

CHAPTER ONE

Spending the morning ball-and-chained to a new kid was *not* my idea of a good kickoff to our senior year.

“Can’t you find someone else?” I asked, hoofing it up the front steps to Norse Falls High.

“There’s no time,” Penny said. “I didn’t expect two of them, and they have different schedules, so we need two welcome guides.” I could hear the *slap-slap* of her clogs as she struggled to keep up.

As much as I admired everything about Penny—including her sis-boom-bah school spirit—I didn’t think I was the right gal for the job. For starters, I still felt new to the place myself. Moreover, I was hardly ambassador material.

“I’m not feeling very welcome-ish.” Reluctant to enter, I paused. It was crazy to think that one year ago I was the new arrival. Twelve short months later and I not only had a best friend but had also come into an inherited magical ability as a deliverer of souls, a human Stork. Oh, and I had a special someone, too. Standing there on the stone landing, I was already wondering how I’d get through a whole day without Jack, my now-college-enrolled boyfriend and superpower, weather-wielding sidekick. I wasn’t even inside yet and the place felt fundamentally altered: empty, lifeless, and lacking.

“Please,” Penny pleaded. “It won’t take very long. Besides, it’s a privilege and an honor. *Come on.*” If she batted her lashes at me any harder, we’d need a home base and an umpire.

I sighed. This would be the third time she roped me into one of her extracurriculars. Already last year, I’d been shanghaied as the fashion editor of the school paper and pressed into singing and dancing for the musical production of *The Snow Queen*. No wonder I was a little wary around the girl.

“How long will it take?”

“Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.” Penny hopped up and down and was through the front doors and bounding down the hallway without even answering me.

I scowled and pulled on the massive wooden door.
Happy flippin' first day of school.

I found Penny in the front office. She had her back to me and was filling out some kind of paperwork. I made a quick note-to-self not to sign anything. She'd have us shipped out with Doctors Without Borders by lunchtime. Triage unit. War zone. Front line. And she'd claim it a privilege and an honor, no doubt.

Ever the what-would-I-wear type, I was mentally tricking out bulletproof scrubs when I caught sight of a guy sitting in one of the waiting-area chairs.

Holy crap. I almost dropped for cover. And now, by comparison, foreign service didn't sound half bad. Here in Norse Falls, not ten feet from me, sat none other than Marik.

Marik as in the messenger from Vatnheim.

Vatnheim as in the otherworldly realm where mermaids, mermen, and split-tailed sirens are healthy, happy, and in pursuit of an heir to Queen Safira.

Safira as in the queen who believes—because of my impulsive Stork prophecy—that an heir exists here on our earthly Midgard and is none other than Leira.

Leira as in my born-too-soon, still-frail, five-month-old sister, whose name—pre-chosen by our long-dead grandmother—is one from a selkie legend and an anagram of Ariel, like in *The Little Mermaid*. Not to mention she was born with webbed fingers and toes.

Yeah. That Leira. That Safira. That Vatnheim. That Marik.

I wanted to hurl.

Penny, turning, must have noticed my greenish hue.

“Kat, are you all right?” she asked.

“Sorry.” I put a hand to my tummy. “My mom put a shot of wheatgrass in my smoothie this morning.” She had. It was nasty. “I think *it* and the acai just started a turf war.” It really had left an aftertaste, one that had, if nothing else, provided a tip-of-the-tongue alibi for my puckered cheeks.

“Should you go to the nurse?” Penny asked, hugging the clipboard to her chest.

And leave Marik unattended? No way. “I’ll be fine,” I said.

Like I had a choice. Like I intended to let Marik, who was eyeing me playfully, out of my sight for a second. Unsuspecting Norse Falls had more than its share of the para-abled pounding its streets. Besides my own clan of soul-delivering Storks and my Jack Frost–descended boyfriend, we’d come up against Wade, an evil Raven, and Brigid, the power-hungry Snow Queen from land o’ snow Niflheim. The last thing we needed was—

“Jinky?” I said, steadying myself against the front-office counter.

Jinky, the second of our new kids, arrived and now stood just a few steps inside the office waiting area. Jinky,

the tough-chick, rune-reading gypsy girl (Roma, if we're being PC) who swiped my runes last spring in Iceland and, with the help of her Laplander (Sami if we're *still* hung up on PC) grandmother, launched me onto some kind of sweat-lodge-induced vision quest, the one where I met Marik and wrested Jack out of Brigid's frigid fingers. Uh-huh. That Jinky. And as back-to-schools went, this one was sizing up to be epic in all the worst ways.

"Do you two know each other?" Penny asked, confused. She thumbed through the papers of her welcome packet as if she were out of the loop.

I knew the feeling. Except it wasn't so much that I felt out of the loop. Rather that it was cinching around me — my neck, to be specific.

"We met in Iceland," Jinky said, "at the festival. Kat told me such great things about Norse Falls that I was intrigued. So intrigued I talked my cousin, Marik here, into joining me for a study-abroad program."

OK. So that was the story. It didn't seem like I had much choice but to go along with it. "What a surprise," I said, taking a step toward Jinky. "You should have let me know you were coming."

Penny, still baffled, watched us. By now, she knew me better than anyone around here. And if Jinky had come halfway across the world to see Norse Falls at my — albeit inadvertent — recommendation, I'd be pretty stoked. So stoked I'd — ugh — hug the girl. Wouldn't I? I took the

final step separating us and threw my arms around Jinky. Judging by the way she stiffened, she wasn't the PDA type.

Marik rushed forward, too, extending his hand, thank God. "So nice to see you again, Katla." We shook. At least he didn't try to embrace me. Penny was still looking at me like I was big-time holding out on her.

"Wow," I said, shaking the hair out of my face. "This is turning into one wild morning," said the human Stork to the merman and the rune-reading gypsy. Not knowing what to do with either of these unwelcome visitors, I was stalling for time.

Penny pulled two sheets of paper from the clipboard. "Here are their schedules. We should split up and—"

"I'll take Marik," I said, fast. Too fast. It earned me another odd once-over from Penny, though this one had a tinge of disappointment to it.

Taking a moment to breathe and survey the situation, I could understand her letdown. To the not-dating-anyone Penny, Marik would be the preference. He wasn't pretty-boy handsome, but—just like I'd intuited that first time we'd met—there was something appealing about him. His nutmeg-brown hair was shaggy chic with the odd stray swatch tumbling over his broad forehead. His kelp-green eyes were mischievous, his lips were pouty, and, despite his height and muscular frame, he gave off a light-and-nimble vibe. And he was dressed

like he stepped right out of an Abercrombie ad, with a distressed sweater over a tails-pulled-out crew shirt, jeans, and sockless loafers.

Jinky, on the other hand, was still into the all-hell-no-angel look with heavy motorcycle boots, leather jacket, teased black hair, and heavily lined eyes. She was, as always, a little scary. Who could blame Penny for the droop in her shoulders?

“I mean, I figured you’d like to tell Jinky about the school paper,” I said to Penny, scrambling. “Jinky’s into photography.”

Jinky chopped me a look, one that could roll a head, and mine was first on the block, judging by the glint in her eye.

“Oh. We *are* looking for another photographer,” Penny said. “Our best one just graduated.”

“If only I had brought my camera,” Jinky said, still staring at me.

“My dad has one,” I said. “A good one.” I was asking for it, I knew. Jinky did not look like the capture-the-moment type. She probably hadn’t snapped a photo in her life. Necks, on the other hand . . .

Penny handed one of the schedules to me. “Marik has biology first period. Mr. Serra.”

“Got it,” I said. Wasting no time, I signaled for Marik to follow me, leaving Penny with the paper’s new photojournalist.

There were still a few minutes before the final bell. The hall was a zoo. I headed in the direction of the science wing but took the first detour—and private space—I came upon. Marik and I ended up at the back of the auditorium. The room was being prepped for a school-wide assembly later that day. A lone janitor was onstage setting up the PA system.

“What are you doing here?” Arms crossed, I rounded on Marik.

“As you may well guess, I’ve been sent to ensure you fulfill your end of the bargain.”

The bargain. The damn bargain: *Leira to whom the waters are home must be returned to the sea*. It haunted me day and night and was a low-down double cross.

“It’s not fair. I was tricked into the deal. I thought Leira was the redheaded selkie who lent me her skin. And, of course, there’d be no harm in returning *her* to Vatnheim. I had no idea that Leira would be the name of my unborn sister. I’d never have made the pact if—”

“Ah, but you did,” Marik interrupted. “You made the pact.” His eyes focused on the ground, not me. “And Queen Safira brooks no disobedience.”

Feedback from the microphone filled the room.

“She’s too weak, anyway. She’s only been home from the hospital for a few weeks. She’d never survive any sort of ordeal—”

“I have been instructed to be patient,” Marik said, cutting me off again.

I bit my lip. There was, I was still certain, a way out of this. All I needed was more time to devise a plan. All summer, fear had gnawed at my insides, but I was still determined. Marik’s presence, despite his mention of *patience*, was a setback. And it started the clock.

“Katla, it is good that we take a moment here to talk. I must remind you that the agreement is secret. We know that you have . . . friends, many who would be willing to aid you in protecting the child. Be forewarned that this would only endanger you and those you seek to involve. Moreover, the pact is charmed with powerful magic. A potent spell connects the essentials of the agreement. Do you understand?”

I narrowed my eyes. “I think so.”

“Testing. Testing,” the going-about-his-business janitor called out.

“Unlike the one who would jeopardize everything for revenge, Queen Safira is your ally and a voice of reason among the other realms.”

No need to specify who he meant by “the one.” Having foiled Brigid’s domination plans, I had left her purpling with rage.

“And Jinky’s presence here—”

“About that.” It was my turn to interrupt. “What does *she* have to do with any of this?”

“Jinky and her grandmother, perceptive individuals, proved useful in my transition between the two worlds. Instrumental, you might say.”

It occurred to me that Marik had first appeared during last spring’s vision quest, my spiritual journey presided over by Jinky and her shaman grandmother.

“Jinky coming into her own intermediary skills has since been my envoy to all things earthly,” Marik continued. “In seeking to understand her calling, she has agreed to continue in this capacity, understanding only as much as I deem necessary. Again, I remind you that the essentials of our pact are protected by powerful magic. Jinky’s role falls outside of the spell binding your powers to my task and Leira’s future.” He paused, staring at me for an intensity-soaked moment. “I must ask you again if you understand the solemnity of our agreement. Of the secrecy concerning its true nature. To enlighten anyone is to endanger that individual. Queen Safira will not hesitate in the face of interference.”

While Marik’s words were steeped in threats, his delivery was even-keeled and smooth. I understood immediately that he embodied the worst kind of danger, beguiling at the surface but with a nasty undertow.

“Yes, I understand.” I modulated my own tone in harmony with his because Marik wasn’t the only one who could pour it on.

“Good,” he said, cupping my shoulder with his hand.

So Jinky was some kind of shaman apprentice. So Marik was a messenger-turned-collector. So Leira was currency. And I was on my own. The one-minute warning bell sounded, marking the beginning of more than another school year.

CHAPTER TWO

Even knowing that Marik and I had the same second-period class, I was nervous to leave him at the science lab. I still didn't know who or even what he was at heart. Nor did I understand what he was capable of. Complicating these fears were my memories of being the new kid just one short year ago. No one had cut me any slack. They'd walked all over me and then just scraped their boots at the door. How would Marik, new to the planet, handle the looks and whispers and outright rudeness? Was he prepared for teen culture, a brand of human interaction that explained our ancestral need for clubs and extra-thick skulls? Had he ever been to school? Would he know to sit down, shut up, and let the teacher do the talking? Marik had described Jinky as "useful in the

transition between the two worlds.” Would that include basic societal norms and etiquette? And it was not lost on me that learning social skills from Jinky was like getting sensitivity training from Sue Sylvester. I was distracted by such worries all hour, as if, on its own, AP Econ wasn’t enough of a brain fry.

Second period was Design, a class I was looking forward to. I was one of the first to arrive and grabbed a seat in the middle of the room, saving the two on either side of me with my satchel and a notebook. Penny walked in, and I called her over. She took the chair to my right. Marik entered next, flanked on one side by an all-smiles, blushing Abby Mills and on the other by the chatty, also flushed Shauna Jones. *Huh?* These two girls had given me the full-body shutout this time last year. And now that they were seniors—*top o’ the mountain* as I’d seen it referred to on Facebook—it was clear that certain groups were scrambling for first-flag bragging rights. At any rate, the way Abby, class president, and Shauna, a track star, were pink-cheeked and giddy indicated some kind of thin air.

Marik paused just inside the doorway, pulling his schedule out as if checking whether he was in the right place. Both Abby and Shauna peered over his shoulder, pointing at the paper and nodding with big hair-plumping, you-belong-here-with-us shakes of their heads. *What the heck?*

I flared my eyes. It was, I knew, a gender thing. The girls were eyeing him as fresh meat. The guys, on the other hand, were sure to put him—the outsider elbowing in at what was already a small drinking hole—in his place.

John Gilbert walked in and braked, taking in the two girls panting over Marik. Uh-oh. John was a state-champion wrestler: big, brawny, and packing attitude. He rolled his head in their direction. I held my breath.

“Dude,” John said, lifting his fist.

Marik turned, readying his own. And then they fist-bumped like best buds. I almost fell out of my chair. Marik knew those two stuck-up girls? Marik knew John Gilbert? Marik knew how to fist-bump? All by second period?

Their small party yukked it up to a cozy four-square of desks at the back of the room. I dropped my book bag onto the floor, catching a glimpse of Penny as I did so. Judging by her glum expression, I wasn’t the only one who had expected Marik to join us.

Just as the bell rang, none other than Jinky came clomping into the room. She breezily surveyed the open spots, eyes fixing on the one next to me. Her graceless collapse into the seat was loud, and she reeked of cigarettes. A smoker; I should have known. Luckily, the arrival of Ms. Bryant spared me the chore of conversing with her. Ms. Bryant was my favorite teacher ever, because she was

young and smart and hip. It didn't hurt that she was into art and design and could rock a belted sweaterdress and a pair of boots like nobody's business.

"If I could have your attention." Holding a single sheet of paper in front of her, Ms. Bryant took a seat at her desk. "Good morning, everyone. To begin, I'd like to welcome two exchange students from Iceland to Norse Falls High." She stabbed at the paper with her index finger. "Jinky Birksdottir and Marik Galdursson, welcome. Would you introduce yourselves and maybe tell us what you hope to take home from your study-abroad experience?"

Jinky folded her arms over her chest, while Marik popped to a stand.

"I am Marik. I'm from Hafmeyjafjörur in Iceland. My cousin Jinky and I are very happy for the opportunity to study here in America."

It wasn't so much that he spoke slowly, it was, rather, that his voice pitched at unexpected words and syllables. My classmates surely attributed it to an accent. I, however, felt something more physical at work. I was aware of my shoulders rocking from side to side, and my hands grasped the sides of the desk for balance.

"And I'm hoping," Marik continued, "that my time here will reward me with much more than just language and culture."

That last remark was meant for me, and I dug my

nails into the underside of the desk in reaction. The girls in the room, on the other hand, purred their approval of the handsome foreigner. Even Ms. Bryant's reaction was strong. While Marik was speaking, she pulled her hand to her throat and her eyes widened. She seemed to stammer, even, when next calling on Jinky.

Jinky, for her part, kept it short and to the point. Like the way her choppy black bangs came to a sharp V at the center of her forehead.

"My name is Jinky. I'm looking forward to studying here at your school." Her still-crossed arms didn't sell the message, nor did her scowl.

Next, Ms. Bryant, lover of all things collaborative, explained our first project. Working in pairs, we were to prepare a design package for an imaginary start-up business, including company name, logo, a website landing page, and promotional materials. The rub was it had to be a business for which we saw a need in either Norse Falls or Pinewood. That last detail got a few "Huhs" and "Why them?"s, from the class.

Dating way back, the two towns were rivals. Penny once told me that the tensions began with two feuding families. Whatever its roots, the fact that our two schools, due to budget constraints and falling enrollments, were considering a merge did nothing to improve relations.

"Because," Ms. Bryant said, "the projects are to be

displayed at a joint By Student Design Show that our class and their high school Design class will plan together. Seven weeks from Friday, all projects will be displayed at Pinewood as a partnership. No matter what comes of the consolidation proposal between the two schools, it's time the two communities focused on something cooperative, not just a football rivalry."

A few more grumbles floated in from the back of the room, but Ms. Bryant ignored them, continuing with a description of the assignment.

"This semester, I think I'll let you pick your own partners." Ms. Bryant paused, consulting her notes.

Penny and I locked eyes and gave each other a small nod. No deliberation required; Penny and I had the term-project thing down to a science.

When she glanced up and resumed, a strange look passed over Ms. Bryant's face. "Sorry. I don't think we will do it that way. Not this semester, anyway." Again, her finger trailed down the page of her lesson plan. "Katla Leblanc . . ."

Funny, Ms. Bryant knew I preferred Kat. Not so funny was my foreboding that I'd get Jinky.

". . . will team with Marik Galdursson," Ms. Bryant continued. I gave Penny a small shoulder lift before turning to receive Marik's broad smile. Just a few names later, Penny was saddled with Jinky. I couldn't help but notice

Penny's slump; even her lobes hung lower. Though, guessing by her glances to the back of the room, I wasn't her first choice of partner, after all.

Once all the groups were assigned, Ms. Bryant distributed handouts and talked us through the entire semester's coursework and timeline. For the last five minutes of class, she suggested we sit with our partner and look over the list of sample businesses. It was clear Jinky was not going to budge from the chair she was in. Penny, therefore, eyed my seat expectantly. I gathered my things and headed to the back of the room and a spot that had opened up next to Marik.

Abby and John, another assigned team, occupied the seats in front of us. Abby, who I thought was dating a basketball player, spent the bulk of the remaining class time turning and addressing Marik.

"So where does your host family live?" she asked.

"On Spruce Street."

"That's nice and close," Abby said, "and walkable to school and downtown."

"Good thing," Marik said. "We don't have a car."

"We . . . meaning?" Abby asked.

"My cousin Jinky and I are staying with the same host family," Marik said, pointing to where Jinky sat stone-faced and an ambitious Penny chatted away.

"Your first cousin?" Abby leaned in closer.

"Yes."

“If you ever need a ride anywhere, just let me know,” Abby said.

John, a buddy of taxicab Abby’s basketball-player boyfriend, had been busy texting during their little gab-fest. No doubt sending his friend a heads-up on the potential situation.

“No wheels is a serious problem around here, dude,” John said, dropping his phone into his backpack. “Don’t worry, though, we got you covered.”

Got you covered? Seriously? Already two of the school’s finest were open-arming Marik, whereas one year ago I was Leper City.

“Should we take a look at this list?” I asked Marik, fully aware of the glare Abby shot me before turning in her seat. Because Marik on his own wasn’t enough of a handful. And like I needed a situation in which he had more friends than me.

CHAPTER THREE

Third period was an all-school assembly. Penny and I entered together. Marik, I noticed, was already camped out with Abby, John, Shauna, and their kind. Spotting a group of our fellow school-paper writers, Penny pointed and led us to the front of the auditorium. Jinky entered a few minutes later and sat by herself in the back. I wondered at her aloofness. Why had she come if she wasn't going to make an effort?

Following the principal's annual welcome, the senior-class officers were called to the stage. Abby, our president, delivered a by-the-cue-card speech. What it lacked in spontaneity, it went for in dramatics. The

save-our-school message revisited last year's rumors and Ms. Bryant's mention of a merger between our school and Pinewood. With a year's worth of attachments to the place—and to a guy named Jack—I, too, was now in the SOS camp, but I couldn't help think that Abby's remarks were all hype, no content. Plus, I imagined it was the school board that needed convincing, not the student body. Finally, lowering her voice from its helium-sucking heights, she dropped her note cards onto the podium. "Finally, I'd like to take a moment to welcome our new kids, especially our two exchange students."

I noticed Abby looked over to where Marik sat, not Jinky.

"Let's all do our best to make their year one to remember," she finished, clapping her hands above her head in a do-as-I-do gesture.

The room detonated in cheers. *Seriously?* And was it the anti-merge message or the special welcome they were responding to? In irritation, I scratched at my neck.

After the assembly, Penny hurried to catch up to Jinky, inviting her to walk through the lunch line with us and to follow us over to the journalism room. I was more than a little surprised when she fell in step behind us. I'd half expected her to bail on the photographer thing. Then again, I remembered how lunch had been my least favorite thing about being a new kid. During the rest of the day, you could keep your head down and

not draw too much attention. But in the cafeteria—all cafeterias, I'd assume—the true pecking order was revealed. Though I figured Jinky could give as good as she'd get, Abby, Shauna, and their gang would shun her the way Monique, last year's senior queen, had done me. As much as Jinky's perpetual scowl irked me, I still kind of owed her for last spring. She and her grandmother had helped me save Jack's life, after all. I even handed her a tray and steered her away from the fish croquettes. *No one* deserved that particular brand of cruel and unusual.

Just as we exited the line, I saw Marik. Holding his tray in front of him, he wavered back and forth, looking confused. I took a step toward him and he lifted his chin as a sign of acknowledgment, possibly even relief. I wondered then if this all wasn't a little overwhelming for him. Pulling me from this internal debate was a whistle, followed by John Gilbert hollering, "Yo, Marik. Over here." Marik gave me a nod and a coy smile as he sailed off for his lunch with the top o' the heapers. Whatever.

Our first lunchtime journalism meeting was an all-business affair: partly because Mr. Parks was putting in one of his rare appearances, and also because Penny, the new editor in chief, had some ambitious goals. She wanted the paper to have an online presence with a blog, Facebook page, and Twitter feed. She, too, mentioned the merger and the paper's role in reporting the events. I was proud of her, although I wondered what my

traditionalist, former-editor-in-chief boyfriend would have to say about the web branding. He hadn't even wanted a Starbucks to open up in town.

I did not see Marik, Jinky, or revolutionist Penny as I closed my locker on day one of my senior year. I bounded down the front steps of the building with an Iced Peppermint White Chocolate Mocha on my mind when a figure leaning against my VW bug came into focus.

"Jack," I said, skipping the remaining ten feet that separated us, "shouldn't you be at Walden?"

"I finished my lab work early so I could surprise you."

"Mission accomplished." I slipped into his arms, sensing my burdens ease. Only Jack had this effect on me.

"So how did it go?" he asked, resting his chin on my head.

Despite sharing three near-death experiences with the guy—something other couples might take as a sign of incompatibility—I believed in our unique connection. Given this conviction, a part of me wanted to tell him everything right then and there. I felt words collect in my mouth; they pooled under my tongue until I had to force a dry swallow. Coming in with only the slightest of majorities, my cautious side remembered that the guy had once plunged into an icy lake after me. Recognizing I triggered this reckless, self-sacrificing trait in him, I knew I had no right to involve him in my current mess. So how much was, therefore, wise to reveal? Norse Falls

was too small a place for the presence of two Icelandic exchange students to go unremarked upon.

“So do you remember that girl I told you about? The one I met at the fair in Iceland and who read my runes?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Funny enough, she’s here. As an exchange student. With her cousin. It seems my descriptions of Norse Falls were pretty enticing.”

“She’s here?” Jack pulled back, holding me at arm’s length.

“Yes.”

“But she’s the one who helped you—”

“I know.”

“Isn’t that kind of strange?”

“A little, I guess.” I tried to keep my tone breezy and flipped back a strand of my hair.

“What cousin?” Jack asked, narrowing his eyes.

Ugh. I should not have attempted body language. Jack knew me too well.

“His name is Marik. I met him briefly. On the boat.”

I knew I was leading Jack to assume I was talking about Hinrik, Jinky’s real cousin who boated us over to her grandmother’s nub of an island. I had *not* told Jack anything about Marik, nor had I given any details as to how I came about the gift of a selkie skin that was so key to my survival in Niflheim. To have done so would have necessitated an explanation of why the Water World

was involved. All Jack knew, all Jack had to know, was that Jinky had helped me get to him. Given Marik's warning—threat, really—it was a topic best left intentionally vague.

“Oh,” Jack said, questions still clouding those gem-blue eyes of his.

I felt something in my gut pouch with regret: liar's tummy. And then I wondered how Marik or Safira would ever know what Jack and I whispered to each other. As it was, we practically had our own language. A single twitch of his mouth or bite of his lip and I, for instance, knew exactly where his thoughts were headed. What chance did I stand of keeping the existence of a landlocked merman and a shaman-in-training from him?

“And cool that they've come all this way,” he continued. “I guess I'll be meeting them sometime or other, then.”

With that small act of graciousness, of calling the situation “cool,” all thoughts of involving Jack in my mess gusted away. I couldn't do that to him.

“I'm on my way to the factory,” I said, inventing a change of subject. “I need to borrow my dad's camera. You wanna come along?”

Jack's phone rang. I unlocked my car door and threw my book bag over to the passenger seat during his brief brow-scruncher of a conversation.

“I can’t.” Jack pocketed his phone. “That was my dad; he needs me. Plus, I’ve got an assignment due tomorrow.”

The assignment alone would be enough to distract him. I knew also that harvest was their busiest season.

“Will I see you tomorrow?” I asked.

“Not likely,” he said with a shake of his head.

“How much longer will it be like this?” I asked.

“We grow different varieties, all with different grow cycles. The worst should be over by Halloween, I’d think.”

“Halloween?”

“And by Thanksgiving, we’re just sitting around waiting for it to snow.”

I could tell he was goading me now. Best to redirect. Besides, Thanksgiving made me think of something.

“For Thanksgiving, my dad and I are planning a trip to Santa Monica to visit my grandmother. You should come. She said she’d like to meet you.”

“What? To California?”

“Yeah.”

He swiped at his brow as if mopping up sweat. “The beach. Sunshine. Temps in the 70s or 80s. Am I painting an accurate picture?”

“Well, sort of.”

“Nothing personal, but summers around here are

torment enough. You know I barely go out. Southern California is not my idea of a vacation.”

“Ever?”

He shook his head. “I really don’t think so.”

As much as I knew all about his Jack Frost heritage, this was somehow news to me; bad news, to be specific. I had a secret fantasy of showing him my old stompings, parading him in front of my old friends, kissing him as the surf crashed over us. This was a serious buzzkill.

“Hey,” he said, pulling me from my sulk. “I’ll see you on Friday.”

“OK.”

“Count on it,” he said.

Watching him walk away, I couldn’t help feeling that our gifts were more often than not burdens. And on top of it all, we still had the full complement of household chores, schoolwork, financial obligations, and all the rest of the load that came with life. And Jack took on more than most. The only upside was that just maybe, with his own preoccupations, he’d be too busy to further question the Marik issue, at least until I could devise a plan. It was a reprieve, at best. One I’d take for now.

CHAPTER FOUR

Balancing a carrier full of Starbucks offerings, I strode the short distance across the reception area and set the drinks down.

“Just what the doctor ordered,” Jelle, my dad’s office manager, said, getting up from her desk. She boxed me into one of her hugs and then initiated a hand slide, a gesture so jive I laughed out loud every time I was on the receiving end. As always, Jelle had a way of making anyone and anything look cool. Case in point, the thick zebra-print headband, nubby green cardigan, knee-length corduroy skirt, and scuffed cowboy boots she presently sported. Jelle had been my very first friend here, a kindness for which I would always be grateful.

“Is my dad busy?” I asked.

“He’s on the floor,” Jelle said, sipping from her Grande bold drip with a shot of skim foam and *ah*-ing in appreciation. “I’ll help you find him.”

I followed Jelle down the hallway that separated the quiet office space from the assembly area. The moment she pulled open the door, a din of machinery and voices hit me like a rogue wave. My dad’s wind turbine factory had been in business for less than a year, but already it was in full swing, with more orders than they could handle.

As we passed various stations, I noticed one or two of the workers snap to attention. It wasn’t for me, the boss’s daughter. My dad, a big softie, had done well to hire the clever and capable Jelle. He liked to joke that she had even *him* kowtowing around her. Proving my point, her husband, Russ, a brawny former logger, saluted as we walked by. I inwardly preened. When I’d first met Jelle, a little over a year ago, she was underemployed as a waitress and lamenting her husband’s travel-required backbuckler of a job. Convincing my dad to open his factory here instead of California was admittedly a self-serving act; nonetheless, I couldn’t help but gloat a little at how much it had done for Jelle. Even though she had been one of my very first vessels—prospective mothers considered as candidates to receive a hovering soul—and I’d recommended against her, I knew it had been the right

decision. At the time, Jaelle simply wasn't ready. She'd come a long way since then, however.

We found my dad near the shipping dock. He signed a paper, handed the clipboard to his foreman, and walked toward us.

"Atta girl," he said, taking the coffee I held up for him. "I was just thinking about how nice a little of the mermaid would be right now."

While he enjoyed his first sip, I shrugged off the jitters brought about by his casual mention of a water creature. To him, Ariel was simply his nickname for the split-tailed siren that was featured on the Starbucks logo. Little did he know that it was responsible for the ad-lib prophecy that I'd made during my very first Stork assignment and for the difficult situation I was in now.

"A little bird must have told me," I said, recovered enough to make a private joke. My dad had no idea that his daughter was a member of an ancient flock of soul deliverers.

"So how much is this cup going to cost me?" he asked.

Busted. Kind of. It was true enough that the last time I'd come bearing beverages he'd ended up out two hundred bucks for my car's tune-up.

"It's more of a trade than anything else," I 'fessed up.

"A trade?" he asked, arching his brows.

"Can I borrow your camera for a while? Well, tech-

nically I'll be lending it to an exchange student, our newest member of the school paper."

"My good camera?" he asked.

"Well, yeah."

"And you're lending it to a stranger?"

"Well, not a complete stranger. I met her briefly while I was in Iceland." I left out the part about her pickpocketing my runes as well as any kind of physical description.

"It's in my desk drawer," he said with resignation. "Jaelle, would you get it for her?"

At times like these, I super-loved the way my easygoing, surfer-dude dad just rolled with things.

"Sure can," Jaelle replied.

I walked behind Jaelle back across the factory. The afternoon sun was streaming through the west-facing windows; it cast a slanted shaft of light over our path. In this illuminated patch, dust motes danced like first-of-the-season snowflakes. It was fascinating, like a peek under a microscope, but they weren't the only things catching my notice. Above Jaelle's head, corking spirals of energy bounced. Finally. I'd been waiting a long time for the signal that Jaelle was *all systems go*.

As we stepped back into the calm of the office space and Jaelle retrieved the camera from my dad's desk drawer, I, again, saw the vibrations above her head. I took it as the very best of vibes.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or, if real, are used fictitiously.

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