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Opening Extract from...

The Book of Life

Written by Deborah E. Harkness

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THE
BOOK
OF
LIFE

DEBORAH HARKNESS

headline

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SOL IN CANCER

The Signe of the Crabbe pertains to houses, lands, treasures, and whatever is hidden. It is the fourth house of the Zodiak. It signifies death and the end of thinges.

– *Anonymous English Commonplace Book*, c. 1590,
Gonçalves MS 4890, f. 11v

CHAPTER I

Ghosts didn't have much substance. All they were composed of was memories and heart. Atop one of Sept-Tours' round towers, Emily Mather pressed a diaphanous hand against the spot in the center of her chest that even now was heavy with dread.

Does it ever get easier? Her voice, like the rest of her, was almost imperceptible. *The watching? The waiting? The knowing?*

Not that I've noticed, Philippe de Clermont replied shortly. He was perched nearby, studying his own transparent fingers. Of all the things Philippe disliked about being dead – the inability to touch his wife, Ysabeau; his lack of smell or taste; the fact that he had no muscles for a good sparring match – invisibility topped the list. It was a constant reminder of how inconsequential he had become.

Emily's face fell, and Philippe silently cursed himself. Since she'd died, the witch had been his constant companion, cutting his loneliness in two. What was he thinking, barking at her as if she were a servant?

Perhaps it will be easier when they don't need us anymore, Philippe said in a gentler tone. He might be the more experienced ghost, but it was Emily who understood the metaphysics of their situation. What the witch had told him went against everything Philippe believed about the afterworld. He thought the living saw the dead *because* they needed something from them: assistance, forgiveness, retribution. Emily insisted these were nothing more than human myths, and it was only when the living moved on and let go that the dead could appear to them.

This information made Ysabeau's failure to notice him somewhat easier to bear, but not much.

'I can't wait to see Em's reaction. She's going to be so surprised.' Diana's warm alto floated up to the battlements.

Diana and Matthew, Emily and Philippe said in unison, peering down to the cobbled courtyard that surrounded the chateau.

There, Philippe said, pointing at the drive. Even dead, he had vampire sight that was sharper than any human's. He was also still handsomer than any man had a right to be, with his broad shoulders and devilish grin. He turned the latter on Emily, who couldn't help grinning back. *They are a fine couple, are they not? Look how much my son has changed.*

Vampires weren't supposed to be altered by the passing of time, and therefore Emily expected to see the same black hair, so dark it glinted blue; the same mutable gray-green eyes, cool and remote as a winter sea; the same pale skin and wide mouth. There were a few subtle differences, though, as Philippe suggested. Matthew's hair was shorter, and he had a beard that made him look even more dangerous, like a pirate. She gasped.

Is Matthew . . . bigger?

He is. I fattened him up when he and Diana were here in 1590. Books were making him soft. Matthew needed to fight more and read less. Philippe had always contended there was such a thing as too much education. Matthew was living proof of it.

Diana looks different, too. More like her mother, with that long, coppery hair, Em said, acknowledging the most obvious change in her niece.

Diana stumbled on a cobblestone, and Matthew's hand shot out to steady her. Once, Emily had seen Matthew's incessant hovering as a sign of vampire overprotectiveness. Now, with the perspicacity of a ghost, she realized that this tendency stemmed from his preternatural awareness of every change in Diana's expression, every shift of mood, every sign of fatigue or hunger. Today, however, Matthew's concern seemed even more focused and acute.

It's not just Diana's hair that has changed. Philippe's face had a look of wonder. *Diana is with child – Matthew's child.*

Emily examined her niece more carefully, using the enhanced grasp of truth that death afforded. Philippe was right – in part. *You mean 'with children'.* *Diana is having twins.*

Twins, Philippe said in an awed voice. He looked away, distracted by the appearance of his wife. *Look, here are Ysabeau and Sarah with Sophie and Margaret.*

What will happen now, Philippe? Emily asked, her heart growing heavier with anticipation.

Endings. Beginnings, Philippe said with deliberate vagueness. *Change.*

Diana has never liked change, Emily said.

That is because Diana is afraid of what she must become, Philippe said.

Marcus Whitmore had faced horrors aplenty since the night in 1781 when Matthew de Clermont made him a vampire. None had prepared him for today's ordeal: telling Diana Bishop that her beloved aunt, Emily Mather, was dead.

Marcus had received the phone call from Ysabeau while he and Nathaniel Wilson were watching the television news in the family library. Sophie, Nathaniel's wife, and their baby, Margaret, were dozing on a nearby sofa.

'The temple,' Ysabeau had said breathlessly, her tone frantic. 'Come. At once.'

Marcus had obeyed his grandmother without question, only taking time to shout for his cousin, Gallowglass, and his Aunt Verin on his way out the door.

The summer half-light of evening had lightened further as he approached the clearing at the top of the mountain, brightened by the otherworldly power that Marcus glimpsed through the trees. His hair stood at attention at the magic in the air.

Then he scented the presence of a vampire, Gerbert of Aurillac. And someone else – an unfamiliar witch.

A light, purposeful step sounded down the stone corridor, drawing Marcus out of the past and back into the present. The heavy door opened, creaking as it always did.

'Hello, sweetheart.' Marcus turned from the view of the Auvergne countryside and drew a deep breath. Phoebe Taylor's scent reminded him of the thicket of lilac bushes that had grown outside the red-painted door of his family's farm. Delicate and resolute, the fragrance had symbolized the hope of spring after a long Massachusetts winter and conjured up his long-dead mother's understanding smile. Now it only made Marcus think of the petite, iron-willed woman before him.

'Everything will be all right.' Phoebe reached up and straightened his

collar, her olive eyes full of concern. Marcus had taken to wearing more formal clothes than concert T-shirts around the same time he'd started to sign his letters Marcus de Clermont instead of Marcus Whitmore – the name she'd first known him by, before he had told her about vampires, fifteen-hundred-year-old fathers, French castles full of forbidding relatives, and a witch named Diana Bishop. It was, in Marcus's opinion, nothing short of miraculous that Phoebe had remained at his side.

'No. It won't.' He caught one of her hands and planted a kiss on the palm. Phoebe didn't know Matthew. 'Stay here with Nathaniel and the rest of them. Please.'

'For the final time, Marcus Whitmore, I will be standing beside you when you greet your father and his wife. I don't believe we need discuss it further.' Phoebe held out her hand. 'Shall we?'

Marcus put his hand in Phoebe's, but instead of following her out the door as she expected, he tugged her toward him. Phoebe came to rest against his chest, one hand clasped in his and the other pressed to his heart. She looked at him with surprise.

'Very well. But if you come down with me, Phoebe, there are conditions. First, you are with me or with Ysabeau at all times.'

Phoebe opened her mouth to protest, but Marcus's serious look silenced her.

'Second, if I tell you to leave the room, you will do so. No delay. No questions. Go straight to Fernando. He'll be in the chapel or the kitchen.' Marcus searched her face and saw a wary acceptance. 'Third, do not, under any circumstances, get within arm's reach of my father. Agreed?'

Phoebe nodded. Like any good diplomat, she was prepared to follow Marcus's rules – for now. But if Matthew's father was the monster some in the house seemed to think he was, Phoebe would do what she must.

Fernando Gonçalves poured beaten eggs into the hot skillet, blanketing the browned potatoes already in the pan. His tortilla española was one of the few dishes Sarah Bishop would eat, and today of all days the widow needed sustenance.

Gallowglass sat at the kitchen table, picking drops of wax out of a crack in the ancient boards. With his collar-length blond hair and muscular build, he looked like a morose bear. Tattoos snaked around his forearms

and biceps in bright swirls of color. Their subject matter revealed whatever was on Gallowglass's mind at the moment, for a tattoo lasted only a few months on a vampire. Right now he seemed to be thinking about his roots, for his arms were covered with Celtic knotwork, runes, and fabulous beasts drawn from Norse and Gaelic myths and legends.

'Stop worrying.' Fernando's voice was as warm and cultured as sherry aged in oak barrels.

Gallowglass looked up for a moment, then returned his attention to the wax.

'No one will prevent Matthew from doing what he must, Gallowglass. Avenging Emily's death is a matter of honor.' Fernando turned off the heat and joined Gallowglass at the table, bare feet moving silently across the flagstone floors. As he walked, he rolled down the sleeves of his white shirt. It was pristine, in spite of the hours he'd spent in the kitchen that day. He tucked the shirt into the waistband of his jeans and ran his fingers through his dark, wavy hair.

'Marcus is going to try to take the blame, you know,' Gallowglass said. 'But Emily's death wasn't the boy's fault.'

The scene on the mountain had been oddly peaceful, considering the circumstances. Gallowglass had arrived at the temple a few moments after Marcus. There had been nothing but silence and the sight of Emily Mather kneeling inside a circle marked out with pale rocks. The witch Peter Knox had been with her, his hands on her head and a look of anticipation – even hunger – on his face. Gerbert of Aurillac, the de Clermonts' nearest vampire neighbor, was looking on with interest.

'Emily!' Sarah's anguished cry had torn through the silence with such force that even Gerbert stepped back.

Startled, Knox released Emily. She crumpled to the ground, unconscious. Sarah beat the other witch back with a single, powerful spell that sent Knox flying backward across the clearing.

'No, Marcus didn't kill her,' Fernando said, drawing Gallowglass's attention. 'But his negligence—'

'Inexperience,' Gallowglass interjected.

'Negligence,' Fernando repeated, 'did play a role in the tragedy. Marcus knows that and accepts responsibility for it.'

'Marcus didn't ask to be in charge,' Gallowglass grumbled.

‘No. I nominated him for the position, and Matthew agreed it was the right decision.’ Fernando pressed Gallowglass’s shoulder briefly and returned to the stove.

‘Is that why you came? Because you felt guilty about refusing to lead the brotherhood when Matthew asked for your help?’ No one had been more surprised than Gallowglass when Fernando turned up at Sept-Tours. Fernando had avoided the place ever since Gallowglass’s father, Hugh de Clermont, died in the fourteenth century.

‘I am here because Matthew was there for me after the French king executed Hugh. I was alone in all the world then, except for my grief.’ Fernando’s tone was harsh. ‘And I refused to lead the Knights of Lazarus because I am not a de Clermont.’

‘You were Father’s mate!’ Gallowglass protested. ‘You are as much a de Clermont as Ysabeau or her children!’

Fernando carefully shut the oven door. ‘I *am* Hugh’s mate,’ he said, his back still turned. ‘Your father will never be past tense to me.’

‘Sorry, Fernando,’ Gallowglass said, stricken. Though Hugh had been dead for nearly seven centuries, Fernando had never recovered from the loss. Gallowglass doubted he ever would.

‘As for my being a de Clermont,’ Fernando continued, still staring at the wall over the stove, ‘Philippe disagreed.’

Gallowglass resumed his nervous picking at the wax. Fernando poured two glasses of red wine and carried them to the table.

‘Here,’ he said, thrusting one at Gallowglass. ‘You’ll need your strength today, too.’

Marthe bustled into the kitchen. Ysabeau’s housekeeper ruled over this part of the château and was not pleased to see intruders in it. After giving Fernando and Gallowglass sour looks, she sniffed and wrested the oven door open.

‘That is my best pan!’ she said accusingly.

‘I know. That’s why I’m using it,’ Fernando replied, taking a sip of wine.

‘You do not belong in the kitchen, *Dom* Fernando. Go upstairs. Take Gallowglass with you.’ Marthe took a packet of tea and a teapot from the shelf by the sink. Then she noticed the towel-wrapped pot sitting on a tray next to cups, saucers, milk, and sugar. Her frown deepened.

‘What is wrong with my being here?’ Fernando demanded.

‘You are not a servant,’ Marthe said. She picked the lid off the top of the pot and sniffed suspiciously at its contents.

‘It’s Diana’s favorite. You told me what she liked, remember?’ Fernando smiled sadly. ‘And everyone in this house serves the de Clermonts, Marthe. The only difference is that you, Alain, and Victoire are paid handsomely to do so. The rest of us are expected to be grateful for the privilege.’

‘With good reason. Other *manjasang* dream of being part of this family. See that you remember that in future – and the lemon, *Dom* Fernando,’ Marthe said, placing emphasis on his lordly title. She picked up the tea tray. ‘By the way, your eggs are burning.’

Fernando leaped up to rescue them.

‘As for you,’ Marthe said, fixing her black eyes on Gallowglass, ‘you did not tell us everything you should have about Matthew and his wife.’

Gallowglass looked down into his wine with a guilty expression.

‘*Madame* your grandmother will deal with you later.’ On that bone-chilling note, Marthe stalked out of the room.

‘What have you done now?’ asked Fernando, putting his *tortilla* – which was not ruined, Alhamdulillah – on the stove. Long experience had taught him that whatever the mess, Gallowglass had made it with good intentions and complete disregard for possible disaster.

‘Weeell,’ Gallowglass said, drawing out the vowels as only a Scot could, ‘I might have left one or two things out of the tale.’

‘Like what?’ Fernando said, catching a whiff of catastrophe among the kitchen’s homely scents.

‘Like the fact that Auntie is pregnant – and by none other than Matthew. And the fact that Granddad adopted her as a daughter. Lord, his blood vow was deafening.’ Gallowglass looked reflective. ‘Do you think we’ll still be able to hear it?’

Fernando stood, open-mouthed and silent.

‘Don’t look at me that way. It didn’t seem right to share the news about the babe. Women can be funny about such things. And Philippe told Auntie Verin about the blood vow before he died in 1945, and she never said a word either!’ Gallowglass said defensively.

A concussion tore the air, as if a silent bomb had been detonated. Something green and fiery streaked past the kitchen window.

‘What the hell was that?’ Fernando flung the door open and shielded his eyes against the bright sunlight.

‘One pissed-off witch, I imagine.’ Gallowglass’s tone was glum. ‘Sarah must have told Diana and Matthew the news about Emily.’

‘Not the explosion. That!’ Fernando pointed to Saint-Lucien’s bell tower, which was being circled by a winged, two-legged, fire-breathing creature. Gallowglass rose for a better look.

‘That’s Corra. She goes where Auntie goes,’ Gallowglass said matter-of-factly.

‘But that’s a *dragon*.’ Fernando turned wild eyes on his stepson.

‘Bah! That’s no dragon. Can’t you see she’s only got two legs? Corra is a fire Drake.’ Gallowglass twisted his arm to show off a tattoo of a winged creature that strongly resembled the airborne beast. ‘Like this. I might have left out one or two details, but I did warn everybody that Auntie Diana wasn’t going to be the same witch she was before.’

‘It’s true, honey. Em is dead.’ The stress of telling Diana and Matthew was clearly too much for her. Sarah could have sworn that she saw a dragon. Fernando was right. She needed to cut back on the whiskey.

‘I don’t believe you.’ Diana’s voice was high and sharp with panic. She searched Ysabeau’s grand salon as though she suspected to find Emily hiding behind one of the ornate settees.

‘Emily’s not here, Diana.’ Matthew’s hushed voice was infused with regret and tenderness as he stepped before her. ‘She’s gone.’

‘No.’ Diana tried to push past him and continue her search, but Matthew drew her into his arms.

‘I’m so sorry, Sarah,’ Matthew said, holding Diana tight to his body.

‘Don’t say you’re sorry!’ Diana cried, struggling to free herself from the vampire’s unbreakable hold. She pounded on Matthew’s shoulder with her fist. ‘Em isn’t dead!. This is a nightmare. Wake me up, Matthew – please! I want to wake up and find we’re still in 1591.’

‘This isn’t a nightmare,’ Sarah said. The long weeks had convinced her that Em’s death was horribly real.

‘Then I took a wrong turn – or tied a bad knot in the time-walking

spell. This can't be where we were supposed to end up!' Diana was shaking from head to toe with grief and shock. 'Em promised she would never leave without saying goodbye.'

'Em didn't have time to say goodbye – to anyone. But that doesn't mean she didn't love you.' Sarah reminded herself of this a hundred times a day.

'Diana should sit,' Marcus said, pulling a chair closer to Sarah. In many ways Matthew's son looked like the same twenty-something surfer who had walked into the Bishop house last October. His leather cord, with its strange assortment of objects gathered over the centuries, was still tangled in the blond hair at the nape of his neck. The Converse sneakers he loved remained on his feet. The guarded, sad look in his eyes was new, however.

Sarah was grateful for the presence of Marcus and Ysabeau, but the person she really wanted at her side at this moment was Fernando. He'd been her rock during this ordeal.

'Thank you, Marcus,' Matthew said, settling Diana in the seat. Phoebe tried to press a glass of water into Diana's hand. When Diana just stared at it blankly, Matthew took it and placed it on a nearby table.

All eyes alighted on Sarah.

Sarah was no good at this kind of thing. Diana was the historian in the family. She would know where to start and how to string the confusing events into a coherent story with a beginning, a middle, and an end, and perhaps even a plausible explanation of why Emily had died.

'There's no easy way to tell you this,' Diana's aunt began.

'You don't have to tell us anything,' Matthew said, his eyes filled with compassion and sympathy. 'The explanations can wait.'

'No. You both need to know.' Sarah reached for the glass of whiskey that usually sat at her side, but there was nothing there. She looked to Marcus in mute appeal.

'Emily died up at the old temple,' Marcus said, taking up the role of storyteller.

'The temple dedicated to the goddess?' Diana whispered, her brow creasing with the effort to concentrate.

'Yes,' Sarah croaked, coughing to dislodge the lump in her throat. 'Emily was spending more and more time up there.'

‘Was she alone?’ Matthew’s expression was no longer warm and understanding, and his tone was frosty.

Silence descended again, this one heavy and awkward.

‘Emily wouldn’t let anyone go with her,’ Sarah said, steeling herself to be honest. Diana was a witch, too, and would know if she strayed from the truth. ‘Marcus tried to convince her to take someone with her, but Emily refused.’

‘Why did she want to be alone?’ Diana said, picking up on Sarah’s own uneasiness. ‘What was going on, Sarah?’

‘Since January, Em had been turning to the higher magics for guidance.’ Sarah looked away from Diana’s shocked face. ‘She was having terrible premonitions of death and disaster and thought they might help her figure out why.’

‘But Em always said higher magics were too dark for witches to handle safely,’ Diana said, her voice rising again. ‘She said any witch who thought she was immune to their dangers would find out the hard way just how powerful they were.’

‘She spoke from experience,’ Sarah said. ‘They can be addictive. Emily didn’t want you to know she’d felt their lure, honey. She hadn’t touched a scrying stone or tried to summon a spirit for decades.’

‘Summon spirits?’ Matthew’s eyes narrowed into slits. With his dark beard, he looked truly terrifying.

‘I think she was trying to reach Rebecca. If I’d realized how far she’d gone in her attempts, I would have tried harder to stop her.’ Sarah’s eyes brimmed with tears. ‘Peter Knox must have sensed the power Emily was working with, and the higher magics have always fascinated him. Once he found her—’

‘Knox?’ Matthew spoke softly, but the hairs on the back of Sarah’s neck rose in warning.

‘When we found Em, Knox and Gerbert were there, too,’ Marcus explained, looking miserable at the admission. ‘She’d suffered a heart attack. Emily must have been under enormous stress trying to resist whatever Knox was doing. She was barely conscious. I tried to revive her. So did Sarah. But there was nothing either of us could do.’

‘Why were Gerbert and Knox here? And what in the world did Knox hope to gain from killing Em?’ Diana cried.

‘I don’t think Knox was trying to kill her, honey,’ Sarah replied. ‘Knox was reading Emily’s thoughts, or trying his best to. Her last words were, “*I know the secret of Ashmole 782, and you will never possess it.*”’

‘Ashmole 782?’ Diana looked stunned. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Positive.’ Sarah wished her niece had never found that damned manuscript in the Bodleian Library. It was the cause of most of their present problems.

‘Knox insisted that the de Clermonts had missing pages from Diana’s manuscript and knew its secrets,’ Ysabeau chimed in. ‘Verin and I told Knox he was mistaken, but the only thing that distracted him from the subject was the baby. Margaret.’

‘Nathaniel and Sophie followed us to the temple. Margaret was with them,’ Marcus explained in answer to Matthew’s astonished stare. ‘Before Emily fell unconscious, Knox saw Margaret and demanded to know how two daemons had given birth to a baby witch. Knox invoked the covenant. He threatened to take Margaret to the Congregation pending investigation into what he called “serious breaches” of law. While we were trying to revive Emily and get the baby to safety, Gerbert and Knox slipped away.’

Until recently Sarah had always seen the Congregation and the covenant as necessary evils. It was not easy for the three otherworldly species – daemons, vampires, and witches – to live among humans. All had been targets of human fear and violence at some point in history, and creatures had long ago agreed to a covenant to minimize the risk of their world’s coming to human attention. It limited fraternization between species as well as any participation in human religion or politics. The nine-member Congregation enforced the covenant and made sure that creatures abided by its terms. Now that Diana and Matthew were home, the Congregation could go to hell and take their covenant with them as far as Sarah was concerned.

Diana’s head swung around, and a look of disbelief passed over her face.

‘Gallowglass?’ she breathed as the salon filled with the scent of the sea.

‘Welcome home, Auntie.’ Gallowglass stepped forward, his golden beard gleaming where the sunlight struck it. Diana stared at him in astonishment before a sob broke free.

‘There, there.’ Gallowglass lifted her into a bear hug. ‘It’s been some

time since the sight of me brought a woman to tears. Besides, it really should be me weeping at our reunion. As far as you're concerned, it's been only a few days since we spoke. By my reckoning it's been centuries.'

Something numinous flickered around the edges of Diana's body, like a candle slowly catching light. Sarah blinked. She really was going to have to lay off the booze.

Matthew and his nephew exchanged glances. Matthew's expression grew even more concerned as Diana's tears increased and the glow surrounding her intensified.

'Let Matthew take you upstairs.' Gallowglass reached into a pocket and pulled out a crumpled yellow bandanna. He offered this to Diana, carefully shielding her from view.

'Is she all right?' Sarah asked.

'Just a wee bit tired,' Gallowglass said as he and Matthew hustled Diana off toward Matthew's remote tower rooms.

Once Diana and Matthew were gone, Sarah's fragile composure cracked, and she began to weep. Reliving the events of Em's death was a daily occurrence, but having to do so with Diana was even more painful. Fernando appeared, his expression concerned.

'It's all right, Sarah. Let it out,' Fernando murmured, drawing her close.

'Where were you when I needed you?' Sarah demanded as her weeping turned to sobs.

'I'm here now,' Fernando said, rocking her gently. 'And Diana and Matthew are safely home.'

'I can't stop shaking.' Diana's teeth were chattering, and her limbs were jerking as if pulled by invisible strings. Gallowglass pressed his lips together, standing back while Matthew wrapped a blanket tight around his wife.

'That's the shock, *mon coeur*,' Matthew murmured, pressing a kiss to her cheek. It wasn't just the death of Emily but the memories of the earlier, traumatic loss of her parents that were causing her distress. He rubbed her arms, the blanket moving against her flesh. 'Can you get some wine, Gallowglass?'

'I shouldn't. The babies . . .' Diana began. Her expression turned wild

and her tears returned. ‘They’ll never know Em. Our children will grow up not knowing Em.’

‘Here.’ Gallowglass thrust a silver flask in Matthew’s direction. His uncle looked at him gratefully.

‘Even better,’ Matthew said, pulling the stopper free. ‘Just a sip, Diana. It won’t hurt the twins, and it will help calm you. I’ll have Marthe bring up some black tea with plenty of sugar.’

‘I’m going to kill Peter Knox,’ Diana said fiercely after she’d taken a sip of whiskey. The light around her grew brighter.

‘Not today you’re not,’ Matthew said firmly, handing the flask back to Gallowglass.

‘Has Auntie’s *glæm* been this bright since you returned?’ Gallowglass hadn’t seen Diana Bishop since 1591, but he didn’t recall it being this noticeable.

‘Yes. She’s been wearing a disguising spell. The shock must have knocked it out of place,’ Matthew said, lowering her onto the sofa. ‘Diana wanted Emily and Sarah to enjoy the fact that they were going to be grandmothers before they started asking questions about her increased power.’

Gallowglass bit back an oath.

‘Better?’ Matthew asked, drawing Diana’s fingers to his lips.

Diana nodded. Her teeth were still chattering, Gallowglass noted. It made him ache to think about the effort it must be taking for her to control herself.

‘I am so sorry about Emily,’ Matthew said, cupping her face between his hands.

‘Is it our fault? Did we stay in the past too long, like Dad said?’ Diana spoke so softly it was hard for even Gallowglass to hear.

‘Of course not,’ Gallowglass replied, his voice brusque. ‘Peter Knox did this. Nobody else is to blame.’

‘Let’s not worry about who’s to blame,’ Matthew said, but his eyes were angry.

Gallowglass gave him a nod of understanding. Matthew would have plenty to say about Knox and Gerbert – later. Right now he was concerned with his wife.

‘Emily would want you to focus on taking care of yourself and Sarah.

That's enough for now.' Matthew brushed back the coppery strands that were stuck to Diana's cheeks by the salt from her tears.

'I should go back downstairs,' Diana said, drawing Gallowglass's bright yellow bandanna to her eyes. 'Sarah needs me.'

'Let's stay up here a bit longer. Wait for Marthe to bring the tea,' Matthew said, sitting down next to her. Diana slumped against him, her breath hiccupping in and out as she tried to hold back the tears.

'I'll leave you two,' Gallowglass said gruffly.

Matthew nodded in silent thanks.

'Thank you, Gallowglass,' Diana said, holding out the bandanna.

'Keep it,' he said, turning for the stairs.

'We're alone. You don't have to be strong now,' Matthew murmured to Diana as Gallowglass descended the twisting staircase.

Gallowglass left Matthew and Diana twined together in an unbreakable knot, their faces twisted with pain and sorrow, each giving the other the comfort they could not find for themselves.

I should never have summoned you here. I should have found another way to get my answers. Emily turned to face her closest friend. *You should be with Stephen.*

I'd rather be here with my daughter than anywhere else, Rebecca Bishop said. *Stephen understands.* She turned back to the sight of Diana and Matthew, still locked in their sorrowful embrace.

Do not fear. Matthew will take care of her, Philippe said. He was still trying to figure out Rebecca Bishop – she was an unusually challenging creature, and as skilled at keeping secrets as any vampire.

They'll take care of each other, Rebecca said, her hand over her heart, *just as I knew they would.*