

THE GRIMM LEGACY



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An imprint of
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Musa Publishing
633 Edgewood Ave
Lancaster, OH 43130
www.musapublishing.com

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Published by Musa Publishing, May 2012

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ISBN: 978-1-61937-221-4

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This book is dedicated to

Merlin David Woodruff

I hope it's twelve o'clock, Grandpa.

I miss you.

Chapter One

The blond newscaster was way too perky for me this early in the morning. If I didn't get coffee soon I'd find out firsthand if perkiness prior to percolation qualified for justifiable homicide.

My ratty old bathrobe and wild bedhead hair just couldn't compete with the polish of the woman on the battered second-hand television. She deserved a smack for that alone, at least in my opinion. I settled for smacking the side of the television when the picture fuzzed at the edges and wished for some kind of supernatural power that would allow me to slap her through the TV.

I stumbled through the half unpacked boxes and piles of books and papers in my new apartment yawning and stretching. I hoped I'd unpacked the coffeepot the night before; I'd just moved yesterday, and everything was still in a jumbled mess.

"This just in; Dayton police discovered a dead wolf in McGregor Park this morning. The wolf's stomach appears to have been cut open, and seven heavy paving stones were placed inside, likely prior to death..."

Huh? It must've been the lack of caffeine; the newscaster couldn't actually be talking about something that strange. I was only twenty-two; too young for dementia. And a wolf that close to where I lived? Yikes. The park was right next door to my apartment complex. I didn't think we had wolves in Dayton, Ohio. I stood in front of the coffee pot, willing it to brew faster and yawning some more, but the newscast caught my attention again.

"And in other news, last night police responded to a break in at the Dayton Art Institute. A source close to the museum has told us that several pieces for the upcoming German folk art exhibit have been taken, including a red cape, a spinning wheel and spindle, and a glass shoe, but none of the framed art or sculptures from the museum were touched. In a stranger note, the security cameras seem to have been malfunctioning because there is no record of entry or exit into the building after the museum closed for the day."

The coffeepot finally finished brewing. Thank God.

Now where were those coffee mugs? I must not have unpacked them the night before. I reached for the first open box and rummaged around until I found my *Give Me My Coffee and No One Will Get Hurt* mug. It was my favorite.

Who would want such oddball things, as opposed to valuable art that could be stolen and sold for money? Not that I would steal anything, but the items the newscaster was talking about couldn't be worth all that much. I looked around my tiny one-bedroom apartment furnished sparsely from garage sales and thrift stores and attics. Money was something I didn't have a lot of, either.

My stepmother was going to be furious. Evangeline Kravits Grimm worked as a volunteer at the museum, and I knew she was preparing something big for the exhibit. I really hoped they wouldn't have to cancel it after all of her hard work, or I'd be listening to her complain for a good long while. She'd be miserable, and she'd make me miserable with her.

I had to meet Evangeline for brunch today. I winced as I poured myself some coffee. That was not going to be a fun meal. I headed back into the living room, sipping my coffee and trying to orient

myself about what I might be able to accomplish before I left for brunch.

As I turned, I slipped on the pile of mail lying on the floor below the mail slot in my front door and stubbed my toe on a nearby box of books before I could catch my balance. Coffee slopped over the side of the mug, singeing the back of my hand and spilling on the sleeve of my bathrobe.

“Ow, ow, ow.” I hopped on one foot, trying not to spill any more coffee as I also tried to see how badly I’d stubbed my toe. I didn’t see any blood. It probably wasn’t more than just bruised, but wow, that hurt. I scooped up the mail and tossed it on the kitchen table where I’d sort out the junk and the coupons later. As I set down the coffee mug on the counter and wiped the coffee off the back of my hand, I noticed that the envelopes were marked “occupant.” I wondered how long it would take to start getting mail with my own name, Janie Grimm, on the label.

What to wear? My version of acceptable brunch clothing was nowhere near as particular as my step-mother’s. If left to my own devices, I’d end up in a T-shirt and a pair of jean cutoffs. It took several wardrobe changes before I finally settled on an outfit. If the newscast was to be believed about a break-in at the museum, she’d be extra picky today. She was always hard to please when she was in a bad mood, and thieves being inconsiderate enough to ruin her hard work and steal her exhibits would affect her mood for sure.

I got dressed in Evangeline-approved gear: tan slacks and a pale blue sweater set. I hated clothing like that. It made me look like one of those people in high-end shopping malls, all wearing the same outfit and carrying the same giant paisley purse, with fake acrylic French manicures and perfectly coiffed hair. They were like poodles: primped and pressed within an inch of having a life.

Speaking of primping, I’d have to find my makeup. I hated wearing it, but I needed to go the extra mile today to prevent a stepmother scolding. I always felt like I was wearing a disguise when I wore makeup; it was like I was wearing someone else’s face instead of my own.

“Where did I put that makeup kit?” I asked aloud, speaking to no one in particular, especially since I lived alone. After several minutes of frantic rummaging, I found it in exactly the place I shouldn’t have been: jammed in a box of Dad’s old books, between the leather bound family Bible and the photo album of my father’s wedding to Evangeline.

I shouldn’t have taken the time, but I cracked open the photo album to see a picture of my Dad. Mom took off when I was eight, and two years later Evangeline married Dad in a ceremony so sickeningly perfect that Martha Stewart herself would’ve cringed. I wore a scratchy pink crinoline dress that day without complaint, because it made my dad so happy.

I missed him. Dad got sick just after the wedding and spent the next twelve years fighting the cancer that finally killed him six months ago. I was, at least, able to announce my acceptance to law school before he died. He made Evangeline promise to help and support me since he couldn’t be there himself, and she had, albeit reluctantly, agreed. She was my only family now, and I was stuck with her because she held the purse strings. The relationship she and I had didn’t come without obligation.

It’s not that I can’t pay the rent, I thought, as I put the album on a shelf beside the Bible. I don’t mind hard work. I could get a job, but first year law students aren’t supposed to work. The law school was adamant all through the application and acceptance process and through orientation, telling us the workload would be too heavy to take on a job, even a part-time one. I hated the idea of putting myself in debt to Evangeline, but all she’d asked for in return for paying my rent was a promise to meet her for a weekly brunch, on her. At the time it seemed like a small price to pay.

Now I was spending the day before my classes started meeting her for brunch instead of figuring out which boxes held my notebooks and highlighters for tomorrow. I grabbed the makeup bag and hurried to get ready. As it was, I'd taken too much time looking at old pictures and ended up rushing to finish my makeup in the parking lot when I arrived.

When I got to the restaurant, a chi-chi bistro I couldn't hope to afford on my current budget, I caught sight of my reflection in the glass door and groaned. My chin-length brown hair was not being cooperative. It was mid-August in Ohio and the humidity was making my hair look like I'd combed it with a pitchfork. I reached for a headband in my purse and hoped Evangeline wouldn't complain too much. It was too late to do anything about it now.

And there she was: a vision in a pale yellow sweater set, her blond hair shellacked into place with enough hairspray to make me consider buying stock in Aqua Net, her long manicured nails clicking and clacking as they drummed an impatient rhythm on the table. Okay, so I was late. It was only ten minutes. I swear it wasn't on purpose.

Evangeline's gravelly voice didn't match the perfect, falsely youthful, exterior. "Didn't you promise to meet me at eleven? At least you made it here while they're still serving brunch. My dear, you really must start wearing a good watch, especially if you're going to be an attorney. How will you know how much time to bill a client if you don't get used to checking your watch?"

I wondered if I could buy a reliable watch for less than ten dollars. That was just about all the money I could afford for it. I muttered an incoherent objection, not expecting to win any argument with her but physically unable to agree with anything she said. It was a reflex after years of digs and disagreements.

And, as usual, she waved off petty concerns like money. "You have plenty of money. Your father's estate had money and a watch is an investment in your future."

Yeah, I'd inherited money from my dad in the form of the proceeds of selling the house we'd lived in before Evangeline married Dad, but law school tuition was the investment in my future I'd chosen to make, rather than fancy jewelry. Between tuition, books, supplies, and all the expenses other than the rent, I didn't have much extra cash left to get through law school without running out of money, especially if I couldn't work for the first year.

"Evangeline, how's your work with the art institute going?" *Better get it out of the way, now,* I thought.

The waiter came by to take our drink order before my stepmother got a chance to say anything else. Evangeline ordered a soy milk latte, and I ordered a mimosa. This wasn't starting well.

The waiter, a cute redheaded guy about my own age, started yammering on about the day specials. I smiled at him; he had served us at most of our brunch meetings. I never could remember his name, but he wasn't bad to look at, and never tried to extend our meetings with dessert or coffee offerings. It was almost like he knew I didn't want to be there, and was trying to help me get out there faster. I caught a glimpse of his name tag: Aiden.

Evangeline looked down, meticulously lining up the handles of her silverware so they were even with the edge of the table. She then refolded the napkin on her lap twice before pulling out a small jar of lotion, which she proceeded to rub into her hands while she complained to the waiter that there were spots on the silverware. Okay, Evangeline was anal retentive, and the hand lotion thing was a bit of an obsession with her, but that was way overboard.

I shooed the waiter away, despite the insane urge to keep talking with him instead of my stepmother. He seemed nicer than Evangeline. He tripped on his way back into the kitchen, knocking over a tray of dishes that crashed to the floor as he fell. I definitely would have preferred to go over and see if he was okay rather than stay at my table.

Instead, I asked her the question I knew I was supposed to ask. “Are you all right?”

“Oh, I’m fine. Thank you for asking,” she said, clearing her throat and looking up from the pristine napkin in her lap. “I suppose the news last night shook me up a bit.”

Huh? The plastic Barbie of Botox shook up? This I had to hear. “What happened?” Ice queen clenched-teeth pique, I expected. Frostily annoyed? Sure. Shook up? I’d never seen her antsy and distracted like this. Maybe I shouldn’t have brought it up.

“Someone broke into the art institute last night and several of the exhibits were taken. There was to be an exhibition of German folk art and historical artifacts to open right before Oktoberfest and now they must cancel, because the cornerstone pieces were taken.”

“What pieces?” I asked, wondering if the news had gotten it all correct.

“There was a horn mouthpiece made of bone, a glass shoe, a red cape, a spinning wheel and spindle, an iron stove, as well as twelve worn out pairs of dancing shoes. And they cannot be replaced!”

It sounded like an overreaction to me. But then again, Evangeline had perfected the art of genteel melodrama. “I’m sure it’ll turn up. At least it wasn’t a Monet or a Van Gogh. I’m assuming the exhibit had more pieces to display than that, so those six things shouldn’t stop the show, should it? Our drinks arrived, and the waiter asked for our order again.

I sipped my drink and started to order. The cute waiter bolted, babbling incoherently about needing to get more water. I looked at our full water glasses and began to call after him, but I caught sight of Evangeline’s expression, and gaped at her uncharacteristic show of emotion.

Her face flushed, her eyes went red, and she was gritting her teeth as she spoke in clipped bursts of tight-lipped pique. “Don’t you dare belittle the value of those precious items, you ungrateful thing! They may not be traditional art, but they’re irreplaceable cultural treasures and you’d do well to remember it. Someday you’ll understand the true value of things.”

I must’ve looked shocked at her outburst, my glass halfway to my mouth. She took a moment to run her hands over her hair and smooth back the nonexistent flyaways as she took a deep breath to compose herself. Evangeline didn’t lose her temper, not ever. I’d seen her be frostily annoyed. I’d seen her nag without a crack in her polished veneer. But visibly angry? Never. And lecturing me about the true value of things? From Evangeline? Was she kidding me?

Chapter Two

I tried to apologize. Just the idea that Evangeline had actual emotions had thrown me.

I could've slapped myself for that ungrateful thought. If I'd managed to piss off my stepmother I wasn't sure how I'd get the rent paid this month. She let me stew about it a moment, and then her face relaxed as much as it was able with all of the Botox. After she collected herself, she pulled a check out of her purse and slid it across the table. I grabbed for it before she could snatch it back, and noticed that she'd written it for three hundred dollars more than my rent. Now I really felt bad. "Evangeline, I did tell you that my rent was only five hundred dollars a month, didn't I?"

She gave me a serene smile, a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree change from just moments before. "Of course I know what your rent costs, my dear; I was there when you signed the paperwork. I just felt your father would want me to look after you better than that. After all, he did make me promise to take care of you."

I stammered something that sounded appreciative, still in shock at her turnaround.

She continued, "You'll have some expenses getting started that I'm sure you weren't expecting. Of course, I expect you to buy a decent watch, as well. You'll need to be sure to get yourself to class on time. I can't imagine how you made it through college without someone to ensure you went to all of your classes without being late. And someone certainly needs to look after you if you don't have the social graces to think about what you say before you say it."

And there it was. The dig. Not that I wasn't grateful for the money. Setting up house was more expensive than I'd budgeted for, and my savings were taking quite a beating. Who knew just how far bed linens, and brooms, and pots and pans could blow a budget? I certainly hadn't realized how expensive it would be.

I felt bad about belittling something that obviously meant so much to her. "I appreciate your help, Evangeline. Is there anything I can do to help you this week?" It'd be hard to juggle my first week of law school with keeping her happy, but I'd fouled up, and I knew it.

"Well, if you would be a dear, the art institute is having a fundraiser on Friday night. If you could show up in an appropriate outfit and pass out programs, I would appreciate it, and you'd get a free meal out of it as well."

Done. It was the least I could do for her when she'd covered the extra expenses that had kept me up late last night budgeting and recalculating in my head, worrying about how I'd afford food for the next two weeks. There's only so much Top Ramen a person can eat. "I'll be there."

As I left the restaurant, I was congratulating myself at giving her what she wanted. The whole meal hadn't lasted long, so I still had time to get back to my place to unpack a few more boxes and get a good night's sleep.

I went home and straightened up my apartment, then began organizing my backpack and my notebooks to embark on my first day of law school. This was what I'd been working for. I wished Dad could be here. He used to send me off to my first day of school with a hand-packed lunch, complete with a goofy I-love-you note and cookies, even when Evangeline hadn't approved.

I went to bed early that night, trying not to fantasize about how interesting law school would be. ~~how much I was looking forward to it. I couldn't wait to join the clinic program that the law school had.~~ One day, I'd represent people in court and make a difference in their lives.

Yeah, I know. Real life isn't all hearts and rainbows.

I had set the alarm, set a backup alarm, had my things all packed and ready to go, as well as organized for note-taking frenzy. I was ready.

Or so I thought.

The next morning, I woke up early and made it to class with plenty of time to spare. I got organized, opened my notebook to the first page and was ready to take notes. I was well rested, ready and eager to see what would happen next. I was looking forward to law school, ready for the challenge and I couldn't wait.

Within five minutes, I was in trouble. And it had nothing to do with my stepmother.

"Ms. Grimm, do you mean to tell this class that you failed to check the assignment board for the first day assignments?" The contracts professor snapped at me as the entire class watched. I frantically skimmed the case as he waited for an answer. It had something to do with one party offering a contract to another, but it just didn't make a lot of sense to me. I was toast.

"I apologize, sir. I didn't check the board, because I didn't realize that we'd have homework for the first day of class." Could I sink any lower in my seat? Maybe if I just fell over dead, the embarrassment would be over, and I could go home to cry.

He huffed at me, and the class tittered. "Ms. Grimm, you realize that I only allow four unexcused absences before I fail a student?"

Gulp. "Yes sir, I do." He'd announced it the moment he started the class, less than fifteen minutes ago. I written it down at the top of the notes I'd been trying to take, but it's impossible to take coherent notes when I didn't understand what he was talking about. It was like taking notes in Martian and expecting those of us living on earth to understand it.

"Being unprepared is as bad as failing to appear for class; this will count as an unexcused absence. The same goes for any other student in this class for the rest of the semester. Be prepared, or don't waste my time. Exciting careers in other fields await you if you cannot move yourself to do the work. Mr. Templeton, could you save Ms. Grimm and give us the facts of the case in the assigned reading for today?" he asked, as he turned to someone else.

My face was on fire, the blood pounding in my ears. I buried my face in the textbook and tried to follow along as Professor Higgenbottom raked Mr. Templeton over the coals. The class continued, but I just wanted to go home. This wasn't what I'd imagined law school to be. I'd thought that we'd debate the law, rather than be chastised like misbehaving children who'd failed to do their chores. Was I wasting the money I'd inherited from Dad by spending it on law school tuition? Did I really belong here?

Croak. "Wow, some people are really clueless," a deep voice coming from somewhere in front of me muttered.

What the hell? The person directly in front of me was a petite blond woman. That couldn't be her voice, could it? Who was talking?

I couldn't figure out where the sound was coming from. I didn't see anything, and I didn't wa

to draw any attention to myself. I tried not to respond, hoping I hadn't already been noticed.

Croak. It sounded like a frog. And a really big one, at that.

Chapter Three

People were starting to look around, but no one wanted to be in the line of fire.

There had to be a window open. The frog kept croaking and ribbit-ing as the class continued, but no one got up to close the window. I suspected that the rest of the class was trying to avoid coming to Professor Higgenbottom's attention. Maybe I wasn't the only one who'd screwed up by missing the first day assignments. I hoped the next person called on would be the mysterious mutterer, and I hoped they hadn't done the work. That would serve them right for making me feel like I'd lost my mind.

The whole class breathed a collective sigh of relief at the end of the hour, and the professor's parting shot that he'd taken it easy on us wasn't helping the general stress level in the room. I bolted away from my humiliation and that weird noise as fast as I could, but I wasn't quite fast enough to avoid everyone.

"Look, honey, don't worry about it. I heard he can be a real bear, but my cousin went to school here and told me he really does prepare students well for the bar exam. That's the bottom line, isn't it?" My good friend from high school, Mia Andersen, was standing there, waiting for me. She pulled her long blond hair back into a ponytail and slung her backpack over her shoulder to head for our next class.

"Thanks, Mia. Seriously, though, I feel like my stomach is about to drop straight through my feet. Why does law school have to be this way? We're all adults; we shouldn't be treated like irresponsible children." I knew I was whining, but I figured I'd earned the right to be a little upset with the humiliation I'd just endured.

Mia grinned at me as we walked out into the hallway. "You just happened to land in the line of fire today. I'm sure everyone will be there at some point. Meanwhile, there's a few of us meeting for coffee after the last class of the day to talk about forming a study group. Wanna come?"

I forced myself to smile back, even though my stomach still felt like I'd drunk heated needles dipped in hot sauce. It did help to think that we were all going through this together. We went on to our next class, Torts, where a similar scene was repeated, although, thankfully, not with me. The other student who'd incurred the professor's wrath was just as upset as I was, and when the day was over Mia and I retreated to a nearby coffee shop to commiserate.

While we waited on the others to arrive, we looked over our schedules. We both had the four core classes—Torts, Contracts, Property, and Civil Procedure—at the same times throughout the week, but we were in different classes for our Legal Writing course. It looked like Tuesdays would be the longest day, five hours of class with the first one at nine in the morning and the last class not ending until six in the evening, but we'd have long breaks in between to get more studying done at the library. Each class met multiple times through the week, so we'd be spending plenty of time at the law school.

Thanks to Evangeline's generosity I had the cash to get a cup of coffee, but I still didn't order the expensive froufrou drinks on the menu. I like my coffee strong and black, and I didn't think a lot of sugar, whipped cream, or flavored syrups would sit too well on my still-nervous stomach. Besides, with Evangeline's check, I was looking forward to heading to the grocery store later to stock up on

something other than store brand macaroni and cheese.

Mia was a natural organizer. Before long, we'd all agreed to meet on Wednesday evenings and Sunday afternoons for study meetings, to talk about the week before, help each other, and generally commiserate. The others in our group were just as scared as we were. David was a middle-aged man with a girlfriend who was a single mom, and was going back to school after being an insurance salesman for the last ten years. Mike was a retired cop, who decided to go to law school when he had to take an early retirement due to a leg injury. Leann was younger than anyone else in the first year class. She'd graduated from high school early and finished college at nineteen. I hoped she'd handle the stress of law school better than I was handling it at the moment.

Croak. "What a bunch of Nervous Nellies." I heard that same deep voice I'd heard in class. *O crap. The Mad Mutterer was in my study group?* I wasn't sure I liked that idea. Wait, I hadn't seen any of their lips move when I'd heard that statement made.

"Do you hear that?" I asked.

They all nodded, and we looked around again, but still couldn't figure out the source of the noise. When we didn't hear it again, we continued our plans to stay on track with the assignments and outlining we'd have to do in order to be prepared for exams in three months. Law school grades were whatever the student got on the final; there wasn't an average of tests and projects and assignments like in high school and college. With everything riding on one exam score, we hoped that the stress of preparing would be less if we helped each other.

Croooooaaaaak. Ribbit.

I'd had enough. "Am I going crazy, or is there a frog stalking us?"

They all laughed. Leann spoke up. "I heard it in class, too. I thought I was losing my mind. Or maybe it's some kind of prank being played by another student to get us all in trouble."

We agreed that we'd all heard it, but no one knew where it was coming from. We searched again but still had no luck in finding the offensive amphibian. The noise was starting to grate on me, but we were just about done with our meeting. I tried to ignore the frog, and so did everyone else. If it was a prank, why was it targeting us? Was it some second or third year law student having fun with the newbies? Or some fraternity prank?

"Where're we going to meet? I can't afford to meet at a coffee shop or restaurant all the time." I was still mentally counting and budgeting Evangeline's check, and worrying about how I'd keep up with expenses once the extra money was gone. I couldn't count on getting extra money from her every month. Our agreement was that she pays my rent, nothing else. I might swing a bit more this month because of the extra funds, but I didn't want to count on it.

"I can't afford to, either," said Mike. "Is there another way to do this?"

"Why don't we just rotate going to each other's houses?" Mia suggested. "That way we aren't tempted to spend too much money. Besides, a pot of spaghetti or a few hamburgers on a grill is a whole lot cheaper to put together than going out to eat, and if we take turns, the cost shouldn't be too bad."

I jumped in. "Here's another idea; why not reserve a meeting room in the library for a study session right after our last Wednesday classes, and then Sunday afternoon can be more relaxed at our houses. That way we're not stressed about hosting everyone more than once a month or so, we don't spend too much money, and we help each other as much as possible."

We all agreed, and I volunteered to host our first Sunday meeting while I still had the extra cash. Mia agreed to reserve the library study room for Wednesday. As we trudged out to our cars, carrying heavy backpacks and anticipating a long night of reading for tomorrow, my cell phone went off. It was Evangeline.

“I was just calling to remind you of your promise to help at the fundraiser on Friday night, dear. We’re shorthanded, so you can’t forget, and I don’t want the museum to pay for your meal if you can’t show up.”

I had an idea. “Evangeline, you told me I could eat dinner for free if I helped, right?”

“Yes, of course.” She sounded annoyed that I had asked, but I wanted to make sure.

“I bet I could get a few more volunteers to help if I could make the same promise to them.” We all get a break on Friday night, and get to socialize a bit over something other than cases and lectures. And hopefully, they’d be a buffer from the worst of Evangeline’s insults, even as I made up for my insensitivity yesterday. I call that a win-win situation.

“Why, that would be wonderful. Go ahead and tell your friends, but let me know how many so I can keep an accurate head count. It wouldn’t do for the caterers to run out of food for the paying guests because they gave it all to the volunteers.” She clicked off without saying goodbye, as she usually did when she was done with a conversation. I’d have been annoyed at anyone else, but I was used to it from her. I’d heard her be more polite to people whose opinion she actually cared about, but I knew I wasn’t in that category.

I hung up and ran after the others.

“Anyone want to go to a party and get a free meal Friday night?” I asked, slightly out of breath from running after them with forty pounds of textbooks weighing down my backpack.

They all turned around, and I relayed my stepmother’s offer. David declined, citing child care issues, but the others all agreed. Evangeline was ecstatic when I called her back, and I was actually looking forward to it. Maybe it wouldn’t be as boring as I’d thought. After all, I’d have people to talk to, free dinner, and distractions from Evangeline. I figured I could handle that without a problem; this week was starting to look up.

Except for the mystery voice following me around, that is. I’d have to do something to figure out who was making me feel like I’d lost my mind. If I didn’t, I’d never get any studying done tonight.

Chapter Four

I headed home that afternoon with a smile on my face. Law school wasn't going to be easy, but I made a few friends and we had weekend plans to look forward to. Even working at one of Evangeline's fundraisers was guaranteed to be an interesting night. She always had the city's best caterers, and, if nothing else, I'd be able to amuse myself at the sight of the city's upper crust acting like they were hoity-toity society mavens. It's not like we're in New York or L.A. Our concept of big money just isn't all that big; we don't exactly have any Hiltons or Rockefellers in the greater Dayton metropolitan area.

I got out of my car and walked up to the small patio outside of my apartment, my mind chewing over the possibility of a fun Friday night and distracted from most of my surroundings. And I was away from that deep voice that had been bothering me all day.

Ribbit. Croak. "'Bout time you got here."

There it was again. It had followed me home from the coffee shop. Or at least it sounded the same.

"God damn it!" I yelled. "I can't lose my mind right now." I still had to catch up on the Contract homework, and do the rest of today's assignments, and to read for Property class for tomorrow. I had a fleeting thought that my priorities were completely out of whack, but I just couldn't face another day like today.

Wait a minute. This was a frog. I shouldn't be able to hear it inside. If I went in my apartment and made sure all the windows were closed, I'd be able to block out the sound enough to concentrate on all the reading for tonight.

A deep voice answered from right behind me as I put the key in my lock. "If you don't want your neighbors thinking you're crazy, then I suggest you stop yelling and cursing in public when you're alone. That's a one way ticket to a rubber room."

"Who the hell are you?" I spun around. There was no one there.

The same deep voice rumbled again, like he was speaking right over my shoulder. "Spinning around in a circle and talking to someone whom others can't see isn't going to help you in the proof of sanity department, either. Besides, you're making me dizzy, as well. Cut it out, or I'll yak on you."

I couldn't help it; I spun around again. There was still no one standing there. I unlocked the door and turned to look back over my shoulder as I slipped inside. I had to see if any of my new neighbors were watching me doing the Hokey-Pokey on the patio. I still didn't see anyone outside, and there definitely wasn't anyone standing close enough to account for the voice, so I shut the door and dropped my law book-heavy backpack.

"Ouch!" I heard simultaneously with the thud of books hitting the floor.

Huh? There wasn't another person in my apartment; my apartment isn't big enough for a human sized being to hide and I didn't have enough stuff for anyone to hide behind. There couldn't be anyone here without me seeing them.

I'd been under a lot of stress on my first day. Maybe I was losing it. It had to be my imagination. I shook my head to clear it before I started to ~~unpack my backpack for a night of studying and reading~~

When I pulled my Torts book out of the bag, there was a frog beneath it. It was no ordinary frog; it was bigger than both of my fists put together. I had to use two hands to pull it out of my backpack, its skinny frog legs dangling over the sides of my palms.

I did the only thing I could think of. I shrieked at the top of my lungs like a scared little girl and picked up the slimy green amphibian, running outside to put him in the grass beyond the sidewalk in front of my apartment. I was happy to note that none of my neighbors were outside to witness my freak-out.

I wiped my hands on the seat of my jeans, sure they were covered in some kind of invisible frog goo, and shuddered as I did so.

"Well, that sure looked brave, Janie Grimm. Big tough city girl scared of a little frog? I didn't know you'd be such a wimp, and to think I'd been looking forward to meeting you." There it was again, that deep voice, coming from somewhere near my toes. It was the same voice from class, the same voice from the coffee shop, the same voice from my patio. But there was no one else around.

I looked down, and the frog was blinking in slow motion. "It couldn't be," I whispered.

"And, wait for it; she's getting the picture..." His lips clearly moved as he spoke.

"This must be what going mad feels like," I said, wanting to reach up and rub the hallucination out of my eyes.

The frog laughed. I didn't know frogs could laugh. Oh, what the hell was I thinking? I didn't think frogs could *talk*. Amphibian laughter was the least of my problems at the moment.

I ran back inside and slammed the door. No frogs inside my apartment. It was an air pocket of sanity in a bubble of crazy. I sighed and ran my hands over my face. I must be hearing things. No way was this really happening.

After a quick search of my apartment failed to turn up any intruders, and a quick glance out the window showed me that no burglars, bad guys, bogeymen, or neighbors were outside, I figured I'd get my work done and go to bed early. I tried to convince myself that the voice was the result of an overactive imagination, extreme stress, and too many meals costing less than a dollar.

Once I'd calmed down, I settled onto the couch to start on my homework. I opened my Torts book and took out my highlighter, holding the cap in my mouth as I tried to concentrate on the reckless standard needed to constitute negligence. I was trying to disregard the nagging feeling that wasn't my imagination making the frog appear to speak.

The next thing I heard was a deep voice singing Kermit the Frog's "It's Not Easy Being Green" outside my front door. I tried to ignore it. There wasn't anyone out there. It couldn't be the frog. I peeked out the window again, and the frog was sitting at the edge of my patio, singing his heart out. No one else was around, but it was almost dinnertime. The neighbors could come home from work any moment to find a slimy green thing serenading me on the patio.

His song finished, he launched into a loud rendition of "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?" Maybe the newscaster yesterday wasn't wrong; maybe the moon really was made of green cheese; maybe aliens really had landed at Roswell, and winning lottery tickets really do grow on trees. No matter what, though, I didn't have the time to deal with being crazy. I had fifty pages of case law to read for tomorrow, and I didn't understand any of it.

“Will you kindly shut the hell up?” My fists balled at my sides, hissing softly at him through the window and around the highlighter cap still in my mouth.

He blinked at me slowly and kept singing. “Hey there Little Red Riding Hood, you sure a lookin’ good...” It took me a minute to place it as “Li’l Red Riding Hood” from Sam The Sham and the Pharaohs, a band Dad used to listen to on the oldies station when I was a kid.

The whole world was going crazy. I saw my neighbor, Chris, a brawny guy stationed at nearby Wright-Patterson Air Force base, as he pulled up in his Chevy extended-cab truck. The frog winked at me, slowly turning to face Chris as he came up the sidewalk. Rather than risk Chris thinking me ready for the funny farm (hey, he was cute and had impressive chest muscles that he showed off in tight T-shirts), I scooped up the frog and ran inside, barely swallowing the “Ew, ew, ew” that came to my lips when I touched him. I’m not big on slimy things, so sue me.

I got back inside, closed the drain on the kitchen sink, and placed the frog in the sink. Before I got back to the door, he was already talking again. I ignored him until I got the door shut and the lock secured behind me.

“Boy, are you paranoid, Janie Grimm. Makes me think they’ve already got to you or something. Got a beer in this place?”

“A beer?” I settled one hip against the counter and crossed my arms over my chest. “You’ve got to be kidding me. You’re a talking frog, you know my name, you showed up out of nowhere, but the only thing you can say is ‘you got a beer in this place’? And for your information, beer’s expensive. I don’t keep any around.”

The frog belched, long and loud. Great. Not only did I have a talking frog in my apartment, but he was also an obnoxious pig. Er, frog. Whatever.

“Are you done?” he asked.

“Who the hell are you, and what the hell do you want?”

“That’s the first intelligent thing you’ve said today, Janie, and believe me, I should know. I’ve been stuck in your book bag all day. By the way, that was pretty embarrassing this morning in Contracts class when you didn’t have a clue. Though that professor of yours did seem to know what I was talking about.”

I gritted my teeth. I could add know-it-all to the rapidly growing list of things I didn’t like about this frog. “You still didn’t answer my question.”

“I guess I didn’t, did I? Well, tenaciousness will serve you well in trial, future counselor. You can call me Bert.”

“What kind of name is that?” I pinched my own arm to see if this was some sort of weird dream. It hurt.

“You’re gonna want to stop that, or you’ll bruise. Besides, I’m as real as you are. My name’s Englebert Maximus Jorgenson Horace the Sixth. Bert’s about the best I’m gonna get out of that. I swear my parents hated me to saddle me with such an awful mouthful of a name.”

What can one say to that? “I guess I didn’t realize frogs named their children.” Wow. That was lame. Of course, what could I expect? I was making small talk with a frog. That wasn’t a situation I was prepared for, and it certainly wasn’t something Emily Post ever covered. On the other hand, it wasn’t something Evangeline was around to see and get after me for violating some arcane etiquette.

rule.

He rolled his eyes. "I wasn't always a frog, you nitwit. I was a human, a prince. Well, a young prince, anyway. I had four older brothers, so I wasn't getting anywhere near the throne. I was an advisor to my oldest brother on matters that affected our people, including dispute resolution. I gave good advice, so I was popular, and that made me a target for the witch."

"You believe in witches?" I asked.

"I'm sure you don't believe in them, but I do," he said. "It's hard not to, after one turns you into a frog."

He had a point. That'd convince me, too. "So, why are you here?" I asked. I opened the refrigerator door and got out a pitcher of iced tea I'd made when I was unpacking boxes yesterday. There might not have been any beer, but tea bags are cheap. I poured some into a small bowl and set it in the sink next to him. He made a face, but he drank.

"I'm not some dumb ass pet. I can drink out of a mug like a civilized person."

"I'm sorry," I retorted, automatically. "How would I know? I've never served iced tea to a talking frog before." I still didn't believe this was real. It had to be some kind of strange hallucination, a dream, or break with reality, and apparently I couldn't ignore it away. If I wasn't worried it would get me kicked out of law school, I'd have hightailed it right to the nearest mental health hospital for an evaluation. I wasn't sure I'd be allowed to stay if I was psychotic enough for hospitalization, and there just wasn't a better explanation for what was going on.

He shrugged. I couldn't believe he actually shrugged. Of course, I didn't think frogs had shoulders, either.

"There are bigger things to worry about right now, Janie. I'm here to warn you. You might be in danger."

I resumed my position against the counter with my arms crossed over my chest. "The only person I've pissed off lately is my Contracts professor and he just doesn't seem the murderer or rampage type." The man wore a polka-dotted bow tie for crying out loud. If there's one thing that doesn't scream psycho killer, it's a polka-dotted bow tie. Who wears things like that anymore? Maybe it *was* a sign of an unhinged mind.

"This goes back a lot further than just this morning, Janie. It goes back to your father."

"My father had been sick for a long time before he died. He couldn't have been involved with anything that could come up now, and you have no right to talk about him." Rage, like a white hot spear in my belly, rose up in the back of my throat. I fought not to grit my teeth as I spat back at him. "He suffered and he fought as hard as he could, but nothing worked. He's gone. And no one can do anything about it." I caught myself crying, and took a deep breath, hard and fast through my nose. I mopped the tears off my face, trying to shut off the waterworks. I guess I was still mad that my father wasn't here any more.

Bert tried to say something, but I cut him off. "You know nothing about my father."

"Yes, Janie, I actually do. Your father didn't die of cancer. He was murdered."

I was still trying to get a hold on my emotions, and realized my hands were clenched into fists. My mouth opening and closing repeatedly like a fish out of water. It took me a minute to respond in a coherent sentence through the anger and grief trying to shut down my brain. "What the hell are you

talking about? I watched him die. I held his hand through chemo treatment after radiation treatment after surgery. ~~Of course he had cancer. No one killed him. And now, just months after he's gone, you~~ have the audacity to show up here, make me question my sanity, tell me I'm stupid, and that my father was murdered?"

Bert nodded his head. "You might not want to hear it, but it's the truth."

I snatched up the bowl of iced tea and dumped it in the other side of the double sink. Petty, I know, but it did make me feel better. "There's no way what you're saying could be the truth. Despite what you might think, I'm not a complete idiot. I know what I saw. I know what he went through. It's time to go. You've said what you came to say. I have work to do." I didn't have the time to lose my mind, and I certainly didn't have the time or the emotional resources to talk about losing my dad with a figment of my imagination. I was done talking to him.

He scrambled around in the sink, slipping and sliding and trying to dodge my grasping hands. I meant to kick him out of my house, though I knew it would be a struggle to concentrate now that I was thinking about Dad. I missed the smell of his cologne, the cheap peppermints he always carried in his pockets, and the smile he always gave me at the end of a bad day, even on his last day. It was time for Bert to go, because the memories hurt on a day I could have used reassurance and a big hug from Dad.

He looked panicked as he evaded me. "Please, don't kick me out there. I won't be safe in that form. You don't understand what they went through to place me with you."

"Place you with me?" I stopped grabbing for him. He slid toward the drain. "Who placed you with me? What do you mean?"

He ignored my questions, but he nodded his head as he spoke, cowering at the back of the sink. "Something's after you. You won't know where to look unless I tell you. They sent me to warn you and to help you spot danger. It's about all I'm good for at this size."

No way was this toad staying in my house tonight. He wouldn't tell me who he worked for, but his fear seemed genuine. We compromised, in that I agreed to let him stay on my patio, and wedged himself on the threshold between the storm door and the screen door if he felt the need. I couldn't quite catch the slippery little slime ball, so he allowed himself to be picked up once I made the promise that he didn't have to leave completely. I didn't care, as long as he was outside, and he was quiet. I didn't really want him reciting every line from "It's a Mad Mad Mad Mad World" for my neighbors throughout the night. That would just be the icing on the proverbial psycho-nutcake.

I set him outside, on the threshold, like I'd promised, and gingerly shut the door behind him, throwing every lock, deadbolt, and chain latch I had. It took a while for me to focus on my work, with the barrage of memories about my dad, but I had to be prepared for school in the morning. I couldn't fail when everything my father left me was riding on my performance.

Screw that frog. He was crazy. He was making me think I was crazy. Tomorrow I would wake up and find that he didn't exist. Or at least, I hoped so.

Chapter Five

When I woke up the next morning, my alarm clock was bleating an insistent shriek in my ear. I shot bolt upright, panicking when I saw that the clock read seven a.m. I'd meant to get up at five, to have another two hours to go over notes for class today. I needed to prove to everyone I belonged in law school after my miserable showing yesterday. And I had a stop to make first.

It turned out I hadn't reset the alarm for five, but instead had left it at yesterday's setting. Too late to fix it now, I dressed quickly and packed my bag for the day's classes. Of course, I had to drop my backpack on the patio and run back inside to make sure I'd turned the coffeepot off. That was something I always forget to do. In fact, the morning stop to check the coffeepot was rapidly becoming part of my morning routine.

Fire hazard averted, I scooped up my backpack and headed to the car. I didn't even turn on the radio. My morning errand was too somber for music or radio humor.

I was visiting my dad's gravesite.

Yesterday had been an abject lesson in humiliation and embarrassment. I needed to talk to my dad, and this was the only way left to me. I'd figured that visiting early in the morning would mean an empty cemetery, where no one would hear me talking to Dad.

I was wrong.

I pulled in and put Dad's old Buick in park. There was a man with flame-red hair standing near my father's grave. He looked familiar, but I couldn't place him. I sighed. It was a public cemetery; I couldn't shoo him away or call the police just because he happened to be there. I'd just have to deal with it, and hope he'd either leave quickly or leave me alone. Or both.

I left my backpack in the car and headed for Dad's grave. I'd just say hello and spend some time trying to remember what it was like to sit in a park with my dad. He used to take me to feed the ducks at a park near our house. We'd sit together quietly, but it was peaceful, and I needed a bit of peace in my life. If I shut my eyes tightly, could I pretend he was sitting beside me without wondering if I was really losing touch with reality? I decided that would be pushing it, after all the strange things that had happened the day before.

His headstone was a simple, black granite marker, stark, with only his name, Robert Jonathan Grimm, and dates of birth and death. Evangeline and I'd butted heads on an appropriate marker for her grave. My ideas for something meaningful weren't extravagant enough for her, and her ideas were horrifying to me. Finally, the granite guy had stepped in and told us that we had to decide on something, and sometimes the easiest thing to do was a simple marker. He told us that we could always replace it later if we ever agreed on anything. At this rate, Dad would never have anything more, but it suited him a lot better than the angel wings, lacy hearts, and gushy love sentiments from Evangeline. Gag me.

"Ms. Grimm? My name's Aiden Ferguson. Can I talk to you a moment?"

I kept walking even as I pulled out my cell phone, poisoning my fingers over the keys to dial 9-1-1. My own internal weirdness-meter blared an alarm signal in my head, even as I thought I'd recognized

him from somewhere. Wait, how did this guy know who I was? It wasn't like I was wearing a name tag.

"Ms. Grimm, it's really important," he called, tripping over his own feet as he came my way. Suddenly, he fell to the ground, got up, tripped on the nearest headstone, got back up, and slid in a puddle, until he found himself teetering precariously in front of me.

Wow. I've never seen such an uncoordinated display in real life. I've only seen something similar in old slapstick comedies, and I didn't think it was possible for anyone to pull it off without using a banana peel and doing it on purpose. He had my attention for that fact alone. "Can I help you?" I didn't have a lot of time, but it was like a train wreck. I couldn't look away. And I still had my cell phone at the ready to call the cops.

"Ms. Grimm, thank you! I've needed to talk with you ever since I saw you at the restaurant."

That's where I'd seen him before; he was the waiter who'd looked so spooked when Evangelina lost her temper, running off to refill our already full water glasses. I'd thought he was a flake then, even though he was cute. He wasn't doing much to change my initial impression. I turned away from him and took the last step towards Dad's grave. Maybe if I ignored him, he'd go away.

No such luck; he seemed determined to talk with me.

"Ms. Grimm, I know you won't want to believe me, but I can help you. And you're going to need it. It sounds crazy, I know, but you're in a position you won't be able to get out of on your own." He reached up and swiped his hair back from his forehead, putting on a University of Dayton Flyers baseball cap he pulled out from a back pocket.

I turned on him. I didn't need help from a clumsy dork, especially one I didn't know. And the whole "Ms. Grimm" thing was a little too formal for me. Had my morning breakfast been Crazy-C instead of store brand Wheaties? "What do you plan to help me with? You don't know anything about me; there's no way you could know what problems I might have in my life. So, if you don't mind, I like to spend a moment of peace thinking about my father before I have to jump back into my shitty, stressful, and stupid life."

He waited until I'd stepped away and was settling myself on the small bench near Dad's gravestone before he said anything else. "It's Jane, but you go by Janie, don't you? And your dad was a professor of history and folklore here in Dayton. Your stepmother's on the board at the Art Institute, and you're a first year student at the law school. You just moved into your first apartment, and you live alone."

"Are you spying on me? I don't know who you think you are, but I can file a restraining order against you and have you arrested if you violate it. Stay away from me, and don't ever follow me again. And a little advice? Showing some girl how well you've stalked her does not exactly engender trust." I wondered if I still had that old can of pepper spray Dad gave me when I started college. If I did, it probably wasn't in my bag today; it was probably still in a box, one of the ones I hadn't unpacked yet. One of many I still hadn't gotten to yet. And who knows if the spray would actually work when I needed it.

"If I do what you tell me to do, you'll be dead within the next six months. Your dad told us to get away as well, and look where he is."

"How dare you speak about my father like that? Refusing to talk with you has nothing to do with the cancer that killed him. Unless you're some kind of doctor, there's nothing you could've done even

if he had talked to you, and unless you're some kind of weird voodoo priest or magician, you can't bring him back either, so go away." What the hell was he talking about? It wasn't like cancer was contagious. And besides, didn't all those cheesy horror movies advise against bringing someone back from the dead?

He sat down on my bench, facing the opposite way.

"My predecessor tried to talk with your father. I tried to talk with him. He didn't want anything to do with us. There was probably some academic bias working against us, too; he'd heard of us, and he'd heard we were a bunch of story collectors. The truth is, however, we're more than that."

"Yeah, you're a bunch of stalker whack jobs. You need to leave." I tried to get up, to walk around him, but he reached up one hand and laid it on my shoulder.

"Your dad thought the same thing at first. My mentor, John Brown, approached him years ago. I can tell you about it, if you like."

As much as I wanted him to leave, if he had a story about Dad, I wanted to hear it. I still would have preferred time alone, but this was a close second. I checked the clock on my cell phone since I hadn't picked up a watch yet despite Evangeline's nagging, and I still had an hour to kill before my first class. I could listen to his remembrances of my father, and then I could leave and never talk to him again. That could work. I sat back down.

He ignored my internal monologue, and kept talking. "You'd have still been a kid, and it was just before you lost your mother. John told me your father had just gotten tenure at the university, and he was so happy that he didn't want to listen when we told him something might be wrong."

I wondered what Dad was like when my mother was still around. I didn't remember her well, but I remembered the scent of her perfume, the roughness of her corduroy jacket on my cheek, and the softness of her hand holding mine. I remembered my father's smiling face as he wrapped his arm around her waist in the kitchen. They were very happy, but I didn't know my mother as a person. I don't have an independent recollection of any family events prior to Dad's wedding to Evangeline. Then I remembered the ice-cream cones, the zoo, and other outings designed to get me away from my stepmother when she was having one of her famous headaches. It seemed like most of my good memories from childhood were from those outings with Dad.

Aiden continued. "From what I've heard, John tried several times to talk with your father about The Legacy, but your dad didn't want anything to do with it. In fact, he told me once, privately, that he thought John was delusional. He'd never found any reference to the Holder or Legacy in his own research, and he thought we were a bunch of crackpots."

I didn't have the nerve to tell him I agreed about the crackpot label, but how do you tell someone they're crazy when they're not listening? Besides, what the hell was the Holder and whose Legacy? I refrained from asking. I didn't want to distract Aiden from telling his story, and I didn't know how long he'd take to answer my questions instead of just talking about Dad. I'd listen to a lot of insanity if it meant hearing more about my dad.

"Well, your father was polite to me when I was just starting out. I first met him as a student a couple of years ago. He wasn't teaching a lot then, but there was an elective class he taught as an adjunct professor just before he went into the hospital that last time. I thought he was a really nice man, and awful smart, but he thought I was nuts when I took up with John's group."

Regardless of what I thought about Aiden, he was saying nice things about Dad. And it was nice

to hear that other people thought good things about him.

He handed me his business card. Of course, he spilled a small stack of them on the ground as I tried to pull one out of his pocket for me, but he had them scooped up before I could help him. He looked like he was used to being uncoordinated. "This is us. We aren't just collectors of folk stories. We collect real stories, but we also try to help people who find themselves in situations they don't know how to resolve. We think you're headed for one of those situations, Janie. We're actually here to help."

Despite the fact I was uncomfortable with the amount of information he had about my life, he looked very earnest. He continued to pack his spilled business cards back into his pocket as he talked. It was kind of cute, even though I thought he must be high on something to believe a word of what he was saying. "I appreciate your concern, but I'm still not sure what you could do to bring Dad back or make Evangeline rational, or get my reading done for class today. It was nice talking to you, but stay away from me." He might have been a creepy stalker boy, but he had good memories of Dad so it was worth listening to him. Besides, what would their help cost? I didn't think that fees for folktales collectors were in my budget no matter how much extra money Evangeline gave me.

He let me go; I don't think he really expected me to walk away, but I took advantage of it to head toward the car, glancing at his card as I went. Whatever this group of his was (and his card said they called themselves F.A.B.L.E.S., the Foundation for Ancestry, Biography, Legends, Epics, and Stories), I was comforted by the fact Dad had heard of them. He might have thought they were crackpots, but he did know them. I certainly hadn't expected anything like that. I slid into the front seat of the car and started it up when I heard a deep voice again.

"You know, you're going to need to call him soon and get his help."

I screamed, long and loud, twisting around to make sure no one was waiting in the backseat of my car to slit my throat like I'd seen in so many movies. I didn't see anything, so I sat back down in the driver's seat, my heart pounding in my throat.

Bert stuck his head out of the top of my backpack. "Not exactly the reaction I like to get from a woman," he quipped.

"Why are you still here?" I yelled. I'd chalked up last night's amphibian interaction as a bad coffee-and-stress-induced dream. Besides, he was supposed to be gone this morning.

"You said I could stay in your doorway last night, but you didn't say anything about today, so I hitched a ride. I'll stay quiet, I promise. I enjoyed listening to the class yesterday, and I think something strange might happen soon. You'll need my advice when it does, so you might as well have me close by."

I didn't know what was worse, that he'd hitched a ride, that I had a frog in my backpack, or that he'd actually enjoyed Contracts class. "I give up," I said, giving him permission.

My life was just too weird. Maybe if Bert kept his promise to keep quiet, I could at least pretend my life was semi-normal. Maybe I could forget all about the last twenty-four hours long enough to get things done today. As it was, I needed to get to class. I didn't really have time to argue. I guess I was feeling magnanimous after listening to someone else's good opinion of Dad.

I put the car in drive and headed for the law school.

Chapter Six

I was early to my first class, and arrived to find Mia sitting in the classroom, looking over her notes for the first Civil Procedure class. I dumped my stuff next to her and sat down.

“Hey there,” she said. “Are you letting your hair grow?”

Huh? “What are you talking about?” I asked.

“It seems longer. I just wondered if I’d missed it with all the first day craziness.” She capped her highlighter and put down her pen. “It’s a different look for you. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you with hair longer than your shoulders. I like it.”

I shook my head. I’d just gotten it trimmed two weeks ago. I reached up to find that my hair was longer, and thought my new hairdresser must have been too conservative with my last trim. I shook my head off, vowing to be more specific the next time I had an appointment.

We talked about the study group; making plans for that Sunday’s meeting, talking about the fund-raising dinner we’d go to on Friday night with Evangeline’s friends, and laughing about our feat yesterday. “It seems like hazing, like we’re rushing some sort of law related fraternity,” I commented.

“I’d rather eat a live goldfish than go through what you had to deal with yesterday. No offense, but this is more like mental boot camp than a fraternity,” she responded, laughing at my grimace over the first day debacle.

“At least a fraternity would have some good parties. I haven’t heard of anything like that in law school. Of course, it’s early in the year. You never know how crazy things might get after we all get in the groove. And there’s always the week after finals are over to let one’s hair down.”

“You’re probably right. Anyway, let’s hope today goes better than yesterday,” she said, turning back again to her notes.

The other students began trickling in. The professor wasn’t far behind, spouting some nonsense about “fee simple.” I didn’t know what that meant, but at least I wasn’t getting called on. I couldn’t handle that.

Professor Talbot, a tall guy with a long grey ponytail, wire-rimmed glasses, and a potbelly, kept looking at me. I couldn’t figure out why, but I wasn’t ready to be in the spotlight again, so I tried to pay attention without looking like I wanted to answer a question. As long as he wasn’t asking me to explain some obscure property term I didn’t understand, I was fine. He could make whatever faces he wanted to as long as he didn’t call on me.

As different students answered his questions, the professor never took his eyes off me. I caught Mia staring at me as well. I had this insane urge to stand up and yell at them to cut it out, but I didn’t want to risk looking crazier than I already did after failing to get my work done yesterday.

Oh well, I thought, trying to scribble down notes I hoped would make sense after I finally figured out what all the terms meant. I remembered seeing them in the cases I’d read last night, but I hadn’t taken the time to look them up. I wouldn’t make that mistake again.

“Ms. Grimm,” the professor intoned, cutting off the student who’d been droning on in answer

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