Chapter 14 – A Step Beyond

I was spooning with Sylvio, sated from our session together, but too energized to sleep. My mind was racing through possibilities as I considered what Ramon had told me. Earlier that day—yesterday, I mentally corrected myself as I glanced at the clock—he had emailed me the address of the empty house my mother kept returning to when she was in foster care.

Sylvio nuzzled my hair away from my neck with his nose and kissed it, sending a shiver of pleasure up my spine. "What are you thinking so deeply about?"

I hesitated. Would he be insulted that I wasn't thinking of him since we'd been quite happily engaged with each other until moments earlier? His arm was wrapped around me, and his hand was on mine. I kissed the back of his hand, as always surprised at how cold it had already become. Where to begin?

"Did Ramon fill you in about my mother?" I asked. I felt tension rising within him. "About the house she kept going back to?" I added.

Sylvio's apprehension was replaced with curiosity. "Yes, what about it?"

Oh, good, I thought. *He's not insulted*. Reading emotions is quite handy sometimes, although it concerned me a little that invading another mind didn't bother me as much as it used to.

I rolled over onto my back, and he propped himself up on his elbow. "He gave me the address," I said. "I'd like to go there and see if anything can be found."

"Where is it?"

"Lake County, in Illinois. Do you know where that is?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Yes. Antone and I both kept a house near Chicago in the sixties."

"Which sixties?" I asked, remembering Antone had been born in the 1830s.

He gave me a tolerant smile. "The 1960s."

"Did you keep the property?"

Sylvio often did that. He had a personal goal to keep people in each of the fifty states. He would find an area he liked and build on it, then make improvements. When it was time to move on, he frequently kept the property and rented it out after he moved his people away. His current property manager was named Alan Benton. He'd been one of Sylvio's. Alan was now in his seventies, looked fifty, and had the energy of someone in his twenties. I'd met him a month earlier. He reminded me of Jack LaLanne.

"Yes," Sylvio said. "It's on the lake, not far from Six Flags."

"What lake?"

"Lake Michigan."

Of course, the Great Lakes. His eyes grew unfocused as he thought over what I'd said. I waited.

"Everyone enjoyed Disneyland," he said. "They all like those crazy rides. I think they would love a visit to Six Flags."

I had been thinking that maybe he could teleport the two of us there. But if we all went, we could take a few days to check out the house while the others were entertained at Six Flags.

"That's a great idea!" I exclaimed.

"I'll get ahold of Alan and arrange for the house. It might be prudent to invite Micah and James, too. Or Ramon and Carlisle." His face looked impassive, but he felt concerned about my going to the house.

"You think we need backup for this?" I asked.

“The more the merrier,” he said it flippantly, but it was clear he wanted one or two big guns if we went there.

“Should we bring Tim, too?”

“I doubt you could get him to leave Rain right now.”

“Good point.” Rain had just had a litter of pups. It was unlikely Tim would want to leave her alone with them. “Well, then, looks like we’ll have someone to do the chores around the farm while we’re away.”

* * *

One thing nice about living at Sylvio’s was we didn’t have work schedules to worry about. We only had to be sure we kept up on whatever online courses we were taking at the time since Tim would take care of the place while we were away.

At Sylvio’s suggestion, we rode the Zephyr train to Chicago and spent a day at the Field Museum before driving out to Zion where his house was. I had always wanted to see the lions that had killed so many people at Tsavo, Kenya, and I loved museums anyway. I also learned that pedestrians don’t have the right of way in Chicago; I nearly got squashed by a cab when I stepped off the curb, even though it was our turn to cross.

Ramon joined us. He flew over the afternoon we settled in at Sylvio’s mansion. The only thing between his property and the lake was Illinois State Park. We could see the beach from the house. Lake Michigan was beautiful but intimidating. It was so huge that it was like looking out over the ocean, but the sound of the waves was different, and the air was missing the salty tang of the sea.

I watched the joggers going by in the park and thought it strange that there were so many out in the evening instead of the morning. Then I gazed out at the water for a while, wondering where the ships and their cargo were going. I stood for some time on the deck that ran the length of the back of the mansion. Ramon joined me and watched the water and the park without speaking. Silence didn’t bother him. He didn’t feel the need to start a conversation, so we simply took in the scenery until Sylvio approached us.

Ramon wore a cloak of power around him and had a commanding presence, but even he was eclipsed by Sylvio. I had become used to it, but no matter where we went, if Sylvio was not using magic to mask his presence, everyone’s attention was on him.

“Thanks for coming, Ramon,” Sylvio said. “What can we expect at this house?”

Ramon was surprised. “You’ve never been there?”

Now it was Sylvio who looked surprised. “Should I have been?”

“Not really, I guess. It’s just that you seem to enjoy investigating the unusual or unexplained.”

Sylvio scowled. “Jean told me it was haunted, that The Coven here bought it to keep it out of the news. But she neglected to mention there was anything unusual about the house.” He paused, then added, “Why would she want to keep me away?”

I thought it humorous that from Sylvio’s perspective, a haunted house was not unusual.

“Probably only that she would rather not deal with you,” Ramon said. “Are you taking Antone along for this?”

“I’ll ask him to come. He likes diversions as much as I do.”

“When he gets here, I’ll fill you all in.”

Sylvio took us to The Purple Pig for dinner. It was beyond excellent. The proprietor himself came out to greet Sylvio when we arrived. He shook his hand and slapped Sylvio’s shoulder like

an old friend. I wondered if perhaps he had been one of Antone's in the past, or maybe Sylvio's, but I didn't ask. When we got back to the house, Antone was there, but he wasn't alone. Marshal Carlisle was with him.

As we approached, Antone's warm chocolate eyes met mine. I felt a flash of desire from him. He wanted to feed and link with me, but he quelled the impulse and turned his attention to Sylvio.

"Thanks for coming, Antone, and I'm glad to see you, Carlisle," Sylvio said as we settled on the couch.

"He was very persuasive," Carlisle said, grinning.

"Don't tell me he talked you into teleporting with him?" I said. Previously, Carlisle had flat refused their offers to do that.

Carlisle shook his head. "He said he'd owe me one. A favor from Antone is not to be turned down lightly. Besides, I was in Detroit anyway, so it wasn't much of a drive."

"What were you doing in Detroit?" I asked.

"A ghost came to me," he replied, then paused.

I couldn't hide my eagerness to know more. I leaned forward. "And?"

"He was murdered when he was tracking down the people who kidnapped his sister. It took me a while to sort it all out. I thought he was some drug addict bent on revenge at first, and I wasn't interested in helping him. It's frustrating that the dead can't speak to me, and he was too agitated to settle down and convey it in another way. But we sorted it out eventually, and he took me to his body.

"He had been beaten to death. After that, he took me to the city to show me where his killers lived. Turns out the police were already trying to build a case on them. They'd been implicated in several kidnappings, but there was no evidence. Ghosts can find out a lot of things if they're motivated, and this one was. He'd discovered where the girls were taken to be shipped off. Before he was killed, he found the spot they used to cook the drugs they were selling. He stole their stash and a bunch of money. That's why they took their time killing him. They thought they could beat the location of the drugs and money out of him, but he'd dumped the drugs ad given away the money. So now I'm working with Detroit PD to build a case against the killers."

"And I thought my life was weird," I observed.

Carlisle grinned and motioned to Sylvio and Antone. "Oh, I think living with these two would be a bit stranger than the occasional ghost dropping by."

Sylvio and Antone chuckled. Then Sylvio turned to Ramon. "What can we expect to find at that house?"

"That's just it," Ramon said, shaking his head. "We aren't sure what kind of magic it is."

"Which would make me think of the fae," Sylvio said. "Their magic is often unique to the fae who can wield it."

"Right, but Rachel's mother said it was witches that were after her, not fae," Ramon replied.

"Do you think she knew the difference?" Antone asked.

"She may not have, that is true," Ramon conceded.

"In the past, people blamed witches for many things the fae did," Sylvio said. Antone and Ramon nodded, but all of this was news to me.

"Maybe we shouldn't go in with a preconceived idea about what's there," I suggested.

An hour later, we were standing on the street looking at a house that didn't seem too different from those around it. It was a normal neighborhood of normal two-story brick homes where I

assumed normal middle-class families lived. Even in the dim light of the moon, I could see the lawn in front of the house was trimmed and green.

"I thought you said no one lives here," I said.

"The local coven maintains the house and grounds so people don't complain about it not being cared for," Ramon explained.

That made sense. "Why are we here in the middle of the night?" I asked. As mundane as the house appeared, I was frightened of it. Especially since Sylvio thought we needed backup.

"If we want to know what evil resides here, it will be much easier to locate it when the sun sleeps," Sylvio replied. He stepped toward the house. "What do you sense, Antone?"

Antone had a particular gift for sensing the preternatural. "Nothing at the moment," he said.

I asked the spirits for their help and felt them gather around me in a protective blanket, but sensed nothing from them except anticipation. Their lack of concern helped calm my fears as we ascended the steps to the entryway. Ramon took a key out of his pocket and opened the door. I held my breath. Nothing happened. We went into the small foyer and looked in the living room, which was on the right. It was empty and seemed rather forlorn. We walked forward into the hall, where we could see the kitchen on the right and stairs going down to the basement. To the left were the stairs for the upper floor and hallway.

"I'll go this way with Ramon," Antone said. They started down the hall.

"That won't be necessary," Carlisle said. He was staring over my shoulder into the kitchen.

I felt a pulse of magic come from Sylvio. It moved through the house and down into the basement. I felt it swirl around something near the bar in the kitchen. From the basement, a pulse of foreign magic reverberated back at us, sending a tingle up my spine.

"What do you see, Carlisle?" Antone asked.

"Rachel's mother." He glanced at me, and then into the kitchen again. "At least she looks like a younger version of Rachel."

I stared at the spot where he was looking and could sense nothing but magic. The spirits felt quiet and unchanged.

"She's gesturing down there." Carlisle nodded toward the stairs that led into the basement.

"Is she aware of the rest of us?" Sylvio asked.

I thought that was an odd question, but then I knew practically nothing about ghosts except the little bit I'd learned from Micah.

"I can't tell for sure," Carlisle said, "but I think she's only aware of Rachel and me."

Finally, I found my voice. "They don't see everyone?"

"They seem to see only what they want to," Carlisle said, "what matters for their purpose. She would only linger if she had a reason."

"Then let's see what she has been waiting for," Ramon said.

Carlisle looked at the ghost and gestured to the stairs. We waited. I felt the magic Sylvio had identified with his seek spell move toward us and descend the stairs. I could feel a chill and a slight breeze as it passed by, but nothing else. Micah had told me that ghosts are concerned solely with the past, and are only echoes of their former selves. Still, it was hard to wrap my mind around the thought that some conscious part of my mother's spirit was here in this house with us.

Ramon raised his hands. One held a lighter, which he lit. Then I felt a pull as he asked the fire spirits to gather around. He whispered the incantation *"cynuea"* and a ball of light formed in the air.

Carlisle, who had lived with odd occurrences and spirits visiting him since he was a boy, said, “Showoff. Normal people carry flashlights, like the one in my pocket.” He didn’t take it out, though, and I observed that Carlisle wasn’t all that normal.

His comment served to release the tension that had been building. The moon was only a sliver that night. Being creatures of the night, Ramon, Sylvio, and Antone had no need of light, and with Sylvio’s blood fresh in me, my vision was keen. But to Carlisle, the house would have been quite dark.

Carlisle followed the ghost down the stairs. Ramon followed behind, lighting the stairs with the little ball of light. The rest of us followed him.

The basement was as empty and neglected as the upper floor. Carlisle led us past what had been a family room, then a bathroom, and into a bedroom that occupied the far corner on the left side. As soon as we passed through the doorway to the bedroom, the spirits became agitated and magic filled the air. I could even taste the electricity. It was like sucking on a penny. I had never felt so much power in one place.

We stopped inside the room. The walls were bare, and a window looked out onto a window well. There was tan carpeting on the floor. There was nothing else in the room but a closet. This was where the magic was strongest.

“Antone?” Sylvio asked.

“Witches... and fairy magic,” Antone said. His deep voice rumbled and echoed in the empty space.

“She wants me to open the closet door,” Carlisle said. He walked to the closet and opened the sliding door.

When the closet opened, the spirits sent a push my way to go in. As I took a step forward, Sylvio placed a hand on the closet door and pulled it away quickly, hissing through his teeth. His eyes were beginning to gleam red in the light of the orb. “This feels like the fairy mounds in Hibernia.”

His comment distracted me, and I paused. *Fairy mounds?* The spirits gave me an impatient push, and I followed their lead. They led me to the other side of the closet. I reached for the door.

“Wait!” Sylvio commanded. He rarely sounded alarmed, but I could hear it in his voice as well as feel his concern.

I didn’t hesitate. “The spirits want me to open it.” I began to pull the second sliding door open and Sylvio was instantly beside me, his hand on my shoulder. But he didn’t stop me.

“The ghost is in the closet,” Carlisle informed us.

I peered in. To my eyes, the closet was empty. I could feel that same chill, but nothing else, and the spirits were not concerned with the ghost. They wanted me to go in. I tentatively reached a hand forward and felt an invisible barrier, similar to the one that surrounded Sylvio’s property in Willard. But that barrier had not been able to stop me, and I knew this one would not either. I stepped into the closet with Sylvio clinging to my shoulder.

White light engulfed me, and for a brief moment I saw a very familiar face—my own face, when I was a teenager—only the ghost had lighter hair, almost blonde. She smiled and beckoned me forward. I took another step.

I was instantly trapped in a suffocating darkness, it pressed all around me, pinning my arms to my sides and making it impossible to move or even breathe. It went on long enough that I began to panic. Then the darkness lifted and the sudden bright light made me squeeze my eyes shut.

After a moment, I dared open my eyes. We were standing on a rocky cliff under a midday sun. Red sandstone surrounded us, and a river with willows along its banks flowed lazily below us. I

turned around and was met by nothing but sand, rock, and desert air. Not a closet or a ghost in sight. Sylvio and I were the only living things I could see or sense. I turned back to look down at the river and the red pillar that stood sentinel on the other side. I reached out to the spirits. I could have sworn they were laughing.

"Filius canis!" Sylvio said with slow emphasis. He rarely swore unless he was truly surprised or angry, and when he did, it was often in Latin. I didn't know what the words meant, but I was sure he was swearing.

"Vaffanculo!" he exclaimed.

Yep, he was swearing. That was in Italian; I'd learned it recently. He muttered a few more words with a lot of heat behind them.

"You're expanding my vocabulary," I remarked. He glared at me, his eyes glowing red, and even his hands had claws on them. He rarely lost control like that. I thought that maybe I should curb my tongue until he calmed down, but I was having a hard time taking his anger seriously since the spirits were doing a happy dance.

"How could she possibly know about this place?" I asked in bewilderment.

Sylvio stopped mumbling oaths and looked around. We were on top of the ridge where he'd taken us riding not so long ago, and not far from where he'd hauled the cow back down the hillside. Around the corner of this hill was the old abandoned ranch with its many cedar buildings and pack rat nests. But it wasn't quite right. When Sylvio took us to the ranch before there had been tamarisk lining the bank of the river, not willows, and the pillar stood sentinel over sand and rock, not the alfalfa fields we could see now.

"The grave is missing," Sylvio said. He looked behind us, up the hill. He studied the pillar and the hay fields below it. "This is what it looked like the last time I visited the ranch, right before Annabelle died."

Sylvio had been partners in a cattle ranch along the Price River in the early 1900s. When the rancher's wife died, it took the wind out of the rancher's sails and he let the desert reclaim the property. Sylvio had been occupied elsewhere and didn't find out until the ranch had been abandoned. Many years later, he bought the BLM permit for the area.

"What's going on?" I said. "What kind of power could do this?"

When he looked at me, he made his features appear more human. I'd rarely seen him do that. Normally, he only appeared as a vampire when he fed, and he usually kept the lights off when he did that.

"Fae magic," he said. "As much as this might look like that old ranch in its heyday, it's a mind trick of the fae. This is Underhill, not central Utah."

Nonplussed, I asked, "What's Underhill?"

"Underhill is its own world. The fae are able to manipulate it if they have the strength. Underhill weaves a trap from your own memories or your dreams. This appears genuine because both of us can wield powerful magic, and our memories of this place are similar."

"Well," I said, looking around, "I'm impressed. It looks very real to me."

Sylvio looked around again. He'd lost his anger and now felt more curious than apprehensive. "It may take a while to find a way out. Let's go around the corner of the hill and see what the ranch looks like in this world."

We climbed down the hill and came to the road, which in our time in the real world was a track about two feet wide that clung to the cliff face. In Underhill, the track was wide enough for a

wagon. An irrigation ditch ran alongside the cliff. We hopped over the water in the ditch and turned the corner of the road.

Instead of a flat acre of sagebrush and tamarisk, the space in front of the bunkhouse was a fruit orchard. We left the road and walked under the shade of the trees. It felt very nice. The grass softened our footsteps. I preferred it to the red sand we'd walked on before.

We were spotted when we emerged from the orchard. A cattle dog came charging toward us, barking, but also wagging its stubby tail. I felt a tiny pulse of magic from Sylvio as he worked his mojo on the dog, which stopped barking and ran up to get its ears scratched.

It all felt so real. I looked around with a more discerning eye. It was not what I saw that was wrong; it was what I didn't see. There were no bugs, and besides the dog, there was not another soul in sight. There were no cattle or horses in the corral, even though there was a pile of hay tall enough to be seen over the roof of the main house.

As if whoever was playing with us heard my thoughts, a rider came around the corner of the hill, trotting down the road toward us. Sylvio's hearing was quite keen, so I asked, "Did you hear that rider before now?"

"No." He turned around to look. I did not sense fear from Sylvio, only curiosity and humor. His mood helped calm my apprehension.

Sylvio raised a hand to the rider. "Ho, there! We're over here."

The rider stopped and sat his horse for a moment before riding in our direction. His clothes were stained red from the desert sand. His chaps were made of latigo, and the face under the old black cowboy hat was weatherworn and cheerful. A pistol belt hung at his hip, and his spurs jingled as the horse trotted toward us.

"Well, I'll be damned!" the rider said. "Drake, what brings you out here?" He swung off his horse, took off his glove, and extended a hand in one smooth motion.

"Alma," Sylvio said. "Good to see you. Looks like the ranch is faring well." He shook the offered hand. "Chance brought me here."

Alma turned his pale-blue eyes from Sylvio to me. The spirits pushed at me. I smiled and said, "I'm Rachel." I wasn't sure if I should give him my actual name since Sylvio wasn't using his, but the spirits prompted me to answer truthfully.

Alma looked me up and down, and I was suddenly very glad I was wearing a shirt with buttons and not a t-shirt with some modern logo or year stamped on it. He paused in his perusal momentarily when he noticed I was wearing jeans. But when he met my eyes again, I didn't see disapproval there.

"Rachel," Alma said under his breath. His thoughts turned inward, and a puzzled look filled his mobile face as he scratched his chin. I was sure I would have liked him if I'd known him in the real world. He was like Lisa; his face reflected his true thoughts. Then he remembered what he'd been puzzling over. "Well, maybe you can solve a riddle. I have a letter for you."

My mouth dropped open in shock, and I felt a little lightheaded. I put a hand on Sylvio's arm to steady myself.

Sylvio looked at me and shook his head, laughing inside. He enjoyed the unexpected. "Where is everyone?" he asked Alma.

"Over by Newkirk's cabin, haying." He looked around us. "Where are your horses?" In that country, in his time, you did not walk on foot across the desert.

"Something spooked them last night, and they ran off," Sylvio lied. "You'll probably find them mixed in with yours."

I was certain he'd had to cover his tracks to explain his sudden appearances countless times in the past. I wondered if he'd ended up teleporting to destinations that weren't in his mind, or if it was only in Underhill where time and space were mixed up.

Alma began to lead the way toward the main house. On the right were the guest houses, which now had doors and roofs that were complete. When I had first seen them, the sod between the logs was gone, and sunlight streamed down through the cracks between them onto pack rat nests three and four feet high. The doors, gray with time, were open and the bottom few inches were buried in sand. In Underhill, the fence in front of the guest houses was intact. Chickens wandered in front of the closed doors, which were painted green. I noted that the chickens had not been there moments earlier.

The dog, which Alma had not introduced, led the way. The buildings were squat. Even in the main house, Sylvio's head had been only inches from the ceiling when we had explored the abandoned house before. As we approached the main house, it struck me again how different things looked. The walls were whitewashed, and flowers hung drying from the rafters. The dog looked up and barked at the calico cat that now sat perched on the roof, watching us.

Alma didn't take us into the main house but bypassed it and headed for the blacksmith shop that lay behind and to the left of the stable. Equipment parts lay all around, and there was a wagon wheel lying on the bench in the shop, ready to be repaired. I stared at the huge, leather bellows and the forge and recognized them both—they now hung on the north side of the indoor arena at Sylvio's home in Willard. There was a covered awning, and at the west end were Sylvio's blacksmith tools. He liked to make things out of metal.

Alma went to the back of the shop and began rummaging around on the shelves, making quite a bit of noise and grumbling about it not being safe to put his things in the house because Annabelle would move them. He said something about women ruling the house anyway, and I grinned at Sylvio. He gave me an exasperated look.

I whispered, "Drake?"

Sylvio gave a short nod, his eyes on Alma. "Benjamin Drake," he whispered back, not quite hiding the grin on his face.

"Can I call you Benny?" I didn't hide my own grin. He rolled his eyes and started to say something, but stopped when Alma came back over to us holding a small brown envelope for me to take.

I turned it over and read the address.

Miss Rachel
c/o Benjamin Drake
Red Cliff Ranch
Woodside, UT

My hands were shaking as I opened the envelope. There was a seal on the envelope holding the back flap closed. A letter M was embossed in the wax. I felt both alarm and curiosity from Sylvio, as well as his ever-present reckless zeal whenever dangerous or strange things were happening. I glanced at him. "Do you recognize this seal?"

"Yes, I think I do. Open it. Let's see what she has to say."

She? Did he mean my mother? My fingers trembled as I broke the seal and took out the folded paper inside. While the envelope was plain brown, the paper inside was fine, white, and heavy. It

brought a scent of lilacs with it when I opened it. The script was beautiful and bold, the letters written with large loops and long lines. Sylvio hissed through his teeth, obviously recognizing the handwriting.

Dear Rachel,

I was acquainted with your mother, who asked me to keep this letter safe from prying eyes. She seemed assured you would be able to retrieve it.

Go to the Valley of the Goblins. If you have been gifted with the magic of the spirits like your mother, you will find what she left for you there. Stay with Sir Drake. I've known him by other names in other times. He can help you return to where you belong. Give him a kiss from me.

M

I was speechless. Sylvio saved me. "Thank you very much, Alma, for keeping this letter safe," he said. "It has important information for us. Could we borrow a couple of horses? I'm afraid our business is urgent, and we can't stay to visit."

"As it happens," Alma said, "we have three that showed up wandering Dilly's Garden. They'd been ridden hard and turned loose up there, and three of ours are missing. We brought them down here."

Sylvio chuckled. "No doubt the others will turn up in a month or so, hopefully not too worse for wear."

"Yes, that's usually what happens. Folks around here know our brand, and they'll know the horses are ours. But if the men who borrowed our horses were in a hurry, the roan they took will slow them down. June started him only a few days before, and he liked to buck."

They laughed and I joined in, although my laugh was a little shaky.

Alma took us to the corral behind the house, where six horses now wandered. They had not been there when we'd walked past heading for the blacksmith shop. Alma didn't seem to notice their sudden appearance. He took a lariat off the gate and shook out a loop. Sylvio did the same with another rope he found hanging on the corral.

"Take the bay over there," Alma said, nodding to a chunky mare that stood at the far side. "I'll get you this sorrel gelding."

The gelding was lankier and taller, but still had a lot of muscle. The horses began to mill about when the gate was opened, but as soon as the loop settled over their necks, they stopped and stood. Both men twisted the lariat loop into a makeshift halter and led them to the stables.

"We'll leave them and your gear at the Wells Ranch in Green River," Sylvio said.

"That'll do," Alma replied and went into the stable. He came back with a saddle and two blankets. Sylvio handed me the lead ropes and went in to get the other saddle and the bridles. We brushed the sand off the horses' coats and tacked up. Alma went into the house. A few minutes later, he brought us out canteens and flour sacks with food in them to tie to our saddles.

"You sure you can't stay?" Alma said. "They're bound to be back by evening."

"Thanks for the offer, and for the help, but we better be going." Sylvio looked around. "The ranch seems to be doing well."

"Yes, if we can keep the river from taking our fields, we'll do okay."

"Take care, and say hi to Annabelle and the family."

"I'll do that."

Sylvio led the way but did not go back to the road, which ended at the house. Instead, he headed upstream, following the trail that went past the ranch buildings and along the banks of the river. The horses walked at a good pace, and the buildings were soon out of sight.

When we were quite a way up the river from the ranch, I asked, “Who is M?”

“Morgen.”

I waited, but he didn’t elaborate. “Was she a past lover?” If he was going to leave me in the dark, I was going to make him pay.

He snorted. “Hardly! We barely tolerated each other. She’s a fae. She likes to play games with humans—those who are either wealthy or powerful, or both. She asked me for a kiss once, and I turned her down. She’s never forgiven me for dallying with the women at court and not her.”

“You aren’t seriously talking about Morgen le Fey, are you? You mean le Fey meant ‘of the fae’ and not the place she was from?”

“Here’s as good a place as any,” he said and dismounted under some cottonwood trees. I stayed on the mare, who was quite a nice horse, and glowered at Sylvio.

He turned and looked up at me, grinning, not feeling one bit repentant for his less than satisfactory answers. “You don’t really want to ride all the way to Green River and then over to Goblin Valley, do you?”

“Was that person Alma or not?”

“Not. Underhill takes your memories and makes them real, with a twist. Usually, a nasty one. It’s best to simply play along and not challenge what you find until it’s necessary.”

I stayed in the saddle. “Are you going to enlighten me about Morgen?”

“Not while we’re in her world. We can puzzle out how your mother knew to leave a message for us with Morgen later when we’re back in the real world.”

I sighed and dismounted. We took the bridles off the horses and tied them to the trees.

“Have a snack then I’ll take us to Goblin Valley.”

“Are we leaving the horses here?”

“No, I’ll take them to Green River.”

“All at once? I didn’t know you could do that.”

“Well, I’d have to take only one horse at a time and rest up afterward in the real world, but here I can make it do whatever I imagine.”

I peeked into the flour sack and found some hard cheese and bread. It smelled good. “Do I dare eat this?”

“I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

I settled on a flat rock and nibbled the cheese and bread while Sylvio brushed the horses for something to do. It was clear he didn’t want to discuss things at the moment. Not long after that, the cheese and bread were gone. I hadn’t realized I was so hungry.

A little while later, we were putting the horses’ bridles on, and they started to dance around and snort in fear. At the same time, I felt a pulse of a strange kind of magic. The spirits swarmed around me in a thick shield. The cottonwoods we’d tied the horses to were next to a pillar of rock that jutted out from the mesa. Bits of sand fell off the rock in front of the horses, and I looked up.

The biggest cougar I’d ever seen was poised to pounce.