

Chapter 1

The women moved slowly, shuffling into the clearing in the woods, careful not to trip on the long white robes they had been instructed to wear. A few stole surreptitious glances at one or the other of their group as they formed a loose semicircle before the slab of stone in the clearing. A chill wind blew through the trees and the sound of beating wings came from above.

Cordelia Rank took her place at the designated altar. Behind her, a brazier flamed on the ancient rock. She surveyed the gathering critically. “Sisters, please! You *can* do better. Form a *semicircle!*” she ordered, indicating her wishes with a sweep of her arm. Each woman glanced to her left and right, and, stepping carefully over the pine needles and damp earth, shifted position to form a more uniform shape.

Cecily Winters took a deep breath, wondering, not for the first time, if joining the Snowflake coven was such a good idea. Her sister Marjorie certainly hadn’t been happy about it. It had sounded just so wonderful when she had first heard of the plan. Beltane Eve, April 30th, a night to celebrate the coming of spring and the first buds of May with a bonfire, feasting, candlelight and song. Their small iron container would have to do. A bonfire in the woods at midnight could be dangerous. Cecily shuddered involuntarily. The crackling flames formed eerie shadows in the night, flickering against the tree trunks. If only Cordelia hadn’t appointed herself high priestess, she thought, insufferable woman, it might have been fun.

At a nod from Cordelia, one of the group, holding a candle cupped in her hand, moved within the inner circumference of their small circle, and with her own candle, lit those clutched in the hands of the women. When all the candles were lit, Cordelia nodded.

“Now we begin,” she announced. She turned back to the stone altar and, raising her arms, spoke in ringing tones. “Mother Earth, we have gathered together here, in this wood, to honor you, to celebrate the light of coming spring. Beltane is a time for love and the union of souls, the union of minds and the union of bodies.”

Cecily looked up quickly. This was the first she had heard of the union of bodies. She glanced around the circle to see if anyone else had noticed the phrase.

“We have been called to replenish the earth.” Cordelia continued. “Our fire and our candles will light the sacred union of fertility, as our pagan ancestors have done for centuries. We will assist in bringing the sun’s light to earth, so that the earth may awaken from its long winter sleep. Our bodies, our minds and our spirits will alight with joy. We are ready to cast away all the doubts and fears of the winter. Our dream will be of hope and harmony.”

Cecily’s nose was itching. The band of flowers in the headdress she wore was slipping down over her forehead. She needed to scratch, but holding the candle and her too long robe together, she had no free hand. She moved her shoulder up and turned her head, rubbing her nose on her arm. Cordelia glared at her from the stone altar. Cecily dropped her arm but before

she could stifle it, she erupted with a thunderous sneeze.

Cordelia sighed her disappointment. Addressing the women, she said, “We now dedicate our herbs to the glory of Mother Earth. Each of us shall drink of our May wine.” She turned to the woman on her left. “You, sister, shall be the first to drink of our draught tonight.” Cordelia filled a shallow bowl from a cauldron that sat next to the fire. “With these herbs of sweet woodruff, strawberry and honey, you shall partake.”

One woman stepped forward and doused her candle on the stone altar. She grasped the bowl in both hands. Cordelia paused, about to speak, but before she could utter a word, the woman drank the brew in its entirety. Cordelia stared at her, then filled the bowl again as a second woman stepped forward.

A strangled sound came from the lips of the first woman to drink. She gasped, clutching her throat. Her eyes grew large in panic as she tried to speak. Her chest heaved with the effort to breathe. She dropped to the ground as her legs crumpled beneath her. The others watched helplessly as the woman lay before them, retching and gasping for air.

“Agnes,” Emily cried out.

“What’s wrong?” Cecily asked.

Someone replied in alarm. “She can’t breathe. Help her!”

“Let me through. I know CPR,” Emily Rathbone pushed the women aside. They stepped back and stared as Agnes continued to gasp. Emily struggled to lift Agnes’s head and open her jaw while Agnes writhed violently.

“Help me hold her.” Emily shouted. Two of the women knelt. One held Agnes’s arms and the other, her legs. Emily tilted Agnes’s head and checked her throat. “There’s nothing there. Nothing’s interfering with her breathing. Maybe it’s an allergic reaction.” She deftly rolled Agnes to her side. Agnes’s head fell forward, her movements still violent. She retched again and whispered, “help me.” Then her body went limp.

Complete stillness filled the clearing. No one spoke. Someone finally whispered, “Is she breathing?”

Emily felt for a pulse while the women watched in silence. She looked up at their concerned faces. “Agnes is gone.”