” I said, as I placed the full tray on the table between us. “Tell me what you know.”

“That’s just it,” Marjorie said. “I don’t know much. No one does. And no one will believe me when I say she’s—”

She stopped, her gaze going past me and widening just a fraction. I knew without looking that Belle had just entered, because by anyone’s standards, she was a sight to behold. At just over six foot and with an athlete’s physique, she was something of an Amazon. She was also stunningly beautiful, with ebony skin, long, silky black hair, and eyes that were a gray so pale they shone silver in even the dullest of light.

That eye color was the one feature all six witch families had in common, and I couldn’t even get *that* right. Mine were emerald green, the same as my grandmother’s.

“Mrs. Banks?” I prompted when she didn’t immediately continue.

Belle placed a small plate of red cookies on the tray and then began pouring our drinks. Hints of lemon and passionflower teased the air; it wasn’t strong enough to overpower the taste of the English Breakfast tea, but it would, hopefully, help soothe the older woman’s jangled nerves.

Marjorie cleared her throat and said, “They don’t believe she’s in trouble. They just think she’s run off again.”

“So she’s run away before?” I asked.

“It was a regular event when her father and I first separated, but it had stopped until about two months ago.”

“What happened to set her off again?”

“I wouldn’t let her go out with her boyfriend.” She accepted the cup of tea with a tremulous smile. “My mother had a set like this. She used to bring it out when we were having a ‘proper’ English afternoon tea.”

Which was why I’d chosen it. While this particular cup hadn’t belonged to Marjorie’s mother’s set, as far as I was aware, something about its resonance had suggested it would raise happier memories—and Marjorie very much needed those.

I offered the older woman the milk jug, then, when she shook her head, poured some into my own tea. Two teaspoons of sugar followed rather than the usual one, as I suspected I was going to need the energy boost to get through the night. “Is there a chance she’s simply run off with the boyfriend?”

Marjorie shook her head even before I’d finished the question. “The first thing I did was ring and check with his mom. Jason is home, and hasn’t heard from Karen in over a week.”

“Is that usual?” Belle asked.

Marjorie shrugged. “Who can say? They’re teenagers. One day they can’t keep their hands off each other, the next they’re not talking.”

“What about her friends? She did go out with them, didn’t she?” I said.

“Yes, but they said she got a call about nine and claimed it was from me. That I said she had to go home.” Tears filled Marjorie’s eyes and she rapidly blinked them away. “It wasn’t me, of course, and that’s the last time anyone saw her.”

Which sounded suspiciously like Karen was meeting someone she either didn't want her friends to know about, or that she knew they wouldn't approve of. If I'd been a cop, the first thing I would have done was get hold of the kid's phone records. But I wasn't, and I had no idea if the rangers here had that sort of power. Castle Rock was the capital of the Faelan Reservation, which was one of only seven werewolf reservations here in Australia. Rangers— who were always werewolves nominated by the council elders rather than those who lived within the reservation— had full police powers when it came to dealing with their own kind, but were somewhat more restricted when it came to the humans living within the reservation. Which was rather archaic, given humans now accounted for nearly 40 percent of Castle Rock's regular population— and that figure increased dramatically over the summer months, thanks to the mineral springs located in the nearby town of Argyle.

Of course, archaic pretty much described the world in general. There might have been huge leaps in technology and medicine, but magic and tradition still ruled in many ways.

And what *that* all meant was, if something bad *had* happened to Karen, then the rangers would be forced to call in the Interspecies Investigations Team. And *that* wouldn't go down well with either the rangers *or* the pack elders.

And unhappy elders generally meant an unhappy town.

I took a sip of tea and winced a little over its sweetness. "Are the rangers searching for her?"

"Yes. I asked them to send some trackers into the scrub."

Meaning Marjorie had some pull in this town. But given the hills surrounding Castle Rock were heavily forested, a werewolf's keen nose probably *was* Karen's best hope if she was lost out there somewhere.

"Then I suggest your next move should be to go home and wait for their call—"

"No! I can't. I *won't*." Marjorie's expression was a mix of desperation and determination. "Surely you can understand that? Surely, if you were in my place, you'd be doing everything you can to find your child?"

Old pain rose, and I briefly closed my eyes. I *had* been in the same position, even if the life in question had been that of a sister rather than a daughter.

The past is never a good place to dwell, Belle said gently. *Especially when there's nothing you can do to change it.*

I knew that, but knowing never stopped the guilt. Never stopped the nightmares that still plagued me. I took a somewhat shuddery breath and said, "I do understand, Marjorie, believe me. It's just that—"

"Please," she said, her voice soft. Beseeking. "You're Karen's only hope. I just know it."

I leaned back and rubbed my arms. Every instinct I had was screaming *any* search—be it mine, or the rangers'—was going to end badly. Was it selfish of me to *not* want to confront all that again? Probably. But the real question was—could I live with the guilt and the what-ifs if I *did* walk away?

Probably not.

Besides, the moment I'd allowed Marjorie to step through the door and tell me her story, I'd basically forsaken any hope of refusal. Hard-hearted, I was not.

"No matter how certain you might be," I said slowly, "there's no guarantee that I'll be able to find her. Psychometry—or any other psi talent, for that matter—isn't always as reliable as true magic. Maybe you'd be better to seek the help of the local witch—"

"There *is* no witch in Castle Rock," she cut in. "The elders declared the reservation a witch-free zone just over a year ago."

I shared a surprise glance with Belle. *That* was something we hadn't been aware of when we'd come here, and it made me wonder why they'd approved our permit for the café. Granted, it was now an accepted fact that psi skills were totally unrelated to mainstream magic, but—as Belle had noted—there were still many who thought otherwise.

How could the elders even pass such a rule, let alone want to? It was a government requirement that a witch be present on all reservations. Aside from providing magical assistance when needed, they were also the

government's mouthpieces and rule enforcers. But it was the magic aspect of the situation that made the decision even more surprising. Castle Rock was filled with wild magic, and it was very dangerous to leave such a force unguarded for too long. While wild magic in and of itself was neither good nor bad, without a witch to protect and channel it, it *would* be a draw to the darker forces of the world.

Maybe that's why you felt called here, Belle said. *Maybe you're meant to take up that position.*

Even if wild magic had the will to do such a thing, I said, mental tones heavy with sarcasm, *it could certainly do a whole lot better than me."*

No one fully understands the wild places of this world. Don't be so certain such magic has no sentience.

Which only reinforces my point. I took another sip of tea. "Why would they ban witches? What happened here?"

Marjorie shrugged. "No one really knows. The elders don't always communicate the reason behind their rulings, and it's not like we humans are invited to council meetings."

Because all werewolf reservations were self-governing—up to a point, anyway—any humans who chose to live in them had to accept that they would never have a say in any decisions made.

"Please help me," Marjorie added softly. "You *must*."

I blew out a breath and crossed mental fingers that my intuition was wrong—that this search *wouldn't* end as I suspected it might. "I'll try. Just.. don't get your hopes up. As I've said, there's never any guarantee when it comes to this sort of search."

Marjorie leaned forward and clasped my hand. The move caught me by surprise and images surged; *a pigtailed little girl, laughing in delight as her father swung her around in a circle. That same girl—older, angrier—screaming at Marjorie that she was the reason her dad had left and that she never wanted to see her again.* Recent history, not past, at least in the case of that last vision.

"You're trying," Marjorie said. "That's all I want. All Karen needs."

I blinked and the images shattered, leaving behind little more than childish echoes of anger and hurt. I gently pulled my hand from hers. I'd been well enough trained that touching people generally posed no threat; the only time my talents broke free of their leash was when I either desired it, or at times like this, when I was caught by surprise.

"I need something of hers. Something she has a lot of contact with."

"*That* would be her phone," Marjorie said. "And she has it with her, even if she's not answering."

I half smiled. "I mean something more personal; something she wore close to her skin."

"Ah." Marjorie frowned. "Would jewelry do? She has a locket her father gave her—"

"That," I interrupted, "would be perfect."

"I'll go get it now." She rose swiftly and then hesitated. "You will search for her tonight, won't you?"

"Yes," I said heavily. "I will."

"Good." Marjorie spun and marched for the door, her steps far more determined and hopeful than they had been when she first arrived.

The small bell chimed at her departure. I wearily rubbed my eyes. "I hope I'm not doing the wrong thing."

Belle leaned forward and placed her hand over mine. The strength that flowed from it infused my body with a sense of calm. "You can't go back on your word now. That choice, as you've noted, left as soon as you allowed her entry."

"I know. I just—" I stopped and shrugged. "I was hoping I could stick to finding things that *don't* matter. You know, car keys, jewelry, etcetera."

"Then we shouldn't have used the 'Coffee Served, Futures Told, and Things Found' slogan when we opened this place." Amusement touched Belle's voice. "The truth of the matter is, you're finally tired of running, and we

both know it.”

Yes, I was. But it wasn't like I'd ever had much choice, and we both knew that, too.

“Cat's death was twelve years ago, Lizzie. Many things can change in that time—maybe even the attitude of your parents.”

I snorted. “Yeah. And next year, the prime minister and his party will renounce its reliance on the council of advisors, and the three royal families of magic will suddenly find themselves out of favor.”

Belle laughed. The sound was so warm and carefree it brought a smile to my lips.

“That,” she said, “is something I'd love to see. Your father's expression alone would be worth the chaos that would undoubtedly unfold.”

“Yes, it would.” Hell, he considered it enough of an affront that he'd sired a daughter blessed with so little in the way of magic; the shock of being tossed out of power would probably kill him.

Not that *that* was something I wanted, no matter how badly he'd treated Belle or me.

I picked up a still warm biscuit and munched on it contemplatively. It didn't do a lot to calm the growing sense of trepidation, but it tasted as delicious as it smelled and certainly made my stomach happy. And *that* was better than no happiness at all.

The door chimed again as Marjorie returned. Either she lived close by, or she'd had something of Karen's in the car, just in case. The older woman didn't say anything, just sat down opposite me and held out her hand. In her palm sat a heart-shaped locket on a fine gold chain.

I brushed the crumbs from my fingertips then reached out for—but didn't quite touch—the locket. The last time I'd tried searching for *someone* rather than *something*, that person had died.

I briefly closed my eyes and shoved the thought away. This situation was different—and if my psychometry *did* find Karen, Belle could call the

rangers while I headed out. If Cat's death had taught me anything, it was the fact that there were some situations neither magic *nor* psychic power could salvage.

Heat began to burn across my fingertips, a sure sign that the connection between the locket and Karen was strong and active. Which meant, as of this moment, the teenager was still alive.

But I wasn't about to offer that hope to Marjorie. Not when hope could be killed as easily as a life taken.

And I certainly didn't want to examine the reason behind *that* particular thought.

I took another of those deep breaths that didn't do a whole lot to calm the butterflies. Then, before I could think about it too much more, I picked up the locket and pressed it into my palm.

For several seconds, nothing happened. Then the locket began to burn against my skin, its heat initially clean and bright, but gradually becoming darker. I shuddered, suddenly uneasy.

I'm here, Lizzie, Belle said. *I'll pull you back if need be.*

I knew that, but it didn't stop the growing tide of reluctance. But I'd said I'd do this. I couldn't back out now.

Not allowing myself any more time to think—or fear—I closed my eyes again and reached down to that place deep inside where my second sight lay leashed and waiting.

The minute I set it free, pictures flowed, but they were fragile things, little more than a reel of bright flickers. I let them slip by unheeded, waiting until I drew closer to a more recent memory before I slowed that reel down.

And what I saw chilled me: *a laptop, a chat room, an older man who made her laugh and who promised to help her escape her mother's iron fist. A clock, chiming at midnight. Climbing through her window to meet the man with dark hair and darker eyes. Warmth and laughter and exploratory passion.*

The only thing that hinted at danger in those images was the fact that Karen

was meeting a much older man, and that really wasn't surprising if she was looking for someone to replace her father's absence in her life. But there was no hint as to where she was now, and that meant I had to go deeper into her memories if I wanted any hope of uncovering that information.

I'm here, Belle repeated, her voice distant but filled with reassurance. *I won't let you get lost in there.*

I tightened my grip on the locket, pressing it more forcefully into my skin. But instead of growing stronger, the images momentarily fled and an oddly dark force rose to resist me. I fought on, determined to get into the more recent store of memories.

Then, without warning, a connection formed and I was *with* Karen, seeing what she was seeing, feeling what she was feeling....

...and oh God, it felt glorious. He touched her, caressed her, made her feel, burn, in a way that Jason never had.

"Stroke me," he whispered, his voice a low rumble that vibrated through every part of her.

Karen glanced down. His erection seemed huge and oddly pale in the light of the campfire and fear momentarily filled her. She'd never taken this final step....

He took her hand and placed it on his cock. "Be not afraid. It will never hurt you."

Karen swallowed her fear and let her fingers play up and down his skin. He was hot, hard, and somehow very different to Jason. But then, Jason was a boy, not a man like Tomme. When he groaned, a smile tugged her lips and she became bolder. He took off the rest of her clothes and touched her, teased her, and soon she couldn't breathe, it felt so good. And when he finally thrust inside of her, it hurt, but he kissed away her pain and began to move, and an avalanche of unfamiliar but amazing sensations flooded her body.

As his movements became faster, his lips returned to hers. He kissed her cheeks, her chin, her neck....

Lizzie, a distant voice screamed. *Pull the connection.*

His teeth scraped her neck, the sensation unpleasant. But before she could say anything, he kissed the sore spot and brushed his tongue across her ear. She moaned in pleasure. He chuckled softly and bit her again. This time, his teeth pierced her skin. Pain bloomed, and

she tried to jerk away from him. But his left hand gripped the other side of her neck and held her motionless. She cried out, begging him to stop, but he didn't. She struggled, hit him, doing all that she could in an effort to get out from under him, but he didn't stop fucking her and he didn't stop biting her, and there was warmth on her neck and she couldn't breathe....

Water—*hot* water—hit my face and the connection snapped. For several seconds, I didn't move. *Couldn't* move. My heart raced, my stomach turned, and my body burned with the echo of the teenager's desire. And the warm water that dribbled down my neck felt an awful lot like blood....

"Excuse me for a minute," I muttered, and stood up so suddenly my chair crashed to the floor.

I dropped the locket onto the table, then, without looking at Marjorie, turned and bolted for the bathroom. Once there, I lost everything I'd eaten over day.

Belle followed me in. "How the hell did you form such an intimate connection? That's *never* happened before."

"Not to that extent, no."

I took a deep, shuddery breath, then flushed the toilet and walked over to the hand basin. My reflection was flushed with heat and my irises wide with a mix of fear and desire, but my skin was paler than usual, and it made the smattering of golden freckles across my nose and cheeks stand out sharply. Never, ever, had I expected *anything* like that. I flicked on the cold tap, cupped my hands under the water, and splashed my face. And wished I could do the same to both my memories and the unwanted burn.

"Is she dead?" Belle asked softly.

I glanced past my reflection and met Belle's silvery gaze. "You didn't catch it?"

"No. But there's nothing unusual in that."

Because, as my familiar, it wasn't her job to follow me down the rabbit hole, but rather to monitor me, ensuring my vital functions were not being so completely taxed by whatever I was seeing or doing that it could lead to my

death. She was my security *and* my strength.

I reached for a towel and patted my face dry. “She’s currently alive, but I don’t think she’s going to remain that way for long.”

There’d been far too much blood running down her neck for life to continue on without swift intervention.

“You can’t tell Marjorie that.”

“No, but I can’t give her false hope, either.”

Belle grimaced. “It’s a bitch of a situation. Maybe we *should* have said we couldn’t help her.”

“More than likely.” But then a teenager would be out in there in that forest, all alone and without hope. At least if I tried to find her, there was the tiniest of chances that I could help her. Save her.

Even if that inner part of me was saying otherwise.

I took a deep, calming breath, then squeezed past Belle and headed back into the main café space.

Marjorie’s expression was a mix of anxiety and fear. “Did you find my daughter? Is she okay?”

I hesitated. “She’s in the woods somewhere. There was a campfire and a man.”

“Who? A friend?”

“I don’t know.”

“But she’s alive? She’s okay?”

Again I hesitated. I certainly couldn’t tell the truth, but I couldn’t risk an outright lie, either. Not when the warm pulse of blood down my neck was still so fresh in my memory.

“She was when I saw her. If you’ll lend me the locket, I’ll go out now and try to find her.”

“Please, hurry.” Marjorie swept the locket off the table and held it out to me. “Because something is very wrong.”

Yes, it was. I stared at the shining, dangling locket, and saw the shadows gathering around it. Those shadows were death. And for too many seconds, I simply couldn’t force my hand to grasp the damn thing.

The minute I did—the minute it touched my skin—the images surged: *lethargy, the sensation of floating, light, bright light, light that wasn’t calling her but rather pushing her toward the growing darkness....*

I clamped the leash on my abilities and ruthlessly shoved the images away. I didn’t have the time for the fear and questions they raised... and neither did Karen.

“I need to go now, Mrs. Banks. Give me your phone number, and then go home.”

“But I want to help—”

“No,” I cut in. “You can’t. I’m sorry, but for this section of the search, anyone too close can interfere with my ability to find whatever—whoever—is missing.”

Her expression suggested she wasn’t happy, but she pulled a business card from her purse and handed it to me. *Marjorie Banks*, it said, *Attorney at Law*.

I shoved the card into my back pocket and tried not to think about the havoc a grieving lawyer could cause to the woman who failed to find her daughter alive.

Even before Marjorie was out of the shop, we were gathering everything I needed: a first aid kit—which also included herbal remedies like yarrow and agrimony to stop both internal and external bleeding—a couple of potions to ward off evil, a knife made of silver, and finally, my warding stones. I had no idea who that man with Karen was, no idea whether he was just a human sicko or something else entirely, but I fully intended to be as fight-ready as I could.

Even if the last time I’d gone running to the rescue similarly prepared had ended in utter disaster.

“Better grab the flashlight,” Belle said, as I slung the backpack over my shoulder. “It’s as dark as Hades out in the scrub.”

“A flashlight will warn that man of my presence way sooner than I might want. I’ll call a wisp if I’m having trouble seeing.” And at least calling a will-o’-the-wisp—or ghost candles, as they were more commonly known around these parts—to help me wasn’t beyond the range of my meager magic skills.

“Be careful out there.” Belle hugged me briefly. “You dying will play utter havoc with my lifespan.”

I smiled, despite the tension riding me. “You and I are destined to live very long lives.”

“Says the woman who has never seen *anything*—good or bad—relating to us in her dreams.”

“I don’t have to. Not when I’m hell-bent on remaining alive just so I can become the bane of my father’s existence.”

“He has to care that you’re actually alive for that to work.” She pushed me lightly to the door. “Go. I’ll ring the rangers and tell them what’s going on.”

She would also, I knew, keep track of my whereabouts via our connection, and come running to the rescue if my own abilities were somehow overwhelmed. Although in this case, that might be too little, too late, given I’d be deep in the forest’s heart.

I zipped up my jacket as I exited the café and headed up Lyttleton Street, the burn in the locket guiding my steps. All too soon I’d entered the thickly treed Kalimna Park, and the darkness grew heavier as the trees closed in around me. I followed the road for half a mile or so before the locket pulled me left, into the deeper darkness. My steps slowed, and then stopped. It was so damn black that I could barely see my hand when I stuck it in front of my face, let alone anything else. But the fear pounding through my veins had little to do with the thought of falling over and breaking a limb, but rather the darkness staining the locket. It had grown so heavy it was a dead weight in my hand. Death’s talons had reached the teenager, and that meant I only had a small window left. While it *was* possible to keep a soul from moving on if its body was still alive, not even my parents—who were not only witch

royalty, but two of a only a handful of witches who were considered the most powerful in Australia—had the power to call a soul back once it had begun its journey. I had to hurry.

But to go faster, I needed light.

I quickly kicked off my shoes and socks, and then dug my toes into the dirt. It felt warm against my skin, and filled me with an odd sense of energy. That meant there was wild magic near, which was strange, given how close I still was to town. Usually it kept to the wilder places of the world.

But I thrust concern aside, wriggled my toes a little deeper into the soil to ensure I was well grounded, and then began the summoning incantation. It wasn't exactly a smart thing to do this close to wild magic, but I didn't have time to go elsewhere—and neither did Karen.

After several minutes, warmth caressed my skin. When I opened my eyes, I discovered a wisp hovering a meter or so away from my face. It was orb shaped, and the glow of its being caressed the nearby tree trunks with a cool blue light. Wisps weren't ghosts despite their nickname; they were spirits, and very fragile by nature. Wind could tear them away, rain could wash them out, and they couldn't stand the touch of sunshine. Sometimes they were helpful, and other times they weren't. The myths of them leading travelers astray were very much based on truth. This one was older, if its size and glow were anything to go by, and that generally meant it'd be more inclined to help.

I bowed slightly. "Thank you for answering my call."

The wisp spun in response, its light briefly pulsing. Wisps undoubtedly had their own language, but it was one most witches didn't understand.

"I'm here to find a teenager—a girl who is in deep trouble. Could you light my path through the trees?"

The wisp seemed to consider me for a moment, then its light flickered. When it didn't disappear, I took it as acceptance.

"Thank you," I said, and bowed again. Though I really hadn't had a lot of experience dealing with spirits—that was more Belle's forte—and had no

idea if they actually cared about politeness, I'd always worked on the theory that it cost me nothing.

The wisp moved closer and settled about half a meter above my head. Its cool blue light fanned across the darkness, lightly touching the tree trunks around us and providing just enough light for me to make my way through the thick scrub. I shoved my feet back into my shoes, then grabbed my socks and ran.

The pulse of life in the locket was dying.

I crashed my way through the scrub, the noise echoing across the night. Branches whipped across my face and tore at my clothes, but I ignored it and kept on going. Time—and the teenager—was slipping away.

Deeper and deeper into the trees I ran, until the thick canopy above me blocked the stars and even the distant sounds rising from Castle Rock faded. The only noise to be heard—aside from the racket I was making—was the occasional hoot of an owl, and even that halted as I drew close to it.

The locket's pulse stilled, and the warmth and connection began to fade. I cursed and ran on. There was still a chance I could save the teenager, still a chance I could bring her back to life if she hadn't bled out. The soul didn't leave the body straight away, and while it was still present, there was always hope.

The smell of smoke began to taint the crisp, eucalyptus-scented air. The memory of the campfire rose and I ran on, my speed close to reckless in scrub this thick. A branch snagged my jacket and ripped my sleeve; I pulled free, leaped over a log, and ran on. The ground began to rise and, up ahead, the trees seemed to be thinning. Hope flared, and I pushed on.

When I reached the top of the hill, I paused despite the urgency riding me. The clearing was small and half filled with leaf and tree litter. The teenager lay in the middle; there was no life in her, just as there was no life in the locket. Her spirit had fled.

“Goddammit, no!”

The words were wrenched from me. I'd been so close—so damn *close*. But

once again, close enough simply wasn't good enough. A thick sense of uselessness washed over me and, for a second, all I wanted to do was drop to the ground and let the tears flow. Not just for this teenager, but also for the sister I'd failed to save so many years ago.

But tears had never helped anyone. Not then, and certainly not now.

So I shoved my emotions back in their box and studied the clearing. The embers still glowing in the fire pit provided little in the way of light, but it was enough to see Karen's clothes were missing. Maybe the man she'd been with—the man she'd called Tomme—had taken them. Maybe he'd wanted a memento of his sick crime.

The wisp shot forward unasked, its light trailing behind it like a comet as it ran along the length of the teenager's body, not only highlighting her nakedness but the dark dampness matting her blonde hair. The memory of Tomme biting her neck rose. Had it been a fetish, or something worse?

Something like a vampire, perhaps?

Even thinking the word had me shuddering. Vampires existed, everyone knew that, but they certainly weren't the accepted part of society that werewolves had become. Vampires were not only loners, they were also hunters, in a way that werewolves had never been. The simple fact was, vamps needed human blood to survive and went mad if they didn't get it. All the rot Hollywood and fiction had everyone believing about them being able to survive on animal blood was just that—fiction. They could certainly drink it—and often did—but it wouldn't sustain them long-term. Of course, few vampires risked killing their human prey these days, but that didn't alter the fact they were an unwelcome addition to most towns and cities. So unwelcome, in fact, that few announced their presence and they generally hunted well away from home ground.

Was that what had happened here?

Until I saw the wound, I wouldn't know for sure. I shoved the now dead locket into my pocket and continued on. The wisp's brightness had muted, until the only thing it highlighted was Karen's face. The cool light gave the teenager's skin a frosty, bluish tinge, and yet her lips seemed to glow a rich, ruby red, which was decidedly odd.

I stopped and stared down at her for several seconds. Despite the flush of heat still in her lips, her face was drawn and her expression one of terror. Whoever said a vampire's bite was orgasmic either had rocks in their head or had clearly never been bitten.

I squatted down beside her and reached to sweep her bloodied hair away from her neck. But as I did, the wisp's light went out.

Then, from behind me, a deep voice growled, "Don't you *dare* touch her, witch."