

Chapter 1

Visitor after Dark

How far that little candle throws its beams! So shines a good deed in a naughty world.

-Shakespeare, *Merchant of Venice*

Kelly drew her knees up to her chest, hugging them tightly as her bedroom blurred through her tears. Hot wet splashes on her kneecaps were the final resting place of her pain. Her eyes focused blearily for a moment on the mirror/stand on the side of her bed. She felt a stir of shock at the strange little girl that inhabited it. Her long raven hair was lank and hung in clumps; her face was pale and gaunt, while dark circles rested underneath the girl's eyes. Her twisted expression of despair and agony was awful.

Who is that girl, and how did she get to be in the mirror? That surely can't be me; I don't even recognize myself anymore. Kelly stared at her reflection in fascination.

Soft murmurs outside her door pulled her attention away from her reflection. Pricking her ears, she tried to overhear what was being said. The voices sounded familiar but...oh! It was Mom and Dad, she realized. Her parents were talking quietly outside her door with someone, probably one of the officers. She tried to make out what was being said without moving.

"...I'm sorry sir. We haven't found anything yet."

"...Please, tell me what to do, I can't just do *nothing*."

"There's nothing you can really do ma'am. We have people already..."

"This is my *daughter* we're talking about. I'm not going to just sit..."

"Please, we're..."

"...you listen, I'm..."

"...you listen..."

"...I..."

"...we..."

"Ma'am, Sir." The officer's voice came slightly louder and infinitely clearer. Kelly could tell that he was irritated. "I understand your fears and concerns. Believe me when I say we share them. But having you out on the streets is liable to make things much worse. If the kidnappers call here, you need to keep them talking long enough for a trace, something you can't do if you're out of the house. We'll find her, I promise. You need to stay here with your youngest, and let us do our jobs."

"Not so loud." Her mother hissed. "You'll wake Kelly!"

"Sorry." The officer lowered his voice. Creaks and soft pops told her that they were walking back down the hallway towards the front door.

Kelly stopped listening. *They haven't found Cass yet*, her heart felt slightly. What was she going to do? She couldn't help, she'd tried. Her parents refused to let her out of the house to help look; she couldn't even go to school anymore in case someone tried to snatch her there. She'd called her friends and they told her patrol cars were practically camped outside during recesses, lunch, and in the mornings and evenings as kids got on and off the school buses.

Kelly wondered how it had gone so terribly wrong. It'd been so *fast*. One moment she had been making posters for Halloween, and the next her entire world had turned upside down. Kelly closed her eyes and let the memory surface;

Kelly smiled happily as she held up her completed witch to Shelly. She'd taken great care to get the nose the proper shade of green, with one great wart on the very tip.

"Hey Shell, what do you think?" Kelly suppressed small giggle of excitement.

"Neat!" Shelly grinned excitedly as she held up her effort. Kelly frowned as she tried to figure out what it was. It had a back half of a cat, but an eagle's head and wings. She could tell that Shelly was waiting for a better response, but Kelly couldn't give her one.

"I've never seen anything like it." Kelly enthused. Shelly flushed.

"Really?" she asked shyly.

"Yeah. What kind of animal is that?"

"It's a Griffon!"

Kelly frowned. "What's a Griffon?" she started to ask, but she was interrupted by the sound of the classroom door opening. She turned to look with everyone else and stared. Two police officers were standing in the doorway with Principle Newlon, all three looking uncharacteristically grim.

"Ms. Kelly Grifson," Principle Newlon's normally gruff voice was gentle as he looked right at her. "I need you to come with me please. Collect your things, quickly."

Kelly shrank back, heart pounding. What was happening? She racked her brains, trying to figure what she could possibly have done to warrant such attention, but nothing came to mind.

"Wha-what'd I do, Principle Newlon?" she whimpered.

He hesitated, then shook his massive, nearly bald head. "It's not what you've done, Ms. Grifson. It's about your sister. Your parents are waiting at home for you now. Please hurry."

Kelly was not reassured. If something had happened...she lunged across the table and swept all of her things into her bookbag without bothering to check and see if everything was safe to do so. Zipping it quickly, she ran for her coat, the cops falling in on either side of her as they walked quickly to the door. The last thing Kelly saw before the door closed was the wide-eyed faces of her friends, and Shelly's scared look before the smoked glass of the door made her vanish from view

The cops had placed her in their cruiser and raced her home, the sirens wailing as they sped through lights and around slower vehicles pulling off to the side of the road. They had kept moving their heads side to side, as if looking for danger. Their concern had made Kelly even more frightened and nervous, and they drove in tense silence to her house. When she had learned of her sister's abduction, Kelly had run to her room, refusing to believe it was true. After frantic searching, she was forced to conclude that her parents were right. Cassie was gone.

Kelly had immediately asked to go search for her, almost making a break for it when she saw they weren't going to let her go. Her father held on to tightly though, and her mother's voice heavy with tears, telling her to stay made her stop. So she waited in her room for any news, any at all, about what had happened. That was three days ago and no one had found a trace of her yet.

Kelly groaned as she flopped backwards onto the bed. *It's not fair. I want to help search, but because I'm only eight they won't let me go! I bet I could find her.* She thought angrily. *I really could!* An idea popped into her head for the hundredth time, and she rejected it again. She would *not* sneak out. Not because she didn't think she couldn't find her, but because it would destroy mom and dad. They were already on edge as it was. She couldn't imagine what they would do if she left. And, she admitted bitterly to herself, she didn't know where to start looking either.

Kelly stared at the ceiling and wondered if her sister was even now looking up at the sky wherever she was and thinking about her. It was an interesting thought, one that was strangely comforting, and Kelly felt her eyelashes close ever so slowly as the night stole her away.

She was chained in a circle of light, her arms stretched cruelly over her head as in the shadows she heard manic laughter circling, coming ever closer. Her breath caught in her throat, her heart thudded painfully in her chest. Frantically, she tugged and pulled on the cold manacles that seemed to pull the warmth straight from her flesh.

The sound of footsteps approaching halted her efforts to escape. She eyed the circle of darkness, straining to see something. There! A small patch of blackness, darker than the surround, shifted slightly. Was it a person? A man? Or was it something else?

“DESMORDET FAYEN TOLKRAT!” A voice roared in the darkness.

Kelly screamed as light blinded her and there was a burning sensation in her back as if someone had tossed itching powder between her shoulders. There was a soft rapping in the background, like someone pounding on a window far away. A great wind developed Kelly and carried her screaming away.

Kelly jolted upright, blowing hard as if she had run half a mile. Memory of the dream crashed down on her, and she grasped the sheets with a sob. Her shoulders shook for minutes that dragged on until she had no more tears left. Drying her eyes on a section of her sheet, she realized she was hearing a soft tapping at her window. Not thinking, she hopped out of bed and threw up the blinds.

The full moon was hanging above an autumnal world. Its pale light shone on the colored leaves of the oak in front of her window, its hopelessly snarled branches twisting to the dusty sky. Dew hung heavy on the edges of her window, and patches of fog whisked their way through her neighborhood. Kelly barely noticed. Her attention is on the small creature on the outside of her window looking in.

It stood barely taller than her hand, the human body perfectly formed. Her small feet were standing on the windowsill, her delicate-seeming gossamer wings fluttering softly to help maintain her balance. She smiled up at Kelly when she saw her. Kelly just stared dumbly as her tiny sister waved her hand in greeting.

Am I really seeing this? Kelly passed herself. She pinched her arm, slapped her cheek, and looked again. But the figure refused to go away. Instead, it raised his fist again and lightly tapped on the glass, no louder than a twig falling onto glass. Kelly opened the window and the fairy flew in. Kelly immediately closed it up and turned back.

The fairy alighted on to her dresser and sat down. It waited patiently for her to come over and investigate. Kelly felt as if her feet were made of lead. This isn't possible, this isn't possible, she chanted to herself. Yet the evidence was right in front of her. *This must be some sort of joke, a prank or something. No way is my sister been turned into a fairy.* Wait, of course it was impossible! Her parents and teacher had said so, though privately she had always wished to be able to turn herself into one. But surely the adults are right? This wasn't real. Was it?

“Cassie? Is-is that you?” Kelly asked cautiously.

The fairy nodded. A small tail, furry like a cat's tail, twisted slightly behind her.

“How-how is this possible?” Kelly stammered. “Can you tell me?”

The fairy shook her head sadly, opened her mouth and pointed. No sound came out. The fairy tried again, and nothing could be heard. The look of frustration crossed her face.

“It's okay.” Kelly added hastily. “I get you can't talk.” She racked her brain, trying to figure out how she could talk. An idea came to her. “Wait here. One moment.” Excited, she rushed to her bag hanging on its peg near the door. Rummaging around in the main pocket, she pulled out a slightly crumpled

notebook and a pencil. Returning to her dresser, she laid the notebook down at a fresh sheet of paper. Handing the pencil over to Cassie, she looked eagerly on.

Cassie, on the other hand, looked bemused. The pencil was taller than she was! She gripped it like a large tree that had somehow sprouted right in front of her, and looked up almost helplessly at Kelly. Kelly just waited, she had faith her sister could do this. Cassie's shoulders moved in a sigh. Her face set in a determined look as she lifted off the stand and set the pencil onto the notebook. With grim patience, she set out to draw the first letter, and then the second. It was very slow going, but she kept at it while Kelly leaned over to make out what was being written. She read it out loud.

"I...M...C...A...S...S...I...E...S...I...S. I am Cassie Sis, right?" Kelly squealed excitedly. Cassie threw her a slightly exasperated look, before nodding.

"I knew it, ha ha!" She felt like capering. "We can talk sis! And we can tell Mom and Dad and the cops, and then they can turn you back and...what's wrong?" Cassie was shaking her head, horrified. She began writing fast.

"P...L...S...D...N...T...T...E...L..." the letters went on for a few minutes until the message finally read: "Please don't tell mom and dad, or the cops." Kelly looked down at Cassie in confusion, tears stinging her eyes. "But-but *why*?" she asked. Why didn't Cassie want her parents to know? Cassie resumed writing.

BCS, MOM & DAD IN DNQR. CPS TOO. WRLK

Kelly looked at the text for a moment, confused at the last word. "Wr-luck" she pronounced clumsily. Then she brightened as an episode of My Little Pony came to her. "Warlock!" she smiled, pleased while her sister nodded. But then it hit her. Her dream. She looked down at her sister, horrified. She fell backwards, hitting the ground with a loud crash.

"Honey?! What's wrong!" shrieked her mother. Hurrying footsteps came outside her door. Cassie dove for the backpack, disappearing inside the main pocket just as the door burst open wide.

Michelle Grifson was a tiny woman not much taller than Kelly herself. But at that moment, Kelly thought she was looking up at a giant. The woman quivered with emotion, whether rage or fear Kelly couldn't see, and she rushed into the room looking wildly about. When her eyes fell on Kelly, sitting down staring up at her, she threw herself down on the floor, wrapping her arms around Kelly.

"Oh God honey, you scared me. Soo very much." She whispered in Kelly's ear.

Kelly felt a huge surge of guilt. She hadn't meant to worry her mom! She quickly wrapped her arms back around her mother. "I'm okay." She whispered back. "Really. I am."

"What happened?"

Kelly froze. Should she tell her mom that Cassie was hiding in her backpack? But no, she'd promised her sister, hadn't she? Well, perhaps not, but it was important to Cassie. She'd keep the secret, for now.

"I was...just thinking of her. That's all." Kelly said in a small voice. She gulped, she hadn't meant to say that!

"Oh, honey." Her mom's embrace grew tighter, nearly suffocating. "I'm...sure...she'll be home...soon." Her voice grew thicker with tears at each word. Kelly felt tears sting her eyes and she closed her arms tighter.

"It's going to be okay mom." She whispered. "You'll see."

"You're right." Michelle sniffed as she leaned back. "You've gotten so...so very big." She smiled through the tears.

"Really!" Kelly bounced excitedly for a moment. "Do you think so!"

"I, heh, know so." Michelle ruffled her daughter's hair.

"Mooom!" Kelly growled slightly, wiggling under the unexpected follicular assault. Her mom smiled sadly as she stood up. Picking Kelly up from the floor, she helped get her back in bed. Once she was sure Kelly was comfortable, she walked over to the window and checked. She froze when she saw the window unlocked.

"Kelly!" she gasped. "Did you do this?!"

Kelly gulped. Uh-oh. "There was uh...a bird on the windowsill! I wanted to bring it inside, because it's so cold out, but..." she thought fast, trying to come up with the right excuse.

"Kelly!" her mom snapped. "Don't you *ever* open this window at night again! If something...some...Oh!" she nearly broke down again.

"Mom!" Kelly nearly shrieked, alarmed. "Please, don't cry! Don't cry! It's going to be alright. Please, it'll be all right." She was watery-eyed again, but she focused on her mother, trying to keep her from crying. Michelle was the strongest woman she'd ever known. All her life she'd been there for her against everything, and now...

"I'll be fine honey." She sniffled as she wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "Honest. Just...keep the window closed and locked from now on, okay?"

"Okay mom. I love you."

"And I love you, sweet cheeks." She flipped off the light switch as she walked out the door.

Kelly tucked her knees up under her chin, feeling terribly conflicted. She wanted to tell her mother everything, but wasn't sure she would believe her. She could hardly believe herself, after all!

A soft rustling from the post made her turn and see her sister pop up from the pack. It was difficult to see in the dark, but she could tell the little fairy's face was twisted with pain. Cassie fluttered up and landed lightly on the bed. For a few minutes they just stared at each other.

"That could have gone better." Kelly finally sniffed. Cassie nodded slowly.

"I forgot. You can't speak, can you?" There was a shake of the head. No.

"I wish you could tell me what happened." Kelly whispered. "I want..." she stopped. She didn't really know *what* she wanted. No, that wasn't true, she knew what she wanted. But how the heck could she get everything back to the way it was?

She looked up as she felt footsteps on her leg. Cassie was turning around, wings starting to flutter, tail hanging from her back limply.

"Where are you going?" Kelly asked. Cassie turned around, mouth opening in reply, but no sound came out. Kelly started to see tears shining on her cheeks. Without exactly knowing how she knew, Kelly realized Cassie as going to leave.

"No!" she cried, alarmed. "Don't go. Please...I don't want to lose you again."

Cassie paused on the edge of her bed, looking back. Kelly pleaded with her eyes, begging her to come back. Cassie peered a moment at the open door to the hallway. Her shoulders slumped and she flew back, settling down on Kelly's legs.

"Thanks." Kelly sniffed. She reached out to touch her sister's body and received a strong jolt. Shocked, she somehow managed to keep from crying out. She stared at Cassie, who had fallen flat on her back, not moving. Kelly felt like shrieking, had she killed Cassie? She quickly scooped up the unconscious fairy, holding her close. She nearly collapsed in relief when she noticed Cassie's chest rising and falling. An eternity passed before the fairy stirred and slowly sat back up.

"What happened?" Kelly blurted. "Are you okay? What was that?"

Cassie shrugged helplessly, and Kelly tried to calm herself down. It was plain that she didn't know what was going on either.

Should I go to mom, despite what Cassie thinks? It's plain she doesn't have a clue as to what's happening either. Mom would probably freak though, and Cassie did ask. Kelly felt torn as to what to do. This was far too much for her to understand, she was only eight! She wasn't ready for any of this! This was grownup stuff, the kind they usually sent her away for.

A soft touch pulled her from her reverie. Cassie had flown up from her legs and was clutching at her shirt. Kelly frowned a moment before it clicked; she was trying to give her a hug. Kelly felt a smile sneak through. She was so small, barely larger than her dolls, that she seemed no more than a baby on her! With great tenderness, she hugged her sister back. *Whatever happens, we'll do it together. I won't betray my sister,* Kelly vowed.

Kelly let go and saw Cassie with that little smile she always got. Kelly was surprised to realize how much she had missed that smile. She grinned back, the weight lifting from her heart.

"All right sis. Let's..."

Cassie shook her head, wiping one finger across the other. Kelly sensed disapproval coming strongly from her. A moment later Cassie mimed going to sleep.

"Awww, do I have ta?" Kelly immediately whined. "I don't wanna go to sleep."

Cassie gave her a stern look, but oddly Kelly got a feeling of amusement. She frowned, where did that come from? Unless...

"Are you laughing at me?" she asked Cassie, who looked startled for a moment. She quickly shook her head though and attempted to look sternly back. The feeling changed slightly, to one of confusion. Kelly couldn't begin to believe it...she could *feel* what her sister was feeling! Excited, she blurted out what she had realized to Cassie, who was stunned clear down to her fairy toes! And Kelly knew that.

All thoughts of sleep banished, Kelly decided to experiment. Quickly, she tried to tickle Cassie, rubbing her finger up and down her back. Cassie squirmed slightly, but wasn't laughing, and there came a feeling of annoyance and some fear through the bond. Kelly stopped immediately, wondering what her sister could be afraid of until she realized she had been running her finger where the fairy wings were. What if she had pulled them out by accident? Kelly snatched her hand back, ashamed and scared. Cassie grabbed her finger, making Kelly stop. A sudden rush filled Kelly, a feeling that everything was okay. Awed, Kelly let it course through her.

"Did you do that?" she asked. Cassie nodded, and a feeling of pleasure flooded through the link.

"This is so cool!" Kelly squealed quietly. "We're like Emeraldia and Erathorn! Except you're not a dragon!" Cassie rolled her eyes slightly, but nodded.

"That's so cool! We can *yawn* do things tomorrow." Kelly felt her jaws crack wide open as a wave of unexpected tiredness hit her. "Maybe tomorrow." She murmured, feeling her eyelids grow heavy. Suspicion filled her and she narrowed her eyes. "Is that you?" Cassie's face stared, but Kelly felt her smugness anyway.

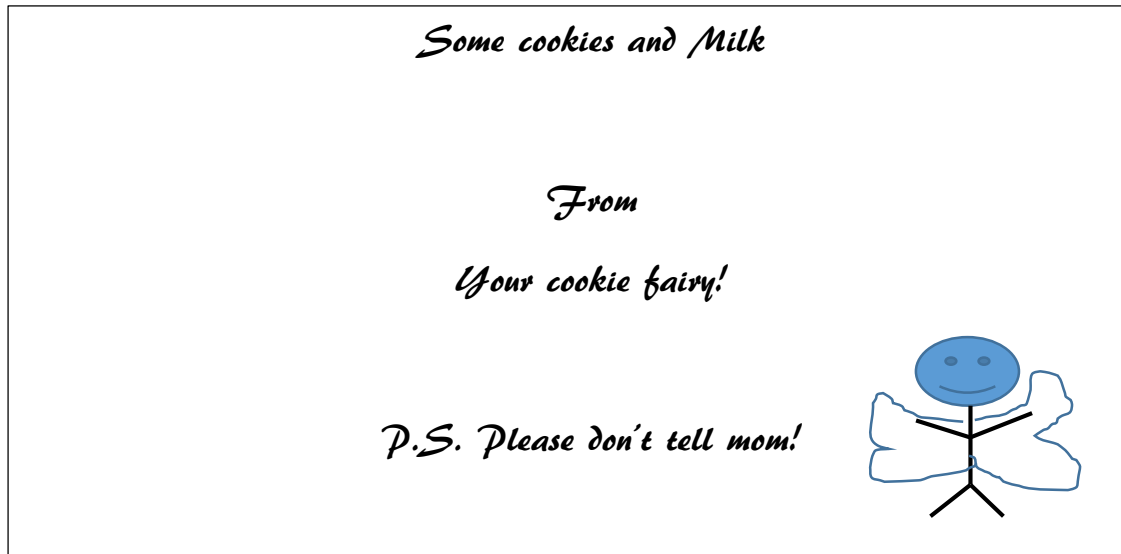
"Oooh! When I *yawn* get up you're in so much trouble." Kelly tried to growl. However, when she narrowed her eyes it made it far too easy to let them slide closed. A moment later she felt the first kiss of slumber, and darkness carried her away.

Cassie watched her sister's breathing, making sure that she wasn't playing around but was actually asleep. Once she was satisfied, she flitted to the dresser and alighted carefully. She didn't want to wake her sister. The bond that'd apparently formed had surprised her a great deal. She hadn't realized that would happen, but now that she thought about it, it would explain why the warlock that had attacked her had done everything in his power to have her *want* him to touch her. She breathed a silent prayer of thankfulness that he hadn't succeeded. His hold over her had been nearly absolute; many of the things he had done to her to break her will she could never reveal to Kelly or her parents...ever. The memory of his cold hands grasping her body painfully, of magic curses thrown at her, her body poked and prodded...and worse things.

She pulled out of her memory with a silent scream. She heard a soft whimper from the bed, and felt like hitting herself. Her bad feelings were affecting Kelly! She was probably suffering nightmares. Cassie pushed down the feelings of despair and pain, trying desperately to think of happier things; her birthday last year, her mom taking her to her first manicure, her first kiss. It wasn't working. The memories of the

black-robed warlock kept drowning them out. Kelly's whimpers were increasing, her head beginning to toss and turn. Cassie wanted to whimper herself, the fear was so strong in her.

A memory drifted to the front of her consciousness, one she had nearly forgotten. She was several years younger, sitting in her room feeling sorry for herself. She had been exiled there after an argument with her mom, smelling the delicious cookies that Michelle had cooked that day and wishing she could have gotten at least one. Her door suddenly opened, not more than a crack, and a plate with cookies and milk was pushed in. Cassie got up to investigate and saw a scrawled note with a tiny fairy drawn in the lower corner, reading:



She picked up one of the cookies, tears stinging her eyes. The cookie had to be one of the best she had ever tasted in her life.

The memory filled Cassie, drowning out the others and pushing back the fear. Kelly's whimpers ceased; her body relaxing. Cassie held onto that memory with bleeding fingers, determined not to frighten her sister again. This was her own problem, not Kelly's! She couldn't hurt her little sister, not again.

Cassie flew back to the giant form of her sister, not really aware of what she was doing. Landing lightly ontop, she laid down, feeling her entire body lifted into the air and falling down with each breath from below. The soft breathing of her sister filled her world, and she drifted off to sleep herself.

