

Archived thesis/research paper/faculty publication from the University of North Carolina at Asheville's NC DOCKS Institutional Repository: <http://libres.uncg.edu/ir/unca/>

The Care & Keeping of Demons

Senior Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with
A Major in Literature at
The University of North Carolina at Asheville
Spring 2016

By *McKinley Churchwell*

Thesis Director
Katherine Min

Thesis Advisor
Cynthia Chadwick

Chapter 1

November 1893

The demon, seated at the window, stared wistfully outside. One black nailed hand, buried in a glass vase, fondled marbles; the other restlessly played a tiny invisible piano upon his knee. He watched as children frolicked and couples strolled by, arms latched.

It was an oddly warm fall day and a contagious bliss blew through Boston. The demon's finger tapping increased with his fury; he was not allowed outside, not today, not yesterday, not for the last week in fact. Outside of the stately brick townhouse, a prison with lacey curtains, were bleating babies perfect for juggling, truant schoolboys really just begging to be tricked into doing inane tasks in return for nonexistent wishes, and frilled young ladies who would've been delicious paired with a black tea.

He drew his hand from the vase with two marbles jailed between his fingers. One was an opaque green speckled with red; the other a transparent bright blue.

The green, plucked from the watery ruins of Atlantis in the summer of 1640, had been his first. There was a bit of him imbued within it, a bit of him who was still wild and free riding whales, sinking ships, eating pirates, sleeping on mounds of gold, and fucking mermaids.

He closed his eyes and felt himself merge a bit with the him in the marble; the renewal of old memories, their crispness, was wonderful. He let out a long sigh, as if he was expelling smoke, and then he dropped the marble before he reabsorbed the memory completely. Gloom shrouded him as he looked at the marble, the past, upon the floor.

The blue marble he'd acquired just a few months ago, July 14th, 1893, when he happened upon the baker's son during his errands.

Normally a chance to dawdle and make mischief would have been denied to him, but the baker had had a mishap with the bread and there was to be a short delay. The demon's witch-mistress, Prudence What-God-Will Perry, had set the errands up to be a strict routine; however, her meticulous orders regarding errands matched her peculiarity pertaining to bread (for example: it had to be a very certain hue of gold, any variation in color was unacceptable) and so on this miraculous day a loop-hole appeared.

The demon crouched down beside the baker's son. The child looked a lot like his father; he was red haired, pink cheeked, and though not plump, not yet, he had, in the demon's opinion, rather pudgy fingers. The boy couldn't have been more than eight years old.

They still taste like veal at that age, the demon thought, pity, I'm not allowed to eat children.

He quelled his bloodthirst and said with a large grin, "Well, then, what's this?"

The boy looked up, surprised at the adult's interest. The baker's son had put his face on level with the ground to better examine the marbles' playing field; he had dirt on his nose. "I'm practicing shooting my marbles, Mr. Obadiah."

The demon inwardly cringed upon hearing the name that Prudence had assigned him.

"I see, how exciting," the demon said, "you know, I guarantee that after one game with me you'll be a marble shooting expert, how does that sound?"

The boy regarded him solemnly until the demon revealed his pouch of marbles; he always kept some of his hoard on his person. Enamored by the demon's collection, the baker's son made for easy prey and he readily agreed to play for keeps; he was obviously under the impression that no adult, even one who constantly carried marbles, could be as practiced as a child.

The baker's son was proved wrong.

"It's not fair!" the child protested as the demon dropped his new marbles into the pouch one-by-one, relishing the clicking of glass and clay.

"Oh, but it is. For you see, Pudgy Fingers," the demon replied. "We made a deal."

"But—"

The demon laid his hand upon the boy's head and a shiver went through the child's body when, rather than the pat of a man's hands, he felt claws scratch ever so slightly against his scalp. The child looked up at the demon and gasped at the sheer blackness of his eyes and the sharpness of his teeth.

"You should be careful in the future, to not so quickly make deals with the devil."

"Mr. Obadiah, I apologize for your wait," the baker said as he came out the door with a carefully wrapped loaf of bread.

The demon's appearance instantly reverted; not a trace of inhuman predator lurked about him besides the odd dark color of his fingernails. "No trouble."

He paid the baker, all the while wearing a crescent smile, and said, “You have a fine boy here. Very bright, he seems to have a fine understanding of the value of... talk.”

The child stared silently at the demon as his father chuckled.

“We appreciate your business, Mr. Obadiah. Give the widow my regards.”

The demon nodded in reply before walking street.

Whistling a jaunty tune, he considered that if today was truly lucky then Prudence would be dead when he got home and the baker’s regards would have no recipient.

A similar wish preoccupied the demon’s mind now, months later, as he sat at the window with his marbles and his impatience; Prudence’s death would signal the end of over seventy miserable years in her service and of the effectiveness of Witch’s Word—the spell that Prudence had used to bind him that included completed obedience and a proximity rule (unless otherwise ordered he had to remain within 200 feet of his witch at all times).

He had tried to break the spell countless times but it was useless without Prudence’s grimoire.

Something upstairs fell to the floor. He looked at the ceiling and listened as he heard Prudence stumbling out of the bed. He sat there and followed her footsteps, tracing her path: the desk, the bookcase, and then back to the bed.

What fresh foolishness is this? He wondered.

The smell of blood filled him. She was coughing again, quite badly.

The scent of his mistress's blood conjured up images of a rusted plow sitting on an abandoned farm with soil reduced to dust. He lingered there, enjoyed the decrepitude. He smiled and licked his lips. He was practically salivating. Prudence's pain was one of his few pleasures, besides it served her right for pushing herself.

Then the bell started ringing. He flinched. He hated the ringing of bells; they gave him the same feeling as when he was being compelled by Witch's Word.

He stood up and hid his vase of marbles, his hoard, behind a curtain. His original hoard, a lovely collection of knick-knacks, gold, silver, jewels, and the like, Prudence had forced him to give to charity; the only treasures he maintained and kept hidden from her War on Materialism were his marbles. It had been a long time since Prudence had been able to make her way down the stairs to the first floor, but the demon never left his collection out in the open.

The bell did not stop ringing until after the demon had made his way up the stairs and knocked at Prudence's door.

"Well, come on, Obadiah!" Her voice rasped.

He sighed. The name pricked at him the worse when it spilled forth from her. Something about his chosen name, Auden Nicor Dubhglas, was offensive to Prudence's ears (he suspected it was her irrational dislike of the Irish); so her first act of business after binding him had been to change his name to Obadiah—servant of God. He opened the door.

The décor of Prudence's room was minimal. There was a bookshelf, a bed, a desk, and a rather large music box. The blankets were in disarray. She'd obviously covered something up, bulges rested beneath the white. One of the desk drawers lay on the ground amidst papers, spilled

ink, and several quills. The bookcase was in similar chaos, one rather large text was missing, and all the other books leaned and pressed against one another. The demon instantly recognized the missing text, Prudence's grimoire.

He was immediately suspicious; Prudence hadn't bothered with magic in a long time. He had thought the process of dying had exhausted her of practicing the intricacies of weaving spells; the demon had delighted in the decline of her mind.

The absence of the grimoire was disturbing, but it made sense now why she had gotten out of the bed herself. The grimoire was protected against him. The demon could not touch it without the book eating away at his essence and dissolving his matter. Simply grazing the grimoire with a finger would result in the loss of a hand, and growing new hands was exceedingly painful and time consuming.

He looked at the bulges in the bed, well, at least he could rely on her not being sneaky.

Prudence sat in the bed, propped up by pillows, and glared at him with pursed lips and tiny pinprick blue eyes. She was a terrible pale color. Her lips would have been as white as her shallow cheeks if it had not been for the blood that rested upon them. Her hands were folded on her lap; her fingers were long and thin and perpetually shaking. Beneath her hands was a handkerchief wet with fresh blood. Her long white hair was pulled up into a surprisingly messy bun. Her plain white nightgown had not even been buttoned up all the way, and he could see her sternum through her paper thin skin. Her regular preoccupation with propriety was being undone by her age, which wasn't surprising considering she'd made it to almost two hundred; though the demon wasn't completely sure of her exact age given how private she was.

“Shall I fix your room? You have made quite a mess,” the demon said, raising his eyebrows and opening his mouth just wide enough to display sharp teeth and a mocking almost smile, “Or do you want me to correct your bun or braid your hair? Poor child. Can’t even make it two centuries without falling apart.”

“I did not summon you to listen to you spew venom. Now,” she said, voice still imperial though labored, “wind my music box.”

There were so many things that the demon hated in that house, and of all those things he hated the music box the most. Sometimes Prudence would call him up and make him sit silently in the room for hours winding and rewinding the damned machine. Every note of the William Tell Overture that the music box spout forth struck him like a bell, and inspired his irritation with his predicament to new heights.

He strode over to the musical contraption not bothering to avoid stepping on the items that Prudence had spilt on the floor. He enjoyed listening to the quill snap and the paper crumple underfoot.

The music box was a warm amber color with gold designs spiraling across it. If you lifted the lid you would see no room to store things, but an array of shining gears and complicated mechanisms. The lid was rarely opened, so a gold key normally remained in the lock, ensuring that it was closed. Today the lid was not closed and the key lay on the table beside it. Trepidation and arrogance both pinched at the demon. Something was off. He shook his head, freeing his face from his mane. Prudence was dying, his freedom was coming.

He grimaced as he reached for the music box. The twinkling brightness of the William Tell Overture mocked him. Sometimes he imagined that Prudence had sought out the composer

and commissioned him to make the song; that she had sat there, sneering, time after time and told the composer, “No, no, it needs to sound more like a legless wolf that a laughing little girl is dressing in her old clothing. Think bonnets and ribbons. Think of her grinding down the creature’s teeth. Now throw that trash away and do it again. You are lucky that I’m spending my money on such debauchery as *music*.”

The demon paused and glanced at Prudence, “Do we really have to? Do we have to listen to it today?”

“Wind the music box.”

He reached out to touch the crank and then found that he could move no more. He tried to draw back, but his fingers remained upon the metal. He tried to turn his head, but it was frozen as well. He found that his eyes could still flick side to side and that his mouth had not been forcibly shut. His lips curled back in a rage. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Prudence drawing back her blankets.

The grimoire rested open in her bed as he had suspected, but there was also a mirror, crystals, lavender (he had failed to smell it due to the overwhelming scent of the blood), and rectangular rods of soft black clay. Her bed was marked with black from the clay and red from her blood. Bits of lavender were scattered about the witch. The mirror sat upon her lap. Prudence had a light smile on her face and a dash of mischief about her that he had never detected before; Prudence didn’t play tricks.

“What is the meaning of this?” The demon said.

“Well, Obadiah,” Prudence said, as she took one of the clay rods and began to draw on the mirror, “I am dying—”

“That has been rather obvious.” The demon had in fact been counting down the days, hours, and minutes till the big finale.

“Shush. No interrupting,” the witch said. “You see. I cannot simply destroy you... I lack, well...” She coughed and then continued, “The fortitude, I suppose. But I cannot have you running free when I pass on. That would be... irresponsible.”

Another cough caught her and turned into a brief fit.

The demon growled.

With a deep breath, Prudence took control of her voice once more. “Unfortunately, I do not know a witch currently alive that I could entrust you to. So, I have done some seeing, and made some adjustments to Witch’s Word and some other arrangements for you. And I have waited till now...”

Fury and panic flooded him. Desperately he willed his hand to move, to leave the crank.

Damn her, he thought.

Prudence placed the lavender and the crystals on the mirror.

The demon scolded himself for his foolishness. Of course, she wouldn’t just die without considering the consequences of her death. No, that would be far too simple.

She lifted her handkerchief, and it struck him, the secret ingredient, how she had adjusted her binding: blood has power.

“Prudence!” The demon yelled.

She looked at him expectantly, eyebrows up. “Yes?”

He searched for words, for something to argue, but all he could find in that moment was, “Please!”

Her smile widened. The few teeth she still had actually presented themselves; they hung loosely from her bright red gums.

His begging seemed to have renewed her, and her voice sparked with an energy that had been absent for some time, “Prudence, please? Please let you go eat lost children and churlish clerks? Let you slaughter and destroy? Let you trick, tempt, and torture? Why would I do that? Why would I free a blasphemy?”

She laid the hand, not holding the bloody handkerchief, upon the grimoire.

“I’ve changed!” The demon said, his voice cracked with fear then settled and quickened. “I understand humanity. Those poetry books you had me memorize, they enlightened me to the deepness and beauty of the human soul. I love the Romantics, even Percy. You had me pray nightly, you know this. What do you think I prayed for?”

“My death,” Prudence responded, “people to eat, all manner of things that the ill repute think they deserve.”

“Compassion!” He said, “I understand. I truly do. I understand!”

Both the witch and the demon knew that there was quite a difference between understanding humanity and compassion and actually being capable of such things. Neither of them actually thought the demon could practice either. The lie was far too apparent.

Prudence shook her head and dabbed the bloody napkin to the center of the mirror. She took her right hand from the grimoire to hover above the mirror; the words, the knowledge, seemed to transfer with its movement.

“Stop!” the demon yelled.

She started to read a page from the spell book aloud. Her voice was rhythmic and high and twittering like the birds that he would occasionally catch and eat, since Prudence had never forbade him from eating birds (just cats, humans, horses, and dogs).

Prudence began to move her hand in time with her words, each finger punctuating a note.

The music box began to wind itself.

First, the demon’s fingers turned to a black smoke and then rapidly curled into the music box with the winding of the crank. Then his arm followed.

“This is unfair!”

Everything was becoming smoke. Everything was swirling. Soon he was just a floating torso.

“Have you lost your wits?” He yelled.

Prudence continued reading.

“You are going to die, Prudence! Not in your sleep, you fool, but from starvation! Because you have put me in a goddamn music box!”

The demon had been reduced to a head.

“Go to Hell! Oh, once you’ve grown accustomed to the fire and the whips, Pru, then I’ll find my way there. We all do, and a trip home, dealing with the old man, will be so worth it just for the chance to torture you for an eternity!”

Then the demon smiled, a horrible smile with rows upon rows of pointed teeth that seemed to descend down his throat, and he laughed as his features began to dissolve into black smoke. The winding had just hardly stopped and the William Tell Overture had just started to play as the last words rung out:

“How damn long do you think it is going to take someone to open a music box?”

Chapter 2

Present Day

Imogen Williams held the lighter to the tip of the incense and, with a flick and a flame, it was lit. The smell of bergamot, like smoked orange peels that had been doused in rum, filled the shop.

Imogen returned the lighter to its drawer, below the cash register, and then waved her hand through the smoke.

She paused, fingers spread, hand hovering above the incense, and watched as the smoke danced through her digits. Precious curls of white and gray fondled her fingers. It was so warm. She closed her eyes and breathed in.

Bergamot— for prosperity, joy, protection, and confidence—was perfect for the antique store.

Imogen had been working at Conway's Curiosities for three years. She had started while still an art history major in undergrad. She had planned to move on, to go to graduate school and become an archivist, but a year had passed since she'd graduated and she hadn't even researched schools. She was content at the antique store.

Every morning she would draw the curtains to reveal the front window display (today gnomes, brilliantly colored vases, a bust of Caesar, a clique of porcelain dolls in floral dresses, and a lamp with a lounging lion as a base were featured), flick on the purple neon "Open" sign that made her boss feel delightfully wicked (he had been subject to a rather strict New England upbringing, puritanical even), comb through her box of incense, and with a flame set the mood

for the day. Then she would wait in the fort she had formed through the arrangement of two long desks and one short one into the shape of a “C.”

Opening her eyes she proceeded to follow her daily routine.

Imogen spun her chair around and tapped at the cash register (she did this occasionally to make herself feel productive in some minute way), then she spun again and set a record going on the player sitting upon the adjacent desk (today it was Frank Sinatra), and then she spun once more and busied herself at her laptop checking for updates on the witch blogs that she regularly followed.

Her favorite blogs were Witch Bitch, Modern Spelling, and Get Magical with Blair. Witch Bitch’s intended audience was “modern feminist bad ass witches;” the articles posted featured titles ranging from “Use Love Potions? You’re a Rapist” to “What is a Male Witch? A Witch.” Modern Spelling was more academic; if you needed a hex translated or a charm to protect your computer from viruses then Modern Spelling was #1.

Then there was Get Magical with Blair. Her blog was eclectic: monthly recipes for blessed bath bombs, articles about Blair’s quest to befriend local elemental spirits, a plethora of selfies with motivational quotes about self-love, bi-weekly magical make-up guides, and everything that Imogen happened to find cute and witty. Blair Farrah was local to Charleston; so local in fact that she just so happened to be one of Imogen’s neighbors.

Imogen checked Blair’s blog daily despite the awkwardness and anxiety she felt knowing so much about an individual who she was certain didn’t even know her name.

Blair had just posted a video entitled: “Behind the Scenes: The Charleston Coven’s Boudoir Photoshoot.”

Imogen watched it jealously.

Blair appeared on screen in a short floral robe. She spun in circles; the robe flew up for a brief instant to reveal the blue charmeuse romper underneath. One witch, in a black teddy, halted the spinning Blair. Another, in pink bejeweled bra and panties, offered her a glass of champagne, while a third, clasping a loose corset to her chest, beckoned Blair to lace her up. Blair was the shortest of the Charleston Coven; she was about five feet tall. With her curly hair, freckles, and bare feet she resembled a hobbit among elves. Leaving the scantily clad witches behind, the video went into the usual animated title sequence, a spoof of the intro to *Bewitched*.

The video switched between pictures from the shoot and behind-the-scenes clips as Blair’s voice narrated.

“So, I recently got the chance to partake in a boudoir party with my coven,” Blair said. Her words had a natural melody to them. You could practically hear her bright smile. “I know some of you might be cringing at this video, but don’t worry. We’re going to discuss sexualization, body issues, reclamation, and whether I’m a complete hypocrite in the next 20 minutes.”

Imogen sighed as she watched the witches clinking their glasses and tightening corsets. She felt like she’d been born a lonely person.

Suddenly the crooning of Frank Sinatra, Blair’s narration, and the witch’s giggles were interrupted by the chiming of the bell at the front door.

Quickly, Imogen closed her laptop, stood, smoothed her blouse, put on her best smile, and left the desk fort.

“Hello!” Imogen called as she passed the Artemis statue, standing just an inch shorter than Imogen at 5’5, and rounded the bookcase full of novelty salt and pepper shakers. “Can I help you with anything?”

It was Madame Pratt, a regular, accompanied by a short woman who Imogen was unfamiliar with. Mrs. Pratt wore a large white hat and a blue dress littered with one too many brooches. The woman, appearing to be Madame Pratt’s peer in age—somewhere in her 60s, wore a scarf, a jacket, and a dress, all of which were in a different wild print. The stranger gave Imogen the “look.”

Imogen had become accustomed to the “Look” while working at the antique store; most older southern women sported the raised eyebrows, pursed lips, and upturned chins upon spotting the young black girl wearing a waterfall of blue green locs and a turquoise nose ring.

Madame Pratt had never sported the “Look;” her face lit up. “Imogen! This is my friend, Betty—“

“Mrs. Dermott,” the short woman said, eyes narrowed, “to you.”

“Yes, well, I regaled her with tale upon tale about your lovely little shop. Is Miles,” Madame Pratt blushed, “Mr. Conway here today?”

Imogen smiled. “He’s supposed to be returning today, but, you know, there’s really no guarantee.”

“So easily distracted,” Madame Pratt said with a sigh.

“Might be going senile,” Mrs. Dermott said.

Mrs. Pratt dismissed her friend’s statement with a flourish of her hand and asked, “How long has he been off treasure hunting this time?”

“Almost two weeks,” Imogen replied.

Madame Pratt, twirling a wisp of her long silver hair, leaned towards Imogen conspiratorially. She smelled vaguely of roses and alcohol. “He didn’t go up North did he? He always gets sick when he ventures North. That silly handsome man really needs something to ground him. I mean, it’s simply not healthy to be a lifelong bachelor. He really needs a wealthy good-natured widow type who didn’t murder even one of her seven husbands.”

Mrs. Dermott rolled her eyes and stamped her foot impatiently. Madame Pratt sighed dramatically and said, “We’re actually here on a mission today. I’m having a garden party; the theme is enchantment. If I remember correctly, you have some rather large pieces perfect for decorating my garden.”

“Right this way.” Imogen said with a smile.

She led the ladies around the corner to the Artemis statue. Imogen had been contemplating calling Mrs. Pratt about the sculpture; she had thought of her immediately upon its arrival. The goddess had made for an excellent companion though; she was full of stories. Imogen had seen them all with a magical touch. So she had decided there was no need to rush the inevitable. Imogen thought back to memories imbued in the statue. This would be easy. Madame Pratt was charmed by Conway for one primary reason: she was a sucker for some storytelling.

“She used to belong to Bing Carvall—” Imogen began.

“Aw, the Trump type from Louisiana,” Madame Pratt said, “I met him once at the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals charity gala of all places. He came in riding on top of a rolling platform being pushed by three butlers, all the while arm in arm with a stuffed bear wearing specially made alligator cowboy boots. He called me a ‘humorless fucking hippie.’”

Mrs. Dermott’s eyes rested on the ceiling as she shook her head. She was probably recalling the numerous scandals the Carvall family, particularly Bing, had been involved in.

Imogen cleared her throat and wove her web of words. She told them about how Bing Carvall had been determined to litter his Louisiana estate with hundreds of gods and goddesses; how in 1962, he hosted a competition, attracting sculptors far and wide. The winner would make an indecent amount of money. Prizes for runners-up were extravagant as well. He provided free room and board to those competing and even had special workshops built on his estate. It was an artist’s dream.

However, there always runs the risk with a perfect dream that any moment it can transform into a nightmare. This dream was more at risk than any of the artists would have supposed. Bing Carvall was a sadist. When the artists arrived they signed certain papers, and neglected to read them that thoroughly. Bing Carvall’s terms and conditions would put any website to shame. Each challenge required the making of a time consuming creation and every loser was subjected to Carvall’s critique, a harrowing experience by itself. But here’s the kicker, Bing would personally destroy the loser’s creations. Normally, he would just take a sledgehammer to them. Sometimes he got creative; after all, what’s the point of owning a cannon if you never use it? One artist had tried to escape the loser’s penalty.

Artemis had seen the great hunt, or rather her maker had, and therefore so had Imogen. The images were still fresh in her mind as she described the artist's flight; she chose her words carefully to avoid outing herself—her magic. For Imogen had seen the fugitive artist, the man who'd tried to escape Carvall's competition with his masterpiece, stumbling, huffing and puffing as he dragged his Hera along, toward the estate's walls. She had heard the beat of hooves behind her and seen the dirt fly as the dark horse, a massive Friesian, tore past her after the artist. The poor man didn't make it anywhere near the gate. Bing caught him and forced him to run a gauntlet; at the end the artist was black, blue and bloody.

"Once the competition came to an end," Imogen said, "Bing Carvall had twelve statues and the sculpting community had banded together to blacklist him since justice wasn't forthcoming in other areas."

Mrs. Dermott tapped her foot impatiently.

"A few years back, when Bing Carvall died, his family had a massive estate auction. Conway couldn't resist."

Madame Pratt perked up once more at the mention of Conway's name.

"He's a sucker for Greek mythology," Imogen continued, "so he bought all eleven."

"I thought you said there were twelve?" Mrs. Dermott said. The tapping of her foot halted. Her anticipation at perhaps having caught Imogen making a mistake smothered the air around her.

Imogen smiled sadly. "Aphrodite was shattered in some Carvall shooting practice gone awry."

Madame Pratt gasped; her hand flew to her chest. Mrs. Dermott resumed her foot tapping.

“We have Artemis out here in the showroom, but we don’t have the other ten on site. They couldn’t fit in the back room; it’s rather cramped. So they’re in a storage building near the water. If you don’t want Artemis, I can pull up pictures of the other pieces on my laptop for you to select from.”

Madame Pratt ran her finger along the crescent moon that adorned the goddess, “If they are as beautiful as she, then I believe I will have to buy them all. Don’t you think they’d be perfect for a party, Betty?”

“Oh, yes,” Mrs. Dermott said, foot tapping intensity increasing. “Tortured artists always make for great small talk.”

Madame Pratt waved her hand once more, as if shooing Mrs. Dermott away, before she turned her attention back to Imogen. “Be a dear, pull up the pictures and show me them all.”

The bergamot, Imogen thought, had brought them something prosperous indeed.

She quickly directed Madame Pratt to her desk and showed her the rest of the collection on her laptop. After a lot of oohing and awing, Imogen charged Mrs. Pratt’s platinum credit card. She was just taking down the details for delivery when the bell rang and, with a shallow breeze, entered Miles Preston Conway.

“Hello, hello!” Conway said.

Madame Pratt let out a tiny excited gasp. She smoothed the skirt of her dress and turned expectantly. Mrs. Dermott curiously glanced towards the door; she had previously been

preoccupied with examining a bookcase that contained nothing but Russian nesting dolls.

Imogen smiled and sat down to watch the show. Conway came around the corner; the glint in his eyes, the pull of his lips, and the tilt of his eyebrows bore resemblance to the face of a rather smug fox.

Conway had a swathe of silver hair; every strand always perfectly placed. His eyes were the bluest that Imogen had ever seen. “Blue like heaven,” Madame Pratt, practically swooning, had once said. It was impossible to catch the man in anything but a suit. He looked like the type of person who would sail overseas to bid on expensive wines, and when the ship’s captain died of mysterious consequences would not only take over the captaining of the ship, with little to no difficulty, but would also launch a very thorough investigation all while wooing some young Parisian heiress.

“Madame Pratt!” Conway exclaimed upon seeing the customer. “Isn’t this a pleasure! I would offer to be your personal guide through the treasure trove, but it would appear that Miss Imogen has already located something to your liking.”

“Oh, yes,” Madame Pratt said, her cheeks and ears rapidly developing a bright pink hue, “She’s been a perfect doll.”

Conway looked at Mrs. Dermott, “And who is your charming companion today?”

Mrs. Dermott blushed and consequently looked annoyed. She stood a little straighter and lifted her chin a little higher as she introduced herself. “Betty Dermott.”

“How lovely it is to make your acquaintance, Betty,” Conway said with a slight bow.

Imogen noticed that Mrs. Dermott did not protest to Conway's familiarity; in fact the blush, which seemed to so infuriate the lady, deepened. Mrs. Dermott quickly turned back to the bookcase of Russian nesting dolls as Madame Pratt rattled off questions about Conway's travels and he answered with his usual small talk and occasional witticisms. Every ten seconds or so Madame Pratt would laugh and stroke the side of her cheek.

"It has certainly been divine seeing you today, Madame Pratt," Conway said as he kissed her hand; he held the lady's petite paw before him for a moment, gazing at the emerald and gold ring upon her finger, before releasing her.

"I'm afraid," Conway said, "that I must return to work. I do hope that you enjoy the pantheon. I imagine that you'll be right at home among goddesses."

Imogen smiled and rolled her eyes. She noted that Conway appeared to be excellent health today, which was not always the case. Not only did he often sport a horrible cough but he was also the victim of a series of medical mysteries that, in the last three years, included: random bouts of blindness, fingernails falling off, hearing for two months continual strange tinny noises that sounded oddly like *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*, crying stones, a month of constant hiccupping, persistently choking on air, and hearing his eyes move. It was always a relief to see him in his natural element—wantonly flirting.

Madame Pratt giggled, said something unintelligible, and twirled out of the door. Mrs. Dermott followed slowly, swiping her own hand away from Conway when he offered to kiss it as well.

"Good day, Mr. Conway." Mrs. Dermott said.

“Good day, Betty.” Conway relied.

Mrs. Dermott blushed furiously and practically sprinted out the door.

He chuckled as he closed the door behind her, flipped the lock, and switched off the light for the purple neon “Open” sign.

“We’re closing already?” Imogen asked. She stood next to Aphrodite, peeking around the corner at Conway.

“I won an interesting lot this last week up in Maine. I need your special eyes to take a look.”

His smile and shoulders had relaxed, though something of the fox still seemed about him.

They walked back to the desk fort, and through the green curtain behind it that separated the front of the shop from the back. The back room was smaller and even more crowded and cluttered than the front. When Imogen had started at the shop she had spent a considerable amount of time organizing the front of the shop, but in the back Conway’s hoarding tendencies reigned supreme. Boxes upon boxes upon boxes lined the walls. Rows were created by junkier bookcases, rickety wire shelving, and more boxes. There was one truly clear area in the back, and that was where the rainbow braided rug lay. Imogen lowered herself to the floor and ran her hands across the rug, her safe place for the seeing and sorting.

Conway darted to the back door and brought in a cart carrying two rather large cardboard boxes. He situated the cart next to the rug and between the plain fold-out chair and the one nicer bookcase in the room, where the good knick-knacks went. He sat down on the fold out chair. He

took a breath and then, in fluid motion, he pulled a blade from his pocket, slit the tape from the first box, and pried it open.

Imogen shifted forward and began removing the items, wrapped in brown paper, from the box. One by one she peeled the paper back and revealed them.

Imogen had a talent; with a touch, she could feel or see the memories associated with objects. During her childhood the gift had been fun, but her parents had blown it off as child's play. During her adolescence Imogen had become convinced that she was crazy, and invested a large amount of time to studying psychology to try and determine exactly what was wrong with her. This thrilled her psychiatrist father who thought his daughter was following in his footsteps. By her freshman year at college she had accepted her ability with some trepidation and had begun experimentation, but she had remained quiet about all this.

Conway, well read in the various theories of magic but possessing little to no usable power, had recognized Imogen's skill almost immediately.

Under Conway's supervision, meaning him sipping tea and reading a newspaper, Imogen had dashed around cleaning and organizing the store her first full day there. She had been a flurry of emotions, going from one object to the next. These rapidly occurring emotions had been registered by Conway, obvious by the questioning raised eyebrows he had shot her with several times. But it was not till she was reorganizing the display case—till she touched the dagger—that the secret came out.

She had glanced at Conway as she was picking up the dagger. The initial emotion, the pain embedded in the dagger, caught her off guard and she immediately dropped it back into the case. It landed on the velvet lining with a dull thud. She felt stupid. She felt trapped. She knew

he'd seen it. Recognition gleamed in Conway's eyes. In that brief instant when she had touched the dagger she'd seen him see the spark travel from the dagger up her fingers; he had traced the sudden brightness through the veins in her arm till it was obscured by the sleeve of her t-shirt. He had known that the spark had touched her heart.

“What did you see?” Conway asked.

He set his teacup down and then his paper and pushed himself out of the large green and gold armchair by the display case. He moved quicker than she had expected. He seemed to circle her, going from one side to the other. He glanced back and forth, between the dagger and her, waiting.

Imogen didn't know what to say. No one had ever asked her that question before. They had simply assumed that she was clumsy, sleep deprived, or the like.

“What?” She said.

“Don't be coy.” Conway said with a smile, “When you touched the dagger, you saw something right?”

Imogen nodded. She felt like she was dreaming.

“What was it?” Conway asked.

Imogen replied, “A murder.”

Conway had then insisted that she handle the dagger again. He had stood beside her, taking notes, as she closed her eyes, let the image immerse her, and related to him the details. She stood in a barn, sunlight filtered through the boards. Some of the images were fuzzy, but that

was not uncommon. It was rare that Imogen fell into memories like this; normally it was just a scent or a sound. There was a body; it was hanging upside down from one of the rafters, blood and guts spilled out of it. The murderer was knelt down; he was using the dagger to cut out of the corpse's eyes. The bits of bloody gore that fell on him from the body's stomach didn't seem to bother him; he brushed them away like petals from a blooming dogwood tree.

Imogen was shaking when she dropped the dagger once more. Conway had promptly apologized for making her go back in and then pulled up an old news article about an unsolved murder.

It had been something between horrifying and delicious for someone to recognize her ability, for someone to confirm its reality. Those muddled feelings had permanently attached themselves to Conway. He was her mentor and her friend, but he was full of secrets; he hoarded and hid them from her like some kind of secret dragon.

When Conway had enlisted her help, a little over a year ago, he had told her that he was working on a book; that he needed help collecting materials on some of the most mysterious figures, America's witches—*real* witches. Imogen had readily agreed. Magic thrilled her, besides Conway paid an additional \$5 on top of her normal hourly wage whenever she did seeing for the quest. But lately, he had become almost strangely preoccupied with one witch in particular. It had been difficult work to coax the name out of him; it was like trying to convince a man to rip his pacemaker from his chest.

Finally, he had told her the name: Prudence What-God-Will Perry. He had whispered as if something living in the store's walls would steal it and deliver it to some rival history detective type. Imogen had poured out question upon question, and Conway had just smiled and assured

her that all her questions would be answered once the book was written. “Just look for the secret ingredients: the sea, sin, witchcraft, fury, and trickery,” he told her. So Imogen relaxed and cooled her curiosity. She decided to make a game out of it, and see if she could guess the secrets before Conway ever revealed them. He always gave her the proudest smile when she guessed right, like a sly grandfather playing Socrates.

Conway hummed some perky tune as Imogen made quick work of the first box. She set many things aside; they were not embedded with deep memories or emotions. There was not even an iota of magic in the bundle of silverware she unwrapped, nor did a blue tin mug offer any clues. Some she stopped and paused to look at. With a pot she heard fire crackling and felt the dull ache of starvation. With a blanket she felt the grief of a mother who had miscarried; it was so strong.

Conway’s humming halted and he leaned forward as tears fell from Imogen’s eyes.

“Is it?”

“No,” Imogen said, wiping the tears away with the back of her hand, “just a normal tragedy.”

Conway fell back, “Oh.”

“Next box, please,” Imogen said.

It’d been awhile since she’d seen anything that incorporated all the clues—the secret ingredients. But Conway looked excited. Did he know something Imogen didn’t? The question elicited a strange jealousy.

Imogen sighed, shook the feelings off, and swept her locs back. Conway pushed the second box towards her. She blindly rummaged through the cardboard monstrosity; it was full of packaging peanuts.

His excitement was probably for nothing. The pessimism began to settle upon her, but then—whales, people yelling in thick Boston accents, bells ringing, old fingers resting upon a leather bound book.

“Im-O-gen. Imogen Williams.” Someone sang.

Eyes wide she looked up, and Conway returned her look with raised eyebrows.

“What?” he asked.

“Um, I—”

What felt like a clawed hand grasped the back of Imogen’s head and then pushed her forward forcing her to look back down at the box.

“We should speak privately, you and I,” Disembodied-not-Conway said, “away from wannabe warlocks.”

“Imogen?” Conway asked. “What’s wrong?”

“I—”

The claws dug into Imogen’s head. Imogen repressed a pained gasp.

“I have a migraine.” She finally said. “Can you get me some water?”

“Must have been triggered from the seeing. I’ll be right back,” Conway said. He stood and after giving her once last glance, it seemed knowing, he went to fetch a glass of water.

“Good girl,” the silvery voice said and the presence of the clawed hand evaporated.

Imogen lifted her hand from the box; packaging peanuts fell away like foam from the sea as she brought forth the object that had produced the magical bully. It was a bright blue marble. She held it in her palm for a moment. She could feel energy swirling passively within, lurking. Imogen had never encountered anything like it before; never had anything addressed her, probed at her mind, like that. This had to be more than some treasured item imbued with a memory.

She turned the marble around and considered ignoring the spirit’s words and telling Conway. He’d know what it was. He’d advise her. But as Conway’s returning footsteps came into earshot a light flickered in the marble like a wink, and Imogen felt a searing pain on her palm where the marble rested. She jumped and almost dropped the marble, but caught it between her fingers. The skin where the marble had rested was red and raised, as if she had been holding a wasp rather than a marble. Flustered she quickly pocketed the marble before Conway came around the corner.

“Aqua,” he said, “as requested.”

She took the glass. Her hands were shaking; the water sloshed back and forth.

Conway sat down and watched as Imogen took a series of dainty sips. The sound the glass made as she set it down upon the concrete floor of the back room seemed too loud. She closed her eyes and breathed in and out; she was playing a part while trying to soothe the guilt of hiding the marble. She could feel Conway’s eyes upon her, truth seeking.

“You’re not feeling nauseous, are you?” Conway asked.

“No, actually,” Imogen said, eyes flickering open, “I think we can proceed.”

So they proceeded. There was a jumping rope that had memorized only the most gruesome of rhymes and a red spinning top that carried a child’s giggles; no other objects carried sensory memories stronger than these. All the while the marble felt like a thorn burying itself deeper and deeper into Imogen’s leg.

After two hours of lackluster visions, Conway decided it was time to call it quits for the day. As they tidied the back room, he shifted between faraway looks and the occasional narrowed eyes.

Conway glanced at his watch. “I think it’s time we depart and live our lives. Do you have any plans this evening, dear?”

“No. Just the usual.” Imogen was painfully aware of the marble in her pocket.

“Tsk.” Conway pulled the green curtain aside and held it open like any good gentleman with a door. Imogen walked through into the front room with the same sort of nervousness people get when they go through airport security.

“Need to get yourself out of your comfort zone, then you’ll have plans,” Conway said, following her, “that I’ll guarantee.”

Imogen’s ears were hot with guilt. She smiled weakly as she collected her belongings from the desk fort.

“The Bacchus Bar has an occult night biweekly.” He suggested as he strode past her,
“Guess what tonight is? Hmm?”

He waited for her answer. She didn't.

“Occult night.” He said. There was a note of concern in his voice.

“I know.”

Conway watched her for a moment, eyes narrowed. Imogen looked up from packing her laptop into her satchel and said, “What?”

The old fox flashed his grin and started to walk down the antique strewn aisles of the shop. He gave Artemis a peck on the cheek. He paused as he opened the front door and the bells chimed. Conway turned and yelled, “Make sure those delivery men don't break anything tomorrow when they carry Artemis out. But you, Imogen, break your habits!”

The door clattered shut. The bells were a choir in disarray.

“Will do,” Imogen said to the empty store.

Chapter 3

The teapot screamed. Imogen darted over. Her robe, a giant mass of dark blue fabric, blew back like wings sending a chamomile tea packet spiraling down to the black and white linoleum floor and nearly whisking her favorite purple mug off the counter.

Imogen had stripped her jeans, containing the marble, off immediately upon arriving home. She had lowered them onto the coffee table in her living room like they were radioactive and stared at them for a moment before going to fetch her robe and a pair of fluffy shorts. While pulling the elastic onto her hips she had been surprised to see that the red raised sting the marble had inflicted on her earlier had vanished. For a moment she had stood there staring at her hand and debating whether it had been a trick, an illusion. The pain had certainly felt real. Could the spirit in the marble hurt her? The idea that it could frightened her.

She noted that her hands still shook as she lowered the chamomile tea packet into her mug. Imogen frowned. She had hoped to quell the fear before touching the marble, but the resolve to be brave and proud was in a losing debate to her survival instincts. Imogen murmured a protective chant as she carried her steeping tea into the living room.

Despite the fact that it was still light outside, Imogen's living room was dark aside from a dim lamp. She hardly ever drew the blinds. A fellow she'd known in high school lived across the street. She had made two mistakes during her first week at her new apartment. Her first mistake had been lingering outside; her second had been approaching the figure that excitedly waved at her from across the street and shouted her name. If she had known then of his clingy habits and his collection of binoculars for "birdwatching" she would've never talked to him. Whenever the

annoying fellow knew for sure that Imogen was home, she was guaranteed a phone call at best, and a knock at her door at worse. Rather than telling him off, she hid.

Imogen put down her chamomile tea and settled down on her couch. It was a good couch, aside from one lump that had resulted in it being nicknamed “the cyst couch.” She grabbed the jeans she’d been wearing earlier off the coffee table and sat for a moment poking at the marble through the fabric shield. She didn’t really have a choice. Imogen had never encountered anything like the marble before. There was only one way to get answers and it was not from the internet.

Imogen pulled the marble from the pocket. For a moment she held it and nothing happened. It was like it was any other marble. It was like there was nothing imbued within it. It was just cool glass resting between her thumb and forefinger. But then the marble began to grow warm. Suddenly a blue spark, far more brilliant than the color of the marble, flashed. Imogen could feel fire licking her fingers. She cried out. The bright blue flame traveled through her veins; they glowed furiously. It felt like her blood was gasoline and the marble a match, lit and dropped. The pain struck her. Imogen fell forward hitting the coffee table and dropping to the carpeted floor. Her mug of chamomile, intended for calming, spilled and doused the fallen woman, and yet she did not let go of the marble.

The burning suddenly stopped.

Imogen was no longer lying on her carpet in her living room.

Imogen was in the ocean and she was sinking.

Her long green-blue locs floated about obscuring her vision; she pushed them back and threw her arms forward desperately cutting through the cold dark water. Eighty seconds, if she remembered correctly, was all she had till her body hit the break point and forced her to breathe in. Darkness crept in at the corners of her vision as she swam, what she presumed, was upwards.

Debris and corpses, falling like snow, were sinking around her.

There, there was a muggy light; it was her northern star. Imogen's throat tightened. She clawed at the water.

69, 68, 67, 66, 65.

Fuck, fuck me, Imogen thought, I should have breathed in before touching the marble.

58, 57, 56, 55, 54.

She stopped. There she floated in the ocean. She had forgotten the marble. Imogen reprimanded herself for allowing it to have consumed her mind so easily; of course she wasn't the comrade of those bleeding bloating bodies that encircled her. No matter how real the water felt against her skin, it was an illusion. She was still in her living room.

Her lungs screamed.

You're seeing, she told herself.

Eyes pinched closed, she brought a hand to her throat, and willed herself to breathe in. Her senses, her body, defied her.

She dug her bright green nails into her palms.

Imogen forced her lips to part and screamed, “Fuck!”

Instead of water flooding her lungs, it was air. It was wonderful. She took deep breaths, drinking it in; the air was flavored with chamomile and the scent of a carpet that was apparently due for a cleaning. Everything was fine. She opened her eyes.

This memory, this aftermath, was overrun with magic. But how?

Conway had told her that all humans had some natural magic about them, but that it was so small it normally couldn't be used in any sort of deliberate manner. Occasionally with a frequent touch magical energy could leak into objects that the toucher had strong associations with. When the magic was substantial then gifts like Imogen's could manifest. But everything in this illusion was so sharp, when Imogen breathed bubbles went through the water, how was this happening?

The bully spirit, she thought, maybe someone died and instead of going wherever people go they inhabited the marble.

Her spine tingled at the idea of meeting a ghost. Imogen was surprised that her host had not yet spoken up with a snarky jibe or something.

“Hello?” She called out.

She waited for a response. None came.

She moved among the bodies, swimming downward alongside them. If her host wasn't going to be as forthcoming as they were earlier she might as well just treat this like any other memory.

Imogen reached out, touching a corpse. The body's sinking quickened with the force of her hand upon it. A strange fear rumbled through her as she realized that her touch had affected it. She'd never been able to interact with a memory before. Normally things just played out and she moved around them, sometimes walking through people and objects that were in her way.

She went from corpse to corpse examining their clothes. They all appeared to be sailors. The majority wore plain linen shirts, neckerchiefs of varying colors and patterns, knee-length breeches fastened around the legs with frayed drawstrings, knitted socks, and black square toe shoes.

One man, the only one barefoot, wore a grey double breasted jacket and held a large conical hat in his death grip. Imogen tried to avoid looking at the dead man's face as she went through the articles in his pockets. She found a one cent piece; it had the word "liberty" floating above the head of a woman whose features had been smoothed with time. The coin was already aged. The date beneath the woman set the coin's origin at the year 1800. The man also had a wooden snuff box and a partially toothless comb.

Any papers that might have identified the ship and its crew had already been ravaged by the salty water, and Imogen's touch only served in finalizing their destruction.

She looked upwards, wondering if she might find anything or anyone floating on the surface.

She began to swim upwards. Maybe she'd find the bully spirit. She shivered at the idea that maybe she already had. The spirit could have been the man who was so attached to his hat.

No, Imogen thought, her host had survived to carry and imbue that tiny shimmering marble that she now held between her fingers in the world outside of the illusion.

Suddenly, her upward swim was interrupted. A low hum filled the water and struck her body like a shiver—a warning. She saw in the distance a great shadow. It was moving quickly, too quickly. Like a whirlwind underwater she was swept up and sent spiraling.

She smelled lavender and heard rough grumblings in Boston accents.

Images flashed past: marble hitting marble, children crying, a bowler hat drifting away, fresh baked bread, and blood.

The visions stopped at the same time as Imogen’s spiraling. She was face to face with a whale; its lips were against hers, as if a tender kiss. It opened its massive mouth. Water rushed about her. Imogen was being swallowed.

A cacophony of noises crashed upon each other as Imogen found herself carried into absolute darkness. There was whistling, screaming, and chanting in languages she did not know. The chaos seemed merge together, new sounds piped out with the distortion, and then Imogen heard something that familiar.

Wait, Imogen thought, is that the William Tell Overture?

Then everything went silent.

Imogen held up her hand, but she could not see it. She was floating in a black abyss.

“Hello?” Imogen said because she didn’t know what else to do.

She heard a low chuckle in response and then felt a quick flick to her forehead.

“Ow!”

The chuckle grew into all out laughter.

Then someone said her name. It was Disembodied-not-Conway—the bully spirit.

The silvery voice repeated her name several more times as if sizing her up.

Imogen, heart racing, stared into the darkness.

Be calm, she told herself, it’s an illusion. It can’t hurt you. It’s not real.

“Your father is the child of immigrants from Nicaragua. Your mother’s from the Midwest,” the voice purred, “Germanic ancestry. Oooh my, with a dash of Irish. Prudence would have disliked you greatly.”

“What?” Imogen said. “How do you—”

“You didn’t think that this was a one-sided exchange, did you? Some memories of yours, for some of mine.”

“What are you?” Imogen said. A sudden braveness filled her. “Who are you? If you like equivalency so much, isn’t that fair? You know my name.”

Something moved in the pitch-black water surrounding her. It was close. If Imogen reached out she could touch it; she could feel it lingering there. Something about its energy gave her the distinct impression that it was daring her.

“You’ve certainly got the gift,” the voice said everything slowly, deliberately, as if it were trying to determine what flavor had turned this amusement to a taste bitter and disgusting,

“but you lack the knowledge. Certainly not the equal to foul Prudence. What is the rule in regards to speaking of the dead? Heh. Rules. May her rotting body be impregnated with damned worms.”

Imogen turned in the water, spinning 360, to try to see the speaker.

“Prudence? You don’t mean—” Imogen said, thinking of Conway’s quest, “Prudence What-God-Will Perry?”

The water stirred and sandpaper scales bit into her legs. The creature encircled Imogen. It had a firm grip on her calves. It started pulling her down.

Panic blinded Imogen’s mind. She had to say something. She had to do something. What would happen if it dragged her down? She tried to swim upwards. She had always been a strong swimmer, but the creature had a hold of her and it was much stronger. She tried to free her legs from the creature, scratching and tearing the palms of her hands against its knife-like scales in the process.

“God damn, you! You cocky shark monster!” Imogen yelled.

This caused the creature to burst out laughing. Its grip on Imogen loosened enough for her to free herself. She kicked her feet against it, using the monster as a launching board to torpedo herself upwards, up into the dark water that might not have a surface.

“Exactly!” the creature yelled amidst its savage laughter.

Pressure suddenly began to fill Imogen’s head, as if she was swimming down and the illusion’s water had gained real force. Pain streaked red in her vision. It felt like there was a wasp inside her ear. She screamed and there it was, real water, flooding her lungs. She was going to

die. Everything was shaking. Everything was cold and dark. Her lungs were collapsing. There was blood in the water.

“Imogen? Hello?” The voice was light; it rang out like bells.

There was a pounding.

“Imogen?”

No water flooded Imogen’s lungs. She lay on the floor, prone, face in the carpet. She heaved herself up, gasping for air. Her legs were weak under her and she almost fell back down. Someone was knocking at her door.

“Imogen?”

Imogen gritted her teeth and walked slowly towards the door. That stupid song “Put One Foot in Front of the Other” filled her head and seemed to harmonize with the pain that wracked her body. She paused for a moment, hand against the wall, to stabilize herself. She leaned over, convinced that she was going to puke. She gagged a bit and the person at the door stopped knocking. They’d heard her.

Imogen righted herself; in so doing she threw back her shoulders and her tea soaked robe fell to the floor. She was panting as she unlocked and opened the door.

There was Blair, the tiny witch, looking adorable and concerned.

Fuck, Imogen thought.

Blair’s green eyes widened. “You’re bleeding!”

“I’m bleeding?!”

Imogen looked at her hands and gasped. They were scratched, like someone had plowed them with needles. Little beads of blood bloomed like roses on her legs.

“Oh God!” Imogen stumbled back and lowered herself to the floor, staring at her bloody hands.

Blair entered, closing the door behind her. She knelt down in front of Imogen. “Do you have a first aid kit?”

“In the bathroom. Under the sink.”

Blair darted off.

Imogen lowered her hands and looked towards the living room. There was a bloody handprint on the wall.

“Oh God.” Imogen murmured.

Blair suddenly appeared around the corner carrying the first aid kit and some paper towels. She stopped and looked at Imogen and then at the handprint. Nonchalantly, Blair said, “It’s really not a big deal, Imogen. Happens all the time. We can fix it.”

Imogen stared at Blair as she walked over and plopped down in front of Imogen. She was wearing a black and white polka dot blouse, high waisted shorts, and toe socks with galaxies spiraling across them. Never had Imogen thought that Blair would ever be in her apartment, much less have sought her out and summoned her by name.

“Wait, you know my name?” Imogen said. Her brow was crinkled.

Blair opened the first aid kit.

“You live two doors down from me,” the little witch said, “I get your mail sometimes. Of course, I know your name. I mean you know mine.”

“Yeah...”

Imogen flinched as Blair touched a paper towel soaked in rubbing alcohol to her hand.

“Why are you here?” Imogen asked.

“The cards,” Blair said with a little smile.

“The cards?”

The little witch just nodded, as if she had explained everything.

Imogen waited for Blair to ask what had happened, but she never did. Instead Blair twittered away regaling her quiet patient with the issues she was having with the plumbing in her apartment and the landlord’s inattentiveness.

After bandaging Imogen’s hands, Blair told Imogen to keep still while she fetched something from her apartment. Imogen, afraid of speckling her house with blood drops, complied. She stared at the living room, wondering where the marble had rolled off to when she dropped it. Was it lurking beneath her couch? She would have to check; she made a mental note to wear oven mitts for protection when doing so.

Blair darted back in with a floral beach bag that featured a large cursive script proclaiming, “I love Folly Beach!” She sat down and removed a tin from the bag. Tossing the lid aside, she revealed a fragrant paste.

“What’s that?” Imogen asked.

“Secret.” Blair said with a grin. She took some wipes from the bag and quickly swiped the blood from Imogen’s legs. Imogen jumped. Blair moved too fast for her. She was never ready for her touch. Then Blair grabbed some paste from the tin and spread it over Imogen’s legs. The coolness caused Imogen to shiver. The stinging of the many minor wounds stopped as Blair smeared on the secret paste.

“Now,” Blair said as she coated Imogen’s legs, “you’ll want to leave this on for about 40 minutes before washing it off. If you can’t stand to wait that long though just make sure it’s dry. I guess you could always take a hair drier to it.”

Imogen nodded, “I—”

Blair’s green eyes met Imogen’s own. Imogen felt like she was a butterfly who had just had a pin driven through its core. Her intended words flew from her memory entirely. Desperate to break eye contact, she looked to the bloody handprint.

“I should really clean that,” Imogen said. She slowly rose to her feet. Her legs wobbled beneath her.

But Blair beat her to it. In an instant she had grabbed the floral beach bag and was up. In another, the bag was hanging from her shoulder and she suddenly held a pink spritzer and a blue washcloth. “I got it, you should rest.”

“Oh, you really don’t have to,” Imogen said. She stumbled as she attempted to follow Blair, “I made the mess. I should really be the one to—”

“I got it,” Blair said, eternally smiling, and with a spritz and a wipe Imogen’s bloody handprint was gone, like magic. Blair dropped the bloodied washcloth and the spritzer back into the bag and removed a small card which she offered to Imogen.

Imogen hesitantly took the card from Blair. The front was decorated with flowers and baby animals and a cursive script that read, “Feel Better!”

Imogen stared at the card for a moment. It was like the card maker had accepted a dare to see how many different kinds of baby animals he could throw on one card and still get the thing accepted for mass production.

“There’s a spell in there. You should read it before you bathe tonight,” Blair said. Her smile faltered. “Oh, I never explained, you see, I’m a witch—“

“I know, I, uh, read your blog.”

“Really?” Blair said, her smile renewed.

Imogen’s face burned, “Yeah.”

Blair waited for a moment, as if expecting that any instant now Imogen would offer her tea and they would launch into discussing witchy business, Edvard Munch, the rise and fall of the Roman Empire, or America’s puritanical ancestry. After much shuffling, mouth opening and closing, and lip biting from Imogen, Blair smiled and walked to the door.

“If you ever need anything,” the little witch said as she opened the door, “I’m just down the hall. Take care!”

“Oh, well—“ Imogen started. The door closed. “Bye.”

Imogen sighed. Inwardly, she cursed herself for her awkwardness. She looked around the apartment for a moment and then at the card in her hand; she opened it. The purple words seemed to dance across the page. Imogen wished her handwriting was so fetching. The spell was one that Imogen had never seen before in her relentless perusing of spells published on witch blogs; it read:

“Pain refrain from my flesh, take up your evil burden and leave me afresh, all that is good and bright hear my plea, drive out the aches and let me be.”

Imogen locked the door before heading to the kitchen. She ran the scene through her head over and over again, before she came to the anxiety-producing conclusion that she had never thanked Blair. Imogen grabbed the plaid oven mitts from the drawer next to the oven. She had to find that marble, and once she found it she intended to find a nice wet newly laid concrete sidewalk to bury it in.

Maybe, Imogen thought, I should buy Blair a fruit basket. Everyone likes fruit baskets, right?

Chapter 4

The boxes shook and threatened to topple down as Imogen waded through the backroom trying to find a place to set the most recent arrival. The delivery man stood at the back door watching her; he let out a long high whistle.

“I haven’t seen this place looking this bad in a long time,” he said.

“Yeah,” Imogen grunted, “Conway’s been on a spree.”

She dropped the box on top of the brown armchair that occupied the far left corner. She turned and looked back at the treacherous path she had just journeyed through and sighed. She could barely see the slow burning afternoon light streaming in from the back door through all the towers of boxes. The room was exceptionally dark and musty at present.

“No need for you to do that again,” the delivery man called out, “I just need to turn this here and it’ll lock behind me when I close it, right?”

“Yeah, that’s right, thank you!”

“Good luck!”

The door slammed causing the shaky stack of boxes nearest to topple and Imogen to jump.

“Sorry!” the muffled voice of the delivery man yelled from outside.

Conway had been eagerly buying objects over a century old in Massachusetts. He had jumped from town to town for two weeks, before illness struck. Now he was bedridden, over nine hundred miles away from home, and a swift return seemed unlikely. Imogen could only

abide such a clutter for so long. Today was the so long point. She was determined to sort through the boxes and send the uninteresting, the useless, objects to the warehouse for storage till Conway returned.

She rolled up her sleeves and took a pair of gloves from her back pocket. She slid the thin black gloves on lightly scarred hands as she slid through the narrow aisles to her space, her rainbow braided rug. Ever since the marble incident she had taken some precautions when seeing.

She grabbed what appeared to be a rolled up poster from the top shelf of the bookcase that overlooked her seeing spot. She sat down and unrolled it to reveal an intricately marked circle. Opening a tackle box that she now kept on the ground beside her rug, she removed four hand bells that she had decorated in black sharpie with protective symbols. Every bell had a corresponding place on the paper's four corners. She smoothed the paper and rang each bell before setting it down; the bells' weight tamed the curling corners. She sat back and examined her set-up. Content she started going through the nearest boxes; clearing the room from the center out.

Imogen now had a very strict process for seeing: first, she would examine an object while wearing the gloves. Then she would place it in the middle of the intricate circle. Only after this would she remove a glove and carefully reach a finger out to touch it, to see.

The marble had been traumatizing. Worse yet, she had never been able to locate the horrible thing; it still lurked somewhere in her apartment. Imogen consoled herself with the perhaps foolish belief that it was contained to the living room; she had spread a salt barrier around the living room, so she didn't have to live in fear that the marble would somehow

magically roll into her bedroom or other areas of her home. Whenever she went into the living room she covered herself head to toe, not leaving any skin bare and at risk of accidentally touching the marble. She was sure that even if she momentarily brushed the marble that it would absorb her.

It took a while to sort through the first box due to apprehension regarding actually touching the objects, but after an uneventful hour of minor magic, she became less nervous and her pace quickened.