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THE SECRET OF THE SCOTTISH STONES
Book One
Into the Kaleidoscope Series
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A WORD TO THE WISE...

No one knows exactly how the Scottish Stones became enchanted.

Some say they were magicked by the Loch Ness Monster herself. Others blame the fairies, which, in my opinion, is lazy thinking. There are lingering whispers about Finfolk being involved. So if you ever bump into one while swimming and can summon the courage, just ask. They might give you a hint. Personally, I wouldn't count on it.

What's that? You've never heard of the Scottish Stones?

Ocht. 'Tis no surprise. Schools are grand with numbers and dates, but they often forget the good stuff. The magic stuff.

But dinna fash, my dears. That means don't worry.

That's where I come in.

I may be old, I may be forgotten, but I know the legend. And if you're reading this, perhaps the old magic has found you too.

Now, a word to the wise—this tale contains characters who were once very real people.

So, if you grow curious about the women wandering through these pages, you'll find their stories at the back of the book. And if the Scottish words leave you scratching your head, there's a glossary for that too.

One more thing...

Watch out for the Trows!



CHAPTER 1: THE CALL

The Orkney Isles

June 1, 1984

In a dusty Scottish attic, a wooden trunk began to vibrate. A low buzzing followed, like the sound of bees trapped beneath the floorboards. The vibration grew stronger until the windows shook.

Inside the trunk, tucked beneath a thick woolen blanket, lay a wide leather belt, its turquoise color faded with age. Embroidered flowers and symbols were stitched throughout, as if someone had taken the time to tell a story in thread. Custom-made pouches hung from the belt, each a different shape and size. They were all snapped tightly shut, their contents hidden.

The belt shuddered. Then jerked.

Three round glass discs were set into the leather, glowing like miniature stained-glass windows.

The discs began to spin. On their own.

Slowly at first. Then faster, straining against the leather as if trying to break free. The trunk rattled harder.

The attic door burst open. A woman rushed in, her breath quick, her eyes wide and searching. She dropped to her knees, flung open the trunk, and tore back the blanket.

The glass discs spun wildly, flashing streaks of color across the ceiling. A deep crease formed on her forehead. A frown darkened her usually cheerful face.

“No...” she whispered.

She had been instructed not to touch the belt.

She slammed the lid shut and held it there, as if something inside might push back. Then she hurried downstairs to make the call she had been dreading. Her hands trembled as she dialed.

“Wake up, Bessie! ‘Tis Florie. Come quickly—an emergency.”

She took a breath.

“Something terrible’s happened tae Aggie.”

* * *

Washington, D.C.

June 1, 1984

Zoe Flores jerked awake, her heart pounding.

The dream clung to her—dark water, shadowy shapes circling, trying to speak. She strained to catch the pattern in their sounds, like a code just out of reach.

The phone was ringing.

She scrambled out of bed and hurried into the hallway, her bare feet silent on the hardwood floor, just as her mother’s voice carried through the closed bedroom door.

Her mom’s voice sounded urgent. “Calm down. Slow down. I can’t understand you.” A pause. “What? Scuba diving? Again?”

Zoe froze.

“...No, I understand. The diving club... Scuba for Seniors... and no one saw her come up?”

Zoe's stomach dropped. Her great-aunt Aggie was a die-hard scuba diver.

Zoe found her mom sitting on the edge of the bed, phone in one hand, notepad in the other. Her auburn curls were wild in every direction.

"The police are there?" Isa said. "The Coast Guard, too? Okay, mom... give me the number."

She copied it down and then hung up.

"What happened?" Zoe asked. "Is Aggie okay?"

Isa pulled her into a quick hug. "We don't know, honey. Grandma Bessie said she went diving this morning... and well... she didn't come back."

Zoe pulled away. "That doesn't make sense. Aggie's a pro."

Isa didn't answer. "I know. She's usually so careful. Let me make some more calls. Go check on your sister."

Zoe opened her mouth, ready to argue, but stopped. Wrong moment.

Aunt Aggie couldn't disappear. She was the one who taught Zoe how to swim. The one who taught her to stay calm when the water turned rough.

Zoe's mind ticked through what could have gone wrong. Equipment. Air tank. Current.

"Zoe," Isa said, sharper now.

Zoe nodded and stepped out, heading to Anna's room.

Her little sister was still asleep. Completely upside down. One leg hanging off the bed. Her long, glossy black hair spread across the sheets like spilled ink.

Her mouth hung open, and a soft snore escaped.

Anna considered herself quite the princess and would be horrified to see herself now.

Zoe glanced toward her room. Her Polaroid camera sat on the dresser. It would take two seconds. Perfect blackmail material.

She chuckled just a little, then shook her head. Not now.

She closed Anna's door quietly and stepped into the hallway where blue ribbons from years of her swim meets were pinned to the wall. Dozens of trophies crowded the shelves below. She passed them without slowing.

The thoughts came faster. Where was Aggie diving? Who saw her last? Who checked her gear? Timeline. Location. Witnesses.

Zoe forced herself to calm her breathing. She had a habit of spiraling when confronted with surprises. The police would investigate. They would follow procedure.

But this wasn't a regular missing person case.

This was Aggie.

She knew this was different—something else was going on. And it was beneath the surface, where no one else would look.

Zoe straightened.

It's up to me.



CHAPTER 2: VANISHED

Orkney Isles

The Day Before

A weathered dive boat bobbed gently, its anchor chain rattling into the sea. On deck, six silver-haired adventurers shuffled in matching wetsuits—bright blue, *Scuba for Seniors* stamped in cheerful yellow across their backs. One by one, they flipped backward into the sea.

Only one diver remained.

The old skipper grinned down at her, his face lined by years of sun and salt.

“Good luck, ye old biddie,” he teased, giving her tank a hearty pat. “Hope ye find what yer lookin’ for. Mind yerself oot there.”

The woman chuckled, her eyes bright with anticipation.

“I can feel it,” she said. “‘Tis going tae be me lucky day.”

She winked at the captain and gracefully fell backward into the water, as she had done hundreds of times before.

Her quest had begun.

Initially, sunlight danced through silver schools of fish around her. Gradually, the blue water dimmed to gray. Pressure squeezed her ribs. Her ears popped.

She glided past the skeleton of a World War II-era German warship, its twisted frame half-buried in the seafloor. Other divers lingered there, weaving through its hollow remains.

She didn't stop.

Clutching her laminated map, she kicked deeper into the darkening water until the seafloor slowly emerged below her, ridges and shadows taking shape in the gloom.

The temperature plunged. Then she saw it.

The rock formation rose from the seafloor like a giant stone beehive, just as her ancient map had promised. Hidden beneath its dome lay the treasure she had hunted for decades.

She cautiously circled the chamber. After a few attempts, she found a narrow opening and peered inside.

The chamber's floor was carpeted with Dead Man's Fingers—orange seaweed resembling hands reaching from the depths.

Some believed they were an omen.

Ignoring the whispers of folklore, she squeezed forward, but her oxygen tank lodged in the narrow gap. Cursing, she backed out and slipped off the tank. She'd trained for dives like this, twisting wrecks and narrow caves. She wriggled through the hole again, but this time, her hips wedged tight.

"Shouldna have eaten all those scones this mornin'," she chided herself.

Half in, half out, she scanned the chamber.

There, at the center of the seaweed, lay a single stone—round, smooth, and blue as the afternoon sky.

Wait. Blue?

All her research indicated the Stones of Life were red. Confused but determined, she stretched out her hand, muscles trembling.

Almost there...

But all she felt were the tips of Dead Man's Fingers.

The diver lunged a fraction farther, her fingers finally clasping the smooth stone.

Suddenly, the silt erupted. Water clouded, swirling like smoke.

She froze, heart hammering. *Stay calm. Don't panic.*

A violent yank pulled her backward. Her oxygen line snapped with a terrifying hiss. With a jolt, freezing seawater flooded her mouth.

She spat out the mouthpiece and kicked upward, desperate for air. Pressure crushed her chest. Panic clawed at her throat.

A violent current seized her, dragging her down. She spun, weightless and helpless.

The rock formation vanished. The seafloor fell away. The stone dropped from her hand.

Darkness yawned wide, swallowing her whole.

She was gone.

Not even her gear remained.



CHAPTER 3: BLACK THINGS

A few days later, the same weathered scuba boat chugged toward the spot where the diver had vanished. Salt crusted its battered hull. The faded name, *The Talisman*, peeked through layers of chipped paint.

Onboard were the old scuba captain, a sharp-eyed woman with windblown hair, and Zoe—restless and already hunting for clues.

Zoe tried to look nonchalant as she sauntered toward the back of the boat, hoping no one would notice her slipping away. Fortunately, Isabel had the captain distracted with an endless stream of questions.

While her mom grilled the captain at the bow, Zoe headed toward the stern. She yanked off the life vest that had been choking her all morning and ducked into the shadowy lower deck.

She reached into her backpack for her flashlight. Nothing.

“Anna!” she muttered. Of course her little sister had stolen it.

Undaunted, Zoe groped her way along the walls of the cabin, searching for a light switch. Just steps into the cabin, Zoe’s size ten hiking boots got tangled in something round and thin that felt like a snake wrapping around her ankles. In a matter of seconds, she lost her balance, careened forward, and crashed into a pile of wetsuits that smelled of moldy cheese.

“Bigfoot strikes again,” she muttered, brushing herself off. Her size-ten feet were great for swimming, bad for sneaking.

While untangling herself from the rubbery arms and legs of the wetsuits, she accidentally brushed against a light switch on the wall and the captain’s quarters lit up before her.

The “snake” around her ankle was an air hose.

Truth be told, the cabin was a bit of a disappointment. Part of Zoe had hoped to find her missing Aunt Aggie down there, tied up like a hostage from an action movie.

Zoe scanned the disarray: wetsuits and scuba fins littered the floor and aging yellow maps were pinned haphazardly to the walls. The captain’s desk was buried in nautical charts. Altogether, Zoe thought the cabin looked even messier than her bedroom.

She rummaged through the scarred wooden desk but found nothing unusual, just more tidal charts. She rifled through the mounds of papers and saw only invoices for scuba expeditions.

No secret compartments.

No false drawers.

None of Aggie’s jewelry.

Zoe couldn’t find a single clue that would help explain how or why her favorite relative had disappeared.

She pulled out her well-worn *Young Sleuths of America* notebook. Her pencil was in her hand before she realized it.

Document everything. That’s what real detectives do.

She had just started writing when the engine cut out.

Her mom’s voice rang out. “ZoZo! Where are you?”

Zoe shoved the papers back into place, flicked off the light, and scrambled upstairs, colliding with her mom, who stood blocking the hatch with crossed arms.

Isa's eyes narrowed, as if to say, *What have you done now?*

"Don't worry, Mom, I didn't break anything."

For a second, Zoe's cinnamon curls tangled with her mom's auburn waves, creating a brief rainbow of reds.

The captain heaved the anchor overboard. Chains rattled and vanished into the sea. He motioned them closer.

Zoe felt oddly at ease around Captain Cormack, even though at first glance he was a bit intimidating. His gray hair stuck out in every direction, and deep wrinkles lined his weather-beaten face. A milky film clouded one eye. Zoe wondered if he might be partially blind.

"Ye sure ye want tae do this now, Isabel?" he asked. His voice rasped, rough as sandpaper. "Might be too much. Especially for the wee lass."

"I'm almost twelve," Zoe muttered.

"Please, call me Isa," her mom said. "And yes, Mac—I need to hear *exactly* what happened. Zoe insisted on coming. She can handle it."

Mac nodded. "Fair enough. But lass," he turned to Zoe, "I see ye ditched yer life vest. On my boat, we all wear one, champion swimmer or no."

Zoe groaned but accepted the vest. She hated cookie-cutter rules.

"Walk us through it, Mac. I know you spoke to the police, but I need to hear it directly from you," Isabel said.

Mac's jaw tightened. "Told 'em everything. They didna listen. Loved yer Auntie, crazy as she was. Kent her me whole life."

Zoe blinked. “Kent?”

Isa didn’t look away from Mac. “It means *know*. Old Scots.”

Mac pointed toward the water. “Happened right there. Friday morn. Calm seas. Good visibility. Yer Auntie had a spot she was determined to dive. Said she had coordinates from an old map.”

“Did she say what she was looking for?” Zoe asked, pencil ready.

“Nae. And I didna ask.”

Zoe jotted: *Old map?*

“Started out just fine. Divers were down maybe fifteen minutes,” Mac continued, “when the fog rolled in. Thickest I’d seen. Came outta nowhere.”

Zoe looked up. “And then?”

Mac hesitated.

“Then I saw them. Black fins. Four or five. Circlin’ right above where Aggie was divin’.”

Zoe’s stomach flipped. “Fins? Like sharks?”

“I never said sharks, mind ye,” Mac snapped. “They didna move like sharks.”

“Then...what were they?” Isa asked. “Dolphins? Seals?”

Mac shook his head. “Too dark. Too still. Nae right.”

Zoe scribbled: *Strange fins*

Mac leaned closer.

“And then somethin’ even stranger. The water started twistin’. Pullin’ down like a drain. I thought it was a swelchie—a whirlpool, ye ken. So I sounded the emergency horn and tugged the line. Called the divers back, ye see.”

Zoe underlined *swelchie* three times.

Mac continued, “Soon as the horn blew—bam. Fog gone. Fins gone. Water still. Eerie-like.”

“All at once?” Zoe asked quickly.

“Aye. Like someone flipped a switch.”

Zoe’s pencil flew. *Whirlpool. Fins. Fog. GONE!*

“Divers came up, one by one,” Mac continued. “All but Aggie.”

“They were shaken, but safe. Claimed the water had been clear one minute and then cloudy the next. We started searchin’ for Aggie straight away.”

He paused.

“So there was no... body?” Zoe blurted out.

Isa turned sharply. “Zoe! Honestly—”

Zoe’s face went hot. Too blunt. “I just—I mean—wouldn’t there be something? Her gear or—”

Mac shook his head slowly. “If she’d drowned, we’d have found somethin’. Mask. Tank. Anythin’. But there was nothin’.”

Zoe swallowed. Her pencil pressed so hard it nearly tore the page.

No remains.

Isa’s voice tightened. “Then what happened?”

Mac looked from side to side, as if checking to see if anyone else could hear him.

“‘Tis what I’ve been tryin’ to figure oot. I canna sleep at night because I canna stop thinkin’ about it. T’was somethin’ to do with those black things in the water. Somethin’ I didna tell ye. Somethin’ I didna even tell the police.”

Zoe leaned in, barely breathing.

Mac sucked in his breath and then exhaled loudly.

“The black things with fins... they had arms.”

Zoe blinked. “Arms?”

Isa’s purse slipped from her shoulder and hit the deck with a thud.

“Could they have been divers?” Isa asked.

Mac shook his head. “Not ours. I kent every diver onboard.”

“Then, what were they?” Isa pressed.

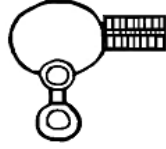
Mac slammed his fist on the railing. “Wish I kent! One moment she was there. Gone the next. Those black things...” He swallowed. “I think they took yer auntie.”

Zoe’s mind raced ahead, trying to make the pieces fit, even though they didn’t. She added a final note:

Did someone kidnap Aunt Aggie? Who? Why?

* * *

Reader, according to Zoe’s Young Sleuths of America manual, the case of the missing aunt was officially open.



CHAPTER 4: ARTIFACTS IN THE ATTIC

Zoe and Isa drifted toward Aggie’s tiny European car, so small it looked like a circus prop. Neither had been prepared for what they’d heard. They wore the dazed expressions of people who’d just seen a three-headed goat.

Zoe reached for the door, then hesitated. Wrong side. Duh. Scots drive on the left. She circled around, pausing to grin at Aggie’s bumper stickers.

Think Globally. Act Locally.

Well-Behaved Women Rarely Make History.

Books, not bombs.

Totally Aggie.

Zoe fastened her seatbelt while her mom struggled with the stick shift sandwiched between them. Isa hadn’t driven a standard car with gearshifts since her college days. After a lurch and sputter, she got them rolling. The Beatles crackled through the radio.

“Help! I need somebody—”

Isa belted it out, loud and off-key.

“Mom,” Zoe groaned. “Aggie’s missing. We shouldn’t be singing.” Zoe’s world was sometimes very black and white.

Isa kept singing. It was clearly her stress relief. Zoe reached over and flipped the dial. Madonna replaced the Beatles.

“Much better.”

Isa shot her a look. “Nothing beats The Beatles, ZoZo.”

For a moment, everything felt normal. Then Zoe’s mind flipped back to Mac’s bizarre story about black things with fins and arms. She shivered.

“What was Mac talking about, Mom? Black things with fins and arms?”

Isa shook her head. “He’s senile, Zo. I have no idea what he saw. We’re no closer to figuring out this mess.”

Zoe stared out the window. “Well ... I guess the good news is this isn’t the first time she’s disappeared.”

Isa didn’t respond.

Zoe continued, “She goes out at night. Full moons, ruins, stone circles. Then...”

“She always comes back,” Isa said quickly.

“But Grandma said after the third time, the police stopped showing up,” Zoe added.

Isa sighed.

“What kind of old lady bikes six miles a day and still goes scuba diving?” Zoe said with a hint of pride.

“True,” Isa replied.

“Do you think she was diving with her belt on?” Zoe asked.

Isa shook her head. “I doubt it. She said it was for gardening.”

Zoe raised an eyebrow. “Gardening?” Oddly, Zoe had never seen Aggie’s tools.

Aggie called it the *Wonderbelt*, like it was some kind of superhero accessory. Zoe thought the name sounded ridiculous. Everyone did.

Isa shrugged. "I mean, what can you expect? The way Aggie dresses. Overalls? Turbans? No one takes her seriously. She looks like some sort of bohemian Indiana Jones."

Zoe smiled faintly.

"Or," Isa added, "like a time traveler who raided a craft fair."

Zoe chuckled, but then instantly felt guilty. Her thoughts snapped back to Mac.

"Maybe she was kidnapped," Zoe said suddenly. Maybe those weren't fins. Maybe they were people. Maybe Mac's in on it."

Zoe's brain was already rearranging the pieces.

"Zoe. Why would Mac kidnap Aggie? What's his motive?"

Zoe pressed her lips together.

Motive later. Facts first.

"He was the last to see her. According to the *Young Sleuths of America* manual, that makes him the *prime* suspect."

Isa sighed. "I don't think he has Aggie. But fine... write him down. Let's put Mac out of our minds for now and see what Florie has to say. She insisted that we come right over."

Zoe opened her YSA notebook and wrote:

Captain Cormack: Last to see her

She underlined it once, firmly.

Satisfied with herself, Zoe traded her notebook for the mystery novel tucked beside her backpack. She loved reading almost as much as swimming, but today she kept rereading the same paragraph without absorbing a word.

Instead, she pictured Aunt Aggie alone on some rocky Scottish island—cold, hungry, maybe hurt.

The thought twisted painfully inside her. Zoe had always been especially close to Aunt Aggie. With no children of her own, Aggie treated Zoe like a daughter, and during every trip to Orkney, the two of them spent hours swimming, exploring beaches, and wandering through ancient ruins together.

More than anyone else, Aggie understood her. Zoe could tell her things she would never say out loud to anyone else. The idea of losing her felt impossible.

Zoe closed her book and stared out the window, trying to shake the image of Aunt Aggie stranded somewhere alone.

The Orkney landscape looked nothing like her Georgetown home in Washington, D.C. Instead of crowded streets and tall buildings, the countryside rolled wide and green beneath enormous skies. Stone walls crisscrossed the fields, and sheep dotted the hillsides like scattered tufts of cotton.

What amazed Zoe the most was the lack of trees. Not one. She'd once been told the Orkney wind was so fierce, trees simply couldn't survive there.

A thick wall of clouds pressed overhead, and raindrops pelted the windshield.

Zoe sighed. "It's going to rain every day, isn't it, Mom?"

Isa nodded without taking her eyes off the curving road. "You know the Orkney weather, honey. Thunderstorms come out of nowhere. And the wind...well, it never stops."

Zoe's window now served as a mirror of sorts, reflecting back Zoe's wild mane of curly red hair. She counted seven freckles on her cheeks, even though she knew there were more. Her

eyes shone brightly in the window; the right one was brown and the left one was green. A faulty gene on her mother's side of the family was the culprit for Zoe's eye abnormality.

"Mom, I forgot my colored contacts."

"No biggie," Isa said dismissively. "No one cares about your eyes here. Plus, you know, it's an honor to follow in Lizzie's footsteps."

Zoe's last known relative born with her eye affliction was Lizzie Leask, who was lost on an expedition to the Congo in the 1800s. Family rumor was that Lizzie thought she could talk to animals, and legend had it that she died trying to tame a wild crocodile. Aunt Aggie talked about Lizzie as if she were a goddess.

"Easy for you to say," Zoe muttered. "No one calls you 'crazy eyes.'"

Isa softened. "Kids are mean. Ignore them."

Zoe didn't answer. She missed her dad, off on a remote archaeological dig somewhere in the Amazon with no phone access. She pulled out a creased family photo—Isa, her pale-skinned Scottish mom; Victor, her dark-skinned Cuban dad; Anna, her sparkly little sister; and Zoe, awkwardly in the middle, unsure where she belonged.

"*Mi pececita*," her dad used to say, shaking his head when she refused to get out of the water. *My little fish*. She could almost hear his voice now, half-teasing, half-proud.

Isa turned onto a crunchy shell driveway. "Here we are. Florie's place."

* * *

The farmhouse stood white and square, like a frosted cake with a shiny red roof, cheerful enough to make you forget how gray the sky was.

"Grab your slicker. Run!" Isa hopped out.

Florie Dearness, Aggie's oldest and dearest friend, was already waiting on the porch, cradling a large gray cat with sharp yellow eyes. "Scoot, Mischief," she said, setting him down.

The cat slipped past Zoe, brushing her leg as it went.

Florie pulled Isa into a tight hug. "Dinna fash, we'll sort it. We always do."

Isa let out a breath. "Leave it to Aggie..."

Then Florie turned to Zoe and winked. "I'm so glad to see you again, Zoe! My, how ye've grown since Doddie's wake! Please, please, come in and dry off."

It dawned on Zoe that Florie Dearness never seemed to age. Her skin was nearly wrinkle-free, her honey-brown hair was glossy without a trace of gray. Deep dimples framed her smile, and her bright blue eyes still twinkled.

After patting Zoe's cheek affectionately, Florie led them into a cheerful yellow kitchen where her kitchen table overflowed with cakes and biscuits.

"Help yerselves, dears. Let me put the kettle on, and then we'll get down tae business."

While Zoe reached for her second piece of shortbread, Florie busied herself with teacups and saucers. Soon the kettle began to whistle. Loud. Sharp.

But instead of turning it off, Florie called over the shriek, "Let's go oot and get a bit o' fresh air, dears."

Except Florie didn't head for the porch. She swept upstairs instead, motioning for Zoe and Isa to follow. At the end of the hallway, she slid open a paneled section of wall Zoe never would have noticed as a door.

A secret staircase was right up Zoe's alley, and she eagerly took the lead up the narrow stairs.

Florie hurried back downstairs to silence the screaming kettle.

“What is this place?” Isa muttered.

At the top, the light flicked on. Zoe’s mouth fell open. Isa gasped.

Artifacts. Everywhere.

Broken statues and stone slabs taller than Zoe crowded the attic alongside scrolls, jewelry, and strange objects sealed inside plastic boxes. Trunks and trinkets of every shape and size filled the space.

Then Zoe spotted what looked disturbingly like human bones.

Every item had been tagged and numbered with notes written in Aggie’s distinctive, spidery handwriting.

Zoe winced at the sight of a pristine skull resting on a pedestal.

“What on earth?” Isa whispered.

“You should charge admission,” Zoe said, eyeing the skull.

Florie chuckled. “Och, Aggie’s been buildin’ on this wee trove for years, so she has. Quiet as a Selkie.”

Zoe’s eyes moved from object to object, trying to take it all in.

Isa rubbed her temples. “Has she been *stealing* from archeological sites?”

“Let’s call it relocatin’... protectin’ things, really. Aggie said the world wasn’t ready.”

Zoe tilted her head. *Protecting them from what?*

“Bessie didn’t approve,” Florie went on, “so she stashed her finds here. No one suspects sweet old Florie.”

Isa folded her arms. “Once we find her, this all goes to a proper museum.”

Florie nodded. “Course. T’was always the plan. But I think... she found something... dangerous.”

Isa's brow shot up. "Like what?"

Florie led them to a carved wooden trunk.

"Three stones," she whispered. "Ancient ones. Been chasin' them her whole life."

Zoe leaned in a little closer.

"Why didn't you say so earlier?" Isa asked.

"Feared someone might be listenin', ken? Aggie told me never to mention the Stones over the phone."

Zoe's mind snagged on that. "Wait, someone is listening?"

"Aye. 'Tis why I did the porch trick with the kettle. Saw it on *Miss Marple*," Florie added with a wink.

Isa sighed. "A bug on your phone? Seriously? In Orkney?"

Florie shrugged. "Stranger things. No one could hear anything over that kettle." She pulled an old brass key from her pocket and fitted it into the trunk's lock.

It stuck for a moment. She twisted harder.

Click. The lid creaked open.

Zoe leaned closer, studying the trunk's unusual carvings. "What are those symbols?"

"Pictish, I'd say," Florie said.

Zoe crouched beside the trunk, tracing one of the carvings with her fingertips. "What's Pictish again?"

Isa slipped automatically into professor mode. "The Picts were ancient people from northern Scotland. They covered their bodies in tattoos and used symbols as language."

She pointed to the carving Zoe had touched. “That one’s called the mirror and comb. It represents women with power. Pictish society was matrilineal, meaning power passed through the women instead of the men.”

Zoe brushed her fingers across the carving again. It felt important somehow.

“Here it is,” Florie said, almost reverently, lifting the turquoise-colored belt like it was a precious family heirloom.

Zoe gasped. “The Wonderbelt! Aunt Aggie never went anywhere without it.”

“Aggie left it with me before the dive. Said if anything happened, it was yours, Zoe. No one else.”

“Me? Really?”

“Aye. Aggie was crystal clear.”

Zoe accepted the belt carefully. The moment her fingers closed around the leather, a tingle raced up her arms. The air shifted, as if the room had taken a breath.

Somewhere deep inside the belt, something seemed to wake.

Zoe went still. She knew that feeling. It was the same strange hum she sometimes felt before one of her dreams came true.

Florie watched her closely, her voice softer now. “There’s more to ye than meets the eye, dear heart. Always has been.”

“I also found these. Unusual, aren’t they?”

She held out a clear mayonnaise jar containing what looked like very fine, shiny, iridescent shavings.

Zoe took the jar from her mother and shook it. The scales shimmered like moonlit fish.

“These scale-like things were scattered all around me well. I collected as many of ‘em as I could.”

“What are they?”

“Not sure, dear. But I heard rustlin’ by the well the night before Aggie disappeared. Mischief said—I mean knew—someone was oot there.”

Isa added, “But Florie, it’s not unusual for people to hang out at Bigswell. It’s kind of famous. Some say it heals. Others call it a portal. Some kooks think it’s a haunt for the Trows.”

“Trows?” Zoe repeated, head cocked.

“Fairies,” Florie said, clicking her tongue. “Trows. Nasty wee things. Not the glittery kind from the movies.”

Isa rolled her eyes. “They’re not real, Zo.”

Florie snapped her fingers. “Heavens! I almost forgot; I also found *this* at the same time I found those scales things. T’was caught in a bush oot near me porch.” Florie held up a torn piece of purple fabric with gold threads running through it.

“What is it?” Zoe asked.

“The better question is: ‘*Whose* is it?’” Florie retorted. “Ye see, Zoe, there’s only one woman in Orkney who wears purple all the time. Right, Isa?”

Isa rolled her eyes. “Give me a break...you don’t think *she’s* involved in Aggie’s disappearance, do you?”

“Actually, I do.” Florie planted her hands on her hips. “And this confirms me suspicions. I watch all the detective shows, ye see: *Agatha Christie, Sherlock Holmes...Miss Marple*. Trust me, I ken what I’m talkin’ about.”

Isa chuckled. “She probably came here for *magic* well water to put in her concoctions or whatever she calls them these days. Anyway, why would *she* be following Aggie?”

Zoe interrupted impatiently, “Who is SHE?”

“It’s a long story, Zo-Zo. I’ll tell you all about it on the ride home,” Isa said.

“*She* went to high school with yer mother,” Florie said. “Isa knows all about *her*.”

“All about WHO?” Zoe shouted.

“Grisel...Grisel Goar,” Isa muttered.

Florie bent down and whispered into Zoe’s ear, “Otherwise known as *The Orkney Witch*.”

* * *

Ah, the famous Wonderbelt. Zoe doesn’t know it yet...but it holds more than meets the eye. Eventually, it will lead her to me.



CHAPTER 5: THE WONDERBELT

Zoe jumped off Florie's porch and noticed the rain had stopped. A rainbow stretched across the sky which had shifted from dull gray to a wash of lavender and pink, streaked with feathery clouds.

"Is Grisel really a witch, Mom?"

Isa raised an eyebrow. "You're asking a scientist if witches are real?"

"Well, Florie seems pretty sure."

"Zoe, Orcadians love to gossip. Everything gets embellished. Of course Grisel Goar isn't a witch."

"So why do they call her the Orkney Witch?"

Isa started the car, stalled it, then tried again. "Part of it is Grisel's doing... and part of it goes back to what happened at the Academy, my high school."

Zoe leaned forward. "What do you mean?"

"She kind of invites it," Isa said. "Wild black hair, probably a wig or dye job. Jet-black eyes—contacts, I'd bet. And those ridiculous purple robes, all that jangling jewelry. You can hear her coming a mile away. She does it to drum up business with tourists at that shop of hers, *The Lucky Charm*. Herbal remedies, teas, love potions. They think they're buying real Orkney magic."

Isa tapped the brakes for a family of sheep crossing the road.

“But what about the high school thing?” Zoe asked, leaning out the window toward a lamb.

“That’s where the witch rumors started. Grisel wasn’t popular. Strange name, taller than the boys she wanted nothing to do with. And she loved chemistry. Spent so much time in the lab she smelled like sulfur.”

“But you’re a chemist, and people don’t think you’re a witch.”

“Of course they don’t,” Isa said. “I don’t dress like a weirdo.”

“That’s debatable,” Zoe said, pointing at Isa’s Birkenstocks, worn over thick hiking socks, as always.

Isa rolled her eyes. “Anyway, she and a girl named Eliza were lab partners. One day, there was a horrible accident—boom! A flask exploded all over Eliza. Hands, face... everything. She was in the hospital for months. Grisel was unharmed.”

Zoe shifted uneasily. “That’s awful. And people thought Grisel did it on purpose?”

“They’d clashed before. Eliza was popular. Not exactly kind. There was no proof, but the whispers spread. Grisel stopped denying it and leaned into the whole thing. The robes, the potions, the Orkney Witch act.”

“And Eliza?” Zoe murmured.

Isa hesitated. “She was never the same. Went from being the prettiest girl in school to...” Isa trailed off. “I mean, not that looks matter, Zoe. It’s not what’s on the outside that counts. It’s who you are—”

“I know,” Zoe said, a little quieter. “It’s what’s on the inside.”

Zoe met her mother’s gaze in the mirror. Isa smiled. “That’s right. And don’t you forget it.”

Isa parked beside the Stennhowe barn but didn't move to get out of the car. "Strange thing was, Eliza was wearing protective gloves. They should've worked. But they burned right through. The teacher tried to recreate the accident but couldn't. I never understood what went wrong."

* * *

Isa flung open the bright red door to Stennhowe, the old stone farmhouse that had been in Zoe's family for generations. "We're home!"

Zoe's Grandma Bessie and her six-year-old little sister, Anna, sat at the pine table in the kitchen. Bessie was scribbling a grocery list, her short gray hair tucked behind her ears, her dress pulled tight around her plump middle.

Anna was busy making a makeshift magic wand out of a fly swatter covered in tin foil.

She looked up at Zoe. "*Hola!* Frizz face." Like Zoe, Anna was fluent in Spanish.

"Well?" Bessie demanded. "What did Florie say?"

Zoe and Isa exchanged a quick look. There was to be no mention of Aggie's attic museum.

"Nothing definite," Isa said. "Just... strange happenings the night Aggie disappeared."

"No surprise," Bessie sniffed. "That Bigswell draws all the loonies."

"Well, Florie thinks someone might've been following her," Isa added. "Did Aggie ever say anything about that?"

"No. Of course not," Bessie huffed. "I'd have told the police."

Isa held up the scrap of purple and gold fabric.

"Purple!" Bessie gasped. "Aye, I knew it! That Grisel's always up to nae good. Especially after the outbreak."

“What outbreak?” Zoe asked.

Bessie leaned in, delighted to gossip. “Well... about a month ago, the Orkney Environmental Association met. Aggie chairs it, of course. Grisel’s a member, gets her potion ingredients from nature, so she says. Tempers flared. Grisel stormed out shouting, ‘Ye’ll be sorry!’ Next day, half the lot came down sick. Fevers. Blood-red spots. Doctors baffled. Folks say she cursed them. I say she flat out poisoned their tea.”

“Ooh, a spell!” Anna waved her wand. “I want to meet a real witch!”

“I’d be careful,” Zoe said. “Grisel might cook you up into her stew.”

Zoe scribbled in her notebook:

Suspects:

1. *Captain Cormack*

2. *Grisel Goar*

She pushed in her chair and headed upstairs to examine the Wonderbelt.

“I think we should start plannin’ services,” Bessie said miserably. “Aggie’s been missin’ for nearly a week.”

Isa stared blankly out the window, still clutching the purple fabric.

Then Bessie began full-force sobbing, her plump body heaving. “Let’s face it, Isa, she’s probably dead! And what am I goin’ tae do? I can’t live in Stennhowe all alone.”

As Zoe climbed the stairs, she heard Isa’s soothing response: “It’ll be okay, Mom. You can always come live with us in D.C.”

“Oh, no,” Zoe groaned. She hurried upstairs, leaving Bessie’s muffled crying behind.

Zoe shut the door to her bedroom and spread the Wonderbelt across her twin bed.

She stared at the peculiar compartments, not knowing where to start. *I can't believe Aggie left this to me!* The belt's leather felt smooth and supple from its years of wear. As Zoe rubbed her fingers across the metal buckle, she thought about the last time she saw her Aunt Aggie.

* * *

It had only been six months since Zoe's last trip to Orkney, when she and Isa flew over for Grandpa Doddie's funeral. Zoe rarely visited in winter, and the island had felt completely different then—gray skies, bitter wind, and because Orkney sat so far north, darkness settling over everything by late afternoon.

But one conversation with Aunt Aggie had stayed with her ever since.

On Zoe's last morning in Orkney, Aggie had woken her before sunrise.

"Put on yer heaviest coat and lots o' layers," Aggie had said. "We're goin' for a walk."

The two of them ended up at the Ring of Brodgar, one of Aggie's favorite places.

Massive standing stones towered above the frozen ground, weathered by thousands of years of wind and sea.

"Most folk have heard of Stonehenge," Aggie said, "but these stones are even older."

Aggie led her into the center of the circle. The moment Zoe sat down on the icy earth, a strange tingling spread through her temples.

"Feel that?" Aggie asked quietly. "Yer family's been connected tae this place for centuries. Yer great-great-grandmother chose Stennhowe because it sits on powerful ground."

Zoe frowned. "I do feel different here. Like something's happening under the surface."

"Of course ye can feel it," Aggie said. "Yer tuned tae it."

"Me?"

“Aye. From the moment ye were born. Summer solstice—that was the first sign. Then yer eyes...”

Zoe touched her face automatically. “What do my eyes have to do with anything?”

Aggie squeezed her hand. “Some women in our family were spae-wives. Wise women. Healers.”

“Why hasn’t Mom ever told me this?”

“It skipped her,” Aggie said softly. “Went straight tae you.”

A nervous flutter rolled through Zoe’s stomach. “What skipped?”

Aggie suddenly stood, staring toward the darkening clouds. “Storm’s comin’. We’ll talk later.”

But they never did.

* * *

Zoe opened her eyes and realized she was holding the Wonderbelt so tightly that her fist was turning white. She never figured out what Aggie was talking about that day.

And now I can’t even ask her.

Zoe sighed and focused on the belt again. Every tool was hidden away in its own leather compartment, like secrets waiting to be uncovered. She opened the smallest one.

A brass compass, scratched and well-used. It worked perfectly.

Next, a strange screwdriver with snowflake-shaped heads.

Then a miniature spade. A magnifying glass. An old metal flashlight.

At the back—three circular openings. Each held a glass disc, colorful like stained glass.

Then she flipped the belt over. A row of carved stone rings lined the underside. All evenly spaced. Except, one was missing. Zoe froze. Loose threads dangled where it should have been.

“Wait... why is one gone?”

Zoe turned her attention to the three glass discs. As she brushed her fingers against one of them, it clicked and shifted.

She jerked her hand back. “Weird. Did that just move?”

Her brain immediately started listing possibilities—hidden mechanism, pressure trigger, magnetics—but none quite fit.

Downstairs, Bessie shouted, “Off tae market!”

“Stay inside!” Isa called.

“Yeah, yeah,” Zoe muttered.

Zoe reached for one of the unopened compartments—

Anna came galloping up the stairs, waving her wand overhead. “I, Anna the Great, shall put a spell on you, Bigfoot!”

She leapt onto the bed, singing at the top of her lungs and bouncing on the mattress. Anna was always performing: dancing, singing, and turning everything into a show.

Zoe rolled her eyes. “Watch it. Grandma will freak out if you break the bed.”

Most of the time, Zoe felt more like a babysitter than a sister. And while strangers constantly stopped to gush over Anna’s glossy dark hair, huge brown eyes, and musical talent, Zoe usually faded into the background.

“Ooohh, what’s that?” Anna pointed at the Wonderbelt. “What are the pretty colors on the back?”

“Decoration, probably. The tools are the important part.”

Zoe pulled the belt away from her just as a small silver flute slipped from one of the unopened compartments.

“Mine! That’s not a tool. It’s a toy!”

Anna snatched it and bolted.

Zoe chased Anna into Aggie’s room. The smell hit instantly, the syrupy scent of Twinkelrot Toffee. It was Aggie’s favorite. She always kept a fistful tucked in her overall pockets.

The sweetness suddenly made her feel as though Aggie were terribly far away.

Anna was hiding behind Aggie’s old armoire, trying to figure out the notes on the flute. Along with their father’s looks, Anna had inherited his extraordinary musical talent. At six years old, she already played the violin better than most adults, and people actually paid to hear her perform.

It was just another thing everyone adored about Anna.

Anna marched out, playing a tune from one of her favorite Disney movies.

Then—whoosh. Somewhere in the house, a door banged shut.

The sisters froze beneath a row of faded family portraits as another heavy thud rattled the doorframes.

Zoe froze. “Mom? Grandma?”

Silence.

“Must be the wind,” she muttered. “C’mon, Anna.”

The lights flickered. Zoe’s stomach dropped. That feeling again. Like something was about to happen.

Dios! Zoe had learned to curse in Spanish, so she didn’t get in trouble at school.

They moved on, but as they passed the old laundry chute, Zoe slowed. Her head tilted.

Music?

Not Anna's tune, something else. Faint. Distant. A melody drifted up from the basement. Zoe stepped closer, pressing her ear to the wooden chute door. The sound grew clearer. Upbeat. Thumping. Familiar.

"Do you hear that?" she whispered.

Anna lowered the flute. "Hear what?"

Zoe frowned and slid open the chute door. Music burst out—loud, bright, impossible to miss. Disco.

"YMCA," Zoe said, a smile tugging at her lips. "Aggie's favorite."

Anna's eyes lit up. "I know this one!"

She darted forward, dropping the flute, and started dancing behind Zoe, arms swinging.

"Y! M! C—"

She didn't even make it to the A.

Her foot caught Zoe's giant hiking boot. With a shriek, Anna toppled headfirst down the laundry chute.

"Anna!" Zoe lunged, catching nothing but a fuzzy pink slipper.

From the dark below came a panicked wail.

"Heeeelp meee!"



CHAPTER 6: THE HUEY FLUTE

Zoe scrambled down the stairs, fearing the worst.

Please don't let anything be broken. Mom's going to kill me.

Anna's terrified screeches echoed through Stennhowe. "HELP ME, ZOE! There's something down here... and it's going to EAT ME!"

Zoe grabbed the cellar doorknob and froze. If something was down there, she needed protection. She snatched an old iron poker from the fireplace. It was heavy and sharp enough.

"Stay away from me or I'll bite you!" Anna screamed from below.

Zoe eased the cellar door open and flipped the light switch. Nothing. Instead, a foul stench rolled up the stairs—a rancid mix of mold, rot, and stinky feet. Zoe gagged. Grabbing matches from the mantel, she lit a candle from the kitchen table.

Suddenly, the music stopped, and Anna went silent.

Using the candle to guide her, Zoe crept down the staircase. The smell grew stronger, and she covered her nose with her sleeve. At the bottom, she heard a faint crunching noise, like someone munching on potato chips.

"Anna? Where are you? Are you okay?"

"I'm over here," Anna whispered.

"Are you hurt?"

“No. I landed on a gross, smelly mattress. But Zoe... there’s something down here.” She pointed behind the staircase.

Zoe froze. Soft singing drifted through the dark. It sounded like a child with a lisp.

“Dancing queen... young and sweet... seventeen... tambourine...”

“WHO’S DOWN HERE?” Zoe raised the poker like a sword and thrust the candle forward.

CRASH! An old record player toppled from behind the stairs, followed by a cascade of vinyl records.

“I’M CALLING THE POLICE!” Zoe shouted.

“Music broke... Huey’s songs... all gone,” a voice whimpered.

Zoe lowered the candle and noticed a trail of white flakes—like coconut shavings—leading behind the staircase. She followed it.

First, two small feet, about Anna’s size, covered in fur. Then gray knickers, a filthy vest with mismatched buttons, and a torn white shirt. Above it all stood a small, hairy creature no more than three feet tall. Its beard was thick and tangled, its skin like worn leather, and something misshapen jutted from the top of its head.

Is that a horn?

The creature’s pointy ears slowly moved back and forth. Zoe imagined the thing gnashing its teeth, preparing to attack her.

“He...hello?” she said, backing away.

“Aggie come?” the creature asked.

Relief flooded Zoe. “No. I’m Aggie’s great-niece, Zoe.”

“Aggie call me,” he said, then pointed at Anna. “Little girl stole flute. Huey flute.”

Anna scrambled over. “When I fell, I saw something singing and dancing! What is it?”

“I’m not sure.” Zoe tilted her head, trying to assess the being standing in front of her.

“From what I can tell, it looks like a little furry man.”

“Oooh! A leprechaun!” Anna clapped.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Anna. Leprechauns are Irish.”

Behind them, the creature knelt, trying to piece together broken records. “Disco Fever” and “Swinging Seventies” scattered in pieces.

Interesting choice of music.

“Huey’s songs... all gone,” he muttered, hanging his head.

Zoe’s voice softened. “Do you live down here... in the basement?”

“Sometimes. Aggie feed Huey toes. Brush Huey hair.”

“Toes?” Zoe choked.

“Toes. Huey love toes.” He pointed to a metal barrel.

Anna shrieked. “Eeeewww! A cannibalist!”

Zoe was afraid to look in the barrel. She gulped. She thought she might vomit.

So that’s the awful smell down here.

Reluctantly, she peered over the canister’s edge. She prepared for pieces of flesh and blood. Instead, white shavings. Piled high. Hard. Yellowed around the edges. She leaned closer.

Is that rice? Coconut?

Zoe finally realized what the white shavings were.

“Toenails!” she said, recoiling. “Those are toenails.”

“Gross!” Anna cried.

Huey licked his lips. “Toes. Delicious.”

“Your name is Huey?” Zoe asked, not quite believing she was carrying on a conversation this—this—creature.

“Yessss.”

“Where do you live?”

“Huey lives in mound. No sunlight. Underground. Huey love music. You break music. No more Stayin’ Al-iiiiivve.”

Zoe shook her head in disbelief. “We’ll find you more records.”

Anna peeked out. “He doesn’t seem dangerous.”

“Huey, can you come out so we can talk?” Zoe asked.

“No!” Huey stomped his foot. “Pretty girl say she bite Huey!”

Anna tossed her hair proudly. “I warned him.”

Zoe crouched beside him. “She was scared. She won’t bite you.”

Huey peeked out, and Zoe bit back a laugh. The “horn” was actually a hairbrush, stuck straight up in his tangled hair.

“Huey... what’s in your hair?”

Huey frowned. “Aggie brush Huey hair. Wash Huey face. No see Aggie. Huey try. Brush stuck.”

“Here, let me help.”

His hair was coarse and knotted, and each tug made him yelp. After several minutes, Zoe sighed. “We’ll have to cut the brush out.”

“Cut Huey? No. No. No... don’t hurt Huey.”

“No. Just your hair.”

Anna nodded encouragingly. "I had gum cut out once. Didn't hurt a bit."

"Anna, go get scissors. From the kitchen. Now."

Anna ran. Huey sniffed the air where she'd stood. "Girl pretty. She can see."

"See what?" Zoe asked.

Anna came bounding back with Bessie's sewing scissors. "It's all I could find."

"Perfect," Zoe said, carefully snipping the brush free. A clump of filthy hair dropped to the floor.

"Huey, we'll get you a new brush. And maybe... a bath?"

Huey shuffled. "Huey go to loch at night. No like water."

"Huey, can you go back to your mound?"

"Huey a Hogboon. Live anywhere."

Zoe blinked. *Hogboon*? That was not a word she recognized. "A what?"

"You have more toes?"

"You need more than that?" Zoe pointed to the barrel.

"Yes! Aggie say Huey has big apple-tie."

Zoe sighed. "You mean appetite. We'll get you more toenails. Come back tomorrow. We'll call you with the flute."

"Oh yes. Huey love flute. Love music. Huey be back."

And with that, he disappeared through a small trap door behind the stairs.

Anna stared. "Where does that go?"

"Who knows. We can't follow him now; we'll have to come back tomorrow night since Huey can't come out during the day. Grandma will flip out if she finds out about this. And what about Mom? I guess we should tell her?" Zoe shrugged.

“Mom wouldn’t believe us anyway,” Anna said in a grown-up, matter-of-fact tone. “She never believes me when I tell her about the fairies.”

Zoe rolled her eyes. But then she remembered her mother’s reaction to Florie bringing up the Trows. “I think we should keep this our little secret, Anna. Can you do that?”

Anna crossed her arms. “What do I get for keeping a secret?”

“Um... you can play the flute tomorrow.”

“And I want candy, too.”

“Deal.” They shook hands. Zoe looked back at the trap door, still not believing what she’d seen. *What was happening in Orkney?*

“In the meantime,” Zoe said, “we need to figure out what a Hogboon is.”

* * *

Meeting Huey will change everything. Such encounters are never random—Hogboons do not reveal themselves lightly.



DREAM NUMBER ONE

Despite the day's discoveries of the Wonderbelt and Huey the Hogboon, Zoe drifted to sleep with the belt clasped to her chest like a shield. Her dreams were often strange, filled with moments that felt more like memories than imagination.

This night was no exception.

She stood at the edge of the Orkney shoreline. The wind whispered her name in low tones, like a song only meant for her. The waves answered with a soft, steady hum.

As if pulled forward, Zoe stepped into the water.

The tide welcomed her, curling around her ankles, then her waist, until she was floating on her back, lifted and carried by a slow, steady current.

Water had always been her safe place. On the swim team, everything else fell away. The noise, the questions, the worry all gone.

Here, there was only quiet.

Salt brushed her lips, faintly sweet, like Twinkelrot toffee. Zoe smiled.

A dolphin surfaced without a splash, smooth and gray. There was something familiar in the way it held itself.

"Aggie?" she whispered.

The dolphin dipped beneath her, then rose again, lifting her gently along the curve of its back. Zoe wrapped her arms around it without thinking. Its skin was smooth and warm. It felt safe.

The dolphin carried her forward. Stars shifted overhead as time seemed to loosen and drift away. Sea and sky blurred together until there was no clear horizon.

At last, Zoe slipped back into the water and began to tread. The dolphin lingered beside her, nudging her arm before lifting its head and resting its snout in her hands.

Zoe held it without thinking. Its eyes met hers—kind, steady, familiar.

The dolphin exhaled, spraying a soft mist across her face.

Zoe blinked.

When she reopened her eyes, a glowing symbol shimmered on its forehead.

It looked like a letter Z, but not exactly.

Two small shapes, like eyes, were set within it, staring out.

Zoe reached toward it, her fingers brushing the light, and the dolphin vanished. Ripples spread across the surface. Then faded. The water was gone.

Zoe stood on the shore, alone. In her hands was a red leather book. The cover was damp, and the edges glowed faintly. It didn't look like it belonged in this world.

But it felt like it belonged to her.



CHAPTER 7: THE RAINBOW'S END

Bessie drove like lanes were optional. The dark green sedan jolted over a cobblestone bump, flinging Zoe and Anna sideways in the back seat. Isabel braced herself with one hand and pointed out the windshield with the other.

"There. The courthouse, just past the chippie!"

"You don't need to shout, Isabel," Bessie said evenly. "I've driven this way since before ye were born."

Anna clutched her seatbelt. "Are we under arrest?"

Zoe smirked. "If we are, it's for Mom's fashion crimes."

"No, we're not under arrest," Isabel said, smoothing her jacket. "I have an appointment with Detective Budge to talk about Auntie Aggie. And you two, please behave for Grandma."

As Isabel disappeared through the gingerbread-looking courthouse doors, Zoe shook her head.

"Feels weird seeing Mom go into a police station... voluntarily."

Bessie snorted. "Aye. Usually, she's being bailed out of one."

Environmental activism was practically a family tradition.

Even though Isa taught chemistry full-time at Georgetown, she spent most weekends at protests and demonstrations in Washington, D.C.—usually against war, pollution, or whatever

corporation was currently destroying the planet. Every so often, Isa's activism landed her in jail for civil disobedience, which Zoe's father loved teasing her about.

Victor always joked that Isa's rap sheet was taller than Zoe.

Zoe had inherited her mother's activist streak. Last semester, she'd organized a garbage-filled sit-in at school after discovering the cafeteria dumped recyclable bottles straight into the trash. The protest earned Zoe a suspension and a very long meeting with the headmistress.

"Did you help her organize this?" Victor had asked Isa afterward, trying unsuccessfully not to laugh. "Can we at least get Zoe through middle school before her first arrest?"

Zoe smiled faintly at the memory. She missed her dad terribly.

Victor was a well-known archaeologist with the Smithsonian, and this summer he was leading an excavation somewhere deep in the jungles of South America. The site was so remote he couldn't even be reached by phone.

Bessie parked the car and they headed down Broad Street.

Kirkwall felt frozen in time with its crooked stone buildings, narrow cobblestone streets, and bits of Viking history carved throughout. They passed the Bishop's Palace ruins—an actual medieval castle—sitting beside a fish-and-chip shop like it belonged there.

Zoe was struck by how casually the past sat with the present. It felt like a fairy tale accidentally dropped into real life.

The moss-covered stones reminded her of past adventures with Aunt Aggie, who could make even a walk feel like time travel. Zoe's throat tightened.

What if I never get to explore with Aggie again?

At the steps of St. Magnus Cathedral, Bessie paused, catching her breath. The towering red sandstone walls, built nearly a thousand years ago by Vikings, cast long shadows over the cobbled street.

“That’s where they did the witch trials,” Anna proclaimed.

Zoe blinked. “How do you know that?”

“Mom told me. She said that Grisel lady got called a witch, and some women got burned on a stick, like Joan of the Arc.”

Zoe shook her head. “It’s stake, Anna. Burned at the stake. But yeah, it was horrible.”

They continued down Albert Street, past shops with bright facades and postcard stands.

“Grandma! Look at the charms in the window!” Anna squealed, tugging Bessie toward a jewelry shop next door.

“I thought we were going to the toy store,” Bessie said, a bit surprised.

“I’m not a baby anymore.” She stomped her sparkly princess shoe-slipper. “I deserve something special from Orkney.” Anna flipped her hair like she was starring in a shampoo commercial.

Zoe winced. Anna was six going on diva, and a meltdown was brewing. “Grandma, Anna’s birthday’s next month,” she offered quickly. “This could be an early present?”

Bessie shook her finger at Anna. “One gift only, Banana. And ye mustn’t lose it.”

As Anna and Bessie went into the jewelry shop, Zoe kept walking.

The vibrant green door of *The Lucky Charm* sat just beyond, its window crowded with strange objects—bundles of herbs, amber stones, feathers tied with string, a rusting cauldron. A hand-painted sign read: *Cures, Charms & Consultations by Grisel Goar*.

Zoe slowed. People whispered about Grisel. *The Orkney Witch*, Florie claimed.

A nervous flutter rippled through her. But the place didn't feel creepy. It felt... kind of amazing. And if Aggie had found this place, she would've marched straight inside without hesitation. Zoe pushed the door open.

The shop was dim and earthy. The air smelled of salt, pine, and something sweet, like the world's strangest, most perfect snack.

Shelves sagged under rows of bottles. Zoe leaned in, scanning their labels.

Selkie Salve. The seal on the label looked like it was smiling. The thick blue cream shimmered like moonlight on water.

Helmet Head Remedy. A squat jar with a Viking helmet etched into the lid. Inside, tangled thistle roots floated in murky gray water.

Finmen's Foil. A tiny golden cup, sealed tight. When she shook it, glittering flakes swirled inside like a snow globe.

Hogboon Heart.

A heavy black jar. No label. Just a sign beside it:

NOT FOR SALE

Zoe hovered, fingers inching toward the lid... then pulled back.

A loud *kraaaawk!* ripped through the back room. Zoe jolted.

A raven?

She froze. Movement flashed past the window—purple velvet, long black hair, jewelry catching the light.

Grisel!

Zoe bolted out the door. Anna and Bessie had just stepped out of the jewelry shop.

“Did you see that?” Zoe asked.

“See what?” Anna blinked.

Zoe looked back. The alley was empty. She lingered a second, then hurried to catch up, her thoughts still tangled.

Did I just run into the Orkney Witch?

Zoe trailed behind. Thinking about Grisel. Thinking about the shop. Thinking a million things all at once.

Focus, she told herself.

As she peered into shop windows, she tried to notice things she wouldn't see back in the States. The local bakery didn't have muffins or donuts. Instead, its shelves held oatcakes, Bannocks and scones with chutney and marmalade. In the coffee shop, people didn't carry drinks in paper cups. They sat and drank from wide bowls, using spoons, like soup.

Zoe prided herself on noticing small details like that. She liked to imagine that one day, it might lead to a Very Important Discovery that would land her on the cover of *National Geographic*.

She was still thinking about her future fame when something strange caught her eye—Faint streaks of red, blue, and violet flickered across her jeans, making them seem tie-dyed.

She stopped. “What the...?”

“Ah... 'Tis Archie's shop!” Bessie called, pointing to a crooked brick cottage swallowed in ivy. A hand-carved, multicolored sign read: *The Rainbow's End*.

They stepped inside. Prisms spun sunlight into ribbons that slid across crimson walls and a violet ceiling. Crystals chimed softly in the breeze.

An old man stepped from behind the counter, tall and stooped, with a snow-white beard and eyes like polished sapphires.

“My dear Elizabeth, what a pleasure! And ye’ve brought company.”

“Mr. Archibald Sinclair, meet my granddaughters, Zoe and Anna.”

“Good day to ye, lasses. Yer great-aunt is one of me best customers. She’s told me all about ye bairns. Have ye heard any news? Do the police have any leads?”

Bessie forced a smile. “Unfortunately, no. We keep hoping. Thought an outing might take our minds off... well, the circumstances.”

“I understand completely. Do ye lasses ken how a kaleidoscope works?”

It was then that Zoe realized the store was filled with kaleidoscopes—hundreds of them. There were brass ones, wood ones, marble ones, small ones, and five-foot-tall ones.

“Archie, we’re meetin’ Isa at the chippie soon,” Bessie said. “Is there a special kaleidoscope ye can show us? Perhaps one of yer favorites?”

He drew in a breath, almost offended. “They are all favorites,” he said. “I craft each one by hand. T’was me great-great uncle—Sir David Brewster—who invented the kaleidoscope. I like to think I’ve improved on his design.”

He paused, then smiled. “But there is one treasure I’ve been workin’ on nearly a year. Let me fetch it.”

Zoe shrugged. “Sir David Brewster. Never heard of him.”

Bessie clicked her tongue in disapproval. “Of course ye haven’t. Ye Americans only learn about yer own. We Scots invented plenty. Golf, for one.”

“My newest masterpiece,” Archie said, returning with a blue velvet tray.

A large brass kaleidoscope rested on it, topped with three colorful glass wheels.

“This kaleidoscope allows three wheels at once,” he said. “Extra special. Would ye fancy a turn?”

“Yes, please,” Zoe said.

Mr. Sinclair clipped the three wheels to the end of the scope and turned a screw to fasten them. He beamed proudly. “Ye can turn one wheel, two wheels, or all three.”

Zoe lifted the heavy brass cylinder and peered inside.

The first wheel burst into red and gold, like fireworks. The second swirled lavender and sapphire. The third layered emeralds and icy blues. Patterns shifted and folded—flowers becoming stars, stars spiraling into endless designs. The patterns seemed to dance. She had the sensation of moving through time and space.

“Breathtaking, isn’t it?” Mr. Sinclair whispered. “Like lookin’ into another world.”

Zoe nodded. “It’s amazing.”

He leaned closer, voice low. “Don’t worry, Zoe. Ye’ll find yer spark. ‘Tis within yer grasp.”

Zoe furrowed her brow.

That was a strange thing to say.

Zoe re-examined Mr. Sinclair to make sure she hadn’t missed anything. Suddenly, he seemed very odd. Zoe had failed to notice his suit was pea green velvet or that his bowtie was purple with red polka dots. She studied his shoes and discovered that tied between the old leather laces were donut stones. Exactly like the ones sewn on the underside of the Wonderbelt.

What are those weird stones?



CHAPTER 8: THE SECRET ROOM

Upon leaving The Rainbow's End, Zoe jotted Mr. Sinclair's name on the **Suspects** page of her notebook. The stones in his shoes had been quite alarming, and Zoe wondered if he had stolen them from the Wonderbelt. Although Zoe was instantly fond of Mr. Sinclair, and considered him quite a genius, she could not let her emotions cloud the investigation. That would be very bad detective work.

Behind her, Isa stormed down the cobblestones, cheeks flushed rose-petal pink, fists clenched. Jaw tight. Eyes blazing. The visit to the Orkney police had gone worse than expected.

Detective Budge, the officer assigned to Aggie's case, had been called away to a bizarre tractor incident. After an hour of waiting, Isa lost patience with the deputy on duty. He wasn't assigned to the case and didn't seem especially bright. When his answers turned to bumbling nonsense, Isa grabbed him by the shirt collar and yanked him across the intake counter.

For the record, Isa wasn't a violent person. She was a pacifist, staunchly so. But her temper? That was another matter. With Aggie missing and the police shrugging it off, she'd snapped.

Thankfully, a fried haddock sandwich brought her back. Fish and chips were Isa's favorite, reminding her of childhood in Orkney. After devouring half the sandwich and taking several deep breaths, she filled Bessie in.

“The Orkney police aren’t going to lift a finger,” Isa said bitterly, wiping tartar sauce from her chin. “They’ve already decided Aggie drowned. Case closed. They’re not investigating anymore.”

Zoe nudged her plate away. She liked chips. Tolerated fried fish. But Isa’s words turned her stomach.

Fine. If the police won’t investigate, I will.

Across the table, Anna had a smear of chocolate ice cream across her upper lip. Zoe raised an eyebrow. Nothing. She cleared her throat. Still nothing. She kicked Anna under the table.

“Ow! What was that for?” Anna scowled.

Zoe shot her a look. Anna blinked, then remembered.

“Mom,” Anna said sweetly, “can we go to the library? Grandma doesn’t have any good kids’ books.”

“Wonderful idea,” Isa said. “We’ll stop on the way home.”

Zoe smiled. *Operation Hogboon is on.*

They looped back to Albert Street and turned onto Laing. Midway down the block stood a two-story stone building with weather-worn columns. It looked more like a manor house than a library—and a slightly haunted one at that.

“It’s kinda creepy,” Anna said.

“It’s perfect,” Zoe replied. “Exactly how a library should look.”

They climbed the steps. Inside, Isa paused to read a bronze plaque. “Girls, this is the oldest public library in Scotland. Says it was founded in 1544 in St. Magnus Cathedral.”

“Older than you, Grandma,” Anna chirped.

“I should hope so, dear, otherwise I’d be a ghost,” Bessie chuckled. “Isa, dear, I’ve been meanin’ to pick up a new book on knittin’.”

“Go ahead, Mom. Let’s meet back here in half an hour. Anna, let’s find the children’s section. Coming, Zozo?”

“No. I’ll find my way around.” Zoe strode off to find a different librarian, one far from her mom and Anna.

Behind the checkout counter, a tall woman with shiny black hair was talking on the phone. Prim white gloves covered both her hands and a red turtleneck was pulled up almost to her cheeks. Thick makeup coated her skin, which appeared uneven and splotchy. She held up her index finger indicating for Zoe to wait a moment. After replacing the telephone receiver, she smiled at Zoe.

“Hello. I’m Ms. Nesbit, the Head Librarian. How may I help you?”

Zoe hesitated. “I’m looking for books on... well, I guess you’d call it... um... Orkney wildlife.”

“Puffins, seals, seabirds. Right this way,” Ms. Nesbit replied.

Zoe lowered her voice. “Not exactly... I’m looking for books on... *Hogboons*.” She exhaled the word like a secret.

Ms. Nesbit’s smile vanished. “Hogboons? Hogboons! Don’t be ridiculous. You Americans come over here thinking we believe in fairies and sea monsters. Just because C.S. Lewis wrote about lions and witches coming out of wardrobes, doesn’t mean we’re all superstitious ninnies. There are no books on Hogboons because there are no such things. Understand?”

Zoe backed away, face flaming. Her clever reply vanished. She hated how her brain fizzled when adults made her feel small. Fighting back the urge to cry, she walked briskly toward the back of the library.

Her throat tightened. Her cheeks burned. She spotted a drinking fountain beside a pillar and leaned over it, letting the cool water splash on her face.

Just as she stood and wiped her mouth, a whisper cut through the still air.

“Pssst. Up here, lass.”

She spun. No one.

“Up here!”

Around the corner from the fountain, hidden from most passersby, stood a rickety spiral staircase. Zoe craned her neck and spotted a petite older woman in a brightly patterned Indian shawl standing on the top rung. The woman motioned her forward with quick gestures.

“Come up here, lass,” she whispered. “I can help ye.”

Zoe ducked under the braided rope blocking the hazardous staircase and hurried upward. With each step, the staircase swayed side to side, making her stomach flutter. At the top, the woman unlocked a glass door labeled: The Orkney Room.

“I’m Marjory Comloquoy. Assistant librarian. Ye’ll find what ye’re lookin’ for in here.”

Zoe stepped inside. The room looked untouched by time—wood-paneled walls, cracked leather volumes, a brass-tracked ladder, and a dusty card catalog.

“Heard ye askin’ about Hogboons,” Mrs. Marjory said, already scaling the ladder. “Ms. Nesbit’s no help with that. But I can be.”

Zoe stumbled over her name. “Thanks, Mrs. Comloqu—Comlow—”

“Och, call me Mrs. Margie.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Margie.”

“An American, aye? What brings ye to Kirkwall?”

“My great-aunt... she... well... she, uh... had an accident.”

Mrs. Margie's face paled. "You must be Zoe. Aggie's kin. Heard any news?" She rolled back down the ladder and stepped off.

"Not yet."

"All of us—we're sick about it. Aggie was a dear friend. Came to the Orkney Room all the time. In fact, I got so tired of lettin' her in and out, I had a special key made for her." Mrs. Margie winked. "But of course, Ms. Nesbit doesn't know about that. Let's keep it our wee secret, aye?"

She handed Zoe a thick green book: *The Mysterious Creatures of Orkney*.

The cover was battered, the yellowed pages jagged and uneven.

"This book is precious," Mrs. Margie warned. "Wear these gloves to handle it. No pen, only pencil in this room."

Zoe slipped on the gloves, marveling at the book's age. Written in 1708!

"I've never read anything this old."

"Aggie trusted ye. So do I," Mrs. Margie said softly.

A voice echoed from the hallway.

"Margie, where are you?" Ms. Nesbit's sharp tone rang out. "We've got trouble in the Archive Room. Mr. Guthrie is using ink! These reporters think they own the place."

Mrs. Margie gave Zoe a quick nod. "Stay hidden behind the card catalog, lass. I'll be back."

Zoe opened her backpack. Her mermaid bookmark slipped into her lap, a gift from Aggie.

She held it for a moment, letting its familiar weight steady her.

Shaped like a mermaid, with multicolored stones dangling from the top, it was more than pretty. Holding it helped her breathe when her thoughts spun too fast. The smooth weight of the stones always calmed her down.

She refocused on the yellowed pages. A whole chapter on Hogboons.

Take that, Ms. Nesbit.

The Hogboon illustration was grotesque: hunchbacked, pig-faced, with oversized hands.

HOGBOONS ARE NOCTURNAL CREATURES WHO POSSESS GREAT STRENGTH. THEY APPEAR DIM-WITTED BUT ARE USUALLY FRIENDLY. TRICKSTERS BY NATURE, THEY HAVE A WEAKNESS FOR MUSIC AND ARE EASILY MESMERIZED BY THE FLUTE OR FIDDLE.

Zoe snorted. "Or disco."

They bonded with people, the book said. Followed them. Everywhere.

Zoe envisioned carrying buckets of toenails to Huey in her Washington, D.C. basement. She already struggled to make friends, blurting things at the wrong time, freezing when conversations went sideways. A stinky little man lurking in her bedroom wouldn't exactly help.

She turned the page.

THE TREACHEROUS FINFOLK

An illustration of a sinister man in a black cape stared up at her, eyes sharp and cold.

THE FINFOLK ARE POWERFUL SORCERERS WHO HAVE THE UNIQUE ABILITY TO LIVE BOTH ON LAND AND IN THE SEA. CONSIDERED UNUSUALLY INTELLIGENT AND EXCEPTIONALLY RUTHLESS, HUMANS SHOULD AVOID THEM AT ALL COSTS.

She flipped to the next page and froze.

Drawn in delicate ink lines, a mermaid gazed out with haunting, hollow eyes. Her seaweed hair coiled around her shoulders. Her mouth was a thin, sorrowful line.

MERMAIDS ARE THE DAUGHTERS OF FINMEN. IF A MERMAID CAPTURES THE HEART OF A HUMAN, SHE LOSES HER TAIL AND BECOMES A BEAUTIFUL, AGELESS WOMAN. IF SHE FAILS, SHE IS FORCED TO MARRY

A FINMAN AND IS CURSED. EVERY SEVEN YEARS, SHE LOSES A LAYER
OF BEAUTY UNTIL SHE BECOMES A WRETCHED, WIZENED FINWIFE.

Zoe recoiled. The Finwife's face was a swirl of deep wrinkles, bulging lips, hooked nose.
Horriifying.

She blinked, unsettled, and looked up. Through the Orkney Room's arched window, a
flicker of motion caught her eye—a flash of purple fabric and dark hair vanishing around a corner.
She thought she heard it too: beads or charms, tinkling softly like wind chimes.

Grisel. It had to be.

She bolted from the room. In the corridor, she hugged the wall, footsteps slow and silent.
She didn't want to be seen; she needed to follow unnoticed.

The woman disappeared behind a door labeled: **PRIVATE: LIBRARY STAFF ONLY**

“Mrs. Margie?” Zoe knocked.

The door creaked open. A break room. It smelled faintly of coffee and dust. Against one
wall stood a coat rack. Hanging from it was a purple cape. She stepped closer. Her fingers brushed
the hem; it was the same purple weave and threaded gold as the scrap Florie found in her yard. The
bottom corner of the cape was torn, and a chunk of fabric was missing.

Grisel must have been outside Florie's house the night before Aggie disappeared!

Below the cape, near the baseboard, an earring. Not silver. Not gold. It was three donut-
shaped stones strung together. It looked homemade. Her breath caught. She picked it up and turned
it over.

*The same as Aggie's Wonderbelt. And Mr. Sinclair's shoes. Why is everyone in Orkney
wearing these weird donut-stones?*

She tucked the earring into her backpack, then flipped to the **CLUES** page in her *Young Sleuths of America* notebook. So far, she had: ***Fins with arms, Fish scales, Purple fabric. She added: Donut-shaped stones***

With the earring safely stored for evidence, she headed for the door. As she passed, a large needlepoint tapestry caught her eye. It was a sweeping embroidered panorama of the Orkney shoreline. Towering cliffs. A sea stack. Waves crashing in tangled white froth. And at the bottom, barely visible, a tiny red boat moored in rough water.

Her eyes narrowed. Just above the bow, stitched in red thread, a mark: a faint Z with eyes. The symbol from her dream. The one that shimmered on the dolphin's forehead. Her mind spun.

That dolphin had the same mark. And at the end of the dream, I was holding a book. Could the library be the clue? Could Aggie be trapped in here right now?

She stepped forward. The tapestry seemed to shimmer, as if vibrating with importance. She reached out. Her fingertip brushed the stitched Z—and sank.

She jerked her hand back. Then flung the tapestry aside. Behind the symbol: an indentation. A keyhole. Shaped like a snowflake.

Think, think... Where have I seen that?

The Wonderbelt!

She unlatched the pouch, pulled out the screwdriver, and flipped through the tips. One matched the snowflake. She fit it in. Turned clockwise.

The wall groaned as the stone shifted. A cold wind hissed out from the dark. Beside the doorway sat a lantern and a small box of matches. She slipped into the passage and fumbled with the matches before finally lighting one. The wax from the candle was still soft as if it had been recently used.

She tried to see to the end of the darkened hallway but couldn't. She stared back at the tapestry wondering if she was making a mistake. Just then, the wall closed.

Don't panic. There must be a reason Aggie's tool opens this door. Maybe she's trapped in here right now!

Zoe pressed forward, lantern in one hand, fingertips trailing the stone wall. Cold seeped through her gloves. Her fingers bumped a thick frame. She lifted the lantern.

A pudgy woman stared back from the canvas, arms raised toward a roiling sky. Lightning flashed above her head, dark clouds churning like smoke from a cauldron. Beneath the painting, a brass plaque gleamed: MATTIE BLACK OF BRIMS: 1803–1888 CALLER OF WIND, KEEPER OF TIDES.

Zoe lit the candle sconces flanking the portrait. Mattie's face came into full view. Several teeth were missing. Maybe some hair too. *Are those chin whiskers? Eeww, that's gross.*

But above the whiskers, Mattie grinned with a wide, unapologetic smile—free and wild, unlike anything Zoe had ever seen in a painting.

She moved down the hallway, lighting sconces as she went. Dozens of portraits lined the walls, each woman smiling, as if to welcome her. She could almost feel their invisible hands urging her forward.

The passageway ended in a large, cold room. There was no sign of Aggie. Twelve high-backed chairs surrounded a round mahogany table topped with an ornate silver candelabrum. As she lit the candles, dozens of eyes stared back.

Portraits covered the walls—Scottish women from across the centuries. The most prominent painting was of a dark-skinned woman of striking natural beauty dressed in a flowing white gown. She looked like an Egyptian priestess. Her plaque read: SCOTA

Zoe scanned the others: Alluna, Ragna, Mary Queen of Scots, Flora MacDonald.

The room seemed to be a Hall of Fame for Scottish women.

A prickling sensation ran across her scalp, giving her the strong impression that someone was watching her from above. She gulped and looked up at the ceiling.

Books. Floating. Dozens of them, hovering like jellyfish suspended in deep water. No shelves. No wires.

She clambered onto a purple velvet chair, then climbed on the table, stretching toward the nearest one. But each time she reached, the books floated out of range, dodging like balloons in a breeze.

She leapt again, chasing another.

Breathless, she dropped down to a velvet chair and yanked off her backpack, planning to write a detailed description of everything in her journal. That's when she noticed her backpack was glowing. From inside.

Her mermaid bookmark pulsed—as if waking up—its stones glowing, shifting color. She pulled it out. Warm. Almost hot. It had never done this before. Not once.

Aggie never said it was glow-in-the-dark...

WHOOSH.

A red book dive-bombed the table, grazing her neck and whipping through her hair. It landed with a heavy thud, like a bird of prey striking.

The bookmark flew from her hand, pulled toward the book like a magnet.

The cover shimmered faintly:

PREDICTIONS OF ORKNEY'S WISE WOMAN

Its pages flipped faster and faster, as if they were turned by invisible fingers. The book looked alive, searching for the right page. It stopped. Zoe stared.

CHAPTER THREE: THE FALL OF THE SELKIES

THE MOST GENTLE OF MAGIC CREATURES WILL BE ENDANGERED BY
HUMAN GREED. IF THE UNSPEAKABLE COLLECTION IS COMPLETED, THE
SELKIES WILL VANISH. WISE WOMEN OF THE EARTH MUST PREVENT THEIR
DEMISE. LET US MAKE A PACT TO AID OUR DESCENDANTS IN FIGHTING
THIS EVIL.

Zoe read it three times. She copied it slowly, word for word. Sacred. Urgent. She couldn't afford to get even one line wrong.

She began to realize Aggie's passions weren't just about recycling. Or committee meetings. Aggie had been protecting something ancient. Something magical.

Selkies? The unspeakable collection?

It didn't make sense. But one thing was clear: Aggie's disappearance was no accident.

She let the book of predictions float back into the air. It didn't seem right to remove it from this room.

She checked her watch, and her stomach dropped. She was later than she'd thought.

She retraced her steps, candlelight flickering behind her. Shadows stretched long across the cold floor. At the end of the corridor, she stopped short. The door was gone. Just a wall of smooth stone.

"Don't panic," she whispered, though her voice wobbled.

Then—scratch, scratch, scratch.

A faint shuffling. Fingernails or claws against stone. Again. Louder. More deliberate. Like something—or someone—wanted her attention.

She followed the sound, hand trailing the wall until her fingers found a second indentation.
A tiny knot in the stonework. Another keyhole.

She slipped the snowflake tool into place and gave it a slow turn.
The wall groaned. Cracked open, just wide enough to glimpse the Orkney Room beyond.

She turned sideways and squeezed through. As she was nearly clear, something cold and furry pressed against her calf. Not brushed, pressed. On purpose.

She jerked her leg free and stumbled forward. The wall sealed shut behind her.

Seconds before the stone clicked shut, she caught a glimpse:

Two yellow eyes. Watching her.

* * *

Zoe has finally arrived. Our gathering place, hidden for centuries, now revealed. We've waited a long while for her. She's also seen our faces.

But which portrait is mine?

She doesn't yet know.

She will. In due time.



CHAPTER 9: THE BREAKTHROUGH

After a day of floating books and secret passageways, Zoe was quite exhausted. She was single-mindedly focused on finding her Aunt Aggie and nothing was going to keep her from the midnight rendezvous with Huey the Hogboon.

She sat cross-legged on the fuzzy lid of a closed toilet seat, the Wonderbelt draped across her lap. The bathroom wasn't ideal for research, but it was the only place her little sister wouldn't barge in and her mom wouldn't pepper her with questions. Probably.

In order to meet Huey, she needed to get Aggie's flashlight to work.

She twisted, pulled, and pushed the metal tube every which way. Nothing. Finally, out of frustration, she gave it a hard twist, and to her surprise, a small hole clicked open at one end.

Zoe lifted it to her eye and aimed it at the shower curtain. The image fractured instantly, splintering into mirrored shapes.

This isn't a flashlight—it's a strange spyglass.

Her gaze dropped back to the belt. Three glass discs were set into the worn leather along the back, like miniature stained-glass windows, their jewel tones glinting in the dim light.

Zoe tilted her head, studying them, matching their shape and size with quick precision. Then she held the brass cylinder over one of the discs. Same size. Exactly.

"...no way."

She pressed the bottom edge of the leather slot. The first glass disc popped upward through the slit. She caught it before it fell.

The three-inch disc was etched with nine intricate animal symbols: a horse, a snake, a wolf, a seahorse, an eagle, a deer, a boar, a fish, and a bull. Each symbol shimmered faintly in the bathroom light.

“What are these symbols?” she wondered, turning them over in her fingers.

Her attention returned to the two remaining discs. Then to the cylinder again.

“Bingo!” she blurted, a little too loudly.

The wide end of the spyglass looked like it could hold all three wheels. She released the other two glass discs from the belt and snapped them onto the cylinder, just like Mr. Sinclair had shown her at The Rainbow’s End.

Eagerly, she peered inside.

It’s a kaleidoscope!

She spun the three wheels again, faster. The patterns stretched, pulling outward, no longer flat. Something deeper. Multidimensional.

Colors burst across her vision, rippling like heat waves. Primitive shapes—circles, zigzags, spirals—bloomed into view, then twisted and folded into one another. The patterns spun faster and faster, layering over each other like stained glass in a wind tunnel. Red shattered into blue. Green fractured into gold.

Her vision blurred. Her pulse quickened. She felt like she was falling through color.

A blinding gold light filled the scope. It was so bright it made her eyes water, like staring at the sun.

She jerked back, lowering the kaleidoscope, her heart pounding.

Then came a high-pitched nasal voice, clearly irritated.

“Agnes! Where have you been? We’ve been so worried about you!”

Startled, Zoe dropped the kaleidoscope. It clattered into the sink.

Who's talking?

She spun, scanning the bathroom. She yanked back the shower curtain, threw open the vanity, and checked the hallway. All empty.

“Anna?” she called, her voice thinner than she meant. “If this is you, it’s not funny.”

Silence.

Okay. Think. The voice had said Aggie's name.

“He... hee... heellloooo?” she whispered into thin air.

Again, the same shrill voice, sounding even more agitated.

“Did you misplace my combination again? Honestly! Remember last year? You tried to reach Mary Somerville and ended up dialing Mary, Queen of Scots. Without an appointment? Boy, was she mad!”

Zoe went very still. The voice wasn’t coming from the bathroom. Slowly, deliberately, her gaze drifted back to the sink. The kaleidoscope sat where she’d dropped it. Waiting. Zoe hesitated, then lifted it to her eye.

A tiny scene flickered into view. She sucked in a breath. It wasn’t a reflection. It wasn’t in the bathroom at all. It was a miniature world, alive inside the lens.

A plump, bald woman stirred an enormous copper pot in a pale blue kitchen. Nearby, a stern woman in a starched white robe peered into a microscope. The image was so vivid, Zoe could almost smell the broth.

Zoe didn’t move.

This has to be some kind of trick.

She lowered the kaleidoscope a fraction, then raised it again. Same scene. Same people. They were moving. Talking. Working. And they had said Aggie's name.

A nasal, high-pitched voice rang out, startling her.

“Aggie, deeeear, it's been nearly a weeeek in human time! Did you find the Sea Stone? Wait—let me fetch my wig!”

The woman darted to the table and grabbed a tangled mess of red curls, which she gingerly plopped onto her head. A wig, but no shade of red found in nature.

Zoe couldn't help noticing the whiskers sprouting from her chin.

WHISKERS!

Zoe's mouth dropped open. The woman was Mattie Black of Brims, the free-spirited figure from the Orkney Room portraits. But Mattie died in 1888.

The nasal voice continued. “Of course, you remember Florence.” Mattie gestured toward the nurse in white.

The woman looked up. “How's your health, Agnes? Still taking the herbal blend I prescribed?”

“What's happening?” Zoe whispered, hands shaking.

Zoe swallowed hard. “Um... I'm not Aggie. I'm her great-niece. Zoe.”

Mattie's eyes narrowed. She grabbed her ladle and began banging it against the pot while blowing a shell whistle from around her neck.

“Breach! Breach!” she shrieked. “We have a security breach! Effie, come quickly!”

Florence stood, face darkening. Zoe squinted, convinced she'd seen her before.

Another woman swept into view, tall, with piercing green eyes and long gray hair. A silver gown flowed to her feet, red jewels glinting at her throat and wrists.

“What now, you old bat?” she snapped, then composed herself. “Ah. Florence. Didn’t see you there.”

Zoe blinked. There were more of them now.

“Florence is helping me with my hair loss situation,” Mattie muttered.

“Well, that’s just lovely,” the woman said dryly. “But I was in the middle of finishing some important enchantment work. Why were you blowing the emergen—”

Mattie yanked Effie close, whispering rapidly. Effie’s eyes widened. She turned to Zoe.

“Child, I’m Effie Gray. Did you steal the kaleidoscope? It’s not a toy. You must return it to Agnes Muir. Immediately!”

Zoe’s face went red. “I didn’t steal it. Aggie left it to me. She’s missing. The police think she drowned.”

Florence gasped. “Oh no. Not Agnes!”

Mattie clutched her heart.

“IMPOSSIBLE. IF AGNES WERE DEAD, *WE* CERTAINLY WOULD KNOW!”

Zoe’s thoughts raced. Who are they? How do they know Aggie? How can they see me? The most important question pushed forward.

“Are you... ghosts?”

Effie and Mattie exchanged a tense look. Effie paused, choosing her words carefully.

“Not... exactly. We are The Clan, Wise Women. Guardians of ancient magic.”

Zoe dropped the kaleidoscope to her lap. *Ancient magic?*

She breathed deep and raised the kaleidoscope to her eye once more. Now, the women were lost in an argument.

“I told you that map was a forgery,” Effie snapped. “We never should have let her go on that dive.” Then Effie refocused. “This is a grave matter.”

“Grave matter!” Mattie cackled. “Get it? Grave? And we’re... dead?”

Florence closed her eyes and shook her head, exasperated at Mattie’s tasteless pun. She began packing her things.

“Weather Witches, I must go. Cleopatra is having another... episode. You know how difficult she can be. Please keep me informed about Agnes. She is one of my favorite... well... living members.”

She smiled gently at Zoe. “Good luck, Zoe. I hope you find Aggie.”

Then she vanished.

Zoe stared into the empty space. Her mind scrambled—textbooks, documentaries, images flickering past.

The Lady with the Lamp.

“Wait, was that... Florence Nightingale?”

“Of course it was,” Mattie said. “I mean, she’s a Brit and all, but do you think I’d let just anyone work on this body?”

Effie swatted her. “Enough. We need help. Katherine Caray is a longtime member of The Clan. You must go directly to her as she can’t travel. Her address is Seahorse, Bull, Seahorse.”

Zoe frowned. “Wait, what?”

Mattie leaned toward Effie and whispered loudly, “Not too bright, is she? And have you noticed she’s sitting on a toilet? Summoning the dead from the loo. Simply not done. There is protocol!”

“Mattie,” Effie snapped. “Be quiet. This might be her first taste of magic.”

Zoe tightened her grip on the kaleidoscope.

“Zoe, the kaleidoscope has three wheels,” Effie said more gently. “Each marked with nine animal symbols. Each member of The Clan has an address—a combination.”

Zoe studied the kaleidoscope. The three animal wheels clicked with each turn, just like her locker at school. Each Wise Woman had her own address, only instead of numbers, there were pictures. The right combination opened the line.

“Okay...”

“To reach Katherine, turn the inside wheel to the Seahorse, the middle wheel to the Bull, and the outside wheel to the Seahorse. Always work from the inside out. Do you understand?”

Zoe pictured it. Three rings turning separately.

“I... think so.”

“Well, if something goes wrong,” Mattie added, “just come back here. You must have myyyy combination. How else could you find me?”

“It was an accident,” Zoe muttered.

She studied the top of the kaleidoscope: Horse, Eagle, Snake. She made a mental note of Mattie’s address, just in case.

Mattie clapped three times. The women vanished.

Zoe sighed, head in her hands. A glowing bookmark. Floating books. Dead witches in a talking kaleidoscope.

Too much. Am I dreaming? What was Aunt Aggie mixed up in?

She pinched her arm. Definitely awake.

Might as well try the combination. These weren’t the kind of women you ignored.

She turned each wheel three times—Seahorse, Bull, Seahorse—held her breath and looked inside.

Katherine Caray lay in a gold-draped canopy bed, surrounded by three black cats.

“Child,” she said softly, “I’m an old friend of Agnes. Tell me everything.”

Zoe did—fins with arms, attic secrets, fish scales, purple fabric, donut stones, Grisel.

Katherine listened, expression darkening.

“Your aunt’s disappearance is serious. Thank goodness you have the kaleidoscope. Are you in charge of all... her tools?”

“Yes,” Zoe said, hand instinctively resting on the Wonderbelt.

“You must keep them safe,” Effie added. “In the wrong hands, they’re dangerous.”

Zoe pictured Grisel’s sharp smile.

“Of course,” Mattie added. “Most people couldn’t use them anyway.”

“What do you mean?” Zoe asked.

“Not everyone has The Gift,” Effie said. “You do. That’s why Aggie left you the belt.

Explaining more would overwhelm you, for now.”

Katherine lifted a trembling hand. “Zoe, we need you to retrieve directions for us.”

“Directions to where?”

The women exchanged uneasy glances.

“They’re hidden in Marwick’s Hole,” Katherine said softly.

“What’s that?”

“An old dungeon beneath St. Magnus Cathedral,” Effie answered.

“A dungeon? In a church?” Zoe’s stomach tightened.

“It’s not used anymore,” Effie added. “Not officially. But they used to lock up women there, those accused of witchcraft. It’s cold. Small. Forgotten.”

“Aggie tried sneaking in once,” Katherine said. “To find the directions. But she got stuck.”

“Stuck?” Zoe echoed.

“There’s only one way in,” Effie said. “A small window near the foundation. Agnes couldn’t fit through it. But you might.”

Zoe stared into the kaleidoscope, heart thudding.

“Where exactly are the directions hidden? And why are they so important?”

“The directions are in the Wall of the Dead. They will lead you to the Stones of Life, which I hid before I went to trial—before my ex...exec...execut...” Unable to finish, Katherine fell back into bed.

Effie patted Katherine’s arm. “It’s okay, dear; I’ll explain. You see, Zoe, many years ago, wise women like us were tried and executed as witches in Orkney. Katherine suffered that fate herself. She courageously hid the three Stones of Life to protect them. After everything she suffered, she cannot remember where she hid the stones. However, she does recall leaving directions for them in Marwick’s Hole.”

“I’m so sorry, Katherine,” Zoe said. “That sounds awful. But I don’t understand. Why do I need to find these stones?”

Effie clasped her hands together, her green eyes glowing.

“To save your Aunt Aggie, you must find the Stones of Life.”