

K.B. Hoyle

The Enchanted

The Gateway Chronicles Book 4

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“Try to exclude the possibility of suffering which the order of nature and the
existence of free-wills involve, and you find that you have excluded life
itself.” C. S. Lewis

Prologue

After They Found Him

The flashing lights of the ambulance, police cars, and fire department vehicles danced before Darcy's eyes in a kaleidoscope of colors, distracting her from the questions she was supposed to be answering.

"What were you doing out in the woods alone?" It was the third—maybe the fourth—time the officer had asked her.

"I wasn't alone." Although Darcy moved her lips, it felt as though some other person answered for her. She was a disembodied spirit floating above it all, watching. "I was with Sam."

The medics had Colin strapped to a stretcher, an IV drip trailing out of his arm, oxygen flowing in through his nostrils.

"What were you and your friend doing out in the woods alone?"

The ambulance doors closed. The siren wailed and gravel flew as the boxy ambulance accelerated out of the parking lot. Darcy watched, mesmerized, as a fire truck and two police cars followed the taillights.

"Miss!"

Darcy blinked. "Sorry."

"What were you and your friend doing out in the woods alone?" he repeated and tapped his pencil on his notepad as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

"Hiking. It's a camp. We like to hike here." She glanced over at Sam, who was being interrogated by a different, older officer. She was twisting her fingers and looked close to tears.

"On the last morning of camp?" the officer asked. "On a trail that doesn't go anywhere?"

“Sir, Sam and I were just trying to get in one more hike before we had to leave. We didn’t know the trail was a dead-end . . . or what we would find.” Darcy looked down, hoping he wouldn’t detect her white lie. She couldn’t tell him the truth. That she and Sam had been looking for evidence of a magic gateway to a dark and horrific world. That she’d suspected the trail as being where Colin disappeared. She would be strapped to a stretcher like Colin, only she’d be headed for the loony bin to have her head examined.

The officer scribbled some notes on his pad of paper. “Tell me again exactly what happened. You were hiking down the path, and then . . .” He raised his eyebrows.

Darcy took a deep breath and spoke in a slow monotone. They’d already told the whole thing to the paramedics and the fire department officials. “Sam noticed a body lying on the trail, so we ran to it, and it was Colin—”

“And you recognized him because you’re friends with him?”

Darcy hesitated. “Not—not exactly . . . but we know him.”

The officer’s pencil scratched the paper. “Continue.”

“I checked to see if he was breathing, and I felt his pulse—”

“And he was breathing when you found him, correct?”

“Yes.” Darcy was annoyed. “I already told the paramedics. He didn’t stop breathing until just before you arrived. The camp medic performed CPR.”

“Sergeant!” Another officer climbed out of a squad car and waved his arms at a middle-aged policeman with a handlebar mustache. “We reached the parents. We have them on the phone.”

“I’ll take it in the truck,” the sergeant said in a thick “Yooper” accent, as it was called in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. “Let’s wrap this up, boys!” He waved his hand in a rolling motion and climbed into a massive police SUV as the other officer handed him the cell phone.

Darcy felt a tight grip on her shoulder and looked back in alarm to find her mother standing beside her.

“Officer,” Sue Pennington said, “has my daughter committed any crime?”

“No, ma’am, we just need to take her statement.”

“Yes, well, she’s already given it to the paramedics and the fire department.”

The officer seemed unperturbed by her mother’s directness.

“I must insist that you release her. We have a long drive home, all of us.” Her mom nodded in Sam’s direction. “It’s time we get on the road.”

“Where did you say you’re from?” The officer looked to his pad of paper.

“Chicago.”

“And do you have a number I can reach you at if we have any further questions?” His tone promised that there would be further questions.

Her mom scribbled their phone number on the notepad and handed it back to him. “We’re free to go?”

“One more thing.” The officer tucked his notepad into his breast pocket. “As the mother of this girl, you should know we suspect this boy Colin of drug use. His eyes were dilated, and the state he’s in could mean he’s in some sort of drug coma. You should keep informed of the sorts of people your daughter associates with.”

Darcy was about to protest, but she didn’t need to bother. Her mother looked incredulous at the very suggestion her daughter was hanging out with drug addicts.

“You can expect to hear from us,” the officer said. “I’m sure we’ll have much more to talk about.”

“Thank you, Officer . . .” she said and squinted at his name tag, “White.”



Six weeks later, Darcy received a single call from Officer White informing her that Colin had awoken from his coma. He admitted to having run away but couldn't remember where he'd been the four months previous or what made him ill. He was adamant no drug use was involved. Then the officer said the case was closed and hung up.

Chapter 1

The Phone Call

"Guess what I found!" Sam said as she breezed into Darcy's room without warning.

"Huh?" Darcy jumped and flailed her arms, making her knock the plastic lamp off her bedside table. She'd been half-asleep over her laptop, trying to finish a term paper for history class. She blinked at her screen and saw lines of dashes. She must have had her finger on the key when she dozed off. Embarrassed, she tried to discreetly delete them as she turned half her attention on Sam who'd plopped down at the foot of her bed. "What'd you say?"

"Look." She handed Darcy a stiffly creased packet of stapled pages.

"What is this?" Darcy abandoned the deleting halfway through and took the packet.

"It's my parents' old contact list from Cedar Cove from like, ten years ago, or something."

“So?”

“Look at the name I circled for you!”

Darcy felt her exhaustion slip away. “Mackaby,” she said, sitting forward. “Long Island, New York. There’s a phone number. Is that where they live? Do you think this number’s still good?” She set her laptop aside, term paper forgotten, and swung her legs over the side of the bed.

“It’s worth a try, isn’t it?”

Darcy snatched up her cell phone and began dialing.

“Wait, Darcy. What are you going to say?” she asked as she twisted her fingers in her lap.

“I don’t know. I just want to see if it’s the right number.”

“You should think this through. What if you only get one shot?”

Darcy blinked down at the completed number on the screen. All she had to do was hit “send” and she’d be on her way to finding out some answers to the mystery of Colin Mackaby. But Sam was right. If the number was correct and she did get through, she might have just one chance to get the information. She sighed and put her phone away.

“I’ll think about it and try later tonight.”

“Okay, good.” Sam sounded relieved she wouldn’t be there. “Besides, you have to get changed for fencing club. Lewis will be here to pick us up in ten minutes.”

Darcy had forgotten what day it was. One night a week, she, Sam, and Lewis attended the high school’s fencing club. It was made up mostly of strange, anti-social types, and it hadn’t helped the reputation of any of the three of them to join, but they were beyond caring. Living each year of their young adult lives twice—once in Alitheia and once in their world— had matured them beyond their classmates. Plus, Darcy didn’t want to lose the sword-

fighting skills she'd acquired through working with Tellius the year before. Sam and Lewis had been happy to come along and learn a few things.

"Um . . . Darcy? What were you doing? Making line art?" Sam raised an eyebrow.

"Fell asleep with my finger on the dash key," Darcy said, then stretched and picked through the piles on the floor, looking for some clean workout clothes.

"Do you want me to erase the rest of these for you?" Sam's finger hovered over the delete key.

"Sure," Darcy said, her voice muffled through her shirt as she pulled it over her head. "Just be sure not to erase any of my paper. I'm almost done."

"Ugh, not me," Sam said. "I haven't even started. Who cares about the stupid Spanish Armada, anyway?"

"You could have chosen a different topic," Darcy shimmied into a tight-fitting t-shirt. Loose clothing was a bad idea when fencing.

"Whatever. You know history's not my thing." Sam's lips were pursed as she looked at her, and Darcy knew exactly what she was thinking.

"Sam," she said. "I am eating, I promise."

The wrinkles in Sam's lips grew deeper as she pursed them tighter.

"Seriously!" They'd had this conversation many times over the past several months. "Ask my mom! She sees what I eat for dinner."

"Your dad agrees with me," Sam said as she finished deleting the dashes and hit save. After snapping the laptop closed, she crossed her arms over her chest and glared at Darcy.

"Just because he nicknamed me 'Driftwood' —"

Honk honk!

“Lewis is here,” Sam said and got up to peer through the blinds and raise her hand. “Are you making him run with you again tonight?”

“You know my dad won’t let me go by myself after dark.” Darcy hesitated. “Are you mad that I’m spending so much time with your boyfriend?”

“No!” Sam blushed and fidgeted as she did whenever Darcy brought up her relationship with Lewis. “I just wish you’d take it easy. You didn’t have any weight to lose in the first place—not like me.”

Darcy picked up a tennis shoe and jammed her foot into it. “You know it’s not about losing weight for me. How many times do I have to tell you?”

“But you just fell asleep at your laptop! How is that any different from falling asleep at night?”

Darcy finished tying her shoes without looking up. “It’s different after dark.”

“There are some good sleep medications you could take.”

“I’ve already told you. I’m not drugging myself every night!”

“But, Darcy, what you’re doing can’t be healthy.”

Honk! Hooooooooonk!

Darcy sighed. “Would you please go down and tell him I’m almost ready?”

Sam huffed out of the room without another word.

Darcy knew her best friend only wanted to help, and she couldn’t deny if their roles were reversed, Darcy would be just as concerned. But there was no way Sam could understand the crippling nightmares and the terror that descended as soon as Darcy was alone in her room every night. After returning from Cedar Cove the previous summer, she found the only way for her to fall asleep and stay asleep, without the images and sounds of the Oracle’s lair, or Tellius’s parents dying, or the monster Thea ripping out that old man’s throat, or her own gradual transformation into a tsellodrin, was for her to run herself into an exhausted stupor just before she went to bed. Surprisingly, Lewis had become a willing accomplice to her plan. He seemed

to enjoy running and never bothered her with needless chatter. And since her dad wouldn't let her go alone, she sometimes was able to persuade her brother Roger to go with her on nights when Lewis couldn't make it. The funny thing was, she hated running—hated it—but it was better than the alternative.

She pulled herself up and looked in the mirror as she tied her hair back. Her dad was right. She did look like a piece of driftwood. Months of hard running, a four-mile loop almost every night from her house to her school and back, had shaped her body into something resembling more an adolescent boy than the sixteen-year-old girl she was. But at least she could sleep.

Darcy gave her right hand a quick, habitual rub and felt the coldness that had now crept up into her forearm. Her weight loss was the least of her concerns.

She had little less than half an hour until Lewis returned to accompany her on their nightly run, and she sat and stared at the number she'd keyed into her phone. She'd told Sam she would think about what she'd say to Colin before she called him, but the truth was, she still didn't know. It would either come to her or not, and she was tired of waiting.

She hit "send" and leaned over her knees, feeling tense. The phone rang eight times before Darcy hung up, a sense of relief and disappointment washing over her. It was strange there was no voice mail, and if the number had been disconnected, she wouldn't have gotten through at all . . .

She hit send again. This time it rang six times before someone picked up.

"Darcy, I was wondering when I would hear from you." The voice was silky, deep, and male . . . and it didn't sound like his dad.

"Colin?" Darcy whispered.

"Although, I'll admit, I didn't expect you to call this number—"

"Colin, is that really you?"

"Well, who were you expecting?" He sounded irritated—threatening.

“I’m just—I can’t . . . how did you know it was me?”

“Do I need to explain to you the intricate and magical world of caller ID?”

Darcy was too surprised even to rise to his sarcasm.

“I suppose I shouldn’t be shocked you got this number,” Colin said as though they were having a normal conversation. “It belongs to my dad’s private penthouse in the city. He sent me to live here. All by myself. He wants to keep me quiet and out of sight even though he gives this number out to anyone—sales people, telemarketers, clients he’s finished with, women he doesn’t want my mother to know about . . . Of course, what better way to reach an unwanted like me than with an unwanted number?”

Colin’s voice dripped with so much bitterness that Darcy cringed. She needed to gain control of this phone call, and fast.

“Listen, Colin, I wanted to ask you . . .” What did she want to ask him? “How are you?”

Colin laughed, and there was real humor behind it. “Oh come on, you didn’t call to ask me how I am.”

“How do you know?” Darcy sat forward in agitation. “I really have been worried about you. Do you have any idea how scary it was to find you on that path?”

“You were nosing around where you didn’t belong,” Colin said, his voice dropping even lower.

“Nosy my—” Darcy closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Sam and I saved your life.”

He snorted. “Don’t flatter yourself. He wouldn’t have let me die.”

Wanna bet? Darcy thought. “Colin, you don’t know what you’re messing with. You don’t know what he is really like. Whatever he’s told you or promised you—”

“Oh, do you think it’s a secret?” Colin snickered. “I can share, you know. He’s promised me relief from this life. From a mother who doesn’t know I exist and a father who hates me. If I help him, he’ll give me a new life.”

“He’s ten times worse than your father.”

“Don’t talk about my father like you know him! You saw him hit me one time and you think you know something about him? You have no idea!”

Darcy slowly brought the phone back to her ear after Colin’s outburst. “I’m not saying things aren’t bad for you,” she said. “And I’m so sorry but—”

“You’re sorry? Sorry like the school social workers who told me there was nothing they could do because my father is a ‘very important patron of our school,’ or sorry like my grandfather who told me to ‘be a man and take my medicine’? Is that how you’re sorry?”

“No! I wish there was something I could do to help you, that’s why I’m calling.” Darcy felt close to tears.

“Don’t kid yourself. You hate me just as much as your little friends do. You didn’t call to help me, you called to help yourself. But I won’t answer the questions you really want answered. I’ve made a deal, and I don’t need your charity or anybody else’s. Tselloch has given me a way to help myself.”

“Colin, please,” she said. She could feel him slipping away. “See you at camp, Darcy,” Colin said, and the line went dead.

“What’s wrong?” Lewis asked, standing in her front doorway. He was dressed in baggy sweatpants and a sweatshirt.

Darcy stood frozen with her hand still on the doorknob, her mind still reeling from her conversation with Colin. “N-nothing.” Darcy shook her head. Now was not the time to tell Lewis about it. She needed to process what she’d learned . . . or failed to learn.

Lewis shrugged. That was one of the great things about him. He didn’t push for details. “You ready, then?”

“Yeah.” Darcy followed him out and shut the door behind her. The halo of light from above the door cast an eerie yellow glow over them that reminded Darcy of the Oracle’s lair.

They took the stairs from her stoop two at a time, crossed the grass of her front yard, and hung a left at the sidewalk. As usual, Darcy took the lead and let Lewis trail in her wake.

She’d learned virtually nothing from talking with Colin. She’d failed to ask where he’d been for four months, failed to discover if Tselloch was constructing a gateway to their world, and failed even to ask about the Oracle scar that had been on his hand in Alitheia but not Cedar Cove. She also didn’t know how he’d gotten connected with Tselloch in the first place or how he was traveling between the worlds. The only thing she’d confirmed was that Colin was working with Tselloch and had made some sort of deal that was clearly not beneficial to her, her friends, or the future of Alitheia.

“Um . . . Darcy . . . you’re getting a little . . . fast.” Lewis was panting behind her.

“Oh, sorry.” She ran faster when she was aggravated. She concentrated on slowing her steps, even as the pace of her thoughts increased.

Two and a half months until camp, and Colin said he would be there. She would corner him and ask him then. But could his parents be serious about bringing him back? She would never bring her child back to a place he’d once disappeared from. Then again, with the way his father treated him . . .

They jogged in place at the stop sign, and she listened to the muffled laughter coming from within the fancy SUV passing through the intersection. It seemed odd that so many people were oblivious to worlds other than their own. Didn’t they realize this wasn’t all there was to life? Wasn’t it obvious? After three trips to and from Alitheia, Darcy felt the truth now more than ever that she didn’t belong to the world into which she’d been born.

She shivered and grabbed at her right hand, feeling Lewis watching her. He seemed concerned tonight. Sam must have gotten to him.

Darcy didn't react to it. The intersection cleared and she hurried across. Let him worry. Let them all worry. Even she was worried, though not about herself so much as about Colin, and Voitto Vesa, and . . . Tellius.

No nightmares tonight, she promised herself. Thinking about Tellius often triggered images of the murder of his mother and remembering Tellius's nightmare fueled her own. She'd also been plagued with strange dreams of him walking alone, shrouded in darkness, cut off from his brother, from Eleanor, from everyone. Was she having visions of what was going on in Alitheia while they were away? Was Tellius even alive?

No, no, no! I said I wouldn't go there tonight! Darcy increased her pace as Lewis struggled to keep up, but she felt incapable of slowing. They were passing the halfway point to the high school. Her feet pounded the pavement, and she could feel every step through her knees to her hips. As cold as it was, she was already drenched with sweat, and her skin felt fiery hot beneath the surface—except for her right hand and forearm. No amount of running would ever banish the coldness there. Feeling overheated, she unwound her thin scarf and let it hang suspended from her neck. Three-quarters of the way to the school.

“Darcy!” Lewis lunged forward, caught her by the elbow, and dragged her to a stop. “Please!” He sucked air into his lungs in what sounded like painful gasps. “Give . . . me . . . a break . . . here.”

Darcy stood with her hands on her hips, her legs tingling to keep going, as if the constant motion would drive the dark thoughts from her mind. That was the idea. She stared at Lewis who was bent over as he struggled to regain his breath, his light brown hair painted black by sweat. Darcy bounced on the balls of her feet while swinging her arms and flexing her fingers. If they didn't keep going soon, she felt she might go crazy.

“I don't mind running . . . with you,” Lewis said at last, straightening and stretching. “I like it, even. I mean, I'm in the best shape of my life! But I can't sprint for four miles, and neither can you, no matter what you might think. If you don't tone this down, you're going to end up hurting yourself.”

“That’s Sam talking, not you.” Darcy glanced up the dark stretch of street. “I told her this afternoon that I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not,” Lewis said. “You’re manic and . . . unpredictable.”

Darcy stopped bouncing. “You’ve never complained before.”

“That’s because I like to stay out of other people’s business. But Sam does have a point.”

Darcy dropped her arms to her sides, feeling helpless. “Come on, Lewis, you know I’m not trying to kill myself. I just can’t sleep . . .” Darcy’s throat closed up and her eyes watered. She coughed and hung her head.

Lewis didn’t try to physically comfort her. That wasn’t his way, and Darcy appreciated it. But he did stare at her, his brow furrowed, for several quiet moments. Finally, he said, “I know a lot of things happened in Alitheia last year, and I know you carry a lot more of that on your mind than any of the rest of us, but you’ve got to find some way to take better care of yourself—if not for your sake, then for Sam’s. She’s worried sick about you, and I’m beginning to see what she means.”

Darcy nodded. “Are you still going to run with me?” she asked without looking at him.

Lewis sighed, and there was almost a trace of a smile in his tone when he said, “As long as you promise not to run me into the ground any more.”

“How about I let you take the lead?”

“That’s a start. Just take it easy, okay?”

Darcy studied her fingernails and said, “Okay.”

Chapter 2

In the Woods

Darcy hopped out of the driver's seat and examined the Cedar Cove parking lot before slamming the door behind her. She felt almost like she'd returned to her first day at camp, back when she was a scrawny and self-conscious thirteen-year-old looking for a familiar face and almost afraid of finding it. But back then, life had been a lot simpler.

The usual array of families were there, but Darcy didn't spot any of her close friends or a car that could be the Mackabys'. The only vehicles in the gravel lot were minivans, station wagons, beat-up sedans, and SUVs— nothing fancy enough for Colin's real-estate-broker dad. Maybe they weren't coming . . . maybe Colin had been messing with her.

"Nice job, Darcy," her dad said from the other side of the van. "You got us here in one piece."

Darcy cracked a half-smile. "You should ride with Sam sometime. You'll never doubt my driving abilities again."

Sam was a disaster behind the wheel. Her natural flightiness and over-exuberance translated into a driving style as erratic as it was terrifying.

Sam's parents had argued about whether to allow her to drive the family to Cedar Cove that year. Her mom had thought it would be good practice, while her dad tended toward preservation of life. Mr. Palm, much to Sam's own relief, won out. She'd be arriving sometime that evening, having spent eight hours resting in the back of their family van, while Darcy felt exhausted after eight hours of interstate and highway driving. Still, she didn't mind. She liked driving. It reminded her of riding a horse.

"I doubt your driving abilities all the time," Roger said as he unfolded himself from the side door of the van. He was nearly as tall as her dad now. "I don't know how a piece of driftwood like you can control a vehicle."

Driftwood at home; Furniture Girl at school. She sometimes wondered if people remembered her name was Darcy.

Ignoring her brother's comment, she gave him a sickly sweet smile and came around him to help her mom unload the trunk. She felt her shoulders relax as she drew deep breaths and enjoyed the scent of cedar trees and moist dirt from a recent rain. The calls of seagulls and the sound of the waves on the beach heralded a simple fact: she was almost home.

Three quick trips to and from their van, with the help of a reluctant Roger, were enough to unload all the luggage and haul it up to their usual wood-side room. The room across the hall was vacant. Sam's family hadn't arrived. Darcy's family was a little early this year, because her mom had insisted on giving her an extra hour, as though sixteen-year-olds were known for driving slower than their parents. Darcy didn't mind, though. For once, she didn't have to rush right off to dinner.

She dumped her things on her bunk and left the room with a hurried explanation of waiting for Sam down on the porch. Really, she just wanted a few minutes to herself in one of the Adirondack chairs before all her friends arrived. She bounded out the door, dodged some children running down the hall, and descended the master staircase to the sitting room outside the dining hall. She could smell roast beef wafting out the closed double doors, but she turned away from the tantalizing aroma and exited to the boardwalk and the patio.

It didn't take long to see that quiet solitude was not going to be an option for her. Walking up the boardwalk was a familiar figure with golden-blond hair. He was a bit taller and his hair was longer, but it was undoubtedly him. Darcy felt a momentary panicked desire to dash back into the lodge, but she steadied herself instead.

It was stupid to feel so frightened of saying hello to Perry. It wasn't as if they hadn't spoken since last summer. But most of their online conversations had centered on Perry's social life and his ever-growing assembly line of girlfriends. Darcy had wondered more than once whether he'd been trying to make her jealous, but as he came to a stop before her, she was more

convinced than ever that her feelings toward him were nothing more than platonic.

“Hello,” she said, squinting up at him. It was a cool evening for July and he had his hands shoved deep into his sweatshirt pockets.

“Hey.” He squinted back and looked her over from top to bottom. His eyes widened.

“How are you?” Darcy asked. “Fine. How are you?” “Surviving.”

“Huh, yeah.” He seemed to know what she meant but didn’t press her for details. Instead, he looked out toward the lake and removed a hand from his pocket to scratch at his nose.

Darcy searched for something else to say. “How’s your girlfriend . . . Gabby?”

“Elise,” he said. “Gabby was the one before.” “Oh, right. So how’s Elise?” He shrugged. “We broke up.” “Sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’m not.”

“Okay.” Darcy rolled her eyes when he wasn’t looking. Things hadn’t been anywhere near this awkward right after they’d broken up in Alitheia. It was as though their year apart had reopened the breakup wound. She decided to try a different tack. “Have you seen anybody else yet?”

“Amelia’s here,” Perry replied. “And she brought a surprise.”

Darcy raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“Simon.”

“She didn’t!” Darcy gaped at him. “What is she thinking?”

Perry shrugged. “I know, right?”

“Is she down at her cabin?”

“As far as I know. I saw them . . . canoodling on their private porch.”

Darcy giggled. “Canoodling? Really?”

“It’s a word!”

“I know, but . . . how exactly do you define ‘canoodling’?”

Perry crossed his arms. “Well, they weren’t making out or anything, but they were still all up in each other’s business, so . . . canoodling.”

“Fair enough.”

Their momentary camaraderie faded as awkward silence fell again. Darcy hugged her chest and said, “Well, I’m—” just as Perry said, “Yeah, well—”

“Sorry, you go!” they said at the same time.

Darcy let out a nervous laugh. “Sorry,” she said again. “I was just going

to say that I’d wait for Sam, but now I think I might go meet Simon.”

“I think I’ll hang out inside and wait for Dean and Lewis,” Perry said. “Okay. See you later, then.”

“See you.” Perry gave a short wave and disappeared into the lodge.

Darcy high-tailed it down the boardwalk without looking back and let the awkwardness melt away as she passed the stretch of lawn, which in Alitheia would be the palace yard. A cool breeze was blowing, probably brought in by the recent rainstorm, and the air had an even fresher, cleaner feel than it usually did. Everything was quiet and still. Many families still hadn’t arrived. The quiet grew as she ducked off the boardwalk and onto the path that led into the forest.

Her senses were on high alert as they always were in the woods at Cedar Cove. Something about these cedar trees with their root systems weaving through the moss-and fern-covered forest floor took her away to Alitheia like nothing else in her world could. It was in these woods she’d first experienced glimpses through the magical veil, as Rubidius called it. Darcy passed a configuration of three trees that looked intertwined in an intimate embrace,

and she marveled over how enchanted they looked. It was no wonder Pateros had set up the gateway to their world between two cedar trees.

Darcy's solitude was interrupted by a high-pitched laugh. She stopped and tilted her head, reluctant now to intrude on the canoodling and introduce herself to Simon. The path ahead beckoned to her. It led to the nature center, the ferry dock, and Cedar Point trail. But Darcy resisted. She'd learned several times that hiking alone at Cedar Cove could be dangerous.

Another laugh floated toward her and Darcy sighed as she dragged herself up the path and turned onto the trail that led up to Amelia's cabin. She now knew what Perry meant by the word "canoodling." Amelia and Simon were on the front porch, wrapped up together in the same chair, intertwined the way the three cedar trees had been. Simon had his face hidden in Amelia's neck. He must have whispered something funny in her ear, because she wriggled and laughed that same over-the-top laugh Darcy had heard from yards away.

As Amelia threw back her head, she spotted Darcy. Her eyes lit up and she disentangled herself with some difficulty. "Darcy! Hey!" she shouted, waving.

Darcy smiled, although less enthusiastically, and tried not to look uncomfortable. She climbed the steps and Simon hung back as Amelia rushed forward to greet her.

"My gosh, Darcy!" Amelia said after giving her a quick hug. "Sam said you'd lost a lot of weight, but I thought she was exaggerating!" She stood back and examined Darcy with a critical eye.

Darcy felt a quick rush of anger but took a deep breath to calm down. Sam didn't gossip. Anything she'd said to Amelia had been out of genuine concern.

"Is Sam here yet?" Amelia asked, looking over Darcy's shoulder.

"Not yet," Darcy said. "I've only seen Perry."

"Oh! Darcy, I'm sorry, this is Simon." Amelia drew her boyfriend toward them with an arm hooked through his, and Darcy got her first good look at him.

She could see why Amelia liked him. He was dressed in a trendy style with pants tighter than anyone should ever wear, colorful European-style tennis shoes, a V-neck T-shirt, and large plastic sunglasses hooked into the neck of his shirt. He had long musician's fingers, sharp, almost feminine features, and shoulder-length hair. He was also an inch or two shorter than Amelia.

"Hi," she said, smiling.

He extended his hand and Darcy shook it, feeling very formal. "Nice to meet you," he responded. Something about his pronunciation sounded almost like he was putting on a fake British accent, but Darcy figured it had more to do with him being cultured. He was a musician, after all.

"I've heard a lot about you," Darcy said as she put her hands in her pockets. "It's nice to finally meet you in person."

"Likewise. I'm glad I could come. The way Amelia talks about this place . . . it's almost like it's a different world to her."

Darcy shot a sharp look at Amelia, but she was staring, enraptured, at the side of Simon's face.

"Um . . . yeah, well, it's kind of that way for all of us."

"Brrr! It's chilly out today, isn't it? I just noticed," Amelia said, shivering.

"Simon, do you think you could run inside and get my sweater? Then we can all walk up to the lodge and see if Sam's gotten here yet."

"Sure." Simon smiled at Darcy and peeled himself away from Amelia's side.

Amelia waited until the door was closed and then, with a gleam in her eye, she whispered, "I'm going to tell him!" as though Simon could hear her through walls.

"Um . . . Tell him what, exactly?" Darcy asked, feeling a surge of alarm.

"About Alitheia! Maybe if I tell him, he'll be allowed to come!"

"Are you out of your mind?" Darcy asked. "He'll think you're crazy!" "No, he won't. You don't know him."

“I don’t have to! Any person in his right mind would think it’s insane. Remember how you guys responded when Sam and I told you about Alitheia in the first place?”

Amelia shook her head. “No . . . you’re wrong. Simon and I have been together for two years now. If I can’t trust him with this secret, what can I trust him with?”

“But you don’t have to tell him! You can go, spend the year in Alitheia, and come back to the same time here without him ever knowing the difference.”

“And what would you suggest I tell him when we all head out to Whitetail Point tomorrow?” Amelia asked. “ ‘Sorry, sweetheart, you can’t come’?”

“Well, maybe you should have thought of that before you brought him to Cedar Cove.”

As Simon returned, Amelia shot Darcy a warning look and pasted on a smile. “Thanks, babe,” she said as he handed her a sweater that looked like it had been shredded by an army of angry mice. Simon had wrapped a purple scarf around his neck that was too skimpy to serve any practical purpose. He’d also donned a fedora and brought out a similar hat for Amelia. Side-by-side, they looked like a foldout in a fashion magazine.

“Come on,” Amelia said, wrapping an arm around his waist and pulling his arm around hers.

They marched down the path, and Darcy trailed behind, trying not to stare at Simon’s too-tight pants and the way the two of them managed to move, entwined as they were, without tripping each other up. She’d known Amelia was head-over-heels in love, but this was ridiculous.

What do I care if Amelia is stupid enough to tell him about Alitheia? Either he’ll believe her, or he’ll think she’s insane. Darcy shook her head. As much as Amelia drove her nuts sometimes, she didn’t want to see her friend get hurt.

A kitchen worker headed across the lawn to ring the dinner bell. If Sam’s family wasn’t here already, they would be soon.

As if reading her thoughts, Sam emerged from the lodge, her bright blond curls bouncing as she waved enthusiastically. “Hey!” she shouted and raced toward them.

Amelia broke away from Simon and hurried to meet her. They came together in a bone-crushing hug. “Sam, you look amazing!” Amelia pulled away and held Sam at arm’s length. “I can’t believe how fit you’ve gotten!”

Darcy snorted, resentful that Amelia’s tone lacked the disgust she’d reserved for her. So it was okay for Sam to lose a ton of weight? She trailed behind and tried not to feel awkward.

“Sam, this is Simon,” Amelia said. Sam expressed her happiness to meet him with all the exuberance Darcy’d come to expect, but when nobody was looking, she raised surprised eyebrows at Darcy.

I know, Darcy mouthed.

Dean, Lewis, and Perry poured out of the dining hall and came to introduce themselves. The boys poked each other and snickered, but they managed not to let Simon see.

Darcy saw no sign of the Mackabys at dinner. Maybe Colin really had been messing with her head. But on the other hand, she couldn’t imagine Colin would simply give up whatever he had stewing with Tselloch. They might show up yet, and she hoped it would be before she and the others left for Alitheia.

After dinner, Darcy and Sam meandered upstairs so she could keep Sam company as she unpacked. Both windows in Sam’s room were flung wide open, and the cool breeze coming off Lake Huron carried the scent of rain. Sam bent over her suitcase and moved her clothing into the old-fashioned chest of drawers. Darcy went to the window and stared down at the boardwalk just beyond the awning of the porch beneath them.

“Amelia’s going to tell Simon about Alitheia.”

“Are you kidding?”

“I told her not to, but I don’t think it mattered.”

“I suppose she knows what she’s doing,” Sam said, but she didn’t sound convinced.

“Speaking of boys, what about Perry?” Darcy asked. “Do you still feel . . . resolved?”

Sam sighed, but in a relieved sort of way “I feel really good, actually.”

Darcy turned to face her. “So you still think you’re over him, right?”

“Yes,” Sam said. “Seeing Perry today for the first time without feeling like I had to impress him was . . . great. We’ve been friends for so long, but there’s always been that between us. Now we can just be friends.”

Darcy laughed. “Are you still planning to tell him you’re over him?”

Sam blushed. “Well, I don’t know. It was never a secret that I liked him. Don’t you think I should let him know he doesn’t have to worry about that any more?”

“I think you should just tell him you’re dating Lewis and let that speak for itself. Why make things any weirder than they have to be?”

Sam’s blush deepened and she ducked behind her raised suitcase lid. “Yeah, I could just do that.”

“Speaking of Lewis, I need to find out if he’ll run with me tonight,” Darcy said, and turned back to the window. Lewis, Dean, Perry, Amelia, and Simon were gathered on the boardwalk talking.

Sam shut her suitcase. “You’re still going to run tonight? Here? Don’t you think your brain will be distracted enough with thoughts of going back to Alitheia tomorrow?”

“I don’t know. But I won’t risk it. The last thing I want to do is wake up screaming from a nightmare. I swear my mom thinks I’m crazy already, especially after this year with the fencing club and all that.”

“What are you going to do when we get to Alitheia? Running isn’t exactly a part of their daily routine, unless it entails running to or from a battle.” Sam snorted. “Why don’t you just take it easy tonight and try to think about more important things . . . like whether Voitto Vesa is still alive, or whether Tellius made it through the battle okay after we left, or whether Ormiskos is even still standing!”

Darcy sighed and closed her eyes, then pinched the bridge of her nose. “Running is how I think about those things, and I’m tired of having this argument. If I can work things out in my brain during a good run, I’ll be tired enough for them not to plague me in my sleep.” She opened her eyes wearily.

Sam stared back at her with deep concern. Unlike Darcy, whose face was sallow and sunken thanks to the year of running, worry, and poor sleep, Sam glowed with good health. She’d almost grown into her adult body, and her complexion was as clear and shining as her blue eyes and her curly blond ponytail. Sam had always been pretty. Now, by the world’s standards, she looked as beautiful on the outside as she was on the inside. Darcy had seen many boys cast Sam a second glance as the school year drew to a close, but Sam had been oblivious. Now that Lewis had started dressing in clothes that fit, gotten a decent haircut, and grown several inches, he and Sam were actually something of a cute couple. Except for the fact they rarely acted like a couple.

“What, Sam?” Darcy asked when Sam continued to stare at her.

“Fine,” Sam said. “Okay, I understand. I’m sure Lewis will run with you if you ask him. Let’s go and see the others.”

Darcy sighed. “Thank you,” she said and let Sam give her a tight hug. As they exited the room together, she asked, “Do you think Simon’s going to believe Amelia when she tells him?”

“If he does, he must really love her.” Sam laughed. “That’s the only reason I believed you.”

Darcy stood in the parking lot, dressed in her cold-weather running clothes. It had been a chilly day in Upper Michigan, and the temperature always

dropped as the sun went down. She jogged in place for a few minutes to get her blood flowing.

The rest of her friends were tucked away in the library on the second floor of the Stevenson Center, probably enjoying microwave popcorn and spiced tea—the perfect Cedar Cove comfort foods. Shadows were deepening, and the breeze was getting colder. Distant thunder rumbled over the bay, and Darcy hoped Lewis would hurry so they could complete a run before the rain started.

Headlights swung into the parking lot, and Darcy expected them to head left down the service road, because at this hour, it was probably a staff member coming over from the other side of camp. Instead, they veered right, in the direction of East Mooring cabin.

Darcy's breath caught and she froze. The Mackabys. They'd missed evening registration and dinner, so why wouldn't they head straight to their cabin?

Darcy cast an anxious look over her shoulder at the lodge. Lewis still hadn't appeared. East Mooring wasn't that far. She could take a quick dash through the woods—just to see if it was Colin and his family—and be back before Lewis had to wait for too long.

I won't talk to him. That would be stupid. She darted into the trees before she could change her mind.

She approached East Mooring through the campground. The families, busy setting up tents and trailers, ignored her. She passed through to the other side of the campground, and all sounds of life faded, replaced by almost complete silence. The woods usually teemed with life, but now it was eerily quiet. Darcy slowed to a jog and ducked off the trail into the trees as she neared the cabin. A light was lit somewhere inside, and a single window glowed yellow through the blinds. Despite her promise that she'd head back immediately, she crept up to the cabin until she was close enough to hear voices. Then she hid behind a thick cedar trunk and watched.

Colin's father, Lawrence, stood on the front porch talking on his cell phone, pausing for periodic stretches of silence. After several minutes, he hung up,

and a moment later the orange glow of a cigarette became visible, followed by a puff of smoke.

Darcy wrinkled her nose in disgust. She hated cigarette smoke, and the smell of it wafting toward her made her want to cough. She had no need to stick around just to watch Colin's dad smoke. She'd established what she'd wanted to know.

As she turned away, a dark shadow caught her eye. A lanky form unfolded itself from a window and dropped to the ground, cracking only a few twigs. It froze for a moment before creeping into the woods. It had to be Colin. Was he going to meet with Tselloch already?

She crept after him, assuming it was her responsibility to find out what he was up to. Lewis must be waiting for you by now, the reasonable part of her brain argued. He'll report you as missing, and your parents will never bring you back here again. But Darcy felt pulled. There were too many mysteries surrounding Colin Mackaby. She couldn't let him disappear again.

There was still just enough light that she could follow him at a distance without too much difficulty and without him hearing her. Plus, she knew exactly where he was going.

Before long she saw him come to a halt at a familiar pile of rocks. He stood stock-still for so long, Darcy figured he must be doing something. She needed a better vantage point. Staying well away, she tiptoed over to the game trail and peered around a tree.

If she hadn't seen Colin's father earlier, she wouldn't have believed this boy was Colin. His shaggy hair was golden blond like his father's, and his outfit wasn't at all Goth. His one concession to his previous style was the tight black T-shirt he wore over dark jeans and sneakers.

He stood with his head bowed, muttering something incoherent. His hands were clenched into fists and he was focused on a spot at the end of the game trail.

There was a sudden oppressive darkness. Even the cold wind seemed to still, and Darcy's chest grew heavy with fear as sweat broke out on her forehead. Something was here. Colin was calling on dark powers—powers from another world. She had to do something.

She jumped onto the path and yelled, "Colin!"

He swung around. The darkness lifted for a moment and then returned with a vengeance as he hurried toward her. "Why are you here? Why are you here? Don't you know it's dangerous for you to be here?"

Colin came on fast. His irises had turned black, and he reached toward her. She jerked away, wanting to run, but stared, mesmerized as the darkness in his eyes spread until it swallowed up the whites. He grabbed her right wrist and held it tight.

"You're mine," he growled in a voice that wasn't his. "Mine!"

Darcy's cold hand and forearm pulsed. She tried to yank away, but his grip was like iron. The cold spread like a plague up her arm and toward her heart. She shuddered. It entered her chest, and she gasped and whimpered. Her knees gave out beneath her. Colin seemed to grow bigger as he loomed over her collapsing form.

"Hey!" someone shouted. A blur rushed past her, and Colin loosened his grasp and stumbled backward. A deep growl emanated from his chest, and he lowered his head like a threatened animal.

Darcy sat back and cradled her frozen arm as she gasped for air. Lewis stood over her with his feet planted, facing down Colin.

Colin lunged toward Lewis with a snarl, and Lewis punched him right in the nose.

Colin stumbled backward while holding his bleeding nose in both hands. He swayed drunkenly and looked up at Lewis. His eyes had returned to their usual brown, though a strange gleam still lingered.

"Go," Colin said, sounding as though he had a bad cold. "Go on, get her away from here."

Lewis stood in uncertainty, his hands clasped into fists.

“Go!” Colin said again. “I can’t—not right now—not yet . . .” He waved them away and plunged off into the woods.