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LILLY NOBLE

&

ACTUAL MAGIC

(excerpt)

BY

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CHAPTER ONE
OPERATION NEW GIRL

Lilly Noble shivered violently against the blustery chill, but underneath all the layers of clothing she wore, she also trembled with fear.

Was she being sent away to the strange new school as punishment, or because her father couldn't bear to look at her anymore? Since the accident, his abrupt mood swings and sudden naps whenever she walked into the room he occupied made her wonder if he blamed her for the car accident that took her mother's life.

About that particular day, Lilly could remember not a single detail. The lingering amnesia that the doctors had said was a side effect of the coma left her with an untrustworthy memory.

If there was a good thing to come out of leaving home, it was that Lilly would be far away from Morgann, her new stepmother. The woman's unblinking glare barely concealed a simmering hatred, and the rancid aroma of stinky feet seemed to cling to her like a nasty cloud.

With a brilliant flash, lightning ignited the gloom overhead. Thunder rumbled and echoed across the sodden gray skies like eerie voodoo drums.

The ferryboat chugged mightily forward, lurching across the heavy North Atlantic chop. A fog horn bellowed somewhere off in the distance. Its lighthouse remained a phantom, thanks to the drooping clouds obscuring everything, and bleeding all the light from the late summer afternoon.

Something inside the fleur-de-lis locket at her throat slithered and hissed. Lilly closed her fist over the pendant to block out the sound. She wanted to toss the thing into the sea, but it had belonged to her mother, and her father said its luck would keep her safe while she was far away from home. Lilly decided she could use all the luck she could get, even if it came in the form of a creepy locket.

The small crowd gathered on the ship's deck consisted mostly of kids her age and a handful of adults. Everyone, except the captain and crew, appeared to be cold, nervous, and traveling alone.

Some of the boys stamped their feet on the wooden planks and blew foggy breath into cupped hands. They avoided eye contact by staring straight ahead, or down at the deck. Most everyone seemed to be trying way too hard to look indifferent.

Lilly avoided eye contact, too, but she was desperately curious to take a peek. Unable to resist the urge, she casually removed her black onyx compact from her coat pocket and hid it

behind her hand to quietly study the reflections of the passengers around her.

A distracted boy with wavy black hair stood next to the railing and stared down into the sea. In the mirror's reflection, a small pair of horns protruded from his temples. Startled by the odd sight, she glanced over her shoulder at him. With her naked eyes, she saw no horns. When she studied his head in her compact again, the horns were there! The boy whirled around and glared at her back as if he knew she was spying on him.

She quickly snapped the compact closed and slipped it back into her coat pocket. Nervous that she'd been caught staring, she leaned forward and studied her boots as she ran her trembling fingertips over the pearl inlay fleur-de-lis on the compact's cover.

The small makeup case, a gift from her mother on her thirteenth birthday, was the only thing she owned that triggered a memory. When she pushed her mind to try to recall her mother's face, or her smile, Lilly's brain simply refused to cooperate. An unexpected wave of sadness rolled over her. She choked back a miserable sob and shivered against the damp wind.

Taking a deep breath, Lilly raised her head, blinked back her tears, and gazed out at the sea. No matter how much she hurt on the inside, she had to face reality. Her life would never be the same. She had to get control of herself. She refused to be the pathetic girl with amnesia and no mom. The

girl everyone pitied. If she was going to survive this new school, she'd have to let go of the sadness, be brave, and find a way to fit in.

Immediately, her mind began brewing a plan.

No one here knew her. Since she didn't remember who she used to be, she could become someone brand new. Anyone she wanted to be. The choice was hers. Lilly suddenly recognized she had the chance of a lifetime.

Right then and there, she decided the distraction of creating a new and improved version of herself would keep away the loneliness and get her through the next few days of being on her own. By this time next week, hopefully, she'd have enough homework, school activities, and new friends to occupy her mind and fill up the emptiness.

Maybe she had no reason to be scared about being away from home. Maybe she was letting sadness run away with her emotions. The idea of Operation New Girl gave her the boost of confidence she needed, and her outlook immediately changed for the better.

The heavy hum of the ferryboat's motors soothed the raw edges of her frayed nerves. A quiet whisper of hope dared her to imagine the possibilities of what new adventures lay ahead.

Waves lapped against the ship's hull as the boat heaved and rolled over the white-capped sea. The violent rocking of the ferry brought a sudden burst of excited chatter from its nervous passengers and made Lilly edgy and anxious.

Reaching one hand under the wooden bench, she patted her

duffel bag and backpack to reassure herself her belongings were still right where she'd put them hours ago. The two shabby pieces of luggage contained the few things Morgann had allowed her to take from home.

Flicking another quick glance around the deck, she secretly hoped she'd make a friend at this school soon. She had to. Her newly hatched plan counted on it.

Something large brushed against the ship's underbelly from stem to stern. She watched a slender undulating shadow make a long slow pass beneath the waves. What was that?

Some of the passengers exchanged worried looks and comments with their neighbors. Others turned their heads, curiously glancing around and then looking away, as if embarrassed because they were afraid.

Lilly remained cautious and alert, but continued to avoid direct eye contact with anyone.

Her wandering gaze came to rest once again on the boy she'd seen earlier in the mirror of her compact. He leaned against the railing and stared thoughtfully up at the churning clouds as he dropped something into the water below.

His face was chiseled and handsome.

Without warning, he turned.

His ice blue eyes stopped on hers.

Caught looking, she froze.

Fighting the urge to look away, she gave him a vague smile.

The brisk breeze stirred his hair up and away from his

face. Angrily raking at his bangs with his fingers, he hastily covered his forehead. He pursed his lips in disgust as if he'd bitten into a lemon, and then he glared at her.

She flinched. Embarrassed, she dropped her gaze.

Wow! What's his problem?

A tall, willowy girl with exotic features glided the length of the wooden bench in her direction. She hooked a thumb over her shoulder at the rude boy and grinned. "Do you two know each other?"

Lilly shook her head. "No." She felt she'd spoken the truth, but the fractures in her memory and his angry glare left her with a lingering doubt. "Not that I remember."

"Murosky is vermin. If you knew him, trust me, you'd remember him." The girl had long metal spikes holding her sleek black hair in a tightly coiled bun at the back of her head. The spikes made her appear even taller than she was. Feathers hung from her lobes, and the tips of her ears came to delicate points. She sat down and smiled. "Hi, I'm Zymura Chan."

"My name's Lilly Noble," she smiled back. "Do you know that boy?"

"Murosky Skaggs? Not personally." Her spikes sliced through the air as she shook her head. "He's in Major High School, I think."

Murosky Skaggs. The strange name didn't ring any bells. "What's the matter with him?" Lilly asked, wrinkling her nose, but she knew she was doing a poor job disguising her curiosity.

"It's hard to say for sure. Everybody stays out of his way though. He seems to enjoy putting people down in a weird, dark, mystical way, like he's throwing a curse. You know what I mean?"

Lilly nodded her head, but had no idea what Zymura meant. "Have you ever seen him curse anyone?"

"No, but I overheard a couple of girls talking about him in the dorm. I get the impression no one takes him too seriously." The girl waved a hand dismissively in the boy's direction.

"Hopefully he's harmless."

Lilly peeked at the boy from beneath her eyelashes. "He's standing over there all by himself."

"He's usually all by himself. I heard he has a girlfriend, but I haven't seen her yet."

"Are you in Major High School, too?" Lilly knew Minor High School students were first years at this school. Her classmates would all be new kids. Zymura seemed too well-informed to be in her grade.

"No, I'm a Minor, same as you."

"How do you know I'm a Minor?"

The girl leaned toward her and whispered. "I saw your name on the class roster. The list is posted on the bulletin board outside Headmaster Mondragon's office."

"How come you know so much?" Lilly asked, wondering if the girl had been held back a year.

Zymura shrugged. "My mom sent me here a week ago. I came

early to get the lay of the land and check out the competition as people arrived."

The air suddenly filled with the charmless stench of stinky feet. An odor that hadn't been in the air only a moment earlier now poured off Zymura, like it always poured off her stepmother. But why?

Lilly swallowed the urge to gag. "Ugh. Do you smell that?"

The girl quickly looked away as she sniffed at the air. "Smell what?"

Then, just as suddenly as the odor arrived, the wind tore it apart.

"That's strange. I don't smell it anymore." Besides her stepmother, she knew of no one else who gave off that sickening odor until now. She glanced down at the boots on the girl's feet and quickly decided they weren't the source.

Seeing the girl's embarrassment, Lilly changed the subject. "You said you're checking out the competition. Competition for what?"

The girl pulled her feet under the bench and glanced quickly over her shoulder, as she continued to avoid Lilly's gaze. "The Bonaventure-Mondragon Award. It's given out to whoever earns the most points for our trimester project. All of the Minors are expected to participate. It's like a big science experiment, only, you know, a whole lot better because of the magic," she said, adding a wink before looking away again. "My

mom won the competition when she was here.”

Lilly wondered vaguely what magic had to do with making a science experiment a whole lot better. She was also worried about all the things she'd learned in school before the accident and didn't remember any more. Though she knew she wasn't stupid, she couldn't figure out how she'd explain the gaps in her education to total strangers without looking like a moron. “The whole class is expected to participate?”

“It's mandatory. It's like half our grade.” Zymura twisted her hands in her lap.

“I'm not sure I have what it takes to be here.” Lilly didn't want her new teachers to make an exception for her because of her amnesia, but the added concern of an important class assignment on top of having to relearn everything was the last thing she needed to think about.

“Trust me; if you got into this school, you've got everything it takes to be here. And you've got everything it takes to win that award, too.” The girl's eyes flicked nervously from the passengers, to Lilly, and back.

“Zymura, I don't know how hard my classes will be.” The way her dad had talked, this school was supposed to make her into some kind of superhero. At the time, she thought he'd said all those encouraging things to spare her feelings because she was upset at being sent away from home. But, maybe there was more to this Bonaventure's Academy than she'd originally considered.

"Lilly, relax. We can do our homework and the trimester assignment together."

"Let me think about it. Okay?"

"The Bonaventure-Mondragon is a huge award. If I'm going to win it, I know I'll need your help," the girl insisted.

"My help?" Lilly grew increasingly uncomfortable at the thought of helping someone when she wasn't sure she could help herself.

"Your mother won the Bonaventure-Mondragon the year before my mom did. There are pictures of them accepting their winner's cups. They're on display in the awards case down the hall from the school's atrium."

"There's a picture of my mom here?" Lilly could scarcely believe her ears. Maybe this boarding school hadn't been such a random decision. If this was where her mother went to school, there would be other pictures here, too. Yearbook pictures! She'd have to dig to find them, but so what. Any photographs of her mother would definitely be worth the work of finding them, especially if they helped to jog her memory.

"Yeah. It was her photograph that helped me recognize you. You look just like her." Zymura sighed and seemed to relax.

People used to say she looked like her mom, but no one had mentioned it since the accident. "Thank you." For the first time since learning she was being sent away, Lilly could hardly wait for the ferry to dock on the island. She wanted to check out that trophy case and see the pictures of her mom when she

was her age.

"My mom said the only reason she won the Bonaventure-Mondragon was because your mom helped her. They were best friends. That's why I'm hoping you and I can be friends. We can help each other and we can practice together," Zymura said breathlessly.

"Practice what?"

"Spells, incantations, all the normal enchantments. You know actual magic."

Actual magic? What kind of school was she going to? Lilly stopped for a moment, took a deep breath, and paused to consider her choices. Zymura seemed to know a lot about the goings-on at this new school. Lilly was definitely at a disadvantage. Not only did she have amnesia, at this point, she also knew she was clueless. The classes here didn't sound at all like what she could remember was taught at the school back home. She decided her best strategy was to come clean. "Zymura, can you keep a secret?"

Zymura's eyes widened. She leaned toward Lilly and nodded. "I'm great at keeping secrets."

"I have a little problem with my memory, so I might be spending a lot of time relearning the stuff I used to know."

Sadness touched the corners of Zymura's eyes. "It's okay. I know about the accident. Your secret's safe with me."

A shock coursed through Lilly, causing her to gasp. "You know?" Who was this girl and how could she possibly know

anything about her?

"I do, and I'm really sorry about your mom."

"How do you know about my mom?"

"When I told you before that I'd been here for a week, getting the lay of the land and checking out the competition, I wasn't totally honest with you."

Lilly remembered the rank odor that had come from Zymura the last time she spoke those words. She braced herself for the odor's return, but only the briny aroma of the sea filled her senses.

"In fact, I lied."

"Why would you lie to me?"

"Lilly, my mom sent me here early because she'd heard about the car accident and she was worried about you. She didn't want you to be all alone here on your first day. Because she couldn't be certain of when you'd be coming, she sent me here three weeks ago. Not one week, three. I haven't lied about anything else though, I swear."

"Okay, I believe you," Lilly said slowly, wondering what made Zymura confess to her earlier lie. The amount of time she'd been here seemed like a strange thing not to be honest about. "So you've been here three weeks and not one, so what."

"Are you sure you believe me?"

Lilly watched Zymura's eyes studying her. "Yes. Are you okay?"

The girl nodded, "I'm fine. But, I want you to trust me."

"Okay, I trust you. Wow, that's some conscience you've got there."

"It isn't just that. My mom said your mother had the ability to know when someone was lying. She wasn't sure if you'd grown into that power yet or not."

Lilly thought about the smell of stinky feet around Morgann, and now Zymura. Were lies the thing that caused that odor?

Oh, gross!

"My mom told me your mother could smell a liar from thirty feet away," the girl said very quickly. "So, when you wrinkled your nose and asked if I smelled anything, I was sure you'd caught me in the lie."

Lilly shrugged. That explained why Zymura had been so nervous. "I didn't know you lied." Was this the reason Morgann always reeked of feet? She'd been lying to her? If Lilly had that power and no one else did, that would explain why she could smell Morgann's lies and her father couldn't.

Wait a minute!

If she had that power and no one else did? What was she thinking? If she had that power, any power, and no one else did, what did that mean? What did that say about her? She didn't want to think about things she didn't fully understand. It made her nervous. She stifled a worried giggle and abruptly changed the subject. "Why would your mother want you to look out for a total stranger?"

"Like I said, your mom and my mom were best friends when they were kids. They stayed in touch after they graduated from Bonaventure's Academy and the University of Dark Magic."

Lilly glanced at the kids around them, to see if anyone was listening. They weren't. She returned her attention to Zymura. "Does anyone else know about the accident?"

The girl shook her head. "I doubt it."

"Have you and I ever met before today?"

"No, never. I've seen lots of pictures of you when you were growing up, but our moms kept in touch mostly by crystal ball and e-mail."

Crystal ball? Lilly studied Zymura with cautious curiosity, uncertain of what to say next.

Zymura spoke first. "I'll make you a deal. I'll help you with your homework, if you'll help me with my spell work."

"If I knew anything about spells before, I don't remember, but I'll do the best I can. Maybe working with you will help my memory."

"And we can work on the Bonaventure-Mondragon Project as a team?"

"Okay, I have no idea how this is going to work, but I'm in."

"And when we win, we'll share the trophy and split the prize money fifty-fifty."

"There's prize money?"

"Ten thousand dollars." Zymura hesitated, and then

extended her right hand to shake Lilly's. "Do we have a deal?"

Lilly grabbed her hand and gave it a firm shake.

"Absolutely." Five thousand dollars was a lot of money. The thirty-seven dollars and one cent in the front pocket of her backpack was all the money she had in the world right now. Morgann had firmly refused to give her a single penny more. "We have a deal."

Lilly decided to test her theory connecting the smell of sweaty feet to someone telling her a lie. "Zymura, do me a favor?"

"What?"

"I want you to lie to me."

The girl hesitated. "Uh. Okay, why?"

"I want to know if I have the power to detect a lie," she said nervously, almost giggling again. "The only way I can think to test myself is to know that what you're saying to me isn't true before you tell me."

"Oh, I get it. Good idea. Okay. Let me think," she paused, gazing upward for a moment. "I really hate this school," Zymura said, twisting her face in disgust for dramatic effect.

The air immediately saturated with the sickening stench of stinky feet.

Lilly held her breath and controlled the urge to gag against the smell.

"Well? Anything?" Zymura asked, looking at her curiously.

"Yeah, you really stink."

"Thanks," the girl said with a grin.

The salt sea air rushed in, replacing the stench.

Lilly breathed a sigh of relief. She was satisfied that she'd proven her theory correct. She did, indeed, possess the power to detect a lie. Then as an urgent afterthought, she added, "We've got to keep this a secret though."

Zymura quickly nodded her understanding. "Right! What good is the ability to detect a lie if everyone knows about it?"

A rotating beam of light sliced through the thick mist. The foghorn's echoing blast made Lilly jump and left her ears ringing. At last, they were nearing land. The long trip to the island would soon be over.

Heavy surf smashed against the ferry's hull, rocking the boat. Out of the corner of her eye, Lilly saw a fluked tail slap the water's surface. The strange flipper sparkled like emeralds despite the fog. She turned in time to see the tail disappear beneath the waves.

Lilly sifted through her mind for things she knew about fish. She couldn't recall a single species of ocean-dwelling creature with skin that twinkled in the gloom.

At the front of the ship, a distant fog-blurred smudge of gray grew massive and darkened. A tall, black chunk of rock jutted out of the Atlantic Ocean's choppy waves. At last, the island. As the ferry drew closer, she made out the silhouette of impressive stone structures crowning the cliffs.

Bonaventure's Academy, with its huge blue and gold domes capping cobbled walls of mortar and stone, looked like a medieval fairy tale castle. She caught her breath and swallowed hard. "The school is beautiful. What's it like on the inside?"

"I don't want to spoil the surprise. Just wait, you'll see. But, you're going to love it."

The bluff dropped off into a sheltered cove with a rocky breakwater and a generous swath of jade-colored sand. A sun-bleached wooden pier stretched from a boardwalk of businesses at the dunes' edge, out into the deep water. Thin strands of jellyfish, clam shells, driftwood, and seaweed cluttered the tide line. A tornado of big black birds cartwheeled and cawed in the swirling mist.

Zymura gestured to the rapidly approaching chunk of land. "Welcome to Bonaventure's Academy of Magic."

Lilly nodded. "Those birds, are they vultures?"

"They're ravens."

"Oh, right. Raven's Landing Island, I get it. What are they circling over?" Shivering, Lilly tugged her coat tight around her shoulders and yanked the zipper up to her neck.

"I have no idea, but now that I think about it, they always seem to be in the same place."

"They're kind of creepy." Searching her pockets, she found her mittens and pulled them on over her hands.

"Yeah, well, they're ravens. What can I say?"

The others on the boat were taking in their new

surroundings, too. Some were anxious, just like she'd felt earlier. But now, with Zymura by her side, Lilly was relaxed and happy. Her anxiety had dissipated. She no longer felt alone. Or lonely.

As the boat neared the breakwater, Lilly sensed someone's stare. She glanced up.

The handsome boy with the wavy black hair and ice blue eyes grinned at her and winked.

Oh great. First a snub, and now a smile? Did he think she was crazy, or better yet, desperate?

"Stop looking at me like that," she whispered under her breath.

As if in response to her words, his eyes widened for a split second, and a nervous smile twitched the edges of his broad lips. He acted surprised, but she knew he was too far away to hear her whisper.

Was that even possible, or had she just imagined his reaction?

She felt silly, but she decided to see if she could get him to respond again. "Don't stare at me," she whispered harshly. Then, she leveled an even gaze at him and waited.

He pressed his lips together in a defiant line and studied her face for a long moment. Then, he looked away, as if confused and deliberating.

The boat's hard rocking made Lilly's stomach roll.

The boy turned back and dazzled her with a brilliant smile.

His lips moved.

"You're kind of cute, and very bossy," a hoarse, deep whisper floated into her ear.

Lilly flinched. She heard his words clearly, as if he'd been standing right next to her. How was that possible? Then she remembered his words and instantly became annoyed with him. "Do you honestly think you have a shot with me?"

The boat's lurching made her seasick. The strangeness of the conversation didn't help.

"You were interested a few minutes ago," came his retort.

"I was curious a few minutes ago. Now, I've changed my mind. I'm not curious anymore."

"Okay, but kiss me anyway."

"Get over yourself!"

"You turned out to be a lot cuter than I thought you'd be." With his eyelids at half-mast, his seductive expression was unconvincing. In fact, he looked about to doze off.

She caught the meaning of his words, and instantly grew wary. Apparently, Zymura was not the only one on the island who knew she'd be here. "'Than you'd thought I'd be'? How could you possibly know anything about me?"

He gaped at her and then clumsily covered his surprise with a grin. "Don't you like me?"

The boat swayed.

Lilly clutched her stomach. "No, and I think I'm going to throw up."

"Sure, you say that now, but I'll get you to change your mind." The smug grin on the boy's face betrayed his belief that he'd successfully covered the tracks of his error.

"What are you doing?" Zymura interrupted, breaking the spell.

Lilly looked at the boy from underneath her eyelashes. Not a good place to hide, but she couldn't seem to pull her gaze away from his. "I'm not sure."

Zymura stepped in front of Lilly, deliberately blocking her view of the boy standing by the railing. "Don't be nice to him."

"What?"

"From all the gossip, I suspect Skaggs is one of those mystics who drains the power and energy from people by getting them to doubt themselves."

Lilly glanced over at the boy, and then returned her gaze to Zymura. "How do you know that?"

"He tried pretty much the same routine on me a couple of days ago."

The boat suddenly jerked to one side.

A sharp, ominous scrape ground its way along the hollow pontoons beneath Lilly's feet.

That didn't sound good!

At the helm, she saw the captain turn around and stare in the direction of the sound. Confusion, then surprise flashed across his rugged features. His knuckles tightened convulsively

on the wheel.

Uh, oh. The boat's in trouble.

The captain grimaced and faced forward. His was a commanding presence that made Lilly feel safe. The muscles in his arms bulged as he strained to crank the ferry's wheel hard right. He reached across the control console and punched a big red button.

An eardrum splintering claxon split the air.

Then a harsh grinding sound came from the front end. The ship smashed into the pier and jolted to a full stop. The far end of the landing collapsed with a splintering crash and splashed into the sea.

"Captain! The dock," boomed a voice from somewhere behind her.

The captain turned, and with a purposeful wave of his hand, the damaged pier creaked as it popped to the surface and instantly repaired itself. "Thanks, Farney!"

Doubting what she'd just witnessed, Lilly did a double-take as she was pitched backward and landed on her bottom between a pair of benches. Kids went sprawling across the deck. Glancing around her, Zymura was nowhere to be seen.

The boat reared up, tilted wildly to the starboard side, and then swung around.

Lilly's unexpected happy day now took a sudden and horrific turn for the worse.

The tangy aroma of salt air rose in her nostrils as an icy

spray from the sea hit her in the face. She clung to the bench. Her duffel bag and backpack slid across the deck, along with everyone else's luggage, and splashed overboard.

Screaming teenagers scurried with uneven, skidding steps to the side of the ferry closest to the pier, and then they jumped. A few landed safely on the wooden dock. Others splashed down into the chilly waters below.

Heads bobbed on the surface as those in the sea frantically swam for the shore. Jellyfish spun and whirled on the churning waves and closed the distance to the swimmers.

Lilly saw the shimmering fluked tail rise out of the water, and then with a quick flick and a hard slap, it again slipped beneath the waves.

The foamy sea curled, dragging people to the beach as the boat again slammed into the rickety wooden pier. This time the structure held together.

A hand locked onto her wrist and yanked Lilly to her feet.

"Come on! We've got to get off this ferry before it sinks." Zymura dragged her across the slippery deck. Snatching a life preserver from its hook, she looped it over her shoulder like a purse, and led Lilly to the gated opening in the railing.

Waves crested over the bow.

Beneath her feet, the deck shifted again. The ferry was being sucked away from the rocky shore, and out toward the open sea.

Dark, ominous waters rushed across the deck and swirled

around her feet. The boat was sinking.

Zymura held on to the railing with one hand and clung to Lilly with the other. Teetering at the deck's edge, she studied the ocean. "We have to jump." She glanced over her shoulder at Lilly. "Get ready!"

Jump? "No way!" Lilly gawked at her friend, dumbfounded, and quickly looked away to keep Zymura from seeing the fear in her eyes. Tremors of terror surged through her body.

Icy waves lapped up Lilly's ankles to her knees. "Zymura!" She wrenched her wrist free of the girl's tight grip. "I'm not going to jump."

The girl made a frantic grab for Lilly's hand and missed. "If you don't, you're going to drown when the boat goes down!"

Lilly watched in horror as the gap between the ship and the shore widened. "I don't remember how to swim. Go, Zymura! I'll find another way."

Waves smacked into the bow, threatening to capsize the listing boat.

"No, you won't." Again, Zymura reached for Lilly and missed. "I'm a good swimmer. Come on, let's go. I'll make sure we both get to the beach."

A bolt of lightning lanced across the sky. Thunder roared overhead. The clouds cracked open and icy, wind-whipped rain hammered down upon them.

Lilly felt someone shove her violently from behind. She turned to find no one there. Did someone just push her, or had

she only imagined it? Then, without warning, a howling tempest lifted her off the deck. As she soared through the air, she thought she heard the clanging of bells. Then, she was blown into the sea.

"Lilly!" she heard Zymura yell after her.

Frigid waters closed over her head, cutting off her screams and filling her mouth with a briny stew.

Fighting the urge to take a deep breath, Lilly kicked hard and tried to make her way to the surface. Instead, she sank. Her water-logged winter coat and the fleur-de-lis locket around her neck suddenly grew very heavy and threatened to drag her to the ocean's bottom. If she could take them off, maybe she'd be able to swim. That was a great big maybe.

Feeling for the zipper tab of her coat, she realized her mittens made that impossible. She slipped her hands free of the saturated woolen gloves and let the current take them. Her fingers though, already numb from the icy water, refused to cooperate with the zipper.

Lilly realized she was about to die.

From below her, slimy tentacles slithered up around her legs and her body, and tightened like a noose around her throat. A bulb-shaped head, with a dull, black eye the size of a trash can lid bobbed into view.

Refusing to meet the unblinking stare of the creature that was probably going to kill her, Lilly squeezed her eyes shut.

She felt a sharp, pinching sting on the side of her neck.

Pain shot up to her ear and exploded in her brain. Stars popped into her shuttered vision. Her body grew tingly and weak, then limp.

She felt herself being dragged down, deeper and deeper. The water grew colder still. Was the creature taking her to the ocean floor to eat her?

Another arm, this one with a hand and fingers, and a vise-like grip, locked around her waist and held on tight. A second hand pulled her free of the tentacles.

A moment later, she broke the water's surface, soared through the air, and landed on the jade-green sand with a slippery, wet smack.

She spat out a mouthful of salt water, drew in a breath, and promptly threw up.

A pair of pale ice blue eyes, surrounded by a dripping fringe of wavy, jet black hair, studied her with a startling intensity.

She felt as if she was being examined for more than just signs of life.

A large hand firmly pumped her breast bone. Water bubbled up from her lungs and poured over her lips.

"Come on, breathe," a baritone voice urged from between the boy's clenched teeth. It was the same deep voice she'd heard whisper into her ear earlier. The strange curiosity in his eyes made her heart pound and her breath quicken.

Coughing and sputtering, Lilly struggled against his hand

to sit up. "Knock it off! Can't you see I'm breathing?"

She caught herself staring back at him with the same intensity. Embarrassed, she dropped her gaze. "Stop looking at me like that." Then defiant, she glared at him and tried to stare him down.

"It's your eyes," he said with an amazed expression on his face.

"What's wrong with them?" she stammered, confused. Fear made her unable to catch her breath.

"They're the color of shamrocks," he said quietly. He was close enough she could feel his breath on her cheek.

Lilly felt herself flush. "You're staring at me because my eyes are green?" she moaned. Realizing she was okay, she relaxed.

"Yeah, I guess I am," he whispered.

The surf crashed hard against the sand.

"Isn't it too soon for the waves to be coming up this far on the beach?" a male voice shouted. He sounded concerned.

The boy with the ice blue eyes glanced quickly over his shoulder. "Looks like a high tide."

"The moon isn't full!" the concerned voice argued.

"Aptos, forget about the moon and help me with Lilly."

How did this boy with blue eyes know her name?

"I'm not going to help you with her. Anyone who falls off a boat is a dimwit."

"Then go get Ren!" the blue-eyed boy insisted through

gritted teeth. "I can't get her to the infirmary by myself!"

Without warning, the loud music of bells filled her ears, making her brain hurt and her head swim.

Overcome by a shock wave of sudden dizziness, Lilly's world faded to black.

#

Squeaking rubber soles from someone walking nearby forced Lilly to open her eyes. She tried to sit up, but a firm hand pressed her gently back. She felt herself sink into a soft, squashy pillow.

"You're in the infirmary." The handsome boy from the ferryboat moved into view from the edge of her awareness.

"Is she awake?" A woman with a sleek red ponytail that swished when she walked made her way to Lilly's bedside. Her name badge read Nurse Mercy Cheshire.

The woman moved aside the pile of blankets burying Lilly and pressed the bell of a chilly stethoscope to her chest. "Take a deep breath, child," she said with a faint lilting accent.

The nurse's slitted pupils and canary yellow eyes caused Lilly to stare. So as not to be rude, she reflexively dropped her gaze, continued doing as she was told, and inhaled deeply. A searing pain burned deep in her chest. She held her breath and moaned. An uncontrollable spasm building in her throat

erupted into a choking, airless fit of coughing.

Again, she struggled to sit up.

This time, the boy slipped his cool hand under her sweaty armpit and abruptly cleared his throat. "Better do as she says," he warned.

"Or, what?" she gasped between coughs.

He shrugged and grinned, then wiggled his fingers against her bare skin.

Lilly felt an unexpected shock of nerves. She became aware that all she had on was a hospital gown that was wide open in the back. Surprised and mortified at her nakedness, but too air starved to wrench herself free, she had to surrender to his helping hand as another smothering spasm set in. A helpless feeling of dizziness rolled over her.

"Here, let me help you." The nurse gently laid her warm hands against Lilly's naked back.

For a moment, every inch of her skin was covered with a tingling sensation, like being wickedly stung by millions of bees. The searing pain in her chest instantly vanished. She drew a deep breath into her lungs and sighed with relief.

"There now, is that better?" the nurse asked, watching her carefully.

Lilly nodded weakly, and then groaned with embarrassment as the boy plumped up a big pillow on the bed next to her and shoved it roughly behind her naked back. Her hand automatically went up to lift her hair and brushed against a bandage taped to

the side of her neck. Abruptly, the memory of being stung by the creature in the sea came back to her. Thinking about the crush of its slimy tentacles caused her to shudder.

Nurse Cheshire took a pen from her pocket, plucked a clipboard from the end of her bed, and made a series of long scribbling scratches across the page.

A jagged shadow edging toward the foot of her bed grew tall and took on a human shape. A moment later, the ferryboat captain stepped up to her bedside.

Were her eyes playing tricks on her? Had the captain been quietly standing in the room the entire time without her noticing him? Lilly didn't think that was possible. She was usually pretty observant of her surroundings, but her amnesia had a strange way of making her doubt herself. Now, she wasn't so sure of what she'd seen. Maybe the nurse had given her something to make her sleep that interfered with her perception.

At the helm of the ferryboat, the captain had appeared majestic. Up close, he was a broad-shouldered man, with a deep tan and a thick tussle of unruly brown hair going gray at the temples. The expression in his toffee-colored eyes revealed someone who seemed to carry the weight of the world on those broad shoulders.

"How's our new girl?" The seafaring captain's gruff voice and the off-handed way he asked the question did nothing to disguise the concern in his eyes.

"She'll be fine no thanks to you," Nurse Cheshire snapped.

She looked the captain up and down, then scowled and shook her head. "Merlin Hopewell, you need to learn how to dock that ship of yours in the harbor along with everyone else before you lose another boat, or worse, you lose a student."

Captain Hopewell's eyes bulged and his face flushed purple. His glance traveled from Lilly to the nurse. "I'll pull up to the pier as long as Mondragon keeps that pet of his in the waters near the main docking bay," he said from between clenched teeth.

"You mean, what's left of that pier, don't you, Merlin?"

"I fixed it!"

The nurse raised an eyebrow. "I thought your powers controlled the weather and the seas. They haven't been working very well for you lately, have they?"

"Look here, Mercy! The waters around the island are getting harder to tame. And the weather was uncooperative."

"Maybe your age is causing you to lose your touch or your nerve. Perhaps it's time you retired," Nurse Cheshire said snidely.

Captain Hopewell held very still and studied the nurse with a measured gaze. "I'm not too old! There's something very wrong with the sea. It's affecting the currents and the tides, and the weather."

"Really, Merlin? You're blaming the sea and the weather for your accident?" the nurse persisted.

"No! Didn't you hear what I just said?"

"What, Merlin? What did you just say?"

"I said there's something wrong with the ocean."

Lilly heard the barely harnessed anger in Captain Hopewell's voice increasing with each word.

"What do you think is wrong?" Nurse Cheshire said dismissively.

From the edge of her vision, Lilly saw something small and nearly invisible slink into the infirmary from the corridor.

Straightening herself higher in the bed to get a better look, Lilly saw a pale gray cat standing stiffly in the corner staring back at her.

"I don't know what it is, but I can feel it. Can't you feel it?" the captain dropped his voice. There was a look of fear in his eyes. "And it's getting stronger."

The handsome boy cleared his throat, interrupting the escalating argument. "How long does Miss Noble have to stay in bed?"

Miss Noble! He knew her last name too? What else had he found out about her after she fainted?

The grownups fell silent but continued to glare at each other.

The boy's bored expression betrayed a hint of impatience that he quickly covered with a smile when he realized Lilly was watching him.

Her heart skipped a beat. Who was this boy? Why would he concern himself with what happened to her? And what did he mean

when he told her she turned out to be a lot cuter than he thought she'd be? Sooner or later, she'd get an answer to that question.

Bending over her, the boy straightened her covers. That's when she noticed two small oval lumps protruding from beneath the boy's hairline on either side of his forehead. "Are you hurt?"

"What?" He lifted his head and gazed at her.

Instinctively, she raised her hand to touch his forehead. "Those bumps on your head. Did you get those when you helped me?"

He took a quick step out of her reach, roughly finger combing his hair over his forehead to cover the lumps. For a moment, alarm flickered in his eyes, and then vanished. "Uh, no. Those are just birthmarks," he countered too fast.

"Oh." If those were birthmarks, why did he hide them? He seemed more afraid than self-conscious.

Nurse Cheshire abruptly cleared her throat. "I'm keeping Miss Noble in the infirmary overnight. She should be well enough to attend the student assembly tomorrow, but we'll have to wait and see." She glanced at the rotating hourglass above the bed.

"You have fifteen minutes until curfew, Mr. Skaggs." She inclined her head to the door in a firm and not-so-subtle gesture indicating it was time for him to leave. "Miss Noble needs her rest and she can't do that with you hovering. Better

check into your dormitory before the house father on duty discovers you're missing again."

His face reddened. "Of course, you're right," he mumbled. The boy jumped to his feet, jostling both the bed and Lilly. "I had no idea it was so late."

"No one forced you to stay, Mr. Skaggs," the nurse snapped.

The boy bolted for the door, but stopped abruptly and turned, looking back at Lilly with a practiced smile. His lips moved, but no words came out. In her ear, she heard, "I am so handsome I intoxicate you."

She twitched. "Get over yourself. You're pathetic!" she hissed quietly back at him.

"Who's pathetic? You're the one who almost drowned because you can't swim."

"You're the one visiting a sick room and staring at a complete stranger."

"I wanted to make sure you were okay," he whispered gruffly.

The sickening aroma of sour feet rose in her nostrils, and then quickly intensified to the wretched stench of rotten eggs.

Lilly struggled against the urge to gag. Her eyes watered. The inside of her nose burned. She wondered why he was lying to her, and what part of 'I wanted to make sure you were okay' was the lie.

The boy stood in the doorway, stock still and staring at her. "Are you okay? You're as white as that sheet."

"Mr. Skaggs," Nurse Cheshire warned. "You were told to leave. Now, go!" She then turned on the captain, "You too, Merlin. This girl needs her rest."

"Feel better, Lilly Noble. I'll see you again, and soon," Murosky whispered.

He was through the door and gone before his last words reached her ears.

#

Lilly watched the nurse bustle about the infirmary, filling lidded clay cauldrons with cotton balls, Q-tips, gauze bandages, slippery green worms, and rolls of white tape.

Nurse Cheshire straightened her back and gave Lilly a small smile. "Are you having trouble falling asleep? I can help you with that."

Feeling like every move she made was being carefully monitored; Lilly self-consciously tucked the bed sheet up under her chin. "I'm fine, I guess." But she was too exhausted and achy from her dunk in the ocean to be certain of how she felt. "Will you be turning the lights out soon? My head hurts."

From across the room, Miss Cheshire's spooky yellow eyes studied Lilly's with close scrutiny. "How long have you had that headache?"

"Oh, it's not new. I've had it off and on for a couple of months now."

"Since you woke up in the hospital?"

Lilly tried not to show her surprise. "Um, yes." How did the nurse know about her stay in the hospital?

Concern lined the woman's forehead. "How bad does it get?"

"Pretty bad sometimes."

Nurse Cheshire raised an eyebrow. "I'll take care of that headache for you." With that proclamation, she squeaked across the room and lightly placed her fingertips on Lilly's temples for only a moment.

In a flash, the blinding pain in her head raged, faded, and then vanished.

The nurse dropped her hands to her sides and stepped back. "Better?" She studied Lilly with the intensity of a mother hawk tending to her baby chick.

Lilly guardedly turned her head from side to side, testing for any signs of lingering pain. To her amazement and relief, the headache was completely gone. "Yes. I'm feeling much better. Thank you. How did you do that?"

The nurse looked at her hands and then at Lilly. "I don't have a clue. All I know is when I touch someone who is sick, they feel better." With a shrug, she added, "It's one of my gifts." She tucked the blankets in around Lilly and grinned. "By morning, you'll feel like your old self again."

Nurse Mercy Cheshire snapped her fingers and the infirmary lights winked out one at a time. Close to the floor, low wattage night lamps blinked on in a chain reaction.

The nurse then returned her attention to filling the rest of the empty cauldrons with fresh, familiar medical supplies and a variety of strange worms.

Questions about the handsome boy nagged at Lilly, begging for answers. Fearing word of her interest would get back to him, she quietly sized up Nurse Cheshire. Could she trust this woman not to gossip?

Curiosity won out over the possible pain of any future humiliation. "Who is that annoying boy?"

In the corner, the gray cat's ears swiveled as if listening intently to every word.

Lilly immediately regretted her bold question the moment it left her lips. To cover her curiosity, she quickly added, "Boys are so stupid." Though she'd used a tone of disgust, the nurse's grin told Lilly the woman recognized her question for what it really was.

Interest.

Nurse Cheshire gently set her box of assorted infirmary supplies down on the exam table and crinkled her nose. "He really is annoying, isn't he?" Her rubber soles squeaked as she walked to Lilly's bedside. She dragged a straight back metal chair with her as she went.

Glancing quickly over her shoulder, she looked at the partially closed door to the hallway and then returned her attention to Lilly. Keeping her voice barely above a whisper, Nurse Cheshire eased into the chair and leaned forward, closing

the distance between them. "You'll want to stay away from Murosky Skaggs, Miss Noble."

A shiver of curiosity, or maybe fear, traveled from the base of Lilly's spine to the top of her head. "But he saved my life."

"Yes, he did." The nurse's expression was solemn and her tone firm. "But Mr. Skaggs is a bully and a braggart. Trust me, by noon tomorrow, the entire island will have heard of the brave way he stared down death to save you. Depending on how he decides to spin the tale, you'll either be the helpless damsel-in-distress or the dumb girl who fell into the water. He will, of course, make himself out to be the rescuing hero."

"Of course." She'd been blown into the water by a strong gust of wind, but she hadn't fallen. Of that, she was quite certain. "Do you think he will talk less if I'm nice to him?"

"Not at all. In fact, Mr. Skaggs will probably gossip more if you're nice to him, and his story will grow bigger with each telling."

"Oh, I didn't think about that." Lilly's stomach churned at the prospect of being the topic of conversation, but there was nothing she could do to stop it now. She'd just have to lie low, ride it out, and hope no one noticed her. "Is there anything I can do about this?"

"Keep your eye on him, but don't let him know you're watching."

"That's it?"

"Yes, but don't worry. Once school's in session, the talk will die down soon enough. You'll be this week's news, but next week will be someone else's turn." Nurse Cheshire's voice felt quietly reassuring. "Miss Noble, your problem with Mr. Skaggs won't be his gossiping about you."

"It won't?"

"The problem is, when you fell off the boat, you caught Murosky's eye. You made him curious. That's not a good thing to do where that boy is concerned." The nurse shook her head slowly from side to side. "Not a good thing to do at all."

In the corner, the pale gray cat stuck its tail into the air, sniffed sharply, turned its back on Lilly, and strutted from the room.

"Boys are really stupid." Lilly scowled to hide her embarrassment and concern the attention her nearly drowning in the harbor would draw to her in the days ahead.

Nurse Cheshire glanced into the quiet shadows of the dark infirmary with her quick yellow eyes. "You're right. Some boys are really stupid, Miss Noble. But some boys who act stupid can be really dangerous. It's those dangerous ones you can't afford to ignore. And Murosky Skaggs is one of those boys."