

# DAWN'S SHADOW

Vampire Magic – The Prequel

By Sela Croft

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he forest behind my house was tranquil and quiet. Only a few birds were up that early, chirping melodically. At dawn, the air was fresh, and the grass was covered with dew.

Astoria was a small Oregon town, nestled on hillsides, thick with foliage. The welcoming darkness of the forest drew me in; it spoke to me. The tranquility provided a safe haven from the bullying and taunts at school. I stepped into the shadows and walked toward the trees. Then I took in a lungful of air and spread my arms wide, embracing nature.

My twin sister Rosamon and I had been adopted at a young age. Being different was a crime, or so students at my high school thought. As if that wasn't enough, I was graced with jet-black hair and violet eyes. So there was no chance of blending in.

The striking eye color couldn't be explained, nor could I hide it. Sunglasses were forbidden in class. Maybe if I'd been able to fit in, my looks wouldn't have hindered my acceptance. But the trouble was that I couldn't settle in, and was unable to take part in my very real surroundings.

High school was boring. Not much happened—especially in such a small town. The other girls found shopping entertaining, or went to the movies or to a restaurant. But the conversation was dull at best, so I tended to turn down invitations, making me even less popular.

Boys were a frequent topic, especially the current boy a girl liked, if he liked her, and whether he was already taken. Since I hadn't met a boy who excited me in that way, I was left out of such discussions. It wasn't that I didn't want to date; it was just that I feared it would be yet another awkward situation.

In the forest, I leaned against a huge tree trunk and gazed up, unable to see the sky. The trees were so tall that the light was blocked out. I stood in the heavy shadows and tried to still my mind. Far away from the noises of civilization, my mind wandered.

I dreamed of far-off lands, and a life that held a higher purpose. Since I was so different, there must be a reason—a destiny that I hadn't yet fulfilled. But I was only kidding myself.

Since I'd moved to town, the days, months, and years had rolled by with no adventure to speak of. I reached up and touched a nearby branch, feeling the rough bark under my fingers. Maybe fate was saving up all the excitement for one really big moment. That was wishful thinking. Not much was going to happen, if it hadn't already.

I strolled farther underneath the canopy of trees, wishing I might stay there for the rest of the day. But it was not to be. After lingering a few minutes longer, I turned and headed home. I'd be missed, and my sister would wait to walk to school with me.

I'd gone deep into the forest, so had some distance to cover to get home. I made my way along the path through the trees, knowing it well. I emerged from the chilly forest to see that the sun had lit the morning. A hawk swooped by, blowing my hair under the whoosh of wide wings. Shielding my eyes, I watched the magnificent creature disappear into the blue sky, wishing to escape with similar abandon.

After crossing the field, the white clapboard house was in sight. I opened the gate and covered the last few yards to the porch. The smell of bacon sizzling greeted me at the back door. It was a welcoming smell, even though I didn't eat the greasy fare. As I stepped into the kitchen, my eyes met Rosamon's. My sister knew me well, so didn't ask where I'd been.

My mother waved toward the table. She had her hair tied back and wore an apron. "Callendra, you're nearly out of time. Sit and eat. I don't want you going off to school on an empty stomach." She was the only person who called me by my full name. To everyone else, I was Callie.

My father lowered the paper and gave me a nod, then went back to reading. He reached for his coffee cup without looking up. The familiar sights and smells were reassuring.

Even though it had been twelve years, I still missed my real mom and dad. After the car accident, I'd bounced around in foster care with my sister, until the Densens had filed for the adoption. Emma and Ian Densen were our adoptive parents.

The one thing I'd retained was my given name. Our new parents had thought that we should keep the last name of Mayfair—so we had. It had been a small enough thing, but had made me feel good.

I had only experienced kindness in the home, but the void inside of me didn't go away. My parents were gone, leaving an emptiness that couldn't be filled. "I'm not hungry."

Emma frowned. "At least drink some juice, honey."

I flopped into a chair across the table, then glanced at the silver necklace around my sister's neck. It had been a birthday gift from me, and the pendant was engraved with Heart to Heart. As sisters, we were very close.

My sister looked up with a twinkle in her eyes. Nibbling on toast, she didn't say a word. She didn't need to. There was a special bond between us, like we were on the same wavelength. I was able to sense what she felt.

At a young age, I'd discovered that I was able to read minds. Not all the time. But often, I knew what another person was thinking.

Apparently, this was annoying. Other people hadn't been pleased when their inner thoughts were revealed. So I'd soon learned to keep quiet about it. Also, Rosamon had unique abilities of her own.

Growing up, I'd conspired with my sister, and we'd teamed up to share the advantages of our special abilities. Together, things were better. Rosamon had

premonitions, and I was adept at perceiving what others were thinking. But it was best not to reveal such things.

Our peers already thought I was from some other race, more like an alien. I mean, who has violet eyes? Plus, my antisocial tendencies were all the encouragement my classmates needed to shun me. It was hopeless, really.

Ian looked up from the paper. "Last day of school?"

"Yes, it's summer vacation," Rosamon said.

"A few months of freedom before your senior year. I'm sure you're looking forward to it." Ian was kind, and showed affection like any father might. Several times in recent weeks, he'd mentioned next year's graduation with a hint of melancholy in his voice. He would miss us when we left home to follow our dreams. That was how he'd put it.

That was just the thing. I didn't have plans and hadn't looked beyond high school. At seventeen, I had plenty of time. It was the same for Rosamon. My sister was like me in so many ways. The only ideas that held any charm, for either of us, had to do with adventure and travel.

"You girls are quiet this morning," Emma said, and put the plate of bacon on the table. It seemed to escape her notice that the breakfast table was usually quiet. She had a habit of commenting on it, as if it was something new. I let it go, having realized long ago that no response was expected.

"We have to get going," Rosamon said, and hefted her satchel over her shoulder.

I took the hint and gulped the rest of my juice, then stood up. "See you this afternoon." I smiled at Emma, then kissed Ian on the cheek. He'd be off to work at the bakery shortly after we left for school. By the time he arrived to supervise, his bakers would already be there.

With a sense of relief, I skipped down the front steps and walked beside my sister. The last day of school was always the best. As Ian had commented, a few months of freedom were within my grasp. "Let's go to the church tonight, after dark." That was where the magic happened. One thing I possessed in abundance was imagination. The old stone walls of the abandoned church provided atmosphere for all sorts of pretending.

"It will be a celebration of our last day." Rosamon smiled, and then waved at a few classmates walking up ahead.

My sister had lucked out. She had been graced with blond hair and blue eyes. We were twins, but we didn't look alike. Yet I couldn't resent my sister.

She was lovely and genuine, even seemed to fit in—at least, more than I did. Others pointed us out, as though we were some other species. Or sometimes it felt that way. Orphaned at the age of five, I was lost until the Densens adopted us. I was truly grateful and felt fortunate.

Yet a house with a yard and attending a small-town school did little to create a normal life for me. I was different. At least Rosamon and I had each other. Things could have been worse—a lot worse.



ince it was the last day of school, classes were short and there was no homework. The teachers seemed as pleased as the students that summer break was upon them. That day, I only had one class with Rosamon. It was history.

That was one subject I found interesting, especially tales of medieval castles or pirate stories. Unfortunately, too much of what was taught consisted of dry facts and over-told stories. Too bad. My mind often drifted, as I embellished the text with incidents to get the blood pumping and the mind working.

Rosamon preferred subjects like art or pottery, being creative in a different way. Only today, the mood was enlivened by the imminent freedom of summer. The boys in the class kidded around with my sister. She attracted attention easily with her beauty.

But there was no one special for her or for me. Rosamon dated sometimes, to go to movies or parties. And was asked out again. Yet she seemed a bit aloof, and had told me that if falling in love was in her future, it hadn't happened yet.

I couldn't imagine the type of guy who would be interested in me. It was not that I wasn't attractive, in my own way. It was more of a personality thing. I couldn't imagine being a cheerleader or hobnobbing with the popular crowd. There was no way. I didn't fit.

Fortunately, there was only one more year of high school to endure. Then I'd have the rest of my life before me. But there was plenty of time to consider that. For now, the cherished summer months stretched languidly ahead, and that was enough to cheer me up.

Classes seemed to drag, then finally it was lunch. The weather was pleasant, so I meandered toward a table in the courtyard. A guy from math sped his pace to catch up with me, but I didn't turn to look at him. That wasn't the first time he'd encroached on my privacy.

"Hey, don't snub me, girl...like you're all high and mighty." He grabbed my lunch bag and held it high, laughing at his cleverness. "You think you're better than me. Can't talk to the likes of me?"

"Give back my lunch, Devin." I reach for it, and he grabbed my arm.

"Not so fast, weirdo girl. Tell me how come your eyes are such a funny color and why your hair is so inky black. Are you related to a raven?"

"Leave me alone." Yanking my arm, I tried to get free. But Devin's grip was too strong. "You're hurting me." In a flash, an arm wrapped around Devin's waist and lifted him off the ground. A hand snatched the lunch bag and handed it to me. The offender was released. "Now, make a run for it, before I pound you into the ground...you sniveling bully."

Noah Wingate had materialized from nowhere and rescued me. I accepted the bag he offered. "Thanks. You showed up just in time. I was about to cast a magic spell over that idiot and turn him into a frog."

"That would serve him right. I should have stayed back and watched."

Noah had been my best friend through high school. The town had taken a turn for the better when he'd moved here. He was in a few of my classes, and he helped with homework. There were a few different things about Noah, and one was that he was very smart...smarter than he cared to admit.

Tossing my bag on the table, I plopped onto the bench. "Where's your lunch?" "Didn't bring one today."

"Here, I'll share. Emma packs enough for the whole class." I motioned to the seat across from me.

Noah accepted half of my sandwich, and in three bites it was gone. He was a goodlooking guy, with deep copper eyes that sometimes seemed to glow. Either that, or it was my overactive imagination. He had thick brown hair, wide shoulders, and an athletic build.

He charmed the girls without trying, and even now, I spotted a couple of classmates glancing over at him. But Noah didn't seem to realize the effect he had. If he'd dated, I didn't know about it. In fact, that was one thing about him: he kept his distance.

It was hard to describe. He was protective, watched Rosamon and me, but didn't share too much about himself. Despite his muscular build, he didn't go out for sports or engage in other guy things. Plus, he didn't smile much. Yet I liked him anyway.

My sister glided over to the table and sat beside Noah. "I got caught up talking after class." She opened her bag. "What did Emma give us?"

I didn't bother to tell her about the bullying. It wasn't anything new, just the same old thing. If it wasn't one guy, it was another. It was some big deal that I looked unique. I couldn't help that. I was born that way. I supposed if I'd tried to befriend more of my classmates, it might have made up for some of my oddness.

But I hadn't, so I just put up with the taunts, telling myself that I was different for a reason. I'd discover my purpose in life and find the place I fit in. I didn't really believe that, although I hadn't lost hope.

School let out early, which was just as well, since no one was paying attention. There was a lot of laughing and kidding around. With the pressure off, even the teachers acted more relaxed. Rosamon met up with me, and we headed home.

Noah appeared without a word and strolled along beside us.

"Too bad we have to work this summer," Rosamon said. "I'd rather spend every day at the river."

"Or walking in the forest." That sounded particularly good. But the temptation was to just keep walking, as if, deep in the trees, I'd find my destiny.

"Helping out in Ian's bakery isn't so bad," Noah said. "I'll be at the mill again, doing manual labor."

Maybe that was how he'd gotten so strong, because Noah was as solid as the guys who lifted weights or played football. Only he was...more agile. That was the only way to explain it. The way he'd scooped Devin right off his feet was an example. Sometime, I'd ask Noah more about that.

At a curve in the road, Noah turned toward his house.

"Meet us at the church tonight," Rosamon said. "We're celebrating."

Noah lifted his hand. "See you there."

My sister watched him go. It was clear that she liked him. I wasn't good at reading my sister's mind, but I didn't have to be. The way she acted around Noah made me wonder how she felt about him. I'd asked her before, but she'd assured me that he was only a friend.

"Noah saved me today, just before you showed up at lunch."

Rosamon rolled her eyes. "Oh, jeez...the bullies?"

"Just one...Devin."

"That guy needs to get a life."

"He's an idiot. Too bad he's bent on giving me a hard time."

Rosamon put her arms out and spun in a circle like a dancer. "He's just jealous."

"Yeah, right." But I smiled anyway.

Our house came into view. "Maybe we can get out of chores." But I didn't expect a reply. Emma asked little enough, so I'd grudgingly labor through my tasks. There was later to look forward to.

A few extra chores had been added to the list, so I didn't get a break until dinnertime. Rosamon set the table, and I poured the drinks. Ian was going to be late, so we ate without him. Sometimes the bakery was busy, or he was short-handed.

Rosamon chatted a bit with Emma, so I was left to eat without having to talk. I sensed my sister's anticipation for the evening ahead. And though I couldn't read her mind, I could read Emma's. She wanted to watch a movie with us, and was about to mention it.

"We're going out for a while," I said, scooping up my plate and taking it to the sink. "Noah's meeting us."

Since it was a small town, safety wasn't an issue. Emma didn't object to us going where we pleased. I mean, how far could we go—surrounded by forest? But she liked it when Noah was with us, knowing that he was protective toward us.

Upstairs, I changed into jeans and a light sweater. Rosamon and I shared a room, which we didn't mind. While she decided what to wear, I brushed out my hair. On the dresser was a photo of prom night. I held it up for a closer look.

It hardly looked like me. I'd worn a blue satin dress that reminded me of some sort of princess. Rosamon had worn a glittery gold dress and piled her hair high on her head, in an elaborate twisted hairstyle. Noah had been our date. It had been a lot more fun going with our friend, and he'd voiced his agreement. So, Noah had two dates for the prom. He was unconventional and didn't care what others thought. That was a rare quality among the guys I knew. But Noah was like that.



he old abandoned church loomed large in the distance. The stone walls were massive, though crumbling a bit. It was still light outside, just barely, and the building was forbidding in the twilight.

A thrill tickled my spine. The sight of the ancient church held excitement, more than usual. Although I didn't know why. The sky had a pink glow at the horizon, and the ominous structure stood majestically in the shadows.

The scariness drew me in, offering the unknown. It was as though, in the night, new worlds were accessible and alluring possibilities hovered close. My imagination easily got the best of me, but I didn't attempt to curb it.

If I relinquished my grip on the pretend worlds that might exist, boredom might overtake me. Since living in Astoria, the old church had been a favorite haunt. I found it mystifying, and once I entered the courtyard, my heart beat a little faster.

Rosamon swept past me, twirling around on the stone walkway. Her long hair blew in the breeze and her eyes gleamed. She liked the old church as much as I did. And Noah had been instantly attracted to it. During countless evenings, I'd gotten lost in the spirit of the place.

Noah stepped out from behind the building, surprising us. "You beat us here," my sister screeched. Then she danced off, in search of some long-forgotten trinket, a magic pebble, or a feather able to cast a spell, if waved just right.

"Are you a pirate tonight?" I grinned at Noah. "Or a knight from King Arthur's roundtable?" On many occasions, the scenes enacted had seemed more real than life itself.

"Maybe I'm a monster, come to eat you alive." Noah growled, and I took off running. The grounds were enormous, yet familiar to me. I ducked down passageways and turned dark corners. Breathlessly, I ran from the threat, my heart beating wildly in my chest.

But Noah had been here as often as I had. When I rushed down a dimly lit path, I plowed into him, and he lifted me off my feet. Playing my part, I screamed. And in a deep recess of my mind, I was afraid. His strength made me glad he was my protector, and not truly a monster.

Something about Noah's demeanor was slightly menacing, although I was certain that he wouldn't hurt me. Quite the opposite: he'd proven that he'd look out for me, and my sister, too. Yet my pulse raced, and calm wasn't restored, even when he put me down.

Noah stood motionless, staring into the darkness. His eyes glowed amber, like they were on fire. His muscles tensed, and his breathing was quiet, even though he'd been running like I had. He looked at something that I couldn't see.

Straining my eyes, I peered into the distance, expecting some amorphous form to take shape. But I saw only empty space. Yet Noah didn't stir; he looked like he was made of stone.

"What is it?" I touched Noah's arm. "You're scaring me."

He turned then looked in my eyes. Without a smile, he said, "Isn't that what you want?"

His deep voice wasn't reassuring. It didn't sound like his voice. But then he laughed and lurched at me. Back into the game, I dodged him. Noah was fast, so that wasn't easy to do. I suspected that he let me get away. I couldn't read his thoughts, and hadn't been able to earlier. But that didn't surprise me, because he was a mystery. He was my friend, but he kept to himself and held things inside.

The passage was chilly, the air musty. My hand touched the cold stone wall as I passed by. Noah disappeared from sight, but couldn't be far. I wrapped my jacket around me, shivering, though not from the cold. The game had created an effect that hadn't dissipated.

I was being silly. Noah wasn't a monster. And though the darkness lent itself to all sorts of things that went bump in the night, there wasn't anything scary out there. Yet I stepped toward the dimness ahead with trepidation.

My sister might bump into Noah before I did, but I didn't hear her footsteps. I listened, but there was no echo of her voice or her laugh. Maybe she was hiding, intending to frighten me. If so, she was too late. I was already unnerved by...

At the end of the hallway, Noah stood in the courtyard. The moon was bright now, and illuminated him in pale light. He watched me approach, his gaze mesmerizing me. Something was off.

"Where's Rosamon?" Alarmed for real now, I strode into the moonlight. "I didn't see her in there, did you?"

Noah reacted by taking my hand, then guided me toward the church structure. "We have to find her." His voice was calm, yet I sensed the urgency.

There was no need to panic. Rosamon knew her way around as well as I did, so she'd find us. But I didn't hear any sound other than my own breathing. Noah stalked the grounds silently, and I held tight to his hand. At the entry to the church, we paused, waiting for any indication that Rosamon was nearby.

Yet silence greeted us.

Noah went inside first, then I followed. The scraping of our feet on the stone was loud in the empty abbey. I made my way to the front and glanced up at the pulpit, half expecting to see a ghost. Then I turned to see Noah moving toward the shadows.

Suddenly, Rosamon stepped from an alcove. Her blond hair shone in the low lights, and her eyes were glassy. I rushed over and wrapped her in my arms. "You're so pale. What happened? Where were you?"

My sister hugged me tightly. Then she sat in one of the pews, her eyes wide. "I

don't know what happened. I was walking. It got darker and darker." She looked at Noah. "I blanked out. I don't remember after that. I'm not sure how I got here."

That was one moment that I wished for the ability to read my sister's thoughts. I wanted to delve into her mind and witness what had occurred. I sat beside her and held her hand.

"I felt a pull—it was magnetic, sort of. I was drawn closer, and then..."

"What, Rosamon? Tell me." I glanced at Noah and saw recognition in his eyes. Whatever it was, he knew more about it than he was saying. I'd pry it out of him later. For now, I had to take care of my sister.

No wonder I'd been so afraid. My twin had been in some sort of danger, real or imagined. It was common for me to feel what she did. I was used to it.

"We'd better go." Noah reached out his hand, and I grabbed it. Then I put my arm around Rosamon, and we left the church. The moon lit our way home, but the dark mood hadn't left.

Noah escorted us to the front door. "I'll check on you tomorrow. Stay in tonight...promise me."

I nodded, having no intention of going anyplace else. I only wanted to get my sister to bed, knowing better than to pry more details from her until she was ready.

Upstairs, I changed for bed, and Rosamon did too. The curtains were open, letting the moonlight shine across my bed. Instead of getting in her own bed, my sister got into mine and snuggled beside me. I held her hand and she squeezed, as if to reassure me.

I stared up at the ceiling. "It's times like this that I miss Mom and Dad, don't you?"

"I so wish..." But Rosamon didn't finish her thought. I didn't have to ask what she wished, because I wished the same.

I wished our parents hadn't died in a car accident, so that we'd be a family. For all my clamoring for excitement, I'd trade it for a normal life any day—if it meant my parents would be a part of it.

Rosamon whispered, "If Mom was here, she'd hug me and tell me that everything was okay, that it was just my imagination."

"And Dad would tell us that we'd freaked ourselves out, so it served us right."

My sister laughed softly. "He would, and he'd be right. It's sometimes hard to separate the real from the pretend. Don't you find that's true?"

More than I cared to deal with. My real life, whatever that was, had long since taken on surreal aspects. Yet I failed to control my imagination, even now. I couldn't resist pretending that I'd see my parents again. I'd lost them when I'd been only five years old, yet I remembered certain things about them—my mother's smile, my father's protectiveness.

Now, Rosamon and I were seventeen, and family memories were all we had left. Yet it seemed sometimes that our parents were close, watching out for us.



woke from a dreamless sleep and opened my eyes, unsure where I was. Then I felt the soft bed underneath me and watched the ceiling glitter in the flicker of moonlight. Rosamon's breathing was steady, so I slipped out of the covers without disturbing her.

In bare feet, I walked to the window, absorbing the coolness of the wood floor with each step. From the second story, the forest was visible. The trees shone under pale yellow moonlight. An urge to be in the forest struck me, but I resisted.

A breeze flowed through the open window and brushed over my skin. I placed my palm on the screen to commune with nature. I was part of the greater universe, and it was part of me. Yet I was unable to reach it, as though an invisible barrier separated me from my destiny.

I peered toward the far-off trees, the thick canopy beckoning. Though it was dark, I looked deep into the grove, wishing—for what, I wasn't sure. My eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, and I could make out forms. The thick tree trunks stood majestically, drawing me into their charisma.

Breathing deeply, I calmed down. Even from a distance, my wooded respite shielded me, and I felt more myself. Gazing out, I sensed motion, so looked closer. With my forehead pressed to the screen, I strained to see. Maybe it was an animal, or merely the breeze rustling the leaves.

I looked at the trees, and something looked back. I jumped away from the screen, my pulse pounding. But when I turned my eyes back to the spot, there was only stillness and silence. I really needed to get a grip, before I started to believe this stuff was real.

With my hand over my heart, I turned and saw Rosamon sleeping. She shifted and pulled the blanket tighter under her chin, but did not awaken. I tiptoed back to bed and got under the covers. I wondered what I'd seen, or how to explain it. If I'd seen an animal, then why had I sensed eyes looking back at me? It was a while before I drifted to sleep.

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It was the first day of summer break, so Rosamon and I got dressed to go to the river. My sister looked thoughtful, and I perceived her concern before she voiced it. "Don't tell Emma about last night. It will worry her, and she might keep us home. That would be the worst." "You didn't have to say that. There's no reason to tell her." I sat on the bed. "Do you remember anything more about what happened?"

It had been bizarre seeing my sister in such a state. She'd looked like she was under a spell, and I was curious.

Rosamon twisted her hair up and wrapped a band around it, then fluffed out the ponytail. "It's weird, you know. I have my premonitions, but I didn't see that coming. One minute I was walking down a passage, and the next I was standing in a dark alcove."

"But how did you get there?"

"That's just the thing." My sister wrinkled her brow. "The last thing I recall is pulling back. I sensed something reaching out for me, and it gave me quite a fright. Before I could even scream...I guess I blacked out."

"How did you get to the abbey?" It was a stupid question. She'd already said that she didn't remember. But maybe it would come back to her.

Rosamon looked off into the distance, recalling what she could. I tried to tap into her wavelength, hoping to sense more, but drew a blank.

"I had a sense of a force reaching out for me, an unfamiliar one. And I didn't get a good feeling about it. I shielded myself as best I could. That thing I do when I sort of withdraw into myself, shut down."

That was a clever trick that my sister had developed. It came in handy for her at school, when a guy she didn't like would approach her.

"How do you feel now?"

Rosamon looked at me. "I wasn't hurt, if that's what you mean." She wrapped her arms around her waist. "I wanted to call out to you."

"The fear came through. I felt it too, but didn't perceive that you were in danger. I thought it was just the church atmosphere, how we scare ourselves and stuff."

"Yeah, that's what I would have thought too." Rosamon shook her head. "But I'm telling you...something really happened. It wasn't my imagination."

Neither of us had any explanations, but I was determined to go back to the church to find answers. Probably not right away, though. I had to think it through first, and my sister needed to regain her emotional balance. It would have to remain a mystery until then.

After a quick breakfast, we hugged Emma and Ian, then rushed out the door. I breathed in the fresh air and let the breeze whip my hair around. I lifted my arms toward the sky, and Rosamon danced along the dirt path.

Astoria was at the mouth of the Columbia River, and offered many places to enjoy the tree-lined water. Avoiding any tourist areas, my sister and I skipped along toward a part of the river we frequented. It was quiet and private, so we could swim or sit in the sun without being bothered.

The powder-blue sky was dotted with white, wispy clouds, and the scent of spruce trees filled the air. At the edge of the water, I plopped onto the grassy edge, then dipped my toes into the river. Rosamon found some small pebbles and tossed them into the water to watch the circles they made.

The day was warm enough for swimming, but instead I stretched out on the grass and gazed up at the sky. The sound of my sister splashing around in the water soothed me. We were together, and that mattered a lot. So long as we stayed together, things would be okay.



he sun warmed my skin and the grass tickled my toes. I stretched out my arms and closed my eyes. I didn't want to think about anything right then. The peace of the river soothed my mind and lured me into a sense of security.

Then a shadow blocked out the light, and I opened my eyes to see Noah standing over me. "Hey, you're late. I thought you weren't coming."

My friend dropped to the grass beside me, so I sat up. "Why wouldn't I come?" He didn't smile or offer any explanation. But that was how he was. I was used to it.

Noah looked at the river, appearing thoughtful. He was serious much of the time, but seemed more so now. I sensed it would be useless to ask why. And I hadn't yet been able to read his mind. He was one of the few who was inaccessible to me.

"Let's climb the tree," I said, jumping to my feet and brushing the grass off my shorts. An old spruce was nearby, one that we favored. It had an enormous trunk, and there were low-hanging branches. "I'll race you."

I took off toward the tree. When I arrived out of breath, Noah was already there. I bent over with my hands on my knees. "No fair. I know you cheated." I didn't know how, but he had to. I'd raced off with a head start. He was just fast...really fast.

Noah gave me a boost to the branch, and I made my way up to a wide perch. He followed, and we settled with our backs against the powerful trunk. Down below, I could see my sister floating on her back in the river. "I think she's part fish."

When I turned toward Noah, he looked out to the horizon, not focused on my sister or even the river.

"I talked to my sister this morning, but she doesn't remember much from last night." I looked at him, but he didn't turn to face me. "Do you understand what happened?"

Although I couldn't read his thoughts, Noah couldn't hide his reaction. His jaw tensed, and he gripped his knees. "We should stay away from the church for a while." He glanced at me. "We aren't children anymore, playing pretend."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I gripped a branch and pulled at it. "We've been going to the church...well, forever. What's gotten into you?"

Noah's gaze pierced into me, and whatever he wasn't saying came through loud and clear as a warning. "It's just safer, that's all."

"You can't really think we're in danger there?" I said, doubting, and hoping for reassurance that all was back to normal.

"Something happened to Rosamon. We can't take the risk." Then Noah clammed up.

What risk? What in the world was he talking about? A scream echoed through the trees, and I caught sight of my sister, standing on a rock outcropping, just before she fell and disappeared underwater.

In the blink of an eye, Noah was in the water with her. I gasped. I hadn't seen him move that fast before. It wasn't possible. But there he was, carrying Rosamon out of the water. I shimmied down the tree and ran to the water's edge.

My sister twisted her hair to wring out the water, then put her hand on her head. "Ouch. I hit my head on that rock."

Noah looked up at me, his eyes glowing amber in the sun, then frowned. His expression conveyed an emotion I couldn't name. If I didn't know better, I'd think he knew a lot more than he'd shared.

I sat next to my sister, accessing the damage, but she appeared to be all right. Slipping on a rock wasn't a supernatural occurrence. It could happen to anyone. So why was Noah making a big deal out of it?

He had moved so quickly, faster than my eyes could follow. That was something I'd make him explain, no skirting the issue this time. Whatever type of workouts he did, I wanted to know. And if he was some sort of superhero, now was the time to confess.

But I could hardly ask while my sister was in distress. She hid it well, but her thoughts told me the incident had unnerved her. I handed over her clothes, so she could put something over her wet swimsuit. It was warm out. Even so, Rosamon was shivering.

Noah reached for Rosamon's hand. "We need to leave now."

I stood up, waiting for him to say more. But he didn't. Noah put his arm around my sister and headed back to the path. I followed, unsure what I'd witnessed. He was protecting us from some unseen threat, and a fall in the river wasn't the half of it.

As soon as my sister was over this bump on the head, I was going to have a heartto-heart with Noah. If he thought he could keep what he knew to himself, he was wrong. There was no way I'd let him get away with that. He was protecting Rosamon, and I would demand to know who or what was after her.



t our street, Noah turned to go the other way, heading for his house. "I have to work tomorrow," he said. "Take care of each other. I won't be far, if you need me."

Rosamon waved. "I'm okay now. It was just a bump on the head." But Noah had disappeared around the corner.

Instead of going up the path to our house, my sister veered toward the forest. "I'm not ready to go in yet."

The feeling was mutual, and I welcomed the reprieve. The forest was alluring. Rosamon led me into the shade, and I glanced toward the place where I'd seen someone last night—or thought I had. I saw only trees, without any breeze to unsettle the leaves.

It was quiet, and the tall spruce shielded us from the sun. The stillness was palpable. Not even the birds were singing. The shadows felt eerie. Maybe I was making too much out of it all.

Yet it seemed that we weren't alone. I felt a presence, as though we were being watched. That was silly—unless someone was hiding out in the forest. But that was so not Astoria. Our little town was virtually crime-free.

The leaves rustled, then the shadows moved. I held my breath.

Rosamon leaned against a wide trunk. "I have to tell you something."

I grabbed on to a nearby branch. "I'm surprised you have to tell me. I should know."

"Well, that's just it," my sister said. "Something is off. I can't perceive like I should be able to. It's like there is a premonition, one I strain in my mind to see, but I can't get it. That hasn't happened before."

"What do you think it is?"

"All I can tell is that it's dark. I keep seeing gloom. But when I try to decipher it, then it vanishes." Rosamon frowned and fingered her delicate necklace. "It's as if...I'm not supposed to know."

"Now you're really scaring me." I scanned the forest. No wayward person came forth. But the silence was deafening, and the shadows shifted unnaturally.

"Let's get back," I said. "But I promise you, we'll figure this out. We've always stuck together. So whatever has affected your ability, it won't be your undoing. I'm here with you."

My sister stepped away from the tree and gave me a hug. "Whatever happens, Callie, I know I can count on you."

It was best not to tell Emma about the fall in the river. So Rosamon went up to change out of her wet clothes, and I retrieved an ice pack from the freezer. It was late afternoon, and Emma was out in the garden. When I went upstairs, my sister iced the bump on her head.

"It doesn't hurt." She plunked the ice pack onto a chair. "I guess we should help with dinner. If we don't, Emma will start to wonder what we're up to."

Dinner was uneventful. Ian was home early, and Emma had made our favorite, chicken dumplings. Rosamon and I behaved normally, making no mention of alarming news. After dishes, I politely bowed out of watching a movie, claiming to be in the middle of a good book. And Rosamon followed me, offering no excuse.

While Emma and Ian watched the movie, my sister and I played some computer games, then actually did some reading. The book pulled me in, and I couldn't put it down until I turned the last page. I looked up to see Rosamon lost in a story. She yawned and set the book on the nightstand.

It was after midnight before lights were out. Emma and Ian had said goodnight long before. Despite the familiarity of a night at home, I could tell my sister was unsettled. Having her ability blocked had disturbed her.

Rosamon slid into her bed, and I got into mine. The window was open, allowing the cool night air in. "Noah's outside," I said, "watching."

"How do you know?"

"I just do. He's always out there. I've seen him sometimes."

"Doesn't he sleep?" Rosamon said.

"He must...but I haven't asked him. He doesn't know that I'm aware of his presence, so I don't bring it up."

"I'm glad that you're with me," Rosamon said. "And that Noah looks out for us."

So was I, especially after all that had happened. After a few minutes, my sister's breathing grew steady. She slept, and I listened. Since she sounded okay, I closed my eyes.

In pitch dark, I looked over at Rosamon's bed. I wasn't sure what woke me up, but something had startled me. The moonlight had vanished, replaced by the shadow of dawn.

I sat up, staring at a pile of covers. But my sister wasn't there. My heart skipped a beat. It was nearly morning, so maybe she'd gotten up early. I leapt from my bed and threw on some clothes. It was a chilly morning, so I grabbed a jacket then opened the door.

The hallway was empty. I crept down the stairs, not wanting to wake anyone. The kitchen was quiet, with only the soft hum of the refrigerator breaking the silence.

Quickly, I scanned the other rooms. Rosamon was not in the house. Desperate to see that she was okay, I went outside. She could be waiting for sunrise, as she had sometimes before. But she wasn't in the yard either.

I glanced toward the forest, but the trees were still.

Then I looked down the path. Far in the distance, I glimpsed my sister's blond hair. I had no idea why she'd be out walking by herself. I sprinted after her, but she was too far for me to call out her name.

I lost sight of her, then spotted her again. I ran faster. My sister was headed toward the church. I couldn't believe that she would go there without me. Hadn't we agreed to do this together?

It made no sense for her to go there before dawn.

I willed my legs to move faster, breathing harder. I must get to her. I couldn't allow her to go into the church. The stark reality hit me. I could lose her.

That couldn't happen.

I ran as hard as I could and spotted the church up ahead. Rosamon entered the courtyard. I prayed she would stop, but she didn't. I made it to the stone wall, then raced down the path.

"Rosamon. Stop!"

At first, I didn't see her. Then I remembered the abbey. I went there, hoping to find her in one of the pews. I could discover what was going on.

There she was. Rosamon stood where she had the night before. She faced the alcove, invisible in the shadows.

"Rosamon!" I shouted at the top of my lungs. But she didn't turn, didn't seem to know I was there. I couldn't sense what she felt. I drew a blank, and couldn't get any clue of what was transpiring.

I raced down the aisle to grab her, but she stepped into the shadows. I reached out into empty air. She had disappeared, just like that. I froze.

The alcove was vacant. My sister couldn't walk through stone walls. She had disappeared. Panic riddled me, and I was unable to breathe.

I was stunned...Rosamon wasn't in sight. There wasn't a second to waste. Wherever she'd gone, I had to follow and save my sister. Without hesitation, I stepped into the heavy shadows of the alcove. I vowed I'd get her back...

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