CHAPTER ONE

THE OAK TREE

I can see that the tree has moved. It's a little closer to the house than it was yesterday.

"Ramya? Ramya!"

I know Gran is asking me something. Or telling me something. Yet I cannot stop staring at the tree. Pondering how it could possibly have moved since last night. It's an oak tree and I noticed it when Mum and Dad first dropped me off here. Mum said it wasn't there when she and her sisters were younger. Even Gran had seemed a bit puzzled by it.

"Ramya, stop daydreaming for five seconds and try the spell again."

I'm sitting at the eating nook in Gran's large kitchen. There's an AGA stove and a large fireplace. I know

what I'm supposed to be doing, but I'm not Mum. I'm not so good at fire.

Gran is pretending to be preoccupied with her mortar and pestle, getting the seasoning ready for dinner, but I can tell by the way her shoulders sit that she is concentrating on what I am about to do.

I'm not allowed to attempt fire by myself, not ever.

I focus on the empty space in the wall, where the wood is waiting for a flame.

I do what Aunt Opal always says. I focus on the doing and not the trying. She always says we don't *try* to do the things that are most important, we just do them. Magic is no different.

But this still feels more like trying than doing.

Gran must sense my growing frustration, because she briskly moves to the window and says, "Were you looking at that oak tree?"

I glare down at my empty palms but take the olive branch. "Yes. It looks like it's getting closer to the house."

"It's probably just growing taller," she counters, but she doesn't sound completely convinced.

It's winter; in Scotland that means the dark creeps in during the afternoon. It's dusk and we are so remote, far from any urban life at all.

That does not include Hidden Folk. They are scattered all around, and they like to visit Gran's giant house.

Loch Ness is so different to anywhere I've ever been. While other lochs in Scotland are little blotches on the map, Loch Ness is a long and straight splinter. I expected it to look like a traditional lake, a wide body of water that lets you see the other side. Like the Forth in Edinburgh or Loch Morlich near Aviemore.

But Loch Ness is long and endless. Slender, but as deep as fresh water can be.

I haven't asked any of the Hidden Folk about the rumours Loch Ness is famous for. I'm a little afraid of what they might say.

I see some coming towards us, carrying a basket.

"What are they?" Gran asks carefully.

She can't see through their Glamour, their human disguises, like I can.

"Troll," I say nonchalantly. "One Blue Man. And a Hulder."

They reach the door and knock. This seems to be a regular occurrence at Gran's house, and it made me nervous at first. However, Opal says the house is protected by Old Magic. An ancient spell from an ancestor, making the house untraceable to anyone who

wishes its occupants harm.

That's the kind of spell I want to learn to cast.

I fling the door open and welcome the Hidden Folk into the foyer. They are friendly and warm and they drop their Glamour for Gran, but we're not who they are here to see.

"Is she about?" asks the Troll. "We've brought gifts for the Winter Solstice."

Gran directs them to the large table in the middle of the hall. It's more of a foyer than a hall – I like that her and Grandpa's house is like the one from Cluedo. Two doors on the right, leading to the kitchen and dining room. Two on the left for the living room and Grandpa's study.

It's dusty because Gran never lets anyone inside it.

There is a fireplace in the hall, and I try to start a small fire. I concentrate with ten times the might it takes me to bring water.

I don't understand why fire is so much harder for me.

"Opal is indisposed," Gran says curtly, inspecting the basket of goods these Hidden Folk have brought for the hearth. "Is there a problem?"

Her voice is flinty. She is someone who insists on the house always being warm, and the meals that she

prepares always piping hot, but there's a coolness about her at all times. She seems as cold as the water of the loch. Her white hair and pale eyes make me think of a snow queen.

"No problem," the Blue Man says cheerfully. He looks directly at me and his brow furrows. "Are you a little witch?"

I open my mouth to proudly claim so when Gran cuts across me. "No, she just has Sight. Only one witch in this house at present."

I glower at her, but say nothing. That was the condition of coming here to learn. My powers were to be kept a family secret.

As if we needed another.

"Well, it's not a problem," the Hulder says, and her voice is nervous. Nervous enough to make Gran look over at her with a sharpness; a look that demands the facts and none of the dressing. "Not a problem, per se."

"Speak."

Gran has no time for tiptoeing around a topic. She enjoys conversational sledgehammers.

"There's Fae in the area," the Troll says quietly.

The words are enough to freeze the entire house. The Blue Man and Hulder both wince at the blunt words. I can no longer feel the warmth coming in

from the kitchen.

Gran is as still as the water in the loch outside our front door. It's strange to see her so motionless. She's always busying herself with something. There's always something to check, something to test, something to manage. Now, she stands too still. Waiting.

The fire in the hearth suddenly crackles and flares, burning brightly and causing most of us to jump. The Hidden Folk stare behind my head, up at the staircase.

"Who has seen them?"

I turn to gaze up at Aunt Opal. She's wearing a long dressing gown and her hair is damp. She looks calm and collected, but her green eyes are fixed on the Troll. I know what it feels like to be on the other end of her intense gaze.

"You're here," the Hulder says breathlessly. "We heard rumours you came back—"

"Who has seen the Fae?" Opal cuts across the fawning with the direct question.

"By the loch," the Blue Man says. "I barter with some Hidden Folk there. One said she saw them."

"What would they be doing all the way up here?" I ask. I speak mostly because I want Opal to look at me, but she does not.

Faeries are dark creatures that cannot lie. I met too

many for my liking back in Edinburgh. Sinister and malevolent, I was hoping to never run into them again.

"They're looking for something," the Hulder says. The other two Hidden Folk throw her glances that seem to say 'keep quiet'. "Well, they are! And we all know what they want to find…"

"What?" I ask, hungrily.

The Hulder looks over at me and I can see my own curious expression reflected in her wide eyes.

"A monster!"

"That's enough," Gran says smartly. "Ramya? Ramya, where are you going?"

I move to the front door, ignoring Gran's curt calling of my name. I rush down the stoop towards the stones and trees and the water. The vast loch stretches out before me like a flowing road. It's as calm as my aunt, but water holds secrets better than anything. I glance around for Fae, knowing their Glamour will not conceal them from me.

I see nothing but the stillness of the water.

My cousin Marley once told me it is deeper than you can imagine. Deep as the sea.

"Ramya. Come inside this minute!"

"What do they want to find?" I call back over my shoulder, my eyes scouring the loch, searching for any

sign of the unknown. "Why would they come here? What monster?"

My feet are suddenly an inch off the ground. I yelp, wondering if one of the very creatures we were discussing has grabbed me. However, as I slowly float back towards the open front door of Gran's enormous house, I realise who is casting the spell.

Opal is leaning in the doorway, using only one hand to conduct her magic. Gran and the three Hidden Folk watch from the hall of the house, until Opal shuts the door with a pointed click so that the two of us are alone outdoors. I wriggle against invisible bindings, before she drops me unceremoniously on the steps in front of her. I glare up into her face and she looks coolly down into mine.

"Don't run off around these parts," she finally says, her voice soft and laced with a little menace.

I'm not entirely sure why I do it, but I turn and blast as much magic as I can muster. It becomes a little ball of light, rocketing towards the great loch and breaking like a small firework, high above the wide, murky surface.

I turn triumphantly back to Opal, frowning as I see that her face is blank of any reaction.

"Why not send up a red flare so they can really know

where we are?" she finally says.

I grimace. "You said this house is impossible for bad people to find."

"Let's not test that theory, shall we?"

"When do lessons start again?"

"Have you read the books I gave you?"

"No."

"Have you done your schoolwork?"

I grunt and flex my hands. "No."

"Then lessons are not back on."

"Why should any of that matter? Why do I need to do English homework in order to do witchcraft?"

"No one likes an uneducated witch."

"Says the witch who dropped out of school."

Her mildly amused expression darkens and she grabs my wrist, jerking me forward a step. "Exactly."

I should not have said it, but I get riled by her. I can see through Glamour; but not her. Her walls are rarely ever down.

"I want to try flying again."

I say the words with as much pleasantness and peace as I can manage. I'm trying to behave. I know I don't act the way they want me to all the time. so I need to show them I can be better. If they want me to earn the right to witchery, I'll do it. I'll show them.

"Not yet," she says. I'm about to argue but she shushes me, her eyes darting about. She moves down the stairs and onto the path. Out of the gate and along the bank of the loch. I listen, trying to pick up on whatever it is she can hear.

A car. A car driving speedily along the road towards the house. The road leading to Drumnadrochit. The road situated between the bank of the loch and the great slabs of land that are steep and tall.

"Tell the Hidden Folk to leave," Opal instructs me, her eyes never leaving the faint headlights that are presently far away but are only growing nearer. "Now."

I move to obey. As I reach the door, I look once more to the oak tree.

It has, at some point this evening, moved closer again.