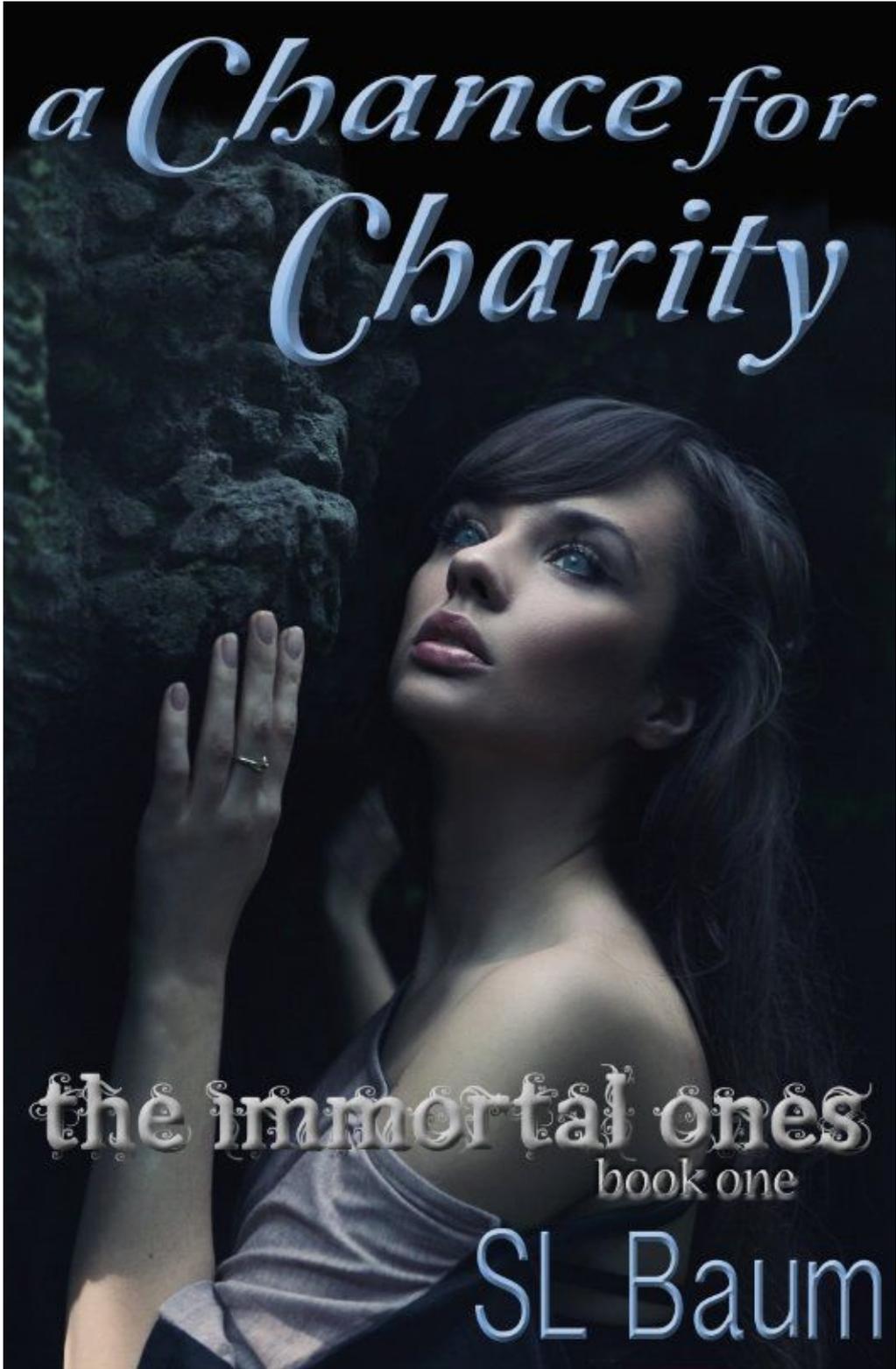




*a Chance for  
Charity*

the immortal ones  
book one

SL Baum



## **BOOK JACKET DESCRIPTION**

A new family has just arrived in the isolated mountain town of Telluride, Colorado. Welcome the Johnstons – Jason (a doctor), Rachel (a designer), and their niece Emily (a current High School Senior).

Emily has lived the life of a quiet loner in the past, trying to go unnoticed. But with Telluride being such a small and welcoming town, she finds a group of friends at school almost immediately. When Emily meets Link (another new transplant in town) her world turns upside down. She doesn't understand why she feels a magnetic pull toward him, or why she unknowingly lets her guard down around him. Link is just as confused by his own need to be with her.

Emily knows she is playing with fire. She should be doing whatever she can to keep herself isolated, to keep Link from getting too close. Danger has a way of finding Emily's family – that is what keeps them on the move. They arrive in a new town every few years – it is safer that way.

Because... Emily isn't really Emily... her real name is Charity – and Charity has an even bigger secret. Charity and her family are not like other people, they have "skills" that mere mortals cannot begin to comprehend.

Before long, Charity is struggling with the reality that her two lives are coming closer to each other with each passing day. Soon Link will find himself wrapped in a supernatural world that he never knew existed – and discover that mortals are not the only beings that walk this earth.

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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For my kiddos  
So they know that being a mommy  
doesn't mean giving up your dreams.  
It's never too late to try something new.

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## prologue

I was twenty years old when my fiancé died. His death almost destroyed me. The world as I knew it ceased to exist, and I fell into a cavernous depression. I wasn't sure that I could ascend from the abyss, to claw my way out, to continue on.

How could I live without him?

My *Aunt* and *Uncle* saved me from my hopelessness. They have a way of making the past disappear so life can start fresh. And that was what I needed at the time. Now, here we are again... starting over. This time, it's out of necessity. This time, I'm apprehensive. This time, everything is about to change.

I can feel it.

**chapter one**  
**A NEW BEGINNING - AGAIN**

“Emily Johnston?... Is Emily Johnston here?” This teacher was clearly annoyed. I could tell by the scowl on his face. His eyebrows almost met in the center of his forehead when he squinted that way and there was a vein pulsing at his temple. I wished Emily Johnston would raise her hand or this guy would give up and move on to the next name. I glanced around the room to see where Emily might be and felt the burn of sixteen pair of eyes glaring at me.

“Oh crap!” I whispered. “Here,” I mumbled aloud. “Sorry... Spacing...,” were the only other words I could manage to utter.

Why did it always take me so long to remember a new name? *Well good job, “Emily,” nothing like calling attention to yourself on your first day of classes,* I admonished myself. I’d choose the name next time. This was the second time Catherine had picked a name that just wouldn’t stick in my brain. Emily... Emily... Emily... I silently chanted in my head.

And Seventeen! Why did I have to be seventeen again? I hated not being considered an adult. High school was interesting the first time, but I hated repeating it. I put my foot down about the grade though, I’m a senior. One year was all I could bear to put in this time. Well, less than one year, it was getting close to the middle of October already. We tried starting me out as a sophomore once, but I could barely pull off fifteen. I’m seventeen, I’m a senior in high school, and my name is Emily.

*You are Emily Johnston,* I told myself. Emily is an average girl, of average height. She has a slight, athletic build. She could be a gymnast or a swimmer. She has dark, almost black, hair that falls just below her shoulders, most days it is pulled back into a low pony-tail, and her eyes are the palest blue. Some people find the eyes quite startling. I try not to hold eye contact for too long. I am Emily... and she is me.

I looked down at the book as Mr. Duncan placed it on my desk. I hadn’t read that one in forever. Did I like it? It took place in a jungle... guy goes crazy... I tried to remember all the details.

“You can copy my notes if you want. We just started the book last Thursday. You didn’t miss much.”

“Thanks, that’d be great.” I turned to the girl sitting at my right and smiled.

“I’m Summer.”

“Emily,” I offered.

“Yeah, kinda figured that,” Summer teased.

“So embarrassing,” I cringed, replaying the moment in my head. I couldn’t believe I had called attention to myself that way. I hated first days, first weeks. It always took awhile for me to settle into my new life.

“Don’t worry about it,” Summer tried to reassure me.

I sat at my desk and tried to tune-in to the teacher’s voice and tune-out the various distracting sounds around the room. I could hear a few kids to the left of me snicker at my “space out.” Some girl, two desks in front of me, was filing her nails and the rhythmic scrape of the emery board was roaring in my ears. The tiny squeak of a dull pencil on notebook paper, from behind me, was driving me crazy. I shook my head and pushed all the extra sounds into the background and concentrated on Mr. Duncan’s voice only.

It was a very long hour.

When the bell rang, releasing us from first period, Summer exited the room alongside me, matching my pace. It made me a bit nervous. I usually kept to myself.

“So, your uncle is the new doc over at the medical center. My mom is a nurse there,” she smiled warmly.

“Clairvoyant?” I asked.

“Small town,” she answered. “What do you have next? I can tell you where to go.”

Summer was trying to be helpful, to ease my transition into this new school. She had a sincere face, I found myself liking her already.

“Trig – with Peterson,” I read to her from my newly printed schedule.

“I have Calculus, right next door. Walk with me.”

Calculus was not my strong point. I’d tried it the last time. The equations were some form of cruel torture, like a constant dripping of water onto my forehead until my brain was ready to explode. Trig was as far as I was willing to test my math skills this time around.

We walked down the hall and Summer pointed in the general direction of each of my classes. It turned out we had four of our six subjects together. With less than two hundred students in all of the high school, each grade level averaged fewer than fifty students. I would have no choice but to get to know these kids extremely well. Why couldn’t I have five hundred students per grade level again? Then I could sink into oblivion and no one would notice. Why did James have to pick Telluride anyway? It was such a tiny town.

“Well, see you in an hour,” Summer chimed as we arrived at our separate math classes.

I watched as she walked through the adjacent doorway. Summer Paxton was a cute girl. Her short brown hair was pulled into two tiny pony-tails. She was dressed neatly, in the unofficial uniform for this high school, jeans and a t-shirt. I was glad I’d picked a similar outfit. I needed to blend in as much as possible. I envied her ease, but she’d said she had lived in Telluride since the age of three. I had been here for three days.

Four days ago I was with my family, in a vehicle, driving to Colorado. It was beautiful. I’d give Telluride that. During the drive I was awed by the fall colors in full

display on the trees - with their brilliant deep jewel toned leaves. Everywhere I looked, out the window, vibrant colors stared back at me. There was gold, amber, and garnet splashed across the mountainside with the evergreens continuously peeking through. Their deep emerald green a constant in any season. The peaks of the mountains were white with snow, pearl white I'd say, keeping with the jewel theme. Did the snow ever melt from up there? I suppose I'd find out next summer.

I wondered how long we'd last in Telluride. We couldn't stay in one place forever. For now, I was seventeen and lived with my *Uncle Jason*, who was twenty-nine, and my *Aunt Rachel*, who was twenty-five. Jason had recently finished all his medical training and Rachel was a designer. I was Emily, a high school student. Oh yeah, we had moved to Colorado from Canada. That was our story and we were sticking to it.

I drove straight home after school. Home – *that* word would never again mean what I believed it should. Home was a house now, whatever house we found in our new city or town to suit our needs. This was our one vice, the one place where we didn't follow the rules and try to blend in. We lived well. We liked a big, strong, beautiful looking, well constructed house. We also needed space, lots of space. After living together as long as we had, there were times when each of us needed to get lost, at home. James and Catherine, aka Jason and Rachel, seemed to need it less than I did. They gravitated toward each other without ever being fully aware of it.

Home was now in Mountain Village, an extension of Telluride, a twenty-or-so minute drive or a ten-plus minute gondola ride from the center of town. We bought an eight thousand square foot house overlooking one of the ski trails. The trail was called Galloping Goose - the thought of a goose galloping made me smile. I had never skied before and was actually looking forward to learning the new skill. It was even part of the curriculum at school. When there was snow enough on the ground, and I was confident enough in my abilities, I could ski out of and ski back onto our property. But the white blanket of snow would not arrive until late November.

I parked my SUV in the garage and entered the house with a smile on my face. I could hear Catherine humming... as she poured... (I inhaled deeply through my nose) ...lavender tea into a mug.

"Hello, *Rachel*, how was your day today?" I asked as I walked into the kitchen.

"Fine, how was yours, *Emily*?" She matched my tone.

"Ugh, why did you pick Emily? I spaced it in first period and everyone was staring at me."

"You've had weeks to prepare for this. You will be fine."

"When do I get to be Charity again?" I whined. I knew I was being unreasonable.

"When everyone who knew Charity is dead," she said plainly.

"I think they all are by now," I whispered as tears welled up in my eyes. The mood in the room had suddenly changed.

"Next time, I promise," Catherine soothed and then crossed the room to hold me in her arms as I cried.

I sank to the floor. My legs had turned to rubber and were unable to hold me up

anymore. Catherine followed and I rested my head in her lap. The frustration of change and the memories I'd tried so hard to suppress consumed me. Visions of my "original" life flashed before my eyes, but they were just illusions. I tried not to think about the past. There was nothing I could do to change it. I had the future in front of me and I needed to make the best of it.

"Sorry, Catherine, I don't know why I do that so often." I stumbled over the words as I tried to force myself to stop crying.

"It's okay dear," she soothed. "I picked out a location for the boutique today. It's right on Colorado Ave., the main drag, same as the high school. You can meet me there tomorrow after school to help me remodel and redecorate. We need to paint right away." Catherine changed the subject and tried to brighten the mood. She was the perfect aunt, mother, and friend.

"I'll be there," I promised Catherine and then excused myself to my suite of rooms. I needed to lie down and watch a movie, an action picture. My three favorite genres were romance, action, and sci-fi. I absolutely hated horror. I could never stand to watch as people were sadistically injured and killed. Tonight it was fast paced, mind blowing action that I needed.

I did my homework while the movie played on my extra large, wall mounted, flat screen. The surround sound made me feel as if I were in the room, with the hostages, in the bank, as the bomb exploded. I jumped, startled by the debris flying toward me on the screen. I could never seem to get over how much things had changed since I was a little girl. Everything was bigger, brighter, and louder now. Except computers, they got smaller as the years passed. I loved it all... hi-def DVDs, MP3 players, laptop computers, cell phones. I'm a technology junky.

I fell asleep sometime after two a.m. - once I had watched the requisite number of car chases, fight sequences, and explosions to push my memories back into the corners of my mind, where I needed them to stay. I woke early and went downstairs for a cup of the coffee I could already smell brewing in the kitchen.

"Morning, James, or should I say Jason," I yawned as I poured myself a large mug of coffee, then added tons of vanilla creamer. I guess it was coffee flavored vanilla creamer at that point, but that's the way I like it.

"Morning, Emily," James smiled at me. "It's not such a bad name. You'll get used to it soon, you always do, and you know you can always call me James at home."

"I know. How was your first day at the medical center?"

"Good, I met Summer Paxton. She came in after school to pay a quick visit to her mom. She told me that you guys will be seeing a lot of each other. Really small school... Sorry, that is the one thing I seriously overlooked. Guess we all should have known though, looking at the size of the town."

"It is less than one square mile," I mused. "Summer seemed really nice, for a teenager. When is my birthday again? I hate being seventeen." I grabbed my purse to answer my own question and fished out the well paid for driver's license. "February tenth," I sighed. "I guess I can live with that. It's only four months away. What's your plan for today?" I asked James, trying to lighten my voice, willing myself into a good

mood.

“Same as yesterday. I’m still getting to know my way around the center, and the urgent care facilities. They tell me that business really starts picking up once ski season hits and the populations of the town skyrocket. So until that time, I plan on taking it easy and just enjoy spending time with my two best girls. There are so many trails for hiking and ranches with horses for horseback riding. There’s a lake nearby that is supposed to be just breathtaking. We need to do some exploring.”

He really looked handsome when his face lit up that way. His jet black hair fell into his eyes as he studied a trail map on the kitchen counter. He loved the outdoors which is another reason he and Catherine were so well suited. She always seemed drawn to water and could spend hours exploring her surroundings. When she wasn’t doing that, she was busy creating.

Catherine designed clothes and was happiest when she had a boutique to showcase her work. I planned to arrive at the boutique promptly when school ended, so I could help her get it ready to open. I owed them that much. I don’t know where I would be without the love and support of these two people, who had once rescued me when I was alone and broken. They took me in and became the family that I needed. They mended my spirit and were a constant source of strength.

“Why do you keep working, James?” I asked. “We have more than enough money. You could stop anytime you want. We could just live like the super rich and travel the world. If we moved every few months no one would ever suspect anything about us. It might be safer.”

The question had popped into my head so many times over the years.

“Catherine and I tried to be nomads, before you joined the family, but neither of us found happiness in that lifestyle. A person needs a place to call home. At least I do. As far as work goes, I like helping people. Being a doctor is all I have ever wanted in life since the age of twelve. I am not completely happy unless I am doing it. Plus I think that one of the reasons I am on this earth is to use my skills to heal. Catherine creates, I heal... you have a purpose too, we all do.”

“I guess I understand. Have a good day, James. I’m going to get ready for school now. Thanks for the pep-talk. I’ll be fine. Love you,” I called back over my shoulder as I ran upstairs to prepare myself for another day of high school.

“Love you too, Charity. Be safe, nothing dangerous today,” he warned as I walked into my room.

Ha, safe... he knew me too well. When I was alone, out on my own, I took risks I shouldn’t. There were a lot of trails to get lost in out here. I was looking forward to it.

I drove to school with the radio cranked up as loud as my ears could stand it. I sang along to one of my favorite Nine Inch Nails songs. Another day, another town, another high school... but every day was the same. I stayed in the driver’s seat after I parked and waited for the song to end. When I finally forced myself to exit the vehicle, I immediately spotted Summer. She was standing in the parking lot with a blonde girl and two guys.

“Hi, Summer,” I called out, greeting my new friend.

“Hi, Emily!” Summer waved me over. “This is Rusty, Burke, and Delilah.” Summer introduced her three friends, when I reached her side.

I recognized each of them from several classes yesterday. Summer was holding hands with Rusty, a tall, lanky guy with a shock of unruly red hair. He had that free spirited skater look that was so popular. Delilah, a head shorter than Summer, was a petite version of a runway model. Her long blonde hair was styled to perfection, expertly applied make-up, and a funky outfit completed her look. She definitely stood out in this crowd. Burke was the muscular athletic type, a typical high school jock. I’d seen him a hundred times before. He looked sincere though, not the usual smug face I was used to seeing on a jock. From the way he kept looking at Delilah it was obvious he was completely smitten with her. She wasn’t quite as taken with him it seemed.

“Hi, guys, it’s good to meet you,” I greeted them nervously. I wasn’t used to the friendly small town thing. I usually tried to disappear at a school. I was pretty good at it too.

“Emily’s uncle is the new Doc over at the medical center. He works with my mom. I met him yesterday,” she explained to the group. “I haven’t met your aunt yet,” she turned to me.

“Aunt Rachel is opening a boutique, down the other end of Colorado Ave. I’m headed there after school, to help with the set up of the shop. Lucky me,” I told them.

“You ski or board?” Burke directed his question to me.

“Neither, but I do want to learn to ski.”

“I’ll teach you. I’ve lived here all my life and started skiing before I was three. It’s easy. I prefer to snow board though. I’ll teach you that too,” he smiled, happy to offer his services. “I already promised Dee I would teach her when the time comes, you could join us,” Burke continued, smiling at Delilah – aka Dee.

It sounded like he was trying to cinch the instructor’s position with her by making it a group thing.

“I’m Delilah. I moved here last school year and just caught the end of ski season, but didn’t get to try it,” Delilah explained.

“Where did you move from?” I asked her, grateful that I wasn’t the only new girl in school.

“LA, my parents were tired of the big city thing. This is a really huge change for me. I’m used to malls and clubs and beaches. Where did you live in Canada?” she asked me, seemingly well informed of my back-story already.

“Oh, an incredibly small town there too. So, this is not so different for me,” I lied convincingly. I was awfully good at it. I’d had years of practice.

“I miss the sunny, sunny days. I miss tanning at the beach. I fake bake here just for some good overall color,” Delilah pouted, and any fool could see that Burke was in love with this little fashion diva. He walked over and put his arm around her tiny shoulders.

“Yeah, not much of a tanner, as you can all see,” I laughed at the sight of my pale skin compared to Delilah’s bronzed version, or even Summer’s lightly sun kissed

tones.

“Oh you look great,” Summer chimed in, “the pale skin looks good with your dark hair and pale blue eyes. You look a lot like your uncle, same hair, same skin tone...”

“Let’s get to class,” Rusty broke in, clearly bored, and started walking, pulling Summer along with him.

As soon as the bell rang, releasing me from the confines of Telluride High School, I sauntered down the length of Colorado Avenue, slowly making my way to the storefront Catherine had rented for her boutique. This little town, surrounded by mountains, has remained little touched by time. The cars and trucks parked along the street were the only blaring evidence of the true year.

If I squinted my eyes and pretended to see everything in sepia tones, I could be viewing a photograph taken over a hundred years ago. As I passed the New Sheridan Hotel, I tried to picture it as it was on its opening day. The colorful storefronts and many hand painted signs were a refreshing change from the ultra modern world in which we all find ourselves.

My time-warp was broken by the sight of Catherine, standing on the side walk just up-ahead, waving at me. She was sporting a glorious grin, eager to show me the location. She seemed to thrive on our new beginnings.

I worked with Catherine every day after school. James joined us after he finished work. It was during our first night of painting that we discovered the Chinese restaurant across the street. I ran over at six o’clock and picked up some take-out for our dinner. We were immediately hooked and it became a nightly routine. The three of us would sit on the floor, for our Chinese picnic dinner, and talk about our hopes for life in this town. Side by side by side we painted, set up displays, and generally worked our butts off until after midnight every night. It was an absolute asset to us that we needed less sleep and could push our bodies harder than the average person.

Seven days later *A Step in Time* opened its doors.

**chapter two**  
**TIME FOR MAKE BELIEVE**

“What do you want to *be*, Charity?” Catherine repeated her question. I had spaced her out the first time. She was getting angry. I knew this because her original Scottish accent, which was nearly unperceivable to most people, would thicken and reappear whenever she was irritated.

I still couldn't get over the fact that we'd been in this town for just a few weeks and already I was getting sucked into the “community.” There was a Halloween Parade down the main drag on Saturday, in two days, and then a big Halloween Party later that evening. All my new friends were pushing for my attendance at both. James and Catherine were adding to the pressure so I felt boxed in, forced to comply.

“Oh, just give me one of your dresses from the early eighteen hundreds, one of the ball gowns. I'll go as English royalty,” I huffed, not happy with the situation. I wanted to stay at home and watch movies, like I always did.

“You'll look beautiful. How about the cream and gold one? No, the lavender will look gorgeous on you. You are wearing some of the jewels too. I won't take ‘no’ for an answer,” she cautioned when I started to frown again. “Remember, you stick out less when you go with the flow. Plus, this will be fun for all of us.” Catherine's eyes pleaded for my approval.

“Okay, Okay, I'll find a way to be happy about it!” I cried out. “What are you and James going to wear?” I asked, hoping to pull her focus off of the grandiose plan for my attire. I could almost catch sight of it brewing in her brain.

“We are doing the Fifties sock hop thing. I have that marvelous skirt and petticoat. With a fuzzy pink sweater around my shoulders and a scarf to tie back my hair, it will be perfect. James will be the leather clad greaser. The good girl paired with the bad boy. I love it,” Catherine bubbled over.

I had to admit, with Catherine in charge of costuming, we would look flawless. She had a detailed memory when it came to fashion and style. If she had seen it once it would be duplicated with precision.

“Not too many jewels, what if I get robbed? I don't want to be responsible for them,” I added, determined to have the last word.

“Nobody will think they're real anyway,” she smiled.

When Saturday afternoon arrived, Telluride was abuzz. The length of Colorado Ave. was filled with people, and dogs, in costume. I put my foot down, and refused to wear the dress during the day. I stayed in the boutique and went with the Fifties theme of James and Catherine. I wore rolled up jeans with a white t-shirt and a leather jacket. I put my hair in a high pony-tail and tied a scarf around it. That was the extent of my daytime costuming. Catherine was going to torture me with hair and make-up for the party tonight.

Summer and Rusty popped into the store around one o'clock and had transformed themselves into anime characters. They looked so cute together. Delilah came in about thirty minutes later with Burke in tow. She was the perfect pixie fairy. Her blonde hair was piled onto her head in an up-do that was supposed to look like she did it in seconds but she had probably spent forever on the style. Burke was simply a soccer player. I'm pretty sure he was wearing his school uniform. They stayed to chat for a few minutes and made me promise, for the third time, that I would be at the party that night.

"I'll be there, I promise. Now go have fun." I urged them away.

"It sucks that you have to work here today," Delilah pouted. I had quickly learned that Delilah loved to pout, and Burke loved to watch her pout. Well, Burke simply loved to watch her.

"Oh, it's okay. I volunteered so Catherine could go have fun with James. They both work a lot," I reassured her, and promised *again* that I would see her tonight.

If our goal was trying to blend, we failed miserably. All eyes turned to us as we entered the room. Maybe it was just curiosity over the new residents. But I think it was that we looked as though we had walked out of a time capsule.

James and Catherine wore their authentic Fifties attire. Their outfits outshone any store bought costume. Catherine had pulled her waist length, wavy auburn hair into a pony and James had slicked his back, as was the style of the time. I concluded that every Hollywood costume designer would pale in comparison to Catherine's skills.

I dressed as the nobility of England once did. Catherine had insisted on doing my hair, but I had insisted on my normal, minimal make-up. I wore an amethyst necklace and earrings set, that was quite intricate in detail, and amethyst jewels in my hair as well. My dress was empire style, cinched just under the bust line and flowed straight to the ground. There were no over grown, wedding cake topper, petticoats worn with this style of dress, hence why I chose early and not mid eighteenth hundreds. The fabric was the most beautifully embroidered lavender silk. I was sure it had taken Catherine weeks, when she had designed and hand sewn it. I felt proud to be wearing one of her creations.

James and Catherine went straight for the dance floor and I searched the hall for a familiar face. I stood in the corner of the room waiting to spot someone from school, when that odd sensation of being watched washed over me. "Of course you are being watched. You just made a grand entrance," I whispered to myself as I scanned the room. Within minutes I spotted Summer and the gang, waving wildly, and went to join them.

"Wow, Emily, you look amazing. That's like, a real costume," Summer greeted me during the lull in the music.

"Yeah, Aunt Rachel likes to design period pieces. Did you see them?" I questioned, trying to be heard over the DJ.

"We saw them dancing a second ago. Did she do those too?"

“Yep... I’m thirsty. Know where I can get some water?”

“This way,” fairy Delilah shouted and led me to the refreshment area.

As I followed behind them, I could still feel someone’s eyes burning a hole in my back. I did a quick scan of the room, trying to figure out who was giving me that creepy feeling. I hated being the center of attention. I was entirely too self conscious to have agreed to attend this party anyway. I wouldn’t be completely at ease again until I was at home, wearing a pair of pajama pants, and a tank top. I tried to let go of my wariness and just have fun. After an hour or so it worked.

I channeled my inner teenager, and danced. I closed my eyes and gave in to the music. As I danced I sang the lyrics to every song I knew - along with Summer, Rusty, Delilah, and Burke. Toward the end of the evening Delilah let Burke lead her onto the dance floor, for a song with a slow pounding rhythm. Summer and Rusty soon followed.

I moved to a corner, in the shadows again, where I felt most comfortable and where I could observe almost everyone in the hall. I watched the couples hold each other close as the steady beat was pounding in my head. I closed my eyes, imagined myself dancing with someone, and swayed to the music, keeping my lids tightly sealed. I could almost feel hands gently moving up the sides of my arms, to hold my face close. My skin came alive and goose-bumps dotted the entire surface of my skin. I could feel the tears starting to form.

I pushed the memories away.

I opened my eyes as the song came to an end, blinking wildly to rid myself of the tears that threatened to flow. I wanted to go home, I couldn’t be here anymore. I looked around trying to find either Catherine or James but instead found him. A tall, blonde, muscular, masked superhero was standing near the exit, staring at me. There was something oddly familiar about his mouth...

“You look tired,” Catherine’s head popped into my view.

“Yes, I’m ready to go. Are you guys okay to leave now?” I asked trying to look around her.

He wasn’t there anymore.

“Yes let’s go. Aren’t you glad you came? We had a blast. I’ll go get Jason. He’s talking to some of the staff from the medical center. Stay here. I’ll be right back.”

“Okay, not going anywhere,” I answered.

As Catherine danced away I spotted him again, our eyes locked, and then he abruptly walked out the door.

For only being in Telluride such a short time, it was amazing how swiftly routine came. Everyone at the bakery, the little markets, and various restaurants we frequented, around town and in Mountain Village, already knew who we were and greeted us so kindly every time we walked in. Almost unconsciously, we had slipped into our roles, as members of this community.

We decided to start our exploring the weekend after Halloween and hiked along

the San Miguel River. Catherine was in heaven. She loved walking along the water's edge, that's one of the reasons they'd picked Telluride. We packed lunches and stayed out for hours, exploring all we could, until it was too dark to stay out any longer. I made mental notes of all the places that I wanted to come back to on my own. Hiking without company suited me better. I could push myself farther and try to reach more places than I could with James and Catherine along. They were always so worried that one of us would injure ourselves, and someone from the town might witness it.

I went out on my own the next Saturday, in the late afternoon. Catherine was at the boutique and James was working in his lab at the house. Instead of going back to the river I decided to explore the ski trails that encircled our house.

At first I climbed in the wide open areas that were clearly meant for skiing once the blanket of snow was again spread across the mountain. Then I ventured into the forested areas, thick with trees that reached up into the heavens. The trees blocked out the sun and without its warmth, the cold crept in. The light sweater I had paired with my favorite jeans kept me warm enough though. Cold weather rarely affected me. The jacket tied around my hips might not be needed.

I climbed higher up the mountain side, digging my fingers into the earth to help pull myself up the steeper inclines. My nails broke and my hands were gouged by small rocks and twigs along my path. But I pressed on, wanting to lose myself in nature, to disappear into the forest like a woodland creature. As I reached one of the smaller peaks I walked into a clearing and my breath caught in my throat. The view in front of my eyes was extraordinary. The peaks of the tree covered mountains were spotted with lines and splatters of white snow, all the colors blending together in an ever changing palate. It was painted by the hand of God.

The fragrance of the mountain was an intricate conglomerate of all things nature. I could smell the sweet dew that clung to the plants in the earth. The soil was pungent, but still pleasant. The fallen leaves, scattered across the mountainside, were in various stages of decay. Each species of tree had its own distinct scent. It was a bouquet like no other. Each component added to the delicate balance that I deeply inhaled.

As the sun started to set, it cast marvelous shadows across the mountainside. I sat down on the damp earth and watched the shadows stretch and play as the sun slowly disappeared. When it was twilight I decided to head back.

Climbing down required a more concentrated effort, to keep from losing my balance. As I made my way down a particularly steep area I became distracted. I thought I saw someone else walking through the trees. I was sure I'd heard twigs breaking in the distance. My foot slipped on loose debris and my careful descent turned into a clumsy fall.

I started to tumble down the slope. My body was twisting, my limbs flailing, as I tried to control my descent. I reached out, trying to grab onto anything that would stop me. I heard a snap and felt a twinge in my right foot, as I finally came to rest.

"Hey are you okay over there?" I heard a male voice call out from a distance.

Oh crap, someone *had* seen me fall. James was going to be so mad. He always lectured me on the importance of being safe. I struggled to find my voice as I sat up

and began to assess the situation.

“Fine,” I called out still not looking up to catch sight of where the guy was.

“Stay still, I’m coming to you,” he yelled back.

I examined my hands. They were badly scratched and bleeding. There was nothing to be done for the nails, but the skin I had hope for.

“Heal quicker,” I whispered aloud, wishing I could control my body’s pace. Relief washed over me as the blood stopped flowing and the scratches smoothed over. The ankle was another story, it was broken. I took my boot and sock off, and straightened my ankle out as best as I could. If I didn’t get the bones in their proper places it would heal all wrong and then James would really be annoyed.

I heard scrambling behind me and in one swift motion, I rubbed my hands together and then wiped at my face, trying to remove any traces of blood that might still linger on my skin. Hands clasped my shoulders. I flinched and looked up.

It was now quite dim but my eyes could easily make out the face, the mouth. My lungs took a sharp intake of air. It was him, the blonde Adonis from the dance.

“Wow you really took a tumble there. Try to stay still so I can check for broken bones,” he ordered. “What are you doing out here by yourself?” He leaned in closer unable to see as clearly as I.

I couldn’t answer him, my voice caught in my throat and my body froze the moment his hands started to move across my limbs. He gently squeezed down the length of my arms, starting at my shoulders and continuing to my wrists. Then he grabbed onto my legs, moving from thigh to foot. That is when he finally saw my badly bruised ankle and reached down to cradle my battered foot in his hands.

“It’s broken?” he questioned.

“No, I’m sure it’s just twisted,” I whispered. “I’ll be fine. I’ll be able to walk on it. Just give me a moment to catch my breath.”

He reached out to brush back the hair that was covering my eyes and tucked it behind my ear.

“Where do you live?” he asked.

I pointed toward my house, after my tumble it wasn’t so far away, “That one.”

“What’s your name?”

“Charity,” I uttered in a barely audible whisper.

“Charity?”

“No, um, I really don’t need your charity...” I let my voice trail off, trying to cover up my mistake.

“Oh you don’t?” he laughed. “Well, I must insist on giving it. Your name?” he repeated his question.

“Emily. Emily Johnston.”

“It’s nice to meet you Emily Johnston. I’m Link, Lincoln Knight, to be exact. Do you think you can lean on me so I can help you get home?”

“I can call my uncle, really, you don’t need to bother with me,” I rambled on, but he decided to ignore my protests.

Link wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me up to standing. When he was sure I had gained my balance he instructed me to put my arms around his shoulders. He held onto me with one hand and snatched up my discarded boot with the other.

“Let’s try to walk. Just lean on me,” he encouraged.

“Really this is not necessary. My uncle…”

“Miss Johnston, will you kindly shut your mouth and concentrate on walking? I *am* helping you. Now, test the ankle, just put a little pressure on it at first,” he ordered, slightly annoyed by my reluctance to accept his assistance.

I gave a little hop. I could already feel my bones fusing back together. I tried to concentrate on walking as though I were truly injured.

“Is this okay?” he breathed into my hair while his body pressed against mine for added support.

I lost all sense of balance. My knees gave way and he had to tighten his grip to keep us both from falling over. This wasn’t helping me concentrate. I couldn’t think while he was touching me. But then again, it did help my act of appearing more injured than I was by now.

“Sorry,” I apologized.

“Careful, take it easy.” Link smiled at me.

We paused in our trek, while I caught my breath and steadied my racing heart. I was right at the dance, there was something strangely familiar about his mouth. I peeked through my eyelashes to get a better look at his face. He had classical good looks, the kind that would always be considered handsome. Thick blonde hair and chocolate brown eyes accented his striking appearance. He flashed me a brilliant smile. Why did I know that smile so well?

“You never answered my question before. What are you doing out here by yourself?”

“I just like to hike on my own.” I defended my right to be out, alone. “It’s peaceful. Until I do something stupid and fall. I’m usually much more careful,” I paused and took a deep breath. “I could ask you the same question,” I challenged him.

“Same as you, except for the falling part,” he smiled. “Anyway, I’m not a high school girl,” he continued.

“How do you know I’m in high school?”

I *hated* being seventeen.

“I saw you at the Halloween dance. You were hanging out with a group of high school kids so I used my awesome powers of deduction,” he teased.

“You have awesome powers, eh? Lucky you,” I replied, my voice thick with sarcasm.

“They come in handy when I’m rescuing fallen angels,” he paused in thought.