

Every home needs a little magic . . .



THE
SPELL
SHOP

SARAH BETH DURST

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*For Adam,
with love and raspberry jam*

Contents

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

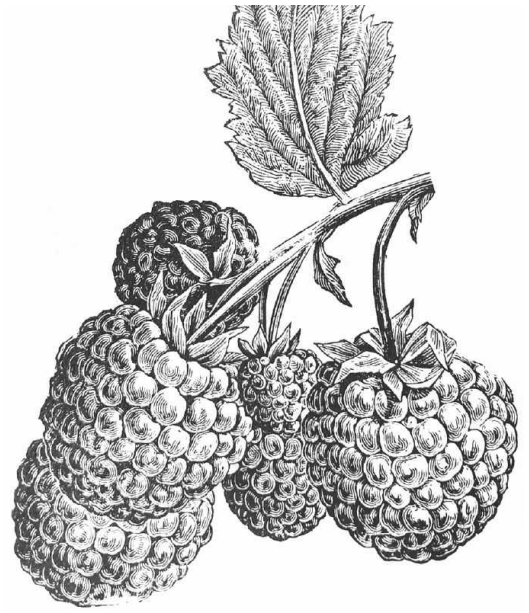
[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Five](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Six](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)



Chapter One

Kiela never thought the flames would reach the library. She was dimly aware that most of the other librarians had fled weeks ago, when the revolutionaries took the palace and defenestrated the emperor in a rather dramatic display. But surely they wouldn't touch the library. After all, there were *books* here. Highly flammable, irreplaceable books.

The Great Library of Alyssium, with its soaring spires, stained-glass windows, and labyrinthine bookshelves, was the jewel of the Crescent Islands Empire. Its hallowed stacks were filled with centuries-old treatises, histories, studies, and (most importantly, in Kiela's opinion) spellbooks. Only the elite, the *crème de la crème* of the scholars, were allowed to even view the spellbooks, as only the rarefied few were permitted, by imperial law, to use magic.

She was responsible for the spellbooks on the third floor, east wing. For the past eleven years, she'd worked, slept, ate, and lived between the shelves, which perhaps explained why, when she first smelled smoke, she thought she'd simply left toast on the cookplate.

Just to be on the safe side, earlier in the week, Kiela and her assistant Caz had begun securing some of her favorite tomes in crates and stowing them on one of the library boats, though she'd never truly believed evacuation would be necessary. Cocooned within the stacks, far away from any whiff of politics or violence, it was a pleasant game: if she were stranded on a deserted island, which books would she most want to have with her? Certainly *The Grimoire on Plantwork*, compiled in the year 357 by scholars Messembe and Cannin, as well as *The Manipulation of Weather Patterns, a Study of the Effects of Spellwork on the Breeding Habits of Eastern Puffins*, which was a fascinating and groundbreaking work that—

Caz swung by his leaves into the aisle where she sat, cross-legged, in front of a pile of books. A spider plant, he was roughly the size of a farm dog but comprised entirely of greenery, with a knot of roots holding soil at his core. He was the smartest assistant she'd ever had, though also, perhaps not coincidentally, the most anxiety-prone. "We're going to die," he informed

her, his leaves rustling so badly that it was challenging to pluck out the words.

“The fighting won’t come here,” Kiela said in the soothing voice she’d perfected after years of working in such a sacred space. She added another book to the pack-in-the-fifth-crate pile, then reconsidered and shifted it to the pack-only-if-it-fits pile.

He shook his leaves at her. “The fighting is *already* here. They’ve battered down the front door and are ransacking Kinney Hall.”

“Goodness!”

The door to Kinney Hall was a monstrosity built of brass and secured with bolts made of the sturdy lumber used for the ribs of ship hulls. She tried to calculate the amount of force required to batter down a thirty-foot door, then blinked. “Ransacking, did you say?”

She’d expected the rebels to secure the library and its treasures—that was only sensible—but *ransacking*? These were freedom fighters, not feral animals. She wasn’t even opposed to their goals. On Caz’s recommendation, she’d read a few of their pamphlets in the early days of the revolution, and the call for elections and the sharing of knowledge seemed quite appealing . . .

“The North Reading Room is on fire,” Caz said. “They lit the tapestries first, and it spread to the scrolls.”

She felt sick. All those old manuscripts!

He tugged on her sleeve with a leaf. “Come on, Kiela, we have to leave.”

Leave? Now? But she hadn’t finished—

“If you make a leave-leaf joke,” Caz warned, “I’m going without you.”

She got to her feet. The fifth crate was only half-filled. Kiela dumped an armload of books into it without even checking what the titles were—“*Enough, Kiela!*” Caz said as she went for a second armload—and then maneuvered it toward the lift. On wheels, it scooted between the shelves, and she felt a lurch in her stomach as they passed all the full shelves of beautiful, wonderful books. She snagged a few more favorites as they hurried past.

Reaching the lift, she shoved the wheeled crate inside and yanked down the gate. Caz pushed the button with a leaf and turned the crank. The lift lurched and then descended.

As they traveled between the floors, Kiela heard the sound of metal clashing on metal, and her stomach flopped. She didn’t know firsthand what a battle sounded like, but she *did* know what a library was supposed to sound

like, and all of this was terribly, horribly wrong. Caz crept closer to her, and she wished the lift would go faster.

What if it stopped on one of the floors with fighting?

What if it stopped altogether?

She pushed the sublevel button again and again, as if that would encourage it. The lift continued to inch downward with clanks and squeaks and whirrs. The stench of smoke grew stronger. Looking out through the grated gate, she saw haze shrouding the stacks.

“We should have taken the stairs,” Caz said.

“We’d have never been able to carry the books,” Kiela said.

“We won’t save any books if we’re dead.” He shook so hard that several of his leaves detached and floated to the floor. “Gah, I’m shedding!”

“You need to think about something else,” she said. “Oak trees are struck by lightning more often than any other tree. Apples can float because they are twenty-five percent air. You can count the number of cricket chirps per second to calculate the outside temperature.”

“Unless the outside is on fire,” Caz said. “How fast do they chirp if it’s all on fire?”

The lift lurched as it reached the lowest level. Kiela yanked the gate open while Caz maneuvered the crate with his tendrils. Shoving the crate outside, they exited the elevator.

This far down, water-level, she couldn’t hear the clang of metal or smell the stench of smoke. It was overwhelmed by the ripe fish odor of the canal that flowed beneath the library. All of the city of Alyssium was riddled with canals. It was part of what made it one of the world’s most beautiful cities, the jewel of the empire. Kiela remembered when she’d first arrived, very young, before her parents died, and how impressed she’d been by the sparkling canals, the lacelike white bridges, the spires, and the flowers that blossomed on every balcony, draped from every window, and framed every door. She wondered how much of the city she remembered was left.

Hurrying through the narrow stone passageway with the wheeled crate, she listened for any other movement. But all she heard was the slosh of water against stone and the drip-drip-drip of a leak somewhere nearby. Ahead were the boats.

Anchored in slips beneath the library, the boats were used to transport books to and from select patrons on nearby islands. Each had silver sails, tied tight around its boom, and a black-cherry hull wide enough to transport

multiple crates of books but sleek enough to be sailed by a single librarian. She herself had used one just last winter to deliver a full set of scholar Cypavia's *Examinations of the Function of Forest Spirits in Fact and Fiction* to a bedridden emeritus sorcerer. He'd had his housekeeper offer her a cup of tea as thanks, but she'd declined, wanting to hurry back to the comfort of her stacks. *At least those books are safe.* That was only a slight consolation, though, compared to the wealth of knowledge in peril above her.

She'd already filled her boat with the first four crates of books, secured beneath a tarp. Maneuvering the half-filled fifth crate onto the boat, she strapped it in. There was room for at least three more crates, but there wasn't time to fetch them. She wished she'd sorted books faster. Or been less picky. She wished she'd packed more provisions. She'd stowed a few jugs of water, as well as jars of preserved peaches, a bag of dried beans, and a sack of pecans. For Caz, she had a tub of fresh soil that he could replenish himself in, and she'd also hidden a couple changes of clothes for herself, as well as a few blank notebooks just in case. But she hadn't emptied her cubicle in the library of her personal items. She thought wistfully of all she'd left—her old journals, her best quill set, a wooden carving in the shape of a mermaid that her parents had given her when she was a child. But Caz was right: better to save themselves. And the books.

We'll come back when it's safe, she thought. *This is just temporary.*

Climbing into the boat, Kiela untied the line and pushed off. She pulled out the pole for navigating the watery tunnels. The sails were wrapped up around the boom. They'd stay down until they reached the open water.

She wasn't technically supposed to take the boat. Or the books. Or Caz. But there had been no one left to ask, and she reassured herself that they'd thank her later, when she returned. It wasn't theft. It was her job: taking care of the collection. *I'm just . . . broadening the definition.*

She poled through the tunnels until they flowed out into the open canals of the city.

"Well, this is absolutely horrible," Caz said.

Kiela had to agree.

The stars were blotted out by the smoke that rose from the bridges and spires. The flames cast everything in a ghoulish light, and the sour taste of the smoke coated the back of her throat. She felt it invading her lungs with each breath. Her sky-blue skin looked sickly in the unnatural light, and her dark blue hair soaked up the scent of smoke. Down on the canals, Kiela and Caz

were free from the worst of it, but they weren't free from the sights and sounds of death.

Later, she'd block out most of that horrible night: the screams, the corpses in the canals, the fear that choked her worse than the smoke. The trip through the canals felt endless, and the sounds traveled across the water even as they broke into the open sea.

With Caz's help, Kiela raised the silver sails once the water was too deep for the pole. She'd learned how to sail as a small child and had delivered enough books scattered over the years to stay in practice, so she thankfully didn't have to think to perform the tasks. Her hands remembered what to do, how to catch the wind in the canvas, how to speed away, away, away.

Behind them, the great city burned, with its people (both good and bad) and its history (both good and bad) and its books and its flowers. And she knew she wasn't coming back.

As the sun rose over the sea, all pink and yellow and hopeful, Kiela resolved to look forward, not backward. There was no one in Alyssium who'd miss her—which was a depressing thought in and of itself. Really, no one?

Absorbed in her work, she hadn't left the library for anything but the occasional book delivery in . . . Had it been years? Yes, years. After she'd finished school, she'd simply moved directly into a cubicle sandwiched between the stacks. It had been simpler that way. She hadn't had to waste any time traveling to and from her work.

She had no family in the city, and she'd lost track of her classmates—they'd drifted off into their lives, and she'd fallen into the routine of hers. All her meals were delivered, prepared fresh at any hour. Scholars often kept odd hours, and therefore so did librarians. She merely had to send a request down the chute, and everything would arrive via lift in a timely manner. No interaction with anyone required. She'd considered it the perfect system.

The other librarians . . . They had their own work on other floors and in other wings. Kiela never liked to disturb anyone, and she had gently—so gently that she hadn't even realized she was doing it—discouraged others from disturbing hers. As the sailboat bounced over the waves, she realized she hadn't even spoken to another soul besides Caz in three weeks. The last person she'd talked to was a janitor whom she'd shooed away for stirring up dust near some particularly fragile manuscripts.

It wasn't that she didn't like people. It was only that she liked books more. They didn't fuss or judge or mock or reject. They invited you in, fluffed up the pillows on the couch, offered you tea and toast, and shared their hearts with no expectation that you'd do anything more than absorb what they had to give.

All of which was very lovely, but it left her in a bit of a quandary: where to go, now that her old life had quite literally burned down. "Caz . . ." she began.

"Mmm," he said, muffled.

She glanced across the boat to see he'd wedged himself between two of the crates and had wound his leaves tight around his root ball. "Caz, what are you doing?"

"Fish eat plants," he said.

"Some fish, yes." She wasn't overly familiar with the dietary preferences of fish. She knew there were fish who liked kelp. She supposed they ate plankton too. Also, insects? "Some fish eat other fish."

"Who eat plants?"

"I suppose so."

"Everything eats plants," Caz said. "But barely anything eats books. That's why I'm positioning myself between the crates. No one will think of looking for a fresh, tasty morsel of green next to so many dead trees. So I am just going to stay here, with the books, until we get to wherever we're going, which I hope won't have fish, sheep, cows, or goats." He shuddered at the word "goats," and Kiela wondered if he'd had a bad experience with a goat or had just read about them. *Most likely the latter*. Livestock wasn't permitted in the Great Library, for obvious reasons.

"That is what I wanted to talk to you about," Kiela said. "We need a destination."

"You . . . didn't plan that out?"

"I didn't think we'd really have to leave," she admitted. "Or I thought, if we did, it would be just for a few hours or days. A week at most." She'd thought they could rent a slip in a harbor at one of the nearby islands, perhaps Varsun or Iva, and stay for a couple days at one of the charming inns where the lesser nobles liked to vacation.

Caz sagged, his leaves drooping as if they'd never tasted water. "So did I."

They sailed silently. It was a gloriously beautiful day for a sail. Light breeze. Cheerful lemon light flashing on the water. Seagulls flew overhead,

cawing to one another. The many islands of the Crescent Islands Empire—if it was an empire anymore, thanks to the revolutionaries—looked peaceful from the distance, if you didn't look back to where smoke still stained the sky over the capital city. The islands' gray, white, and black cliffs were majestic, and the sweet little fishing villages looked quaint, with their brightly painted houses, cheerful gardens, and cobblestone streets. She and Caz could sail into one of their harbors and then—do what? She couldn't afford an inn for more than a couple days. The coins that Kiela had brought with her wouldn't go far. Even if she could pay the harbor fees, she didn't relish living on the boat, day in and day out.

She resolved not to panic. She'd think as she sailed. And an answer would come to her.

Across the water, she saw a herd of merhorses rise and fall with the waves. Her breath caught in her throat. Half horse and half fish, they were a magnificent sight. She watched, mesmerized, as they cantered through the water. Their hooves crashed through the waves as their powerful fish tails propelled them forward. Covered in jewellike scales and made of solid muscle, they were the living embodiment of both beauty and strength. *Like the sea itself*, Kiela thought. One of them tossed its mane, and droplets sprayed up and caught the light—a flash of rainbow.

"Caltrey," Kiela said.

"Excuse me?"

"It's an island."

"I've never heard of it."

"I'd be surprised if you had," Kiela said. "It's tiny and remote. Far to the north. It doesn't fall on any of the shipping lanes. The locals herd merhorses to aid with their fishing."

Curious, Caz lifted himself up between the crates and perched on one to look out across the ocean. "Why do you know about it? Oh, don't tell me—you read about it."

"Actually, no. It's where I was born." She heard a hitch in her voice, and she swallowed hard. She hadn't thought about Caltrey in years—she didn't know why just thinking of returning would make her feel so jumbled.

Her parents had left as soon as they could afford it, to seek a better life in the capital city—they'd wanted to experience life in Alyssium, and they'd wanted Kiela to have the kind of opportunities they, growing up on a remote island, never had. She'd been barely nine years old at the time, but she still

remembered the island with its cliffs and farms and gardens. The sole village on the island, also called Caltrey, was three cobblestone streets wide with a mill by a waterfall and a school that was housed in an old barn. She remembered the way it looked at sunset, with the island's winged cats perched on the rooftops, and the way it smelled at dawn of fresh-baked bread. In spring, wildflowers sprouted everywhere—the roofs, the cliffs, the fields. In winter, snow blanketed everything in thick white fluff. She used to drink hot milk with chocolate mixed in and watch the snow fall on the sea—

“Uh, Kiela?” Caz prodded.

“I think . . . I have a house there.” She knew her parents hadn't sold it. So far from the heart of the empire, it wouldn't have sold for much, and Kiela's father had wanted to hold on to it, in case they decided to retire there after they'd had their fill of city life, though Kiela's mother had loved the city too much to ever want to return. *I suppose that means I inherited it.* Certainly there was no one else who could have. She had no other family. “If no one has moved in. And if it hasn't fallen down. It's small. Just a cottage. But . . .” It was beautiful. At least it was beautiful in her mind, preserved in her memory as lovely and fragile as a soap bubble. Now, it was probably infested with bats, mice, and bears, and the roof had most likely caved in. “I just never expected to go back there.” *At least not without them.*

“Is it nice?”

“Very. I think. It could have changed.” *I've changed.* She'd lost her magenta freckles and the blue pigtails years ago, and she'd gained an advanced degree in library studies and a host of antisocial tendencies.

“Okay then,” Caz said. “Let's go to your island.”

Catching the wind, she steered the boat north.

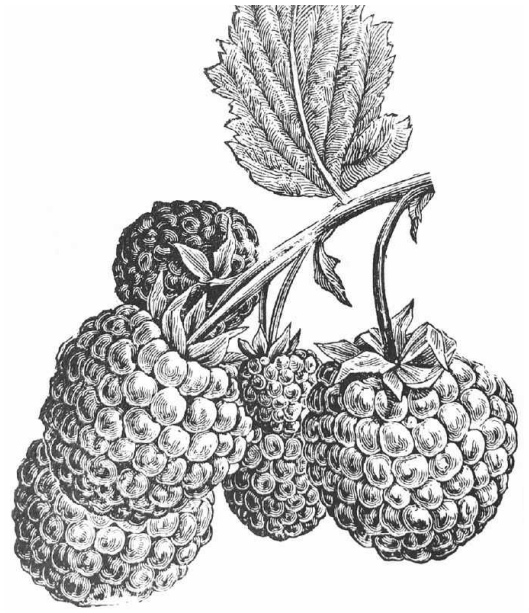
“Just to be clear—they don't have goats, do they?”

“I am sure there are no animals anywhere on Caltrey that eat plants,” Kiela said, as they picked up speed. The boat bounced over the waves.

“Excellent! Wait, are you just saying that to make me feel better?”

“Yes,” she said.

Grumbling, he squished himself back between the crates of spellbooks as they sailed northward, toward their future and her past.



Chapter Two

As the sun stained the horizon orange, Kiela sailed toward a little cove on the island of Caltrey. It was just a mile east of the village and its harbor, tucked behind a veil of rocks and trees. She aimed the boat between the rocks.

“You’re going to crash,” Caz observed.

“I’m not going to crash,” Kiela said. “I’m going to dock.”

Inside the cove, there used to be a wooden dock that belonged to her family’s cottage. She remembered she used to squat on the end and watch the fish dance in the water. At low tide, she’d be able to see crabs scuttling over the rocks, and at high tide, merbabies would swim around the dock posts, before they were called out to sea by their parents—a sighting that locals said was good luck. She wasn’t, of course, entirely certain the dock would still be standing, but she supposed she could drop anchor and they could wade to shore. Or she could just beach the boat, provided she could avoid slicing the hull on the rocks.

One hand on the rudder, she guided the sailboat around the rocks and into the cove. Caz clambered up the mast, using his tendrils to climb, for a better view. With the light so low in the sky, the cove was coated in shadows. The water looked near black, and the trees, with the rocky cliffs behind them, cast even more shadows. It was silent, except for the lapping of the waves on the rocky shore and the call of an unseen bird from one of the pine trees. But despite the shadows, it didn’t feel unwelcoming. As they drifted deeper into the cove, it felt as if the shadows were embracing them, in the same way that a thick nest of blankets did on a chilly night.

Kiela spotted the old dock, right where it was supposed to be. It was more rickety than she remembered, though. About a third of the slats were missing, like the smile of an old man who’d lost some of his teeth. Luckily the posts were there, sturdy but coated in seaweed.

Using the pole, she sidled the boat up next to the dock and tossed a line around a post. Yanking on the line, she dragged them closer and tied a bowline knot. She remembered her mother teaching her how to make this exact knot on this very same dock. It felt both like just yesterday and a

lifetime ago. She shook her head to chase the memory away. Clambering over the crates, Kiela pulled the sail down and wrapped it tight against the boom.

Caz was perched on one of the book crates. "I am *not* walking on that."

"You'd rather swim?"

"I'd rather stay on the boat," he said.

Kiela sighed and rubbed her eyes. She'd never felt this bone-marrow-deep tired before. Even when she stayed up all night with her books, it was never like this. Between the stress of their escape and the effort of their night-and-all-day sail, she felt like a book so well read that its pages curled and spine cracked. "I can carry you."

He was quiet for a moment, then he said, "That's undignified."

"You think the shrubbery is going to mock you?"

If he'd had eyes, she expected he would have rolled them at her. "Fine. Carry me. But only if you tell no one."

"Who am I going to tell? I don't know anyone here and don't want to." She scooped him up, careful to gather all the soil that clung to his exposed roots. It felt like holding a very plump and very leafy toddler. His tendrils draped over her shoulders, and he grumbled as she adjusted her grip. "We're going to lay low, keep to ourselves, and avoid trouble," she said. "With luck, none of the locals will even know we're here."

Kiela tapped the nearest slat of wood with her toes. It seemed sound enough. Cautiously, she shifted her weight and was pleased when the dock held. Caz's leaves flattened around her back. She carried him carefully as she stepped from slat to slat, testing each one before she trusted it. At last, she reached the shore.

He climbed down from her arms to the ground. Shaking out his leaves, he groomed himself with a tendril. He looked a bit like a cat licking his fur. "We won't ever speak of that again."

"Of course," she agreed.

She looked up at the knot of greenery in front of them. There used to be a path, with stairs carved into the rocks, but all she could see was a tangle of vines cascading down the hill. Frowning at it, she paced in front of the green. The stone steps should still be there, if she could find—Ah, there!

Kicking away a few vines, Kiela uncovered the first step. "Found it."

"Found what?" Caz asked.

"The way home." She felt the word vibrate through her.

Step by step, she climbed, with Caz behind her, clearing the steps as best she could. Some, she was only able to uncover a few inches, but it was enough. By the time she reached the top, the sun was completely down.

Bathed in the silvery gray of twilight, the cottage waited for them. She wanted to feel as if they'd made it—she was home, they were safe, and everything would be easy from now on. But the cottage was nearly as enveloped in vines as the stairs. She couldn't tell where the walls ended and the green began. Her former home looked one gulp away from being swallowed entirely.

"It's nice," Caz said.

"Now who's lying," Kiela said.

"It has a roof. And walls."

He was right about that. It could be worse.

An owl hooted much too close, and Kiela jumped. Caz skittered behind her. She forced herself to breathe and calm down. It didn't look as if anyone was living in the house, which was good. She could have come back to find squatters. Or new owners, if the locals had decided there were no more living relatives who might return to claim it. She couldn't vouch for how many mice, birds, or other critters had taken up residence inside.

She wished they'd arrived earlier so it wouldn't look so dark in there.

"Should we go in?" Caz asked.

Yes. Maybe. No. She wanted to retreat to the boat, sail back to Alyssium, and sequester herself in her nice, warm, safe cubicle deep within the stacks of books, where she knew what to expect out of every night and every day. If she went into this house, what would she find? And if she didn't, what would happen then? She hated not knowing which was the right choice.

Have I made a terrible mistake coming here?

The owl hooted again.

"We go in," Kiela said.

They approached the front door. It felt like walking up to the mouth of a slumbering beast. It was ajar, with dead leaves clogging the entranceway. She nudged them out of her way with her foot and leaned against the door to push it open farther. It squeaked loudly, as if it hadn't been moved in years, which was entirely possible.

Stepping inside, Kiela waited for her eyes to adjust. The last gasps of day shed a grayish light through the few windows that weren't blocked by vines. It was enough to see shapes: chairs, she guessed, and a table. She matched the

shadows to her memories and was surprised to find that it felt familiar, like a half-remembered old tale. The wood-burning stove was . . . ahh, yes, *there*, squatting like a hulking creature, with a chimney rising from its back. A daybed used to be in the front corner—that’s where she used to sleep—and her parents’ bedroom budded off the back. A kitchen area with a sink and a window that overlooked the back garden should be to her left, beyond the table. She couldn’t see that in the darkness, though, and it made her feel like she’d walked into a surreal kind of dream, with pieces of memories overlaid by shadows. She wondered how Caz felt about this place. “If you’d rather, we could spend the night in the boat, and explore this in the morning,” she offered.

“Sleep on the boat?” Caz sounded appalled. “With fish under us?”

“You really have a thing about fish,” she said. “I had no idea.”

“You hear stories,” he said darkly.

“Do you? Do you really?” She navigated across the room, leaves crunching underfoot, and found the daybed, exactly where she remembered it. It seemed smaller, though. And dustier. Lifting the quilt, she shook it, and twigs, leaves, and dust flew into the air. She coughed.

Setting the quilt aside in a heap, she pushed her hands against the mattress. It hadn’t disintegrated, which was a plus. She supposed it would hold her, and under where the quilt had lain, it wasn’t that dusty, at least in comparison. It wasn’t as if, after sailing through the night and all day, she was particularly clean anyway.

“Hey, there’s a hole in the floor,” Caz said, pleased. “I can root here for the night.”

Could she sleep here? After their escape and long sail, she should be able to sleep anywhere. *If mice or raccoons or whatever murder me in the night, at least I’ll get some rest.* Gingerly, she lay down on the little bed. It creaked but didn’t collapse. The quilt was the velvety soft of worn cotton, and the mattress cradled her as she sank into it. It smelled like dust and a little like roses. She felt her neck and shoulders begin to unknot.

Outside, the owl hooted softly.

As dawn pried its fingers into the vine-covered cottage, Kiela opened her eyes. And screamed when she saw a man standing in the doorway with a scythe in his hands. She tried to jump to her feet, but the little daybed

couldn't handle the quick movement. It toppled over, and she spilled onto the floor.

The man rushed forward.

Kiela screamed again.

He backpedaled. Leaned his scythe against the wall. Held up his hands, palms out. "Sorry. Very sorry. I didn't mean to startle you." He had a deep voice, soothing. She'd never seen him before, which wasn't a surprise since she hadn't been here in ages. He wasn't what she'd call handsome, but he didn't look like a murderer either. Not that she knew what that would look like. He was tall, which wasn't an argument for or against murderer. He must have had to duck through the doorframe. He also appeared stronger than the average library-goer. Judging by his arms, he looked as if he could pick up one of her book crates one-handed. Or crush her throat with his pinkie. None of that was at all reassuring.

She got to her feet and scanned the cottage quickly. She didn't see the spider plant anywhere, and she felt panic rise up from her stomach. "Caz? Caz, are you okay? Did he hurt you?"

Hands still out, the man said in the same soft, deep tone, "I didn't hurt anyone. Or see anyone else. There was only you here when I came in."

Her heart was thumping wildly in her rib cage, even though he hadn't made any threatening moves beyond coming into the place where she was sleeping and scaring her half to death. It was terrifying enough that he was large, male, and here. *And I don't see Caz.* "Why are you here?" she demanded, trying (and failing) to keep the shake out of her voice. "Who are you? What do you want?"

Mildly, he said, "I had planned to ask you the same questions. This house has been abandoned for years, but that doesn't mean it isn't someone's home."

"It's mine," Kiela said. "My home. It was. Is."

"Ah," he said.

He waited for her to explain further.

"My name is Kiela Orobidan. My parents lived here, and my mother's parents before them. I was born here. We moved away when I was eight. Nine. But they never sold their cottage. It's mine."

"Ah."

He wasn't going to say more than that?

She saw a hint of movement out of the corner of her eye and glanced up at