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The Brunnolf Tradition

A THESIS

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By

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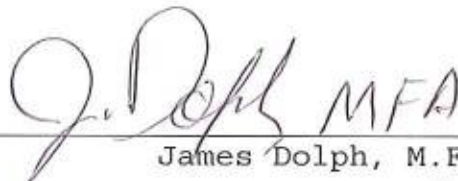
April 18, 2012

The Brunnolf Tradition

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The Brunnolf Tradition

PROLOGUE

A full moon rose large and yellow over the hills, reflecting luminous rays of dampened light onto the golden autumn leaves, but the old man's heavy eyes could not witness the majestic scene. With each shallow breath he felt the ground whirl beneath him. He tried to focus his thoughts, to remember how he had ended up under the black, open sky. Then he slid downward, coming to rest on a hard, cold surface.

A figure leaned over him, blotting out the moonlight that shined into the gloomy chasm. Beyond the murky memories of a needle puncturing his skin, he recognized the face that frowned at him. An overwhelming rush of panic flooded his tired heart as he recalled their argument.

"It won't work," the old man stated with as firm a voice as he could muster. His surge of adrenaline struggled against the desire to sleep. "It won't work!"

The familiar figure walked away and the old man observed the double-peaked mountain swaying in the distance beneath the stars. Then a door slammed over him, snuffing out the moon, and he heard a chain rattle. He tried to reach up and test the door's strength, but his arms were too heavy.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"Don't do it!" he shouted. The reality of what was happening settled over him. His captor gave no response outside. "Don't you dare leave me here!"

But it was too late. He knew he was alone.

Lying there on the cold floor, he steadied his breathing, which his sudden exhaustion made easy. Closing his eyes, he meditated on a sweet child's face, with a mouth shaped just like her mother's. He imagined her surrounded by light, and his heart ached in his chest. So many years had passed since he had kissed her soft, infant hair and whispered goodbye.

"Protect her," he uttered to the darkness. "Keep her safe."

In return for his plea, the darkness swept him away.

CHAPTER ONE

October had brought worthwhile relief to the sweltering summer in Houston, even though the falling temperature had settled at a balmy eighty-four degrees. It had dipped just enough to seduce all varieties of motorcyclists onto the congested roads, yearning for the open highways outside the city limits.

A troop of nine leather-clad bikers roared past her open window while the old Chevy truck waited at a red light. Natalie, who would have grinned and tried to identify their bikes the month before, instead looked away with a troubled frown. Sitting in the driver's seat, Earl gave her a sympathetic pat on the shoulder. The gesture failed to comfort her.

The Chevy pulled into a small lot in front of a working garage. Along the top of the building hung red, blocky letters spelling "Irving's Auto Care." Once Earl had parked, Natalie glanced back at the open garage doors, where a couple of mechanics, whom she recognized as Vince and Timmy, had stepped out to wait for them. Her stomach twisted and she worried that she might be sick.

Earl must have observed the color drain from her face, for he murmured, "We can come back tomorrow, if you want."

The Brunnolf Tradition

She tried to swallow down the dry lump in her throat. Her tongue felt like sandpaper. "No," she managed to say. After a deep breath, she added, "I'm all right."

With a nod, Earl said, "Whenever you're ready," and leaned back in his seat, draping his tattooed arm out the open window.

A burly man dressed in denim with silver stubble on his cheeks, Earl had worked for Natalie's father in the garage since it opened nineteen years ago, just after her birth. Growing up without any relatives, Natalie had decided to adopt him as her uncle. Earl's wife, Donna, had also become a loving aunt of sorts, baking Natalie cakes on her birthday and taking her shopping on the rare occasions that Natalie indulged her.

She could not imagine how she would have gotten by without their generosity over the past few weeks.

Taking another deep breath, Natalie opened the door and stepped down from the truck. Earl put his arm around her shoulders as they walked toward the garage.

"Morning, Tim, Vince," he greeted the two mechanics waiting for them.

They mumbled responses, but their gazes were fixed on Natalie.

"Are you coming back?" Timmy asked.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Natalie forced a smile. "Yeah, eventually." Shifting on her feet, she said, "I just came to... to pick up some stuff."

"Let us know if you need anything," Vince said.

Earl ushered her past a Ford sedan. Across the shop, Conrad worked on a Honda Shadow mounted on a bike stand. He waved at her and she nodded. Behind him she could see her own Triumph Bonneville, and she hurried into the office.

Paperwork smudged with black fingerprints hung from pins all over the walls. Her father's system of organization would have frightened the customers, but it had proved effective over the years. Instead of thumbing through files and stacks of paper, they simply had to look around the room, rather handy in a profession relying on dirty fingers.

Her father's desk, however, had been cleared of its usual clutter of coffee cups, tools, and candy wrappers. The sight instilled a sinking emptiness in her heart.

"I think I've rounded up most of it," Earl said, picking up a packed cardboard box and setting it on the desk. "But you look around and take your time."

He closed the office door to give her some privacy.

For a few moments she simply stood there listening to the electric whine of drills, her coworkers shouting to one

The Brunnolf Tradition

another in the garage as they moved on with their day. Then she brushed her fingers through her short dark hair and approached the desk.

Her father's thick bomber jacket with wool lining lay bundled at the top of the box. He had worn it often during his winter rides; rain and snow never stopped him from taking his favorite Harley Heritage all over Texas. Lifting up the jacket, Natalie pressed her face against the inside of the collar. The mixed scent of leather and her father's aftershave transported her back to her first ride, when she had grinned and hugged him tightly as they sped along fields of wheat in the countryside.

Tears pinched the back of her eyes and she sat down in her father's chair. She could recall only two times in her life when she had wept. The first had been when her father took their dog, a German Shepherd named Sandy, to the vet to put her down. The second happened when Natalie's first boyfriend had broken up with her, just two days after she finished helping him restore his '69 Mustang.

Her father had been tempted to drag the idiot around town behind his Harley that day.

Perhaps the tears exhausted in the past month had been for all those other days she had choked them down, but now she simply could not tolerate them. They were unproductive.

The Brunnolf Tradition

She folded the leather jacket and returned it to the box, which she hefted into her arms. Then she left the office without a backward glance.

A warm breeze through the open garage doors stirred the familiar scent of motor oil and chemical cleaner in the air. She made a customary scan of the garage, noting the make and model of each vehicle. Vince leaned over the open hood of the gold Ford sedan, muttering under his breath.

With an automatic gesture, Natalie reached out to touch the metal frame. Images fluttered in succession through her mind: oil level, grimy pistons, firm brake pads... Then her vision paused on the alternator. The rotor and stator appeared clear and intact, but it did not produce as much charge as it should. She opened her eyes after catching the hint of a groove in one of the slip rings, as though it had physically grazed under her fingers.

"Problem with the alternator?" she said lightly.

Vince glanced at her. "Yeah. I changed the belt and the wiring."

"Check the brushes and slip rings. They might be worn down."

"More rookie's luck, huh?" he said with a smirk.

Natalie did not smile back as she turned away.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Since she had started working at the garage during high school, the guys often liked to peg her with "rookie's luck." She had never explained her peculiar ability to anyone, mostly because she did not fully understand it herself. Sometimes, if a tow truck brought in a vehicle from an accident, she could even look beyond the car's mechanics and predict how the damage had occurred.

It had been unsettling at first, but then she used the strange sixth sense to supplement her skills, and her father had been proud...

She stepped away from the car as Vince began taking out the alternator, and she shifted the box's weight in her arms. Earl and Conrad stood at the other end of the garage, talking quietly with arms crossed. When he saw her, Earl loped toward her with Conrad trailing behind.

"Sure you got everything?" Earl asked, taking the box from her.

Natalie nodded. She had not finished looking through the box's contents, but she trusted him.

Conrad's long hair needed washing and his hands were smudged with oil and grease. Bags drooped under his eyes, and Natalie knew he must have been swamped with work, being the only mechanic there who knew his way around a motorcycle besides her and her father.

The Brunnolf Tradition

He jerked his thumb over his shoulder toward the red Triumph parked in the back of the shop. "Fixed up the Bonnie for you," he said. "She didn't need much, just a bit of paint."

Natalie did not look at it and muttered, "Thanks."

Withdrawing the key from his pocket, he asked, "You want to take her home?"

Both Earl and Conrad watched her expectantly. She caught Timmy glancing sideways at her as he checked the tire pressure of a car nearby. Clearly they all wondered if she would ever pluck up the nerve to ride again.

Natalie snatched the Triumph key from him and stuffed it in her pocket. "I don't have my helmet," she murmured. Even in the pleasant sunlight her teeth chattered, and she wrestled with the urge to run. "I'll get it later."

Averting her eyes, she reclaimed the box of her father's belongings from Earl and marched out to the Chevy truck. So many feelings boiled in her mind that she could not sort them all out, nor did she want to. It was easier to ignore them for now, at least until she could be alone and safely hidden in the dark.

She never allowed anyone to see her crumble.

Sliding the cardboard box across the leather seat, Natalie plopped down beside it and slammed the door. Just

The Brunnolf Tradition

as Earl climbed into the driver's seat beside her, Natalie realized she was pouting and turned her face away from him. She felt like such a child--a miserable urchin on the street that people grieved over even as they walked on by. After finishing school last summer and working in the shop full-time, she had been pleased with her apparent easeful transition into adulthood.

But in a few swift, sickening seconds on a sunny afternoon, that illusion had been smeared across the pavement.

The old truck's rebuilt engine rumbled to life, and they headed for home. Being a kind and patient man, Earl waited several minutes to let her compose her thoughts, and then he said, "It's natural to be scared after what you've been through--"

"I'm not scared," she stated flatly. Then she struggled to figure out what she *did* feel. "There's just... too many memories with that bike. I can't deal with it, not yet."

He turned the steering wheel, guiding them around a corner. "You know, he's not really gone," he said, his voice as deep and soft as the sympathy his words expressed. "He's still with us, and he still loves you."

The Brunnolf Tradition

Natalie faced him at last, her gaze cool and direct. "Do you know the last thing he said to me?" she uttered. "He said, 'Don't go to Colorado.' He thought I was my mother. They met in Colorado when they were teenagers. He was afraid that I--she--was going to leave him."

When Earl glanced at her, she could see the uncertainty in his eyes.

Leaning back in the seat, Natalie stared at the Houston skyline through the open window. The pallor of her father's skin, the daze in his eyes, all of his thinning blond hair shaved off and covered by a thick white bandage... That last image of him burned as hot as tears in her chest, and she would have done anything to scour it away.

"They told me they probably wouldn't be able to wake him up again," she whispered, "so I knew it would be the last time..." Her lip trembled, and she bit it stubbornly before continuing. "I knew it was the last time I could tell him I loved him... And he didn't even know who I was."

"Natalie..." Earl murmured, but it seemed he had finally run out of comforting words.

Part of her was relieved. Another part, hidden deep inside, began to wither.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Since the funeral she had been staying with Earl and Donna in their small apartment, sleeping on the couch. The expenses of the hospital and the final services had wiped out everything from her father's savings. Natalie had been forced to put their house on the market, though she did not expect it to sell fast in the poor state of the economy. Her father's Dodge truck, which he had purchased just the year before, had been the first thing to go, and from that she was able to scrape by. Earl and Donna insisted they were eager to help, but Natalie felt like a burden to them.

Later that evening, she lay on the couch wrapped in her father's bomber jacket, not caring that it was too warm. She could not smell what lingered of him anymore, her nose stuffy from the recent tears she had finally succumbed to in defeat. For several minutes she had tried to relax and steady her breathing, just so she could catch a whiff of him again and relish in the memories that came with it.

How she missed him! She missed the funny way he slurped his coffee, his bursting laughs at silly TV commercials, those days he had picked her up from school on his Harley while the other kids gawked with envy. As tightly as she clung to those moments, just as she clutched the bomber jacket around her shoulders, part of her felt

The Brunnolf Tradition

like they had never happened, like it had all been a dream, because he was gone now... Gone forever...

Her tired, puffy eyes could not find sleep. Each night she tossed and turned, resting for only minutes at a time before a sinking sorrow plunged her into consciousness again. There in the quiet darkness, the loneliness peaked. A sudden dread would twist in the pit of her stomach, and she became aware of how tiny her existence measured in the universe.

Death was infinite. Eternity, immense...

She plummeted through a night sky. Cold wind whipped against her skin and caused her eyes to water. Through the roar rushing past her ears, she thought she heard a woman's voice.

It was her mother, calling for her somewhere in the hazy distance. A desperate longing gained intensity in her soul as she tumbled through the clouds. On the ghostly horizon she could distinguish an imposing mountain, its two snowy peaks shining in the silvery starlight.

Beyond all reason, she wanted nothing more than to crash into that mountain and bury herself in its heart. What was this overwhelming sense that had enveloped her like a mother's embrace? So soft, safe, and accepting...

Home.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"NO!"

The man's declaration jerked Natalie back so hard that she flew off the couch and landed on the floor with a bang. Heart pounding, she stared up at the white popcorn ceiling. Shapes swirled in it as she wondered whether she was awake or asleep.

After a minute, she managed to relax, and she sat up slowly. Sweat beaded on her brow. She pulled off her father's leather jacket and laid it aside, relieved as the air conditioner kicked into power at the same time. Her hands trembled as she listened to Earl's soft snores emitting from the bedroom.

If he was asleep, whose voice had woken her?

Then there was a crash in the next room and Natalie leapt to her feet in terror. Her body rigid in preparation, she held her breath and listened for any noise, but it was quiet. If there was an intruder, she could easily scream and wake Earl and Donna for help. As her mind raced through the various places where she might find a weapon, Natalie tiptoed to the edge of the living room and peeked into the kitchen.

She flipped on the light.

No one was there.

The Brunnolf Tradition

On the floor lay shattered glass next to the broken frame of a photograph. She had set down the box of her father's belongings from the garage on the counter, intending to deal with it later. Had Earl or Donna taken out the picture earlier? Perhaps the setting had been uneven, causing it to fall.

Convincing herself that must have been the case, Natalie knelt down and picked up the ruined frame. It was a photograph of her mother, Adrienne, who had died when Natalie was born. The photo had been taken while her mother was pregnant, sitting in the passenger seat of a car with her hand over her extended abdomen, her gaze lost in thought. She had dark hair as well, and the likeness of their mouths and cheeks struck Natalie breathless.

She had never seen the picture before and wondered if her father had stashed it away in some locked drawer. He had spoken of her mother rarely. On the occasions he tried to divulge a memory, there had been so much pain in his eyes that Natalie had stopped asking about her just to spare him.

The dream recurred to her of hearing her mother's indistinct voice in those faraway mountains. Natalie was not sure how she knew it had been her mother calling, and

The Brunnolf Tradition

she frowned at the curious coincidence that the picture had broken at the precise moment that it did.

She set the frame on the counter and peered into the box from the garage. There were a few more photographs inside, but none of her mother. Tucked away at the bottom she found a pocketknife. It was about five inches long, the white handle appearing to be made from antler. Someone had burned an image onto it of a stag standing before a double-peaked mountain.

With a start, she examined the craftsmanship closer. The mountain was precisely like the one in her dream! Could the knife have been made in Colorado, where her parents met?

Her palm cradled this sudden treasure of her parents' mysterious past until she felt the grief of their absence threatening to swell up and drag her through the undertow once again. A little shaken, she set the knife down and proceeded to sweep up the shards of glass on the floor.

"Are you okay?"

Natalie jumped and spun around. She sighed when she found Donna in the doorway, squinting sleepily in the light.

"Sorry," Donna said. "Didn't mean to sneak up on you."

The Brunnolf Tradition

"I'm fine," Natalie answered and dumped the glass into the trash. "I think this picture fell over and broke. Did you take it out of the box?"

Donna picked up the photo and brushed back her messy hair. She shook her head. "No, I've never seen it before. Is this your mother?" With a glance at her, she smiled and said, "Of course it is. You look just like her." She offered the picture back to Natalie. "We can find a new frame for it tomorrow, if you want."

"Maybe," Natalie murmured.

She stared at the image of her mother, wondering if she had been at all like Donna. Earl's wife was the closest model to a mother Natalie had. Her father had anxiously handed off some maternal duties to her, but Natalie found she had much more in common with him at the end of the day. She preferred spending her afternoons at the garage talking about motorcycles rather than struggling to find a topic of interest with Donna besides the weather.

Nevertheless, Donna was a sweet woman, and she had let Natalie cry on her shoulder numerous times without ever saying word to anyone about it.

After making sure she did not need any help, Donna returned to bed. Once she was gone, Natalie sat on the couch with her mother's picture and her father's

The Brunnolf Tradition

pocketknife. Unfolding the blade, she found it to be wider than she anticipated, and very sharp. She tucked the tip under the clasps on the back of the frame, bending them out so she could remove the picture.

More photographs had been hidden behind her mother's. Natalie spread them on the sofa cushion beside her. The first to catch her instant attention showed her father holding her as a baby with an older man at his side. Seeing his face brought back all the memories and the feelings, postponing her survey of the other pictures as she fought the tightness in her chest. She harbored the photo in her hand until curiosity for the second man in the scene drove the tears aside.

Another picture showed her pregnant mother standing with the older man by a willow tree. He had salt-and-pepper hair and a trimmed beard. In a third photograph, the same man, though a few years younger and with blacker hair, stood with her mother, then only a little girl, on a riverbank with fishing poles in their hands. Mountains towered on the horizon behind them.

She flipped each of the photos over, but only the last was lucky enough to have words penciled on the back in neat, cursive handwriting: "*Richard and Willow Browne. Crystal River, CO. 1974.*"

The Brunnolf Tradition

Natalie's stomach dropped.

Who was Willow? She had been certain the girl in the picture was her mother. Then she looked again at the photo of the man named Richard and her pregnant mother standing by a willow tree.

Had Willow been her mother's nickname? Had she changed her name? Natalie's father had always called her Adrienne...

She thought again of her father lying in the hospital bed, pleading with her not to go to Colorado. Natalie had promised him she wouldn't, though it had never soothed him. Once more she examined the photo of him holding her as an infant. Richard had his arm around her father's shoulders.

This man, who was pictured with her mother at such a young age and also present at the time of Natalie's birth... He must have been her grandfather. She considered there could be other explanations, but somehow the revelation settled deep in the pit of her stomach, a cold, hard stone of truth that she simply could not deny.

Natalie sat at the old computer in the corner of the living room. She waited anxiously as it started up, frustrated that Earl had not updated to a newer and faster model, until she was finally able to open an Internet page.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Selecting a search engine, she typed in "Richard Browne, Colorado" and punched "Enter."

The first several results were from the University of Colorado website. She clicked on one that opened a page listing faculty information. Dr. Richard Browne was labeled a "professor emeritus" under History. It also provided an e-mail address to reach him.

Her heart somersaulted in her chest. She had assumed that, since she had never heard of him, he had passed away. But there he was, alive, in Colorado. The one place she could not go.

She wrote down the e-mail address, but the thought of writing to him terrified her. After so many years without even the notion that he existed, she could not help but believe that he wanted nothing to do with her. Or perhaps her father had pushed him away. But why?

Searching Richard Browne's name again, she found a handful of articles published in *The Journal of American Folklore*, which she could not access without a password, and a spotlight feature in *The Denver Quarterly*. The latter caught her full attention, though she could read only a snippet without a subscription.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"Dr. Richard Browne, an avid hiker and long-time professor at the University of Colorado in Denver, currently lives in Carbondale..."

Before she realized it, she had opened another window and mapped directions from Houston to Carbondale in seconds. It would take a couple of days to get there, over twenty hours of driving time, but with a defeated sigh she closed all the windows and leaned away from the computer. Her mind swayed, shocked from the sudden frenzy that had seized her.

What was she thinking? She did not have any money, she had no idea if Richard would even be happy to see her, and she had promised her father she would not go to Colorado.

Frowning, she returned to the couch and lay back, determined to sleep. She could not allow one strange dream to conjure up so many bad ideas.

CHAPTER TWO

In the morning, as she poured cereal into a bowl in the kitchen, Earl's voice carried to her from the living room. "Where did you find these?"

Knowing he had seen the photographs, she called out, "They were behind my mother's picture in the frame."

Natalie poured a cup of coffee and carried it into the living room along with her cereal. Handing him the cup, she sat beside him as he looked over the photos.

Earl tapped the one of Richard and her father after her birth and said, "Who is that? I've met him before."

Exasperated, she blurted out, "When?"

"Back when I first met your Dad. He gave Alan the loan to get the garage started."

Natalie shook her head in disbelief. "Did he explain who he was?"

With a shrug, Earl said, "No. I thought he was a banker or something." He looked at the picture of Richard and Willow Browne fishing by the Crystal River. "Guess I was wrong."

Natalie put down her cereal, having lost her appetite. She was indignant that her father had never spoken of Richard, who now had apparently helped them start their

The Brunnolf Tradition

life together in Houston. Why had her father failed to mention such generosity? What else had he deemed her too immature to understand?

Behind her irritation, guilt beat her over the head without mercy. How dare she be upset with her father! Where was her grief? Where was the imposing heartache? She was supposed to be a miserable orphan, remember? Not a foolish, angry teenager!

She sighed, trying to stifle all the emotions storming in her pounding head. "I think he's my grandfather."

Earl frowned. "Alan never told me about him."

"He never said anything to me either." She picked up the photograph of Richard and her mother standing by the willow tree. "I searched his name online. I think he taught at the University of Colorado."

With an uneasy glance, Earl scratched the stubble on his chin and murmured, "You're not thinking of going up there, are you?"

"Why not?" she said, the irresistible ire flaring again.

He leaned away from the photos with a sigh, the coffee cup still steaming in his hands. "I just think there must've been some reason Alan didn't say anything to you about him. And he asked you not to go back there."

The Brunnolf Tradition

She rolled her eyes. "He asked *my mother* not to go back there."

Spreading his hands in defeat, Earl stood. "You're nineteen. You're an adult. I'm not going to tell you what to do. Just think about it for a few days and don't go rushing into it."

As he retreated to the kitchen, Natalie gritted her teeth. She knew he was right.

The Chevy truck seemed too loud along the gravel path. Finding a yellow spigot at the side of the road, Natalie parked and shut off the engine, leaving the windows down as she got out. In that place she could have left the keys in the ignition without a care, but it was Earl's truck, not hers, so she stuffed the keys in her pocket.

The sky seared bright blue from every horizon, and the sultry sunlight brought beads of sweat to her brow. She always expected the cemetery to be cold, as though an ethereal force would sweep over the graves to blot out the warmth of every living heart and mind that dared to enter. If such a power existed, it was silence, which made her shiver even in the heat as she walked along the gravestones.

The Brunnolf Tradition

The spigot helped her remember the row in which her parents were buried. She followed the line until she reached an uneven patch of yellow grass. The sod that the caretakers had placed over her father's grave had yet to take root.

Natalie frowned at the withering funeral wreath of lilies that still rested against the headstone. Sitting on the ground, she picked off a few of the meanest flowers and set them aside. A worker had finally inscribed the date of her father's death on the stone. Feeling empty, she ran her fingers over the names Adrienne and Alan. No other Irvings were interred nearby.

At the bottom of the headstone read the simple epitaph: "Love conquers all."

For a second, Natalie opened her mouth to speak to her dead parents, but then she bit her lip and reined in the foolish impulse. They were gone, and she had long ago given up the illusion of a place where they might meet again. There was no one in the world who could alleviate the oppressive gloom on her shoulders... except perhaps in Colorado.

With a sigh she continued picking at the wilting wreath. Her memories drifted through her childhood and the many holidays spent alone with her father. She remembered

The Brunnolf Tradition

staying up late to watch old James Dean movies, riding with him down to Galveston for the first time on her own bike. After she graduated, she had detested the thought of moving out; it had felt too much like abandoning him.

She had never considered then how he might abandon her instead. How would she ever fill the gaping hole he left behind? That SUV might have just as easily plowed through her heart like a dagger and put her to rest beside him. She could still see it lurching through the intersection ahead of her, like lightning caught in a slow replay, looping over and over again in her mind.

Then Richard's face consumed her thoughts. Natalie imagined turning up at his house, being welcomed into his arms with a smile as he said it was all a misunderstanding. He would tell her about her mother and why he called her "Willow." He would invite her to stay, and everything would be all right.

Her gaze rested again on her parents' epitaph. Love had compelled her father to ask Natalie to stay away from Colorado, whether or not he had understood to whom he was speaking, and love had made Natalie promise him she would. Now he was gone, but did that cheapen her word? Was she really so inclined to betray him, even if she knew she would only be deceiving her own conscience in the end?

The Brunnolf Tradition

A full hour passed while she sulked in the late afternoon sun, debating the trip she longed to make. She departed with no resolution at hand and resolved to heed Earl's advice to give it time.

Perhaps sleep would clear her head, though the dream of flying over the mountains in the starlight prowled through her mind like a caged creature calling for release.

Immigrants swarmed the port. French, German, and Irish accents all blended together in an incoherent clamor. People pushed and shoved their way through the horde, luggage bringing curses from their mouths as they tripped or struck their knees.

A little girl clasped an old man's hand tightly, terror and confusion gleaming in her wide dark eyes as they passed through the crowd. Her other hand made a fist around a small jewel at the end of a golden chain around her neck. She remembered her mother draping the ruby over her head and kissing her cheek before sending her away with the stableman. It was all she had left of home, which now lay very, very far behind her.

"Stay with me, June," said the old man with a German accent. He glanced down at her, catching sight of the gold chain. Squeezing her hand, he whispered, "Put it away!"

The Brunnolf Tradition

With a frown she slipped the pendant beneath the collar of her plain dress and picked up her feet to match the old man's haste. The stableman stopped several times, speaking to different men over the noise of the throng.

Soon she found herself standing in a line beside him. He knelt to her briefly, his aged hands sweeping back her dark hair in an attempt to make it look neat. The stench of smoke, manure, and sweat made her frown.

"Smile," he told her urgently, "and do not speak. I will speak for you."

At that moment, a hush fell over the men and women who had gathered in a row. She noticed that all of them were much younger than the stableman, yet older than herself.

The captain who had led them across the Atlantic walked along the line of workers with a gentleman dressed in a green jacket and gold waistcoat. Pausing on occasion, the men asked each individual of his or her skills and purpose for coming to Philadelphia. A young man scribbled notes and, when the gentleman gave a nod, he exchanged money with the captain's servant and sent the newly acquired laborer to a wagon on the street.

Arriving before her and her stableman, the gentleman scrutinized them both with a touch of his gloved hand to

The Brunnolf Tradition

his chin. "He's too old," he stated to the captain with a careless gesture to the stableman.

But his gaze lingered curiously on the little girl. "And she is too young. Why is she here?"

"An orphan, sir," answered the elderly stableman, struggling to mute his accent. "I brought her to America on her mother's last wish."

The gentleman considered her again, and she looked away uncomfortably. Though she had felt deep in the pit of her stomach that her mother and father were dead, the stableman had not stated it outright until then.

She knew every bit of blame rested on her sister.

"I have a daughter about her age," said the gentleman quietly. After a pause, he turned to the young man and nodded.

When a servant tried to lead her away, she hesitated and reached for the stableman's hand. He shook his head, urging her onward. The servant's grip on her shoulder grew more insistent.

"No!" she cried. The thought of being alone in that foreign place terrified her.

"You must go, June!" he yelled, pushing her away. "Go! Go now!"

The Brunnolf Tradition

Natalie woke with a start. An unnatural heaviness settled in her bones, turning her muscles to clay. In the darkness a figure leaned over her. She struggled to breathe as her wide eyes searched for an absent face in the looming shadow. Her body defied her commands to strike the specter in any way possible, and it seemed to draw closer.

The nightmare had trapped her, slowly suffocating her under its weight. The rest of the world had stopped at the wraith's command while it focused every shade of darkness upon her.

"Go now!" rasped an ethereal voice, grating up her spine.

Then the shadow inexplicably disappeared, and moonlight illuminated the living room in a gentle glow.

Gasping, Natalie rolled off the couch and fell to the floor. She staggered to her feet, her entire body trembling with adrenaline.

Without any deliberation of what she had just witnessed, she began packing what few belongings she had brought with her to Earl's apartment: a couple of pairs of jeans, a few shirts, all rolled up in haste and shoved into her old backpack.

As she got dressed, she could not believe the plans racing through her head, calculating how much money she

The Brunnolf Tradition

would need to arrive in Colorado. She gathered the photos of Richard and slipped them carefully into her pack. Then she snatched up her father's pocketknife and stuck it in her back pocket.

At that instant, while the abrupt memory of her father's face blazed in her mind, the frenzy ceased. The dream of that little girl rushed through her, and Natalie bowed her head as tears warmed her eyes and strangled her throat. She too had been abandoned to a bleak world, left with no one. The thought of those starlit mountains called to Natalie more fiercely than ever with the promise of family and safety and love.

The fear of never knowing what could be waiting for her in Colorado outweighed the guilt of breaking her father's last wishes. If she did not go, she would live with regret for the rest of her life. Surely her father would not have wanted that.

Pulling on her boots, she was ready to leave, but she hesitated. She could not run off with Earl's truck, not after all he had done for her, but another possibility came to her as she picked up her father's thick leather jacket. She retrieved a single key that lay on the kitchen counter, and then went to the laundry closet. Pulling down a box

The Brunnolf Tradition

from the top shelf, she took a deep breath before opening it.

Her helmet had a scuff on one side from where she had carelessly thrown it down on the street. She had not worn it since the day of her father's accident, nor had she touched her bike. But it was the one thing left in her name, and she needed to climb back in the saddle sooner rather than later before she lost her nerve entirely.

Natalie parked Earl's Chevy truck behind the shop. She would have to leave it there, but at least one of the guys would find it in the morning. Unlocking the back door with her father's key, she slipped into the garage and marched confidently through the dark toward a cabinet where they stored a few flashlights. She needed to be quick, in case anyone saw the light from the street.

Conrad had done a nice job with the crimson paint on her Bonneville, and he had polished away the few scrapes on the chrome from when she had dropped it. Opening the leather saddlebags, Natalie made certain her kit of essential tools remained in place.

Then she grabbed a few things from the shelves against the wall: chain lubricant, spare sparkplugs and fuses, a pair of light bulbs, a tire patch, a roll of duct tape, and

The Brunnolf Tradition

a small set of lock picks, which her father had trained her to use. She organized them all into her saddlebags and vowed she would pay for them later.

After leaving Earl's truck keys on her father's empty desk in the office, she jotted down a note to explain her intent to go to Colorado. Then Natalie opened one of the garage doors and pushed out her Triumph. Once the garage was secured, she put on her father's bomber jacket, leaving it unzipped in the temperate night air, and adjusted the straps of her backpack to a comfortable position.

As she sat down on the bike and placed the key in the ignition, Natalie realized her hands were shaking. She closed her eyes and breathed, counting to ten, and reminded herself that she had been riding motorcycles since before she could legally drive a car.

When she started the engine, her worries evaporated. The deep thrum of the motor, the heat of the exhaust as it warmed up, the smell of gasoline and oil filtering through the system, the vibration of the frame--all of it was familiar and exciting. She pulled on the throttle a bit, and through her mind surged visions of the intake valve opening, pistons shifting, sparkplugs firing, each part working together in preparation to speed her away.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Grinning for the first time in weeks, Natalie pulled on her helmet and buckled it under her chin. With a tap of her boot, the bike clicked into first gear, and she roared onto the street.

CHAPTER THREE

Highways in the Rockies made for a beautiful ride, soaring along forests gilded in yellow and orange, but Natalie spared the sight little attention. The curving, undulating roads required a great deal of concentration, and the misty rain that swathed over her within a few miles of Carbondale added to her toiling exhaustion.

Back in Amarillo that morning, she had perused a map to find the sliver of the Crystal River in Colorado, where her mother and grandfather had gone fishing. It flowed from Carbondale, which *The Denver Quarterly* had cited as Richard Browne's current residence, to the little town of Marble along Highway 133. That particular highway curved west, however, so she had taken Highway 82 north through Aspen.

The narrow, vaulting curves of Independence Pass had carved themselves into her memory with each terrifying, magnificent view of the Roaring Fork Valley. Already packed with snow, the pass was set to close within the next couple of weeks for the winter season. She had never ridden in such conditions, and the journey had sapped all the energy out of her.

Her hands had grown numb from the combination of the steady vibration of the handlebars and the cold wind that

The Brunnolf Tradition

pierced through her gloves. The bike needed gas, and she craved a hot cup of coffee and a place to thaw for an hour or two.

She should have listened to Earl's warnings. She had called him the previous day during one of her breaks to fill up, making sure he had found her note. Though he had not sounded thrilled with her sudden departure, he had only asked her to be careful, reminding her to drink plenty of fluids because the altitude could wipe her out. Or he was making sure she took frequent breaks to find a bathroom. Either way, she was beginning to believe she had hit the road a little too enthusiastically, something her father had often predicted would get her in trouble.

Finally she turned south on Highway 133 and Carbondale spread before her. The twin peaks of Mount Sopris, veiled in snow, provided the impressive backdrop for the whole city. It was the same mountain of which she had dreamed, the same that was burned into the handle of her father's pocketknife.

An eerie feeling trickled over her, like she was being watched. The overcast sky allowed night to creep in early throughout the valley. Combined with the wet roads and the icy wind, Natalie knew she needed to find a place to pull over fast.

The Brunnolf Tradition

She had just passed a wide, colorful sign featuring Mount Sopris and proclaiming "Welcome to Carbondale!" when an abrupt wall of wintery air smacked into her like a solid car.

Swerving slightly, her wheels spun on the slick pavement. Just as her father had trained her, Natalie corrected the bike and performed a quick stop, flipping the kill switch and pumping the brakes. Though she managed to stop the bike, she could not regain her balance and the Bonneville tipped. She cursed when her knee hit the ground, but she jerked back quickly so as not to be pinned under the bike as she carefully laid it down.

For a few seconds Natalie simply sat there in the empty road, the straps of her backpack digging into her shoulders. All she could remember was the blaring of horns as she dropped her bike and threw down her helmet, running past the pieces of her father's fallen Harley...

Swallowing over the lump in her throat, Natalie doused the harrowing memories of that day and pulled herself up to her feet. She tested her weight on her knee. It stung a bit, but the injury would not be worth a hospital visit. The asphalt had ripped through her jeans, and the frigid air prickled over her abraded skin.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Nearby she saw that her lock picks and a couple of spark plugs had fallen from her saddlebag. She limped over and picked them up, stuffing them in the pockets of her jacket.

Looking up, Natalie groaned when a green Jeep pulled to the shoulder on the opposite side of the road. A man with short red hair stepped out, and she tried to wave him off. "I'm fine!"

"Are you sure?" he called, jogging across the street toward the bike. He wore a gray wool coat and his pants looked to be the green scrubs of a medical uniform.

"Yeah, just a scratch."

As he got closer, Natalie squatted down and attempted to pull her bike up before he could offer aid, but the short burst of adrenaline from the fall had only magnified her exhaustion. He helped her bring it up and they pushed the Bonneville to the side of the road.

Once the kickstand was down, Natalie pulled off her helmet and reluctantly met his eyes. In the fading light they were gray and cool like river stones. He had strong cheekbones and a long nose set beneath a stern-looking brow. She judged him to be in his early twenties, with the freshness of youth about his features, but also a strong foundation of wisdom in the depth of his gaze.

The Brunnolf Tradition

When she realized she was staring at him, Natalie glanced away in embarrassment. Brushing her hand over her messy hair, she murmured, "Thanks."

He gestured toward the Jeep, saying, "I have a first aid kit."

Though hesitant, Natalie set down her helmet on the seat of her bike and limped after him. He opened up the back and pulled forward a small plastic case. She crossed her arms to keep warm, her leather coat feeling no more than a shawl after so many hours in the chill, while he took up a roll of gauze and a bottle of cleaning solution.

"I can't believe you're out riding in these temperatures," he said.

"It's not so bad," she lied.

"Right."

He knelt at her side and inspected her knee under the light of a streetlamp. Judging by his attire and scrutinizing gaze, she guessed he was a physician of some kind. Natalie flinched when he poured some of the solution on the scrape, but it only burned when he dabbed the gauze over it.

"Looks like there's a little gravel in there." He stood and retrieved a pair of small plastic tweezers from his kit. "I can clean it out, with your permission."

The Brunnolf Tradition

Feeling foolish, Natalie simply nodded her head. When the redheaded man touched her thigh to pick out the tiny bit of gravel, she smothered a sense of bashful excitement.

"Are you a doctor?" she asked, trying to assuage the awkwardness.

He pressed the gauze pad firmly within the tear in her jeans and began wrapping it. With a smirk, he said, "I'm a veterinarian." Knotting the bandage, he then stood and offered his hand. "My name is Wesley."

"I'm Natalie," she replied, placing her gloved hand in his.

Wesley paused, looking at her with a curious expression. For an instant, she wondered if he had somehow been expecting her.

A flash of light caught their attention, and she turned her head to see a police car pull over behind them. Wesley shielded his eyes from the bright headlights while Natalie whimpered. Hadn't she been embarrassed enough?

The officer got out of the vehicle, but he did not immediately move toward them. Instead he stood by the car, watching them warily with his hand a little too close to his gun for Natalie's comfort.

"Everything okay here?" he asked.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"Yes," Natalie answered. "Just an accident." She motioned to the veterinarian. "He wasn't involved. He just stopped to help me."

As the officer approached, Wesley turned away and packed up his kit. "I'll just be going," he murmured.

"Don't rush off on my account," said the officer. Tall with cropped brown hair, he had the build of a linebacker. He glanced at Natalie, examining her with chestnut eyes, which lingered on the bandage around her knee.

"The Howards are expecting me," Wesley explained, securing the Jeep. "One of their horses may have colic." He met Natalie's eyes briefly before walking around to the driver's side.

"You can't avoid me forever, Wesley," said the officer in a flat tone.

Frowning, Natalie watched the red-haired man climb into his car and drive away. What had the officer meant by saying that?

When she noticed the policeman was looking at her again, she brushed back her short dark hair, hoping her exhaustion was not too evident.

"I'm Officer Wagner," he said.

She held out her hand. "Natalie Irving."

The Brunnolf Tradition

He also seemed to pause upon hearing her name. "May I see your license?"

Consenting quickly, Natalie slid her backpack off her shoulders and dug inside for her wallet. Officer Wagner withdrew a flashlight from his belt and studied her license for almost a full minute.

When he looked up at her, his eyes filled with regret and sympathy, she thought the ground would drop out beneath her feet.

"You're here about Richard, aren't you?" he asked.

Natalie blinked. "How... How could you know that?"

"Ivy once told me about you." He handed her license back to her. "She said that you lived in Texas with your father."

"Who's Ivy?" she asked, still reeling.

He frowned. "Richard's sister."

She swiftly forgot about the cold, the sting in her knee, and meeting the kind veterinarian. It had never occurred to her that she would have more family in addition to her grandfather in Colorado, and her stomach twisted into an anxious knot.

Officer Wagner observed her surprise with curiosity. "Natalie," he murmured, "you do know that he's gone missing, right?"

The Brunnolf Tradition

If the world had dropped away before, in that moment it seemed every star in the universe suddenly extinguished. Images from the dream settled heavily over her mind as she relived the terrifying cries of a little girl, parted from her stableman, her last link to home...

With a short, guilty sigh, Officer Wagner gestured to his police cruiser. "Come with me," he said. "I'll take you to Ivy. You can leave the bike here tonight and I'll bring you back in the morning."

Uncertain that she could find the will to argue, Natalie followed him to the car. After he retrieved her helmet left on the Triumph's leather seat, he directed her to sit in the front and called in a code on his radio. Then they continued south on Highway 133.

As dusk darkened into night, they drove by tall forests of aspen and spruce trees with burnt orange cliffs of sandstone sweeping up frequently beside the road. Natalie did not speak, trying to digest the revelation of her grandfather's disappearance. Her fingertips had started to tingle against the warmth inside the cruiser, and her palms hurt from gripping the handlebars of her bike so tightly in the cold.

The Brunnolf Tradition

As they passed the modest town of Redstone, she spotted several round, beehive-shaped mounds forming a line along the right side of the road in the headlights.

"Coke ovens," stated Officer Wagner. "They used to mine coal throughout these hills in the early 1900s, and they would bake the coal in those ovens. It's how this town was originally built, but the coal mining only lasted a few years."

He drove a couple of miles farther until they reached a long row of mailboxes off the side of the highway. As he turned left, Natalie peered out the window to catch the name of the street: Bighorn Way. They crossed a narrow bridge, and with a stir of exhilaration she realized they must have passed the Crystal River in the dark.

She thought of the picture tucked safely in her backpack of her mother and grandfather fishing in those waters, and the sudden reality that she was there overwhelmed her. In some dimension where time did not exist, she had finally been reunited with her mother.

At length Officer Wagner turned onto Spotted Owl Drive, coming to a stop at a graveled driveway lined with spruces to one side. A yellow foursquare house rested there beside a willow tree, though in the dark she could not determine whether it was the same willow from the

The Brunnolf Tradition

photograph of her mother and Richard. A short picket fence wrapped around a garden to the far side of the sprawling yard, ending at the edge of a wood that climbed up a sloping hill. Above the front door a porch light glinted off a couple of wind chimes.

Together they got out of the car and started down a little path to the door. Before they had reached the porch, a petite woman emerged from the house, her long gray hair flowing down the back of her loose white blouse.

Natalie held her breath, freezing halfway down the path. Somewhere in the distance behind the house, she could hear the river flowing.

"Cody!" exclaimed the old woman as she smiled at the officer. "I wasn't expecting you..."

As soon as the old woman's eyes landed on her, Ivy's mouth fell open. Without a word, she rushed to Natalie as eagerly as her years allowed, and locked her arms around her.

"Look at you!" she said, her voice trembling. "You look just like your mother!"

Natalie returned the embrace uncertainly. When Ivy drew away and cupped Natalie's face in her lined palms, her bright blue eyes were full of tears.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"Oh, my dear," Ivy whispered. "I'm so sorry about Alan."

Natalie's already vulnerable heart, aching with the convergence between her mother's past and her present, split in two under the weight of her father's absence. She crumbled into tears, and Officer Wagner helped her limp blindly into Ivy's house.

Once Natalie had sat down in the kitchen, her backpack dropped to the floor at her side, Ivy poured a glass of water and set it on the little round table before her. Natalie stared at the hardwood floor as she sipped the drink, trying to collect what remained of her dignity. The planks had been worn smooth under several generations of feet. As her gaze drifted further around the room, she found that each appliance seemed as old as the house, excepting the refrigerator, which might have been purchased in the sixties.

While she looked around, Officer Wagner explained how he had found Natalie on the side of the road. "He was there," he pegged curtly at the end of his story.

Ivy waved her hand as though swatting an irksome fly. "Leave it alone, Cody."

The Brunnolf Tradition

Wiping her eyes, Natalie glanced at Office Wagner and noticed a muscle flexing in his jaw. Again she wondered what it was about Wesley that had triggered his irritation.

The old woman patted her shoulder. "There, you're all right now," she said with a gentle smile. "Let's have a look at that knee. Not to worry--I was a nurse for many years!"

Unwrapping the bandage, Ivy inspected the scrape before shuffling out of the room. She returned with a small jar full of a chunky, yellowish paste.

"What's that?" Natalie asked as Ivy unscrewed the lid.

"Witch hazel, mostly," the old woman answered. "This will fix you right up."

She dipped her fingertips into the jar and began dabbing the substance over the red, broken skin. Natalie felt a strange warmth seeping through her leg, resuscitating her from the freezing ride through Colorado. All her muscles relaxed and the intense sorrow that had overcome her escaped through every deep breath.

"I told her about Richard," Officer Wagner said suddenly. "She didn't know."

Ivy frowned. "Yes," she murmured, glancing up into Natalie's eyes. "He's been missing for about a week now."

"Dad never told me about him," Natalie said. "Or you."

The Brunnolf Tradition

"I know," Ivy replied.

"Why?"

The old woman looked back at Officer Wagner, who then shifted his feet. "I should get back to the station," he said. "Natalie, I'll see you in the morning." With a nod to Ivy, he departed.

The old woman stalled a minute or two as she screwed the cap back onto the jar of witch hazel paste and washed her hands. Natalie watched her with a slithering sense of unease and felt as though she was being stalked by some unseen creature.

Then Ivy faced her with a somber expression.

"Richard," she began, clasping her hands, "did not want you to have contact with any of us."

Her eyes heavy from tears and fatigue, Natalie stared at Ivy as though peering through a fog. "You mean... it was his decision, and not Dad's?"

Ivy nodded. "I'm afraid so." She pulled a second wooden chair close to Natalie's side and sat down. "We're different, you see. Richard thought it would be better for you to grow up away from our family."

Apprehension riddled her nerves. "Different?" Natalie repeated.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Ivy's blue eyes flickered with intensity, and the wrinkles around her mouth puckered with the slight curve of her lips. "We can do things," she whispered. "Things that may frighten other people. We have the ability to detect hidden potentials in the world, and we can nurture them into fruition or hinder them from existence. Some call it magic, but to us it is the nature of the world."

Her head turned slightly, and Ivy glanced at something that was not there. Natalie looked too, though she only observed that the pantry door needed to be repainted.

Then Ivy smiled, gazing at Natalie as though she could see her fate inscribed in the backs of her eyes. "You have a gift, don't you? An ability that you have never shared with anyone?"

Natalie's lips parted slightly, though she had forgotten how to breathe. In a nearby room, a clock ticked steadily through the silence. She thought of the cars in the shop, running her fingers over them and seeing instinctively how they worked, often identifying the malfunctioning part without ever needing to lift the hood.

But how could Ivy know about that?

The old woman's smile widened a bit. "We all have different talents, dear."

The Brunnolf Tradition

Natalie shook off the impression that Ivy had just listened to her thoughts. "I still don't understand," she said. "Why would he cut me off from everyone if..." Pausing, she wanted to say that she had developed a gift anyway, but she was not yet prepared to admit she even had one.

"Richard did not keep you away hoping to stall your abilities," Ivy assured her. "He wanted to keep you safe." Sighing, the old woman rose to her feet and held out her hand. "Come with me."

Natalie limped behind her great aunt into the parlor. A wealth of aromas greeted her there, nothing like the familiar scents of chemicals and mechanical grease Natalie had grown to associate with home. The smell of a hundred herbs, baking bread, and smoking wood filled the compact house, whisking away its residents to an earlier time.

A fireplace sat on one end of the parlor and a climbing angled staircase on the other. Paintings and photographs obscured the walls, beginning with one large oval portrait of a young woman over the hearth, and branching out through time into black-and-white photos, gradually merging with the colored pictures by the front door.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Ivy gestured to the portrait over the mantelpiece. The young woman within the frame had dark hair tucked underneath a lace cap and brown heavy-lidded eyes over a pointed nose, her small mouth pouting slightly. Though she looked no older than a teenager, her gloomy countenance suggested she had experienced a great deal of suffering in the span of her adolescent life.

More unsettling was the fact that Natalie might have just looked into a mirror.

"That is Juniper Brunnolf," Ivy murmured. "She was the one to bring our family to America in the mid-1700s."

"June," Natalie whispered, recalling the nightmare from her last night in Houston. Picturing the little girl in her mind, she could clearly see the matured features within the portrait, and the hair rose on the back of her neck as she heard Juniper's screams echo against her skull.

Ivy detected her discomfort. "What is it?"

"It's just..." Natalie shifted uneasily. "She looks like me."

Glancing at Juniper's image, Ivy then studied Natalie's face with a strange, discerning perception, as though she could look directly through history and compare the two women side by side.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"You're right," she said quietly, and her lips pursed with interest. "I suppose some things come full circle."

To Natalie's relief, the old woman looked back to the portrait. "She escaped here," Ivy continued, "when the Brunnolfs were accused of practicing witchcraft in Germany. They were all hung, and their home was burnt to the ground." She reached out, touching the oval frame as a worshipper might caress a sacred idol. "Poor child."

Her eyes narrowing, Natalie wondered if her great aunt had ever dreamed about the congested port, of little Juniper being dragged away from all she had ever known.

Ivy turned to her with a solemn frown. "Since that time, the women of our family have faced a terrible threat. Accidents, disappearances... *murders*... Richard hoped that by keeping you away, you might be spared."

Shaking her head with a skeptical look, Natalie said, "Do you mean... we're cursed?"

"Yes."

For several moments Natalie could only stare at the old woman. Psychic abilities, dreams of the past, accusations of witchcraft, a *curse*... She had never believed in such things.

And what did any of it have to do with her grandfather's disappearance?

The Brunnolf Tradition

Without thinking, Natalie turned. Her gaze fell precisely on one particular photograph in a silver frame. She stepped closer to the picture depicting an older man in a suit and tie. He had neat gray hair speckled with black. A friendly smile eased his expression, but his hazel eyes appeared withdrawn.

It was a better picture of Richard than the ones in her backpack. She noticed then the similar shape and color of his eyes to hers, and a sudden resolve bolstered her spirit.

Natalie clenched her jaw as Ivy came to her side. "I have to find him," she whispered.

"You will, my dear," said the old woman, her gaze distant and unfocused as she stared at the floor. "You will."

CHAPTER FOUR

She grinned as they departed the theater in a crowd. All the men were dressed in their fanciest coats, accompanying lovely gowned women. Taking her husband's arm--her *husband*, she thought gleefully--they walked a bit down the road, waving goodbye to their friends and new acquaintances.

The passionate performance of *Antony and Cleopatra* continued to resonate in her heart. Raising her hand, she caressed the ruby pendant at her throat. It had been passed down to her from her mother, and her mother before that.

And there were the dreams...

Yes, she understood that kind of love between the Roman general and his Egyptian queen. It saturated the extremities of the mind, dulling the ordinary world and driving lovers to violence so they might satisfy their thirst for such intensity. That unyielding passion had haunted her family for nearly a century, and she anticipated the day she would meet that lethal specter face to face.

But she relaxed, freeing her mind of past horrors. She was a newlywed, and her husband was kind, generous, and educated. Since their wedding night, she had found that no

The Brunnolf Tradition

nightmarish creature emerged from the shadows so long as she lay in his arms.

Several carriages lined the road, receiving theater patrons to bear them onward into frivolity.

"Shall we walk?" her husband offered. "Take in the night air?"

She smiled at him, adoring the tilt of his hat and the sparkle in his eyes. They walked together, arm in arm, along Walnut Street. The night was relatively peaceful, especially once they were a few blocks from the exodus of the theater, and the stars shone brightly overhead.

However, as they turned the corner, she sensed someone had followed them. Taught never to disregard her instincts, she glanced back. Behind them on the opposite side of the road, she saw an older gentleman watching them. In spite of his finery, his graying hair was disheveled and his face was dark with stubble.

She looked away quickly, terror roiling in her stomach. Horrible, cold reality drained the color from her face, and somehow she knew.

In a panic she clutched her husband's arm, walking faster toward a carriage parked down the street. "Please," she whispered, "I want to go home now."

"Darling, what has alarmed you?"

The Brunnolf Tradition

She glanced back again toward the man pursuing them, only to find his wild, reddened eyes and snarling lips merely a few feet away. Already he was upon them, and in his raised fist was a knife that flashed in the moonlight.

Her husband cried out as the blade bore into his back, and she screamed. The wild-eyed villain stabbed him again and again until her husband collapsed. She fell to his side, watching helplessly as a pool of dark red blood swelled beneath him, but before she could attempt to staunch his wounds, the rogue hauled her up to her feet.

"Look!" he uttered, his voice breaking with emotion. "Look what you made me do!"

She tried to pull away, her vision blurred by tears, but he jerked her around, forcing her to look at him. There were drops of blood spattered on his face.

"Everything's fine now," he murmured, petting her hair as tears dripped down his rough cheeks. "We can be together now."

Her lips quivered. "I don't know who you are."

There were shouts in the distance. Someone had seen what was happening. Help was coming.

But the man's slick, bloodstained hands wrapped around her neck in a rage. She struggled, beating him with her

The Brunnolf Tradition

fists and stomping on his feet, but nothing released his hold.

People were coming. She could hear their racing footsteps. But the darkness was encroaching around her, and she could not gasp for breath.

The man's feral eyes glowered down at her. Silent tears swept down her face for her husband.

It was too late.

Natalie sat up in bed, panting for air. Even in the early morning light, she watched a dark cloud retreat across the ceiling of her room, edging into the corner by an old chest of drawers. Two pinpricks of silver stared down at her from the lurid haze before it evaporated.

Hands shaking, Natalie touched the tender skin around her neck. For a minute she sat in the bed, twisting the flowery coverlet in her hand, waiting for the nefarious spirit to reappear. When it did not, she got up and raced to the bathroom across the hall.

In the mirror she saw red marks around her throat, as though someone had truly reached through the dream to strangle her.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Natalie covered her mouth with one hand and turned away. The tears stung in her already sore throat and she suppressed a sob aching to break free.

The dream had been so vivid, more memory than fantasy. That poor woman! She had been wearing Juniper's necklace. That child, it turned out, had once existed--her portrait was downstairs. Had this woman been a real person, too?

Perhaps the dream had merely been an expression of the overwhelming information Natalie had absorbed the night before. Her incredible exhaustion and the emotional turmoil of her arrival might have contributed as well. She had to convince herself it was only a dream.

But the man's wrathful face flashed with horrifying detail once more in her mind, and she tried to distract herself in preparing a shower.

While she waited for the water to warm in the old, groaning pipes, Natalie began unwrapping the bandage around her knee. She recalled the red-haired veterinarian, the brush of his hand on her thigh and the odd look in his deep eyes just before Cody had arrived. Maybe, when the officer arrived to take her back to her bike, she would ask him why he got so worked up about the man who had helped her.

Removing the patch of gauze beneath the bandage, her jaw dropped. The torn skin had completely healed. No scab

The Brunnolf Tradition

or scar had formed, and the only remainder of her injury was a slight ache when she bent her knee.

Was she still dreaming? She did not recall hitting her head when she dropped her bike the day before, and in any case she had been wearing her helmet.

But so had her father...

A bog of emptiness threatened to swallow her. Natalie pushed away all concerns and reminded herself that Cody would be arriving soon. She showered quickly, dressed, and went down the creaking stairs into the parlor.

Once again the volume of pictures on the walls staggered her. Pausing, Natalie surveyed them all, wondering if Ivy knew the names of every person in every frame. She tried to imagine memorizing each of the places, the histories, the stories behind each relative. It would take years.

On an antique desk by the front door, she found a propped frame housing familiar faces. With a frown, Natalie examined a photograph of her mother and father leaning on a 70s Bonneville, curiously similar to the one he had given her. Her mother wore a green summer dress, her father in jeans and a plain white tee. Mount Sopris towered above them in the distance.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Thinking to ask Ivy if she had a copy of the photograph, Natalie turned to the hallway. The house was quiet. As she looked into the kitchen, finding it empty, she came upon an open door leading to another room.

Jars of herbs and oils as well as many hardcover books lined the shelves on each wall. Flowers were pinned up for drying, and a dusty miniature chandelier hung over a tall rectangular table in the center of the space.

Unexpectedly, a second door opened at the back of the room and Ivy emerged. She paused when she saw Natalie, and promptly turned to lock the door with a key, which she returned to her pocket.

"Good morning," she said lightly. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes," Natalie lied. The man's haggard face from her dream scowled clearly in her mind, and she repressed a shiver.

"And how is your knee?" Ivy's smile suggested that she already knew the answer.

"Like it never happened," Natalie murmured. "How did you do that?"

"As I said last night, dear, we all have gifts." The old woman passed her and walked into the kitchen.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Natalie glanced back at the locked door, which apparently led down to a basement. "What's down there?"

"It's my personal sacred space," Ivy answered, so quick and uncaring that Natalie almost believed her. "I would show you, but you are not ready."

Frowning, Natalie walked into the kitchen and sat at the table as Ivy poured her a cup of coffee. "What would make me ready?"

"Training," she said, handing the cup to Natalie. Then she sat down across the table, her critical gaze appearing to size Natalie up against a family standard. "The first and sometimes *only* lesson we are taught as children is that our words and thoughts have power. What you devote your energy to is what will manifest in your life. Still," she smirked and raised her brow, "many of us learn the hard way."

The coffee cup warmed Natalie's hands and she stared into its rich, dark depths. She pondered what the training would consist of, and briefly imagined her mother sitting in a garden with her, teaching her the names of herbs in the same way her father had taught her the names of tools.

Of course, staying in Colorado would not have kept her mother from dying, but Ivy would have been there. How different her life might have turned out then, and once

The Brunnolf Tradition

again she ached to understand why her father and grandfather had conspired to keep her away.

Thinking of the so-called "curse" Ivy had told her about last night, Natalie clenched her jaw. Anyone could line up a sequence of coincidences and proclaim all sorts of supernatural intervention in the events--good or bad. But she figured that sometimes a person just ended up in the wrong place at the worst time, and then a car would speed out of nowhere to shatter the world into little pieces.

Resolutely grounding herself, Natalie said, "You know how strange this all sounds, don't you?"

Ivy shrugged, though for a moment she grimaced, seemingly perturbed by Natalie's skepticism. "I grew up with these ideas. My training started at a very young age. So did Richard's."

At his name, Natalie looked up.

Reaching across the table, Ivy patted her arm and smiled. "If you ever doubt what we are capable of, then I suggest you look at your knee and think again." Then she stood and returned to the herb room.

Natalie felt that she had treaded over a delicate subject and quietly sipped her coffee in the empty kitchen. A chill crept up her back as she realized the mysterious

The Brunnolf Tradition

recovery of her injury was indeed proof that strange forces were afoot, no matter how she might refuse to believe it. Ivy had a key to unlock some vast, unknown world, and Natalie was suddenly very afraid to know what the old woman could set free from such a place.

A minute later, the front door opened and Ivy greeted Officer Wagner with a kiss on his cheek. While the old woman offered him breakfast, which the patrolman politely refused, Natalie wondered how they had come to know one another so intimately. It made her think of Donna back in Houston, and for a second she thought she should call her to say she had reached Carbondale safely.

Then her knee tingled as she stood to greet Cody, and she reminded herself that her arrival had not been completely harmless.

"You left your helmet in my car," Cody said when he faced her.

"Oh!" So much had happened the night before that she had not even noticed it was gone.

"I still have it," he assured her. "But before we pick up your bike, I thought I would take you to Richard's house."

Natalie gaped at him and then abandoned her coffee, hurrying upstairs to grab her father's bomber jacket and

The Brunnolf Tradition

making certain she had her wallet and keys. She gave a hasty goodbye to her great aunt and waited impatiently for the officer to unlock his cruiser.

As they trundled along the gravel road toward the highway, Natalie glanced at Cody. He could only have been perhaps five years older than her. In spite of the stern set of his jaw and the bulky spread of his shoulders, he had an easy smile that encouraged trust and openness.

He offered her such a grin when he caught her looking at him, and she blushed as she centered her interest instead on the Crystal River sparkling along the highway. The weather was a bit warmer than the previous day, and she saw a fisherman casting a line from one rocky bank as they drove past the beehive-shaped coke ovens near Redstone.

The humble town across the river consisted chiefly of a row of dated shop fronts along Redstone Boulevard. Before Natalie had gone up to bed, Ivy had told her she could find the General Store there to fill up her gas tank. There was also a place to eat called the Crystal Club Café, often populated with other motorcyclists, though often not this late in the year.

Natalie imagined her parents might have eaten there back when they were dating, remembering the picture in Ivy's parlor of them leaning on his old Bonneville in front

The Brunnolf Tradition

of Mount Sopris. Her eyes turned upward to view the towering pair of peaks, which they would soon drive past on their way to Carbondale further up the valley.

"How are you feeling today?" Cody asked. "Get enough sleep?"

Natalie assured him she had, recalling the physical and emotional exhaustion he had witnessed in her the night before. But she brushed her hand over her neck and wondered if she had actually slept much at all. She shifted slightly in her seat, adjusting the position of the knife in her back pocket.

"It must be different from Houston," Cody continued. "I'm glad you came when you did. Ivy's been very anxious the past few days."

"You seem to know her pretty well," Natalie said, hoping to coax an explanation.

Cody gave her a sideways look. A shade of grimness fell over his face like a cloud, obscuring his former ease with misery. "I was going to marry her granddaughter."

A gulf of uncomfortable silence stretched between them as Natalie struggled for a reaction. Again she was stunned by the revelation of more family members nearby. She wondered for the first time if her mother had been an only child, or whether Ivy and Richard had any other siblings.

The Brunnolf Tradition

If Ivy had grandchildren, then Natalie likely had aunts and uncles roaming about the world as well.

A tendril of anger threatened to ignite once more, frustrated that her father had isolated her from the only people left to Natalie in his absence. But with a deep breath, the indignation swiftly receded. If Richard had convinced him of a curse, then her father had only acted out of love to protect her.

And after all, they had not had an unhappy life together.

Cody sighed then, and Natalie returned her attention to him as he confessed, "Her name is Holly. We went to school together, but we didn't start dating until after I joined the force." He paused when the radio operator rambled off a ten-code, but it must not have been too important because he continued. "We were going to get married in November, but she called everything off when Richard went missing."

"Well," Natalie said, considering her words, "I think I'd be upset too if a relative disappeared before such an important ceremony."

Especially now that I have relatives, she thought in a huff.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Cody gestured helplessly with one hand. "Of course I understand why she would want to *postpone* it," he said, "but she called *everything* off. Packed her things and left. I think she must be sleeping at the shop because she's not staying with Ivy." He stared out at the highway with a frown. "She won't talk to either of us."

He said nothing more and Natalie had no idea how to console him. Concern nibbled at the back of her mind. She wondered how well Holly had known Richard, and whether her seclusion indicated that she knew what had happened to him.

But Natalie kept those subversive thoughts to herself, and instead changed the subject.

"You mentioned a shop," she said.

"It belongs to Ivy, but Holly runs the place," he explained. The morning sun gleamed on the red cliffs as they crested a hill, and Carbondale appeared in the distance. "It's called 'Browne's Books and Balms' off Main Street."

Cody parked the patrol car in front of 613 Eagle Crest Road. Around the neighborhood's tall stone-and-brick houses, the impeccable landscaping remained green in the face of winter's encroaching chill. It must have been a

The Brunnolf Tradition

provided service, for Richard's lawn was well manicured despite his absence.

She stared at the house after getting out of the cruiser. Covered in dark brown stone, the front door painted hunter green, there seemed to be an eerie shadow over the place. It reminded her of a hole in the ground she had once investigated as a girl on one of her father's camping trips. She had stuck her hand inside and was promptly bitten by a large burrowing spider.

The memory severely stanching her eagerness to explore her grandfather's house.

Cody, already halfway to the front door, looked back at her with a frown. "We don't have long," he stated. "I have to go to work."

Squaring her shoulders, Natalie marched forward. Cody used a key to open the door and allowed her to pass inside first.

In the gloom within the entryway, she thought she saw someone standing in the open living room next to her. Whether Cody noticed her alarm she did not know, but he switched on a light to reveal the room was empty. Her heart pounded, and Natalie touched her back pocket to make sure her father's knife was there.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"We've looked around, but there was no sign of a struggle," Cody said. His careful gaze roamed around the floor, walls, and ceiling as though he still searched for clues. He remained silent as Natalie stepped into the living room, taking everything in.

Richard's home was vastly different from Ivy's. Whereas her great aunt harbored many antiques and outdated appliances, her grandfather appeared well in touch with modern technology, exposed in part by the large flat-screen television above the wide fireplace. Also, he did not have many photographs on display. There was one on a side table depicting her young mother standing in a field of wildflowers with the peaks of Mount Sopris above her. Otherwise she observed a few prints of local wildlife and scenic views. The decoration was minimal and highly organized in nature.

Turning around, Natalie wandered across the hall and opened a door to find an office. His large desk had a clean glass top, and it faced a vast window overlooking a cluster of aspen trees. A charging cable ran from a plug on the floor to an empty spot on the desk, indicating to her that a laptop had likely rested there before.

If Richard had taken it with him, leaving the charger behind suggested that he had not planned to be gone for

The Brunnolf Tradition

long. She wondered what kind of information he might have saved on it and whether his studies could have been the reason for his disappearance.

"We've made note of the missing computer," Cody said behind her. "His car is gone, too. We thought he might have left to go to the university."

Reaching past her, he opened a desk drawer and withdrew a datebook. Printed on the cover in gold lettering was "The University of Colorado." As Cody flipped through the pages, Natalie noted that many of the appointments had to do with the college: lectures, meetings, art fairs...

He stopped on the current week's schedule and pointed to Richard's neat handwriting. Natalie read: *Friday 6pm-- Lecture on New England folklore, Tivoli Turnhalle.*

"He was going to present that lecture this Friday," Cody explained. "But his colleagues said they haven't seen or heard from him."

With an absent frown, Natalie looked around the rest of the room. Sitting on a shelf in a bookcase was a small photograph showing Richard and a younger man smiling on a mountaintop, both of them in hiking gear.

Her stomach jolted when she recognized the man's auburn hair. "Isn't that Wesley?" she asked, picking up the frame.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"Yes," answered Cody. She could see that muscle flexing in his jaw again. "He and Richard had grown pretty close since Wesley came here from Pittsburgh about seven months ago."

That may have explained why Wesley had appeared to recognize her name. Had her grandfather mentioned her?

Recalling the tension between the two men after her little mishap the day before, Natalie said, "You told Wesley that he couldn't avoid you forever. What did that mean?"

"He was the first one to report that Richard was missing, but he hasn't been very forthcoming with more information, like the time he last saw Richard, or if he knew why Richard would leave suddenly." Taking the photograph, Cody scowled down at Wesley's image. "He's hiding something."

"You don't think he did something to Richard, do you?" she asked. Wesley had seemed so kind and genuinely worried about her injury, even before he had apparently realized who she was, that it was difficult for her to suspect him of any ill intent.

And Natalie was pretty good about judging a person's integrity, having dealt with one or two shady customers--even employees--at the auto shop. Once, with a little brush

The Brunnolf Tradition

of her hand along the bumper of a mechanic's car, she had "seen" packets of meth hidden in the console. That was the only time she had ever witnessed her father so furious that, had the police not arrived in time, he might have chained the man up by his heels in the garage.

As Cody replaced the photograph on the shelf, offering no response, Natalie looked over the desk once more. In a mesh cup by the upper corner, Richard had arranged his writing utensils in a neat spiral, pencils to pens to highlighters, arranged by color. Natalie held her breath as she stared at it, for a very similar cup had once rested on the desk in her room before she had been forced to sell her father's house.

That inherent, meticulous tendency, which had once been nothing more than a little quirk to drive her father crazy, blazed in her chest with sudden clarity. Here was the glaring evidence of a connection to a man she had never met.

Her heart shuddered. What if she had come too late?

Cody touched her shoulder. His chestnut eyes were soft and sympathetic. "We should go," he said.

Natalie reluctantly followed him from the house.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Her red Bonneville stood precisely where they had left it. Cody waited as Natalie performed her routine, checking the tire pressure, oil level, and light bulbs. Much of it derived from her habit of keeping up pretenses, for with one touch she knew the bike would start without a problem.

As it warmed up, Cody gave his number to her in case she needed any help. Then he paused before returning to his cruiser. Staring at the pavement, he mumbled, "If you see Holly..."

But he drifted off, and without saying anything further, he departed.

Natalie felt sorry for him, but she was also grateful when he drove away. She needed some time alone to digest all she had learned. Witches, curses, nightmarish creatures, wounds that healed overnight... It was as though the highways between Texas and Colorado had taken her to another dimension. The laws of the universe had changed, and she no longer had any notion how to proceed.

After a quick breakfast in a little coffee shop on Main Street, Natalie spent about an hour riding around Carbondale. The fall festival was approaching, and she watched volunteers hang advertising banners off the lampposts in Sopris Park for pumpkin patches, hay rides, Trick-or-Treating in the park, and special happy hours at a

The Brunnolf Tradition

local bar. The town could hardly be deemed "urban" when she compared it against Houston, but there were several art galleries and a couple of music theaters along the streets, even a yoga studio. The community seemed tightly knit, though very open and eager for tourists who, come December, would arrive in throngs on their way to the slopes of Aspen.

Natalie was certain that even in the short span of time she had been in Colorado, dozens more trees had changed their colors. The aspens shone yellow and gold while the leaves of ancient oaks had mullled into deep reds, and spotted between them were the evergreen branches of spruce and pine. As the sun hiked higher across the sky, the temperature turned pleasant with a refreshing breeze. Each time she looked at the twin-peaked Sopris in the distance, it was taller and more beautiful.

The people were kind, the buildings traditional, the streets quaint, the scenery stunning beyond compare... She could not fathom what had driven her parents from such an idyllic place.

At length Natalie was obliged to park her bike and take a stroll down Main Street, already active with a few cyclists and joggers, also enjoying the mild weather. She paused outside of an old shop front. Printed in gold

The Brunnolf Tradition

lettering across the window were the words "Browne's Books and Balms" followed by store hours: "10 a.m. to 5 p.m., closed Sundays." Natalie swept her hand over her dark hair, spying several potted plants on a shelf inside beneath the window.

Within the shop, she met a pair of fierce blue eyes. A petite blonde woman with a lovely heart-shaped face stood behind the counter, eyeing Natalie with equal amounts of suspicion and interest.

Taking a deep breath, Natalie decided there was no going back. The woman was most certainly Holly, her cousin, and it would be rude not to go inside.

She opened the door, a bell chiming overhead, and the scents of dozens of herbs wafted into the air, much like Natalie had experienced at Ivy's house. The walls of the narrow shop were lined with shelves, containing over a hundred books and just as many jars of herbs. An antique display case presented a variety of interesting jewelry decorated with crescent moons and rounded female forms. In a back corner was a doorway curtained off in purple velvet.

"May I help you?" asked the blonde woman.

"Actually," Natalie murmured, trying to sort her thoughts around the awkward situation. How strange it was to introduce herself to her own family. "I'm Natalie."

The Brunnolf Tradition

Holly's gaze narrowed in scrutiny. "Yes, Richard's granddaughter. I thought you might be... There's something about your face that reminds me of him--the eyes, maybe." She raised her brow and smiled. "I suppose you've visited Ivy?"

Nodding, Natalie said, "I spent the night at her house in Redstone."

Holly came around the counter to Natalie's side. She clasped her hands together, her nails neatly manicured and an amethyst ring glinting on one finger. Natalie did not see an engagement ring, and she questioned why Holly had left Cody, who seemed to be a gentleman and entirely heartbroken about the separation.

But she maintained a friendly expression. She was genuinely curious about her cousin, who did not look much older than herself.

"I bet she was excited to see you!" Holly said with a light laugh. "This is her shop, you know. Mom and I manage it ourselves, but she and Dad are in Europe."

Natalie's stomach jolted--she *did* have an aunt and uncle after all. "Are they on vacation?" she asked, trying to hide her secret thrill. She looked around at the many jars of herbs, which were labeled alphabetically: agrimony, angelica, anise, aniseed...

The Brunnolf Tradition

Holly laughed again. "A long vacation. They've been researching some old family roots for almost a year now." She had an impish voice, light and airy, but her blue eyes betrayed a cryptic intensity. "When is your birthday?" she asked unexpectedly.

Curious, but deciding it was natural for a relative to want to know, Natalie answered, "December 21st."

"Ah," Holly mused with a smirk. "Capricorn. Very persistent and methodical. Do you read astrology?"

Shrugging, she said, "Not really."

"You should. You'd be amazed how much you can know about a person just from a birth date."

A phone rang from a tiny office behind the counter. With a sigh, Holly excused herself and retreated to answer it.

Natalie walked around the shop and tried to ignore the unsettling feeling that Holly had somehow uncovered everything about her, much in the way Ivy had the night before. She focused instead on examining the books lining the wall across from the antique case.

The shelves had been arranged into categories, each section labeled with little stickers. The titles covered subjects about astral projection and spirit guides, shamanism and chakras, witchcraft and demonology...

The Brunnolf Tradition

Recalling the feel of the ghouls' hands around her neck, Natalie shivered and turned away.

Her mind wandered to Richard's house. She had not seen such herbs and books there, and she wondered why. Ivy had said they both started their training at a young age. Had he turned against the family tradition at some point? Struck some chord, crossed the line, incurred the wrath of the occult? He was about to present a lecture on folklore, and his laptop was missing... Had his work threatened to expose some part of their history?

"You know," Holly said as she returned from the office, and Natalie jumped to face her, "Willow worked here while she was in school."

"Willow," Natalie repeated, thinking of the photos of her mother tucked safely away in her backpack at Ivy's. Shifting anxiously on her feet, she asked, "Did she change her name when she left? Dad always called her Adrienne."

For a moment Holly did not answer, lighting a stick of incense and standing it in a bowl of sand. There seemed to be purpose behind the action, and Natalie glanced around uneasily as though the perfume wafting toward her might conjure up a dragon.

"It is family tradition," Holly stated, "to name the women after flowers, herbs, and trees. But a few

The Brunnolf Tradition

generations later, you end up with four girls named Rose and seven named Lily, so we added a second, mundane name.

"For instance, my full name is Joanna Holly Browne. My mother's is Laura Heather, and grandmother is Odessa Ivy. Your mother was Adrienne Willow. Browne comes from our old German name, Brunnolf, of course. Many of us keep our maiden names after marrying, as a sign of respect."

A chill crept over Natalie's skin, thinking of her own surname, Irving, and whether they had found it offensive. But she could not recall any time in which she had been addressed by another name besides Natalie, so what was her traditional name? Had her mother died without giving her one? Or had her father kept that secret from her, too?

Hoping to change the subject, Natalie approached a small table in the corner on which a handful of little dolls were arranged. They were made of plain white cloth and had no faces.

She picked one up, asking casually, "Are these like Voodoo dolls?"

Holly came over to her. "They're called poppets," she explained. "They're used in a form of sympathetic magic, meaning that what you conjure upon the poppet is what you wish to happen for the person it represents."

The Brunnolf Tradition

With her blue eyes fixed on Natalie's, Holly snatched the doll from her hand and laid it carefully back on the table. "And they are not for playing."

Natalie felt as though she had been reduced to a nosy toddler. In just the few short minutes they had known each other, her cousin had left her nameless and without a clue as to how their mystifying world functioned.

The bell clinked over the door and Natalie was relieved to have Holly look away, forsaking her struggle with shame. She turned to see a man and woman enter the shop. The man was short with a receding hairline. He looked like he did not want to be there and glanced at Natalie meekly before averting his eyes to the floor. The woman appeared anxious, dressed smartly with her brown hair in a sleek ponytail, perhaps on her way to work.

"Hello, Sarah," Holly said in a friendly tone as she approached them, her heels tapping across the wooden floor.

Sarah opened her mouth to speak, but then she hesitated and cast a timid glance in Natalie's direction.

"Don't worry," Holly assured the woman. "She's my cousin."

For some reason, that comment made Sarah relax. "We've decided... that we would like to try it..."

The Brunnolf Tradition

"That's very good." Holly clasped the woman's hand with a gentle smile. "Don't worry one bit. Ivy's made this combination for years with great success."

Holly strode confidently around the shop, gathering several jars of herbs. Natalie tried to see what she was using, but she could not read the small print from where she stood, and she thought it wise to keep her distance. She watched as Holly measured out several portions of each herb, mixing them into two separate batches, which she then placed into plastic bags.

"I want you," she said to Sarah, "to take one teaspoon of this blend and steep it in a cup of hot water. Drink one cup every three hours until midnight. And for you," she said, motioning for the man to come forward and take the second packet, "use the same measurement, but drink one cup every two hours. Do you both understand?"

They assured her they did, looking eager to leave before they were seen.

"Wait until midnight to..." Pausing, she smiled. "Well, you know. And you should keep up this regimen until..." She ran a finger over her calendar by the register. "Saturday. That's the new moon. After that, you should resist temptation for at least a week. It shouldn't

The Brunnolf Tradition

take long to see the results. Please call if you have any questions."

They paid her for the teas and fled with red faces. Natalie eagerly helped Holly replace the herbs on the shelves, catching the names "chasteberry," "red clover," and "Siberian ginseng," and she wondered about their medicinal properties.

"You must know a lot about herbs," Natalie said, hoping to kindle some answers, as well as a renewed effort at friendship.

"I learn more every day," Holly replied lazily. "Actually, I thought about going to school to study pharmaceuticals, but the manmade, chemical-laden stuff is more harmful than helpful in my opinion." She put the last jar away and turned to Natalie with hands on her hips. "Ivy did it though. She was a nurse at Mountain Vale Hospital for over forty years."

"Yeah, she told me." Receiving a sharp glance, Natalie was not sure she struck the right tone with that response.

"Have a boyfriend back home?"

Nearly blushing, Natalie shook her head. What an awkward question! She hoped the conversation was not about to turn to Holly's disintegrated engagement with Cody.

The Brunnolf Tradition

But her cousin simply grinned and sat on a stool behind the antique case. "Come here."

Natalie approached the glass counter, stuffing her hands in her pockets. Inside she found the forgotten sparkplugs and set of lock picks she had picked up from the road after dropping her bike. She twirled one of the plugs anxiously in her fingers. Her palms had started to sweat.

From some hidden drawer to her side, Holly pulled out a silk drawstring purse of deep lavender. Then she opened it up and revealed a deck of cards yellowed with age. The florid designs on the back were printed in maroon ink with a large "B" at the center--for Brunnolf, no doubt.

Natalie watched as she shuffled the cards expertly and then spread them across the glass.

"Ivy's much better at this," she said preemptively. Picking out three, she laid them face-up in front of Natalie.

The Moon. It depicted two dogs and two towers, each separated by a stream, with a face on the moon gazing down at them.

The Nine of Swords. That particular card made Natalie uneasy, showing nine swords stacked over a weeping figure in a bed.

And the final card was Death.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"What are you doing?" Natalie demanded immediately.

"Don't work yourself up," Holly said. "Death very rarely indicates an actual, physical loss. It represents more of a transition. It means a great change is coming."

Natalie did not care for Holly's interpretation. The dark, skeletal figure on a white horse trampled over prostrated people in a field with the sun on the horizon, and Natalie had the distinct vision of her father disappearing under the wheels of a pale SUV.

"The Moon," Holly said, pointing at the first card, "represents duality, deception, and fear. Yet, it could also mean that you are seeking the truth beyond these things. And the Nine of Swords..."

Holly studied her, and Natalie swore she could sense those bright blue eyes sapping the energy straight out of her body.

"Have you been having bad dreams?"

"No," Natalie lied, and quickly added, "I haven't been sleeping much though."

As they stared at one another, an abrupt chill crept over Natalie's skin, even penetrating her leather jacket. Movement caught the corner of her eye, and she and Holly both looked over to the curtained doorway in the corner.

The Brunnolf Tradition

The purple velvet swayed lightly, as if it had caught a draft. Natalie could have sworn that she heard a faint wail...

"You should go," Holly said suddenly, sweeping up the cards and depositing them in the drawer. "I have some work to finish and Ivy will be expecting you."

Natalie did not argue, heading for the door.

The mountain air welcomed her, clearing away the swarm of worries Holly and her shop had stirred. She marched over the fallen autumn leaves toward her Bonneville parked down the street. Though she felt like a silly girl to do it, she kept glancing back over her shoulder, afraid that something had followed her. She shivered, thinking of that wild-eyed man from her nightmare, and walked faster.

Finally reaching her bike, Natalie started up the engine with an anxious frown and fastened her helmet beneath her chin.

CHAPTER FIVE

Stumbling, she fell to the pavement with a cry. Heart pounding and feet aching, she furiously cast away her shoe with the broken heel, and kicked off the other as she stood. The thick air rolling off the bayou weighed heavily on her skin. She glanced back down the alleyway, brushing her damp bobbed hair from her face.

There he stood, his suit jacket torn from their fight in the car, a shadow clouding his eyes. Beyond, the cheers soared over the brass jazz band as the parade marched on into the cheerful night.

Why had she not listened to her mother? With so many people gathered in the city streets to join the festivities, their paths were bound to cross.

Fortunately, she had taken one precaution, and she drew the derringer from her purse into her shaking hands.

"Listen, you," she uttered as the man paused at the sight of the gun. "Try to think clearly."

Her own adrenaline had overpowered the haze of several cocktails earlier on in the night. If only she could get her hands to become steady.

"What you're feeling now goes way back before either of us ever existed. If we go our separate ways now, we

The Brunnolf Tradition

might forget this happened. But if you continue to follow me... it won't end well."

"I don't know what's happening to me," he whispered, hands pulling at his own dark curls at his temple. His back hunched as he shuddered beneath the intensity of his feelings. "I just saw you get into that cab, and this heat is pulsing in my head..."

"I know." She could see his chest rise and fall, as though the effort of breathing was out of his control along with his runaway mind. She had seen it so many times in her dreams.

Then he started toward her once again.

"Stop!" she cried. "I'll pull this trigger, I swear it!"

He did not seem to care. Closer and closer he came, and she screamed in her mind: *Do it! Do it!*

Her finger poised on the trigger. She could imagine the recoil as the bullet flew, the splattering of blood, but the little gun felt so heavy in her trembling hands.

He was upon her!

Grabbing her wrists, he tried to wrestle the gun from her grip. Their bodies pressed together and the muzzle stabbed against her breast. She tried to take her finger off the trigger.

The Brunnolf Tradition

In spite of their struggle, the man kissed the exposed nape of her neck, and she cringed with revulsion...

BANG!

Natalie woke with a jolt, only to find a shadowy wraith bearing down on her. Its unearthly claws dragged over her throat where the possessed man's kiss lingered, leaving trails across her skin that burned. She screamed, which only enticed a low growl from the monster.

The bedroom door flung open, and Ivy strode inside. Instantly, the shade vanished.

As her great aunt leaned over her, Natalie clutched her breast, expecting to find a gaping hole from the gunshot. There was no blood, but the pain of that explosion echoed in her aching body. Along the side of her neck she traced the raised lines of a scratch, as though she had encountered a feral cat.

"It's all right, dear," Ivy murmured. "It was only a dream."

"Didn't you see it?" Natalie demanded, infuriated by Ivy's calm demeanor. She pulled aside her collar to reveal the scratch. "Look at what it did to me! It was right here!"

The Brunnolf Tradition

"It can't hurt you, not really. We all go through this at some point in our lives."

"What are you talking about?" Her heart still pounded in her ears and her hands trembled as the adrenaline began to fade. She knew her anger was an automatic reaction to conceal the absolute terror pulsing in her mind, dredging up a hundred scenarios in which the shadows tormented her. They came only when she slept, when she could not have a chance to fight back, and she dared not imagine what they did to her while she dreamed.

Those dreams! Those people! Why did it feel so real? Why did her chest burn as though someone had taken a sledgehammer to her sternum, as though she had truly been shot another lifetime ago...

Ivy sat down on the flowery blanket beside her, a solemn expression deepening the wrinkles in her face. "The dreams usually begin during adolescence, but I wasn't sure if you would experience them in the same way. When did they start?"

Natalie thought of the first nightmare, of little Juniper being separated from all she knew and loved. That night in Houston seemed ages ago, but only a few days had passed. She remembered the ethereal voice grating in her ear: "*Go now!*"

The Brunnolf Tradition

She shivered at the thought of it. "The night I found out about Richard," she murmured. "There was... something in the room with me. It told me to come here."

The old woman nodded. "The dreams are part of a very old spell. We don't know who cast it, except that it was around Juniper's time." She focused on Natalie, her blue eyes somber and clear. "They are memories, passed down to us so that we may remember who we are and where we came from. Every member of our family has them, perhaps some more vividly than others."

A sob cinched Natalie's throat at the notion. "But those women..."

"All members of our family."

Natalie touched the marks on her neck again, and they throbbed under her fingers. "The curse," she murmured with realization, seeing the wild-eyed man and the miserable soul with the torn jacket. They were cursed men, driven to insanity, and somehow she knew they were connected, because the women--her ancestors--had known it, too.

But how?

Ivy looked away and rose to her feet. "I'll bring up some sage. If we smudge the room, the next attack won't be so potent."

The Brunnolf Tradition

Tears scoured the backs of Natalie's eyes. She just wanted to sleep, to wake up feeling safe and relaxed so she could have the energy to finish what she had come all the way from Houston to do: to find Richard.

"Can't you make them stop?" she whispered.

"No," Ivy murmured from the doorway. She did not look back at her, and Natalie saw her shoulders sink in apparent guilt. "But they will get easier and infrequent. The first couple of months are intense. I would not expect to get much rest if I were you."

With that final assertion, she left the room.

Taking advantage of the momentary solitude, Natalie allowed a few tears to fall. How could a person reach through time and connect her to a stranger's thoughts? The more she tried to rationalize it, the more frustrated she became. She had no control, not even over her own mind!

Natalie did not stay in the room when Ivy returned with a smoking bundle of leaves, and she was quick to get dressed and as far from the house as possible.

She rode her Bonneville up Highway 133 and found herself circling around Sopris Park in Carbondale as she had the day before. Her mind was gratefully empty, focusing only on the lay of the road and the light traffic that

The Brunnolf Tradition

picked up as the workday began. It was a pleasant day again, but the wind was cool enough to make her teeth chatter. Or perhaps it was the stress churning in her stomach, struggling for a way to express itself.

At length she caught sight of a sign down Third Street that pierced through her mindless wandering and made her turn toward it. She then parked her bike outside a little building, its bricks painted evergreen, with a chain-link fence surrounding a yard to the side.

A few dogs watched her eagerly as she removed her helmet and swept her hand over her hair. They wagged their tails, excited at the prospect of company, and licked their chops in expectation of treats.

The sight put a smile on Natalie's face, relieving much of the emotional weariness toiling on her heart. She waved at them and stopped at the fence to let them sniff and lick her fingertips through the wire.

It had been a long time since she had a pet. She and her father had never gotten another dog after poor old Sandy, mostly because she had started working at the garage and they no longer had the time to care for one. But she had missed a dog's easy way of loving, always happy to see its person come through the door.

The Brunnolf Tradition

The animals followed her along the fence to the building. Printed on the front door were the words "Elk Pointe Veterinary Clinic."

The mixed smell of animal dander and hospital air, accompanied by the sound of a puppy barking somewhere in the back, greeted her when she entered. A sleek Siamese cat was sprawled on the counter, and a woman in yellow scrubs scratched its chocolate-colored ears. The cat's blue eyes observed Natalie in disdain as though it knew more about the world than she did, and it reminded her unnervingly of her cousin, who had so thoroughly humbled her at their first meeting.

"Good morning," said the woman politely.

"Good morning." Natalie shifted on her feet, hoping she had come to the right place. Carbondale was a reasonably small town, so there could not be many clinics around.

Only one way to find out. "Is Wesley in?"

The woman smiled. "Sure. He's with someone right now, but if you'll just have a seat..."

Breathing again, Natalie sat in one of the chairs in the tiny lobby and waited. All the while the cat continued to watch her.

The Brunnolf Tradition

When she noticed that her leg had started to bounce anxiously, she sat back and tried to settle down. She could not place why she was so nervous, like she expected him to duck out on her.

As the minutes passed, she began to chastise herself for showing up at his workplace. She had heard the guys at the garage complain when a wife or girlfriend stopped by, and often the other mechanics would give him a healthy round of mockery by the end of the day.

But she, of course, was not Wesley's girlfriend, though the mere suggestion in her mind made her stomach twist. She glanced again at the woman behind the counter, who appeared absorbed with work at her computer, yet Natalie still wondered if she had given the wrong impression.

Taking another deep breath, she told herself to relax and stop thinking. She had come to talk to him about Richard because she had found out that he and Wesley had been close. It was strictly business.

Finally a door by the counter opened, and the redheaded veterinarian emerged with a clipboard in hand. Natalie stood, but then to her surprise Holly also walked out behind Wesley.

When she met her eyes, Holly paused. "Natalie?"

The Brunnolf Tradition

Turning, Wesley looked up at Natalie. If he was shocked to see her there, it was swiftly overcome with concern, firming the line of his mouth. He took a step toward her, laying the clipboard on the counter. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," Natalie answered immediately. His presence was consuming. Under his intense gaze, she stammered and returned her attention to her cousin. "What are you doing here?"

Holly recovered herself as well and brushed back her wavy blonde hair. "I hit a stray dog on the way to work a couple of months ago. Wesley has been taking care of her for me."

With a frown, Holly touched his arm. Wesley went rigid, as though volts of electric current raced through him from the connection.

"I still feel so awful about it. Please let me know when she's better."

Staring at her, he nodded slowly and murmured, "I will keep you informed." The velvety timbre of his voice was almost like a caress.

Natalie looked away, feeling as though she was witnessing something indecent. For one horrifying moment,

The Brunnolf Tradition

she speculated whether she had just discovered why Holly had left Cody.

When Holly smiled and released Wesley, those bright blue eyes, which looked so much like Ivy's, landed on her again. Natalie held her breath as an inexplicable tension weaved through the air around them. Even the woman behind the counter must have felt it, for she quietly stood and retreated behind the door.

"So, Natalie," said the petite blonde, eyes still fixed on her, "would you like to come back to the shop with me? I could use some help with inventory today. You might learn something."

The hint was plain: Holly did not want to leave her alone with Wesley. Natalie felt like she was treading a wire high in a city skyline. When she glanced at Wesley, she found him staring at the floor. His shoulders seemed to strain under the presence of both women before him.

Wondering if she would regret it, Natalie decided she was far more concerned about her grandfather than upsetting Holly.

"Sorry," she finally murmured, "but I need to talk with Wesley."

The Brunnolf Tradition

Holly's smile did not falter. "About Richard, no doubt. Well, you can swing by after you're finished, if you want."

Natalie was skeptical that her cousin ever wanted to see her again, much less come to visit.

As she headed for the door, Wesley raised his head and stared at Holly until she was gone. Then, when the last blonde curl vanished from sight, he at last looked at Natalie, his posture visibly relaxing as he smiled a little. "Back on the bike, I see."

Shifting her feet, Natalie felt the lingering ache in her knee and remembered how he had looked up at her as he wrapped it in a bandage. His sudden change in disposition worried her, and she decided the peculiar tension between him and Holly should bear further investigation.

For now, however, Natalie buried her trepidation beneath the blast of questions in her head.

"Why didn't you tell me that you knew Richard?" she demanded without preamble.

Straightening his back, Wesley folded his arms a bit defensively, his blue scrubs creasing around his shoulders. "Cody whisked you away before I had a chance to say anything, didn't he?"

The Brunnolf Tradition

She frowned. "No--actually, you left first. But he seems to think you're hiding something, so give me a reason not to believe him."

At that Wesley clenched his jaw and said nothing.

Natalie stubbornly continued. "When was the last time you saw Richard?"

After a few moments under her gaze, Wesley relented, his hands dropping to rest on his hips. "We went to Capitol Peak about a month ago," he explained. "It was going to be our last trip before the season ended, but then he wanted to hike Sopris on the way back. We didn't get far up the trail before he had to stop."

Her irritation instantly dissolved into worry. "What happened?" she whispered. "Was he hurt? Was he ill?"

Wesley shook his head. "No, he just knows his limits. The man is nearly seventy years old, it's incredible he managed Capitol Peak without any issues."

Natalie looked at the clinic's clean floor. Seventy years old and still climbing mountains? In that case, he surely must be strong, but that implication only pushed her further to despair. If her grandfather had been capable of defending himself, then there were only a couple of reasons why he had not yet been found. Either he did not want to be found, or his strength had been depleted.

The Brunnolf Tradition

If the latter was true, she could only hope that his power had been all that was taken from him...

Without having to look up, she could feel Wesley's penetrating gray eyes pore over her. "He talked about you sometimes," he murmured, "though it was emotional for him."

Then he stepped closer, obliging her to meet his gaze. His expression was sincere and kind.

"I'm very sorry."

That phrase brought images to her mind of her father's coffin, and Natalie turned away slightly, tucking her hands into the leather jacket he had worn so many times.

She focused once again on Richard and pushed all thoughts of her father from her mind. "Did he ever talk about the rest of the family?"

"Only when they did something to upset him."

Her eyes shot up, and she recalled the lack of herbs and other such relics in his house. "How have they upset him before?"

Wesley glanced around the small lobby, but the only ears left to hear them belonged to the Siamese cat bathing itself contentedly on the counter.

"They are manipulative," he said. "Sometimes they mean well, but they will meddle in people's lives to suit their own purposes."

The Brunnolf Tradition

Natalie thought of the nervous couple that had come into Holly's shop, paying for those strange herbal teas. That did not seem like meddling to her though--they had come in asking for help.

"Have they said anything to you about Richard?" Wesley asked.

She shook her head. "Only that he's gone." Raising her chin, she took back control of the questioning. "Cody said you and Richard have been friends for months. How exactly did you meet him?"

Wesley's brow furrowed in annoyance at the mention of Cody's name, and Natalie had the distinct impression that the animosity between the men came from both sides. Again she reminded herself to look further into the situation with Holly.

"Unfortunately," Wesley said at length, "I first met Richard when he brought in his old Labrador to put down. He was distraught, of course. We talked for a while and ran into each other a few times around town after that. He wanted a hiking partner, and I hadn't lived here long enough to know anyone else, so..."

He trailed off, turning his attention to the feline lounging across the counter, and he scratched under its chin. The animal squinted and purred with pleasure.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"I was going to check the trail roads again," he said, glancing back at Natalie, "before they close for the winter. Want to come with me?"

She hesitated. She barely knew this man, the last person to see her grandfather alive, and who was apparently Cody's only suspect. Did she really want to venture out into the woods alone with him?

Perhaps sensing her apprehension, Wesley faced her again and stepped closer as his expression sobered. "Come with me and I will tell you all that I know about Richard," he murmured. "I'm not hiding anything."

Their bodies were only a few inches apart, and her heart fluttered as an enticing force swelled within her. "All right," she whispered without a thought, feeling like she was about to jump off a cliff.

Then he stepped back, and the sudden allure drained from her, leaving her dizzy and abruptly tired.

"I have to prepare for surgery," he said. "I get off work at three. Let's meet at the park, say around three thirty?"

Natalie nodded absently and watched him depart through the door by the counter. The Siamese cat sat up on its haunches, affronted that its attention-giver dared to leave

The Brunnolf Tradition

its presence. Then it glared at Natalie as though it was her fault, and Natalie promptly turned away.

Outside, she breathed in the cool October air and tried to shake off the fever in her cheeks. She would have to control her emotions around Wesley. While she could not deny that he was an attractive man, she felt it was inappropriate to consider him as anything more than a lead to find her grandfather.

Yet even as she explained this logically to herself, Natalie could only think of his gentle hands brushing over her leg as he had bandaged her knee.

Picking up her helmet, she happened to look up and see a police cruiser parked down the street. She could not see the driver clearly, but she knew it was Cody.

A flurry of uncertainties spurred through her mind: Was he following her? Was he keeping Wesley under surveillance? Had he seen Holly leave the clinic a few minutes ago?

Natalie started her bike and buckled her helmet under her chin. She could find out, at least, if he was tracking her. Pulling on the throttle, she rode up the street and around the corner. Then she slowed a bit, keeping her eye on her side mirror, but the patrol car did not follow.

The Brunnolf Tradition

She relaxed only a little. As she followed Main Street toward the highway, her thoughts returned to the strange interaction she had witnessed between Holly and Wesley. It had seemed there was an undercurrent of attraction there, but as soon as Holly had left, Wesley's bearing had changed almost completely. If there was a true connection between them, Natalie did not think he would have been so relieved after she had gone.

Relief indicated stress. In that case, if Holly's presence had caused him to worry, then perhaps he suspected her of something--something to do with Richard? He had claimed that the family was manipulative and intrusive. Had Holly possibly interfered with Richard's life? With Wesley's?

Natalie sighed. She had the feeling she had just stirred up more questions than answers, and she turned her handlebars back south to Redstone. Clouds had gathered around the twin summits of Mount Sopris, smothering out the daylight and foretelling a drop in temperature. She hoped it would not get too cold before the hike with Wesley, and she desperately needed a nap to restore her energy.

If only her ancestors would allow it.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Parking her Bonneville outside Ivy's yellow house, Natalie pulled off her helmet and ran her gloved fingers through her short hair. As the chilled wind rifled through the autumn leaves and she considered the alluring idea of a long, hot shower, movement caught her eye in the distance. Out past the garden at the side of the house, she saw a cloaked figure pass into the line of aspens and pines at the end of the property.

Natalie's first anxious thought recalled the dark creatures haunting her room each time she woke, but the person in the trees had a distinct, physical form, not like the shadow things that dissipated with ease once their command of terror was done.

Setting her helmet on the seat of her bike, she made the quick decision to follow. She sprinted across the lawn to the trees, staying as far back as possible from the figure without losing sight of it. Treading carefully over the fallen leaves and forest brush, they began to climb up a hill. Part of her was petrified, uncertain of what she would find at the top. The only sounds in the mountain air were the shuffling footsteps of the figure ahead.

Suddenly, the cloaked person paused. Natalie dove behind an oak tree and tried to hold her breath as she clutched the rough bark with her fingertips. In the

The Brunnolf Tradition

silence, a crow cawed as it flew from a tree overhead, and she was afraid her pounding heart would betray her presence.

After a full minute, Natalie peeked up the slope.

The figure had vanished.

Alone in the woods with dark clouds gathering in the sky, she looked all around for a sign of the person she had followed. She thought of the sinister spirits looming over her bed, and without caring if she was heard, she proceeded to race up the hill along the riverside. The pain in her knee fired into life, but she managed to reach the top.

Through the trees she found a vast clearing, which cut off into a cliff to her right with the Crystal River churning below. Across the meadow, near the woods on the opposite side, were tall gray stones: a cemetery, she realized with a tremor.

All in an instant, she knew every name over each grave with an idea of when they had lived: Francis Milton Browne, Louise Rosemary Browne, Jasper Nathaniel Browne, Susannah Iris Browne, Virginia Laurel Browne... The information exploded in her mind like the opening of a dam, stealing all the breath from her lungs in its wake.

The Brunnolf Tradition

They were her family. She tried to tell herself that she could not know that for certain, but the sudden details were far too clear in her mind to be imagined.

She shifted uncomfortably as she stood there, feeling as though her relatives were alive and watching her with heavy judgment in their sunken eyes from below the ground. Bile singed the back of her throat at the vision, and she directed her attention to the cloaked figure in the center of the clearing.

The person pulled back the hood of the black cloak, and Natalie was surprised to see long silver hair fall about the figure's shoulders.

It was Ivy!

The old woman faced her and waved for Natalie to come forward, like she had been expecting her. Feeling foolish, Natalie took a deep breath and joined her in the meadow.

She was alarmed to find her great aunt holding a jar filled with thick, syrupy liquid. Suspended in the substance was a photo of Richard.

Without apprehension, Ivy held up the jar for Natalie's proper inspection. "It's a protective spell," she explained. "A special mix my mother taught me. This will keep all manner of ill intentions from touching him."

The Brunnolf Tradition

Natalie frowned. "Is it really going to help if something has already happened to him?"

"No, but it's worth a shot." Turning away, Ivy strode closer to the cliff. Natalie noticed a garden shovel in her other hand. "Help me find a place to bury it."

"What for?"

"So no one can find it and attempt to break it."

"Would that ruin the spell?"

"It would."

Natalie had her doubts about how much a slimy jar was going to do anything to protect her grandfather, but she remembered the scrape on her knee that had healed overnight and followed Ivy. They found a place closer to the trees and interred the jar in the earth.

As Ivy covered the spot with leaves, concealing any sign of disturbance, Natalie walked to the edge of the cliff and peered at the rushing river below. It was not terribly far down, a little over thirty feet, but she imagined falling into the freezing water would be painful nevertheless.

"This part of the river looks deeper than the stream next to the highway," she observed.

"You should see it in the spring," Ivy said, rising to her feet. "The snowmelt from the mountains turns it into a

The Brunnolf Tradition

torrent. I sometimes watch the kayakers try to take this bend. They always roll over."

When Natalie looked at her, she caught sight of the cemetery in the background. For a moment she thought she saw someone standing there, but it must have been a trick of the cloudy daylight, for it vanished before she could make it out.

Ivy looked over her shoulder and smiled. "Would you like to see them?"

Without waiting for an answer, the old woman turned and walked toward the graves.

Natalie grudgingly approached the little cemetery. Her gaze made an automatic sweep of the ground, searching for the yellow spigot that marked the row of her parents' graves back in Houston, and she shunned the thought mercilessly.

She realized that her poor mother was not buried there with the other generations of her family.

As they reached the headstones, she was surprised to find faded pictures set within many of them. Ivy led her to one of the oldest stones. Green moss had grown in the grooves of their inscriptions, and Ivy brushed the dirt off a black-and-white photograph of two men standing outside the foursquare house at the bottom of the hill.

The Brunnolf Tradition

One was dressed in a black jacket and flat-brimmed hat. He had a thick beard, his hands hidden in his pockets.

Pointing to him, Ivy said, "That's my grandfather, Francis. He came to Redstone to work in the coal mines. He and his brother Jasper built the house." She motioned to the other man in the photo, dressed in the same fashion, but with a mustache instead of a beard.

Natalie shivered as she looked at the names, which had already popped into her head the instant she set eyes on the cemetery. Part of her was in awe of her family's ability to conjure memories into the minds of their descendants. On the other hand, she was mortified once again to find she had no control over her own thoughts!

Whether or not she sensed Natalie's wrangling emotions, Ivy urged her along the graves to another stone, engraved with the name "Susannah Iris Browne." The picture showed a young woman with dark hair, though with features uncannily similar to Ivy's.

"This is my mother," Ivy said. "And here," she gestured to the next grave, "is my sister, Laurel."

There were only eight years between the dates on Laurel's headstone. Natalie observed that Ivy's name was already inscribed next to Laurel's in preparation, and that the two shared the same date of birth.

The Brunnolf Tradition

After looking around, Natalie asked, "What about your husband? Holly's grandfather?" She sensed that he was not there beneath the ground and pondered fleetingly if he might pop out from behind a tree, ready to introduce himself.

Ivy smiled fondly. "He is buried in Carbondale with his family," she said, succinctly squashing Natalie's optimism. "Nick was always appreciative of my heritage. When I told him I wanted to rest next to my sister, he said he would expect no less." She moved on, and they walked between the graves of their family together.

"And my grandmother? Richard's wife?" Natalie asked eagerly as the idea occurred to her. There had been no talk of her, so she had assumed the woman had passed.

Pausing, Ivy shook her head irritably. "That woman left when Willow was just four years old. It was a very unpleasant divorce. I don't think Richard has heard from her since."

Natalie was reduced to silence. Just as she had never known her mother, it seemed Willow had never known hers either. But at least she had Ivy.

"Were you close to my mother?" she asked quietly. Just speaking of her made Natalie's heart ache.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"Oh, yes," Ivy murmured, grief apparent in her voice. "I loved her very much. You are more like her than you know. I see the same determination in you that I often saw in her."

They left the graveyard and started down the hill through the forest. Natalie drifted through her imagination, the only place where her mother now existed. She wondered why she had left with her father for Texas. Had she also been scared for Natalie's future, trying to spare her from the family curse?

What would happen now that Natalie had returned?

A terrible chill coursed through her as Natalie apprehended that she may have undone all the efforts her parents had undertaken to protect her. Yet it had never been a guarantee that she would be safe. That woman, her ancestor from the dream that morning, had known that her path could cross with murder at any time, in any place. The same might happen to Natalie one day, regardless of whether she was with the Brunnolf family when it came.

She gritted her teeth and supposed that conclusion was not the best excuse for her actions.

With a deep breath, Natalie redirected her thoughts once again to her missing grandfather. So many aspects of

The Brunnolf Tradition

her family had been unearthed in only a couple of days, but none of it was getting her closer to finding him.

She could not lose focus.

"When was the last time you saw Richard?"

Ivy sighed and said with a twinge of scorn, "I believe it was last Thanksgiving. He scarcely said two words to anyone, and at the end of the night he said we ought to burn the house down." She shrugged, adjusting the black cloak about her shoulders. "Of course, that might have been the wine talking."

"Why would he want to burn down the house?" Natalie asked in bewilderment. "Didn't he grow up there with you?"

"He certainly did. But he never much liked family tradition. When the dreams started and Mother tried to teach him our ways, he grew belligerent. He moved to Denver straight after school, and he didn't come back until Willow was born. Mother was very ill at the time and, whatever their disagreements, he was devastated when she passed."

Her stomach sank. Natalie realized she had rightly assumed that her grandfather had gone against the Brunnolf tradition. Ivy sounded bitter about the situation, but Natalie could not imagine the old woman doing anything to harm her brother. Had they not just buried a spell to protect him?

The Brunnolf Tradition

However, it still left her suspicious of Holly, especially when her cousin's recent behavior was taken into account. Perhaps that had something to do with Holly's strange interaction with Wesley as well--the men had been good friends.

A cool breeze stirred the autumn leaves about their feet at the bottom of the hill. Natalie felt a heavy gloom spread over her shoulders as they reached the house. The clearing seemed to be a hundred miles away, like they had crossed between two different worlds.

She felt more exhausted than ever from the multitude of possibilities whirling in her mind, and she thought of what Ivy had said after they first met: *"We have the ability to detect hidden potentials in the world, and we can nurture them into fruition or hinder them from existence..."*

With Richard's absence weighing on her, she murmured, "He could have stayed in Houston... He could have still kept everything secret, and stayed."

"Well, dear," Ivy said, gently patting her back, "I won't say that you're wrong."

CHAPTER SIX

Mount Sopris was crowned with afternoon light to the south, the clouds having retreated into the distance.

Natalie leaned on her bike outside of Sopris Park, waiting for Wesley to show. She found herself gnashing her teeth as she scowled at the few scratches on her Bonneville's ruby gas tank, marring the fresh paint job Conrad had done in Houston. Her father would have been mortified that she had not buffed them out yet.

A green Jeep pulled up next to her and Wesley stepped out, wearing his gray wool coat. She stuffed her hands in her bomber jacket as he loped toward her, fiddling once again with the sparkplug in her pocket.

"Ready to go?" he asked.

"Ready."

In the sunlight she could see the stubble on his face and his eyes looked more blue than gray. As he gazed down at her, she ran her hand anxiously over her short dark hair and hoped she did not look too tired. Her nap at Ivy's had been short and frequently interrupted by the creaking of the old house, which made her start at the fear of something approaching her bed.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Wesley gestured to her boots. "How comfortable are those?"

Natalie shrugged. "Comfy enough. Why?"

"I thought about taking a little walk up the trail when we get there, if you're up to it."

They climbed into the Jeep and Wesley took them south on Highway 133 toward Mount Sopris. Just over a mile out of Carbondale, he turned left onto Prince Creek Road.

His radio was set to classic rock, just as her father's had always been. In spite of the memories each song brought to her, Natalie's mood lightened. For the first time in a while, she remembered him alive and smiling without a hint of pain.

She traced her fingertips over the dashboard. Beneath the hood she envisioned the working mechanics, pleased to find that the system was clean and well managed, though she sensed Wesley did not do the work himself. When she withdrew her hand, she wondered if she had inherited the gift from an ancestor and shook her head as she realized that she no longer tried to doubt the ability's existence.

Then she noticed that Wesley was watching her, and Natalie quickly turned her thoughts to her grandfather. "Have you been to Richard's house since he disappeared?"

The Brunnolf Tradition

"I went there looking for him before I reported it," Wesley said. "His car was gone, and his computer, so I thought he might have gone to Denver."

She almost opened her mouth to say Cody had drawn the same conclusion, but then she thought better of it. Thinking of the datebook and his scheduled lecture at the university that Friday, she asked, "Do you know why someone might have taken his laptop? Was he working on anything unusual?"

Wesley shook his head, raising his brow. "Not that I know of. His spent most of his time doing historical research, working out the origins of old wives' tales and superstitions. It was easy to get him into an avid discussion about the Civil War or the Great Depression. He always talked about the past as though he had lived through it."

Again Natalie hesitated. She knew exactly why Richard seemed to have firsthand knowledge about history--it had been handed to him through the memories of their ancestors.

Looking at the profile of Wesley's face, the sun shining on his auburn hair, she decided to say nothing. It was difficult enough for her to believe, even as the nightmares haunted her. She did not want Wesley to think she was... different.

The Brunnolf Tradition

As they drove slowly down the road, Wesley encouraged her to look out the window for any sign of a vehicle or person. Natalie frowned at the possibility of finding her grandfather's body. She had to believe that she would sit and drink coffee with him one day, even if it meant listening to him ramble on about the French and Indian Wars. That was why she had come so far--to find her family. Though she had discovered the Brunnolfs and their extraordinary heritage, it simply was not the same with her grandfather missing.

Still... She suddenly could not get the image of the Death card from Holly's Tarot reading out of her head.

After about twenty minutes, they arrived at a gravel parking lot with a signpost showing the ways to Dinkle Lake, the Thomas Lakes, and Mount Sopris. There were a few other cars in the lot.

A couple of older men appeared to have recently returned from a hike, loading fishing gear in the back of their truck. One waved at the Jeep as Wesley parked next to them. When they stepped out, Natalie watched the men shake hands.

"Catch anything?" Wesley asked with a smile.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"You know, I caught a bass at least three feet long," said one man, measuring the size between his empty hands, "but I had to put it back."

"Right," said Wesley with a laugh. He motioned for Natalie to come closer. "Natalie, this is Gary, and that's Lloyd."

"Nice to meet you," she said politely.

Gary with the three-foot bass cleared his throat.

"Have you found anything?"

Wesley's humor flattened and he shook his head.

With a frown, Gary patted his shoulder and turned around to close the tailgate of his truck. "It's a shame. We see the rangers up here all the time now, but we tell them it's useless. You know the Brownes. It'll be amazing if they even find his bones, probably grind them to dust to use in some devil-worship..."

Wesley grabbed the older man's arm and whispered hastily into his ear while Lloyd leaned in to listen. When Gary and Lloyd both turned to gape at her, Natalie looked at the dirt and rolled around a rock with her boot. Her cheeks grew hot as she recalled the anxious couple that had come into Holly's shop, and she wondered why her family had such a dubious reputation.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"Very sorry, miss," Gary said. "Didn't mean any disrespect."

They left quickly after that, the truck kicking up a cloud of dust. She imagined them racing down to the Redstone General Store or the Crystal Club Café, blabbing to anyone who would listen about the new girl with the motorcycle: "Don't you know? She's one of *them*..."

Wesley returned to the Jeep briefly, retrieving a light backpack and slinging it over his shoulder. "Come on," he said.

Frowning, Natalie followed him out of the lot to a trail marked for the Thomas Lakes.

After a few minutes of listening to their feet crunch on a thin layer of gravel, Natalie could not contain her indignation any longer. "What were those guys getting at?"

Glancing at her, Wesley said, "Your family has been a part of this community through several generations. Everyone who lives here knows, or at least suspects, what the old Browne family is capable of. I haven't lived here for very long, but after hanging around Richard it became very apparent."

She clenched her teeth, her brow furrowing. "Are you saying this whole town believes witches are real?"

The Brunnolf Tradition

He smirked a bit and leaned closer to her. "I'm saying that they don't believe in coincidences."

His proximity and amused expression made her anger evaporate into shyness. "How far is it to the lakes?" she asked, changing the subject.

"A little over three and a half miles, but we're not going that far."

"Where are we going?"

His gray eyes were hesitant, and once again the amusement drained from his features. "I'm going to show you the last place where I saw Richard."

Soon they entered a grove of aspens. Walking among the tall, white, slender trunks with fiery leaves of gold shimmering above, Natalie felt as though they had strayed into a fantasy world. The trail through the trees was clear and appeared heavily used, but to her it was undiscovered territory. Though she had gone camping with her father on occasion in the giant coniferous forests of Huntsville, she had never seen anything like the aspens so tightly rooted together. It was so profound that even when her knee began to ache, she was too distracted by the beauty of her surroundings to let it stop her.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Her awe seemed to entertain Wesley, who indulged her with several stories of hiking with Richard. That past summer, they had gotten lost for three days in the Maroon-Bells Wilderness, but he confessed it had been his favorite trip. They had come across a black bear at a river, and Richard had not been concerned in the least, filtering their water while the bear fished downstream just a few yards away. Wesley believed the old man was not afraid of anything.

Natalie could tell by the way he talked that Wesley cared a great deal about Richard, like a son boasting on the accomplishments of his father. But each time he told her a tale that made him smile, it was eventually overtaken by a deep, troubled frown.

"We'll find him, Wesley," she murmured when he had fallen into grim silence again.

He looked over to her for a long moment, and she knew he was curious about her intuition. She was a Brunnolf, after all.

"Maybe you're right," he said. "But I don't expect to find him alive."

Had anyone else said it, Natalie would have shrugged it off and continued to believe her grandfather was alive

The Brunnolf Tradition

and well. But Wesley's doubts made her heart sink into the pit of her stomach, and she thought she might be sick.

"Sorry," Wesley said, touching her arm, which only made her more anxious. "I try not to be pessimistic. It's just what I'm used to."

When he looked away, his eyes cool and withdrawn, Natalie apprehended that he must not have arrived in Colorado out of the blue. Cody had mentioned that Wesley came from Pittsburg, and she pondered what might have driven him from such a large city to the little town of Carbondale nestled in the Rockies.

A few minutes later, they emerged from the aspen forest into a wide meadow. The peaks of Mount Sopris loomed close by, larger than life. Tiny scattered wildflowers clung to survival in the cold mountain air, and the grass had yellowed under autumn's care. The sky was darkening; the glow of the setting sun dyed a few streaks of cloud pink on the horizon.

"This is it," Wesley stated.

He led her off the trail into the open field, hiking up to the crest of a hill. From there they could see the Roaring Fork Valley stretched before them with Carbondale sheltered in its seat.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"We were standing here," Wesley said quietly, gazing into the distance. The fading light cast a shadow over his cheeks. "Richard had been acting strange lately. He was trying to explain something to me." Taking a deep breath, Wesley craned his neck to observe the first few stars peeking into the sky overhead. "He wanted me to leave town, get as far away as possible."

Natalie studied him, sensing his tremulous emotion. "Why?"

He shook his head. "I still don't understand. But I got angry..." Clenching his jaw, he turned away from her in shame. "I just left him here. I shouldn't have done that. It was getting dark, just like it is now. I shouldn't have left him alone."

A deep ache swelled inside her chest as Natalie heard the regret in his voice. She raised her hand to try comforting him, but her nerves got the better of her, and she dug her fists into her pockets once again.

After a while, Wesley sighed and faced her. "I tried to contact him the following week, but he didn't answer my calls. At first I thought he just wasn't speaking to me. Then I went to his house and he wasn't there. I thought he must have left, but now..."

The Brunnolf Tradition

Natalie stepped forward, staring out at Carbondale's twinkling city lights. "Do you think he might have run from something?" she asked. "Maybe that's why he told you to leave, too."

"No," Wesley said, shaking his head. "He wasn't the type of man to run away."

Glancing at his forlorn expression, Natalie murmured, "I don't think Richard's disappearance is your fault."

When Wesley said nothing, she decided to turn away and give him a moment to compose his thoughts. She looked at the aspens surrounding them, the woods beyond growing indistinct as the sunlight disappeared.

Her gaze paused. It took almost a full minute for Natalie to realize she was staring at the outline of a figure in the trees, and the hair rose on the back of her neck.

"Wesley..." she whispered, struggling to breathe.

He turned, and then he followed her gaze to the shadowy form hidden among the aspens. "I see it," he said and sighed in resignation. "It's been following us up the trail."

"It?" she repeated.

The figure vanished in an instant, and she shuddered. She had not yet seen one so clearly while she was awake.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"They are called many things," Wesley said, peering along the trees as though it was still there. "Probably because they are many things: messengers, spirits, beings created for one purpose or another. They appear only as shadows to us because they have no true form--"

"I don't care what they are," she whispered. "How do you make them go away?"

Wesley looked down at her in concern. "Have you seen one before?"

"Yes," she admitted reluctantly. "Lately, I see them every night."

"They're nothing to be afraid of," he tried to reassure her.

She huffed. "Says the one who hasn't felt its hands around your neck."

At that he put his arm firmly over her shoulders, bringing her close, and he stared more intently into the trees. Her heart raced to feel the heat of his body at her side. Though she had admittedly longed for the embrace, she was too uneasy now to appreciate it.

"I've only started seeing them recently," he confessed. "One keeps leading me here, and I was chasing another when I was driving up the highway that day I saw you fall."

The Brunnolf Tradition

Natalie stepped away from him, anxiety twisting in her stomach. On the way down Prince Creek Road, she had decided not to speak of her family's innate talents, fearing Wesley would judge her. Now he was speaking of those harrowing shadows like they were curious new animals to study in his practice.

"You're into all of this, too?" she finally managed to whisper.

It had grown so dark that it was hard to look into his eyes. "Richard saw the ability in me," he said. "I've been sensitive my whole life, able to read other people, open to receiving messages from all kinds of beings, good and bad. Richard was teaching me to control it, to use it."

Natalie shook her head. "But Richard had distanced himself from the family tradition. I didn't think that he... cast spells or... or 'manipulated' people, as you put it."

"He didn't like the way the family used their talents," Wesley said. "That doesn't mean he rejected his own. He had dreams about the past. Sometimes he shared them with me. He was able to go back in time and look at the world as it truly was."

Looking away, Natalie turned the sparkplug in her pocket between her fingers. "Wesley," she murmured, and in

The Brunnolf Tradition

spite of the stress simmering under her skin, her heart fluttered at the contour of his name on her lips. Sighing, she continued, "We all have those dreams, every member of my family... I've had them."

As he stared at her, she told him about the nightmares she had experienced, waking each time with a dark, threatening spirit upon her, and how Ivy had described them as the result of a long-forgotten spell.

It was an incredible release just to divulge to someone how terrified she truly was.

Wesley said nothing as he privately considered her revelation, and then he suggested they sit down. They would have to wait a few minutes to let their vision adjust to the night before they could head back. Natalie supposed he was telling the truth, but she also wondered if he knew that she needed some time to collect herself.

A chill evening breeze caused the meadow to ripple. Natalie's gaze shied from the trees, and instead she looked up at the sky as more stars appeared. Somewhere near she heard the gentle running water of a creek. In the obscuring dark, it seemed as though they had traveled to the underworld, like mythical heroes in the ancient epics. She was grateful to have Wesley, who could guide her back to the other side.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"I know this sounds frightening," Wesley whispered then, pulling a bottle of water from his backpack, "but the next time you see this shadow, try to embrace it."

She shuddered. "Let it take me?"

"Often these shadows can be the things we fear about ourselves," he explained. "See what happens, and remember that it has no power over you. You are the one in this world. It can only be here for moments at a time."

"So I could... send it back?"

Her hand subconsciously caressed her throat. The scratches from earlier that morning had faded away. She remembered that Ivy had cast the ghoul out of the room, but Natalie had merely assumed her great aunt had the power and training to do so.

"If your will is strong, you certainly could," Wesley told her. "But it might be trying to tell you something, and you won't know what that is until you bring it inside. That's the easiest way to get rid of it."

Natalie frowned. He meant well, she was sure, but she did not think Wesley understood how those otherworld shades affected her. Unable to breathe, eyes unwilling to close only because she *had* to look, had to try comprehending what was about to kill her... She was free only when her tormenter decided to release her.

The Brunnolf Tradition

He took a drink of water and then offered her the bottle. She accepted, feeling a little thrill as she placed her lips over the spot his had been. Then she lay back, staring up as darkness wrapped around the mountains.

"I don't understand why it keeps bringing me back here," Wesley murmured a few minutes later as he looked around the meadow.

Not knowing what to say, Natalie kept silent. She could barely discern the outline of Wesley's face against the starry sky. He continued to stare into the trees, each of his breaths creating little clouds on the chilled evening air, and she feared that he hoped the shadow would come back.

They finished the rest of the water together and then returned to the trail. Every sound was magnified in the forest at night. She frequently caught movements in the corner of her eye, but she could not identify what caused them, so she resolved to keep her gaze to the ground.

Then Wesley took her hand. His palm was smooth and warm, and soon her fears receded behind timid delight. He had said he had an ability to read people, and she wondered if he had sensed her fright or merely wanted to guide her through the dark. Whichever the case, she hoped he could not detect her giddy elation.

The Brunnolf Tradition

The walk back seemed much shorter, likely because they were going downhill and she was not as distracted by the scenery. Yet by the time they reached the Jeep, her knee was on fire and her limp was prominent. Wesley opened the door for her before going around to the driver's side.

They went along Prince Creek Road the same way they had come. She thought Wesley glanced at her several times, and when she chanced a look over, their eyes met. With an irrepressible smile she turned away, feeling silly.

"You should come back in the summer," he said suddenly. "The meadow is filled with wildflowers, mostly lupines and Indian paintbrushes..."

She grinned at his subtle invitation, her heart cartwheeling around in her chest. "I'd like that."

He glanced at her again and smiled.

When she looked out the window, something jettied out in front of the car across the road. Wesley cursed, slamming on the brakes and throwing his arm out in front of her to keep her back against the seat.

"What the hell was that?" she said, her pulse racing.

Together they peered out the passenger window through a cloud of dust, where the shadow had vanished. A dirt path led to an old, rusted gate.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"That's a private road," Wesley said, sounding breathless. "There are a few ranches up here."

"Can we go that way?"

He raised his brow. "You're not against trespassing?"

"You said something keeps bringing you back here," she reminded him. "Was it a coincidence we saw it run in there?"

Wesley sighed. "Okay. Stay here and lock the door."

He got out of the Jeep and she watched him walk down the short road to the gate. Her eyes wandered fervently through the dark, afraid that one of the spirits would attack him. But after he stood at the gate for a few moments, Wesley turned around and came back.

She unlocked the door for him to get inside.

"I couldn't see anything out there," he said, rubbing his hands together from the cold night air. "The gate's locked."

Natalie immediately started patting down her coat. When she had dropped her bike that day she met Wesley, her lock picks had fallen out of her saddlebag. She had tucked them into her bomber jacket, and there she found them, still stuffed in the inner pocket.

With a grin, she hopped out of the Jeep and, ignoring Wesley's exclamations, ran to the gate.

The Brunnolf Tradition

By the time he reached her side, she had the padlock undone.

"Where'd you learn to do that?" he demanded.

"Natural ability," she said with a smirk. It was true; when she touched the lock, she instantly knew the position of the pins required to release it. "Come on, get the car."

She opened the gate and Wesley brought the Jeep through. Then she climbed back inside.

They drove slowly along the dirt road, searching for anything out of place or disturbed. It was hard in the dark, and she worried that they would have to come back the next day. The dirt road curved around a group of pine trees.

Her eyes settled on a faceless shadow watching her from around the evergreen branches. It ducked away and she grabbed Wesley's arm.

"Over there! I saw it!"

As she pointed the way, Wesley stepped on the gas to get the Jeep across a small ditch. They bumped around the terrain before reaching the trees. Then, parking the car, Wesley reached across her lap and opened the glove box, retrieving a flashlight.

"Stay here," he said.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"Hell no!" she retorted and got out before he could say anything else.

When he reached her side with the flashlight shining before them, he uttered, "Did I mention that stubbornness runs through your family?"

At that time, she did not care what Wesley had to say. She knew they were on the verge of something, and the possibility of finding the first real clue to lead her to Richard overwhelmed every other prospect in her mind.

They walked slowly into the trees, their feet crunching over piles of fallen leaves, breaths erupting into patches of fog in the cold air. Wesley shined the flashlight back and forth. Every now and then Natalie would glance behind, making sure the Jeep's headlights stayed within sight.

"Rowan."

"What?" Natalie said.

Wesley glanced at her. "What?"

"Didn't you say something?"

"No."

A chill washed all the color from her face. She had heard a man's distinct voice, sounding as though it had been right next to her.

Rowan. What did that mean?

The Brunnolf Tradition

Wesley placed his hand on her shoulder, encouraging her to keep moving forward.

Finally the flashlight struck a pair of red reflectors. Dread overwhelmed her, making her legs shake and her stomach roll. For a moment they both simply stood staring at the back of a car, covered in dust and autumn leaves.

"Wesley," she whispered, her teeth chattering. "Is that his car?"

He nodded, a muscle flexing in his jaw. Then he took a step forward.

"No!" she said, grabbing his arm. "Don't... What if he's..." Tears choked her throat. She imagined Richard's body sagging behind the wheel, his skin turned gray and eyes lolling. Bile burned on the back of her tongue.

Wesley turned to her and brushed his free hand over her cheek, his fingertips cool against her feverish skin.

"It's all right," he murmured gently. "I have to look. Stay here."

He withdrew from her grasp and she covered her mouth with both hands as he slowly approached the car. Shining the light through the tinted windows, he cupped his hand around his eyes and peered inside.

"It's empty," he said, relief evident in his tone.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Her own voice trembled when she asked, "What about the trunk?"

Wesley stared at the car in hesitation. "I don't want to touch it," he said quietly. "There could be evidence. But I... Well, I don't smell anything."

Natalie gathered her nerves and stepped toward the vehicle. As she got closer, she saw in the light that it was a silver Cadillac.

"I won't be able to pick the lock," she said. "These new models have digital safety precautions. You'd need special equipment to get in without breaking the windows."

Thinking about the mechanics of the car erased fear from her mind, replacing it with logic. The vehicle looked intact. She asked for the flashlight, and without putting too much weight on her knee, she lay down on the ground.

Sweeping away leaves, she shined the flashlight at the undercarriage and looked for any damage or signs of tampering. There were clumps of dirt stuck to low-hanging parts and a few scrapes, likely from taking the car off the road.

She held her breath as she reached out and touched one of the tires. Her senses spread open, and she envisioned the axle, engine, wiring, battery, exhaust... Yet she found nothing. When she attempted to go further, wanting to see

The Brunnolf Tradition

who last sat behind the wheel, a spark of energy jolted through her fingertips and up her arm.

With a gasp, she scrambled to her feet.

"What is it?" Wesley asked.

Her mind reeled. "I touched the tire. I get these visions--I can see everything about the car, sometimes even how it was damaged, but..." She rubbed her throbbing hand. "It shocked me! The *tire* shocked me! How is that even possible?"

"Are you hurt?" He grasped her hand and shined the flashlight on it. The tip of her finger was red, but not burned.

"I'm fine," she stammered, entranced by his touch. Taking a deep breath, she focused again on the car. "It's not wrecked, and it hasn't been tampered with. What is it doing out here?"

"Someone's trying to cover their tracks," Wesley said with an angry scowl as he released her hand. "Someone who would have access to his car."

"Or someone who took his keys from him," she added rationally. She looked away and brushed the dirt from her jeans, knowing what she was about to say would upset him. "We should call Cody."

The Brunnolf Tradition

"Cody?" Wesley snapped. "Natalie, you can't trust him."

She frowned. "Why not? Because he's a friend of the family? Granted I've seen some strange things lately, but tell me, why would they hurt my grandfather?"

After a moment of struggle, Wesley admitted, "I don't know."

Natalie spread her hands. "So what are we going to do? Just leave the car here and not tell anyone about it? You said there could be evidence here and that very well may be true. We have to call him."

"Fine," Wesley muttered. "But we won't get cell reception up here."

"This property belongs to someone. Let's find their house."

"And tell them what, exactly? That we trespassed onto their property to track down a shadow person?"

She frowned. "Well, we should probably leave that part out." Turning around, she searched for the Jeep's headlights between the trees in the distance. "Come on. It's getting late."

Reluctantly Wesley followed her back through the woods. "Just call the police department," he finally

The Brunnolf Tradition

relented. "Cody might not be on duty, and we'll still get someone out here to check things and make a report."

Natalie conceded. She did not want to argue with Wesley, but finding Richard had to be her priority.

His placing the blame automatically on Cody worried her. The officer had been very helpful and sympathetic to both her and Ivy, and as far as she could tell, Cody cared deeply about her family.

The only reason she could furnish for Wesley's attitude was based on Cody's suspicions. She knew instinctively that Wesley had nothing to do with Richard's disappearance, but it seemed Cody had hounded him about it. With a frown, she recalled that his patrol car had been parked outside the vet's office earlier that day.

And, of course, there was Holly. Her cousin's involvement was still puzzling.

Once they were back in the Jeep, Wesley drove along the dirt road until they found the ranch house.

An hour passed before the police finally arrived. During that time, Natalie and Wesley took the rancher and his son out to show them Richard's car abandoned in the trees. Though he seemed uneasy that they had come onto his

The Brunnolf Tradition

property, the rancher was understanding and glad to help with a missing person's case.

When the police car trundled up the dirt road toward Wesley's Jeep and the rancher's truck parked outside the woods, it switched on its top lights and shined a spotlight into the trees. The officer then got out of the car and approached them.

Natalie glanced at Wesley when she recognized Cody's face. It was plain that neither man was pleased to see the other.

"I thought you'd be off duty," Wesley said.

"It's my case." Cody glared at him before turning to the rancher. "I understand you've found Richard Browne's car on your property."

"Yes--well, they found it," said the rancher uncertainly.

"And you gave this man permission to come onto your land?"

"Well, no, but--"

"So this man was trespassing?"

Natalie approached him. "Cody, it was my idea," she stated. "I was the one who picked the lock to get through the gate."

The Brunnolf Tradition

Stepping closer to her with a heavy brow, Cody whispered, "I'll deal with you later. Do you know how upset Ivy would be if she knew you were hanging around with *him* all alone in the wilderness?"

She could not believe his tone, talking down to her as though she were a child. "With all respect," she uttered with an offended scowl, "it's none of her damn business who I decide to spend my time with."

Cody opened his mouth to reply, but Wesley interrupted him.

"Shouldn't you take a look at the car, officer?"

Gritting his teeth, Cody withdrew a flashlight from his belt and marched into the woods. Natalie quickly followed to show him the way, while Wesley and the rancher came behind.

Cody inspected the Cadillac for a few minutes, making note of the tag and serial number. Then he called in a code on his radio, and he was answered promptly, though Natalie had no idea what the codes meant.

"So," he began, shining his flashlight in Wesley's face, "what were you doing up here tonight?"

"Went for a walk," Wesley answered curtly.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Natalie stepped in. "We were on our way back to town when I told him to stop." She narrowed her eyes. "I had a feeling, a sixth sense, if you know what I mean."

And of course he did. Having been so close to Holly and still admired by Ivy, he must have known all about the Brunnolf history. She dared him to doubt her judgment.

With a frown at her, Cody turned his broad shoulders to the rancher and took a quick report from him.

She leaned close to Wesley. "He doesn't like you."

Wesley only scowled and they walked out of the trees once more to where the vehicles were parked.

Silently she fumed. It seemed neither of the men was able to relinquish the grudge that had built between them. She had a mind to tell Ivy about Cody's attitude. The old woman had brushed off his resentful mention of Wesley before, that first night Natalie spent in Redstone. Maybe she could hex some sense into him...

Soon Cody and the rancher returned. "Dr. Crawford," he called. "You can go. Natalie, you're waiting here with me. I'll take you to Ivy's when we're finished."

"No," she said defiantly. Perhaps it was the stubbornness Wesley said she had inherited from Richard, or maybe it was the determination Ivy had spoken of in her mother, but Natalie had never taken direction from anyone

The Brunnolf Tradition

but her father. That was not about to change. "I'm going with Wesley to pick up my bike."

Cody came closer, aiming a baleful stare at the red-haired man. Wesley might have been an inch taller than the policeman, but when they stood side by side, Natalie feared Cody's brawn would crush him.

"Well," Cody uttered, "I see you've already managed to turn her against us."

Natalie's spine went rigid. "I'm not against anyone!" she snapped, but both men ignored her, absorbed in the hostility smoldering between them.

"I'm not leaving," Wesley stated, his voice low and face as cold as stone. "I'm going to stick around and make sure you don't destroy any evidence that could incriminate you."

"I've got nothing to hide," Cody said, spreading his arms with an unpleasant sneer. "I'm not the one with a record."

Wesley lunged at him. Natalie barely had time to grab his arm so she could pull him back before Cody connected one hard right hook to Wesley's jaw. He staggered, but regained his stance just as Natalie put herself between them.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"Do the words 'police brutality' mean anything to you?" she shouted at Cody. Her heart pounded in her ears, fury and disbelief warring in her veins.

"He charged forward with the intent to injure," Cody said. "That's enough for assaulting an officer."

"Just back off!"

She turned to Wesley, pushing against his chest. His eyes were dark with rage, breaths hissing through his grinding teeth.

"Let it go," she pleaded. His lean muscles were taut beneath her palms. "Come on, let's get out of here."

The two men glared at one another a few seconds longer before Wesley finally glanced down at her and turned away.

His strides were long and fast, fists clenched in restraint. When they reached the Jeep, he tore off his woolen coat and threw it inside before jumping into the driver's seat. Natalie had barely gotten inside the door when he stomped on the gas, kicking up a cloud of dust, and she quickly put on her seatbelt.

As they sped to the end of Prince Creek Road, she kept silent. Wesley seethed beside her, the heat of his anger reddening his cheeks. She could not see the left side of his face, but expected it would begin to swell shortly.

The Brunnolf Tradition

His ire was the most dangerous she had ever witnessed in a person. Cody had spurred it on in apparent amusement, like a child poking a tiger with a sharp stick, safe behind the bars of a cage.

But there was no cage anymore, and when Wesley veered recklessly onto Highway 133, the tires screeching across the pavement, she was genuinely terrified of him.

Cody's provocation insinuated that Wesley had some kind of criminal history, but there was no telling at that point how serious those crimes had been. She dared not ask him about it now. Instead, she stared mutely out her window at the stars hanging over the valley.

When they reached Carbondale, Wesley seemed to have calmed at last. His shoulders slackened and he began to drive within the speed limit. She was grateful Cody had decided not to chase after them.

The Jeep turned toward Sopris Park, where the twin-peaked mountain appeared farther away than it actually was, as Natalie had discovered from their hike. Wesley parked beside her red Bonneville and dropped his hands in his lap. Glancing at him, Natalie wondered whether it would be wise to speak yet, or if she could say anything at all without her voice betraying her fright.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"Sorry," he murmured a few moments later. "I shouldn't have lost my temper."

Relieved by his apology, she offered a nervous laugh. "You should be glad I didn't lose mine. We'd both be in jail."

But he did not appreciate her humor. She glimpsed a bruise blooming at the corner of his mouth, and she frowned.

"Thanks for everything," she said quietly.

He glanced at her. "You shouldn't go back there. I don't trust Ivy."

She struggled to withhold a weary sigh. Though she understood his suspicions, she could not share them. Her family had their secrets, that much was obvious, but even though Richard had denounced their traditions, or rather their practice of them, she knew Ivy would protect every member of her family at any cost.

"I'll be fine," she assured him.

He faced her, staring steadily into her soul. The depth of his gray eyes drew her in like a moth to the moonlight, and such a gaze made her believe he did not want her to leave. She was embarrassed to realize she did not want to leave him either.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Oh! What was she supposed to do? She could not deal with this brand of stress, not now.

Opening the door, she murmured, "I'll see you later," and got out of the Jeep.

Wesley waited there as her bike warmed up and she buckled her helmet beneath her chin. Her hands trembled as she pulled on the throttle, but she was ready to fly, hoping the road could assuage her panicked feelings. Wesley followed her down Main Street, whether to watch over her or because he wanted to prolong their parting, until they reached Highway 133. Then she watched in her side mirror as he turned around, and finally she could breathe again.

Her nerves were jittery with excitement and anxious restraint. She had already warned herself it would be better not to get involved, but her determination was crumbling, especially when she thought of their joined hands as they moved through the aspens in the dark. Her imagination taunted her, musing over what would happen if she turned back and raced after him, let him hold her through the night...

The hum of her Bonneville lulled her into ease, the one comfort on which she could always rely. Her ride to Redstone relieved the tension in her muscles, which had continued to build since they chased that shadow creature

The Brunnolf Tradition

to Richard's car. Finally her head started to clear, and she shook off the last ruins of her reverie.

Something ethereal was plainly involved in Richard's disappearance. Wesley's advice to embrace the spirits that threatened her had been out of the question before, but she was starting to believe it could be a practical way to figure out what was going on in her family.

It was all connected: Richard, Wesley, Holly, the dreams, the curse... Natalie only had to find the single piece that could explain how.

CHAPTER SEVEN

As she came close to Ivy's house, she noticed that a blue SUV was parked in the driveway. Curious, Natalie shifted into neutral and shut off the engine. She rolled quietly into the driveway.

On the back window of the SUV was an advertisement for Browne's Books and Balms.

Natalie pushed her bike around to the side of the house, where it was out of sight. Putting down her kickstand and removing her helmet, she tiptoed around to the back of the house. A pile of broken and disused clay pots sat by the back door, where she could hear voices.

"I can't trust you anymore!" Holly exclaimed. "First you bring her here without telling me, and now you're allowing her--even *encouraging* her!--to get involved with *him!*"

"As I've already said," Ivy spoke calmly, "Laurel explained to me that it is vital for her to be here, but we must let her finish this in her own way."

Natalie covered her mouth to keep herself from breathing too loudly, and her ear pressed so hard against the door that she was surprised it did not creak or give

The Brunnolf Tradition

way. She recalled the name Laurel from the cemetery: she had been Ivy's twin sister.

Harrowing dread wrapped around her at the idea of Ivy communicating with the dead, and she glanced over her shoulder with the sudden fear that she would find one of the shadowy wraiths watching her. But the open grass behind the house was empty, and beyond the Crystal River surged by with a dull rumble.

"She doesn't know anything!" Holly continued irritably. "How do you expect her to do what our ancestors couldn't for hundreds of years?"

"Precisely because she has no preconceptions!" Ivy argued. "She's started having the dreams. She will realize soon enough what she's up against. But we must not interfere!"

"You interfered when you brought her down here!" Holly's next words were so quiet that Natalie could scarcely hear them. "I am not giving up my power."

"I don't want to lose it either," Ivy stated, having calmed her tone again. "But we may not have a choice. We cannot rely on these spirits forever."

Every fiber in Natalie's body froze. Their power was derived from those awful, unearthly figures? How could that be, when each time Natalie had been faced with one she

The Brunnolf Tradition

became absolutely helpless, as though her willpower had been stolen away!

Angry footsteps fell away from the kitchen, and another pair followed.

"Holly, stop!" Ivy called.

Natalie crept along the wall, careful not to topple the stack of old clay pots, and crouched by the corner of the house as she listened to Holly and Ivy exit through the front door. They exchanged a few more hissed words, but she could not hear them clearly. Then Holly's SUV started and Natalie pressed her back against the wall to avoid the shine of its headlights. The wheels kicked up clouds of dust and gravel as her cousin drove away.

Natalie waited until she was certain Ivy had returned into the house before putting on her helmet again. She struggled to push her bike down the driveway on shaky legs, but once she managed to reach the street, she started it up and took off.

Her backpack full of clothes and her mother's photographs still lay in Ivy's guestroom, but Natalie would have to abandon it for now. There was no way she could stay in that house another night. She felt like the sacrificial maiden caught in the sinewy web of her great aunt's schemes.

The Brunnolf Tradition

What had Holly said about the Moon in her Tarot reading? "*Duality, deception, and fear.*"

Natalie wondered if her cousin had been toying with her even then.

The Bonneville carried her to Richard's house without her thinking about it. The sight of its stony exterior, especially in the dark, filled her with greater trepidation than it had the first time. Nevertheless, she parked her bike and approached the front door with her lock picks. It was easy enough to get inside, and after turning on a few lights, her anxiety eased.

She brought her bike into the garage, and by then she was ready to lie flat on the floor and pass out if necessary. Her aching feet dragged as she moved down the hall. She stood in the doorway of her grandfather's bedroom for a full minute. Being alone in the noiseless house was unsettling. Eventually she picked up a blanket from the foot of the bed and went back to the living room.

Switching on the television to some unforgettable show, she dropped her leather jacket on the floor and kicked off her boots. Her weary muscles slackened when she lay on the plush sofa. She shifted uncomfortably until she withdrew her father's knife from her back pocket. Tracing

The Brunnolf Tradition

the image of the stag on the handle, she thought of her father with a lonely sigh.

She had broken her last promise to him, but at least she understood now why he did not want her to go, trying to protect her from the perils of the Brunnolfs' power and influence. Perhaps, in the end, he actually had seen her. His pleas had truly been meant for her, not her mother.

Tears burned her eyes, and she laid the knife gently on the coffee table in front of the sofa. Then pulled the fleece blanket up to her chin and took a deep breath past the lump in her throat. She was too exhausted to cry.

A little light and noise from the television was just enough to settle her nerves, but unfortunately it could not drown out the dreams. Scarce seconds seemed to have passed when visions from another time descended on her...

Crouched behind the kitchen island, she held up a pocketknife in her hand. It had been her father's, the image of a stag before a twin-peaked mountain burned into the white handle. Gritting her teeth, she used the knife to cut across her palm. Then she clenched her fist and dark red blood dripped onto the tiled floor. The smell of smoke filled the air, and she knew she did not have much time.

The Brunnolf Tradition

She opened her palm and dabbed the fingertips of her other hand in the blood. Then she lifted her shirt, looking down at her pregnant belly. As though sensing the danger, the baby girl growing inside her womb twisted with fear. She smeared the blood over her protruding abdomen, drawing the ancient protective symbols her aunt had taught her.

"Ancestors protect us," she murmured. "Guard us from his affliction."

The baby calmed, and she took a deep breath.

Knife in hand, she peeked around the kitchen island into the small living room, her long brown hair draping over her shoulder. There was a window on the far side that opened to a fire escape. Down the hall she saw the flickering light of the fire, smoke billowing toward her.

She could sense him waiting there, unaffected by the heat and haze. There was no chance she could make a run for it.

Resigning herself to face him, she gripped the knife tightly and stood. As she stepped slowly out of the kitchen, his form emerged from the smoke, materializing before her eyes.

He treaded closer on bare feet. She could see the blisters on his hands from setting the fire, but on his face there was no pain.

The Brunnolf Tradition

His eyes were as black as death.

She wanted to vomit simply by looking at him. Though he was a striking man, tall and dark with a toned physique, she felt nothing but slimy disgust when they stood in a room together. She could not believe they had managed to last so long.

"Anthony," she whispered, looking for any reaction in his face.

He remained stoic, though a predatory smile bared his white teeth.

"Remember the deal," she said, laying her bloody hand over her swollen belly. "We can still end this."

"There is no end," he uttered, his voice low and gruff. "Our child is conceived, our bloodlines joined... Yet this appalling need continues to consume me..."

As he took a step forward, she took one back. She could hear sirens coming down the city street to the apartment building, but help would not make it in time.

The aversion overwhelmed her, and she imagined plunging the knife into his stomach, his throat, his heart--

Immediately she stifled her murderous desire, but it was more difficult than ever before. It was instinctual, cast into her by the victims who had perished over the

The Brunnolf Tradition

centuries. The impulse to kill him was meant for her protection, because he would not stop until the curse hurled them both into oblivion.

That they had conceived a child was an astonishing miracle, the greatest magic she would ever accomplish in her life, which she knew was hastening to an end. All that mattered was the safety of her unborn daughter, and she could only hope that her birth would one day prove to be their family's salvation.

"What are you waiting for?" she challenged.

Smoke gathered into black clouds above them, searing her eyes and nose. The fire behind Anthony climbed around the corner, scorching the wall. Its reddish-orange light masked the front of him with shadow, transforming him into a demonic figure called up from beyond the grave.

His next move was as fluid as electricity, swooping upon her with his blistered hands around her neck. They fell to the floor. Though she choked for breath, she brandished her hand wildly with the knife and let her hatred carve into his flesh until it found his jugular.

When he finally fell back, freeing her, she gasped for air and choked on the thickening smoke. Sheltering her pregnant abdomen with one arm, she pushed herself up to her knees.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Anthony lay on the floor, heavy currents of blood draining from his slashed throat. Clutching the wound, he stared up at her. His black eyes no longer held contempt, but sank into wells of the deepest sorrow, stretching back through generation after generation. The curse no longer held sway in his final breaths.

She crawled toward him. As swiftly as his wrath had dissolved, so had her own. In its place she owned nothing but the most desperate despair, as though she had been shut alone in the dark with only her misery and guilt for company, and that night would prove the most horrific of the two.

For the first time, she fully comprehended how her family had so utterly destroyed his.

"I'm sorry," she whispered as she witnessed his body slacken, his eyes fade away. She wept, brushing his black hair from his paling face. "I'm so sorry!"

As coughs began to interrupt her sobs, she remembered the fire sweeping closer and closer, the smoke so thick that she could scarcely see across the room. She crawled to the window, heaving the frame upward, and then she scrambled out onto the fire escape.

When she reached the ground, panting in the cool autumn air, she realized the bloodstained knife was still

The Brunnolf Tradition

in her hand. With a gasp her face contorted in grief. She carefully folded the blade into the handle and thrust it into her pocket.

Covered in blood, she did her best to hunch over and hide her hands as she hurried through the alley, away from the sirens. She focused on mentally cloaking herself, which obliged any passersby that came too close to take no notice of her, essentially making her invisible. She had used that ability often to frighten her sister when they were children, but its function in this manner left her disgusted with her own power.

After a few blocks, she went down into the subway, stopping first at the bathroom to wash the blood from her hands and shirt, wrapping a makeshift bandage around her cut palm. Then, still shaking with shock, emotion, and adrenaline, she went to a row of payphones and called her aunt.

The line did not even have the chance to ring when she answered. "Willow? What happened?"

She started to cry. "It fell apart," she whispered. "He attacked me, set our place on fire... I killed him!" Sobbing, she sank to her knees by the phone in the vacant tunnel, the infinite weight of remorse bearing down on her. "I killed him!"

The Brunnolf Tradition

"What about the baby?"

Sniffling, she tried to regain some composure and traced her hand over her belly. "She's fine."

"Good," said the woman with a sigh of relief. "I'm so sorry, dear."

She wiped her eyes, taking a deep breath. "What should I do now?"

"Come home," her aunt said. "We will take care of you until the baby comes."

"What about after?" she whispered timidly.

She had known for years that the birth would kill her. It was written in the cards. That was why she had sought out Anthony, knowing that if she was going to die having a child, she would ensure that it would put an end to the curse between their families.

It seemed that had all been for naught.

The woman on the line repeated, "Come home. Come back to Alan. You know he will take your daughter as his own."

She bowed her head, her heart breaking at the sound of his name. Poor, dear Alan! She had loved him so much--she loved him still. But she had been so convinced that being with Anthony was the only way...

Remembering the anguish on Alan's face when she had told him she must go, she whispered, "He wouldn't want to

The Brunnolf Tradition

see me, not after what I did to him... Not after what I've done tonight..."

"He loves you," her aunt persisted. "Come home and you'll see."

Eventually, she agreed. Her aunt would buy the plane ticket to Colorado, which would be at the desk for her when she arrived at the airport.

Hanging up the phone, she sat on a bench and waited for the Red Line train going to downtown Chicago.

She concentrated on her baby, imagining the smile on Alan's face when he would play with her. She knew he would take the child away from the misery and misfortunes that plagued her family. Her little girl would need protection, and he would provide it at least for the duration of her childhood.

She suddenly smiled. For months she had been waiting for the right name to come to her, and what could be better than one that would innately grant her daughter protection?

"Rowan," she murmured, picturing the sacred tree, and she could feel the baby move within her...

Natalie gasped when her eyes opened. Tears had already slipped down her cheeks, but more came as she turned her face into the sofa cushion and screamed.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Terrible sobs washed through her exhausted body, leaving her with barely enough strength to breathe. She could only think of that single whispered word in the woods, just before they had found Richard's car:

"Rowan."

Wishing it was only her imagination, she could not help thinking that the man's voice had sounded like Anthony's...

"Why?!" she wailed to her dead mother, striking the sofa cushion with her fist. "Why are you showing me this now?"

She could see her father lying pale in the hospital bed, his head bandaged, his body broken. She remembered with staggering anguish how he had begged her not to go to Colorado. Had he been afraid she would discover the truth?

He was not her father.

He was only Alan, and she felt as though she had lost him all over again...

She screamed once more, the sound echoing through the empty house, as empty as her life. Her limbs shook violently from fatigue and absolute misery, and she sobbed in her hands.

"No more!" she whispered fervently. "Please--I don't want to know anymore! I can't break this curse!"

The Brunnolf Tradition

BANG!

The tremendous crash made her jump to the other side of the sofa, covering her face in terror. The noise had come from the garage. When she peeked out from behind her hands, she could see the garage door from the hallway. The television flickered on and off, making shadows stir in the edges of her vision.

Her eyes wide, tears forgotten on her cheeks and ears unwillingly intent on every minute sound, she gaped at the doorknob as it twisted. The door slowly pried open, revealing only darkness in the garage beyond.

Then her attention was drawn to the fleece blanket lying across her lap, pulling itself little by little to the floor. Hands trembling, she started to creep away.

An icy touch suddenly clasped around her ankle.

A shriek ripped through her throat as she was pulled over the sofa, landing hard on the wooden floor, and something dragged her into the hall toward the garage door. She could not see the force carrying her away, but she could feel it around her leg, numbed cold with fear.

Inside the garage, the attic hatch hung open and the ladder had dropped to the floor. A creature more horrible than she could imagine waited for her up there, crouched like a ravenous demon in the darkness. She could see the

The Brunnolf Tradition

two pin-pricks of its eyes penetrating her, staring into her soul, preparing to consume her.

In that instant she knew if she was taken up there, she would never come back.

Bracing her arms against the frame of the hall door, she cried, "Stop! Stop!"

The frozen grip on her ankle lifted her higher into the air until she was no longer touching the floor. She adjusted her grip on the doorway, and soon she was clutching the uppermost corner of the frame by the ceiling.

All she could think of was the Death card Holly had drawn in the Tarot reading. Then the presence wrenched her leg, and pain tore through her muscles.

She gritted her teeth, controlling her sobs and the urge to scream. The only way to free herself was to overcome her fear, so fierce anger boiled up in its place.

"My name is Rowan Brunnolf!" she screamed. Swift, hot power coiled within her, a deadly serpent prepared to strike. "Release me!"

Abruptly, she fell to the floor, her ribs smashing against the edge of the doorstep. It was difficult to draw in a breath after that, but she scrambled into the hallway. She could not get her feet to work properly and stumbled as she hurried across the living room floor, limping through

The Brunnolf Tradition

the kitchen and out the back door into the bitter night air.

Collapsing in the farthest corner of the wooden deck, she locked her arms around the railing and sobbed as hard as her panting breaths would allow. Her heart battered against her already bruised ribs so harshly that she feared it would destroy her.

At that moment only one person came to mind, but she had no idea how to reach him. Instead she closed her eyes, more tears rolling down her cheeks, and whispered his name over and over. Somehow she knew Wesley would hear her plea. He would come to help, just as he had when they first met.

The back door flung open and slammed shut repeatedly, and the lights all flickered madly within the house. Curling her body into a tight ball, Natalie clutched the deck railing with both hands, terrified the thing would try to drag her away again. She wept and called for Wesley more passionately, her breaths misting into the frigid air.

A few minutes later, she heard the sound of glass shattering inside, and the activity ceased. Though her ears strained for any hint of noise, her eyes were far more hesitant as she peeked toward the back door.

Then she heard a voice from inside the house, but she dared not respond, fearing it was a trick. The door opened

The Brunnolf Tradition

and Wesley stepped out, his auburn hair doused in the starlight.

"Natalie?" he called, looking out into the yard.

Her teeth chattered and she had to take a deep breath before managing to whisper his name.

He turned, and upon seeing her cowering there in the corner, he raced to her side. "What is it?" he said, taking her into his arms. "You're freezing! Let's get inside—"

"No!" she cried, flinging her arms around him.

Stammering through her tears, she explained what had happened, about the invisible force dragging her toward the attic.

But when she tried to speak of the dream, of the appalling truth her mother had revealed, she became a weeping mess.

"It's okay," Wesley murmured, brushing his warm hand over her hair and holding her close. "You trust me, right? You know I would sense if anything was left in there. It's gone. It's safe now."

Her legs trembled weakly and her ribs ached with each breath. Natalie pressed her face to his chest, and gradually the sound of his beating heart put her at ease. In the back of her mind, she tried to memorize the feel of

The Brunnolf Tradition

his embrace, the scent of his skin, but her brain was too weary and shocked to allow it.

Once she had settled, Wesley helped her up and led her slowly back into the house. He had turned on all the lights in his search for her, and she felt a little better being able to see every inch of space.

However, when they reached the door to the garage, still wide open, she clutched Wesley's dark blue sweater and budged no farther.

An awful stench came from inside.

"I'll have a look," he said.

"No," she whispered, her voice shaking. "Please, let's just go..."

But he did not falter and approached the doorway. She held his arm, ready to jerk him back if something tried to snatch him away. He carefully reached inside to switch on the light.

Her gaze went automatically to the open attic door, but she looked away quickly with a shudder. Broken glass lay on the floor next to the ladder, brownish liquid spilled around it. Sharp pins and white fragments that looked suspiciously like fangs were also scattered in the foul substance, as well as a wet, matted clump of hair.

The Brunnolf Tradition

She was glad she had parked her Bonneville on the other side of the garage.

Wesley covered his mouth and nose with his sleeve in attempt to protect himself from the rank odor. "Oh... That's not good," he said, his voice slightly muffled.

"What is it?"

He looked at her over his shoulder. "A witch's bottle. It's supposed to protect the household from negative entities." Catching his breath, he uttered, "You don't want to know what's traditionally in it."

She inched closer to him, clenching the back of his sweater in her fist. "Will it come back?"

"Not while I'm here," he said with conviction. Then he stepped onto the ladder leading up to the attic.

"Wesley!" she whispered in a panic. "Don't!"

He looked down at her, his cool gray eyes composed and as intense as ever. She noticed that the corner of his mouth had swollen from Cody's punch, having turned an ugly shade of yellow and purple.

"It's all right," he assured her.

As he crept up the ladder, she reluctantly released him, and he poked his head into the darkness above. Looking around for a moment, he took a few more steps and found a light.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"Natalie," he said, and bent down a bit so she could see him. "It's okay, but you should see this."

"What?" She rubbed her arms anxiously, her ribs still stinging from the fall.

"There's a box up here. It's open--I think the witch's bottle might have come from inside." He looked down at her again. "It has your mother's name on it."

The dream split through her like lightning through a cloud, but her mind was too numb to let it ground. She watched as Wesley shifted his weight on the ladder and brought the box down.

Four books were stacked within, all of them apparently journals written by her mother's hand. Wesley took one up and opened it before them. The untidy scrawl of a child occupied its pages, including many colorful pictures of flowers.

Natalie frowned and backed away from the box. After the memories she had just witnessed, she did not want anything to do with her mother at the moment.

"You don't think," Wesley said quietly as he peered at the books with interest, "that the spirit was trying to show you these?"

She shook her head, bile stinging the back of her throat. "You didn't see it," she whispered.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Frowning with concern, Wesley put down the book and approached her. "Are you okay?"

Looking up at him, Natalie shook her head. The pungent scent of the broken witch's bottle made her eyes burn.

Unexpectedly her stomach heaved, and she turned away to retch on the floor. There was not much in her to come up, but she was mortified nevertheless as Wesley rubbed a comforting hand on her back.

"Just..." She gasped, trying to stall her tears a little longer. "Just give me a minute."

When she rushed through the living room to the kitchen, he did not follow. Standing over the sink, she splashed cold water on her face. Then she took several deep breaths as she tried to wipe the image from her thoughts of Anthony standing in the burning hallway, watching as her world collapsed around her.

Finally, once she was able to breathe again, Natalie dried her face and returned to the living room.

Wesley waited for her there, the box of her mother's journals under one arm. With a somber expression, he said, "You're too exhausted for that bike." He bent down and picked up her father's--Alan's--bomber jacket. "Put your shoes on. You're staying with me."

The Brunnolf Tradition

She did not argue, and she was too exhausted even to blush at the idea. After she pulled on her boots, he helped her into her coat and led her outside to his Jeep in the driveway.

It had started to snow. Tiny white flakes drifted through the calm night air, but they did not stick to the ground. As they drove away from the house, the weight of the night lifted from her shoulders and she closed her eyes.

Though Wesley's home was only minutes away, she had fallen asleep before they arrived. Natalie started, her heart pounding, when Wesley opened her door. They were in his garage. In a daze, she accepted his proffered hand and refused to let go as he took her inside through the laundry room and up a set of stairs.

A golden retriever with a cast on one foreleg waited at the top, her tail swishing back and forth. The dog's eagerness to see them made Natalie smile, and she brushed her hand over the animal's silky forehead.

"Bringing your work home with you?"

Wesley smirked. "Sometimes."

Petting the dog soothed her nerves as she looked around at the small open kitchen and living room. It was

The Brunnolf Tradition

very neat, apart from the books and papers scattered over the breakfast bar. A leather sofa sat against the wall in the living room, and by the wide front window was a brown club chair. Two tall bookcases stood in the corner.

Natalie smiled a little. He seemed the bookworm type.

"Bedrooms are upstairs," he said.

They went up another set of steps to a landing, where a narrow window looked over the front yard. She glanced out in the lamplight and realized that he lived in one of the townhouses on Main Street. She often rode past them on her way in and out of town, admiring the alternating blue, red, and green color schemes.

At the bottom step, the golden retriever whimpered.

With a sigh, Wesley went back and picked her up carefully. "I've been trying to get her to stay in one place because of her leg," he said, "but she's a whiner. I call her Melody."

Natalie smiled, watching him carry the injured dog up the stairs. Somehow she knew that if she had complained about her sore knee or aching ribs, he would have carried her up, too.

He put the dog down gently at the top and proceeded to show Natalie his guestroom. It was sparse, but the full-sized bed looked inviting after the ancient rack she had

The Brunnolf Tradition

slept on at Ivy's. Standing on a short dresser was the figurine of a crow. There were a couple of books lying next to it: one about bird watching and the other on identifying animal tracks.

"Where are your things?" Wesley asked.

"I left them at Ivy's."

He frowned. "Did something happen?"

She considered telling him about the argument she had overheard, but she did not want to explain the conclusions drawn from it. "You were right," she said simply. "I couldn't stay there."

After a moment, he excused himself, going down the hall to what she assumed was his bedroom. Melody stood in the doorway, waiting for his return. Her fur had gone white around her eyes and nose, and Natalie guessed that the dog was on the older side. Looking at the cast, she wondered if she was the same dog Holly had mentioned at the vet's office, the one she had hit with her car a couple of months ago...

When Wesley came back, he sheepishly offered her a green shirt and a pair of sweatpants to wear to bed. She accepted them with a meek, "Thank you." That night he had seen her cry, vomit, and wail in terror. She did not think she could embarrass herself further.

The Brunnolf Tradition

He held up a disk-shaped stone that shone in bands of gold and brown. It was the size of a half dollar, hanging from a thin leather cord.

"Tiger's eye," he said. "A good stone for protection and clarity."

A couple of weeks ago she might have rolled her eyes. However, after everything she had seen and learned since arriving in Colorado, and especially after the horror she had just experienced, Natalie was prepared to accept any means of defense.

Wesley came closer to her and draped the pendant over her head. When the tiger's eye rested over her heart, his hands paused. He traced her jaw, and she nearly sighed at the gentle touch as she looked up into his eyes. If he kissed her then, she did not think she would have the strength to resist him.

But he blinked and apparently came to himself, stepping away from her as he averted his gaze. "Goodnight," he murmured.

"Goodnight," she replied breathlessly.

He patted his thigh, urging Melody to follow him into the hall, and then he closed the door.

Natalie sighed. Her eyes were heavy and she was starting to fall asleep just standing there. She ran her

The Brunnolf Tradition

trembling fingers over the tiger's eye, wondering if she would ever get any rest again.

She changed into the clothes Wesley had brought her. The alluring scent of him lingered in the fabric, bathing her in a wonderful sense of calm. She left the lamp on and tucked herself into the blankets.

Despite her exhaustion, she stared at the bedroom door for several minutes, fighting a sudden onset of claustrophobia. Finally she flung back the covers, went to the door, and quietly cracked it open. At least Wesley might hear her then if she was struggling and could not cry out for help.

Lying in the bed again, she tried to relax.

Then the door creaked.

Her eyes flew open and she watched the door move further and further, just as the garage door had done. She clutched the tiger's eye at her neck and held her breath, her pulse rocketing through her ears. Why had the wraith followed her there? Would it never stop?

A golden snout poked into the room, followed by Melody's seemingly grinning face. Natalie sighed with relief, making a noise that mixed laughter and tears in her throat.

"Silly dog!" she whispered.

The Brunnolf Tradition

The golden retriever hobbled to her bed and gave several feeble hops, attempting to climb up. Getting out of bed one more time, Natalie helped the dog onto the blankets. They both eventually settled, and Natalie smiled as she lay there petting the dog's ears.

It was easy to sleep after that, with a warm, snuggly friend at her side.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Natalie woke with a headache. She had slept hard, the first good rest she had enjoyed since leaving Texas. No dreams, no dark figures haunting the corners. Just calm sunlight and the sound of her own deep breaths.

She did not want to get out of bed. Her head was groggy and muscles stiff, her ribs pinching her side. Yet as she lay there, her mother's revelation crept into her thoughts.

Damn that memory! Alan was her father, whatever her mother had done! Who was the only one there for Natalie as a child? Who taught her how to button her coat and tie her shoes? Change a sparkplug? Fit a timing belt? Who held her when she had cried, and laughed with her on her birthday, taken care of her when she was sick? Alan, her *real* father...

But even that reaffirmation meant nothing.

He was still gone.

Tears cinched Natalie's throat and she threw back the covers to get out of bed.

She found the bathroom across the hall and splashed some water on her face, rinsing it over her short hair. Already she felt better.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Looking at her haggard appearance in the mirror, she traced her finger over the tiger's eye pendant at her breast. She was not sure whether Wesley had only lent it to her or if he meant for her to keep it. Either way, she felt strangely safer and peaceful with its gentle weight over her heart, and she left it draped around her neck as she ventured downstairs.

The kitchen and living room were empty, but a note addressed to her lay on the bar alongside a pair of keys. Wesley explained in small, neat handwriting that he had walked to the clinic, which was not far, and asked that she take the Jeep if she needed to go anywhere.

With a smile, she found Melody resting on a cushion by one of the bookcases. Natalie sat beside her and stroked her head for a few minutes in the quiet, serene house. It was nice to let her mind sit in the emptiness, and all of her worries vanished, if only for a little while.

At length she spotted the box of her mother's journals sitting on the floor. She stared at them for a long time in consideration, until at last she pulled the box over and grasped one of the books inside at random.

The pages were filled with recipes, spells, and ceremonies to be performed at certain phases of the moon or when the sun approached a particular astrological sign.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Each ritual had its own purpose, and in fact quite a few were designed for protection. It was strange to think that her mother had performed those rites, or maybe she had only developed the concept and wrote them down for later use.

Natalie sighed and closed the book. She had been hoping to read some of her mother's private thoughts or insights, some hint of a reason for why she had sought out Anthony...

She tried to remember if she had ever used magic before without knowing it. Again she recalled how Ivy had described it: "*seeing the hidden potentials in the world.*" Natalie was not exactly sure what she meant. Would that make every inventor a magician?

Her gaze wandered, and she examined a small table centered in front of the wide living room window. Resting on it was a short statue of a seated man with antlers sprouting from his head. Next to it was a gathering of black feathers tied together at the quills, and a bundle of grayish-green herbs rested in a brass bowl. She sniffed it curiously, identifying the leaves as sage from the time Ivy had smudged her bedroom in Redstone.

Curling up in the big club chair by the window, she looked out at Mount Sopris, shrouded in dark clouds like a colossal robed guardian over the valley. The ground was

The Brunnolf Tradition

dusted in light snow. An aged oak tree rose across the street with golden leaves about its branches. As she studied it, she found herself wanting to change the leaves to red, a test of her ability. She stared at the tree for a full minute, and the wind ruffled through its limbs hopefully...

A phone rang, making her jump. Natalie looked around the living room and found a cordless phone by the sofa.

"Hello?" she answered.

"It's Wesley. How are you feeling?"

She grinned at the sound of his voice. "Great, actually."

"Good," he said. "I don't get off work until six o'clock on Fridays, so--"

"It's Friday?" Natalie said in surprise. She had lost track of the days. "Richard was supposed to give a lecture tonight at the university."

"In Denver. Yeah, I remember him talking about that."

She frowned, glancing out the window again at Mount Sopris. The dark clouds at its peaks were descending toward the city. "Do you think there could be something at the university to tell us what might have happened to him?" she asked.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"I don't think so," Wesley said. "Richard's been retired for years. He just gives lectures there from time to time, but he wasn't presenting anything he hadn't taught before."

The sudden excitement that had surged through her fizzled out. She wanted so badly to find him. Just being able to talk to him--about the family, about her mother, about her father, even about Wesley--would comfort so many of her worries.

"You're probably right," she murmured, scratching Melody's ears despondently.

"If you feel like you should go up there, then you should," he urged her. "Trust your instincts. Just promise you'll take the Jeep. We're supposed to get sleet this evening."

She smirked. "Thanks, Wesley. I'll take good care of it."

"Good, because if you put it in a ditch, I'm making you fix it."

Laughing, she realized that he was the only person to whom she had ever confessed her ability. She wondered what he would say about the dream, the memories from her mother, but she simply could not bring it up. To talk of it aloud would somehow make it more real.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"Well," Wesley said with a sigh, "I should go. I'll see you tonight, and be careful."

She assured him she would.

After hanging up, she forced the troubling memories to nestle deep in the forgotten caverns of her mind. Then she went upstairs and reluctantly changed back into her dirty clothes from the day before. Going to Redstone and facing Ivy just to retrieve her things did not seem like a pleasant idea at the moment.

Returning to the kitchen, she picked up the car and house keys Wesley had left her.

Melody perked her ears at the sound.

"I'll be back soon," Natalie promised her before going down to the garage.

The drive from Carbondale to Denver was over three hours long through the mountain range. Natalie was grateful for the comfort of the Jeep, though the feel of the open road was not the same as when she rode her Bonneville. At the thought of going to Richard's to retrieve the bike, as she would eventually have to do, she shivered and touched the tiger's eye hanging around her neck.

As long as Wesley went with her, she knew it would be safe.

The Brunnolf Tradition

The noise, traffic, and general activity of Denver reminded her of home, and she missed her father all the more. She circled the University of Colorado campus a couple of times before figuring out where she needed to go.

A little guilt nibbled at her, thinking of the money she had spent from her savings. She had once thought about going to college, but it simply had not been compatible with her life at the auto shop. However, those days seemed to have flown far away. In another year or two, perhaps she would consider it again.

Thinking of the garage made her wonder when she might return to Houston and see Earl and Donna again, but that idea oddly unsettled her. There was no question in her mind that she could not leave Colorado until she knew what had happened to Richard, whether he was alive or dead. She did not care how long that would take. Everything else could wait.

Natalie roamed about the campus until she found the Tivoli building that Richard had named in his datebook. It was enormous with an exterior of red brick and white trim. When she stepped into the lobby of more exposed brick, she looked up to admire the second floor balcony and then wandered further inside.

The Brunnolf Tradition

The whole building had an industrial feel to it, with the air ducts exposed above her head and several mechanical pumps situated as the focal points of various spaces. Several students walked around, some lingering in the halls or various study rooms that she passed. She blended in easily among them.

At length she found a sign pointing the way to the Turnhalle room. Following the directions, she arrived at the small auditorium just as a group of students emerged.

Her senses suddenly amplified. A peculiar feeling came over her, like an ethereal magnet had caught her in its pull. She paused, wondering if it would be wise to follow it, but curiosity got the best of her.

Inside the auditorium, a man in a tweed suit was talking to a student in front of the stage. He had blond hair and a moustache with black-rimmed glasses framing his eyes. As Natalie approached, the student said goodbye and departed.

The man focused on Natalie and gave her a friendly smile. "Did you have a question?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered, though she felt as though someone else was speaking through her, "Do you know Richard Browne?"

The Brunnolf Tradition

His eyes narrowed slightly, though his smile stayed in place. "Well, yes. Who are you?"

"I'm his granddaughter," she said and held out her hand. "Natalie Irving."

"Are you really?" He shook her hand absently as he stared at her. "It's nice to meet you." Then he hesitated. "Have you... found him?"

She shook her head.

"Oh." He relaxed slightly. "Sorry, I thought you'd come to tell me he was..." Shifting on his feet, he picked up his briefcase that was on the stage. "We worked together for a long time. I'm Dr. Harris." Then he motioned for her to follow him out of the auditorium.

They walked outside into the chill autumn air. Heavy, grim clouds had gathered over Denver, prepared to burst at a moment's notice.

"So what can I do for you, Natalie?" the professor asked as they meandered up a wide sidewalk into a courtyard.

"Honestly, I don't know." She stuffed her hands into the pockets of her bomber jacket, rolling the forgotten sparkplug between her fingers. "I just came here to learn more about Richard."

The Brunnolf Tradition

"Yes, I understand. Unfortunately, since he retired I don't know much of what he has been doing."

He took out a pack of cigarettes, looking around furtively before withdrawing one. She glanced over as they passed a sign proclaiming the college to be a "Tobacco-Free Campus."

"We still had coffee together occasionally," he continued, "and he came to lecture as a guest speaker once or twice a year. You know, he was actually going to give a lecture tonight..."

"I saw it in his datebook," Natalie said. "That's how I knew to come here."

Dr. Harris nodded, scratching at the corner of his mustache as he put his cigarette between his lips. "Well, a couple of months ago he called me out of the blue and asked for my help with a genealogy project." With a smirk, he added, "It's a little hobby of mine."

Instantly, Natalie knew she had found the reason for her impulse to visit the university. "So Richard wanted help with his family tree?" she asked.

"No," said Dr. Harris, lighting his cigarette. He inhaled deeply, and when he resumed speaking, smoke escaped from his mouth and nose. "He was doing the research for someone else, a Dr. Crawford living down in Carbondale."

The Brunnolf Tradition

"Wesley?" She frowned. Wesley had not mentioned that he and Richard were building his family tree. Part of her stomach writhed in dread.

"You know him?" Dr. Harris asked. "Great! Richard didn't leave any contact information with me. If you wouldn't mind, could you take my findings back to him?"

After a second's hesitation, she nodded.

He paused on the broad campus sidewalk and dug into his briefcase. At length he produced a small flash drive and offered it to her.

"A lot of sad history there," he said somberly and took another drag from his cigarette. "Richard had every right to be concerned."

Natalie held her breath, clutching the flash drive in her fist. "You mean... Richard was concerned about Wesley?"

Dr. Harris nodded. "It was obvious that Richard cared about this young man. However..." He sighed. "I don't believe violence is genetically predetermined, but I have to admit that Dr. Crawford's genealogy would lend vital evidence to the case."

With a shiver, Natalie recalled Wesley's almost out-of-control temper after his fight with Cody. Then she recalled the man with the wild eyes strangling the woman

The Brunnolf Tradition

from the theater, the miserable soul wrestling for the gun in a woman's hand as he kissed her neck...

She felt the color drain from her face.

Looking at her carefully, Dr. Harris asked, "Are you all right?"

"Fine," she managed to utter beneath her breath.

He adjusted his glasses, the end of his cigarette glowing orange. "I must be going," he said. Then, stepping a bit closer, he murmured, "I hope you find Richard soon. It would be good for us all to have some closure."

She stammered out a reasonable reply and they parted ways. The professor's doubt agitated her as she gazed at the Denver skyline. The notion that she would likely find Richard dead was unacceptable.

Staring up at the leaden sky, she gritted her teeth and challenged whatever power that ruled the universe to try it.

She was a Brunnolf, after all.

Rolling the flash drive in her fingers, Natalie debated whether she should find a computer on campus to explore its contents or take it directly to Wesley. She thought of the criminal record Cody had alluded to the previous night. Although she did not believe Wesley was

The Brunnolf Tradition

trying to hide anything, she suspected he would require a great deal of persuasion before opening up about his past.

Though she knew it was wrong to invade his privacy, she tracked down the Auraria library on the campus map, certain there would be public computers available there. The library had two floors, the modern exterior composed of white aluminum and long rows of windows. Dozens of students gathered within around tables and computers, some reading intently while others held quiet conversations.

Wandering around several workstations, Natalie located a free computer and sat down, plugging in the flash drive from Dr. Harris.

Several files appeared in its stored memory, mostly scanned pages from newsprint sources and registries. However, one document labeled "Richard's Notes" caught her attention, and she opened it with a deep breath.

William Bird (1735-1756), two sons (1 stillborn) and one daughter.

James Bird (c. 1752), three daughters: Mary, Christine, Hannah--(d. 1799).

Christine Hawkins née Bird, two sons and two daughters, immigration to New York c. 1818.

The list continued in that fashion all the way to Geraldine Crane, who passed away in 1942. As Natalie

The Brunnolf Tradition

clicked through the various other files on the drive, she noticed that Dr. Harris had taken the names Richard had provided and unearthed stories about some of them, as well as adding on more discovered relatives.

One small document contained only a website address, a username, and a password. She immediately opened an Internet page, typing in the address and required login. It was a genealogy site for research and the creation of digital family trees. Only one tree was listed under that username, labeled "Crawford-Murphy."

The tree started with Wesley and traced back both his mother, Angela, and his father, Christopher, to the 1700s. At the end of his father's line was William Bird, whom Richard had listed in his notes. Both of Wesley's parents were deceased, though she noted that his father's death was recent, a little over a year ago.

Looking back on the flash drive, she searched out the file she had seen marked "Christopher Crawford." Several scanned images opened, the first being a highlighted news article from the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*.

"Son claims self-defense in fatal injury of father," announced the headline.

Natalie gaped slightly as she read the article in horror. It explained that Wesley had gone to his father's

The Brunnolf Tradition

house the night after his graduation from the University of Pennsylvania and a fight ensued. Christopher, a retired police officer, had stabbed his son three times in the chest before Wesley shot him in the throat with Christopher's own handgun.

Pausing, Natalie backed away from the computer screen. She thought she might be ill. For a couple of minutes she considered closing everything down and not ever mentioning the flash drive to Wesley. Yet when she regained her nerve, she scrolled through the rest of the document to see what else Dr. Harris had found on the case.

Further scans appeared to be a court transcript. She ascertained that Wesley had been tried for murder, which was dropped to voluntary manslaughter. It seemed the jury had struggled to determine who had defended themselves against whom in the brawl, but they eventually concluded that Wesley was not guilty, and he was acquitted.

Several more news articles followed, detailing the trial. It had apparently drawn a lot of attention in Pittsburgh, lasting for nearly six months. During that time Wesley had been in jail, having been taken into custody after he recovered from his wounds at the hospital.

Was *this* the charge Cody had boasted about? Had he even read what had happened?!

The Brunnolf Tradition

Disgusted with the revelation and ashamed that she had snooped into the mess, Natalie closed the document. There were numerous other files on the drive labeled with the different names of Wesley's ancestors and relatives. Judging by Dr. Harris's earlier comments, Natalie knew she would find similar acts of violence in each story.

She unplugged the flash drive and shoved it in her pocket. Walking aimlessly out of the library, she felt the sting of tiny ice pellets and the sprinkle of raindrops over her forehead. She wondered if Richard had known about Wesley's father before researching his genealogy.

Then her heart broke. It was no wonder that Wesley treasured Richard's friendship. After all that had happened in Pittsburgh, it must have been a relief to find such a respectable father figure.

But then Richard had told him to leave...

She hurried across campus to the Jeep as the sleet began pummeling the streets. Starting up the engine, she sat still for a few minutes, listening to winter tapping against the windows. Her thumb traced around Wesley's tiger's eye pendant, her mind saturated with melancholy.

When she came to, Natalie carefully drove back to the highway and prepared what she would have to say to him.

The Brunnolf Tradition

It was late when she finally turned onto Main Street in Carbondale. She saw a light on upstairs as she pulled around into the back alley to park in the townhouse garage. In the laundry room she shook off her jacket and made certain her boots were clean before going upstairs, mostly to delay the discussion she knew was coming. Her shoulders were rigid under the burden of her impending confession.

At the top step Natalie paused. Wesley sat on the floor in the living room, facing the window. Tendrils of smoke rose above him from the altar, and the scent of sage permeated the air.

"I was starting to wonder where you were," he said. Then he rose to his feet and faced her, an easy smile on his lips. He had changed out of his work scrubs, dressed instead in jeans and a black shirt, which made his gray eyes gleam brighter.

"I drove extra carefully," she explained, forcing a smile.

Seeing him was a new experience after everything she had learned. At that moment, Natalie was forced to acknowledge that she cared deeply about him, amazed at how he had gone through hell and survived to still be a compassionate, if reserved, person.

The Brunnolf Tradition

When he came closer, she could see the swollen hint of a bruise at the corner of his mouth. She gritted her teeth and swore that the next time she saw Cody, she would club him with her helmet.

Then she held out the key to the Jeep. "Thanks for letting me borrow it."

"No problem," he said, taking the key and putting it in his pocket. "How'd it go?"

She searched for something to say and then sighed. Melody appeared at her feet, nuzzling Natalie's hand eagerly. Smiling, Natalie relaxed slightly and strode into the living room, sitting on the sofa. Wesley sat beside her and waited patiently for her to speak.

Glancing at his clear gray eyes, she took out the flash drive and offered it to him.

"What's this?" he asked, accepting the device.

"I met a professor," she began, trying to remember all the ways she had planned to explain it to him. "His name was Dr. Harris. He and Richard were working together on a project before he went missing."

"What was it?" Wesley asked. She recognized the trepidation in his gaze.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Shifting in the plush seat, she inhaled the scent of sage and hoped he would forgive her. "They were building your family tree."

Wesley instantly turned away, setting the flash drive aside and leaning his elbows on his knees. His finger linked together, and his knuckles turned white. Then he mumbled, "What else did he tell you?"

"Nothing," she said, and guilt threatened to buckle her. "But I... Well, I had a look at the files... I didn't know what I'd find."

When he said nothing, Natalie timidly touched his arm. Still he remained stoic.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, "about your father."

He flinched, and she knew she was the most awful person in the world.

"Don't be," he said, his voice gruff. Then he looked at her again, his eyes severe and pitiless. "I'm not."

She nodded, abruptly certain that the relationship between Wesley and his father had been abusive. Though she could not explain how the conclusion came to her mind, she knew intuitively that it was true.

Steering the conversation away from the memories she could see tormenting him, she asked, "You didn't know Richard was doing this research?"

The Brunnolf Tradition

He gave no response, clenching his jaw.

Natalie bit her lip and wondered if she should continue. "When you were up in the meadow, why did Richard tell you to leave town?"

After a sigh, Wesley whispered, "He thought I would end up hurting someone."

Her brow furrowed incredulously. "He couldn't possibly have believed that!"

"He was very confident." A pained look crossed Wesley's face. "He must have found out what happened in Pittsburgh. He didn't trust me anymore."

"That can't be true," Natalie insisted. "Richard cared about you! Even Dr. Harris could see it."

Wesley closed his eyes and bowed his head, digging his fingers over his scalp. "You've seen my temper," he muttered helplessly. "I've tried so hard to control it... But sometimes... I know how dangerous it can be..."

Natalie held her breath. Flashes of the nightmares, of her mother stabbing a black-eyed man, haunted her mind.

"There is a curse on my family," she whispered. "And I think that curse... somehow extends to you."

"I know," he said, lifting his face. He clasped his hands, rubbing one hand over the other. "Richard tried to

The Brunnolf Tradition

explain it to me when I last saw him. He said it was a disease of hostility... One that I inherited."

"He wanted to protect you," Natalie asserted.

"Obviously, he thinks the only way to keep someone safe is to push them away. Look at what he did to me..."

At that Wesley glanced at her. "If I am cursed," he whispered, "then how can I break it?"

She thought of Ivy and Holly's argument, in which her great aunt had prophesied that Natalie would be the one to free them from the curse. But she shook her head, for she had no idea even how the curse came to be, how it took hold, or what she could do to stop it.

"Are you afraid of me?" Wesley asked unexpectedly. His gray eyes held a fathomless depth, and wavering there was a delicate fear that threatened to drag him to the darkest corners of his soul.

She sensed then that he was terrified of becoming his father, of carrying on his family's tradition of violence and abuse.

Taking his hand, she murmured, "No."

He stared at her for a long moment until his head gradually bent toward hers. That was all the encouragement she needed.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Their lips pressed together with a warm, intoxicating gentleness. She slipped her hand around his neck, her fingers combing through his soft red hair. With a tender grip on her waist, he urged her to lay back on the sofa and kissed her again more deeply. She swept her hands around his lean torso, reveling in the touch of his mouth as it brushed over her throat, thrilled by the weight of his body bearing down on her.

Then a loud knock shattered the enchantment around them. Wesley pushed himself up, gawking at her with intense disbelief, until a second urgent knock drew him away to the stairs.

Breathless, Natalie tried to recover herself from a heavy lethargy that had slithered into her brain. Her legs trembled with the effort of getting up, and unexpectedly she felt cold, dejected, and faintly ashamed. He had looked so utterly astounded upon the interruption, as though he had not realized what he was doing. Natalie was confused, too--hadn't he been the one to move first?

Then she heard a familiar, desperate voice resonating into the room when Wesley answered the door on the halfway landing below.

"I'm sorry to come here like this. Ivy hasn't seen Natalie since she left yesterday afternoon to see you, and

The Brunnolf Tradition

they found her motorcycle at Richard's house, but she wasn't there, and--"

"Holly, calm down..." Wesley murmured.

Her mind sobering, Natalie hurried downstairs to the door. When her cousin laid eyes on her, shock was evident on her face, but it was not enough to conceal the flash of anger in her gaze. That look stole away the words of reassurance on Natalie's tongue; it stole away every impression she had built around her cousin since they met.

As the two women stared at one another, a sudden growl emitted close to them. Melody had managed to hobble down the steps and stood between Natalie and Wesley with hackles raised and teeth bared. Natalie would have never believed that such a sweet dog could look so feral!

Before any of them could react, the golden retriever lunged forward, barking and snapping her jaws at Holly. The woman leapt back with a cry.

Natalie gasped in horror when Wesley jerked on the dog's collar and very nearly threw her back on the stairs. Melody whimpered in pain and cowered away from him.

When the dog continued to cry, he shouted, "BE QUIET!"

"Stop!" Natalie exclaimed, kneeling down and shielding the animal from his abrupt, incensed glare.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Through the open door, she caught sight of Holly backing away. She also appeared shocked by the force of Wesley's rage.

"I guess I'll let Ivy know you're all right," she uttered hastily, and her petite frame dashed to her car parked at the curb.

Wesley lurched forward, as though he might run after her, but then he froze. Lingered against the doorway, still as stone for several tense seconds, he watched as Holly's taillights disappeared down the road.

In Natalie's arms, the golden retriever became quiet. Natalie tried to pretend that the trembling she felt came from the poor animal, but her own pulse beat so rapidly that she was not entirely convinced of it.

Suddenly, Wesley slammed the door, and with an anguished cry he drove his fist through the wall. Both Natalie and the dog flinched, crowding together on the floor. Terror gripped her, and all she could see was the bloodstained knife, the blistered fingers, the harrowing eyes from her nightmares...

Finally he turned toward them. She could see the fury physically drain from his face as he looked at her, leaving him pale as a ghost and seemingly ready to faint.

"I'm sorry," he whispered unsteadily. "I'm sorry."

The Brunnolf Tradition

Natalie tried to breathe, but before she could decide whether to utter a word of forgiveness, he climbed the stairs and disappeared.

She sat there with Melody for several minutes, reliving those moments over and over. What had set him off? Was it the kiss? Holly? The dog?

His temper truly was frightening, almost as terrible as her encounters with the shadowy spirits. Then guilt washed over her. Just before that kiss, she had told him she was not afraid. How were they ever going to face one another now?

When she was able to stand, Natalie lifted the golden retriever carefully into her arms and hefted her up the stairs to the uppermost floor. She tried to urge the dog toward Wesley's room, figuring he was in great need of her affection, but Melody would have none of it. Instead Natalie was obliged to put her in the guest bed again.

She paused as she brushed her hand over the dog's cast around one foreleg. What if the abnormal ability she used to see the mechanisms of a car could also apply to a living thing?

Closing her eyes, Natalie cautiously opened her mind as she ran her fingers along the cast. She saw the fur starting to grow beneath the dressings, the arteries and

The Brunnolf Tradition

veins pulsing deeper below that, until she went all the way down to the bone, which was broken in two places.

Abruptly, an image flashed behind her eyes of Holly holding a hammer, and Natalie jerked her hand back in pain.

Melody stared up at her, tail flopping gleefully on the bed cover, apparently unaware of what Natalie had seen. With a sigh, Natalie crawled into the bed and hoped it was only her imagination.

Brushing her thumb over the tiger's eye pendant, she knew there was no escaping the dreams and the demons that accompanied them. Instead she focused on what she wanted to see: how the curse had started. If she could get that far, then perhaps she could find a way to put things right before Wesley really lost his mind.

CHAPTER NINE

Running through the street as carriages rolled past and vendors shouted in the nearby market, she clutched her doll tightly and tried to keep up with the older girl ahead of her. Since her sister had returned from the convent, where their parents had sent her to learn humility and obedience, she had been acting unusual and secretive.

"Hazel!" she cried to her. "Wait!"

The blonde teenager spun around with a scowl, her blue eyes as cool as the river in winter. Snatching her hand, Hazel dragged her into a narrow alleyway. They darted around several stacked crates and filth. Then they stumbled upon a slumped man, his skin grayish-blue, his eyes drooping and white.

She inhaled a breath to scream. The decaying stench of his body made bile singe the back of her throat, and her eyes burned.

Hazel yanked on her arm. "Be quiet, June, or I'll cut out your tongue in your sleep!"

Covering her nose and mouth, knowing beyond a doubt that her sister would do it, she held her stomach as they arrived at the other end of the alley.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Hazel peered around the corner. Squeezing her doll, she leaned forward as well to see what had captivated her older sister.

Along a dirt path, the servants and their families were walking on their way to church. She recognized some of them who worked in her family's manor up on the hill.

With a frown, she whispered, "What are we doing here?"

"Hush," Hazel hissed. Then she gasped, clutching her breast.

Craning around her sister, she stared down the road at a family approaching them. The mother carried an infant in her arms, while the father held a little boy's hand at his side. They were an Irish family she had seen on the neighbor's farm before.

The little boy saw her, grinned, and waved. She started to wave back, but Hazel smacked her hand.

Then the father spotted them hiding in the alley. His face was stern with eyes as gray as stone and hair as red as embers. He frowned at them and pulled on his son's hand, scolding him as they passed beyond the alley and out of sight.

She looked up at her older sister, who gazed after the family with a desperate, pained expression. Then Hazel raised her chin in a gesture of pure determination.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"Come," Hazel snapped, and dragged her back through the alley.

They passed the corpse again and she held her breath. She swore the dead man was watching her.

The wind howled at the opening of the cave, and she glanced one more time at the stars glittering over the bare winter trees. There was no moon that night, cloaking the land in the deepest darkness. Such a night was exceptionally powerful.

Descending into the cave, she made a small fire and allowed her wild blond hair to fall loose about her shoulders. As the fire grew with more kindle, she buried her face in the collar of the man's coat she wore. It smelled like him, of horses and earth and pipe smoke. She slipped her arms out of the sleeves, draping them around her lap, and she imagined that he was holding her in the firelight. The fantasy smoldered in her mind.

When the fire was large enough, she strode to the back of the cave and retrieved the small basket she had hidden there months ago. At last she had enough to finish her spell. She brought the basket close to the light and sat on the earthen floor, carefully extracting its contents.

The Brunnolf Tradition

The first was her dear poppet, so delicately crafted by her skilled hands. Sewing had been the only task she proved efficient at in the convent. She had torn the pocket off the man's coat and fashioned it into a little jacket for her doll. All that remained was a hole in the top of its head, prepared for her to plant the thoughts within.

She reached into her coat and withdrew a small handkerchief from its remaining pocket. Slowly she unfolded it, revealing the small, treasured lock of red hair. Months of patience had finally placed her in the pew behind him at church. With the threat of witnesses everywhere, she had focused on cloaking herself in disinterest throughout most of the sermon, so that no one even glanced at her. They would not have been able to say she was there at all.

Then, with her mother's pair of shears, she had clipped the lock from his head...

Gently she pressed the tuft of red hair into the opening at the doll's crown. At last it was ready!

She rose to her feet and turned to the fire. Then she retrieved a small round nut from her pocket, and she held up both it and the doll in that underworld palace.

Closing her eyes and distilling all of her soul into her words, she stated, "William Bird, may your mind be filled with desire for me alone."

The Brunnolf Tradition

Then she placed the hazelnut inside the doll's head.

Taking up needle and thread, she stitched the poppet's head closed, sealing the seed within. A delighted smile grew on her face as she worked.

Finally she held the poppet over the flames, taking a deep breath. Her blue eyes shone brightly in the light. "William Bird, may your body ignite with passion at the very sight of me," she uttered, and promptly dropped the doll into the blaze.

A low hum vibrated through the cave like she had never felt or heard before. Wondrous, intoxicating power pulsed from her fingertips to her temple and down to her toes. The entire universe whirled within her.

She withdrew a small kitchen knife from her pocket. As she slowly dragged the blade across her palm, ecstasy flooded her limbs and made her gasp. Then she held her hand over the fire, allowing her blood to drip on the smoldering poppet in its center.

"William Bird," she whispered breathlessly, "may your blood never rest so long as it is apart from mine!"

The flames burst and blinded her eyes, illuminating every corner of the cave and swallowing her in its heat.

Then, just as quickly, it recoiled and extinguished.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Left in the absolute heart of darkness, inexplicable energy pulsing through the air, she laughed in exhilaration.

It was only a matter of time.

The rain splashed in torrents through the open windows of her bedroom, the shutters banging open and closed in the wind. Thunder crashed through the blackened sky outside. The night had come alive with horrors.

Crouching by the bed in terror, tears choked her throat as she listened to the pounding against the latched bedroom door. She wringed the folds of her skirt, her heart racing as a livid wail echoed through the storm.

"Witch!" cried a man. "Sorceress! What have you done?"

The doorjamb suddenly splintered and the man stumbled into the room as the door flung back against the wall. His eyes were red and puffy with anger and grief. In his hand flashed a knife.

A sob escaped her lungs as she leapt to her feet, cowering away from him. "Why do you not love me?!"

"Love you?" he shouted, his shoulders heaving. "Love you?! I love my wife! I love my children!" His rage retreated into abrupt despair, and he stooped under the

The Brunnolf Tradition

weight of it, pulling at his auburn hair. "Why would you do this to me?" he wept, his Irish accent strong.

She clutched her breast, her sob aching to break through the pounding of her heart. "Because you are normal!" she cried. "Because you are happy and everyone loves you!"

A scowl rent across her young face as she remembered the taunts, the accusations... No one would be her friend... No one would dare to love her...

"I hate this place!" she screamed. "I hate this family! Please... Please, take me away!"

William fell to his knees, sparing no attention to her heartache as he bowed his head to the floor. She saw that his grip on the blade had slackened.

"These impure thoughts," he uttered, and banged his head on the floor as though he might bash them out. "I cannot cast them away! For days and nights on end! Even with my wife at my side..." His sob rose into a tremendous, wrathful roar. "I will burn in Hell for these sins!"

Then once more the anger was gone just as quickly, his body growing limp as he lay on the floor.

"I'm already burning," he whispered in exhaustion.

This was not what she had wanted. He was a strong, respected man. Why couldn't he just accept her and let them

The Brunnolf Tradition

start a new life together? Was she not young and beautiful? Could she not use her power to give him everything he wanted?

She knelt before him, her trembling hands lifting his face to look at her. His forehead was bleeding from where he had struck his head against the floor.

"My dear William," she whispered tremulously. "You love me! I know you do, because I made it so! And now we can leave together, before first light. You'll see! It will be so beautiful--"

"Did you not hear me?!" he yelled, the rage igniting in his eyes once more.

Terrified, she tried to escape, but he was faster. One hand wrapped around her throat, pinning her down to the floor, while the other raised the knife.

"I--DO--NOT--LOVE--YOU!"

Each word was punctuated with a stab of the blade into her flesh. She gasped with each blow to her breast, her stomach, her womb, her throat...

Then the pain started to ebb away, and a fog crept into her bleary eyes. She saw her dear William, blood covering his shirt, his face, his hands... and he wept.

In a fit of guilt, he turned the knife upon himself.

The Brunnolf Tradition

When he lay beside her at last, she heard him whisper, "God forgive me..."

Their blood mixed together between them, and the room grew cold as thunder rumbled in the darkness...

With a start, Natalie opened her eyes. It took her several moments to decide if she had returned to the present. Never before had the dreams stacked on top of one another in that way, and she felt dizzy as she tried to remember who she was.

A strange noise like a growl surged beside her, and her heart pounded with fear, knowing the malevolent spirit had come to attack again. But there was no heaviness pinning her down, no creature forbidding the use of her faculties.

No... No, something was wrong. Was she really awake?

Then she realized the sound was coming from Melody, standing by her side on the bed, hackles raised and teeth bared as she snarled into the dark.

Turning over, Natalie gasped.

She thought it was William Bird, a ghost looming at her bedside. Yet he had too solid a form, and she at last understood that it was not a specter--it was Wesley.

The Brunnolf Tradition

The light from the hall outlined his body, shining on his red hair and masking his face in shadow. Still, she could sense his penetrating gaze focused on her.

And for some reason, Melody was snarling at him.

"Wesley?" she whispered timidly.

He did not respond. A flicker caught her eye, and Natalie froze with dread when she saw her pocketknife in his hand, the blade gleaming in the light.

Memories raced through her head of that same knife, wielded by her mother, carving into Anthony's throat. Then her imagination replaced the victim and the murderer without a shred of mercy. All she could see was Wesley's hellish eyes as he stabbed her heart, which pounded wildly as though it sensed the infinite blackness preparing to consume her...

Shaking her head, Natalie drove the visions away. Wesley remained standing at her bedside, perfectly motionless as he continued to stare. She glanced again at the antler-handled knife and shuddered. There was no doubt in her mind, not after witnessing his outrageous temper, that he could kill her in a matter of seconds if she did not proceed with every ounce of caution she could muster.

Natalie closed her eyes, blinking away her terrified tears, and took several measured breaths to contain her

The Brunnolf Tradition

panic. She clutched the tiger's eye at her breast and recalled the feeling of power that had coursed through her veins when she had freed herself from the spirit at Richard's house.

Looking up into Wesley's darkened face, she whispered through clenched teeth, "I am Rowan Brunnolf." Energy surged through her, prickling over her skin. "Put down that knife and go to your room... *Now.*"

For a moment Wesley remained still. Then the pocketknife fell from his hand, landing with a dull thump on the carpet. Very slowly he turned away, and she caught sight of three distinct scars across his bare chest.

Her heart shattered; they were reminders of his father's attempt to kill him.

His feet shuffled along the carpet into the hallway, and finally he disappeared. Natalie waited until she heard the door of his bedroom close, and then she released the tremulous breath she had been holding along with her tears.

Melody stopped growling and inexpertly climbed down from the bed. She stood at the door, ears perked and tail stiff, as though she was ready to strike at a single sound.

Natalie covered her face with trembling hands. She did not think Wesley had been aware of what he was doing, just like before when he had punched a hole in the wall. It had

The Brunnolf Tradition

not even *felt* like Wesley in the room. In fact, she thought her first impression remained correct: that one of the spirits had come to attack her. The idea that it might possess someone to facilitate that assault was more than horrifying.

Suddenly, it occurred to her that Wesley's fight with his father might have been the other way around, and that Christopher could have honestly been trying to defend himself as his son came into the house with a face obscured in darkness.

Wesley had been angry with Richard, too. As much as she wanted to believe he would never have hurt her grandfather, she could not deny that perilous temper, and recalled how he had nearly thrown Melody against the wall.

Then he had stood with a knife at her bedside, prepared to kill her...

Frustrated, Natalie sat up and clenched her fists, refusing to allow such thoughts to continue. Her chest ached slightly and she remembered being pulled up into the air by a thing that could not possibly exist. She thought again of that damned Tarot reading, of deceptions and nightmares and death.

What confounded her still was that she had initially mistaken Wesley for the man in her dream. They had truly

The Brunnolf Tradition

looked alike: same height and proportions, same piercing gray eyes, same red hair. Beyond that, thinking of Hazel also reminded her of Holly, both in looks and demeanor. Then there was Juniper, whom she had already connected with a likeness to herself.

"*I suppose some things come full circle,*" Ivy had said at the time.

"What the hell is going on here?" Natalie muttered to the dark.

Melody turned, sniffing around the floor. When she paused on the knife, Natalie reached down and picked it up. She folded the blade into the handle, looking at the burnt image of a stag before a mountain, and frowned as she realized the knife had not belonged to Alan--it had been Richard's.

Her dark mood grew even uglier.

She did not recall taking the knife with her to Denver; in fact, she could not remember seeing it since her mother revealed the vile thing had been used to murder her biological father. Wesley must have picked it up at some point, perhaps when he had come to her rescue after the attack at Richard's house. Whether he had intended to give the knife back to her was another matter entirely. Either

The Brunnolf Tradition

way, Natalie was going to keep better track of its possession from now on.

It was three o'clock in the morning, but Natalie and the golden retriever lay awake in the bed for a couple of hours more. She struggled to douse the ruinous thoughts battling in her head, creating the most intense migraine she had ever suffered.

When she finally succumbed to sleep again, she was certain Melody had remained alert, watching the door.

Natalie noticed immediately upon waking that the dog was gone. She reached under her pillow and found the pocketknife still there with a sigh of relief. Quickly she got out of bed and changed, pulling on her pair of jeans and the green shirt Wesley had loaned her. She slipped the knife purposefully into her back pocket before heading downstairs.

Though she had slept rather late, the scent of frying eggs and bacon wafted to her. Wesley was at the stove, Melody by his side with her tail wagging, as though the incident last night had never happened.

The sight terrified her. If all was normal the next day, then had no method of determining how long Wesley's nightly trances had lasted.

The Brunnolf Tradition

He glanced at her and smiled. "Good morning. Would you like an omelette?"

Narrowing her eyes, Natalie watched him scatter bits of bell pepper on the eggs cooking in his pan. His knuckles were dark with bruises from breaking through the wall.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

He paused before saying, "Fine." Then he turned around to look at her with a sincere, grave expression. "What I did last night was inexcusable, and I will not ask for your forgiveness because I don't really deserve it. But I swear to you, I won't let it happen again."

Afraid to look away from his eyes, Natalie nodded. Then he turned back to the eggs.

Frowning, she wondered if he had any idea that he had stood over her with a knife in his hand. If not, she doubted that she should mention it. He already felt guilty enough.

But she was not going to turn her back on him either.

Sitting at the bar, mostly to place a physical barrier between them, Natalie continued to study his behavior. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

When he placed an omelette before her, he innocently asked, "Have anymore dreams?"

The Brunnolf Tradition

Natalie hesitated, cutting into the omelette with a fork. "Not anything new."

She was relieved when Wesley did not persist.

As she ate, she thought of the three distinct and vivid memories from the night before. Ivy had said they would become more intense, and that was an understatement. At least she finally knew how the curse had originated, when the murders began. However, part of her almost wished she had not seen the violent consequences of Hazel's spell, and she shuddered at the image of William Bird, who look so much like Wesley, stabbing her ancestor over and over...

She pushed away her eggs, having lost her appetite. "I need to see Ivy," she stated.

Wesley paused as he rinsed off a few dishes in the sink. Without looking at her, he said, "I thought you didn't trust her anymore."

"I don't, not fully," Natalie admitted. "But we have to talk. I need to give her a chance to tell me everything."

He finished cleaning up, and then he said, "I'll take you to Richard's to get your bike."

She nodded, even though he was not looking at her, and went upstairs to get her leather jacket.

The Brunnolf Tradition

In minutes they were at Richard's house. An autumn breeze caused the leaves to spiral across the sidewalk as they approached the front door. Wesley opened it with his key and allowed Natalie inside before him.

When she opened the door to the garage, she jumped back and closed her eyes.

The attic door was still hanging open.

Wesley flipped on the light, revealing her red Bonneville and the remains of the witch's bottle shattered on the floor. Then he pressed the button to open the garage.

"Be careful," he said simply.

"I always am."

They stared at one another, and she wondered if he was imagining that kiss in his mind as she was. But he made no move, and she was not eager to tempt an encore of the previous night's debacle.

She started up her bike and pulled on her helmet. Glancing to the side, she saw Wesley sweeping up the broken glass and depositing it in a trashcan. Her hand brushed over her back pocket, making sure the knife was still there. Then she backed her bike out of the garage and down the driveway.

The Brunnolf Tradition

With one last look, she caught Wesley's eye. A solemn frown had settled over his mouth, making him appear older. He looked as though he did not expect to see her again.

Her heart twisted with despair as she shifted into gear and rode away.

Driving down Main Street, Natalie headed for Highway 133. Hazy clouds passed through the sky above the mountains, but the roads were not too bad, considering last night's rainy weather. Salt trucks had gone through the town just in case, and she minded the grit over the pavement as she stopped at an intersection.

She had planned to go south toward Redstone and Ivy's house when she reached the highway, but at that second, she was struck with sudden urge to turn north. Thinking of one ancestor from her dream, taught not to ignore her instincts, Natalie turned. After that, it felt like a magnet was in her chest, pulling her toward an unknown destination, reminiscent of the feeling that had led her to Dr. Harris in Denver. If what she had discovered there was any indication of what was to come, she pursued it with only the deepest dismay.

A couple of miles ahead, the road opened to the countryside and curved left around the Weaver Cemetery. She looked over at it briefly, wondering if it was the same

The Brunnolf Tradition

graveyard where Ivy's husband was buried. The place did not provoke the same subconscious familiarity as the clearing on the cliff, and she passed by the quiet graves with a sense of peace.

After another mile, a little farm came up on the right. A banner, designed similarly to the ones she had seen strung from the streetlamps around Carbondale, was tied over part of the fence. It addressed the farm as the location for the fall festival's pumpkin patch.

She inherently felt that she had been delivered to her destination. Turning into the open gateway, she rode down a short dirt road to an old barn. There were a few cars already parked in the grass nearby, and as she shut off her Bonneville, she knew somehow that Ivy was there.

She followed a sign pointing the way to the pumpkin patch, though she was nervous to wander onto a stranger's property. Around a small grove of trees lining a thin creek, the harvest fields spread before her. Haystacks surrounded the patch, and she noticed a couple of families roaming the field with small children, searching for the perfect gourd.

It dredged up memories of the handful of times she and Alan--*her father!* she thought indignantly--had tried to carve pumpkins. Neither of them had been very good at it,

The Brunnolf Tradition

but he baked the most delicious pumpkin bread. She realized that she did not have the first notion of how to make it, and drowned in the sinking sorrow of his loss once again. How often was that destined to happen throughout her life?

Natalie meandered through the vast patch, her eyes alternately drawn to the blots of orange in the greenery and the snowcapped mountains along the horizon. It felt serene, and the occasional laughter of a child in the distance added a sense of sweetness to the atmosphere.

"You're looking for me."

Startled, Natalie turned to find Ivy at her side. She wore a heavy tan coat, and she had a basket filled with several small pumpkins on her arm.

Her surprise faded, and Natalie sighed. Was she truly that surprised that her instincts had led her correctly?

"I think," Natalie murmured, "it's time we talked about a few things."

Ivy nodded. "Let's walk."

Together they wandered down the rows of pumpkins. The midday light flitted in and out between the passing clouds.

Natalie's mind felt clear for the first time in a long while, and she simply stated, "I know about Hazel's spell."

"Well, you don't dance around, do you?" Ivy mused.

After a moment, she continued, "You may recall that I said

The Brunnolf Tradition

the first lesson many of us learn is that our words and thoughts have power in the universe... Can you see, then, how it all went terribly wrong? She was so young and passionate and naïve.

"May your mind be filled with desire for me alone." She wanted him to love no other woman but her, yet it could also be interpreted that he bear no other thought whatsoever but his desire for her. *"May your body ignite with passion at the very sight of me."* Fire represents both passion and rage. And finally, *"may your blood never rest so long as it is apart from mine..."*

"Until they have a child," Natalie whispered, her heart breaking for her poor mother, and poor Anthony, too. They had tried so hard to find an end to it. "But they have that child now, don't they?"

Ivy faced her. With sudden apprehension, she covered her mouth as grief overwhelmed her aged features. "Oh, my dear," she murmured. "I had hoped you might never know..."

Natalie was too tired to be sad, and she felt no desire to offer Ivy solace. "Why hasn't it stopped, then?" she asked. "Why wasn't it over with my birth? That's why my mother had sought him out."

"I honestly don't know," said the old woman, shaking her head as her blue eyes blinked with tears. "Richard

The Brunnolf Tradition

blamed me for all of it. I was the one who put the idea into Willow's head that a child between the lines might break the curse. But she did it on her own, researching the lines and tracking down one of William Bird's descendants. She confided in me only after she was pregnant."

They stepped around a few larger pumpkins. Natalie caught sight of a Monarch butterfly sitting on one, blending with the gourd's orange skin.

She considered the argument she had overheard between Ivy and Holly, and took a deep breath. "Why does Laurel say I will finish it?"

Ivy glanced warily at her. "How much of that did you hear?"

"Enough to know you were hiding things from me. That's why I didn't come back."

"Holly said you were staying with Wesley..."

Gritting her teeth, Natalie stopped and stared at Ivy blatantly. She had not come to her for a lecture. "Why does Laurel say I will break the curse?" she persisted.

Ivy was the first to look away. She stooped and clipped the stem of another miniature pumpkin, adding it to her basket. "When I was a girl, I always felt guilty that I had been born healthy while my twin sister spent all of her short life in illness. But after she passed, she came to me

The Brunnolf Tradition

and explained that it was part of the plan, because now she was on the other side to guide me and teach me.

"She rarely explains why some things need to happen, but I've learned enough over the years to know she's always right. She told me you would come, and that I should let you figure things out on your own."

Sighing, Natalie decided that she was not going to get any answers on that subject. "Then what about the spirits?" she demanded. "Are they the same things haunting us at night? How can you even derive power from such creatures?"

Ivy looked around uncomfortably. A young boy ran past, followed by his even smaller sister. Moments later, their parents excused themselves as they walked by.

Crossing her arms in her bomber jacket, Natalie waited for the old woman to answer.

"You didn't grow up with us," Ivy said at length. "You didn't learn how to control them."

"Control them?" she repeated disdainfully. "What are they?"

With a frown, Ivy quoted the last part of the spell again: "*May your blood never rest so long as it is apart from mine.*"

The Brunnolf Tradition

Natalie's eyes widened. Horror rent through her like a flood that washed the rest of the world away. "Are you saying... 'Blood,' as in 'bloodline?'"

Ivy nodded, her face grave.

"Then all of those spirits..." Natalie scarcely remembered how to breathe. "Those *people*..."

"Are the descendants of William Bird," the old woman finished for her. "Never to rest until the spell is broken and forced to obey its caster... Or, at least, *her* bloodline."

"Us," Natalie uttered, appalled at the thought. "The Brunnolfs."

This was the final piece she was missing. This was what had so thoroughly buried her mother in remorse and self-loathing: Anthony's family was essentially enslaved to hers.

But that spell had been cast well over two centuries ago! How many Birds had dispersed across the globe in that time? How many human spirits had been reduced to servitude as those nightmarish wraiths?

All at once her dread of the shadowy creatures lifted, replaced with pity and a growing resolve.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"And what about me?" Natalie said. "If I am a daughter of both bloodlines, then what will happen to me when I die?"

Closing her eyes in agony, Ivy raised an aged, trembling hand to her temple and whispered, "I don't know!"

Natalie clenched her fists. Though her own soul was at stake, she was more worried for the souls of any children she may bear. How could a person carry on with life, knowing an eternity of servitude waited beyond for all of her kin?

And then there was Wesley.

"Wesley is descended from William Bird," she stated. "Richard proved it. He found the documents going all the way back."

Ivy glanced at her, again surprised and suspicious. "Yes, he told me that just before he disappeared."

"So then Wesley and I are related."

"Distantly," she agreed. "Willow had traced Anthony to William's daughter, Catherine. As Richard understood it, Wesley came from his son, James."

Natalie recalled seeing the names in Dr. Harris's research. Then she realized that all the men and women of whom she had read were also bound to her family. The magnitude of it was exhausting to consider!

The Brunnolf Tradition

No wonder Richard had been concerned!

Natalie rounded on Ivy, her suspicions boiling. "And what does Laurel have to say about Richard?" she snapped. "You cannot expect me to believe that she has not told you where he is!"

Ivy's calm expression betrayed no hint of emotion. "I only know that he will turn up eventually."

Feeling sick and frustrated, Natalie spun away from her great aunt and marched out of the pumpkin patch without a word of farewell.

CHAPTER TEN

Riding out her anger and disgust up and down the highways, Natalie simply could not grasp the scale of her great aunt's revelation. And once she had finally calmed, such confirmation of an afterlife drove her to tears, forcing her to pull over and park on the shoulder along Highway 133 by Mount Sopris. Just a few feet from the road, the cold Crystal River coursed its way through the valley.

She pulled off her helmet and sat on her bike, weeping for her dear Alan. She remembered how she had sat at his grave in Houston, wishing she could speak to him, yet believing that nothing remained of him to hear her.

Now she discovered she had been wrong.

'He's not really gone,' Earl's voice echoed in her mind. *'He's still with us, and he still loves you.'*

As she cried, she found herself inexplicably grateful that Alan had not been her natural father, that he was not a descendant of Bird. She hoped that meant he had been able to find peace somewhere.

On the other hand, her biological father's spirit was even now wandering the earth, and she shivered at the memory of that whispered name in the woods: "Rowan..."

The Brunnolf Tradition

More abysmal than anything: *how did it connect to Richard's disappearance?* That final unanswered question was driving her mad! She *had* to find him! He must still be alive!

Suddenly, a siren whooped behind her. Glancing back, Natalie swore under her breath as a police cruiser rolled to a stop on the side of the highway. She hastily wiped her face as Cody emerged from the driver's seat.

She was *not* in the mood to deal with him.

With a scowl Natalie swung her leg off her bike and clutched the straps of her helmet in one fist, recalling her private oath to club him over the head with it.

However, Cody did not seem intimidated as he approached her. "Having trouble with the bike again?" he asked.

"What do you want?" she spat, though she already had an idea of what she was about to hear. He had likely helped Ivy search for her when she had not returned to the house in Redstone.

A chill breeze wafted the scent of pine and cedar through the air. Cody studied her for a moment, and it was difficult for Natalie to assess the look in his brown eyes. He rested his hands on his hips, seeming both worried and guarded.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"Did Holly really go to his house last night?"

Startled by the question, Natalie did not answer immediately. She noticed that his face had grown pale, and the longer she stretched out the silence, the more dismal he became.

With astonishing clarity, she murmured, "You think she loves him."

Cody grimaced, and his gaze fell to his polished boots.

Doubts whirled in Natalie's head, making her dizzy. She remembered watching the eerie exchange between Holly and Wesley at the clinic, how he had stared at her cousin in near desperation. Then she thought of that kiss the night before, of Wesley's astonishment afterward, and his rage when Holly fled upon finding Natalie in the house with him...

Her heart cowered within her breast, as though hoping to bury itself far away from the cold, cruel wash of reality. How could she have been so *stupid*?

"Richard visited the shop in town before he disappeared," Cody stated unexpectedly.

Natalie looked up at him through a melancholy blur.

When she said nothing, he continued. "I stopped by after my shift and found them arguing. He told her to keep

away from Wesley, said that he was dangerous. I tried to ask her about it, but she just ignored me. Then, when Richard went missing, she left her ring on the nightstand and left."

Already feeling humiliated, vulnerable, and distressed, Natalie could not bring herself to pity him. She had nothing left to rely on but contempt, and her blood seethed in her veins. "If that's true, then why haven't you made her a suspect?"

He frowned. "I love her," he said resolutely. "She wasn't angry when she left, Natalie. She was scared." Then his face darkened. "And you should be, too. You can't stay with him."

Natalie struggled to find some disagreement, but her sense had fled from the disastrous thoughts rioting in her mind. Part of her was shamefully afraid to be around Wesley and his temper, but without him there was no one else she could trust.

Then, without saying a word, she put on her helmet. As she straddled her bike, Cody came forward with a plea, but the throttling engine drowned out his voice and she raced away.

He did not follow.

The Brunnolf Tradition

She must have put two or three hundred miles on her bike before she returned to Carbondale late that afternoon. Riding kept her mind numb, allowing her to focus only on the curve of the road and the traffic around her. Those few hours of quiet allowed her feelings to settle before she could face Wesley again.

However, when she entered his townhouse on Main Street, she found him gone. He did not leave a note for her this time.

Resigned to wait for him, Natalie plopped on the sofa in physical and emotional exhaustion. Her hands hurt from riding through the cold wind, which had cut through her thick gloves, and her cheeks started to tingle in the warmth of the house. Melody hobbled to her side, resting her chin on Natalie's knee.

Running her thumb over the tiger's eye pendant, much like her ancestor had done with Juniper's ruby, Natalie thought of the situation between Holly and Wesley. She worried that it might be the soured love spell at work. If that was so, then Holly had every reason to be petrified, but she did not seem to be, whatever Cody had said differently.

She wondered what had happened to Richard after his argument with Holly. What would he have done next, if

The Brunnolf Tradition

neither Wesley or Holly decided to leave? Had he tried to force one of them to go? Had he suffered the consequences of trying to staunch the family curse, just as Natalie's mother had endured?

Sighing, she turned her head and peered out the window. Across the street, the tall oak's leaves had mullled into a deep red.

Holding her breath, Natalie sat up slowly in disbelief. She remembered staring at the tree the day before, imagining its leaves changing colors... Had she really performed magic, or was it simply nature's inexplicable timing?

The golden retriever whined and turned away. Natalie watched her hobble to the bar, sniffing at the box on the floor containing Willow's journals.

Jumping up, Natalie rushed across the room and pulled out the books. She flipped through each of the pages, searching out a spell for protection. Ivy had cast one for Richard already, but Natalie would feel better if she could make her own.

As she scanned through the pages of her mother's slanted handwriting, her eyes stopped on a single word: "rowan." The spell was titled "For the Protection of Kin" and called for the use of rowan berries, saltwater, a sprig

The Brunnolf Tradition

of rue, and a drop of blood. Her mother explained it would also be helpful to have a photograph of those to be protected and a shielding stone, such as jasper, hematite, or *tiger's eye*.

Natalie's thoughts fixed instantly on Ivy's herb room, where she knew could find the required ingredients, but Ivy did not label her many jars of herbs, knowing them intimately by scent and appearance. That left only one other place to obtain rue and rowan berries, but Natalie could not let Holly know what she was doing. Her cousin would likely be able to counter it.

Stuffing her mother's book inside her bomber jacket, she zipped up her coat and hurried down to the garage.

When Natalie rode past Browne's Books and Balms on Main Street, Holly's SUV was parked outside. She veered south and drove to the end of Sopris Park, where she put down her kickstand and shut off the Bonneville's engine.

It was almost five o'clock and, if Natalie remembered the store hours correctly, Holly would soon close the shop. She walked back toward Main Street and hid herself in one of the modest art galleries within sight of the storefront.

Her stomach roiled as she waited, knowing her father would have been displeased with what she was about to do,

The Brunnolf Tradition

but beneath her angst there was a curious excitement. For the first time she wondered what kind of a person Anthony had been, where he had worked, whether he had ever spied on a person or planned a break-in. What had she inherited from him?

With a frown, she touched the knife in her back pocket, the same blade that had sealed his enslavement in the afterlife, a fate that also waited for her soul if she could not manage to end the curse...

Before the gloomy thoughts had a chance to take hold of her, Natalie saw her cousin exit the shop down the street, locking the door. Her attention returned to the present, and she watched as Holly got into her SUV and drove away.

Bolstering her nerves, Natalie exited the gallery and walked calmly along the sidewalk. She recalled how her mother had mentally cloaked herself to keep prying eyes away. Though Natalie was not sure how it worked, she tried to do the same. As she approached the old shop front, she withdrew her lock picks. She would have to be quick.

The antique keyhole was fortunately uncomplicated. In just a few seconds, she was able to duck into the dim, narrow room lined with shelves. The bell chimed overhead and Natalie jumped up to silence it, her heart pounding.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Then she looked around. It seemed Holly trusted that old lock to be her only means of security, but Natalie supposed only a fool would try stealing from a witch. She just hoped the rule of exception was on her side since she was family.

Searching the shelves of alphabetized herbs for the letter "R," Natalie found the small red berries of rowan, collected a handful, and slipped them carefully into one pocket. Further down the shelf she found the rue and searched through the bottle for a few reasonably fresh leaves.

After replacing the jars in their appropriate spots, she turned to leave, relieved at the ease of her theft.

"Rowan."

She stopped in her tracks, heart springing up with fright as the hair raised on her nape. Looking back, she saw the curtained doorway in the corner of the shop. The purple velvet rippled gently, as though someone was standing behind it.

Glancing at the front door, she pondered whether she dared to linger. It was unlikely Holly would return, but Natalie could not dismiss the possibility that her cousin might have more mystical means of sensing an intruder.

The Brunnolf Tradition

She faced the purple curtain again, and slowly drew it aside.

The small square room beyond was painted a dark shade of violet. In the center stood a round table draped in the same purple velvet, and resting on top was Holly's Tarot deck. Natalie shuddered as she recalled the reading Holly had given her, yet she found herself wondering what she would find if she drew a card now...

A shadow moved at the corner of her eye. Jumping back, Natalie faced the dark spirit, her breath halting in her lungs. She remembered the touch of claws scraping across her neck, the invisible hand dragging her up to the ceiling, and she recoiled in dread of an attack.

But the spirit was still, merely staring at her from its mask of darkness.

Recovering her breath, Natalie looked beneath it and saw a small circle painted on the hardwood floor in the corner, surrounded by strange symbols. The spirit appeared to be confined within its boundaries.

She felt at last that she could examine the nightmarish thing with some amount of rationalization. Knowing the being had once been a living person dissolved some of her fear. Then, with a shiver that reached to her

The Brunnolf Tradition

core, she realized that each spirit had been a part of the Bird family, Anthony's family, her family.

Wesley had said in the mountain meadow that if she wanted to understand the shadow being's purpose, she should embrace it.

She stared at the looming specter, struggling with the innate urge to run. Her gaze could hardly focus on its hazy form, flowing in and out of reality. Finally she gritted her teeth, closed her eyes, and stepped into the circle with her arms spread wide.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then a slow, surreal warmth caressed her like the sun in spring. She breathed deeply, all of her muscles relaxing.

When she opened her eyes, she was standing in a field of golden wheat. William Bird, looking healthy and alive with his auburn hair blazing in the light, gazed down at her with a gentle, fatherly smile. He reached out, grasping her hand, and then guided her fingers to her back pocket.

She jerked when she felt the knife there, the same blade that had murdered her natural father. That bleak night flashed around her, marring the sunny field.

But a reassuring sensation lifted her worries, drawing her into the light again, and she withdrew the knife from her pocket. William silently urged her to kneel on the

The Brunnolf Tradition

dark, rich earth, where she unfolded the blade. After he made a motion of stabbing the ground, she seemed to understand.

When the knife drove into the dirt, the vision abruptly disappeared. She was crouching in the corner of Holly's purple room, scraping the blade across the painted circle, dividing it in half.

A rush of air nearly knocked her over, and Natalie saw the shadowy spirit, released from its prison, dart out of the room and disappear.

In a daze, she looked around. The room had grown abnormally warm and she was starting to sweat beneath her coat. Had it truly been William Bird in the vision, or had the sinister shade merely tricked her?

Whatever the case, she had set the damn thing free, and Holly was bound to notice.

Replacing the knife in her back pocket, Natalie stood and discovered that the spirit had blown over several Tarot cards from the table in its escape.

Only one lay face-up on the floor: *The Hanged Man*.

Uncertain if she wanted to know that particular card's meaning, Natalie hastily departed.

The Brunnolf Tradition

As she closed the shop door, relieved to breathe in the chilled mountain air, she jumped when someone touched her arm. Natalie spun around and found a couple before her.

"You're Holly's cousin, right?" said the woman.

Then Natalie recognized them as the anxious pair that had come into the shop the day she had first met Holly. Her cousin had made them each a special tea and sent them off with very specific directions.

The couple did not seem so nervous anymore, beaming at her with eager gazes, as though prepared to cherish her every word.

Natalie gaped at them, fearful that they might inadvertently tell Holly they had seen her in the shop when it had already been closed up for the day. But she forced a friendly smile and hoped an easy manner could persuade them that she was supposed to be there.

"Um... What can I do for you?" she asked.

"We were just looking for Holly. When you see her, could you tell her we're expecting?"

Blinking in surprise, Natalie said, "Congratulations!"

The couple grinned, said goodbye, and walked away hand in hand.

Natalie stared after them in wonder. Had Holly's herbal medicines helped them to conceive? It had only been

The Brunnolf Tradition

a few days since Natalie had seen them in the shop--surely no herb could work that quickly. What else had Holly added to the enchantment?

What else was she capable of?

Subduing her thoughts, Natalie hastened to her motorcycle.

Riding past the coke ovens on the edge of Redstone, she continued onward until she saw Bighorn Way, soon followed by Spotted Owl Drive. She pulled up to Ivy's house, noticing that her great aunt's car was still gone.

The house was empty.

Seizing the opportunity, Natalie pushed her bike around to the side of the house and out of sight, just as she had the other night. Then she picked open the lock on the back door.

Inside, the house was silent. Hurrying upstairs, Natalie went to the guest bedroom and retrieved her things, hastily packing them all into her backpack. She left out a single photograph that she had brought with her from Houston: the one of Richard and her mother standing by the willow tree.

Returning to the kitchen, she got a small bowl, a container of salt, and a canteen of water, cramming them

The Brunnolf Tradition

into her pack as well. Then she checked her mother's book, making certain she had everything she needed.

With a pause, she stared into the room filled with books and herbs. There was the basement door, leading down to Ivy's personal sacred space. She had said Natalie was not ready for it, but Natalie was beginning to see that she was unprepared for a lot of the things her family expected her to do.

Walking up to the door, she tested the handle. Locked, of course. Yet as she reached for her picks in her jacket, a heaviness settled over the room, and she thought it had even grown darker.

Ivy was not as trusting as Holly, evidently. She had more protection in place than a simple lock; there was something ethereal guarding that door. Natalie was not certain she would be able to do anything about it, and that only made her suspicions rise.

What was Ivy hiding down there?

Suddenly, she heard the front door open. Spinning around, Natalie searched for a place to conceal herself, but there was nothing except shelves and an open table. She held her breath, peeking down the hall and into the parlor.

There she saw Ivy with her basket of pumpkins on one arm and a sack of groceries in the other, heading toward

The Brunnolf Tradition

the kitchen. Natalie panicked, and thought again of her mother's use of a mental cloak to shield herself from attention. She forced herself to relax and pretend like she was supposed to be there, blending in with the room.

Ivy walked past the doorway and into the kitchen. Then Natalie heard the water run in the sink, and a drawer opened and closed. The old woman started humming.

Slowly, Natalie backed out of the herb room into the hall. Each step was carefully placed, minding the creaky floorboards as she headed away from the kitchen and toward the front door. In her mind she begged any spirits that may be watching--Laurel, in particular--to keep silent and allow Natalie to get on with her business.

Reaching the door, she winced as it groaned when she pushed it open, but Ivy continued her activity in the kitchen. Quietly, Natalie stepped out onto the porch and very gently closed the door.

As soon as her boots touched the grass, Natalie made a full sprint through the aspen, oak, spruce, and pine. Her adrenaline propelled her all the way up the hill to the clearing in only a few minutes, where at last she paused to catch her breath.

The sun was setting in the distance, casting a reddish-pink light on Mount Sopris. Across the meadow,

The Brunnolf Tradition

darkness had already shrouded the family cemetery beneath the trees. All was silent but for the rushing water of the Crystal River below.

In the vast sky above, a sliver of moon hung over the mountains. Her mother had specified a certain time for performing the protective spell, but Natalie hoped her intent would be enough.

By the edge of the cliff, she dropped her pack and cleared a space in the fallen autumn leaves to sit. First she opened her mother's book and examined the spell closely under the fading light. She would have to cast a circle, which she had no clue how to do, though she imagined it would be similar to the one she had seen in Holly's curtained room. Unfortunately, circle casting must have fallen under the basic principles of spells, because her mother did not provide instructions for it on the other pages of her journal.

With a sigh, Natalie pulled out her pocketknife. She thought of cutting through Holly's circle, and figured if she could cut through one, then she could just as well construct one. Driving the blade into the earth, she shuffled around on her knees and carved the circle around her.

The Brunnolf Tradition

When she connected the ends, she paused. There was a slight difference in the air. The autumn chill had gone, yet still the hair on the back of her neck stood on end.

Sitting again with her legs crossed, Natalie looked for the next step. She took up the bowl and canteen of water she had taken from Ivy's kitchen. Pouring the water into the basin, she read aloud, "Blessed is this water, the root of all life."

Then she added a pinch of salt.

"Blessed is this salt to cleanse away strife."

Pausing to check the book, she dug a few of the rowan berries out of her pocket and chose five of the ripest. She squeezed what little juice she could from them into the saltwater before dropping the tiny fruit into the bowl.

"Blessed are these berries that protect us from harm."

Lastly, she frowned as she wiped the pocketknife clean on her jeans. She imagined the blade covered in blood, gripped tightly in her mother's hand, and she shuddered. Gritting her teeth, she nicked her finger on the blade. With a wince, she held her finger over the bowl, reminiscent of Hazel holding her palm over the fire, as a drop of blood fell.

"Blessed is my blood, empowering this charm."

The Brunnolf Tradition

After reading over the rest of the spell, Natalie took out the photograph of Richard and her mother. Placing it on the ground beside the bowl, she pulled the tiger's eye pendant over her head and laid it carefully on the picture. Instinctively, she made certain the thin leather cord encircled her grandfather's figure.

Natalie referred to the book one last time before taking up the sprig of rue and the bowl, rising to her feet. She dipped the rue leaves into the water. Then, using it like a brush, she spattered the mixture onto the ground about her, turning in a circle.

"With witches' rue I cast a shield to protect those whose blood I wield. Defense upon them I now bestow. As I will it, it shall be so."

She was supposed to repeat the chant three times, but as she turned around, she detected movement in the trees. Holding her breath, she witnessed more than one shadowy creature emerge. There was a low hum in the air like surging electricity, and she hesitated.

Vicious snarls emitted from several areas at once.

Forcing her attention back to the spell, Natalie blanched when she realized she had forgotten the words to say. Instead she dipped the rue into the bowl again, flinging out the mixture with greater vigor.

The Brunnolf Tradition

The shadows, at least a dozen of them, slowly prowled forward from the trees.

Throwing down the rue, Natalie poured the rest of the spelled mixture directly on the earth around her and dropped the bowl.

That did not halt their advance. She stood in terror, knowing she could not possibly fight against so many.

Then, with an unearthly howl, the spirits rushed toward her. Natalie fell to her knees, covering her head, expecting claws to rip through her flesh.

All was quiet.

After a moment, Natalie looked up. The shadowy figures had stopped, gathered in a ring around her. Standing close to her side was a different spirit, not shadow, but gaunt and gray, and she looked up.

It was William Bird, whom she had released in Holly's shop. He was not the same man she had seen in the warm, sunlit vision. Quite the opposite--he looked pale, ill, and worn thin.

But his opaque, sunken eyes betrayed an ancient power, and with one look he dared his children to come forward and test his wrath.

Then the dark spirits evaporated. Footsteps came over the leaves behind her, and Natalie leapt to her feet.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Holly approached leisurely, her long blonde hair shining against her white parka, hands clasped behind her back. Her gaze swept over William's remaining form only briefly.

"You really should be careful," she said in a casual tone. "It's very dangerous to cast when you have no clue what you're doing." Reaching Natalie's side, she looked down in derision at the items spread out within the small circle. "Is that table salt?" she asked, malicious laughter darkening her blue eyes.

Natalie hid her trembling hands by making fists at her sides. She watched as Holly walked around her circle, experiencing a new, profound fear of the woman. There was no doubt left in her imagination; not only did her family rely on the Bird spirits for their power, but they could send those sinister wraiths to attack anyone who crossed them. The notion that her cousin might have controlled the fiendish specter that had pulled her toward the attic made Natalie's stomach wrench in apprehension.

In spite of Holly's fierce gaze, William's pale spirit stayed defiantly at Natalie's side, a hazy, skeletal image of what he had been in life.

"I must admit," Holly murmured, coming to stand in front of them, "you are bold. Not even a shred of proper

The Brunnolf Tradition

training, and you already have one little helper, don't you?" She glowered at the lingering shade.

"I didn't ask for his help!" Natalie argued. "I don't want any part of this pathetic excuse of an afterlife you all have created!"

"Whatever the case may be," Holly uttered, "you can have him. He's weak, frayed by time... and meddlesome."

William's unnatural form slowly faded away as the evening's darkness crept over the cliff side.

Bending down, her blonde curls sweeping over her shoulder, Holly picked up the photograph and the tiger's eye pendant. With a meaningful stare at Natalie, she tore the picture in half, tossing it aside. Then she flung the tiger's eye over the cliff to the river below.

Natalie's heart twisted anxiously and she jerked forward, but froze when Holly faced her again.

"I think it's time you went home," she stated, and started to walk away.

Grinding her teeth, Natalie looked after her. "I know Wesley is afflicted by the curse."

Holly paused, though she did not face her. "I'll take care of it."

"My mother tried to take care of it, too," she murmured.

The Brunnolf Tradition

At that, Holly looked back. A bright, beautiful smile spread across her face, more frightening than any scowl.

"Goodnight... Rowan."

Shivering, she watched Holly disappear through the trees. Her cousin must have seen her mother's memory, too. How else could she know Natalie's traditional name?

The two halves of the photograph started to blow away in a cold breeze, and Natalie swiftly retrieved them, holding back her tears. She did not have much from her mother, and the ruin of one cherished picture stung her more than she wanted to admit. Her hands trembled as she slowly gathered up the bowl, canteen, and salt, placing them in her backpack.

Suddenly, the tiger's eye pendant dropped onto the fallen leaves in front of her. Looking around, she saw that William's spirit had returned, apparently having retrieved the stone from the river.

Bile rose in her throat as she stared at his corpse-like figure. Angry, she yelled, "Go on! I don't want your help! I set you free!"

He stared at her for a long moment, those white, cloudy eyes sending a chill down her spine. Then he faded away.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Somewhat reluctantly, Natalie picked up the tiger's eye and draped it once again around her neck. The weight of it comforted her a little. She looked around the meadow one last time, trying to remember where she and Ivy had buried the spelled jar that would protect Richard. Hopefully it remained more effective than her own childish attempt.

She stumbled downhill through the trees as it grew dark. When she reached Ivy's house, she marched past the back door and the pile of old bricks and clay pots. She did not want to see Ivy and have to explain what had happened on the cliff. Instead, Natalie just wanted to find Wesley and forget about everything for a while.

As she put on her helmet and pushed her bike out to the street, she knew that would not happen. They needed to talk about Holly, about his true feelings, and plan what they should do next. Even if he knew about the curse, she did not think he understood its full effect, of the imprisonment beyond death that waited for them both.

Riding her Bonneville up Highway 133 once more, Natalie tried to shake off the feeling that she was being followed. She glanced back several times, expecting to see Holly's SUV or perhaps even Cody's patrol car, but the road was empty for miles.

The Brunnolf Tradition

She was approaching the coke ovens that lined the road in the southern part of Redstone when she noticed her bike making a strange noise. Listening closely, she knew it was not the engine. It almost sounded like a broken link in the chain, but she had checked it habitually during her stops to fill up her tank.

Just as she was about to pull over, thinking to use her inherent ability to search out the issue, a loud crack echoed in her ears. Her rear tire jammed and she lost control. The bike started to roll and Natalie pitched herself from the seat, bending her knees and tucking her arms around her neck as she had been taught relentlessly by her father. The ground jarred against her shoulder when she landed, and her helmet smacked against the pavement.

She saw the white SUV run the red light ahead of her, crashing into her father on his favorite Harley. As if time had slowed, she recalled seeing his body bend awkwardly around the front of the car. Then he was pulled down as the SUV continued rolling forward, and his helmeted head bounced between the pavement and the car's bumper before he disappeared beneath its tires...

Blinking her weary eyes, Natalie breathed slowly. She suspected a few minutes had passed since she had hit the ground. In a daze she stared at the glittering indigo sky

The Brunnolf Tradition

above. Her body felt warm and heavy, rooted to the ground beneath her.

At first she started to sit up, but she had barely moved an inch before lying back with a wince. Her shoulder burned with the most pain, but every one of her muscles ached.

Raising one shaky hand, she tried to unbuckle her helmet, but her fingers felt numb and she could not dredge up the logic in her bewildered mind to unfasten it. After fumbling at it for a minute, the strap came loose, and she carefully pulled the helmet off her head.

She took a deep breath of the chilled mountain air. When she exhaled, a puff of fog rose into the sky. Trying to focus her thoughts, she looked at the fresh scratches across the side of her helmet, and silently thanked her father for never letting her go without one. Laying it aside, she reached over to her injured shoulder and brushed her gloved fingertips across the chafed leather of his bomber jacket.

Warmth swelled in her heart and eyes. She felt as though he had reached through time to protect her. Overall, it could have been much worse.

When she finally managed to climb to her feet, a horrible pain spread through her reinjured knee. She looked

The Brunnolf Tradition

down, finding her jeans ripped yet again and her knee bleeding much more than the day she had merely dropped her bike. With a groan, she delicately slipped her backpack off her shoulders and let it drop to the ground. One of the straps had ripped away from the seam. Turning around, she saw her poor motorcycle a little ways up the road.

She limped to it. In the dark it was difficult to see the damage, but the one thing that stood out was the end of the bike chain tangled in the spokes of her rear tire. She had never seen anything like it in her work. Then again, she was not that surprised. After all, unnatural forces were being used against her, and she bit her lip as she considered whether Holly had intended to kill her or merely send a clear message.

Again she imagined the Death card, a skeleton trampling over the ruins of a kingdom...

Her entire body shook from adrenaline. With it being so cold, she knew she would have to find shelter soon in case she went into shock. Fortunately, the accident had happened close enough to Redstone that a short walk would get her to a phone or someone who could help.

Natalie brushed her quivering, gloved hand over her short dark hair and limped farther up the highway. She wished she could have pulled her bike off the road so it

The Brunnolf Tradition

would not cause another accident, but she was afraid to put additional strain on her knee and shoulder. The pain was starting to grow as the adrenaline subsided.

While she walked, an eerie sensation crept over her. She stopped in front of a sign that read "Welcome to Redstone, Ruby of the Rockies." Looking over to the trees on the mountainside to her right, she frowned in confusion. It felt like she had been there before. Of course, she had ridden past that spot a number of times over the past few days, but that particular moment was different.

Then William appeared in the distance, his spectral form terrifying to behold, standing just outside the trees. He raised one skeletal hand, pointing into the grove.

Natalie shivered. "What do you want?" she whispered.

With the other hand, he beckoned her forward.

Grudgingly, she hobbled off the highway and into the grass. As she passed around evergreen spruces and looming pines, she caught sight of William drifting onward.

He was leading her somewhere.

The anticipation of what waited ahead made her heart race, and all of her pain temporarily vanished. She reached the bank of the Crystal River and followed it back south the way she had come from Ivy's. The riverbed diverted into

The Brunnolf Tradition

a far bend, the cold, dark water rushing past with a muted rumble.

After she maneuvered down a rocky mound, emerging behind two spruces at the bottom, she froze. A small clearing lay before her, framed on either side by oak and aspen.

Lying beneath William's fading ghost, just shy of the pebbly riverbank, was an older man, his face unshaven and clothes soaked through, as if he had recently climbed out of the freezing water.

Natalie ran to him and knelt at his side, her skinned knee burning as it bent. She touched his face, but jerked her hand back when she felt his icy skin--the touch of death.

Despair threatened to overwhelm her, but she resolutely leaned over his mouth, listening for any sign of life. She pressed her fingers against his throat in search of a pulse.

A tiny wisp of breath brushed against her cheek. Frantic, Natalie hurriedly removed her leather jacket, tucking it firmly around him. He was not shivering, and she knew that was not a good sign in such temperatures.

"Hold on, grandfather," she whispered, her voice shuddering with emotion. She brushed her hand over

The Brunnolf Tradition

Richard's graying hair as tears seared in her eyes. "I'll get help!"

Though she did not want to leave him, she could not simply wait there for him to die.

Ignoring the twinge in her knee, Natalie sprinted back to the highway, screaming at the top of her lungs. She thought the whole time of Wesley, hoping he would answer her mental cry for help once again.

All the while, tears poured down her face.

She had found him!

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Richard lay on a hospital bed beneath many blankets. An intravenous line was taped to his arm, delivering warm fluids to raise his core temperature. In addition, an oxygen mask covered his mouth and nose, which ensured he received humidified air.

Natalie could not look away from him, memorizing every small detail of his face in the faint lamplight. His eyebrows remained stubbornly dark in contrast to his gray hair, and the stubble on his cheeks was scattered black and white. There was a small scar on his forehead, perhaps derived from one of his many mountain adventures. She would have to ask him about it sometime.

Squeezing his rough hand, she wished she could look into his eyes. Lying there with his eyes closed, he almost appeared dead.

The door opened and Natalie smiled a little when Wesley came in, holding two cups of coffee.

"Thank you," she murmured and accepted one of the cups with her free hand. Her other arm was in a sling.

The doctor had said she was lucky with only a sprain in her shoulder, but she would have to be careful not to overly exert it to prevent the ligaments from tearing

The Brunnolf Tradition

completely. She also had a few bruises and a little road rash on her knee from the accident, but overall she felt physically fine.

Emotionally, on the other hand, she was a mess. The accident had dug up all the memories of her father's wreck, opening the scars of grief on her heart once more.

Her poor Bonneville had been towed to a shop in town. It was not totaled, but would need a lot of work, which in turn would require money she did not have. Better to wait until she had healed so she could do the labor herself.

But more than anything, she was relieved to have found Richard alive.

Wesley had arrived in Redstone just a few minutes after she finally caught an employee closing the Crystal Club Café and called an ambulance. From his Jeep they had taken a couple of blankets and a foil sheet to Richard and began warming him up. Her grandfather had remained unresponsive throughout their attempts.

She sipped her coffee, welcoming its soothing warmth. They had been up all night at Richard's bedside in Mountain Vale Hospital, reporting all that they knew to the nurses and a pair of officers from Glenwood Springs--not Carbondale, for which Wesley was grateful.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Though she did not know if the hospital had called Ivy yet, she imagined Cody would soon get word that Richard had been found. It was only a matter of time before they arrived.

"I saw the doctor in the hall," Wesley murmured. "She said his blood sugar levels came back in good range. She doesn't know why he won't wake up." Sighing, he sipped his coffee. "They're testing for drugs next."

She nodded, feeling numb as she traced her finger across the tiger's eye pendant over her heart. "There were needle marks on his arms. I saw them on the way here in the ambulance."

Wesley closed his tired eyes and swept his hand over his disheveled red hair. "That doesn't make any sense," he said.

"Doesn't it?" she asked, raising a brow. "He has been missing for two weeks. Now he turns up in Redstone, alive, with needle marks?"

She looked down into her rich brown coffee, wishing her thoughts would go in a different direction, but only one solution came to her mind.

"Ivy was a nurse for over forty years," she whispered, "in this very hospital."

The Brunnolf Tradition

Leaning closer, Wesley focused steadily on her. "You think she's behind this?"

"I don't know." With a frown, she set her coffee cup aside. "I hope I'm wrong."

After a moment, he reached toward her and touched her hair, his thumb brushing over her temple. "I'm glad you're all right," he murmured.

Her cheeks warmed and she smiled slightly. "I'm glad you can hear me from miles away."

"It's never happened to me before," he said, looking at her in wonder. "I just get this vision, and I know exactly where you are, and that you need me..."

He timidly grasped her hand, and her heart skipped. She had not spoken a word of what had happened with Holly on the cliff, but it had weighed heavily on her mind all night. Though she wanted nothing more than to sink into his embrace, she could not help thinking that what she felt-- what *he* felt--was only a spell.

"It's strange," Wesley murmured, his anxious gray eyes piercing hers, "because I think I need you more."

His breath trembled suddenly, and Natalie thought she would fall apart if he shed a tear.

"I know you've seen the worst side of me. My..."
Pausing, he breathed deeply, struggling to control his

The Brunnolf Tradition

emotions. "My father was the same way. I thought I was different... until I came here and..." He hesitated again, his face contorting briefly under the strain of his confession.

She knew what had happened then. He had met Holly, and then the curse took hold. After that, she could not imagine the brand of torment he had lived with every day, and she considered again the words of Hazel's spell: *May your mind be filled with desire for me alone. May your body ignite with passion at the very sight of me. May your blood never rest so long as it is apart from mine.*

Wesley raised her hand to his forehead, cupping her fingers tenderly, almost in supplication. "But when you're with me," he whispered, "I feel like myself again..."

Trying valiantly to suspend her tears, Natalie fought the conflicting urges in her head. Those men in her nightmares had been murderous in their desire, yet Wesley was so vulnerable and fearful before her, exposing his soul to her without any hope of mercy.

But she could not forget--she *must* not forget--that just last night he had stood at her bed with a knife in his fist.

The Brunnolf Tradition

She withdrew her hand from his gentle grip and brushed her fingers over his auburn hair. Then she leaned forward to lay a soft kiss on his forehead.

"It will be all right," she whispered. "I promise."

A soft knock on the door swiftly splintered the delicate moment between them, and they leaned away from one another.

Ivy peeked inside, snuffing out all sense of ease in Natalie's mind. She shuffled into the room with a frown at Richard, murmuring, "Oh, dear..."

Natalie shared a knowing look with Wesley and settled back in her seat, her jaw set. With one foot she tucked her backpack under her seat, knowing she still had her mother's journal and whatever remained of the rowan and rue inside. She watched Ivy warily as the old woman checked over the various machines monitoring Richard's status, undoubtedly slipping back into her habits as a nurse.

Then Ivy met her eyes. The old woman ignored Wesley fully as she came forward, gently touching Natalie's face. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine," Natalie said, drawing away slightly.

Ivy narrowed her gaze, the wrinkles around her mouth deepening as she pursed her lips.

The door opened again, and Cody marched inside.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Wesley instantly shot to his feet.

Tension wound through the air between them like a coiling, venomous snake, and they did not wait even to share words of disdain. Cody dove forward to tackle him, but Wesley caught him first with a furious blow to the jaw.

"Stop!" Natalie cried, jumping up from her chair.

Cody's police training perhaps gave him the upper hand for he soon had Wesley's face pinned against the wall, arms held behind his back. Natalie tried to squeeze between them, but Cody shoved her away, thrusting his hand unwittingly against her tender shoulder. She swore loudly as she clutched her arm in acute pain.

"Enough!"

An abrupt stillness came over the room, as though the speaker had flipped a power switch and disconnected them all from thought. Holly stood in the doorway, the ferocity in her eyes reminding Natalie of a cat preparing to attack its prey.

Gingerly shifting her sling around her shoulder, Natalie watched as Cody released Wesley and approached her. The desperate look on his handsome face would have been enough to sink any woman to her knees, but Holly merely scowled at him.

"Get out of here," she uttered.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"Holly," he whispered. "Please, can't we talk..."

For a moment, Holly's irritation shattered, her frown instead reflecting a fragment of despair. But she recovered quickly and pointed to the door. "Get out!"

Shoulders sinking, Cody adjusted the collar of his uniform before meekly leaving the room.

Ivy strode past her granddaughter, muttering, "I don't even know who you are anymore." Then she hurried after Cody, no doubt to try consoling him.

Holly stared at the floor for a few seconds.

To Natalie's disbelief, Wesley stepped toward her, and gently whispered, "Holly..."

Her cousin glanced at her before grasping Wesley's hand. "I need to talk to you. *Alone.*"

Without even looking at Natalie, he drew the other woman into the hall and closed the door.

Gaping, Natalie struggled for thought. After all he had said, almost begging for her to understand, he still left with her! No hesitation, no attempt to fight it!

Natalie pressed herself close to the door, ignoring the pain in her sprained shoulder, but she could not hear a thing through the heavy wood. Slowly pulling the handle, she drew the door open just an inch.

The Brunnolf Tradition

In the hallway, Holly caressed Wesley's face, and his eyes closed with aching relief. She whispered something, but they were too far for Natalie to hear.

Then she kissed him, her small, tender lips pressing eagerly to his. She clutched his shoulders tightly as his fervent hands seized her, burying his fingers in her long blonde hair.

Tears burning her eyes, Natalie fled from the door and sank beside Richard's bed. She covered her face, stifling her cry of anguish with little success.

Bowing her head over her grandfather's hand, she yearned to escape the plunging valley of emotion in which her trip to Colorado had abandoned her. The breadth of history and turmoil rendered to her over the mere length of a few days had finally broken her spirit under its solemnity. She just wanted Richard to be awake and alive, able to comfort her, for he was the only reason she had come at all.

She just wanted to be loved.

As she rested there, the exhaustion of the night dragging her slowly into sleep, Natalie heard a man's soothing voice.

"You're safe," he whispered, echoing deep in the recesses of her mind. "Let go."

The Brunnolf Tradition

Taking a deep breath, she released all of her doubts and fears. Then she was rising into the air.

When the soft ground touched the soles of her bare feet, she opened her eyes and gasped. She was dressed in a clean white robe, standing in the meadow beneath Mount Sopris. The sun was fading and the air was cool.

Natalie knew immediately that the vision presented to her was different from the other dreams. In her ancestor's memories, she had become them, observing the world through their eyes and their thoughts. This time she was aware of herself, aware that she was seeing the past and yet she was not a part of it.

She was a ghost.

Beside her in the meadow, Wesley and Richard took in the view of the Roaring Fork Valley, their hiking packs resting on the grass at their feet. Both men were frowning, and her heart skipped when she saw that Richard's eyes were red with tears.

"There was nothing more they could do," he murmured and sniffed. "They took him off life support. Now she's down there, alone, planning a funeral..."

The Brunnolf Tradition

Natalie bit her lip, holding back her grief as she witnessed the torment on her grandfather's face. Turning, Wesley placed his hand on the older man's shoulder.

Silence reigned for a few moments as Richard collected himself. Then he buried his aged hands in his pockets, glancing at Wesley in the deepening dark.

"We need to talk about Holly," Richard said. "I understand she brought an injured dog to you a few weeks ago--"

"Has she said something about me?" Wesley interrupted, his voice eager and body tensed in anticipation.

That reaction appeared to worry Richard further, and Natalie knew why. "No," he said.

Very carefully, Richard explained the history of Hazel's curse.

Wesley became grim as he stared down at the valley. At any second, Natalie expected him to argue, but his respect for Richard must have outweighed his disbelief.

She could sense Richard's heart already breaking. "I've started researching some of your family history..."

At that Wesley turned away, his fists clenched at his sides. Natalie recalled the similar reaction when she had confessed to him.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"I'm sorry, Wesley," Richard murmured. "Truly, I am. But I had to be sure."

For a long moment Wesley remained silent. As the sun disappeared, his face darkened. "What if you're right?" he whispered. "If this curse is true, and I'm doomed to become my father... What am I supposed to do?"

"Leave," Richard stated. "You have to get as far away from here as possible, and swear to me that you will never come back."

She could see the pain on Wesley's face, though he hid it from Richard. She reached out to touch him, but her hand dissolved through his body.

Wesley spun around, his brow knitted in fury. "And what if you're wrong?" he spat.

"I'm not," Richard said calmly. His eyes swept over Wesley in the dark. "You look just like him."

Like William Bird. Natalie knew with her own eyes that it was true.

"If you stay here," Richard continued, "it will only end in pain--"

"When my father tried to *kill* me, I didn't feel *anything!*" Wesley shouted with as much force as he could muster. Tears rolled down his face in the starlight. "He didn't love me! He had no power to hurt me! But you..."

The Brunnolf Tradition

"I'm sorry," the old man whispered in anguish. "You have to understand... Holly will never love you..."

Wesley's shoulders heaved with each emotive breath, and without warning, he grabbed Richard by the throat.

Natalie cried out, though they could not hear her.

Wheezing within Wesley's grappling hands, Richard slammed his open palm against his chest.

There was a clap of thunder, and Wesley fell back on the ground in the dark. Slowly, he sat up and raised his trembling hands before him in horror. When he looked at Richard, his self-revulsion rent across his face.

Then he stood and ran into the forest of aspens.

Rubbing his neck, Richard staggered and sat on the grass beneath thousands of stars. He dipped his face into his hands, and his shoulders began to quake.

Just as Natalie knelt beside him, she fell through the darkness, guided to another destination.

The new surroundings she recognized instantly: it was Ivy's kitchen. Richard and his sister sat at the small round table with his laptop between them, appearing out of place among Ivy's older appliances.

Natalie became very nervous.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"See there?" Richard said, pointing at the online family tree he and Dr. Harris had built. "We found all the links, all the documents, all the way back to William Bird."

"How could we have missed it?" Ivy murmured, studying the computer screen.

"There in the 1930s, Geraldine Crane had a son and gave him up for adoption. It took some work to find a certificate, and even then she had put down her name as Geraldine *Crawford*."

"Have you found them all?"

"The Crawfords? Of course!" He leaned back in his chair. "But who knows how many others we've missed! It's been over two hundred years! We can't keep track of them all!"

Ivy frowned at him and rose to her feet. Across the kitchen, she leaned against the counter. Natalie caught sight of her hand dipping furtively into a drawer. "You told him, didn't you?"

"Do I have to answer that?" He eyed her back warily as he rubbed his neck. "What has Laurel said to you?"

Closing her eyes, Ivy breathed deeply before facing him. "She says it is time to bring Rowan home."

The Brunnolf Tradition

Richard slammed his fist on the table, glowering at her. When she gave no reaction, he closed up his laptop and walked out of the kitchen. Ivy promptly followed him while rolling her eyes.

"You can forget I said anything!" he shouted.

"Alan is dead," Ivy stated firmly. "Are you just going to leave her down there all alone?"

Spinning around in the parlor, with the faces of their ancestors and relatives watching, Richard aimed a finger at her face. "Don't patronize me! You, of all people, know how much I love her. If you dare even *think* about contacting her, I'll drown you in the river myself!"

"Please," she said with a smirk. "That's a bit ballsy for you, isn't it?"

"I mean it!" he persisted, his hazel eyes severe. When he continued, his voice was barely above a murmur. "You took my daughter from me," he uttered, and Ivy's face drained of color, "you will not have my granddaughter. She has the chance at a free life, away from all this manipulation and influence. Away from *you*."

Ivy tried to recover herself. "You make me sound like the Devil."

"Worse," Richard said, heading for the front door. "You'd have him dancing in circles!"

The Brunnolf Tradition

As he stepped out onto the porch, Natalie saw Ivy dart forward. Though she knew yelling out to him would be useless, Natalie tried.

It was too late.

Richard jerked away from Ivy and saw the needle in her hand. The drug was already delivered.

"I'm sorry, Richard," Ivy said. "But we have to bring her here. When she learns about you, she'll come."

"Ivy!" he growled, clutching his leg. "What are you going to do? Keep me locked up in the basement?"

She grinned. "Now that is a very good idea, little brother. You've always been clever. When she realizes you've gone missing, she'll have to stay until it's done."

Richard swayed, dropping his laptop and leaning against the porch rail. He attempted to bolt for his car, but Ivy was already there to block his way. Instead he turned and staggered around the side of the house, his limbs growing heavy.

Ivy followed him. "This would be so much easier if you would just trust me."

Behind the house, Richard collapsed. Natalie scowled at Ivy as the older woman casually approached him. Opening a cellar door, she dragged Richard down onto the cool stone floor of the basement.

The Brunnolf Tradition

When Ivy climbed back outside, Richard's voice called from below, "It won't work!" She ignored him, closing the doors and securing them with a chain and padlock. Then she began stacking old clay pots over the door, hiding it from view.

Natalie heard her grandfather cry, "Don't you dare leave me here!"

The scene faded away, and she rose into the air once again.

Her feet landed gently on the hardwood floor within the purple room of Holly's shop. Her cousin had books spread over the little circular table, and in the corner William Bird's spirit writhed in anger, appearing as the same gaunt specter that had come to Natalie's aid.

This was different. She had assumed her grandfather was showing his memories to her, but how had he been able to see this?

"*I have been many places,*" he answered swiftly, as though he dwelled within her mind. Holly, however, did not seem to hear him. "*Look.*"

Knowing she was invisible, Natalie strode to Holly's side and peered over her shoulder at the books she was

The Brunnolf Tradition

reading. They were journals written by hand like Willow's, filled with spells and strange markings.

Then Natalie noticed that Holly had a small poppet in her lap. Gasping, she watched as Holly took a small curl of red hair and thrust it into the opening at the top of the poppet's head.

"No!" Natalie said in shock, though no one could hear her.

Or so she thought.

In the corner, William moaned. When Natalie looked at him, their eyes met. Instinctively, she understood. At that moment, they shared the same world, drifting through space and time.

"How can I stop it?" she asked him desperately. "Tell me how to free you!"

His empty gaze stared at her, and then he shook his head.

Suddenly, Holly rose to her feet. "Grandmother thinks Rowan can end this," she uttered. Facing William's spirit, she glowered at him. "This isn't something that can be destroyed! But it's something to take possession of, and I'll prove it. Wesley is your descendant, so he *will* obey me... If we have power over your souls in death, then we can certainly own them in life."

The Brunnolf Tradition

Slowly she turned away, the wild look on her heart-shaped face reflecting the outrageous, glorious plans in her mind.

"He's already trained," she murmured. "Richard said that he's psychic. Even grandmother acknowledges that he's more gifted than we could have ever predicted." She cradled the doll in her hands. "When I claim him, I'll show her that this curse is truly a blessing... and we won't have to be afraid of you anymore..."

Natalie's heart pounded fiercely, a shocking pulse that reminded her she had left her body somewhere behind. Lifting into the air once more, she sensed it was time to return.

"Be brave," Richard whispered.

CHAPTER TWELVE

She struggled to open her eyes. When she tried to move, her body jerked feebly instead.

"Relax," said a woman. "Take a deep breath."

But the sound of that familiar voice sparked a panic in Natalie's mind. Adrenaline flushed through her veins until she finally leaned back in the chair, her eyes opening wide as she panted for breath. Her shoulder ached and she clutched her sling tightly.

Ivy's calm gaze bore down on her from the other side of Richard's bed. Her lips were set in a firm line. "He should know better," she muttered. "You are too inexperienced for that kind of travel."

"I've had the dreams before," Natalie argued.

Ivy raised her brow. "That was not a dream. Your spirit left your body and journeyed through the planes of space and time. You stood there watching the events as they happened."

With a shudder, Natalie flexed her fingers. Her movements almost felt delayed, as though her muscles were not yet fully connected to her brain.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"Richard was an expert at it," Ivy explained further, "a talent developed, no doubt, from all the time he spent checking in on you."

Closing her eyes, Natalie allowed her words to sink in. Inexplicably, she found her grandfather in all of her memories then, always watching her from a distance. All along, all through her life, Richard had been with her in spirit.

She loved him all the more.

"What did he show you?" Ivy asked, perturbed by Natalie's continued silence as she scrutinized her.

When she looked up, fury bubbled over her tears as she remembered how coolly Ivy had detained Richard. "Enough," Natalie uttered with a scowl.

The old woman glanced at Richard's unconscious form in the dim light of the bedside lamp. "He would have done everything in his power to stop you from coming. But I knew what needed to be done." Her voice grew softer. "He was never in any real danger... I know how to care for a bedridden person..."

Ire heated Natalie's cheeks, imagining her grandfather drugged and paralyzed, confined to a bed and the boundaries of his mind--much as he was now. Grinding her teeth, she realized why the doctors had not been able to wake him.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Ivy still had him under her spell.

Then Ivy sighed, fixing her clear blue gaze on Natalie once again. "I was uncertain how he escaped until I found the materials in your backpack." Then she smirked. "What a clever little witch you're turning out to be. It wasn't much, but it was enough to give him the break he needed."

Though she was fuming, knowing that all along Richard had been locked in the basement below her while she spent those nights in Redstone, Natalie reined in her emotions.

Holly was the true threat now, and she would need Ivy's help if she was going to save Wesley's soul.

"He showed me something else," Natalie whispered. "Something he witnessed while you had him trapped in the world beyond."

The beeping of Richard's various machines pulsed through the silence between them as Ivy studied her suspiciously. Finally she said, "Go on."

Natalie took a deep breath. "Holly is determined to take control of the curse." She shook her head, still stunned by what she had witnessed. "She wants to possess Wesley's soul while he's living."

"What?" Ivy's eyes widened in alarm.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"Is it possible?" she asked anxiously. "I saw her making a poppet. It looked just like the one Hazel made for William. Can you think of how she might use it?"

"Well, I had never considered it before!" said the old woman, pacing to the window. "But... Yes, I suppose she could..."

Natalie watched her warily. She did not appreciate the curiosity evident in Ivy's tone and absorbed gaze. "You don't agree with her, do you?"

"Of course not!" Ivy whispered, clutching her breast and looking back at Natalie with a pained expression. "I want to free them. Truly, I do. Even if it means we'll lose some of our strength."

"Then we're on the same side."

Rising to her feet, wincing as the road rash over her knee flared to life, Natalie limped to her great aunt at the window. Outside, snowflakes fell lightly across the hospital's parking lot and dusted the cars below.

"We have to protect Wesley," Ivy said. "Perhaps you should call him."

With a frown, Natalie shook her head. "No. The curse has gripped him. He is obsessed with Holly, though he..." Pausing, her heart flinched under the memory of their kiss.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"Well, he certainly hid it well. Richard confronted him about it, and that's why they fought."

Ivy closed her eyes and sighed, wringing her weathered hands together. "And that's why Holly pushed Cody away. She's trying to encourage Wesley's feelings so she can lure him in... I wonder why it's taken so long?"

"Wesley is strong," Natalie murmured. "I think he was resisting the curse on Richard's behalf. But I know it's difficult for Holly, too." She thought of the dream in which fire scorched the walls, and her stomach tensed. "My mother... She was repulsed by Anthony. She thought it was an instinctual defense, inherited from so many of our ancestors murdered by the Bird family."

Ivy nodded absently, her eyes distant in thought. "Holly will need Wesley there during the ritual," she murmured. "A binding of that magnitude could only be accomplished in person."

Sick with the idea, Natalie glanced back at Richard. She wondered if he was keeping an eye on Holly while they planned, though she doubted there was much he could do in his restricted state.

Then Ivy snapped her fingers. "Cody! We can have Cody pick up Wesley and hold him at the station. That way Holly won't be able to reach him."

The Brunnolf Tradition

Natalie gaped at her in horror. "Are you saying we should let Cody arrest him?" she hissed incredulously, her brow furrowing. "Under what charges?"

Crossing her arms, Ivy said, "He's a veterinarian. He has access to the same solutions I used to sedate Richard."

She stepped away from her great aunt in disgust. The very notion of it infuriated her, and Ivy's careless confession to her own guilt of the crime did not help her to swallow the idea.

Still... Natalie was forced to admit that it would keep Wesley safe until they could confront Holly.

"Fine," she relented. "But make it clear to Cody that we are trying to *protect* him, not convict him."

As Ivy turned away, Natalie grasped her arm.

"And," she added, anger coiling within her as she glowered at the old woman, "you have to undo that spell you put on Richard. That jar we buried wasn't for protection, was it?"

The old woman smiled guiltily. "No. It kept him suspended in the astral plane." She gently patted Natalie's hand around her bony wrist. "I'll do it, but he won't be very happy when he wakes up."

"That's your problem." Letting go of her, Natalie retrieved her backpack from under the chair and draped her

The Brunnolf Tradition

leather jacket over her shoulders. "You can drop me off at the police station on the way," she said. "I'll have to try explaining this to Wesley."

Ivy considered her with that same intuitive gaze that made Natalie wonder whether Laurel was whispering into her ear. "You're learning to use your gift, aren't you?"

"What do you mean?" Natalie asked warily.

"You figure out how things work. You innately know when something is wrong and what you need to do to fix it."

Natalie stared at her for a moment and felt as though she were sinking into a slimy bog of fear and uncertainty. The more she fought it, trying to gasp for a breath of hope, the further it sucked her in.

She shook her head. "I don't know if I can fix this," she whispered, the responsibility lying heavy on her shoulders.

Avoiding Ivy's gaze, she took one last glance at Richard and recalled his final words to her: "*Be brave.*"

As they left the room, Natalie checked her pockets to make certain she had everything. When she laid her hand on her back pocket, she froze.

The knife was gone.

The Brunnolf Tradition

The Carbondale Police Department was located within the Town Hall. Inside, the lobby had white walls and the floor was tiled in royal blue. A glass door with the department emblem, featuring Mount Sopris, led to the waiting area.

In one of the blue chairs that lined the wall, Natalie waited for Cody to bring in Wesley. Her uninjured leg bobbed up and down anxiously, and she rubbed the tiger's eye pendant that Wesley had given her between her fingers. All she could think of were the months he had spent in the Pittsburgh jail during his trial, and she predicted how upset he would be at the accusations to come.

She had never felt more horrible in her life.

Sighing, she leaned back in her chair and tried to ease the knots winding in her stomach. She wondered if Ivy had undone the spell over Richard yet. The sooner he was awake and coherent, the better. She hoped Wesley might be relieved enough to see him that Holly's influence could fade for a little while.

At last the door opened and Cody brought Wesley inside with handcuffs around his wrists. Natalie jumped up with a twinge in her knee and limped toward them.

"Picked him up at Holly's shop," Cody said without preamble, glowering at Wesley's back in contempt.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Before she could rebuke his attitude, she caught Wesley's incensed frown aimed at her. Those bleak, gray eyes were mortified at her betrayal.

"This was your idea?" he whispered.

"It's--It's not like that, Wesley!" she stammered, her heart breaking as he looked away from her. "Nobody is going to prove that you had anything to do with Richard's disappearance! We just need to keep you safe."

"Keep me safe?" he spat, his shocking temper igniting. "Have you ever been in this position before? They can make people believe whatever they want them to believe! When they learn about my father, they'll never let me go!"

"Don't get too excited," Cody muttered and pushed him up to the long wooden counter that split the room, where he began inspecting all of Wesley's pockets.

Natalie held her breath momentarily, waiting for Cody to find her pocketknife. He laid Wesley's wallet and keys on the counter, but that was all.

Relief swayed over her, and she wondered if she might have simply lost it during the accident in Redstone.

Then she caught Wesley's pitiful gaze, the intense agony beneath it causing her to take a step back.

"You think I don't know what she will do to me," he murmured, bowing his head.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Even Cody paused at the sorrowful sound of his voice, and he and Natalie glanced at one another in worry.

"I want her to take this rage from me," he whispered weakly, almost slumping against the counter. "I don't care if it turns me into something else... I don't want to hurt her... She's--She's like an angel!"

Natalie's lip trembled under the burden of tears, but she swallowed them down. "Wesley," she murmured, "this isn't just about you. There's so much that you don't know."

She touched his shoulder, and suddenly he charged toward her with an angry roar.

Cody grabbed him as Natalie stumbled back, astounded by the change in Wesley's posture. His chest heaved with each breath, his gray eyes as wild as a storm cloud while he struggled against Cody's restraining hold.

"*I don't know anything?!*" Wesley bellowed, his face contorting with rage. "What do you know?! Do you think you can actually stop this?! Do you honestly believe that you could come up here and turn a tradition centuries old on its head just in a couple of days?!"

"That's enough!" Cody shouted and grabbed the back of Wesley's neck to direct him down the hallway.

Watching them march around a corner to the holding cells, Natalie felt as though the world tottered on a

The Brunnolf Tradition

precipice, and she collapsed into a seat for fear of fainting. A numbing despair drained her of hope and longing, leaving her with only vicious resentment.

She knew Wesley would never forgive her.

Cody returned to the lobby a few minutes later, sitting beside her with a tired sigh. The night had pressed into the early hours of the morning, but she did not think he would leave so long as Wesley was there, whether to monitor the man personally or to keep her company out of deference to Ivy. Perhaps both.

When she caught him studying her forlorn face, Natalie sighed. "He's right," she whispered. "I don't know what I'm doing."

"Well," Cody said, running his hand over his cropped brown hair, "if it makes you feel any better, I don't know what I'm doing either."

He leaned back, resting his head against the wall and unfastening the top button of his uniform. His radio squawked, and he immediately switched it off with a grumble.

Natalie settled her chin on one propped hand, annoyed with the sling around her other arm. Through the window, she watched wispy snowflakes drift into the yellowish light of a streetlamp.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"I'm sorry," Cody said abruptly.

Frowning in confusion, Natalie turned her head toward him, but he averted his eyes.

"You must care about him a lot, going through all of this to protect him."

Natalie fixed her gaze on the tiled floor. Her head was heavy with fatigue, and she could not think clearly. She could only feel the desolation enveloping her.

Cody leaned forward slightly. "Holly told me about the curse once," he said, "but I thought it was something that happened in the past. I didn't think it would ever affect us."

Glancing up, Natalie saw him rub his thumb along his jaw, which looked like it would soon need a shave.

Then he met her gaze, his chestnut eyes gleaming with the sincere desire to understand. "What did you mean when you said this isn't just about him?"

Natalie sat back in her chair, her muscles aching with exhaustion. "She told you about the curse, but did she mention that the spirits of the Bird family cannot rest until the spell is broken? That they are enslaved to any and every descendant of the Brunnolfs?"

"No," he said. "I never heard about that."

The Brunnolf Tradition

His expression soured, and Natalie's heart ached with pity as she recognized the engulfing defeat that bowed his head.

She touched his arm. "Holly isn't in love with him," she assured him quietly. "Wesley is descended from the Bird family, and she wants to control him. She thinks that if she can claim his soul while he is still alive, he won't be a threat to her anymore."

Cody stared at her blankly, and she wondered if the idea was too outlandish for him. A couple of weeks ago, it definitely would have seemed insane to her ears.

He looked away, his brow furrowing in thought as he continued to scratch at the growing stubble on his chin.

At length he rose to his feet, adjusting his belt and holster around his hips. "I have some work to finish." Gesturing to her sling, he asked, "Do you want some aspirin?"

"Sure," she answered gratefully. A migraine had started to pry apart her brain. She had taken painkillers at the hospital, but that must have been hours ago and their effect had waned.

While he was gone, she picked up her father's bomber jacket, which she had folded and laid in the seat next to her during her wait. Draping it over herself like a

The Brunnolf Tradition

blanket, she abruptly caught the scent of his aftershave hidden somewhere within the wooly collar, and tears tightened her throat. Those sweltering Houston summers, full of bike rides and camping trips and laughter, seemed lifetimes ago.

Had her mother ever told him of the name "Rowan?"

Shaking the thought from her head, Natalie shifted into a decently comfortable position, relieving some of the pain in her shoulder. Where was Cody with that aspirin?

As her eyelids started to sink, she wondered if the inevitable nightmares could be any worse than the hopelessness in her heart.

She smelled smoke. Sounding as though they were underwater, voices yelled all at once in a convoluted clamor, but she could not make out any of their words. It was coming closer...

"Wake up!"

With a jolt, Natalie choked on the thick scent of smoldering wood. A policewoman leaned over her, hands on her shoulders.

"Get up! We're evacuating!"

The Brunnolf Tradition

Looking past the woman, Natalie saw gray smoke billowing into the room from the hall that led to the holding cells. A flicker of flame lapped around the corner.

For a moment she imagined Anthony standing there with blistered hands and dark, malicious eyes...

When the officer pulled Natalie to her feet, her shoulder stabbed with pain, and she realized she was not dreaming.

"What happened?"

"I don't know, but we'll figure it out later!" said the officer. Sweat trickled down her brow, and her brown hair was falling loose from its bun. "Hurry--this way!"

"No!" Natalie wrenched away from her grip and ran toward the fire.

The policewoman chased after her, shouting, "Stop!"

Around the corridor, Natalie came to a short block of jail cells. She covered her nose and mouth as the thick smoke threatened to overwhelm her. The orange flames scorched up the walls to the ceiling, spreading out from the bars of one cell.

A second officer sprayed the inferno with a fire extinguisher. It was a futile effort.

The Brunnolf Tradition

He looked back, catching sight of Natalie and the policewoman joining her side. "Where the hell is Cody?" he shouted. "He took the keys with him!"

"Wesley!" Natalie cried in a panic and raced recklessly to the burning cell. She peered through the haze inside, the extreme heat parching her eyes.

Behind the bars, Wesley gazed at her with an empty expression. All around him the blaze smoldered, and yet he simply stood there.

"Wesley, what are you doing?!" she screamed tearfully, remembering his dismal claims of wanting Holly to take his rage away.

The policewoman grabbed Natalie from behind, pulling her back from the scalding bars of the cell. Natalie scarcely had the strength to fight her.

"Can't we get him out?" the woman shouted.

"I've tried!" yelled the other officer. "It's spreading too fast! Get out of here!"

But as Natalie continued to stare at Wesley's immobile form within the flames, she noticed that his eyes had grown dark, almost completely black, and a horrifying smile spread across his lips.

The Brunnolf Tradition

A chill crept over her in spite of the heat. "That's not Wesley," she said. Her heart raced as the imposter stepped forward. "Run!"

Whether or not they had heard her, the two officers remained rooted to the spot, gaping as their prisoner drifted through the bars as fluidly as the smoke clouding around them. Then his features dissolved into shadow.

The policeman who had tried to douse the fire drew out his weapon, aiming at the specter. Natalie jumped at the sound of a gunshot, followed in rapid succession by a second and third.

Each bullet sailed through the spirit, exploding against the scorching wall beyond without effect.

The monstrous ghoul swept forward swiftly, lifting the policeman off his feet and banging his head against the ceiling. Natalie cried out and dodged with the other officer as the man was flung at them.

Then she felt that formidable, icy grip around her ankle once again.

With a yank, the spirit took her feet out from under her. She threw up her arms to catch herself as she smacked into the grimy floor. Pain ripped through her slung shoulder and the road rash across her knee cracked with fresh blood.

The Brunnolf Tradition

A pair of hostile claws slipped around her throat, wrenching her up into the scorching air. Ethereal howls and snarls filled her ears with terror. Her back dragging across the ceiling toward the flames, Natalie screamed, inhaling smoke and cringing away from the heat of the fire that swept over her legs.

Then a second specter appeared, his gaunt face twisted with fury. The shade of William Bird assailed the shadowed wraith, driving it into the fiery cell where they vanished.

Natalie collapsed to the floor, which knocked the breath from her chest and causing her bruised ribs to explode with pain. The policewoman rushed forward, dashing out the flames that had crept onto Natalie's jeans and helping her scramble to her feet. Coughing as the air scorched her lungs, each violent huff aching throughout her chest, Natalie helped her as best as she could to haul the unconscious officer out of the burning building.

In the street outside the Town Hall, firemen lugged their hoses off a truck. Two of them raced over as Natalie and the woman laid the other officer on the snowy ground. While they examined the man and the policewoman struggled to explain what had happened, Natalie threw her sling down in frustration and doubled over under the agony shredding through every muscle of her body.

The Brunnolf Tradition

She shivered in the frigid air, crossing her arms over the thin green shirt she wore, the same Wesley had lent to her. With a miserable frown, she realized her father's leather jacket had been left inside.

Choking back her tears, Natalie tried to sort out what had happened. She instinctively knew Holly had planted the spirit in Wesley's cell, but it had been Cody who took the keys.

With a curse under her breath, she recalled explaining to him that his ex-fiancée had not been truly in love with Wesley. Of course that would have sent him running to her! But could he actually be willing to sacrifice Wesley's soul just to win Holly back?

Standing with a deep breath, Natalie looked up at the smoke meandering into the dark sky. Little snowflakes melted upon her cheeks.

She caressed the tiger's eye over her heart and whispered, "Where is he?"

Within seconds that unearthly magnetic pull came to life in her veins. She did not know if it was Richard, her mother, or even Laurel guiding her, but she turned toward Main Street and, without a sense of where she was going, she walked away. Behind her, the gathering officers and

The Brunnolf Tradition

firefighters outside the Town Hall did not call after her, too absorbed in trying to smother the flames.

As she continued onto Main Street, her hobbling stride quickened into a run. Natalie caught sight of Browne's Books and Balms down the road. Parked outside was Wesley's Jeep, left there undoubtedly when Cody had placed him under arrest.

Clutching a stitch in her side, her knee threatening to buckle from the pain of her sprint, Natalie tested the driver's door and found it unlocked. She hopped inside, shifted the Jeep into gear, and stomped on the gas pedal. Soon the tires screeched through the empty intersection at Highway 133, and she veered south heading for Redstone.

Then she grasped why her instincts were guiding her there. If Holly was going to attempt such a formidable spell, she would do it in a place of power. Natalie had instinctively gone to cliff above Ivy's house to cast her protective charm, which had apparently found some small measure of success in allowing Richard to escape.

What would Ivy do when they showed up? Could she fight them off on her own until Natalie arrived?

Clenching the steering wheel, she pushed the Jeep a little faster.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

When she arrived at Spotted Owl Drive, Natalie brought the Jeep to a stop down the road and eyed the empty police cruiser parked outside of Ivy's home. She reached down to switch off the headlights before continuing, and then she gasped with a start.

She had driven the full length between Carbondale and Redstone without a key in the ignition.

Her stunned heart pounded as her brain simply gawked without an explanation. Yet, gradually consuming her wonder, a powerful understanding rose within her chest. Throughout the drive she had envisioned the pistons, sparkplugs, and valves of the engine, filled with an urgent need. Her gift and her will had propelled the vehicle onward.

Natalie breathed deeply. She let go of the steering wheel, and the engine died. With new confidence in her own power, she stepped down onto the soft layer of snow swathed over the ground.

The night bathed in serene silence. A gentle wind brushed through the branches of the nearby forest, causing the balding autumn limbs to creak. Thick, wet snowflakes floated down from the black sky above. Despite the calm,

The Brunnolf Tradition

Natalie felt the earth's subtle hum beneath her feet. She touched Wesley's tiger's eye over her heart before hurrying toward the house.

Opening the front door, she was met by a tremendous gust of sweltering air. Hundreds of screams deafened her ears, and she shielded her head with both hands as she looked around at the pictures on the parlor walls. It seemed that every pair of eyes was focused on her, shrieking from beyond the grave in her mind. The noise was nearly crippling, and she turned quickly to the hallway.

There she froze at the sight of a body sprawled on the floor.

"Ivy!" she gasped, and the screams hushed as she knelt at her great aunt's side, her skinned knee jolting with pain.

The old woman had blood smeared across her brow. Natalie pressed her fingers to her neck, finding a pulse with relief. She had to find the phone, call 911...

A strong hand suddenly gripped the back of her neck and slammed her face into the thin carpet. Her shoulder wrenched in pain as her arms were pulled back. She scarcely had a chance to struggle by the time Cody restrained her wrists in a pair of handcuffs. Then he hauled her to her feet.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"Cody!" she exclaimed as he marched her to the basement door in the herb room. She tasted blood on her lip from the strike against the floor. "What have you done? You were like a son to Ivy!"

"Holly explained everything to me," he uttered. "She is more powerful than you know. She can end this mess if you would only let her!"

"By taking a man's soul?" Natalie spat, her anger overcoming her fear. "What kind of solution is that?!"

Cody twisted her elbow, making her shoulder splinter with pain, and led her down the wooden stairs.

The basement was dimly lit by antique oil lanterns fixed on the walls. Next to her was a vast bookcase that stretched the length of the house. On its shelves were many varied tomes, some with weathered leather bindings, and each labeled with the name of its ancestral author. In the corner, a few old-fashioned hospital instruments surrounded a small cot, and Natalie knew that Ivy had kept Richard hostage there.

Yet her full attention fell on the black-robed figure standing before an altar draped in red crushed velvet, and the bare-chested man before her kneeling within a painted circle on the stone floor. Looming over him were two black shadows, their heavy, oppressive energy permeating the air.

The Brunnolf Tradition

From beneath her hood, Holly's sharp blue eyes gazed at Natalie with sparkling malice. In one hand she held Natalie's pocketknife with the antler handle, dark blood shining on the blade, and in the other she cradled the poppet she had crafted into Wesley's likeness.

"Rise, my Wesley," Holly murmured. "We have a guest."

Slowly rising to his feet, Wesley's limbs unfolded with an eerie grace and strength, the muscles in his back and shoulders taut around his lean form. Even the sinister shades at his sides drifted back from the power that emitted from his presence, pulsing in the stifling air.

Tears rushed to Natalie's eyes when he faced her. Across his chest were symbols drawn in blood, yet beneath them she could still see the white raised scars from his father's attack. His visage was that same grim mask she had witnessed the night he had stood at her bedside, possessed by darkness.

In his pitiless gaze, she found no shred of the compassionate man she had grown to admire. He did not even seem to recognize her, his face utterly expressionless, as though he had become nothing more than a puppet.

An intense ache manifested in her heart, wresting it open for all hope to drain away.

She was too late.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Cody pushed her forward into the circle. Within its boundaries the heat magnified tenfold. Then he forced her to her knees. The fiendish shades loomed over her, and Natalie bowed her head in defeat.

"I have to give you credit, cousin," Holly whispered with vicious amusement as she lay the poppet aside on the altar.

The knife she kept at hand.

"Only a true Brunnolf would have stayed after all you have been through." She stepped closer, and Natalie stared at the hem of her robe. "Thank you for bringing this knife. I have seen it in my dreams before. A blade infused with the blood of both lines! It was just the tool I needed to seal his bonds of submission to me..."

Natalie grimaced. She had only carried the knife with her over the miles in memory of her father, yet even that loving tribute had been stolen away in the revelation that Alan had not been her father at all.

She was a daughter of both bloodlines, born out of her parents' sacrifices. From her mother, she knew the power resided within her blood to seize command of the imprisoned wraiths around her, but Natalie could not find it within her heart to do so. Like her natural father, those poor souls were her family, too...

The Brunnolf Tradition

A strange sensation steeled her spine. Her skin shivered as an intense wave of energy tingled up her neck and down to her fingertips. At the station, she had tried to tell Wesley that this was not just about him, and yet she had become so caught up in trying to save him that she had forgotten about the hundreds of others trapped beyond death, bound by a spell much as Wesley was now.

The curse did not lay on the Brunnolf family at all. It was on the Bird family.

Her family.

"Oh, Natalie," Holly murmured, drawing her attention once more as she tapped the tip of the knife against her robe. "What am I going to do with you?"

Her breathing remained calm, her pulse gentle. *Be brave*, echoed her grandfather's words. She had absolute control now, and the spirits at her sides grew still.

All that remained was to acknowledge the power her mother and father had died to bestow on her.

"My name," she whispered, "is Rowan."

She envisioned the mechanisms within the locks of the handcuffs binding her wrists, and with a click they popped open on her silent command and clattered to the floor.

Natalie rose to her feet, rewarded when Holly stepped back in trepidation.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"Stop her!" Holly instructed the ghouls within the circle.

The shadows did not move.

However, not everyone had broken from Holly's spell. When he witnessed the spirits refuse to follow her command, Cody grabbed Natalie from behind, spinning her around. Then the back of his hand collided against her face.

Astounded by the blow, it took a second for Natalie to realize she was on the warm stone floor. Cody aimed a kick at her side, driving the breath from her lungs and reigniting the stabbing pain in her ribs.

Beside them, Wesley watched the scene without interest. Natalie reached for him with a shaky hand, pinching the hem of his jeans. He gave no reaction.

Then Cody hoisted her up by her throat.

Gasping in his clutch, Natalie cried, "William!"

Abruptly, Cody was yanked back by his shoulders, flying across the room and striking hard against the wall.

Collapsing, Natalie struggled to draw breath, each inhale pinching her chest. Every part of her ached down to the core. When she rose onto her knees, she looked up at the gaunt spirit of William Bird, who gazed down upon her with a peculiar clarity in his opaque eyes.

The Brunnolf Tradition

She had not called to him as a Brunnolf summoning up a slave. She had cried out as a daughter in dire need of her father, an heir to her ancestor.

Behind her the cellar door banged. Spinning around, Natalie found that Holly and Wesley had disappeared. A steep set of stairs led up to the back of the house, where Ivy had slipped Richard down into the basement after drugging him.

Natalie rose on her unsteady feet and stumbled up the steps over pieces of broken pottery. The night air was freezing against the sweat on her brow, an utter contrast to the smoldering heat that had festered in the basement. When she found their tracks in the snow, Natalie gritted her teeth and pushed aside the sting in her knee, running for the trees.

In the dark, she could see but a few feet ahead and simply climbed up the hill in what she hoped was the right direction. Each pine that loomed into her view made her start. The still falling snow chilled her skin, dampening her hair and shirt until she could not stop shivering.

By an oak tree, Natalie paused and clutched the tiger's eye pendant in the silence. Though they must not have gotten very far, she could not hear a rustle in the leaves or a pant of breath...

The Brunnolf Tradition

BANG!

Natalie cried out at the sound just as the bark of the oak tree splintered at her side. Dodging around a spruce, she sprinted farther up the snowy slope. When she dared to look back, she witnessed the muzzle flash of a pistol as Cody shot at her again.

Trying to duck out of sight, she tripped on a fallen tree limb and slid down a bank of mud, snow, and leaves.

In an instant Cody was upon her, eyes blind with madness. His free hand clutched the collar of her shirt as he held the gun to her face. Natalie froze in horror, her entire body seizing as though time had halted so that death may sweep forward.

He pulled the trigger, and there was a hollow click.

As Cody looked down at his weapon in confusion, he was suddenly hoisted high into the air. His head slammed against the tall trunk of an aspen tree, and he fell to the ground without moving.

Natalie remembered how to breathe, sitting up slowly as she scrutinized Cody's form in the dark. She had only seen such rage in those gripped by the curse, but surely Ivy or Richard would have known if he was a descendant of the Birds.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Yet... He was in love with Holly, and it had been that intense, powerful feeling that had started this cycle of torment.

Reaching out with a shaky hand, Natalie found his handgun close to her side. For a moment, she considered carrying it with her to the top. Then she frowned and threw it into the distance with all her strength.

No more death. The curse had brought enough violence to her two families. It had not solved anything.

When she pulled herself to her feet once more, William's ghostly form drifted to her side. The faint, eerie light emanating from his figure did not reflect on the snow around them.

Her teeth chattered, and Natalie took a deep breath as she stared into her ancestor's sunken eyes. Even in death she could recognize the similar features in his face and Wesley's. She remembered how Wesley had held her hand in the hospital, how she had kissed his forehead and promised him everything would be all right.

She had broken her promise to Alan that she would not go to Colorado, and now she had broken her promise to Wesley, unable to stop Holly in time.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Her throat constricting as she stepped closer to William's ghost, she vowed to herself that she would never break her word again.

"I don't know if I can save Wesley now," she whispered tremulously, warm tears escaping down her chilled face.

"But I swear to you... I will find a way to set you free."

In deathly silence, William raised his pale hand. His icy fingers brushed her moist cheek, and the love she felt within that touch gave her the last burst of strength she needed to reach the top of the hill.

Standing at the cliff's edge with the Crystal River roaring below, Holly and Wesley appeared to be waiting for her. The beauty of the meadow, its family graves mantled in white snow, struck Natalie with awe in spite of the dangerous tension in the air. To the north, the outline of Mount Sopris was visible against the clouds, lit vaguely by the first glimpse of the coming dawn.

She limped closer to them, taking her time. They were not going anywhere, witnesses to her last march. Gazing at Wesley, she longed to draw him into her arms, sweep him away back to that mountain trail through the aspens shivering in the starlight where had once held her hand.

But his dark gray eyes only glowered at her, his rigid body and pale skin seemingly unaffected by the cold.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"There is nothing you can do," Holly uttered as Natalie reached them. Her hood had fallen back, allowing her wild blonde hair to splay over her shoulders.

Natalie caught a glimpse of the pocketknife in her petite hand, but she paid no attention to it.

"Don't you understand?" Holly continued, her voice tinged with desperation. "We can use this spell! When we find those afflicted by the curse, we can claim them, bind them to us."

The blonde turned to examine Wesley, amazed by her own work. Raising her hand, her fingertips grazed over Wesley's elbow. No reaction came upon his face.

"Look at him," she whispered. "You saw his temper. You know how dangerous he truly was. Now he belongs to me. There is nothing left to fear... They can't hurt us anymore."

Natalie noticed there were tears gleaming in her cousin's bright blue eyes, and she frowned with pity. "Yes," she said, a wisp of cloud rising from her breath on the cold air. "You found a way to stop it, Holly. But the price is too great."

Her tears retreating, Holly's pretty face became grisly. "You still want to set them free?" she hissed.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"What makes you believe that they won't turn on you and claim vengeance for what our family has done to them?"

Shadows crept out from the trees, slinking across the snow toward the cliff. Natalie glanced back at them, but the sight that had once imbued her with terror only plunged her now into sadness.

Facing Holly again, she stood her ground.

"These people," Natalie whispered, "are my family. They are the reason I came here, searching for some part of myself that was missing." As she stared at Holly, she sensed the dark specters drawing ever closer, but she felt no fear. "I love them. I trust them."

When they reached her, the legion of shadows halted, lingering over the still, soft meadow.

Holly's head turned from side to side, surprise and panic escaping in her quick breaths while the beings fixed their faceless stares on her.

"This curse began as a love spell," Natalie murmured, her mind and soul clearer than ever with her family standing as one behind her. "But love is as destructive as it is sustaining. I am a daughter of both bloodlines, the union of Hazel and William. While they could not love each other, I love them both. I love the Brunnolfs and I love the Birds."

The Brunnolf Tradition

Her skin tingled with power and joyful tears filled her eyes.

"Now the spell is fulfilled, and they can rest at last."

All around them the air lifted. The harrowing specters looming over the meadow slowly faded away, and a breeze fluttered over them like a sigh.

Holly gawked at the scene. "No!" she cried. "Come back!"

No response came, and she grasped Wesley's bare shoulder. He was staring up at the sky, watching the sliver of moon peek between the rolling clouds.

Holly proffered the knife to him. "Kill her."

Wesley looked down at the blade, his red hair flecked with snow. The bloody markings on his chest had begun to run.

"Do it!" Holly urged. "This will be the final act to unite us. We will be together forever, even beyond death!"

He stared into her eyes as an intense hunger scorched upon his face. Then Holly placed her free hand on the back of his neck, luring him down for a kiss.

Natalie held her breath, blinking away the tears that bled from her broken heart. Yet when Wesley took the knife and faced her, she made no attempt to retreat.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Striding forward, Wesley braced her with one arm and dipped her back slightly toward the cliff's edge, drawing the knife to her throat.

Unafraid, Natalie met his eyes. If she was about to die, at least her spirit was free to find peace with the rest of her family. Then perhaps, when someday Wesley took his last breath, she would be able to save him then.

The roar of the river below resonated around them. Wesley stood still in the snow, cradling her in his arm, blade steady in his hand...

But he hesitated.

"What are you waiting for?!" Holly shrieked. "Do you think she loves you? She doesn't even know you!"

It was true--Natalie had only met him a few days ago. Yet her heart skipped as she recalled the touch of his warm kiss. Her body had grown cold, but that was not why she shivered beneath him.

As she gazed up into his gray eyes, the gloomy haze over his face seemed to melt away, like waking from a dream, and his breaths misted into rapid clouds. She lifted her trembling hand to touch his cheek. Then, as he looked in horror upon the knife he was pressing against her neck, he shuddered and tossed it aside.

She wept as he drew her to his chest.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"Natalie!" he whispered, squeezing her tightly. "Oh, Natalie! I couldn't do it!"

Wrapping her arms over his bare shoulders, she closed her eyes and felt faint, overwhelmed with the incredible emotions surging through her. Just days ago she had been so lost and alone, afraid to hope that a family may have existed for her in the mountains.

Now she had the world!

Smiling, she opened her eyes. Her gaze rested upon the two peaks of Mount Sopris in the pale, purpling bloom of dawn.

But then her attention fell to Holly, who grasped the antler-handled knife from the snow. Her blue eyes glittered with fierce rage.

As Holly charged toward them with the knife flashing in her fist, Natalie turned, drawing Wesley aside. She caught sight of his confused look, and he gripped her hand even as she pushed him away.

Then, at last, she embraced her cousin.

She did not feel whether the blade pierced her skin, though she was shocked by the intensity of the blow to her stomach. It was so strong that she was lifted off her feet, and her fingers slipped away from Wesley's.

The Brunnolf Tradition

She and Holly fell back together, but the firmness of the ground never came against their backs. They were descending into eternity, the stars remaining poised above them in a vigil.

Then she struck the water of the Crystal River below the cliff, and her senses came alive with pain. The freezing cold seized her muscles, prickling over every inch of her skin. Finally, she surfaced to gasp for breath, but the violent whitewater current soon swept her under again.

Choking and swallowing a mouthful of icy water, she clutched her abdomen where a staggering ache had started to swell. When her head broke into the air a second time, she coughed and struggled to find her voice to cry for help.

Suddenly, Holly's head popped to the surface beside her, looking like a hellish nymph with her blonde hair plastered against her face. With a snarl, she threw her arms around Natalie's neck and submerged her in the depths. Natalie tried to beat her with her fists, but not a shred of strength was left within her grasp.

Her knee crashed against a sharp rock along the river bottom, and she involuntarily inhaled to scream, sucking water into her lungs.

The Brunnolf Tradition

In a daze, she tumbled along. The forbidding cold began to fade. When at last she bobbed to the surface again, she heard someone calling her name in the distance.

Then she sank below, floating down into the peaceful darkness.

All was calm and silent.

She felt no more pain, hovering there in the emptiness. Gradually she became aware of the beautiful trees, the smooth river stones padded with snow beneath her feet, the velvety sky above.

She watched as a bare-chested man pulled a woman up from the swirling water onto the bank. Though the river was churning and the leaves shook in the wind, the world remained perfectly silent.

But she could hear the sound of his voice, muffled as if it was very far away.

"Not now!" he pleaded. "Come on, breathe!"

He folded his hands over the woman's chest and began compressions. Dark blood stained the snow around her, flowing from a stab in her abdomen.

As she watched, she realized that the dying woman was herself, yet that did not alarm her.

The Brunnolf Tradition

She turned away and looked through the evergreens and oaks. Beyond them, a blossoming light permeated through the darkness, stretching through the woods as it brightened. It was warm, like the sunrise on the first day of spring. From within she sensed an enormous, undying love that spanned across all time and space. She smiled, feeling as though she had met an old, endearing friend.

There was a stir behind her, and she looked back to see shadowy forms rising from the river. She was not frightened, watching them float closer and closer. As the light shined upon them, their faces became discernible, and she recognized them all even without knowing them.

Each spirit was a part of her, a member of her long forsaken family, granted release at last. They wandered into the trees toward the light, and she sensed their overwhelming gratitude as they gazed in awe at the radiance before them.

If she had tears to shed in that current state, she would have been left weeping for many lifetimes.

"Rowan."

Turning, she found William Bird beside her. His spirit was bright and healthy, restored to the man he had been in life. With a fond smile, he kissed her brow, and this time his touch was warm.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"We are free," he murmured, the ethereal timbre of his voice echoing around her. "Thank you."

"Thank you," she replied, looking up into his eyes, "for protecting me."

He stared at her for a moment, touching her cheek, and then he glanced behind her.

With a nod, he said, "Look."

Rowan turned around. Among the passing spirits, one had stalled. His ghostly black eyes studied her through the wispy gathering with longing and remorse.

He was Anthony, her link to the Bird family. Though the revelation of his role in her life had crushed her, she bore no resentment toward him. Instead, she found herself smiling, their love stretching between one another in acknowledgement.

Then he looked ahead once more and dissolved into the swelling light with a sigh.

After all the others had found peace, William brushed his hand over her hair one last time.

"I am very proud of you," he murmured.

Then he slowly drifted away, and somewhere in the brilliant glow, Rowan sensed the family he had left behind rejoicing at his return.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Yet just as he disappeared, a dark malevolence surged behind her.

Hovering over the whitewater, firmly rebelling against the light beyond the trees, loomed a dreary young woman. Her wasted eyes raked over Rowan with a brutal fury that the physical world could not express.

As the wraith rushed toward her, the light flashed with such intensity that Rowan felt it illuminate the very fabric of her soul.

When the scene returned, a beautiful woman stood at her side. Rowan recognized the shapes of her own mouth and eyes in the spirit's features, and a surge of powerful love swept her into its protection.

Her mother, Willow, called to the ugly, embittered soul with a gentle whisper, "Come with me, Hazel. You do not have to be alone anymore."

The specter retreated. Rowan watched as Hazel's spirit sank slowly, purposefully into the water and refused absolution.

Pity consumed her. All Hazel had wanted was to be loved, yet even after centuries of sorrow and resentment, she continued to deny the eternal bond of family.

But she realized that she had to let Hazel go, and she turned to her mother.

The Brunnolf Tradition

"My dear Rowan," her mother whispered. "I knew you could do it."

Marveling in the warmth of Willow's smile, which no photograph would have ever been able to grant her, Rowan asked, "Is it over?"

"Yes," she said, caressing Rowan's cheek. "Hazel's spell no longer holds any power."

Time had seemed to stop, yet Rowan was still very aware of a man's faint voice. It had become hopeless as he wept.

"What happens now?"

Her mother gazed at her with a tender smile. "That is up to you."

"You mean... I could stay here?"

Looking toward the radiance shimmering through the trees, Rowan felt its vast, incredible warmth embrace her, filling her with a sense of timeless wonder. The universe spread before her in a magnificent pattern, life and death, dark and light, weaving into eternity.

She took a step closer, that elusive serenity lifting her toward its heart.

Then her mother whispered, "Or you could stay with Wesley..."

The Brunnolf Tradition

Wesley.

His name roused all her memories of life, which suddenly became so precious and beautiful even in its bleakest moments, and she recoiled from the graceful splendor lingering before her.

Still, Rowan hesitated at the thought of leaving. She did not want to forget the encompassing love and sense of wellbeing she had experienced in that majestic place, reunited at last with her family.

"You won't forget." With a somber smile, her mother said, "You have always carried it with you."

Pausing, Rowan understood that she was right.

As though her body had already begun to lure her in, she felt tears welling up within her. "Tell Alan that I love him," she whispered. "Tell him that he will always be my father."

Willow's spirit was fading. "I will, my darling."

She reached out for her mother's hand, which brushed over hers like mist over a stream. Beyond, the radiant warmth started to recede.

Though the parting was painful, Rowan knew one day she would return.

"I love you!"

The Brunnolf Tradition

Water gurgled in her throat, and Natalie turned her head to expel it. Wesley rolled her to one side so that she could cough more easily. Then he cradled her in his arms.

"Oh, Natalie!" he uttered breathlessly. "I thought... I thought you were gone... There's so much blood..."

When he pressed his hand over the stab in her abdomen, she gasped. Pain burned in her shoulder, chest, stomach, and knee, blazing through every breath, but she reveled in those tremendous sensations of life with renewed appreciation.

Looking up, she met his teary gray eyes, his body trembling as intensely as her own, and the deep-sinking cold no longer mattered.

She touched his chin, smiling a little. "Don't worry," she whispered. "Everything is all right."

Wesley swept his other hand over her wet hair, holding her close to keep them both warm. In the distance she could hear sirens, and she knew they would be safe.

Pressing her face against Wesley's chest, she did not fear sleep.

EPILOGUE

The doorbell rang again and Natalie jumped to her feet. Along her abdomen the healing gash contracted sorely, but the pain swiftly ebbed into a dull ache under her excitement. "I've got this one!" she said.

Her grandfather smiled and leaned back on his sofa before the fire.

Natalie tucked the bowl of candy into the crook of her good arm, the other confined to a sling, and she carefully opened the front door.

Waiting on the other side was a golden retriever dressed in a bumblebee costume, little yellow baubles bouncing at the end of her antennae.

Natalie nearly dropped the bowl in laughter.

"I thought you might like that," Wesley said as he brought the dog inside.

At the sound of his voice, Richard came into the entryway and greeted Wesley with an embrace. "I didn't know you were coming," he said. "Do you want some cider?"

"Actually," Wesley began, glancing at Natalie, "I was hoping I could steal her away for a bit."

Looking into Wesley's gray eyes, a shy smile turned her lips. They had not had much time alone together since

The Brunnolf Tradition

that night on the cliff, though during his frequent visits to the hospital she had managed to tell him what she had seen and felt as their family's spirits found peace.

Anticipating her answer, Richard took the bowl of candy from her. "Go have fun," he said and kissed her brow, as he so often did in the past couple of weeks.

She would never forget waking up from the ordeal with her grandfather at her side. No words had been needed as they wept, and he had embraced her as tenderly as her injuries allowed.

Richard turned to Wesley. "Just make sure she doesn't overexert herself. She's as stubborn as her mother."

"Who was as stubborn as you, no doubt," Wesley said with a grin. "Could you watch Melody? She still shouldn't walk around too much."

"Absolutely," Richard said, and he patted his leg. "Let's go, old girl, so the kids can have their fun..."

The golden retriever hobbled after him into the living room, plopping down happily by the fire.

Wesley helped Natalie fix her father's bomber jacket over her shoulders. It had been recovered from the police station after the fire, drenched in water but suitable to wear once it had been cleaned, almost as though someone had kept it safe for her.

The Brunnolf Tradition

Outside the sun had fallen just beyond the horizon, casting the cloudy sky into shades of red and orange. Trick-or-Treaters wandered around the street, and Natalie grinned at a little girl dressed as a witch approaching the neighbor's door.

"I haven't asked," Wesley murmured as they walked to his Jeep, "because I don't want to seem... obsessed... but have you heard more about Holly?"

Natalie took his hand and smiled reassuringly. "I talked to Ivy yesterday. She's going out to Grand Junction to stay with her until her parents arrive from Europe."

Wesley nodded, and she knew he did not want to talk anymore about it.

A few days after the incident on the cliff, Ivy had mustered up the courage for a visit. Natalie did not think the relationship between Ivy and Richard could ever be repaired, but though she did not appreciate much of what her great aunt had done, Natalie knew that Ivy had somehow planned for it all to end well.

In private, Ivy had explained to her that after Holly had been found on the bank of the Crystal River and finished recuperating in the hospital, she was taken to an institution in Grand Junction. She said the admission had

The Brunnolf Tradition

been voluntary, but Natalie was not sure whether she believed that.

Cody, on the other hand, had been taken into custody under charges of arson. He was not talking, and the investigators were having trouble figuring out the depth of his involvement that night.

Wesley did not ask about him.

"So," he said, opening the door for her, "are Earl and Donna still coming up to visit?"

Natalie smirked and answered, "Next week. They were a little disappointed when I told them I wouldn't be going back to Houston."

"Well, I'm glad they're coming," he said with a small smile. "I'd like to meet them."

She leaned against the Jeep door, not yet climbing inside. Her knee ached a bit, but she would just put a dab of Ivy's poultice on it before bed that evening. The doctors at Mountain Vale Hospital had been astounded with her rate of recovery.

"Where are we going?" she asked, admiring how the setting sun gleamed on his auburn hair.

"I thought we might enjoy the fall festival. There's a hay ride, corn mazes..." He smirked. "Haunted houses, too. But I think we've had enough of that for a while."

The Brunnolf Tradition

Grinning, she slipped her good arm around him. "Would you do something for me?"

Wesley gazed down at her, reaching up to trace her jaw with his fingertips. "Anything."

"Call me Rowan."

His brow raised in surprised amusement. "Seriously?"

"Yeah," she persisted. "I just want to try it out."

Considering her for a moment, he leaned closer. The warm scent of his skin enthralled her.

"I love you, Rowan," he murmured.

As he pressed his lips to hers, she felt as though she was floating in the forest once more, enveloped in a loving light that stretched throughout time.

When they parted, she pursed her lips in thought. "I'm not sure if I'm coming around to it yet. I think I'll need some more convincing."

He laughed and kissed her again. Then they got into the Jeep and drove away.

In the distance, the twin snowy peaks of Mount Sopris towered into the sky.