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# Spellbent



Magic is  
everywhere.  
And so is  
pure evil.

LUCY A. SNYDER

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For Carol,  
who always believed

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## prologue

**M**y name is Jessie, and I'm the reason why your life is about to change forever. Maybe you're only just starting to realize that the world is spinning strange, and you're looking for answers. But maybe you already know what's happened, and you're looking for *me* so you can either buy me a drink or kick my ass.

God help me, I could have stopped them. I'm sure of that. My only defense is that I honestly thought I was doing the right thing, but my best intentions are black pavement now.

All I can do now is tell you my story and let you decide for yourself whether I'm a heroine or a villain or just another tool. I've had some time to gather my thoughts, and other people's thoughts for that matter; it's amazing what magic can coax from the dead. So if I start telling you about events I wasn't around to see, know that my memories are solid even if the original owners are dust. I'll be happy to give you the eyewitness tour if you bring good beer.

Begin at the beginning, right? I still can't find memories from the ancients who planted this disaster, so let's start with the night my own life went off the rails . . .

chapter  
ONE

## A Simple Storm-Calling

Cooper woke me up before the nightmare did. He caught me square in the shin with a jerking kick and I bolted up, my heart hammering like a small demon trying to break through my rib cage. Already the dream had slipped from my mind, leaving nothing behind but my wrecked nerves. Cooper twitched and ground his teeth. Sweat plastered his curly black hair against his forehead, and his tattooed arms shook as he crushed the pillow against his chest.

I wanted to hold him close, wake him up. I hated seeing the man I loved in that kind of pain. It didn't matter that he was the teacher and I, his apprentice. But I knew he'd lash out at anyone near him when he came out of the dream. So I wiped the sweat out of my eyes and scooted away from him on the bed.

"Cooper," I called. My throat felt like it was lined with steel wool, and I could taste pennies where I'd bitten the inside of my lip. "Wake up."

No response.

My heart was slowing, finally, but my hands still shook as I wiped my eyes again. I'd never had nightmares before I started sleeping with Cooper. The first couple of times we'd both gotten bad dreams the same night, I dismissed it as coincidence. But after a dozen nights? It was pretty clear that the terror I saw

in his fractured sleep mirrored the terror fading inside my own head.

We were having the same damn nightmare . . . and lately I was having it whether I was sleeping beside him or not.

He writhed and groaned.

Cooper's white fox terrier, Smoky, was cowering under my computer desk, whining. The dog was giving me a scared look: *Wake him up before something bad happens*. I'd seen the dog take on creatures ten times his seventeen pounds when he thought his master was in danger; he'd once torn the ear off an ogreish no-neck who was preparing to brain Cooper with a tire iron in a bar parking lot. But when the nightmare came on, fierce little Smoky was helpless.

I could hear the rustling of my six-month-old ferret racing around in his cage in the corner.

*What's going on inside your head?* I wondered, staring down at Cooper.

I slid off the bed, took a deep breath, and let loose a shout that shook the floor: "*Cooper!*"

He jerked awake, arms windmilling, punching the air, kicking the sheet off the bed. "No, I won't, I won't, get away from me—"

"Cooper, calm down! You're okay, you're okay."

"What? Where—where am I?" he gasped, staring around in the dimness.

"In our apartment. Remember?" I climbed back onto the bed and crawled to him across the twisted bedclothes.

"J-jessie?" he stammered, his eyes finally seeming to focus. "Oh man am I glad to see you."

He caught me in a strong hug and kissed me. His naked skin was slick with sweat, and beneath his

usual pleasantly garlicky smell was the faint, sharp odor of brimstone. Smoky padded out from under the desk and hopped up onto the bed.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Yeah. Think so. Dream can’t really hurt me, right? I can’t even remember what it was all about.” He laughed nervously and patted Smoky’s smooth head. “Serves me right for falling asleep when I didn’t need to.”

“You almost *never* get enough sleep. You go till you finally pass out from sheer exhaustion. Then you get REM rebound and a worse nightmare than you’d have gotten otherwise.”

I chose to ignore the little voice inside my head reminding me that I, too, had been going without sleep. When things got bad, I’d been taking sleeping pills to blunt the dreams. But not very often; the drugs left me groggy and stupid the next day.

“Hmm, much sense you make, young Jedi,” he said. “But sensible man I am not.”

He stretched, his spine popping. I couldn’t help but admire the play of muscles across his lean torso. He was thirty-eight but easily passed for thirty; there wasn’t an ounce of fat on him. Some dumb relationship calculator I’d found online—the kind that divides your age by two and adds seven years and tells you that’s the youngest you can date—said that I wasn’t old enough for him.

I know I’m immature in some ways, but inside me there’s a cranky old lady yelling at the damn kids to get off her lawn. She’s been there awhile. I’ve decided to call her Mabel.

When I was a teenager, most of the other girls got on my very last nerve—all the stuff they obsessed over

just seemed stupid and trivial to me. I mean, seriously, who gives a shit about what shade of eye shadow to wear to a pep rally? I'd rather skip the whole thing and read a book. I thought Ohio State would be better than high school, but mostly it was just bigger.

Maybe I'd have felt different about things if my mom hadn't died when I was eleven. After she was gone, there was nobody around to make me feel particularly excited about makeup and shoe shopping. I started the existential angst early, started feeling like I was way older than the other kids, and that never got better. The day I turned twenty-three, I felt ancient, even with Cooper there to celebrate with me.

Cooper, on the other hand, is nothing if not bubbling with youthful energy. He could be fifty and would still be hotter than half the twentysomething guys I've met. Of course, most of the guys I've seen at OSU would only have six-packs if they bought them at the 7-Eleven. And the boys I've dated didn't have Cooper's brains, or his heart, or his guts. And his southerly anatomy isn't too shabby, either. Top that with him being the real thing when it comes to magic . . . well, whoever made the relationship calculator can kiss my rosy pink butt.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"A little past nine—the sun's just gone down."

Cooper rubbed his face and scratched his chin through his short dark goatee. "How's the sky?"

"Dry. The nearest cloud is in Indiana, I think."

"Well, then it's time for us to earn our rent money."

He reached over the side of the bed to retrieve his jeans. "Three thousand from the farmers for a nice little rainstorm—not a bad payment for a night's work, huh?"

The doorbell rang downstairs.

“I’ll get it,” Cooper said, slipping on his Levi’s.

He thumped downstairs. I peeled off my sweat-soaked T-shirt and panties, tossed them in the hamper, then started digging through the dresser for some fresh clothes. Everything in there was a hopeless jumble, but at least it was clean. A year back, Cooper pissed off a sylph and she nixed all his housecleaning charms; it took us forever to get our laundry mojo working again. As curses go that one was pretty minor—probably the faery equivalent of writing on your face in Sharpie marker while you’re passed out—but there are few things more embarrassing to a modern witch or wizard than being forced to use a Laundromat.

I heard the front door creak open, and then our neighbor’s cheerful greeting: “Hey, man, everything okay over here? I heard someone holler.”

“Hey, Bo,” replied Cooper. “Yeah, we’re fine, sorry if we disturbed you.”

“Oh, ain’t nothing, just makin’ sure you folks is okay,” Bo replied. “Miz Sanchez brought me some of her tamales earlier ’cause I fixed her tire, and she told me to make sure you folks got a couple dozen.”

I heard a paper grocery bag rattle open. “Hey, these smell great,” said Cooper. “That was really nice of her.”

“She’s real grateful for what you two done for her little girl.”

I clearly remembered the afternoon Mrs. Sanchez was running from door to door, panicked to near incoherence because her six-year-old daughter had disappeared from the apartment complex’s pool. Cooper knew enough Spanish to ask for one of the

girl's dolls. After that it was easy enough to go back to the privacy of our apartment and cast a spell to track the kid's spirit to the other side of the complex. We found the little girl in a run-down garden apartment. Thankfully, she was okay; the creepy old pedophile who rented the place hadn't done anything more than feed her ice cream.

Once the girl was safe with her mother—and no one the wiser that we'd used magic to find her—I called the cops on my cell phone while Cooper impressed upon the old man that he was never, ever to go near a child again. The old guy was so frightened by Cooper that he practically raced to the police cruiser like jail was going to be some kind of safe haven.

Cooper can be pretty fierce when he gets angry. To me, that's one of his sexiest traits. It's not just about being able to tear the house down; it's about being willing to do it in a heartbeat to protect the people who genuinely need your help.

"Anyone would've done the same," said Cooper. "Please be sure to thank her for us."

After a quick dinner of Mrs. Sanchez's tasty tamales and salsa, Cooper and I and the two animals piled into the Dinosaur—Cooper's big, black, much-tinkered-with 1965 Lincoln Continental. Smoky hopped onto the backseat while I sat shotgun with my ferret in his walking harness and leash.

Cooper talked to Smoky over his shoulder as he drove. The white terrier seldom made any noise as he replied telepathically. Familiars almost never seem to be "talking" to their masters, so the masters' sides of the conversations can seem a little schizophrenic if

they don't remember to think instead of speaking out loud. I know of several witches and wizards who just can't keep their mouths shut; when Bluetooth headsets came on the market, a lot of chatty Talents ran out and bought them to reclaim some of their dignity.

"Yes, about midnight," Cooper said. "What? No. You have to pee? You should have said something earlier. No, you'll just have to wait."

With a heavy, long-suffering sigh, Smoky lay down on the black leather upholstery and covered his snout with his paws.

I felt my cell phone buzz in the right thigh pocket of my cargo pants. I pulled out my phone and flipped it open.

"Hello, vibrating pants," I said into the receiver.

The woman on the other end burst into laughter. "Jessica, you are such a weirdo sometimes!"

No one still called me Jessica but Mother Karen, an older white witch I had met through Cooper. "Pot, kettle, black, Karen. How are you?"

"I'm fine. What are you two doing tonight?"

"We're off to drown some farmers' sorrows."

"Calling a rainstorm? Good girl, my morning glories are starting to wilt. Well, I was doing some baking tonight and thought I'd invite you two over if you were free."

"Who's that?" Cooper asked.

"Mother Karen. She's baking."

"Ooh!" Cooper's eyes lit up. "I want me some haish brownies," he said in his best hillbilly accent. "An' summa thet cherry pah!"

Karen heard him and laughed. "Tell that man he is not to so much as sniff my cannabis brownies ever again. Last time he got stoned he turned my

kids into spider monkeys and they broke half the dishes in the house. But I will save him a cherry tart or two.”

“You get pie,” I told him. “*Las drogas es verboten.*”

“I never get to have any fun.” Cooper pouted.

“Speaking of breaking things, did you want to ride with me to hapkido practice this week?” Mother Karen asked.

“Yes, thanks. We’re doing knife and sword defenses, right?”

“Right you are. And remember, belt tests are in three short weeks.”

“Oh, cool, I totally forgot!” I was up for my purple belt; I figured it would be at least another year before I was ready for my black belt test, mostly because I kept missing class.

Mother Karen laughed. “Ah, to be young and still excited about belt tests. Meet me at my house around six on Tuesday?”

“Okay, sounds like a plan.”

I said good-bye, turned off the phone, and slipped it back in my pocket. Then I realized Cooper had taken I-71 south toward downtown Columbus. “I thought we’d be doing this someplace out in the country, near the farms.”

Cooper laughed, a touch nervously, it seemed to me. “I . . . just don’t feel like being out in the boonies. I figured we could do this in the Grove. Any magic we work there will be amplified for miles.”

To most people, the Grove is just the middle of Taft Park. The park’s made up of two dozen acres smack in the middle of downtown, extending from the east side of the Statehouse to the Columbus Art Museum. The central dozen acres were old-growth

forest, virtually unchanged since the first European explorers set foot in them.

But to the city's Talents, the Grove is the focal point of a strong upwelling of Earth magic and is one of only two places of power in the entire state. It's home to some of the only enchanted trees left in the Midwest, and, as the occasional normal kid on a ghost hunt finds out, the Grove is a lot bigger on the inside than it looks on the outside. The Talented families in the city have worked hard behind the scenes to make sure the Grove stays wild and unmolested by developers and Parks & Recreation officials bent on "improving" it.

The problem was, if any of the vast majority of the populace who didn't know wizards existed saw us performing magic, Cooper would get into quite a bit of trouble with the local governing circle. A few people, like the farmers paying us to call down some rain, know Talents exist. But those few are put under a geas to keep the secret and not speak to outsiders about magic. In the wake of the medieval witch hunts—which murdered a lot of harmless mundane women and almost nobody using actual black magic—Talent leaders had decided it was best that most mundanes knew as little as possible about the magical world.

"If we get a really good storm going, the skyscrapers will give better lightning protection," Cooper said.

He put his right hand on my leg and moved his fingertips in a light, teasing circle on the inside of my thigh. Tingly. "I have a feeling we're going to get things very, very wet tonight, don't you?"

*You just want to fuck me downtown where someone might see us,* I thought, then found myself sitting

there with a dirty grin on my face as my inner exhibitionist pushed my worries under the covers. Erotomancy was just the thing for working forces of nature. I lifted his hand and put it over my left breast so he could feel my nipple hardening beneath my thin T-shirt.

“Why, ah have no idea what you are talkin’ about, Mista Marron,” I said. “Ah think you might be trying to take advantage of me. Ah think you are planning to put that great big ol’ cock of yours inside me and make me just *scream*.”

His fingers gently squeezed my nipple, sending a shiver of delight down my spine. “Stop with the southern belle dirty talk . . . you know it gets me hot.”

“Why, Mista Marron, isn’t that what you want?”

“What I want is to stop this car, throw you onto the hood, and take you right here by the side of the road.”

He had that certain horny-loony gleam in his eye; he wasn’t kidding one little bit about stopping the car. He was going to do it—do *me*—right out there in the light of the oncoming traffic so the truckers could get a quick rearview mirror peep show at seventy miles an hour. And he’d be able to get us both off before the highway patrol showed up—and if he couldn’t, he’d be able to cast a mirage spell and make the cops and everyone else think the car was parked miles away from our actual location.

*You should stop this*, I thought. *Take his hand off your tit and put it back on the steering wheel.*

Instead I squeezed his hand tighter against my breast and said, “I want you.”

It was the nightmares’ fault this was happening. I

knew he woke up so crazy with relief at finding himself alive with all parts intact that he wanted to send us both into orgasmic oblivion right out in the open where gods and monsters and mundanes could see us.

I knew because I felt exactly the same way. Cooper had always been a bit of an exhibitionist, but I had warmed to it during the year of nightmares as my own way of giving the Darkness the finger. The Darkness could take us to dreamland and torture us, it could murder us in a thousand ways and leave us shivering on our sheets in confusion and terror, it could leave us psychically scarred, afraid to sleep, but it could not break us. We wouldn't let it.

As Cooper's foot touched the brake, my ferret wiggled out of the crook of my right arm, hopped onto my chest, and nipped Cooper's thumb.

"Ow! Dammit!" Cooper jerked his hand away.

The ferret chattered at both of us, his little beady eyes glittering.

I laughed. "Guess he doesn't want us getting our freak on until it's rainstorm time."

"Just what I need, a weasel chaperone," Cooper grumped. "But at least it's a sign of intelligent response. Is he talking to you yet?"

"No, not yet. Should I be worried? I mean, I could've picked wrong."

"You got a good strong empathy buzz off him at the animal shelter, right?"

I pursed my lips. We'd gone to dozens of shelters and pet stores looking for an animal to be my familiar. Birds, snakes, rats, cats, frogs, dogs, rabbits, iguanas . . . my mind was reeling by the time we'd gotten to the Ferret Rescue League. When the attendant put the second slinky ball of fluff in my hands, I

felt a strange warm humming buzz along my spine. And before I had a chance to think, I'd already said *This is the one. Let's take him and go home.*

And honestly? I'd sort of been hoping for a cat or dog. The ferret was sheer adorableness, sure, but we couldn't let him out of his cage without him immediately finding the most damn inaccessible place in the apartment to dive into and hide. Like the bed-springs, or the coils behind the refrigerator. Cooper finally had to cook up a ferret retrieval charm.

However, the ferret was still a bit stinky. The musky oils in his fur took half a dozen hand washings to get off my skin. Cooper refused to do a deodorant charm on the grounds that a ferret ought to smell like a ferret, and I was Just Being Picky. So I became resigned to the ferret funk, and waited for the magic to happen.

"Yeah, I *think* I did," I said. "But how do I know what something's supposed to feel like if I've never felt it before?"

Cooper shrugged. "You just know. I've seen a dozen apprentices pick their first familiars, and so far things seem normal to me. I wouldn't worry about him yet. He isn't fully grown. Sometimes it takes a while for a familiar to awaken. Probably he just needs a little more exposure to magic."

Cooper snapped his fingers and the radio tuner's face lit up, the dial spinning over to his favorite oldies station. "Stairway to Heaven" was just fading out.

The DJ's voice broke in. "Hope all you night birds have found your own little bit of heaven tonight, even if it *is* too darn hot out. Don't you wish it was Christmas? A little Christmas in July? Here's some Doug and Bob McKenzie to make you think cool thoughts . . ."

“The Twelve Days of Christmas” lurched through the speakers.

Cooper jerked and swatted the air. The speakers squealed as the radio sparked in the dashboard. The stench of scorched wiring filled the car.

“Jesus, Cooper, you didn’t have to break it!”

“I hate that goddamn song.” The color had left his face, and a muscle in his left eyelid was twitching.

“I know. But *jeez*.” He’d never been able to explain to me why he so disliked any version of the song, no matter how silly, but usually he could suffer through a few stanzas until he could change the station or leave the room. I’d never seen him react so violently to it before.

“What are you going to do if we get carolers next December, kill them?” I asked.

He didn’t reply. The bad post-nightmare madness was back in his eyes. I rolled down my window to air out the car.

“Hey, are you okay?” I asked him gently. “If you’re not feeling well, we should put this off until tomorrow night.”

“No.” He shook his head as if to clear it. He gave me a quick, unconvincing smile, then fixed his eyes back on the road. “I’m fine. Let’s do this thing. I told the Warlock we’d hit the Panda Inn for karaoke and a late dinner tonight.”

*You mean late drinks*, I thought, irritated, but didn’t say anything. I couldn’t really fault Cooper for wanting to hang out with his half brother; it was good to see Cooper happy, and he and the Warlock always had fun. The Warlock’s boozy come-ons were tolerable. I just wished their nights out didn’t always end with Cooper puking up Suffering Bastards and Mai

Tais at five in the morning. As with stinky ferrets, Cooper refused to use any anti-poisoning charms on the grounds that a night of drinking ought to feel like a night of drinking.

We left the freeway and drove up Broad Street. On one side loomed the St. Joseph Cathedral, which had been home to more than its share of miracles because it was so close to the Grove; on the other was the high stone garden wall that surrounded most of the park. The fence had gone up in the 1960s when traffic got bad enough that wandering Grove creatures started running a real risk of getting squashed by cars.

The only open side faced the Statehouse, and it was also the only part that attempted to masquerade as a standard city park. There was half an acre of mowed lawn, some decorative cherry trees, a goldfish pond surrounded by concrete benches, and a few picnic tables. A line of ward-charmed rocks marked the border between the lawn and the western edge of the Grove. The wards were subtle, but effectively kept most mundanes out of the Grove and reminded most Grove denizens to stay put.

Cooper turned the Dinosaur left onto Third Street and then took another left into Taft Park's tiny parking lot. He gunned the motor to get the huge car over the curb and drove it across the grass, dodging picnic tables and startling a small flock of sleeping Canada geese. The tires left no marks on the turf; Cooper had long ago enchanted the wheels.

"Yuck. Grass is probably covered in goose shit," he said as the geese flew off, honking alarm. "Annoying birds."

"Could we use it for anything?"

“Use what?” he asked. He hit the brake and put the car in park. We were about a dozen yards away from the fishpond.

“Goose poop.”

That’s the core of ubiquemancy: Magic is in everything. The spellcaster just has to figure out what kind of magic, how it can be used, and then invoke it in a spur-of-the-moment chant that sounds like a Pentecostal speaking in tongues to those who can’t understand the primal languages. Unlike other magical disciplines, ubiquemancy seldom involves calling on spirits directly. Instead it relies on instinct, improvisation, and imagination to focus ambient magical energies.

Some people think that we can do any kind of magic with ubiquemancy, and while that’s theoretically true, in practice it’s a whole lot trickier, especially if things have Gone Terribly Wrong. It’s not just about coming up with the right words. It’s a lot like singing—some spells are about as hard as “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” but some of them are as challenging as *La Bohème*. Few singers can do a difficult aria the first time out of the gate, and if they don’t have the right natural range they might never be able to do it. And even if a singer has range and skill, being able to improvise and perform a brand-new aria right there on the spot while the audience is ripping the chairs out of the aisles and throwing them at your head . . . well, like I said, it’s tricky. But then again, you can get lucky sometimes.

Ubiquemancy worked very well with Cooper’s manic, live-for-the-moment mind-set. People who dismiss the style call Cooper and our kind Babblers;

the name's stuck enough that even those who respect the art use it.

Magical talent is the biggest thing that makes a good Babblers. And Cooper had talent in spades. On his good days, he was one of the best wizards I had ever seen; I couldn't have asked for a better master. Unfortunately, on his bad days he had a tendency to give in to his self-destructive streak and drink himself senseless. At least after we became lovers he'd cut way back on his alcohol intake.

I sometimes got frustrated with ubique-mancy's magical anarchy and Cooper's pat "Oh, you just *know*" replies to my questions. Sometimes I thought I would have been better off learning a more formalized magic like Mother Karen's white witchcraft.

But darned if Cooper's crazy magic didn't *work*.

"Goose shit," Cooper mused. He turned off the ignition. "It'd be great for curing barren earth . . . fire tricks . . . controlling geese . . . summoning predatory animals . . . spoiling food and water . . . plant growth . . . and maybe flight. Lots of stuff we don't need to do tonight."

"Should we go to the pond?"

"No, we don't want to be right by water. Over there by those oaks looks good. Let's get undressed."

I tied the ferret's leash to the stick shift and pulled off my T-shirt, sports bra, and sneakers. I shimmied out of my cargo pants and panties, folded my clothes, and stacked them on the dashboard.

Cooper was already standing naked on the grass, stretching and scratching his back. "No, it's better if you stay in here," he told Smoky.

The dog whined.

“What? Oh, right.” Cooper opened the rear door. Smoky jumped out, ran over to a picnic table, and peed on the tubular steel leg. He gave himself a good shake, kicked grass onto his mark, and happily trotted back to the car.

Cooper shut the car’s doors after Smoky was back inside, then met me on the other side.

“Think wet thoughts,” he told me, lightly touching the small of my back and running his hand down to my ass. My skin prickled into goose bumps at his touch. “Think low pressure. The clouds are our audience; make them come.”

We walked across the grass to the edge of the trees. Cooper backed me up against the trunk of a red oak.

“This tree’s roots touch those in the heart of the Grove,” he whispered, planting small kisses on my face. “We’re all set to broadcast; let’s make it good.”

He closed his eyes and started planting soft kisses down my neck, over my breasts. My hormones lit up like Madison Square Garden on New Year’s Eve.

*This is the best job ever*, I thought.

He started moving against me, breathing rhythmically in preparation for the chant. I closed my eyes and followed his body’s rhythm. There was a brief, stretching sting as he pushed up into me, but after that it was beautiful. I wrapped my legs around his waist and ignored the scratching of the bark against my back. Once we really got going the pain might actually start working for me. I don’t think of myself as a masochist, but my wires sometimes get a little crossed.

Anyway. I was glad to have the chant to focus on, or else it would all be over too quickly. Cooper could last for hours, provided I came quietly. But the

nightmares had left me with too much pent-up anxiety to have a nice polite little orgasm. I'd be biting, screaming, demanding the obscene application of Popsicles . . . yeah, I figured the distraction of the spell was going to be a good thing. Silly me.

The old, old words started tumbling out of him, first as sounds that might have been little more than grunts of the ancient pre-humans who lived at the sea and rivers, worshipping the spirits they saw in the cool waters. Then his round grunts grew angles, grew more refined; my mind was filled with an image of a sunburned warlock standing in the reeds of the Nile, begging the gods for rain.

The words were coming out of me, too; my language was different, a tongue that spoke of mists and crashing waves, of broad, gray thunderstorms rolling over windswept North Atlantic islands.

I felt the air around us stir, felt the tiny hairs on my arms and the back of my neck rise. The tops of the trees began to rattle as the wind rose.

Cooper's chant rose to match, changed to something more musical, Western and Eastern in the same breath. I caught a flash of storm clouds boiling above a vast American plain as a medicine man dressed in deerskin and buffalo hide raised his ropy arms to the sky. I could smell the damp plains earth and sweating leather on Cooper's skin.

My chant shifted to match; I spoke the shadow of an old priest in a bear-pelt cloak, standing in the dry forest of a new, green land, pouring the last of his mead on the thirsty earth and asking the Father God to grant him and his men a touch of rain.

Then Cooper's body jerked, and his chant was chopped short by his sudden, pained gasp. I heard

the scream in my mind, smelled entrails being pulled from a still-living body and thrown on a charcoal fire.

“Oh God!” Cooper turned and gave me a hard shove away from him. I tumbled backward over the grass.

I rolled to my feet, feeling confused and exposed, wishing my clothes weren’t all in the car. “Cooper, what the—”

His body had gone rigid; the cords of his neck stood out, and his tattooed sigils glowed faintly purple in the dim light. The air was growing ominously electric, the clouds above them darkening into a slate-gray spiral.

“Get away!” He sounded as if something was choking him. “Far. Fast. *Now!*”

I knew better than to argue or waste time asking questions. I sprinted back for the car, fear churning in my stomach. Nothing like this had happened before. Cooper had said that the ritual couldn’t be interrupted, no matter what.

I got to the Lincoln, ran around to the driver’s side, and dove into the seat. Smoky was whining on the front seat, his paws pressed against the window. Before I could get the door closed, he’d jumped over me and was running toward his master.

Cooper started to scream. His voice sounded like a band-saw blade grinding against a rusty iron post.

*Should you run away like this?* I wondered as I cranked the key in the ignition and slammed the car into drive. *Don’t think. Just do it. Cooper knows this stuff way better than you do.*

The storm was gathering with alarming speed. Thunder rumbled. In the rearview mirror I saw the wind whipping a dust devil around Cooper’s rigid

form. The sound of the gale was drowning out his scream.

I hit the accelerator just as a massive bolt of lightning shot down from the sky.

The earth around Cooper exploded. A shock wave whipped across the park, and I was thrown forward into the steering wheel as the back of the Lincoln jerked off the ground.

*Ohshitohshitohshit!*

The car tilted, and the gale blasted into the Lincoln's passenger side, lifting it and knocking it over onto the driver's side. I fell hard against the window, helpless, as the car spun like a carnival ride across the grass. My clothes and the ferret flew off the dashboard. The weasel scabbled for purchase on my sweaty skin to keep from being hung by his leash.

The car slammed into a steel-framed picnic bench bolted to a concrete slab beside the goldfish pond and stopped.

I untangled myself from the steering wheel and set the frightened ferret on top of the passenger-side headrest. I grabbed my scattered clothes and got dressed as quickly as I could. The ferret had left a dozen pinprick scratches on my side and hip. Once I was no longer in danger of being arrested for public indecency, I unrolled the passenger-side window and stuck my head out to see how Cooper was doing, hoping against hope this would turn out to be just another one of those funny little Babbling-gone-wacky incidents where he'd be standing there amid smoke and debris with singed hair and a sheepish *Oops did it again* look on his face.

No such luck. There was a steaming crater the size of a child's wading pool where he'd been. I couldn't

tell how deep it was, but the charred sides reflected a bright red glow, as if from live coals or lava.

“Cooper! Cooper, where are you?” I shouted, feeling sick bile rise in my throat.

No answer.

Smoky lay near the crater, his flanks heaving as he gasped for breath. His body looked strangely bloated.

I bent down to make sure the ferret’s lead was still secured to the stick shift. “You stay in here,” I told him, my voice shaky, not certain if he understood. “I’ll come get you when I’m sure it’s safe.”

I pulled myself up through the window and slid down the curved door, landing lightly on the grass. Where was Cooper? Had he been knocked unconscious and thrown into the trees? Or was the crater all that was left?

No, no, no. He couldn’t be dead. He just *couldn’t*.

“Smoky?” I called. “Smoky, where’s Cooper?”

The terrier was trying to get to his feet, dragging his hindquarters as if he’d broken his back. Bloody foam flecked his muzzle. He saw me and started to howl.

*Oh, Jesus, poor thing*, I thought.

The crater smelled like a gangrenous wound, like bad magic, and I was getting the same stink off Smoky.

I stepped closer to the crater. And then it hit me: I was looking at an intradimensional portal. I couldn’t have been more stunned if I’d put a cake in the oven, left it to cook, smelled smoke, and opened the oven to discover the cake had transformed into an angry fire Drake. Actually, the cake-to-fire Drake I could have explained away as a prank from the Warlock, but this? This was off-the-chart bad and unexpected.

How in the name of cold sweat and stomach cramps had we created *an intradimensional portal* from a simple storm-calling chant?

After a couple of beats, my brain shifted out of shock and into more practical questions: Where did the portal lead? I had no clue, but by the look of it, it sure wasn't a beachside resort. Had Cooper been pulled inside? It seemed likely. I couldn't see any trace of him nearby. If he'd been blown apart in the explosion, there'd still be blood or—I swallowed sickly against the thought—scattered bits of his flesh.

My first instinct was to call Mother Karen and get her to send help, but I realized I couldn't just stand there and do nothing while I waited for the cavalry. God only knew what might come through. Might come through at any moment. I realized I had to do my best to get that sucker *closed*, and fast.

I'd heard Cooper and the Warlock talking about travel between dimensions; portals were hugely dangerous. The longer they stayed open, the worse things got. And creating one was supposed to be a complicated ordeal involving extended rituals and the blood of red-haired virgins and stuff like that. I never imagined that anyone could open one by *accident*.

Smoky started having some kind of seizure. The howls and growls coming from him were sounding less and less dog-like. I couldn't think of any Earthly creature that made a shriek like metal sheets being rent in half, a rumble like wet bones being crushed beneath a dire war machine. I ran toward the crater, giving the little dog a wide berth.

I came within a few yards of the crater's edge and stopped. I'd expected to see the bottom crawling with lava or hellfire, but there was only a void of utter

blackness. My head swam with vertigo, bile rose in my throat, and every cell in my body thrummed with pain: I was staring into the heart of Nightmare.

I closed my eyes, certain the horrible Dark would surely melt my brain into epileptic gelatin. I could still feel it with every nerve and every pore, an evil heat that would cook me and everybody else down to ash.

Stumbling away from the portal, I bent and grabbed a handful of sod and dirt and hurled it at the crater, shouting what I hoped would work as a sealing chant. I circled, staring at the ragged edge of the crater, pushing the nightmare shadows out of my mind with images of closing doors, healing wounds, windows blocked shut with nails and boards.

The longer I stayed near the portal, the more afraid I was that I would trip and fall inside, that it would grow and swallow me up. And I was desperately afraid I was too weak to get it closed. An ice pick of pain lanced behind my eyes; I was burning through so much magic energy that my blood sugar was getting low. If the spell didn't start working soon, I was going to pass out.

I chanted the words for "close" in every language my mind could bring forth, all the while casting handfuls of good, fresh dirt into the vile portal like antibiotics into an infection.

Finally, *finally*, it was working. I felt the ground start to move under my feet, and the sides of the crater started to pull together. Yard-wide jagged cracks opened in the park's lawn as the crater's edges sealed, a puckered scar in the earth.

I took a step back, breathing hard, pressing against my temples to try to ease my throbbing skull. *You did it. You actually did it.*

A metallic scream dispelled my sense of relief. I turned, dreading what I might see. Smoky was still thrashing. His body was stretching and growing; I could hear his bones crackling. Blade-like reptilian spines erupted from his back. He was fairly steaming with the bad magic I'd felt from the portal.

I backed away. I'd never even *heard* of anything like this happening to a familiar. Definitely time to call for help.

I pulled my cell phone out of my pant pocket and called up Mother Karen's number. I pressed the phone to my ear.

"Jessica, is that you?" Mother Karen didn't sound like herself. "Jessica? It's so dark, it's hard to hear you."

It wasn't Karen. I felt my knees buckle as I recognized the voice. "Aunt Vicky?" I stammered.

"Jessica, I've been waiting so long for you. When will you come visit me? It's so cold in here, and the snakes won't leave me alone—"

I shut off the phone and stared at it, shivering. My aunt Victoria had been dead for over five years; she'd murdered her philandering husband, Bill, with rat poison, then killed herself with a bottle of sleeping pills and a fifth of gin as she cried over his body.

I'd found the corpses four days later after I got worried because nobody was answering the phone; flies had found them much sooner. It was a memory I'd tried hard to purge from my mind.

I turned the phone on again. The menu was no longer in English. The characters resembled Cooper's tattoos: sigils that came from no known human language; symbols he'd described seeing in his dreams.

"Oh *fuck*," I whispered.

Smoky was still growing, changing. His body was hugely elongated now, and a third set of stocky, clawed legs was sprouting from the bottom of his rib cage. His skin was splitting, his white hide hanging in bloody tatters over swelling gray scales.

I was shaking with panic. The pain in my head was making it hard to think; I had *no* idea what I could do. Thunder rumbled, and the first raindrops started pattering down from the sky.

*I can help*, I heard in my mind. *Let me out of this car and I can help.*

The ferret? I didn't expect him to be able to communicate so soon.

I dropped my phone back in my pocket and hurried toward the Lincoln. "Hang on tight," I called, hoping the ferret would hear and understand. "I'm gonna turn the car over."

I spoke the word of a long-dead tribe that described the act of putting a turtle or beetle back on its feet. I made a sweeping movement with both hands. The headache throbbed anew, but I ignored it. I wasn't going to keel over just yet.

The Lincoln creaked over and whammed back down on its wheels. A moment later the ferret poked his head up in the open window.

I ran to the car and started to unbuckle the ferret's harness, wishing I could remember more about what I was supposed to do with a newly awakened familiar. According to Cooper, familiars could be tremendously knowledgeable, veritable furry little walking magic encyclopedias, provided you were lucky enough to get an experienced one. If the ferret was as green as I was, though, it would be *Magic for Dummies* time and we were probably screwed.

Freed from his harness, the ferret clambered up the door's spongy weatherstripping to the roof of the car so we were seeing eye-to-eye.

"So do *you* have any idea what's going on here?" I asked.

"His true body is coming through into this plane," the ferret told me, staring wide-eyed at Smoky's increasingly monstrous form. The ferret sounded smart, his voice like that of an excitable middle-aged librarian inside my head. Finally, some good luck.

"It's what?" I asked.

"This animal body . . . it's just a flesh vessel for my consciousness. I am not a ferret, and the entity that has inhabited Smoky's body is most assuredly not a cute little doggy. If I'm not mistaken, he's changing into something close to his true form," the ferret said. He had a little bit of an accent, I realized. A Canadian librarian.

"But why?"

"Clearly the magic from the portal has . . . altered him."

"But how?" I did realize I was starting to sound like a three-year-old.

"I'd hazard to say it's a side effect of whatever disastrous magic caused that portal to open."

"Which is a fancy way of saying you don't know?" The pain was making me crabbier than usual.

The ferret reared back, looking offended. "I admit I've never seen anything like this before, but I am certainly capable of educated conjecture."

The rain was coming down harder; it looked like Cooper and I had called up a real gully washer of a storm.

"Why wasn't I affected?"

“Well, you’re not a transdimensional being like us familiars, are you?” the ferret replied. “Badly controlled portal magic will inevitably affect us; I was lucky to be farther away.”

“So what are you?” I asked. “What’s your true form?”

The ferret blinked. “You might find my true form . . . upsetting. I would seem somewhat alien in my natural state.”

“Alien how?”

The ferret shuffled his feet uncomfortably. “Can’t I just tell you later, once we’ve gotten to know each other a bit better? I’ve been a familiar for more than three hundred years, and during my service I’ve unfortunately encountered many humans who are prejudiced against—”

“Okay, fine, whatever.” I held up my hands; we really didn’t have time to argue. Whatever he was, I was stuck with him, at least for a while. “Do you have a name?”

“My name in your language is ‘Palimpsest.’ You can call me Pal, if you like.”

Smoky roared. He’d grown positively huge; his scaled body was over twenty feet long, and I guessed he’d stand as tall as me once he got his six sets of taloned legs working under him. His tail was long and covered in the blade-like scales. His red-eyed head looked more crocodilian than canine, and his maw was filled with serpentine teeth the length of my hand.

Smoky roared again, and bright green flame erupted from his mouth. His transformation seemed nearly complete.

“A dragon? All this time, he was really a dragon?” I asked.

“For lack of a better name, yes, a dragon. But he shouldn’t be here.” Pal’s whiskers quivered as he sniffed the air. “I . . . something’s not right here. I can feel a shift. I think he’s warping reality.”

“Warping? How?” I asked, thinking of my brief chat with my dead, damned aunt.

“I don’t have a good sense of exactly what’s happening yet. But I worry that once torn, the fabric of your world could keep tearing. You were right to close the portal as you did; now you’ve got to deal with Smoky.”

My stomach sank. “Deal with him how?”

“Subdue him, however you have to. He’s too dangerous to let run around loose.”

Was he talking about killing Smoky? Jesus. I sure wasn’t looking forward to that. “Would Cooper’s shotgun work, or do I need to summon up the Caladbolg or some damn thing like that?”

“The shotgun should work as well as anything else,” Pal replied.

I popped the Lincoln’s trunk and got into our duffel bag of supplies; I found a packet of Advil and a warm bottle of Gatorade. Hoping the combination would kill my headache, I popped the two pills and chugged the drink. I found a PowerBar gel packet and stuck it in my thigh pocket for later, just in case.

Next, I opened up the long black gun case. Inside was a twelve-gauge, pump-action nine-shot Mossberg 590 “Intimidator” with a black plastic stock. It was fully loaded with cartridges that contained eighteen pellets of mixed silver and iron buckshot: a little something for any sort of hostile creature Cooper and I might encounter out in the woods or in the bad parts of the city. We’d started toting firearms after a

close call with a pack of drunk werewolves in Logan County. I hoped the shot would be enough to penetrate Smoky's thick scales, if it came to that.

A sheathed silver dagger and a bandolier of twenty extra cartridges lay in foam cutouts above the shotgun. Below the shotgun was a holstered Colt .380 "Pocketlite" automatic pistol and a seven-shot clip loaded with silver bullets half-jacketed in iron. Cooper had enlisted the Warlock's help to put various minor enchantments on the weapons to improve their accuracy and stopping power; Cooper's skills definitely lay in making love and not war.

Some mundanes—specifically the farmers—wondered why we relied on firearms for defense instead of magic. Sure, there are binding spells and such . . . but think of the opera singer trying to perform in a riot. If you're in a panic, squeezing a trigger is a whole lot more reliable than trying to cast a spell.

Make no mistake: There *are* killing words. But using a killing word on a familiar or a human being is as serious as deciding to ram your car full-speed into a crowd of pedestrians; it should never be done unless you're left with no other choice, and even in a clean-cut self-defense situation the consequences are severe. There's an allowance for word-killing demons and other bad characters, but most Babblers won't go near that kind of magic, no matter what. Once you've crossed the border into necromancy, it's hard to get your spirit clean again. You start losing your ability to do white magic, and pretty soon all you're good for is death magic on the fast lane to hell.

And there's the little detail that grand necromancy is illegal and will get you imprisoned or worse. So,

killing words? I was sure I'd never use them. Guns and knives seemed far less dangerous.

I slung the bandolier across my body, loaded the Colt, and clipped the holster and the dagger to the waistband of my cargo pants, then hefted the shotgun. Palimpsest ran across the roof onto the trunk lid and hopped onto my shoulder, perching on one of the shotgun cartridges.

Cooper had taken me out to the range every few weeks so we could practice target shooting; the first time I'd fired the shotgun the recoil had damn near knocked me flat. The bruise under my collarbone would have lasted a week if Cooper hadn't healed it. But since then, I'd learned to properly brace myself and could handle the gun pretty well. I'd been good with the Colt from the start; the small gun fit my hand perfectly.

I slammed the trunk shut. Smoky had wobbled to a full twelve feet and was snorting the air, apparently searching for the scent of something. His scaly skin steamed in the rain, smelling of hate and pain and rage.

I raised the shotgun to my shoulder, my heart pounding. His eyes looked most vulnerable. I hated everything about this situation.

"Smoky," I said, struggling to keep my voice and hands steady. "Smoky, look at me, boy."

Smoky ignored me and launched himself across the park toward the Statehouse. He moved like a giant centipede across the street and down the ramp to the Capitol Square's underground parking garage.

"Don't let him get away!" Pal exclaimed. "The farther he goes, the worse the damage might be!"

Cursing, I pelted after Smoky, even though I knew there was no way I could keep up with him. The rain was cold against my skin, and my hair and clothes were getting soaked. At least the downtown area was nearly deserted. Except on the evenings when there was a Blue Jackets hockey game at Nationwide Arena or a concert at the Ohio or Palace theaters, the city's downtown pretty much rolled up its sidewalks and shut down after seven o'clock on Sunday night.

My foot hit something soft and slippery, and I nearly twisted my ankle. I looked down and realized I was standing in a pool of blood.

“Jesus! What the . . .”

There were three corpses, best as I could tell. It looked like they'd been turned inside out, exploded. Bits of flesh and bone were everywhere. I saw shreds of gray maintenance uniforms amid the gore. I felt intensely sick and fought down the urge to vomit.

“God. Poor guys. How—how could Smoky *do* this?” I asked the ferret. “We were barely thirty seconds behind, and these guys look like they swallowed dynamite sandwiches . . . how did this happen?”

“I don't know,” Pal replied, his sinuous body weaving to and fro as he sniffed the air.

The rest of the garage was empty except for a maintenance van and a motorcycle. A wide smear of blood trailed to the far end of the garage, where Smoky was nosing around the underground entrance to the Riffe Center. I didn't see any blood on his muzzle. The glass doors to the center were smashed; huge pieces of thick plate glass lay shattered on the concrete.

“I didn't hear him do that,” I said. “Is there some-

thing else out here? Is he tracking something? Did something come through the portal?"

The ferret sniffed the air. "I can't say."

How could he not know? I tried to force down my panic. "Are you saying you don't know, or you know but won't tell me?" My words came out angrier than I intended, but I didn't feel like apologizing for my tone. I began to walk toward Smoky, hoping he wouldn't slither into the Riffe Center before I got close enough to either shoot or try some kind of a binding spell.

"I don't know if anything else is here," the ferret replied. "Why would you think I'd withhold information from you?"

"Let's see," I replied. "Cooper's been sucked away to God-knows-where by some evil force and his little dog's turned into a monster. Tom, Dick, and Harry on the night cleaning crew just got turned into stew meat. And my familiar suddenly wakes up and starts telling me what to do . . . yet won't tell me what it really is. And it can't tell me the most *important* thing I need to know, which is whether or not I've got some other freak show to deal with besides Hopalong Smaug here."

"Are you saying you don't *trust* me?" The ferret sounded supremely offended.

"Yes, that's exactly what I'm saying," I said, stopping. "Fear? Check. Worry? Check. About to pee my pants? Check. Trust in my new mystery familiar? Nope, sorry, just ran out. How do I know you're not some . . . some evil spirit who came through the portal to possess the body of my ferret?"

"You're paranoid," he said.

"Convince me," I replied.

“I’m not sure how I can do that,” the ferret said, agitated. “There are spells to prove I’m telling the truth, but I imagine you don’t know them. And we can’t spare the time to perform them.”

“Okay. Go back to the car and wait for me. I’ll come back for you when I’m done.”

“You can’t do this by yourself, you’re not experienced—”

“I know how to shoot. And I know Smoky. Go.”

The ferret reluctantly climbed down my back and humped back up the garage ramp into the rainy night.

*Did I just do a phenomenally stupid thing? I wondered. He’s right, I can’t do this alone . . . but I guess I’m going to have to try.*

I paused. Maybe I didn’t have to do this Palimpsest’s way. Maybe Smoky was still sane enough to listen to me and stay put. Maybe I could find a landline in the building that actually connected to the real world. I could phone Mother Karen to find someone who knew about this kind of stuff and could put things back the way they were supposed to be.

And then we could figure out how to get Cooper back.

Maybe.