



LANSIN ISLAND SERIES

A DEATH
DISPLACED

ANDREW BUTCHER

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A Death Displaced
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By Andrew Butcher

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In memory of Monty

Chapter 1

It felt so real.

He walked towards his workplace in the lower grounds of Amiton town centre, his winklepickers tip-tapping on murky cobbles. The chill and dampness in the air left no doubt that it was early morning.

A red-headed girl spun circles near the fountain feature and fell into his path, causing him to sidestep. He apologised for the near collision. As he carried on his way, the girl scurried off to her mother setting up a stall for business.

He smiled. Halloween decorations filled the shop windows: an array of ghouls, pumpkins, witches, and vampires. 'Happy Halloween' was found in orange, black, purple, and white; and in one gruesome display, a blood-red dripping font.

To one side a lady was re-arranging her window layout in preparation for opening. She caught his eyes and gave a friendly nod. He reciprocated, adding a wave.

The morning was as peaceful as a cat asleep.

Perched out the front of his workplace was a seagull, squatting as if waiting for the shop to open. No other birds flocked overhead.

Nothing was strange about seagulls in Amiton of course, but this one appeared to be staring. Directly at him. The eeriness of it made his bones fidget. *Stupid seagull.*

The screeching of tyres came from above. He stopped. His gaze shot to the upper grounds. The seagull reacted instantly, smoothly jumping into flight as if it had known the harsh cries were coming.

There was no way to see the commotion from where he stood. The 50ft wall separating the upper and lower grounds had switchback stairs up the side and a low wall along the top to protect people from falling.

Echoes. The sounds of metal scraping, twisting, crunching. Police sirens wailed in the distance. He couldn't see at this angle, but he imagined a car had crashed at high speed, flipped, and had begun to roll.

After a thud, something finally came into view. A woman. The car must have hit her hard. She was vaulted over the wall a great distance and fell to the lower grounds. She hit the cobbles.

Did he hear her skull crack open, or was that her neck breaking? Maybe both and more.

He snapped out of it.

*

Whoa. He opened his eyes and had to blink a few times. That was too real, too disturbing. It would teach him a lesson for meditating at work. But what had he been trying to accomplish anyway?

Usually he would visualise his dream future, attempt to meet some kind of deity, or ask his 'higher self' for guidance. This time his intentions had been vague, losing him in a creepily realistic daydream.

I really am screwed up, imagining a woman fall to her death, he told himself, but he didn't truly believe it. He was just Nicolas Jack Crystan, or Nick for short, and what could he think of his life? He was twenty-four, had no future plans, was always

striving for enlightenment (whatever *that* was), and worked in a crystal shop.

A Crystan working in a crystal shop called Creaky Crystals, he mused with a half-hearted laugh. Then a customer startled him.

‘Excuse me ...’ whined a lady with a scrunched-up face.

Nick straightened up behind the counter, then tried to portray alert-and-ready-to-serve the best he could. His workplace was in the corner of a large shopping street named The Fallend, snug against the high wall that separated the upper and lower grounds. ‘How can I help?’

‘Oh, so you *are* working ... Not just taking a nap?’ She gave a broad smile, her sarcasm potent and ugly.

‘Sorry; it’s been a quiet day. What can I do for you?’ He couldn’t help observe her choice of clothing. She looked like a witch in a kids’ school play, minus the green face paint but plus an absurd amount of jewellery. What concerned him was when he realised she was serious in her selection of garments.

‘Do you sell any other wands?’ Her eyes widened. ‘I don’t like the ones on display. They don’t feel right.’

‘They’re all we have in stock. Sorry.’

‘You’re not going to check out the back for me?’ She retracted her head, creating a double chin.

‘I know what stock we have, and there are no more wands.’

‘Can you go and check anyway? In case you’ve missed some.’

‘No ... Sorry. I’d be wasting your time.’

‘I’m not in a hurry.’ *God*, this woman was relentless.

‘Trust me, there are no more wands out the back,’ he said with finality. He caught his reflection in the shop window and ruffled his brown hair, then let it settle looking stylishly dishevelled. With an uneasy feeling, he realised he was staring at the spot where the woman in his daydream had hit the ground: directly out the front of the store.

‘Just so you know,’ the customer continued her whining, ‘the other tourist shops around here have a wider range of items. Why is your store so limited?’ She seemed to ask with genuine interest.

Please get a life. ‘I’m sorry to hear that, but my manager is happy with our range of products. If you’re not happy, then feel free to buy from those other shops you mentioned.’

The woman huffed, declaring, ‘I will shop elsewhere!’ then stormed out.

Oops; slight guilt. He hadn’t meant to upset the lady, but she was rude from the start of the conversation, and Nick was getting sick and tired of all the witch wannabes waddling around Amiton. It was something he couldn’t avoid though, due to the history of Lansin Island and the fact that he worked in a tourist shop aimed at those interested in its dark past.

Amiton, the largest town on the island, was where all the tourists got off the ferry and did their shopping. Nick liked the customers interested in witchcraft and the island’s history, but not the witch wannabes who researched Wicca on the internet, read an article on some naff website, then declared themselves High Priestess of this, that, and the other. Some would shove their views down his throat and threaten to hex him when his customer service skills were poor, which was most of the time.

‘Nicolas.’ Her voice was delicate, yet held great authority.

Nick spun to address her. ‘Yeah, Mora?’

She was a short plump lady in her late forties and had a calm demeanour, cropped medium-brown hair, and green eyes. Her complexion was so yellowy-white that if she were to lie down with her eyes closed you’d think she was dead ... or at least severely ill.

‘That lady didn’t seem too impressed with you.’

‘Yeah ... I suggested she shops elsewhere.’

‘You sent a customer away?’

‘She was rude to me.’

‘Okay, Nicolas, but I’d prefer it if your pride didn’t affect our profits in the future.’

It was almost impossible to be offended by anything Mora said. Nick knew she was a careful thinker and spoke only her mind. He liked that about her.

‘I forgot to mention ... She didn’t like your wands and said our store is limited compared to the others in Amiton.’

Mora’s jaw dropped. After a moment of composing herself, she came out with, ‘Stuff her then! The grumpy sod can shop elsewhere.’

Nick laughed with his manager.

‘Nicolas ...’ Mora dawdled off and stood by the table with divination and tarot cards stacked on top. ‘I think more items have been stolen.’ She shook her head, compressed her lips.

‘Really?’

‘I don’t remember selling any of these today, though I could swear there were more here this morning.’

Shrugging, Nick wished he knew what to say. Mora toddled back over to him rather solemnly then said, ‘Never mind. Will you keep an eye out for me? Look out for suspicious customers?’

‘Of course.’ He gave an enthusiastic nod.

‘You can get going if you want. It’s not so busy. I’ll lock up and get the cleaning done.’ She scanned the store, then returned her eyes to him. ‘And don’t worry; I’ll pay you for the whole shift.’ After a sweet smile, she took his place behind the glass counter.

In comparison to Mora, Nick felt like a giant. She was maybe five feet tall. He noticed the height difference more when she sat down. It didn’t bother him much when other staff members were about, but when it was just the two of them, he felt almost obliged to slouch his posture.

‘Thank you. I’ll see you on Friday.’ He scuttled out the back to grab his jacket and then hurried out of the store, waving to Mora on his exit.

Two full-timers, Janet and Alan, had worked nine to five and had already left. As a part-timer, Nick was meant to work twelve to six and then help close up. He checked the time on his mobile: 5:23 p.m.. *Not bad.* He smiled.

His black Vauxhall Corsa nearly failed to start up. With a huff, he looked at the petrol gauge pointing below the ‘E’ (as it always seemed to), estimating that he could squeeze a few more drives to work and back out of it before visiting a station.

On the way home, all he thought about was that disturbing daydream. The sound of the woman hitting the ground was embedded in his mind and seemed to be on replay.

No dreams had ever been so vivid. Even the few lucid ones he'd had were covered in a sense of 'Is this really real?' But when he was inside of this daydream, he was *really there* ... until he wasn't, until he snapped back to reality ... Or was *that* the reality?

Ughh ... Headache. All he wanted right now was a hot chocolate and a decent film to watch or something.

Driving up Maw Street, he compared his house to the others. The fact that he couldn't see it didn't help much. The evening had begun to darken already and the bungalow he lived in was shrouded by trees. His neighbours' houses were very presentable—well-kept front gardens, showy features, neatly gravelled driveways—and some weren't even bungalows anymore but had been extended upwards and outwards.

Unfortunately for Nick, his dwelling was the lowest valued on the street.

'You just *have* to do something about those *awful* trees,' Aimee Price from number 42 once passed by to tell him. The American lady lived alone and was a practicing Wiccan. She had frowned at the prevalent weeds in the driveway and admitted that she couldn't *stand* the thought of her relatives visiting and being subjected to passing Nick's home on the way to hers.

To defend himself, Nick had explained that the enormous sycamores in the front garden were practically impossible to do anything with, the evergreen conifers were too tall to maintain, he couldn't be asked to trim the shrubbery nor to de-weed the drive, and it was the Council's job to cut the grass on the front. But most importantly, it wasn't any of her business. In his mind he also added, *For a Wiccan, you don't seem to like trees much!*

Miss Price had stalked off, mumbling, 'I'm not the only one who thinks you need to sort it out.'

As Nick pulled into his drive now, an overhanging branch rattled and scratched against the roof of his car. *Okay; maybe I should cut that one at least.*

He parked and got out of the vehicle. The front garden was carpeted with fallen leaves. At this time of day they were simply shadowy mounds, but in the sunlight the red-and-orange foliage would be gorgeously vivid. The neighbours might not have liked his trees, but Nick sure appreciated the privacy they offered. He locked his Corsa and headed inside number 16 Maw Street.

After devouring a ready-made microwave meal, he flopped onto his bed, drained of energy. Before he knew it he woke up three hours later. *Ah, crap!* Not only had he wasted the evening, but now he'd struggle to sleep tonight.

As he lay awake, the daydream from earlier today played on his mind. In circles and circles the red-headed girl spun. Yellow-rimmed eyes stared at him, grey wings beat into the air. Screeching and confusion. Metal scraping, twisting, crunching. A thud. A woman. The sounds of her body breaking.

Wednesday morning. Nothing could tempt him to leave his home, except that it was probably warmer outdoors than inside his bungalow. Goosebumps prickled over him. On impulse, he hurried towards the heating controls and made it to the panel before his senses returned.

I can't afford to put the heating on whenever I like ...

He went to find some layers, then decided to meditate. Once comfortably positioned

in his room, he cleared his mind and began rhythmically breathing. Lately he'd become agitated by the smallest things and had boxed them off to the corner of his mind, but now these things seemed determined to claim recognition.

When he noticed how *not* peaceful he felt, the irritation bugged him. The more he tried to find peace the worse his state became.

He fidgeted.

Whatever position he sat in, it created uncomfortable tight areas from his clothes, or he became itchy, had to scratch.

Ignore it, it will go, clear your mind.

A noise interrupted him—the wild beeping of a car horn outside. He sighed.

He achieved a clear mind again. But then he was annoyed at himself for thinking ‘My mind is clear.’ Surely his mind was not clear of thought if he was *thinking* it was clear of thought.

Why don't I feel peaceful?

A pounding began in his head. He came over hot and flustered. Then his frustration steeped. He picked up a smiling Buddha ornament and smashed it against the wall, tore down posters of tranquil landscapes, then pushed over his open storage cabinet. DVDs clattered on the floor. Self-help books clunked alongside them. About to thump the wall, he stopped, not brave enough, then stomped instead.

Fed up, completely and utterly. He could have seen this coming; he knew that all these spiritual, religious, and self-help ideas weren't working for him, but he'd kept on deceiving himself.

Maybe the Law of Attraction can help me, what about CBT, how about Witchcraft, EFT, Buddhism, Wicca, Yoga, meditation, visualisation, affirmations, and every self-help book under the sun!

Yeah, sure, they all seemed to work for a while, but they never kept him happy for long. Bringing together the fingertips of his right hand, he used them to repeatedly tap the centre of his left palm. As he continued this, he mentally repeated, *I'm calm, I'm focused, I'm calm, I'm focused.*

It was something he'd been taught in therapy, and although it took a while, he eventually composed himself. He looked to his room. Ornaments he'd had for years were broken beyond repair. Regret made a sudden appearance in his body. He hated rash outbursts of anger like this. It was like consequences were illusions and all that mattered was his rage getting its cupful of destruction. And in this case, its roomful.

His morose mood occupied the evening, but at least there was something to look forward to the next day. Kind of.

‘Hello, Nicolas.’ Thursday at the local surgery, his therapist greeted him. ‘Come on in, have a seat.’

‘Thank you.’ He sat in his usual place, a bog-standard chair turned at a slight angle to his therapist's seat. She closed the door and sat down. Nick envied how she never rushed about or huffed and puffed.

‘How have you been this week?’

‘Errh, okay mostly.’ It was true; he'd felt good for a few days after seeing her last week.

‘Okay.’ She nodded gently, making it apparent that she'd like him to expand on his answer.

‘Well, I got a bit angry yesterday,’ he admitted. ‘I feel like I’m trying so hard to succeed at something, but I don’t know what I even want to succeed at. I’ve tried out so many self-help books and other new things that surely I should be happy about *something*. I see other people who don’t even seem to try, yet they have everything they want ... and they are happier than me.’

There was no judgement here in the safe-bubble the therapist had created. It helped Nick to understand himself.

‘You’re feeling lost?’

‘I am ...’ He felt suddenly vulnerable. His therapist waited patiently and placed a box of tissues on the nearby desk.

The room was too clinical: a spare office in the surgery, full of doctors’ tools and posters. Cold and unwelcoming. But seeing as Nick received therapy free on the NHS, he couldn’t exactly complain.

When he’d originally been referred, he’d told the doctor, ‘I’ve been feeling upset frequently, at least once a week, for a long time now.’ He was glad he hadn’t been officially diagnosed as depressed, but he was *more* pleased to have been taken seriously and sent on for therapy.

He pulled himself together, realising he’d become accustomed to showing weakness in front of his counsellor. Overall, though, he felt better nowadays. It was a steady climb.

‘I feel a bit better now. I don’t really know what else to say about it. I’ll just see how this week goes.’

Having cleared some emotional baggage, his mind went on a tangent. If his therapist were younger he would probably find her attractive—and the session so wouldn’t work. She was nearing fifty, looked fit as a fiddle, had good teeth, an excellent figure, and Nick doubted that her blonde hair had even thought of greying. There was a genuine aura about her; each facial expression was puppeted by real emotions, not by a need for approval.

Her name was Caroline. *Nicolas and Caroline Crystan ...*

‘How are things with your father?’ she asked without preamble. Nick shook away the odd thoughts.

‘Same as always. He’s barely changed for the past eight years ... and it’s still awkward around him.’

‘Do you think he knows how awkward you feel?’

‘I doubt it. It’s like he’s on pause or something. It’s been so long now that I can’t imagine opening up to him.’

‘What if you did talk to him about it?’

‘I just don’t know. I don’t want to lay out my feelings if he’s never going to come out of his own little bubble. That would make it even *more* awkward ...’

She gave a neutral nod. ‘But is it a risk worth taking?’

Nick thought about it, remembering when his dad had been different—chatty, full of smiles, full of laughter. But that was before the disappearance of Nick’s mother eight years ago.

Nick was sixteen when it happened, his brothers only ten. Their mother simply wasn’t home when they got back from school. They waited and waited for her to return, but later found out she’d withdrawn a few thousand pounds the same day she’d

vanished. Her car was missing too.

As far as anyone could tell, she'd gone off and started a new life. With Lansin Island in the Celtic Sea, fifteen miles off the Cornish coast, it would have been easy for her to get a ferry across from Amiton to Bude. If she *had* done that, then who knew where she would have went from there?

Nick sure as hell didn't.

All he knew was that she had left with the worst possible timing. It was hard enough being a teenager as it was, but with his dad's birthday only a couple of weeks after she disappeared, it was just too cruel.

'Maybe it's worth the risk ... I'll have to think some more.' Once the session was over, he headed home feeling lighter and clearheaded.

He spent the evening watching the film *Big Fish* that one of his brothers had lent him. The emotional ending moved him and he was glad to have enjoyed it. Then he realised that he was a twenty-four-year-old guy snuggled up to himself, all alone and sentimental, watching the credits roll by. So on that thought, he called it a night.

The next morning, he quickly checked his appearance in the mirror before leaving for work. He was lucky enough to have naturally rough and stylish hair, so apart from washing it and getting it cut when necessary, little attention was needed. People had told him he was good-looking before, but he never gave weight to their words. Though he wasn't particularly self-conscious either. Most clothes suited him, weight wasn't an issue, and acne had never come knocking.

Feeling mostly satisfied with his reflection, he left for work.

The weather was pleasant for late October, refreshingly cool and damp. Cold and drizzly was the default on Lansin Island, but today was looking up.

Nick parked his car outside of town and began walking towards Creaky Crystals. Weather permitting, he wore a thin jacket over an olive-green tee-shirt. Below he had on dark jeans and his usual choice of footwear—black winklepickers.

In the lower grounds, a red-headed girl spun circles near the fountain and fell into his path. Nick stopped, his stomach tightening. His sudden halt caused the girl to bump into him.

He had to rationalise for a second. The girl ran over to her mother who was setting up a stall. *I've probably seen them here loads of times. It's just a coincidence.*

Scanning the stores around him, he searched for one in particular. And found it. He caught the eyes of a lady re-arranging her shop display. She gave a friendly nod, which Nick awkwardly reciprocated. He turned dizzy but forced himself to focus.

Another detail came to mind. He looked to the front of Creaky Crystals.

The seagull was there, staring at him.

His instincts took control. He ran for the steps that lead to the upper grounds and ascended them, regretting his choice of footwear. His legs ached as he reached the top. He heard the car screeching and saw it try to swerve a business stall. It failed.

The impact flipped the car. It rolled high speed towards the woman. The noises were deafening, but there was no time for Nick to stop and cover his ears. He grabbed the lady and spun her away from the vehicle with such force that they almost toppled over the ledge together.

The car slammed into the low wall, inches away from them, and came to a stop. Fortunately it didn't go over the edge. There was a man inside the upturned car. He

looked unconscious, blood dripping from his head.

The cry of police sirens drew closer.

Nick realised how hard his grip on the woman was, and with that realisation came another. She was alive. *I saved her.*

‘Sorry,’ he said, and let go of the woman. He looked at her oval face, trying to catch her eyes. They were cerulean blue. She didn’t look back at him though. Her hair was blonde and rested on her shoulders, slightly dishevelled from the incident. She was almost as tall as him, with a slim figure ... *a great figure.*

‘No, it’s fine.’ The woman let out a loud breath, seemingly startled. ‘I’ve got to go.’ She turned without another word and headed away from the scene.

What if the police want a statement from her?

Nick didn’t know what to do, as the woman hurried out of sight. He pulled himself together and called for an ambulance. Moments later a police car pulled up, so he moved away from the crumpled vehicle against the ledge.

Even with all the commotion, only three things were on Nick’s mind. One: The woman he’d saved was gorgeous. Two: He’d had a *real* premonition and saved someone’s life. And three: She didn’t even say thank you to him for saving her!

Chapter 2

The car flipped and rolled, heading straight for her. She knew in that moment there was no way out of it. Air thumped out of her chest. Pain engulfed her, almost numbing. The impact flung her over the edge. She heard the speed of her descent, the swish on the way down. Her mind writhed in pure terror as she met the street below.

But that didn't happen, did it? She opened her eyes, and a dark-haired guy gripped her tightly.

Huh? She felt herself go over the side and fall ... to her death. *I died ...* It didn't make sense. Why was she here, alive?

'Sorry,' the man gripping her said.

Maybe I'm disorientated or in shock? It must be that. She felt different and she knew it. Altered on a deep level, as if all the cells in her body had changed, like she was zinging with a new kind of energy. She was there, but also wasn't.

The wrecked car lay nearby. She blankly stared at it, then glanced over the edge at the sheer drop. Her face buckled under a cringe. There was too much to take in, making her want to get away from the confusion.

'No, it's fine,' she said, releasing a breath she'd held prisoner. 'I've got to go.' She hurried away from the scene and the man who'd held her.

Once out of sight, she stopped in an alley to catch her breath. Examining herself, she checked for marks and cuts, but found nothing. The man had grabbed her so hard that her arms were sore; they were surely going to bruise. She reached one hand up to her head and touched her skull. *I felt myself hit the ground.*

Did the dark-haired stranger save her? She couldn't remember. All she recalled was slamming into the grim cobbles, but then she was in his arms. It was difficult to even bring his face to mind. After shaking her head, she started walking again.

Heading towards the bus station, she took out her mobile with an unsteady hand. Her body shook but she managed to search through the contacts. She found 'Kim' and pressed the call button.

'Hey, Juliet. I'll be in town soon. I can't wait to see you!' a voice on the other end squeaked.

'I'm heading back to Chanton. I'm not feeling well.'

'What? What's wrong with you?'

'I feel dizzy. I have a headache ... I'm just not in the mood to shop anymore.' Juliet detested lying, but she didn't want to mention the near miss she'd just had. It all seemed blurry now anyway. And if she told her best friend that she was almost hit by a car, the conversation would go on for way too long.

'I never get to see you. As if you're just going to blow me off like this!' Kim sounded understandably annoyed.

'I'm sorry, Kim, but I'm going home. We'll go shopping soon.'

'Alright, but you owe me.' Kim mixed up a laugh and a sigh. 'You're lucky, because I was running late anyway. I haven't even left my house.' She laughed some more. 'Call me when you're feeling better then. Love you lots, bye.'

'See you, love you.' Juliet hung up. By now she was waiting for the bus back to Chanton to arrive.

While she waited, she tried to collect her thoughts. She noticed her hands were

shaking and that she'd scrunched up her shoulders high and tense. Closing her eyes for a moment, she let the worry dissolve out of her body. *I'm okay. The car didn't hit me.*

She gazed about the bus station; the place had never impressed her. It looked cheap and contemporary, completely clashing with the rest of Amiton town centre, a predominantly Victorian-style town with hints of modern concrete buildings. The lower grounds were over-run by supermarkets and general stores for locals, offering nothing much for tourists, but the upper grounds were completely different with a variety of tourist shops, restaurants, typical high-street brands, and a bustling market place.

Although Juliet thought the high-street stores reduced the character of Amiton, she could ignore that, because she needed *somewhere* to shop on the island. She loved travelling to London and Birmingham, but found it a nuisance to do often. And anyway, Amiton had a few designer shops blended into the architecture, and although their range of stock wasn't extensive, it could have been worse.

The bus back was quieter than on the way, passing through the outskirts of the town, towards the north of the island.

The houses on the outskirts were mostly modern builds, and only a few tiny thatched cottages, which could be found dotted across the island as primitive farmhouses. After leaving Amiton, the bus route took narrow roads through open fields and over modest hills.

Juliet had begun to relax by now. Breathing steadily, she sank her posture and soaked up the autumn, looking at groups of auburn-leaved trees.

A flicker appeared at the corner of her right eye. But nothing was there when she turned to look out the window.

In her body, there was a feeling of disconnection that she couldn't understand. It was like she wasn't entirely herself, but was a part of everything around her; a part of the bus, the trees, the fields and even a part of each person sat nearby. Was it a sense of disconnection? Or did she feel *more* connected all of a sudden?

These sensations were new to her, and trying to decipher them proved frustratingly futile. She looked across to a small farmhouse the bus was passing and saw a figure in a window. A dark blur that materialised and swiftly dematerialised.

And then she wasn't sure if she'd even seen it at all.

She closed her eyes and shook her head, trying to dispel the strange happenings. What she was seeing simply couldn't be.

It's just stress, like from witnessing trauma, she rationalised. When the bus pulled into Chanton, Juliet walked off on shaky legs, unbalanced both mentally and physically in her state of worry. Within minutes, she was home and in bed, needing to rest her mind. Sleep engulfed her instantly.

A few hours later, she awoke. The morning was gone, wasted, so she began to pace back and forth. She dug into her mind. *Hmmm, something to do, something to do ...*

Her body distracted her. Something was not right. She felt like an empty bottle. Staring down, she thought her hands looked like paws, impersonal and unoccupied. This body wasn't hers. It couldn't be.

With a deep breath through her nose, she observed her senses. The sense of smell was as keen as always, but also seemed distant, not hers to own. For sight, it was like watching from afar.

She decided to go jogging. The mix of fresh air and exercise would bring back her kinship with her physical body. As she ran and her feet connected with the ground, there was no longer the ache and thud of exercise that she normally experienced after running a while. Instead, she felt unaffected, uninvolved.

The air that used to caress her skin seemed to almost pass through her now, its press was so gentle. It was wrong in an unknown way. *What is happening to me?*

With a return home, she decided to ignore the sensations. Her senses would return to normal of their own accord.

She walked to the downstairs living room in search of her laptop. On the mantelshelf above the fireplace were some pictures. Two were of her mother and father together, two were shots of them separately, and in the centre was a photo of her grandmother.

Her gran had died when Juliet was thirteen, and Juliet's parents now lived in Marbella, Spain. Picking up the picture, she held it lovingly and imagined how her gran would have reacted to hearing about the near miss this morning. Her gran would have held her so tight and kissed at her cheeks repeatedly. Juliet could almost feel her embrace.

Juliet's parents were all she had now. Her grandparents on her father's side had died before she was born, and so had her grandfather on her mother's side. She had no aunts or uncles on her mother's branch, but on her father's she had three uncles and one aunt. They were all distant; she never saw them. If she had cousins, she didn't know who they were. For some reason her father wasn't interested in them and refused to talk about it all.

Besides her parents, the only person she had ever considered family was her gran on her mother's side. The lady in the frame.

She had a beautiful and genuine smile. Perfectly photogenic, and even through the picture, Juliet could see her gran the way she remembered her: a sweet, gentle and selfless woman. Closing her eyes, Juliet wished hard that her gran was alive and here today.

After putting the photo back down, she remembered her laptop was in the upstairs living room. She jogged up to it, switched it on, and did some online shopping. Afterwards, she filled out her planner for the upcoming week, making certain to add specifics.

Then she found herself bored.

What to do next? She thought of the new starter at her café. Some training needed addressing.

There was no point in dwelling on the car accident and the strange hallucinations from earlier. How would that help her achieve anything? So, impatiently, she changed her outfit and walked to her café, Chanton Hillview.

As she stepped inside, a fusion of savoury and sweet scents welcomed her. It was like opening the door of a fridge crammed with fresh food; the smell soaked the air. The sounds rated below the fragrance—the chinking of cutlery, some muffled exchanges, and the gurgling coffee-machine.

Juliet's senses were sharp as normal, but there was still that remote feeling. She smiled at a few regular customers, then scooted along to avoid pointless chit-chat. Her team of staff weren't too surprised to see her and went about their work nonchalantly.

She approached the new starter, Ashleigh, and took her to the office.

‘Hi, Juliet. I didn’t know you were in today. I thought you were shopping.’ Ashleigh was sixteen years old, fresh out of school, and wanted to get straight into work and earning money. Her bubbly attitude and sweet smile had secured her the job, as Juliet liked to employ positive, hard-working individuals.

‘My plans changed. Anyway, has Roy done your manual handling training yet?’ The prompt change of subject seemed to unnerve Ashleigh.

‘No, he hasn’t.’

‘Okay. Well, I’ll go through it with you, and we’ll get some other training completed, too.’

‘Okay!’ Ashleigh replied exuberantly, as if the prospect of mandatory training excited her. She even did a little twirl on the spot. Juliet politely laughed.

Ashleigh had recently moved to Chanton with her parents. They used to live in Cornwall but visited Lansin Island a lot over the years. As soon as Ashleigh had finished secondary school, she and her parents moved to Chanton.

Juliet covered manual handling, food hygiene, and fire safety with her giddy new employee, before she retired to her office to do some paperwork.

The feeling of disconnection was still throughout her body. She stared at her hands, focusing intently; she saw them as buzzing particles, as if she wasn’t so solid after all, as if her hands and arms were made of the same material as the desk she was sitting at.

A quick shake of the head returned her to the present moment.

Then in a brief sweep the temperature dropped. Juliet was alone. Glimmers of light shone, barely visible throughout the room. A few streaks danced and hovered before they vanished, twitching the air.

The desk lamp flickered on, off, on. Tension was a taste in the room, and Juliet could almost hear a string instrument playing a shrill and suspenseful note. Her skin prickled as if a spider had dashed across it.

Refusing to believe her eyes, she closed them, her heart pounding. Sounds caught her off guard, maybe footsteps, seeming distant yet also close.

Her eyes opened reluctantly to a woman staring directly at her. At least Juliet *thought* it was a woman. The figure wasn’t fully formed. Juliet strained to see eyes and the outline of the figure, like an aura. It was more like *feeling* there was a woman in the room than actually seeing her.

Juliet was stuck to her chair, unable to move or speak. Although she couldn’t fully see it, she knew the figure was approaching. She sensed one of its arms reaching out. It touched her face.

Horror stiffened her body, but for her life she forced out a scream.

The room returned to normal, the lamp stopped flickering, and the temperature rose in an instant. The figure was gone, and Juliet heaved for air, her hands over her burdened heart.

‘Are you okay?’ Roy, the stand-in manager, knocked, asked, and entered simultaneously. He was alert and ready for some kind of trouble.

A breath rushed into Juliet’s lungs. ‘I’m fine.’

‘You’re fine?’ said Roy, his round face incredulous. ‘The whole café heard you scream.’

‘I said I’m fine,’ she reasserted. *I am fine. It was only my imagination*, she tried to

convince herself.

Roy relaxed his stance. 'What should I tell the team, and our customers? It sounded like a *bad* scream; Ashleigh dropped somebody's order when she heard you. She jumped right out of her skin!' He laughed a deep grumble, but Juliet could see he was still concerned.

'Anything, Roy. Make something up. Say everything's okay and nobody needs to panic.'

'I will say that Sandra and you walked around a corner at the same time and she gave you a fright. Yes? That will do.'

'Thank you, Roy. I'm going to leave soon.' She began clearing her paperwork away. 'I shouldn't have come in today.' She pictured the amorphous thing stretching its arm out to touch her face, and thought, *I should have rested some more. I'm obviously in shock.*

'You're welcome,' said Roy. 'Why did you come in?'

'Shopping fell through, and you know me ... I can't just sit around.'

'I think you need a hobby; you should not just work every minute of your life,' he remarked, stepping on delicate ground.

'I like to work. This is my café, and I like being here.' It felt like a personal attack. 'Besides, I have hobbies.' She had her home-study course, an exercise routine, she was learning Spanish, and she volunteered at a charity shop. *Do they count as hobbies?*

'Okay. I was concerned, that is all. It is easy to get burnt out when you work too much.'

She gave Roy a prickly stare; she didn't need *her employee* questioning her ability to work. There was enough on her mind (the mind she thought she was losing after the day's events).

'Roy,' she said. 'Get back to work.'

He nodded and offered a concerned half-smile before he left the office. Juliet gathered her thoughts until she couldn't stay in the room any longer. She hoped that she wouldn't permanently fear her office; it was one of her favourite places to be, working or not.

As she left the café, she sensed all eyes on her. She held her chin high, managed appropriate smiles, and expressed confident farewells to her employees and customers.

That evening, she watched the local news. It covered a story on a police chase in Amiton. The police had followed a vehicle due to suspicious behaviour, and when they signalled the driver to pull over, he sped away instead. The pursued driver gained distance by cutting through the upper grounds, but had crashed into a business stall, flipped the car and came to a stop. It turned out the driver was drunk, and in his intoxicated state he'd panicked and thought driving through the upper grounds was a good idea. He'd been treated for a head wound sustained in the crash, but no major injuries.

As Juliet eyed the television screen, she experienced bitterness towards the drunk driver. She'd had the strangest day of her life, and he was to blame.

Chapter 3

‘Stop showing off your perfect white teeth!’ Janet Morgan, one of the full-timers at Creaky Crystals, playfully slapped Nick’s arm. ‘You know I want mine whitened.’

Rubbing his arm as if it hurt, Nick said, ‘What are you on about?’

‘You’ve been smiling all day; you’re like a walking dental advert.’

‘Should I take that as a compliment ...?’

‘Whatever floats your boat, Nick.’ Janet laughed to herself. ‘You’re an odd boy aren’t you? I’d have wangled the day off if I was almost hit by a car, but you’re having the best day of your life. Odd-ball.’

He *was* eager to go home after saving the woman’s life, but he wanted to work his hours; or more accurately, he *needed* to work them. ‘Maybe I’m just happy the car didn’t hit me.’

‘Maybe you’re a strange boy ... Anyway, why were you in the upper grounds? You don’t come from that direction.’ She goggled him suspiciously.

‘I was just looking at the view from up there.’

‘Hmmm. That confirms it: you’re a weirdo.’ Janet stuck out her tongue, then dawdled off towards the jewellery section.

Still smiling, Nick thought about the incident. He’d given a statement to the police, omitting the part about the woman he’d saved; she’d hurried off, and he didn’t think anyone had seen her almost get hit. Hiding things from the police was a bad idea, and he wasn’t sure why he did it, but it was done now. And there was a more interesting matter to dwell on.

The rest of the shift dragged, but when it was finally over he made his way home as if his life depended on it.

There was a lot to mull over that night. Excitement oozed out of him. After having a real ‘flash-forward,’ he was infused with a sense of importance. What did it mean?

He spent that evening thinking about it. *Was it a random experience? Is it an ability I can learn to use at will? Am I different, special somehow? If so, are there others like me?* No conclusions were made, but he slept easier that night, feeling like there was purpose to his life.

Across the weekend, he read through books on Celtic, Classical, and Norse mythology. He researched on the internet how to practice psychic powers. He read about oracles, prophets, clairvoyants, seers, and shamans. Some people used cards, the roll of a dice, crystal balls, or other objects for divination, but he also read about people who saw the future in their dreams and through guided meditation.

It wasn’t wise to be on the internet for too long, in case he went over the limit again and got charged more (*again*), so he shut down the computer.

Half the material he’d found was stuff he had knowledge of from past research. Because he’d considered becoming a Wiccan before, he already *kind of* believed in psychic abilities, and also that cheesy word: magic. But seeing was different to believing.

He tried to meditate and get into a trance-like state to bring on another vision, but nothing happened. He was having a hard time with the whole fate/destiny side to it. *How can I see the future if it isn’t planned out? Or maybe it was a probable future I saw, based on people’s choices. And if everyone has a destined path, then did I change*