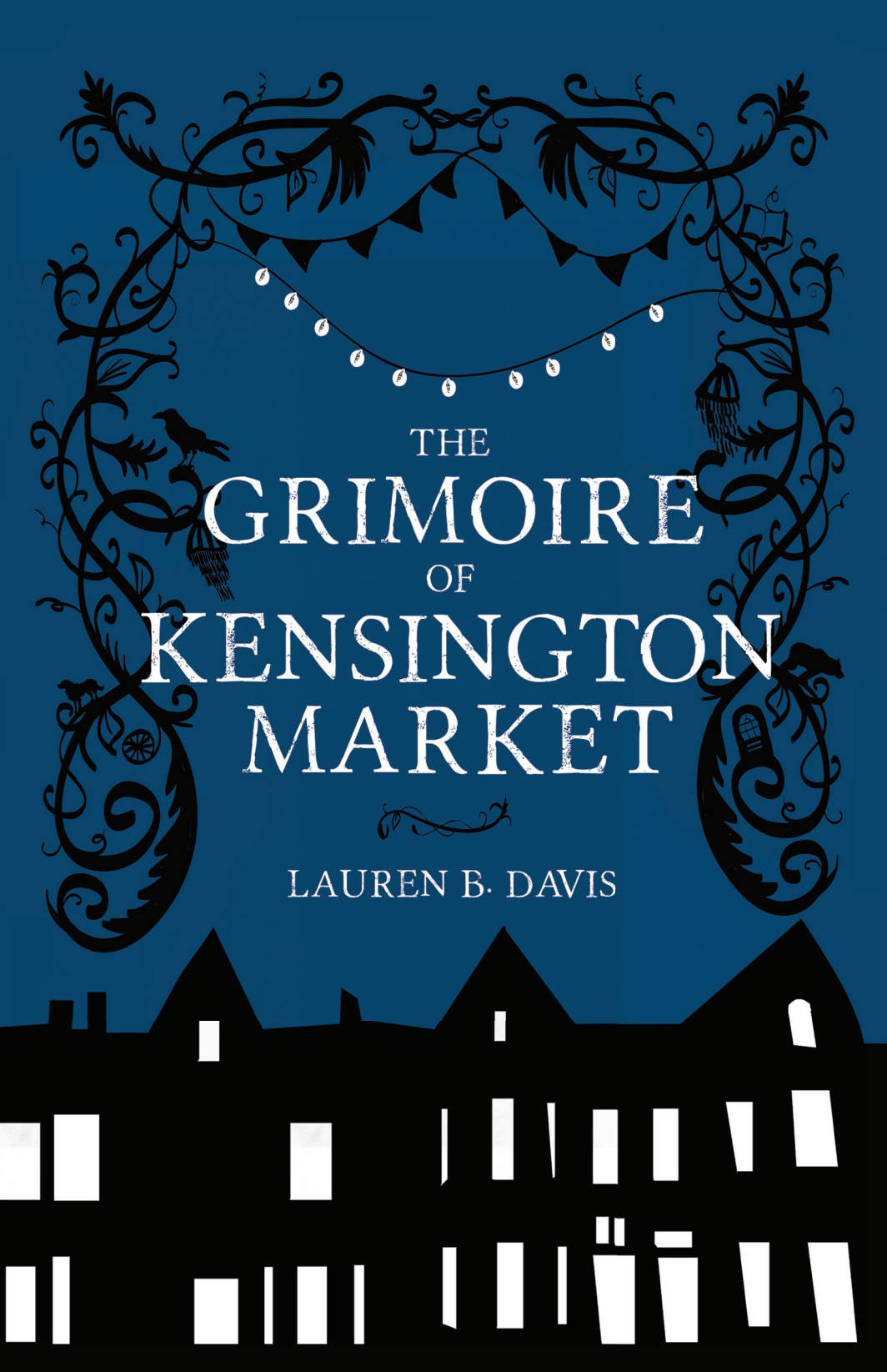
THE
GRIMOIRE
OF
KENSINGTON
MARKET
LAUREN B. DAVIS

THE GRIMOIRE OF KENSINGTON MARKET

LAUREN B. DAVIS

A Buckrider Book

This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, places and events portrayed are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead; events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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CHAPTER ONE

PEOPLE DIDN'T WANDER INTO THE GRIMOIRE. It wasn't that sort of bookshop. People found it by some force even Maggie, the proprietor, didn't understand. If one was meant to find the shop, one did, otherwise it was unnoticeable. Alvin, the nephew of the former proprietor, Mr. Mustby, came as he pleased, as did Mr. Strundale, who ran the Wort & Willow Apothecary a few doors down, but on the other hand, Maggie's brother, Kyle, had never found his way, and she wasn't about to invite him.

Located at the front of the ground floor of an old house, the shop smelled of old paper, glue and wax, with slight undernotes of mildew and mice. It was *full* of books, as one might expect, but not just full of books in the general way of bookshops. Rather, it was full of books so that walking from the door to the corner where Maggie sat behind her desk was like navigating a maze. There were books on the shelves, books on the tables, books precariously balanced on the top of forgotten teacups on the aforementioned tables, books on the windowsills, books on the chairs, books piled on the floor shoulder high, if you were tall, over your head, if you were short.

This morning Maggie, dressed in her usual black turtleneck and jeans, sat behind her desk, which had legs carved with dragons, and their clawed feet gripped marble globes. Across the edge of the desk, piles of books formed a sort of rampart, inside which were a scatter of items: a small saucer of stones and shells, an assortment of small creatures – a wooden mouse reading a bible, a rhinoceros-nosed dragon carved from coal lying on its back reading a book, a winged gargoyle, a crystal owl, a jade turtle – several candles scented with frankincense, a brass lamp and a very large nearly empty teacup, decorated with a blue narwhal. Maggie held a dark blue book with three silver moons embossed on the cover, in the waxing, full and waning aspects. As often happened when a book caught her eye, it was just what she hadn't known she was looking for. She ran her long pale fingers over the artwork. It triggered a memory of last night's dream. Something about a man cast away on the moon. The first story was about an old man who stole a bundle of firewood and then refused to give it to a freezing beggar. As punishment for the hardness of his heart more than the theft, the wind whisked him to the moon, where he waited for Judgment Day. He said he didn't mind. It could have been worse, for the moon only showed itself at night and so his shame would be seen only half the time.

"Huh," she said and fiddled with one of the two silver bird charms pinned in the honey-coloured braid that fell over her shoulder. She wore no makeup; they were her only concession to vanity. Several golden lights flashed, the size of the fairy lights people sometimes hung in gardens, and Maggie noticed two shelves, one housing stories about Syrian immigrants and the other stories of sub-Saharan Africa, lengthened just a tad.

Such was the way new additions to the shop were announced. Some days the shop seemed to sparkle, so many books appeared, other days a few flickers and nothing more. One would think that such a bookshop would eventually burst

through its walls, since more and more stories appear in the world, and therefore in the Grimoire, every hour, with shelves expanding to accommodate each one, but it is a sad truth that stories also leave the world when they are forgotten, or when the last teller of the tale has died. When this happened, a small flame appeared above the book in question and as it burned, the book itself dimmed, lost its shape and, when the flame snuffed out, so did the book. In this way, although the inside of the shop expanded or contracted to fit the world's tales, it was always the perfect size.

Badger, the shaggy black-and-white mixed-breed dog curled near Maggie's feet, looked up and cocked his head, one ear flopping. He whined. Maggie scratched his ear. She turned the page. A very old tale. In one version God exiled the thief to his choice of either sun or moon. In another the wind made him spend eternity repairing hedgerows on the night's silver disk. No one gave the old man a chance to explain or offer a defence. Maybe he was freezing himself. Maybe he had sick children at home. He had no advocate; no one on his side. Maggie snorted. Wasn't that always the case? It was so easy to judge, to punish; so hard to find justice; and mercy never seemed to enter the picture at all.

She closed the book with a thump, causing a puff of dust to explode heavenward, and pushed it away. She slurped up the last of the tea and then went into the kitchen at the back of the shop to make more. While the kettle heated she let Badger out the back door into the stone-walled garden. Within it was a seat under an old oak tree, and rose bushes, lilacs, camellias and hollyhocks that filled the entire shop with fragrance when in bloom. Now, in late October, the garden was quiet and still, falling asleep at the approach of winter. Maggie stood in the doorway and watched Badger sniff around. She thought how Mr. Mustby, the shop's previous proprietor, the man who had saved her life, had loved mornings and how she'd often found

him in the garden when she got up, a coffee in one hand, a book in the other, sitting on the bench under the tree. Three months after his sudden death she fancied she still saw him there.

A few minutes later she was back at her desk, sipping her steaming tea. She tapped her fingers on the moon-story book. Something to learn, certainly, from last night's dream. But what? Well, time would tell. She'd almost grown accustomed to dreaming in fairy tales. As a child, the dreams had been vague, mere snippets of glass mountains, talking frogs and handless maidens. But when she lost herself to the drug elysium all that changed. The boundaries grew thin. Dreams were no longer dreams; they were journeys into the Silver World, the World Beside This One. What was real and what wasn't blended. Fairy tales, holy myths, ancient figures from the imaginations of a million dreamers . . . they were as real as the hand at the end of one's arm. That was the deadly lure of the elysium. And even though she'd put down the pipe three years ago, her dreams had never returned to their pre-addiction vagueness. Perhaps she'd always had some genetic predisposition.

She pinched the bridge of her nose. It was exhausting, as was the grief she was experiencing after Mr. Mustby's recent death. No one ever talked about that. Pain she expected, but this fatigue! Her eyes burned. She didn't want to cry anymore. Maggie tilted her head and rolled her neck, trying to work out the cricks.

The little bell sounded over the door. Badger whined and stood. Alvin, maybe? Maggie's hands went to her hair, but she stopped herself. She hadn't seen Alvin in several days and although she didn't like to admit it, she missed him. More fool, she! Alvin, Mr. Mustby's nephew, who'd once inhabited the second-floor room she now called her own, lived on a charter boat docked in Lake Ontario. Sometimes he took out people to scatter the ashes of loves ones, sometimes wedding parties. If he knew how often she thought about him when he was gone, he'd only tease her.

Badger sat back down. Not Alvin, then.

A moment later a woman's face popped round one of the shelves. "Hello?" she said. "Quite a store you've got here." She was probably in her fifties, with grey hair cut in soft wisps around her face.

"Can I help you find something?"

The woman adjusted her turquoise-framed glasses. "Oh, what a sweet dog!" Badger trotted over and leaned against the woman's camel-hair coat in a position for ear scratches. The woman obliged and said to Maggie, "It's funny, I've never noticed this place before. Have you been here long?"

"Quite a while, but we don't really advertise."

The woman scanned the crowded shelves that went on, row after row, much farther than the laws of physics ought to permit. "What an odd place."

This happened when customers came in; they seemed befuddled, but it didn't last. Maggie concluded long ago that this was part of the spell of the Grimoire – a just-below-the-surface-of-consciousness reassurance people felt when they crossed the threshold.

"I like it though," the woman said. "Anyway, I was walking past and suddenly remembered a dream I had last night. Sounds crazy, I know, but . . ."

"Doesn't sound crazy at all," said Maggie. "I was just pondering a dream I had last night myself."

The woman cocked her head as though trying to recall. "I'm not sure, but there was something about, I know this sounds strange, but a lily and a snake, something about men dressed in blue flames." The woman looked over Maggie's shoulder. "Could have sworn I just saw fireflies or something over there."

"Lights under the rim of the shelves. Darn things are always flickering. Bad connection."

Maggie took the woman by the arm and led her to the back of the store, to a great wall of small wooden drawers containing

index cards upon which were recorded, in a beautiful calligraphy drawn by an unknown hand, all the titles of the books, their authors and a brief description, cross-referenced and updated as books came and went. "I think I know a book you might like. Goethe, of all people, wrote a fascinating story called 'The Green Snake and the Beautiful Lily.' It's considered one of the great symbolic enigmas of world literature." She rifled through the cards. "This one. It's in his book *Tales for Transformation*."

"You know, that sounds right somehow. God knows I'm going through enough transformations right now – divorce, retirement, you don't want to know – and everything feels enigmatic. Might give me some food for thought."

"Follow me." Maggie found the book and handed it to the woman.

"You won't know what it all means until you read it. But it's not that unusual. You'd be surprised how many people come in here asking for books based on their dreams."

"Looks awfully old."

"Not so old. Nineteen-thirties, I think. First edition of the English translation."

The woman went to hand it back to Maggie. "I'm sure I can't afford it."

"I bet you can. How much would you like to pay?"

The woman blinked. "Gee, I don't know . . . forty dollars?"

"I think you were meant for this book."

At noon, Badger and Maggie took their usual constitutional along the crowded, noisy streets of Kensington Market. Opening the door was always a slightly unsettling moment. Behind the doors the world of the bookstore was hushed, calm, as though out of time entirely, and the street noises didn't penetrate. Stepping out into the world of brightly coloured

Victorian houses, the Wort & Willow Apothecary her friend Mr. Strundale owned, riotous second-hand clothing stores, cars and taxis – drivers leaning on their horns – bicycle couriers whooshing by, coffee shops and open-air vegetable markets, which even in winter filled the air with a note of overripe fruit and decay, was a bit like stepping through the looking glass. They walked past Kensington Market's Italian pasta shops and espresso bars, Chinese herbal dispensaries and French cheese shops. The sidewalk was crowded with people speaking English, Arabic, Portuguese, Cantonese, Somali – it seemed like seven or eight different languages at once – and no one paid the least bit of attention to either Maggie or Badger. The air was damp and chill and the few trees were leafless. An empty paper cup danced along the sidewalk in a gust of wind.

Badger trotted along. He had been rummaging through the garbage in the alleyway near the Grimoire when Maggie found him, and he'd chosen to accept her invitation to live with her. Maggie had welcomed him, malodorous and crawling with vermin, given him a bath, as much food as he needed and her love. Now they wandered round to Bellevue Square, where Badger discreetly performed the necessary functions, and then made their way back to the shop.

As they neared the Grimoire's narrow door, Badger lowered his head, flattened his ears and did a fair impression of a lion stalking something through tall grass. "What are you doing?" Maggie laughed, trying to ignore the chill up her spine. Badger stopped and growled. She followed his gaze. The sidewalk traffic looked normal – mothers pushing strollers, people talking into phones, a man walking a schnauzer. Maggie wondered if it was the other dog that disturbed Badger, although he was generally friendly to other animals. Then she noticed a woman.

She looked familiar, but Maggie couldn't place her. Her hair was a short silver halo around her head. Her gaze was downward, and Maggie couldn't make out her features, other than a

slash of dark lipstick. She wore a long wool coat, open, showing a man's suit, and lace-up black shoes. Something about the way she moved . . . and then she raised her head. The ghostly skin, wide mouth, the deep dimples . . . the eyes, holding knowledge of some private joke. It looked so much like *her* . . . but different . . .

"Well, what a nice little shop," the woman said. "Maggie, dear girl, how are you?"

That voice, all honey and smoke, the accent something Eastern European, Ukrainian or Russian perhaps. Srebrenka looked different, yes, softer somehow, but no older than when Lenny, Maggie's old boyfriend, had first introduced her eight years ago. Maggie had asked her then where she was from, but Srebrenka said it was nowhere she would know and refused to say more.

"What are you doing here?" Maggie's mind spun. Srebrenka, from whom everyone bought elysium, knew where she lived? And she could see the Grimoire? How could this be?

"I heard about your loss," Srebrenka said, "and wanted to say how very sorry I am."

Badger growled. "Sit," Maggie said, and the dog did, although not without a reluctant little dance first. "What loss?"

"Oh, dear," said Srebrenka, shaking her head. "Why Mr. Mustby, of course."

"How do you know him?" Maggie's breathing was shallow and her heart beat too quickly. She took a deep breath and tried to relax her shoulders.

Srebrenka smiled and put her hands together as though in prayer. "I was so sorry to hear about his passing. Of course, he was very old, but that's never a comfort when we lose someone we love, is it?"

It was odd, how even though Srebrenka was such a striking figure, no one glanced at her, although several glared at Maggie. She realized she was standing in the middle of the sidewalk, making people go around her. She moved closer to the door.

"You didn't answer my question."

Srebrenka stepped to the side next to Maggie and smiled down at Badger. "I know a lot of people, Maggie. I have a lot of friends. And I count you among them. I've been hurt, frankly, that you disappeared."

"I had to get clean. Or die. That was the choice."

"A bit dramatic," Srebrenka laughed, the sound like little bells. "But you did surprise me. I mean, to be honest, you're the first friend to leave me like that, and I can't imagine what I did to offend you. Wasn't I always there for you?"

"Look, I have to get going. I wish you all the best, okay, but I'm not interested."

Srebrenka tilted her head and gazed into Maggie's eyes. She bit her lower lip. "No? Are you sure? I'm not. I'd love a cup of tea and a chat. Perhaps you could invite me in? Someone grieving, as you are, needs a friend."

"Some other time maybe. I have a lot of work to do."

Srebrenka, ignoring Badger's growl, stepped close to Maggie and whispered in her ear, "The elysium longs for you, longs to hold you, longs to dream for you and ease your grief."

Her breath was like cool silk on Maggie's ear. Badger barked, and Maggie jerked her head and spun away. "Leave me alone."

"I didn't mean to upset you. Another time, then, my dear. Another time." Srebrenka blew her a kiss and walked away.

Maggie ducked in the shop and slammed the door, her heart a wild thing in her chest. She sank to the ground and wept.

Three years and three months ago she had crawled, thin as a grasshopper, into the Grimoire. She was still seeing visions and had only recently put down the pipe. When Mr. Mustby, white bird's-wing eyebrows bristling, shuffled to the front of the store to see what fate had invited in, she'd asked

him, shivering, if she could just sit in a corner and read a book. His tortoiseshell glasses had gleamed and he smelled of something like cinnamon or spice cake. His grey, curly hair fluffed around his head (and around the fountain pen tucked behind his ear, which gave him a scholarly appearance) and his goatee was neatly trimmed. The knees and elbows of his brown corduroy suit bagged from long wear and, judging from the way his pockets bulged, they were stuffed with an inordinate number of objects. His shoes were polished, but one was brown and the other black. He asked her name, nodded as though he'd expected as much and said he didn't care what she did so long as she didn't throw up on the books. She curled up in a dusty corner with a copy of the fifteenth-century masterpiece *Tales from the Sleeping Fortress*, and read and slept, read and slept, all that afternoon and into the night, until Mr. Mustby finally brought her a cup of tea and toast and said, "You may sleep in the back. I've set up a cot near the stove."

The next day Mr. Strundale had come in wearing a burgundy smoking jacket and nearly fainted when he saw her. Seeing the small fox wrapped around his shoulders, Maggie assumed she was hallucinating and nearly passed out herself. "Good God!" Mr. Strundale said, "Cat's dragged in and all that . . ."

He and Mr. Mustby talked for a few minutes and then Mr. Mustby called her over and said, "I have discussed this situation with my friend and counsellor, Mr. Strundale. You are here, so apparently this is where you are supposed to be."

"It's that sort of shop," said Mr. Strundale.

"Indeed," said Mr. Mustby. "In any event, I think you'd best get to work organizing the section on addiction stories, subsection Dark Night of the Soul."

And so the Grimoire had become her home; Mr. Mustby, her foster father; Mr. Strundale, something of an uncle and Alvin, her friend . . . or more than a friend. Life was as full of people as she wanted, and she'd felt safe for the first time in years.

Now, Srebrenka had come for her. But surely, Maggie told herself, she wouldn't be back. Maggie had made herself clear. That part of her life was over. Srebrenka would give up. But of course she wouldn't, would she? Maggie hugged Badger and shivered.

The next morning Maggie took a moment before opening the door. She would open it, she told herself, and find nothing unusual. She and Badger would go for their walk and come home and nothing would happen. She took a deep breath. She clipped the leash to Badger's collar. He was coiled, vibrating, which she told herself was nothing more than a reaction to the unusual leash. She flung open the door, perhaps a little more quickly, with a little more flourish, than she'd intended.

Srebrenka was just walking past, or so it seemed.

"Maggie." She held her arms out, palms up. "I came to apologize. I think I alarmed you yesterday, and that was the last thing I wanted to do." She took a few steps forward, her white coat and trousers shining in the sunlight. "You must know I want to ease your pain. That's all I wanted to do when we first met, so many years ago, and it's all I want to do now." She put her hands in her pockets and opened her coat. "See, nothing to be frightened of. Please, why not invite me in? Let me make amends? I've brought you a little something."

Maggie fought her urge to slam the door. She would not show fear. She stepped out, shutting the door behind her. She walked past Srebrenka, her shoulders high, keeping Badger close, for the dog was trembling and ready to bite. Srebrenka walked beside her.

"This is almost rude, dear. We are old friends, and you're refusing a gift. I give it to you freely, asking no payment." The

woman held out a small silver pipe, the bowl already filled with the shimmering black tar-like potion.

Maggie set her jaw. She would not speak.

Srebrenka trailed along beside her, murmuring about the sweetness of the dreams waiting. Maggie ignored her as long as she could, lasting half a block, before she ducked into Mr. Strundale's apothecary, slamming the door behind her.

Inside, the air smelled of peppermint and lavender. Around the walls stood shelves, some glass-fronted, containing white and blue and green jars filled with herbal and homeopathic remedies, as well as glass canisters of various herbs – burdock, dandelion root, angelica, fennel, chamomile and so forth. Gold and green scrollwork decorated the wall above the shelves and from waist-height down were drawers, each with little brass plates describing the contents. In the centre of the room rested a large, highly polished island with more drawers in it. On the island sat brass scales and weights. A chandelier with flame-shaped bulbs hung from the ceiling, creating a soft glow.

The front door remained shut. It seemed Srebrenka wouldn't venture in, just as she didn't walk into the Grimoire without invitation. Mr. Strundale popped out from behind a screen at the back of the store that was ornately embroidered with dragons and birds. He smiled, although on his basset hound–face the gesture was unpersuasive, then his features settled into their natural droop. Finnick, the fox, pranced around his ankles. Finnick was a bit of a mystery. When Maggie had asked about him, Mr. Strundale had chuckled and said that Finnick wasn't an ordinary sort of fox, by any standard, and that he had been a companion to the previous herbalist, so he'd always been in the Wort & Willow. "But," Maggie had said, "you've been here for forty years so that would make him, what?" "Oh, ancient," Mr. Strundale had said, "and so very wise." And that was that.

"Maggie, how lovely to see you."

Finnick chirped in greeting and Badger flicked his ears but keep his focus on the door. Finnick went and sat next to him, equally alert.

"Thought I'd pop in for a cup of tea. Is that okay?"

He frowned. "Of course, but are you all right? Badger and Finnick seem on guard about something." He tightened the belt on his smoking jacket.

"I'm fine. Just haven't visited for a while." It took effort not to check if Srebrenka was following her.

"Don't be silly. Look at Badger. He's practically ready to vault at the door. What on earth is happening?"

She didn't want to tell him. There was a weakness, a flaw in her, that had led Srebrenka here. Like a dog wanting to kick dirt on its feces, she wanted to hide this. She wanted to take a long bath and soak away whatever Piper-filth must surely remain on her skin, sending out signals like a beacon.

"There's someone outside I don't want to see."

Mr. Strundale's eyebrows met above his nose. "Someone found you at the bookshop? I see. Someone from your life before you came here, yes?"

The flush rising to her hairline gave her away.

"Unusual that," said Mr. Strundale. "Must be, I'm afraid to say, someone quite powerful. Stay here."

He moved toward the door and she reached out to stop him. "Don't."

He patted her hand. "Just wait here. No one will get past me, I assure you." He looked down at Badger and smiled. "Or Badger. And you'd be surprised how ferocious Finnick can be." The animal bristled and chittered. "It'll be fine."

When he opened the door, Finnick at his side, there was no one outside who shouldn't be there. Just a busy street full of people. He stepped out. Looked up the street and down, Finnick mimicking his gesture. "No one there now. Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. It was . . ." She didn't want to bring him into it, old man that he was, and she didn't want to admit how uncertain of herself the visit had made her. "No," she said, "probably not. Just old fears." Badger lay down at her feet.

"Well then, tea it is. Chamomile and lavender, I think." He put his arm around her shoulders. "You know, my dear, you're still grieving. The loss of Mr. Mustby was a great one, seismic even, and it will take a long time for you to come to terms with it. For any of us to come to terms with it. It's quite normal to be discombobulated."

Is that what he thought? That she was delusional with grief?

He smiled, led her into a little kitchen not unlike the one at the Grimoire. Like Maggie, he lived above his shop. He told her to sit at the small table as he plugged in an electric kettle. "Without my old friend the world is changed, and not for the better. But you must remember he trusted you. He left the shop to you, knowing you were the right person." He puttered about, getting cups and saucers. "It takes a certain inner fortitude to be the proprietor of a shop that is the cosmic nexus of the world's tales." He chuckled and sat across from her. "So, regardless of whether the person who came to see you is a function of your grief, or a ghost from your past, or a person with malicious intent, the same advice holds: you mustn't cower. You must, and will, be afraid many times before you're as old as I am. Fear isn't something you can avoid. But you can turn and face it. Bullies hate it when you simply stand your ground. Power comes from resolve, not might."

She hung her head. "And what if I'm not as strong as all that?"

"Then Mr. Mustby wouldn't have chosen you for the job. The Grimoire and, to some extent, the Wort & Willow are thin places, as the Celts say. You know, a place with a somewhat porous barrier between the sacred and the mundane. It is also powerful, and those who reside in it, who are charged with its

care, are recognized by such power, and cannot help but benefit from it." He patted her hand and the kettle began to sing. "Now, we should talk of more pleasant things and leave the morrow to the morrow."

When she left, Srebrenka was nowhere in sight.

When, the day after, the bell over the door sounded mid-morning, Maggie nearly fell off her chair, but it was only a man looking for a book of stories about the War of 1812. She found him the book and when she walked him to the door she peeked out, but saw no one who shouldn't be there.

Later, she opened the door again, Badger's leash wrapped tightly round her hand.

Srebrenka had brought a wooden folding chair and set up on the sidewalk. Maggie's skin tightened. Srebrenka smiled, waved her fingers and then rose. "I come in peace. I can't bear the misunderstanding between us. We were so close once. You're like family, and you know how much that means. After all, we're both alone in the world, aren't we? Especially now."

"I'm not alone," Maggie said.

"Your brother, Kyle? He's a sweet boy, and my friend." She flicked a piece of lint off her fire-engine clothing. The colour matched her lipstick.

Perhaps it was hearing Kyle's name on Srebrenka's lips, but Maggie wanted to strike the woman, to gouge out her eyes, to tear her cheeks. She stepped up to her, so quickly Srebrenka stepped back, knocking the chair into the street. Maggie was shaking, Badger taut as a steel spring.

"Enough! Do you understand? Enough! I'm not coming back. Not now, not ever, and I'll make the biggest scene you can imagine if you don't leave me alone! I'm not giving up everything I've got. I'll tell everyone what you're selling and to hell

with the consequences!" Badger was barking now. "How many people around here do you think have lost relatives because of you? How long would it take the cops to get here? Do you want me to make a scene? Do you?" She'd started screaming out of desperation, and hadn't thought it would do much, but whereas a moment before people hadn't noticed Srebrenka, suddenly people stopped and looked and began to gather and whisper and point.

"Pretty Maggie, calm yourself," Srebrenka said, her eyes darting from one face to another. "No need for all this."

"Leave me alone! I don't want you, I don't want it! I'm done!"

Srebrenka dropped her cigarette to the street and ground it out under her heel. "Well, scenes are so uncouth. You always did surprise me, dear girl."

"I'm calling the cops," said a man from the Korean market. He pulled out his cellphone. Someone else was taking a video on their phone. Maggie flinched and hid her face. She didn't like scenes any more than Srebrenka did.

Srebrenka walked to a silver Jaguar parked at the curb. As she got into the driver's seat she said, "You don't think this is over, do you, pretty Maggie?" Srebrenka winked. "It's not."

The car began to move away. People blinked and scratched their heads. They grinned a little sheepishly, as though they weren't quite sure what they were doing there. They didn't seem to notice Maggie any longer, which suited her just fine.

The wooden chair lay in the street and then a young man with a beard and a knapsack with a U of T sticker on it stopped. "You throwing that away? I'll take it if you don't want it," he said.

"Be my guest," said Maggie.

The next day, Maggie opened the door a crack and peeped out. Nothing. Badger's tail wagged. All clear. And the day after that, and the day after that . . . Srebrenka disappeared as abruptly as she'd appeared. Maggie hoped she might, after several weeks, once again put it all behind her. She wanted it to be a small whitecap on an otherwise calm sea. Nothing to worry about.

CHAPTER TWO

TWO WEEKS LATER, IN THE EARLY MORNING, when Maggie let Badger out in the back garden, something looked off. The sky was clear. Still, it looked too dark. The sun had risen; she'd seen it from the bedroom window. She looked over her shoulder at the clock on the kitchen wall. Yes, just after eight. True, the sun rose late this time of year, but it was up. So why was the day so dark? Badger sniffed here and there, staring at the top of the wall as though at an invisible squirrel. The shadows were long and fell in the wrong direction. Evening shadows, not morning. She shivered. Just a funny trick of the light, surely. "Hurry up, Badger." She hugged herself and stepped back into the kitchen.

By ten o'clock, Maggie sat at her desk, perusing a collection of folk tales from India. Just then she noticed a small red flame hovering over a book. Oh, no, she thought and rushed over to see what it was. The light was brightening, about to burn out, in a moment it would be gone, as would the book. Even now it was becoming indistinct, fading, the writing on the spine was barely visible. *The Stubborn Season* by . . . but Maggie was too late. The tiniest puff and the book was gone. Forgotten. Lost.

The bookshelf contracted as though the story had never been. She preferred not to notice when a book disappeared. They disappeared all the time, of course, but if she didn't look, if she didn't know, then she could avoid the sharp cramp of sorrow in her stomach. Still, there was something almost holy about bearing witness to such a death even if one couldn't help, wasn't there? What happened to a story never told again? All she could think of was void.

The bell over the door chimed. Badger's head came up and he rose to his feet from his bed by the fire. Someone sneezed, twice.

"Excuse me . . . is anyone here?" A child's voice.

"Hello?" Another sneeze. "Look at the dust! Hello? I got a message for someone named Maggie?"

There were few people who would send her messages; she had no friends save for Mr. Strundale and Alvin. Her parents were long dead. The store received no flyers and no bills, since apparently the mailman wasn't intended to find the place.

"Hello?" The child sounded a little frightened. "Anybody?"

Maggie sighed. "Come on, then. Back here. Badger, sit."

A boy's thin face peered around a bookshelf. He was perhaps ten years old, wearing a too-large red plaid jacket and droopy camouflage cargo pants. Black hair stuck out in an impressive number of directions.

"You sure have a lot of books," he said.

"Really? I hadn't noticed." She wandered back to the desk, the boy following, and sat.

"Does your dog bite?"

"Badger's more his own dog than mine, but I've never known him to bite, have I, Badger?" Badger's tail thumped on the floor. The boy looked dubious. "Did you say you had a message?"

"Right." The boy held out a pale blue envelope. His fingernails were black rimmed.

"Do you work in the coal mines when not delivering messages?" Maggie regarded the envelope with suspicion. She

refused to have a cellphone because having one meant people were likely to call you and she didn't want people calling her, not even Alvin. She didn't even have a land line. Alvin didn't seem to care and popped in when he wanted to see her. Kyle, her brother, told her he thought she was nuts, hiding away from the world, but what had the world ever done for her? Might be from Alvin, or Kyle, she supposed. She hoped it wasn't from Srebrenka or any of her acquaintances from her time in the Forest.

"Who gave it to you?"

The boy scratched his head just above his ear. "Just some guy." He waggled the blue envelope. "You gonna take it?"

She wasn't sure why, but she felt obliged, if only to reassure herself it was nothing to worry about, probably not even meant for her. But the boy was here, and no one came to the Grimoire unless they were meant to. "I'll take it." Odd, it was heavier than it looked. Sure enough, there was her name and address, written on the envelope in silver ink. Silver? Her heart fluttered. Her fingers tingled. She tore open the paper. In the centre of a small piece of blue paper were a few words written in a squiggly silver script.

Follow me

No signature, not even a period at the end of the short sentence. She turned the note over. Nothing. She looked at the handwriting. "I don't understand. Am I supposed to follow you?"

He frowned. "I doubt it. Maybe."

"Where are you from?"

"Where do you think?"

"The Forest?"

He shrugged. Maggie opened the desk drawer. She reached into a wooden box and pulled out a ten-dollar bill that she dangled in front of the boy. His eyes narrowed. "I'll give you another if you promise not to deliver more messages."

"I don't make promises. But I'd rather you gimme a book."

"Really?"

He glared. "What, you think I can't read?"

"What kind of book?"

"I dunno, like an adventure story or something."

"Have you read *Peter Pan?*"

"Is it any good?"

"It's about a boy who never grows up and battles a pirate who has a hook instead of a hand."

"I dunno. What's so good about never growing up?"

"Point. But he can also fly, and he's leader of the Lost Boys."

"Yeah, all right."

She got him the book. A nice edition, with full-colour illustrations.

"Thanks." He tucked the book inside his coat.

He was skinny as an eel. She gave him the ten-dollar bill as well. He hurried out as though afraid she'd change her mind. Poor kid. It occurred to her he might work for Srebrenka. Alarming thought. She picked up her tea. Silver ink? It almost looked like the silver swirls Pipers developed on their skin as the addiction grew. She'd developed just a few traces along her abdomen and chest, the kind easily covered with clothing, although they'd faded away after six months or so of being clean.

She snorted. Follow the boy back to the Forest? Not likely. But if she wasn't supposed to, then why had the boy been admitted to the store? Well, she didn't care. She wasn't going. She scratched Badger behind the ear and went back to her book.

The next morning as Badger and Maggie returned from their walk, Maggie noticed the boy from the day before pacing up and down the street, looking decidedly perplexed.

"Are you back?" Maggie opened the door of the Grimoire.

Given the shop's knack for being inconspicuous, she never needed to lock it. "Tell me you're not looking for me."

"Did you change something about the place? It looked different yesterday."

"I don't believe anything's changed here in a very long time," said Maggie as she stepped inside.

Although it wasn't quite true that nothing ever changed, was it? The darkness she'd noticed in the garden yesterday had remained all day, and today it seemed even darker still. On top of that, the garden looked smaller. Impossible, of course. It was just a sense she had, of the stone walls being kind of . . . compacted. Badger trotted into the maze of bookshelves, heading for his nest of blankets near the fireplace by Maggie's desk.

The boy followed Maggie inside and when he closed the door behind him the street noises immediately quieted. He pulled a blue envelope out of his jacket pocket. "Got another one for you."

He put the envelope in her outstretched palm. More silver ink.

"Look, who's giving you these? Do you know Srebrenka? Is this from her?"

The boy snorted. "I wouldn't do nothing for her." Then he looked a little uncertain. "That who you think it's from? Look, some guy gives them to somebody, who gives it to somebody else, who passes it to someone, who gives it to a kid I know, and he gives it to another kid I know, until it gets to me. I'm like a boss, kind of, to some around there, and they know to bring things to me. I know my way around. Thought there might be some cash in delivering it, is all."

She reached into the inner pocket of her black peacoat and pulled out some bills. She handed them to the boy without counting.

He looked at the bills and grinned. "This is turning into a pretty good gig. I'm your delivery guy if you want, okay? Don't

matter how the streets are all funny."

"Meaning?"

"Haven't you heard?"

"Would I have asked?"

"Everyone's talking about it. Shifting buildings and shrinking streets . . . from the Forest, they say."

"What are you talking about?"

"Nobody knows what's up, right? But something is. I got to go." He gave her a quick salute and dashed away.

A few minutes later Maggie sat at her desk, still wearing her coat, staring at the envelope. She took a deep breath and tore the paper.

I need you. Follow me

She cursed and slammed the top of the desk with her palm. Badger barked. "Sorry, boy, sorry." Maggie turned to the fireplace, took a long match from the little brass container by the hearth, lit the match and held the flame to the page. When it caught, she tossed it into the ashes, where it lay for a moment, glowing and backlit, the silver going black, until the paper browned, curled and then burst into flames.